

The Emergence of "Literature": Making and Reading the English Canon in the Eighteenth Century

Trevor Ross

The idea of literature, it has often been noted, is of relatively recent emergence. In Foucault's version of the claim, the idea was born of a radical realignment of the disciplines of knowledge, a realignment that, by the nineteenth century, had left a space for the "pure act of writing" to curve back upon itself and to reconstitute itself as an independent "form of language that we now call 'literature'."¹ We have learned to question this notion of literature's autonomous "purity"; my interest here is with the historical argument. That the modern sense of "literature" has not been in the Western world for long should not be taken to mean that before the nineteenth century the word itself had not been around nor that there was no collective term for identifying the peculiar "form of language" of writings that we would now consider literary. Yet a change did occur: something happened in the late eighteenth century to the way works of art were valued. No longer considered rhetorical or didactic instruments, they became prized as autonomous creations. In Northrop Frye's formulation: "nearly every work of art in the past had a social function in its own time, a function which was often not primarily an aesthetic function at all. The whole conception of 'works of art' as a classification for all pictures, statues, poems, and musical compositions is a relatively modern one." Frye does not explain the change he is describing, though such an explanation is nonetheless implicit in something Frye suggests in his preceding paragraph. Defending humanist culture, Frye writes: "it is the consumer, not the producer, who benefits by culture, the consumer who becomes humanized and liberally educated."² Arguably, it is this assumption that is the relatively modern conception, the one that brought about such concepts as literature and the aesthetic. I wish to suggest that the emergence of literature in its modern sense reflects such a change in how literary value was perceived, a change from production to consumption, invention to reception, writing to reading. **[End Page 397]**

I begin by looking at notions of literature before "literature." It is sometimes claimed that since earlier writers had no knowledge of literature as we understand the concept, they did not consider their work distinct from any other type of discourse, including texts of a didactic or political nature. Literature, Terry Eagleton suggests, "was invented sometime around the turn of the eighteenth century, and would have been thought extremely strange by Chaucer or even Pope."³ There is truth in this: certainly Pope would never have denied the moral and political import of his poetic practice. But there is also exaggeration, for if literature in its modern sense did not yet exist, there was nonetheless an understanding of the distinct rhetorical category under which the writings of Chaucer or Pope could be classed. Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, complains of how the "art that uses only speech by itself or verse, . . . has as yet no name; for we have no common term to apply to the [prose] mimes of Sophron and Xenarchus and to the Socratic dialogues, nor any common term for *mimeseis* produced in verse." Aristotle wants a term to designate that verbal art whose essential quality he identifies with fictive representation. With some reluctance, he accepts the common designation of "poetry," a term which could refer to any rhythmic utterance: "people do attach the making [that is the root of the word *poietes*] to the name of a metre and speak of elegiac-makers and hexameter-makers; they think, no doubt, that 'makers' is applied to poets not because they make *mimeseis* but as a general term meaning 'verse-makers'." Not every fool, Aristotle adds, who writes a medical treatise in verse ought to be called a poet, but that is unfortunately what happens.⁴ Though "poetry" will do for now, Aristotle seems to be saying, we need more refined distinctions if critical discourse is to be a meaningful activity.

Despite Aristotle's protests, the conventional distinctions remained in place throughout much of the history of European criticism. "Maker" was the prevalent term in Chaucer's time, and Dunbar's, "poet" in Shakespeare's. A medical treatise written in verse could still conceivably be praised as the work of a poet well into the eighteenth century, and perhaps into ours: an extract from John Armstrong's *Art of Preserving Health* (1744) makes it into Roger Lonsdale's first collection of eighteenth-century verse. But, owing perhaps to Aristotle's influence, "poetry" before the nineteenth century was usually less a technical designation for verse than a normative category of fictive or rhetorical art. In Sidney's famous formulation, "there haue beene many most excellent Poets that neuer versified, [End Page 398] and now swarme many versifiers that neede neuer aunswere to the name of Poets."⁵ Within this category there could belong poems, plays, fictional works, and discursive prose of a peculiarly refined nature. Sidney included within his definition More's *Utopia*, the romance *Amadis de Gaule* and the ballad *Chevy-Chase*. Some, like Bacon, emphasized the fictionality of poetry while others, like John Dennis a century later, privileged its linguistic peculiarities: "the great Art of Poetry consists in saying almost every thing that is said figuratively."⁶

The point is that while "poesy" was a loose generic category, it was not so loose as to be inseparable from the genres of political, religious or other discourse. Exchanges were certainly frequent, but they did not go unnoticed: Plato and Boethius, according to Sidney, "made Mistres Philosophy very often borrow the masking rayment of Poesie."⁷ But the basic idea of poetry as a fictive or verbal art was generally accepted before the nineteenth century, and still is in some form in modern definitions of literature. The shift from "poesy" to "literature" appears to involve neither a fundamental change in theoretical definition, nor a significant realignment of the genres subsumed by either of these terms.⁸ The efflorescence of the novel in the eighteenth century might have conceivably necessitated such a realignment, but then Fielding could quite easily describe his works as comic epics in prose. The entry of the novel did not seem to enlarge the traditional category of "poesy," though the term itself was fast becoming obsolescent by Fielding's time. The shift must have been caused by something else, having to do with the changing values and social functions of literary works.

Poetry, as Aristotle suggested, had as its root an idea of making. For Horace, as for Ben Jonson, "poesy" designated the "skill, or Crafte of Making . . . the habit, or the Art."⁹ Poetry was at once the activity and the ability of the begetter of fictions and verses. It had to do with production. This did not necessarily imply that the value of poetry was tied to the particular needs of the poet.¹⁰ Rather, the function of poetry was defined in terms of social instrumentality, and its value measured wholly by its utility within a moral order that was determined less by economic profit than by symbolism, rhetoric and representation. Thus the immortality *topos*, until very recently the prime operative trope behind all poetic production, made the patron not the consumer of verse but its subject. The poet was welcome because he ensured fame for his client and his community; they valued the poet's continued output, and whether they actually felt [End Page 399] edified by that work was beside the point, only a by-product, as it were. Utility was equally foregrounded in other early notions of poetry's function. Until well into the seventeenth century, the highest praise that could be awarded a poet held that he had refined his community's or his age's language, in the sense that he had tapped new sources and varieties of eloquence and so had proven the language's beauty, versatility and rhetorical power. Chaucer was the father and, for a time, a national hero because he opened the way for more poets by proving that English was a poetic, productive language.

Even the didactic tradition was largely understood from the point of view of the poet's contribution to the state and to the culture as a whole. It was the poet who taught as he delighted; he was prophet, guide and singer. The audience may have experienced catharsis, found their moral beliefs reinforced, or even learned something, but early defenses of poetry's utility rarely detailed the nature of these effects at the level of individuals.¹¹ These effects were rather benefits to the community at large. Consumption, in other words, was not distinguished from production. The culture, the totality of poet and audience, was the consumer and the producer, and there was felt

to be no problem as to the question of where value resided, whether in the poetic activity, in the poetic utterance, or in its reception. It was the same value or symbolic capital that circulated all around; or, at least, poetic activity was felt to operate within a system of roughly equal exchange. Whatever immortalizing, expressive, educative or exhortative effects poetry was felt to produce were ascribed to the verbal powers of the poet, who, in turn, was at one with the interests of the community. The poet was not a maker of commodities for an autonomous audience, but an agent of production working on behalf of established social relations. At least, this was what early poets and critics asserted time and again in their own defense.¹²

Then there were all the occasional and pragmatic uses of poetry, its indispensability in centuries past as an eloquent tool for the aspiring courtier who wished to get ahead, make friends and make love. At his disposal were a multiplicity of compositional aids, from the several "artes" of poetry that were thinly disguised guidebooks on courtly manners, to the many commonplace books that cut and paste together verse snippets, rhetorical figures and metrical models, all designed to help the courtier to mount Parnassus or whatever. To later, eighteenth-century editors, these textbooks seemed shockingly arbitrary and appallingly short on editorial apparatus. Exclaimed one [End Page 400] such editor, looking over an early miscellany, "There is . . . so abrupt and sudden a hurry from one idea to another in every chapter . . . that the sentences slip through the reader's apprehension as quicksilver through the fingers."¹³ Then again, these anthologies were neither prepared for easy consumption by a reader, nor were they designed to render a fixed and inimitable canon unto posterity. The purpose of reading these collections and, indeed, of reading any canonical poetry was to enable you to compose some poetry yourself or, at least, to sharpen your communicative and suasive skills. And with such powers, you could feel, however provisionally and however much circumscribed by rhetorical conventions, that you controlled value itself--the happy *homo rhetoricus* lately reawakened in neopragmatist imaginings.¹⁴ Of course, the audience may have experienced pleasure or sublimity from listening to the poet's craft. Yet even then, Longinus could conceive of the sublime as a technique that could be outlined in a handbook for young authors, and as an experience that could inspire listeners to feel like producers themselves: elevated by true sublimity, "we come to believe we have created what we have only heard."¹⁵

Classical aesthetics did not often take into account the specific responses or requirements of audiences.¹⁶ Rather, the norms of classical rhetoric were designed in accordance with the immediate needs of speakers and makers. By extension, early evaluative standards were keyed explicitly to each new generation's requirements for cultural and ideological production. This recalls Frye's claim, in the passage I quoted earlier, that the work of art in the past had a social function *in its own time*. I have argued elsewhere that the idea of a literary canon greatly antedates the eighteenth century; this older conception of canon-formation, however, is unfamiliar to us now because it is a severely restricted conception, restricted precisely by the presentism Frye identifies.¹⁷ Works from the distant past could be deemed canonical only if they could be clearly shown to contribute in some way to the productivity and stature of the present age, or to the circulation of contemporary values. The classical canon stood as a pedagogical model of rhetorical eloquence, and as an ideological model of poetry-making in the service of empire-building.¹⁸ As to the status and utility of the indigenous canon, Defoe's rehearsal of contemporary opinion in *A Vindication of the Press* (1718) is typical of two centuries' worth of early English criticism in the way it itemizes the palpable benefits of literary production: "How much the World is oblig'd . . . to the famous [End Page 401] Writings of *Milton* for the Foundation of Divine Poetry; Poetry in general is improv'd from the Writings of *Chaucer*, *Spencer*, and others; Dramatick Entertainments perfected by *Shakespear*; our Language and Poetry refin'd by *Dryden*; the Passions rais'd by *Otway*; the Inclination mov'd by *Cowley*; and the World diverted by *Hudibras*, (not to mention the Perfections of Mr. *Addison*, and several others of this Age) I leave to the determination of every impartial Reader."¹⁹ The narrow prescriptions of the earliest professional critics (Rymer, Dennis, Gildon) were merely an extreme version of this presentist thinking, insofar as they presumed the possibility of literary "perfection" or correctness being achieved in "this Age." On the margins of this canon, then, were a vast diversity of works once esteemed by

previous generations of English readers (including, at one time or another, the works of Chaucer, Spenser and Shakespeare), yet whose value in relation to the present could no longer be readily proclaimed. The canon was something to be produced, not *reproduced*.²⁰

The requirements and responses of readers, as distinct from those of producers, were rarely a consideration before the eighteenth century. Robert Darnton has noted how difficult it can be to analyze the habits and expectations of early readers: "the documents rarely show readers at work, fashioning meaning from texts, and the documents are texts themselves, which also require interpretation. Few of them are rich enough to provide even indirect access to the cognitive and affective elements of reading, and a few exceptional cases may not be enough for one to reconstruct the inner dimensions of that experience."²¹ If the reader was rarely the subject of discourse, he was its object, both real and rhetorical. The figure of the reader or, more commonly in prefaces to poetic works, the "learned reader" (or Defoe's "impartial reader"), was just one among several manipulative devices that helped the writer to control evaluative responses to his work. Richard Tottel, in the preface to his canonical collection of *Songes and Sonettes* (1557), makes clear to the reader what role he is to play: "I aske help of the learned to defend their learned frendes, the authors of this work: And I exhort the vnlearned, by reding to learne to be more skilful, and to purge that swinelike grossnesse, that maketh the swete maierome not to smell to their delight."²² The reader is caught in the agonistic structures of rhetoric. Tottel leaves no room for debate or reflection. His preface sets down principles not of inclusion, but exclusion: either readers commend the poetry as canonical, or they are swine. **[End Page 402]**

The restrictive presentism of canon-formation in its early phase was reflected in the intensity of the antagonism to which readers in an emergent print culture were subjected. It was a fictive antagonism, certainly, yet one that precluded any possibility of evaluative plurality among readers. The fiction of the learned reader reached a peak of ubiquity at the moment when writers began to sense the extent of the alienation that print imposed between them and their readers. The learned reader was an exclusivist projection, the embodiment of interpretive correctness and enthusiastic patronage, and a figure designed to obviate any possible readerly transgression. For the Renaissance author struggling with the new realities of print fixity and increased audience autonomy, the learned reader presented a comforting fiction of fixed responses. Thus Milton yearned for a "fit audience . . . though few," while Ben Jonson, in the preface to *Catiline* (1611), searched London for the "Reader extraordinary" who stands distinct from the mere "Reader in Ordinaire."²³ Yet as the "learned reader" in these formulations was always coupled with its "unlearned" Other, the fiction could not be truly comforting, for it acknowledged the impossibility of having a true uniformity of response. The learned reader denied the "aporia of judgment," the undecidability as to where value resides, in the text, its invention or its reception:²⁴ "he" was a representation of social harmony, of a monologic conversation where the same value circulated all around. The positing of an unlearned reader, however, allowed for the possibility of conflict and undecidability, even if his values were always dismissed, in Webbe's version, as "seldome true, and therefore not to be sought after."²⁵

The agonistic structures slowly fell away with the ascendancy of a print culture in the later seventeenth century. "From this moment onwards," Bertrand Bronson suggests, "gradually but increasingly, there develops a race of authors who write to an indefinite body of readers, personally undifferentiated and unknown; who accept this separation as a primary condition of their creative activity and address their public invisibly, through the curtain, opaque and impersonal, of print."²⁶ Alexander Brome, in the preface to his *Songs and other Poems* (1661), pleads patience and understanding: "being taught by custome, to beg something of the *Reader*, it shall be this; that in *reading* and *judging* these *Poems*, he will consider his own frailty, and *fallibility*; and read with the same *temper* and *apprehension*, as if [he] himself had *written*, and I were to *judge*."²⁷ The opposition of reader and poet is intact, and value is still cast in the **[End Page 403]** poet's terms, but the reader is perceived as an active and autonomous subject, one who has the imaginative ability to recreate himself, to be a poet at one with Brome and so achieve a unity of response. This reader can also, implicitly, refuse such a consensus, and such a

refusal would be incontestable: if it is only a matter of the reader recreating himself, rewriting himself "as if himself had written," then value is entirely with the reader. Indeed, that is the suggestion in later and more famous eighteenth-century versions of the fiction: all is affect when Fielding, in *Tom Jones*, genially hands his reader a bill of fare.²⁸

I will return to this apparent emancipation of the reader, but this is a good place to discuss earlier usages of "literature," since that is precisely what made a reader "learned." It is commonly assumed that "literature" originally designated any and all types of writing. So writes David Bromwich: "In the beginning literature was just books."²⁹ Yet discursive categories prior to the Enlightenment were rarely other than normative. *Litteratura* for the Romans denoted either the ability to form letters or, more usually, the quality of being widely read. In an age when books were comparatively scarce, being widely read meant being well-read. This sense survives in vernacular derivations of the term: "literature" initially designated erudition among a broad range of polite learning, while its cognates, "literate" and, later, "literary", referred to the condition of what has lately been termed "cultural literacy." Bacon had this sense in mind when, in his dedication before *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), he praised his king for being "so learned in all literature and erudition, diuine and humane."³⁰ Literature was the polite *paideia*, with its own hierarchical syllabus. In the curriculum of one John Clarke, a schoolmaster writing in the 1730s: "The Value therefore of the several Parts of Literature is to be measured by their Tendency;" at the top, for their promotion of virtue, Clarke places "*Divinity and Morality*." Next come mathematics and natural philosophy, for their contributions to scientific and technological advancement. Other parts of learning, he goes on, "that indirectly serve either of the two 'fore-mentioned Purposes, as *Languages*, take the third. And in the last and lowest Rank come those, that scarce, I think, serve any other Purpose in Life, than that of immediate Pleasure, or Amusement: Such are *Poetry, Plays and Novels*; which are not indeed so properly Parts of Learning, as Ways of exercising the Invention, that require some Knowledge of Letters, in order to a Man's acquitting himself handsomely therein."³¹ Clarke's hierarchy illustrates how, in the eighteenth century, poetry was increasingly opposed to learning as pragmatic notions of utility were gradually displaced by concepts of truth-value within the emergent disciplines of knowledge. Literature remained, in Clarke's time, a term capacious enough to subsume both paradigms of value, but the fields of discursive activity were moving apart.

Literature was not just books; it was the name given to all reading that could be considered valuable, and the name for the valence of reading, though it is important to emphasize, with Raymond Williams, that "*literature* was never primarily the active composition--the 'making'--which poetry had described. As reading rather than writing, it was a category of a different kind *Literature*, that is to say, was a category of use and condition rather than of production."³² The term was nonetheless a relatively loose one. Samuel Johnson, for one, used it in a variety of contexts. At times, he seemed to equate literature generally with reading. In his "Life of Milton," he remarked that "The call for books was not in Milton's age what it is in the present. To read was not then a general amusement; neither traders, nor often gentlemen thought themselves disgraced by ignorance. The women had not then aspired to literature, nor was every house supplied with a closet of knowledge." "General literature," he added, "now pervades the nation through all its ranks."³³ At other times, Johnson seemed to have something more specific in mind. Boswell reports that what Johnson read at college, "he told me, was not works of mere amusement, 'not voyages and travels, but all literature, Sir, all ancient writers, all manly.'"³⁴ Literature was functional and select reading--phallogocentric reading if we take Johnson's "manly" literally. But Johnson, who recognized the potential rigidities of canon-formation, preferred a broadly literate society to a selectively learned one:

We must read what the world reads at the moment. It has been maintained that this superfoetation, this teeming of the press in modern times, is prejudicial to good literature, because it obliges us to read so much of what is of inferior value, in order to be in fashion; so that better works are neglected for want of time, because a man will have more gratification of his vanity in conversation, from having read modern books, than from having read works of antiquity.

But it must be considered, that we have now more knowledge generally diffused; all our ladies read now, which is a great extension.

"Modern writers," Johnson added, "are the moons of literature; they shine with reflected light, with light borrowed from the ancients."³⁵ [End Page 405] This is a curious statement, and I shall return to it later. For the moment I wish to note how the phrase "good literature" would seem to indicate that, in an age when books were becoming more readily available, the normative dimensions of the term had to be reinforced. Johnson thought the extension of literacy and knowledge to women was a good thing but, ideally, the idea of literature ought to be set against the present, the "superfoetation" and fashion of the moment, and the pale fire of the moderns.

Though "literature" had been in common usage since the medieval period, only in the generation before Johnson's do the qualities denoted by the term begin to be widely perceived to be as central to the young gentleman's equipment as eloquence had formerly been. Good breeding, Swift sardonically advised, must include "an uncommon degree of literature sufficient to qualify a gentleman for reading a play."³⁶ Defoe, in the pamphlet I quoted above, thinks the absence of "an Inspector of the Literature of Youth ought to be unpardonable; how many Persons of Distinction have curs'd their aged Parents for not bestowing on them a liberal Education?"³⁷ We are still a long way from a definition of literature that includes only imaginative writings, but what was signaled in the increasing currency of "literature" was a gradual recognition of readers, their judgment, expectations and requirements. The reasons for this recognition were several and complex. There was, as Johnson reported, an expansion of the reading public, and the displacement of patronage by an expanding book trade. In composition, there was a flight from prescriptive rhetorical standards, which entailed a kinder, gentler didacticism, a subsidence of the bullying that had formerly characterized addresses to the reader, and a tempering of the presentist thinking that had traditionally informed the evaluation and canonization of literary texts. Above all, the function of literary works was slowly redefined in accordance with an ascendant ideology of commercial humanism, which reflected the altered historical conditions of capitalist exchange relations and an emergent liberal republicanism. As J. G. A. Pocock has stressed, commercial humanism emphasized a broad *polis*, in which the citizen, in exchange for surrendering his autonomy to others who would represent him, became a specialized, private, even decentered individual who refined his moral being through a sympathetic social intercourse among the increasingly complex and differentiated human relations and products, including literature and the arts, that commerce could furnish.³⁸ Though the values of commercial humanism were rejected by [End Page 406] many who were fearful of the moral order being feminized because of this emphasis on sympathetic engagement, the fact remained that, as economic capital had displaced symbolic capital as the main currency of social power, literature and the arts were now left to serve a function not much different from that of the many other commercial goods and services that could facilitate the refinement of manners.³⁹ In effect, commercial humanism turned the subject into a consumer, and the learned reader into the common reader.

Like the rhetorical craftsmen before her, a literary consumer is made, not born. And like the craftsmen, she has guidebooks at her disposal. Poetic textbooks in the eighteenth century continue to serve the instruction of composition and expression but, increasingly, they also demonstrate an added concern for the right appreciation and apprehension of poetry. James Greenwood, in the preface to his school anthology *The Virgin Muse* (1717), asserts his selection is suitable "for the *Teaching to Read Poetry*." According to Ian Michael, Greenwood's claim "is the first expression in a textbook of the idea that poetry could be taught, and not just presented to pupils. . . . Only in the study of foreign languages, principally Latin, Greek and Hebrew, is there evidence before now of texts being scrutinised and 'taught' in order to bring out their meaning."⁴⁰ As its title indicates, Greenwood's collection is aimed at women or, as he claims, "Youth of either Sex" who wish to study poetry at home--students, that is, who are likely on the margins of polite society. These students have no apparent practical need to know how to write their own poetry; it is evidently enough for them to learn how to comprehend canonical poetry. Women in particular,

writes Ann Fisher in her preface to *The Pleasing Instructor* (1756), require such instruction because they are often "misled in the Sense of what they are about to trace, especially in *circumstantial* Authors, or such as the Generality call *dark* and *obscure* Writers. . . . They feel an Entanglement, though they *know not* what or where." ⁴¹ This shift from the composition to the appreciation of poetry coincides with the introduction of the polite canon of letters, in these anthologies, into sectors of society that ostensibly have little practical use for it (or perhaps it is polite society that has little use for poetry from outside its class). In other words, the English canon is, as ever, considered the class property of a patrician élite; only now, the task of criticism and pedagogy is to regulate as much the production of the canon as its reproduction. ⁴²

As the century progresses, these guidebooks become more elaborate and theoretical. The old treatises on the art of poetry are being **[End Page 407]** crowded out by newer manuals on the art of reading. ⁴³ Hugh Blair, introducing his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), acknowledges the divergent interests of his audience: "some, by the profession to which they addict themselves, . . . may have the view of being employed in composition, or in public speaking. Others, without any prospect of this kind, may wish only to improve their taste with respect to writing and discourse, and to acquire principles which will enable them to judge for themselves in that part of literature called the Belles Lettres." ⁴⁴ Just as taste and judgment are the prime originary terms of the ideology of the aesthetic, so the category of Belles Lettres is the historical antecedent to the modern sense of literature. Indeed, it has been argued that Blair's hugely influential lectures "did more than anything else" to fix the range of literature's constituent genres: "orations, historical works, philosophical treatises and dialogues, epistles, fiction, pastoral poems, lyric poems, didactic poems, biblical writings, epic poems, tragedies, and comedies." ⁴⁵ If Belles Lettres are associated to some degree with rhetoric, the emergence of the category can equally be taken as a sign of the reader's seeming emancipation from the forceful codes of rhetoric, and from the social structures that relied on such codes. Belles Lettres are works that have no palpable designs on the reader, works she may read and criticize at will for their beauty alone. True criticism, in Blair's words, "teaches us, in a word, to admire and to blame with judgment, and not to follow the crowd blindly." Through Belles Lettres the reader can engage her moral and imaginative sympathies: "Belles Lettres and criticism chiefly consider him as a Being endowed with those powers of taste and imagination, which were intended to embellish his mind, and to supply him with rational and useful entertainment. They open a field of investigation peculiar to themselves." ⁴⁶ Blair does not say whether value resides with this "endowed Being," or is intrinsic to the text or to Belles Lettres, which somehow recognize in advance the critical authority of such a reader. Yet in so doing, in positing the reader as endowed Being, the text assumes an authority that precedes the reader's. Reader and text occupy the irreconcilable semantic grounds of subject and object. No matter: both equally inhabit "a field of investigation" that is peculiar to itself, inwardly directed, self-generating, a pastoral of value.

Eighteenth-century British aesthetics answered the undecidability of intellect and sensibility, or text and affect, with the theories of taste, judgment, imagination and *je ne sais quoi*. ⁴⁷ Introduced as an attempt to redeem literature and the arts generally from **[End Page 408]** commodification under commercial humanism, these theories promised the reader a harmonious, autotelic "field of investigation," the experience of which, by virtue of its purity and self-referentiality, was felt to provide a measure of refinement evidently unobtainable through the ordinary commerce among all the other goods and exchange relations of modern life. In actual evaluative practice, this autotelic field was more difficult to represent, though it was often perceived as an escape from the immediate pressures Johnson associated with reading in the present, when so many demands could be placed on one's time and attention: "we must read what the world reads at the moment." For Johnson in the "Preface to *Shakespeare*," the test of time involved as much a set of received comparative estimations of Shakespeare as a gradual fading away of once-dominant and distracting fashions and interests:

He has long outlived his century, the term commonly fixed as the test of literary merit. Whatever advantages he might once derive from personal allusions, local customs, or temporary opinions,

have for many years been lost; and every topic of merriment or motive of sorrow which the modes of artificial life afforded him now only obscure the scenes which they once illuminated. The effects of favour and competition are at an end; the tradition of his friendships and his enmities has perished; his works support no opinion with arguments, nor supply any faction with invectives; they can neither indulge vanity nor gratify malignity, but are read without any other reason than the desire of pleasure.

Most of these prejudices were, in Shakespeare's age, precisely the values a learned reader might be *expected* to consider in making a judgment. Johnson is cautious enough to add that we cannot escape our own prejudices, and that judgment "never becomes infallible; and approbation, though long continued, may yet be only the approbation of prejudice and fashion."⁴⁸ But the implications of Johnson's argument are clear: true autonomy and disinterestedness of judgment may only occur in relation to the works of the past, whose long pedigree of reception time itself has helped to repress. The reader may not be able entirely to deny her historicity, but she can perhaps transcend what Johnson calls "the modes of artificial life," both of Shakespeare's time and of her own. Going back to the classics, the reader can forget about the burdens of the past and present, and can read and judge authentically.

The examples René Wellek cites as the earliest English usages of "literature" as a term for a specific body of writings, and not just any **[End Page 409]** learning, all have to do with works from the past. "Shakespeare and Milton," writes George Colman the elder in 1761, "seem to stand alone, like first-rate authors, amid the general wreck of old English literature." And Johnson, in a letter of 1774, expresses the hope that "what is underservedly forgotten of our antiquated literature might be revived."⁴⁹ There is much reviving of old literature in the later eighteenth century: Colman's essay appears before an important edition of Massinger's plays, and Johnson within five years will go on to produce his anthology of post-Interregnum verse, now familiar to us as *The Lives of the Poets*. Johnson's moral considerations notwithstanding, such reviving of marginal authors is not usually done in the name of either composition or pedagogy. Massinger could never conceivably be defended as a model of eloquence or a fount of useful wisdom. The edition of his works, and those of many other early English authors, are sold to be read, in Johnson's formulation, without any other reason than the desire of pleasure. This new emphasis on simple appreciation and pleasure results in a considerable broadening of the English canon, which, since its inception, had been keyed to the demands of production, to each generation's standards for poetic and rhetorical expression. The canon becomes, in Johnson's age, something for readers to make.⁵⁰ We can even mark the date of this change.

On 22 February 1774, literature in its modern sense began. On that day, the House of Lords elected to defeat the notion of "perpetual copyright" so long claimed by the London bookselling monopoly over works of the English canon. The Lords had been persuaded by the novel idea that the canon ought to be fully accessible in multiple editions to general readers, for their benefit and pleasure. The moment was highly symbolic, for it marked the official recognition of the needs and desires of the reader. From that moment, the canon of English literature, now conceived of as comprising only *old* works, is valued as public domain: as one contemporary account put it, "the Works of *Shakespeare*, of *Addison*, *Pope*, *Swift*, *Gay*, and many other excellent Authors of the present Century, are, by this Reversal, declared to be the Property of any Person."⁵¹ Never before in English history had it been possible to think that the canon might belong to the people, to readers. From that moment, the canon became a set of commodities to be consumed; it became literature rather than poetry.

Early English writings, in other words, first became widely available in cheap editions at the moment when they were no longer **[End Page 410]** thought useful models for composition but rather things people ought to know in order to help sharpen their taste and judgment. The canon of the dead was felt more suitable for this purpose than contemporary works for the reasons Johnson hinted at: the canon was free of the incrustations of modern prejudice. Readers could more directly experience and value the works of the past than those that had not yet survived the

test of time. Literature was thus a more adequate term than Belles Lettres because it was at an additional remove from rhetoric. It was a term that had to do exclusively with reading, reading isolated from received opinion, considerations of utility, and the pressures of reality. "The concerns of mere literature," writes Isaac D'Israeli in 1796, "are not very material in the system of human life." In the literature of the past, D'Israeli claims, the reader can find refuge from the horrors of the French Revolution: "Literary investigation is allied neither to politics nor religion; it is . . . abstracted from all the factions on earth; and independent of popular discontents, and popular delusions."⁵² Yet to maintain this refuge, even the canon must occasionally be purged: by 1802, Dryden, whose Virgil was long considered an essential pedagogical model of expression in English, is said to be too "political" for young sensibilities.⁵³

If reading canonical works is considered an isolated activity, it follows that it should have nugatory effects on the world outside. Schoolmaster Vicesimus Knox says as much in an essay on reading early English poetry: "Mistakes in matters of mere taste and literature, are harmless in their consequences to society. They have no direct tendency to hurt any interest, or corrupt any morals."⁵⁴ Knox's trivialization of literature would have been unheard of in ages past. Not that Knox disesteems poetry. On the contrary, it is for him a discourse purer than the rest, one which suffers tremendously when it is contaminated by other interests. As he suggests in another essay, politics can be harmful to literature:

Poetry, philology, elegant and polite letters, in all their ramifications, display their alluring charms in vain to him, whose head and heart still vibrate with the harsh and discordant sounds of a political dispute at the tavern. Those books, whose tendency is only to promote elegant pleasures or advance science, which flatter no party, and gratify no malignant passion, are suffered to fall into oblivion; while a pamphlet, which espouses the cause of any political men or measures, however inconsiderable its literary merit, is extolled as one of the first productions of modern literature. . . . From a taste for trash, . . . the community, together with literature, is at last deeply injured.⁵⁵

[End Page 411]

Knox does not quite equate literature with imaginative productions, but the normative import of his categories is clear: literature, no longer synonymous with broad learning, is a canon of works of evident "literary merit" that cannot be judged according to the terms of other, mundane discourses. Reading this canon may be a harmless and ineffectual activity, as long as it is done in an appropriate state of disinterestedness. The reader of literature is at once emancipated from worldly concerns, and powerless to alter that world. The pleasure of the text is all: the reader may be the one who ascribes value to the text, but she has none of consequence to give.⁵⁶

At the very moment, then, when canonical texts are becoming easily available to a wide plurality of readers, the experience of literature is increasingly defined, by Knox and others, as an isolated and autonomous activity; defining that autonomy, then, entails a series of progressively refined demarcations, initially from politics and religion, and then, later, from science and facticity, ideas and abstractions.⁵⁷ Bromwich is no doubt right in saying that the idea of aesthetic autonomy was a myth "of which the more skeptical romantics were free from the start."⁵⁸ But there is the sense, in the later eighteenth century, of aestheticizing the act of reading, of isolating the ideal state of mind for experiencing the canon. In his essay "Of the Choice of Reading" (1797), William Godwin goes so far as to argue that "the impression we derive from a book, depends much less upon its real contents, than upon the temper of mind and preparation with which we read it."⁵⁹ "Literature" comes to imply such detached, well-tempered reading. Archibald Alison, writing in 1790, suggests that literary art is best approached by a mind which is "vacant and unemployed," and whose "imagination is free and unembarrassed" by "the labour of criticism."⁶⁰ Literary value remains a matter between text and reader, so long as the field of knowledge in which judgment can take place is clearly delimited, and forever marked off from extrinsic interests and influences. *Pace* Foucault, the act of *reading* literature is made to seem so pure and unique that there is no sure

telling intellect from sensibility, merit from affect. It is almost as though the subject were herself aestheticized; she is presented alone with the text, so alone you cannot tell the reader from the reading.

Of course, Knox, Johnson and the others are all helping to instruct the reader on how best to read and judge literature. Their editions make older works ready for consumption by correcting, annotating and modernizing them. Their critical commentaries mediate received [End Page 412] opinions and present tastes, and so point the reader to the role she is to play within the test of time. Knox's disinterested reader is as much a rhetorical fiction as Defoe's "impartial reader" in the passage I cited earlier. Inevitably, the fiction of the learned reader reappears in new vestments as the defender of a plural canon that transcends presentist dogma. Thus Colman, in his "Vindication" of Massinger, contrasts a myopic "Publick Taste" that enjoys only "one Species of Excellence," to the judgment of the wiser few who are alive to all variety of literary merit: "the eminent Class of Writers," Colman writes, "who flourished at the Beginning of this Century, have almost entirely superseded their illustrious Predecessors. The Works of *Congreve, Vanbrugh, Steele, Addison, Pope, Swift, Gay, &c. &c.* are the chief Study of the Million: I say, of the Million, for as to those few, who are not only familiar with all our own Authors, but are also conversant with the Antients, they are not to be circumscribed by the narrow limits of the Fashion."⁶¹ The unlearned, their ranks swollen to a "Million," remain slaves to fashion. Though the public has not erred in venerating the Augustans, only a learned élite recognizes the full extent and depth of the English canon.

Such rhetorical manipulations aside, the efforts of critics and editors like Colman contribute significantly to one aspect of emergent readers' aesthetics, the final aspect I wish to treat, and one that presupposed a slightly more engaged reader than the passive figure Knox and Alison envisage. If the canon of the dead was felt to be a more suitably neutral and independent object of study, the reader coming to this canon for the first time would nevertheless be required to overcome her presentist feelings and confront squarely the alterity, or unsettling otherness, of the aged texts. Opening up the canon means coming to terms with cultural and historical difference, a process that is never easy and is often dismaying. The ruins of time, for Addison, could dull even the most revered classics, and make Homer's or Virgil's characters seem "as Strangers, or indifferent Persons" to English readers.⁶² Awareness of such alterity and plurality would conceivably oblige one to recognize the possible relativity of literary values, but early critics like Addison were quick to deny this possibility by dismissing the separations of time and culture as merely "accidental Circumstances." A text from the distant past, if it was to be established as canonical, had therefore to be accommodated to contemporary expectations by being packaged in an allegory of moral and ideological utility: Ancients more modern than the Moderns, Chaucer a refiner of the language, Milton a fount of Whiggish verities.⁶³ [End Page 413]

Yet the question of dealing with cultural alterity is a pressing one in the eighteenth century, particularly given the shift, as I have described it, from the production to the consumption of literature, and the consequent expansion of the canon to include once-marginal authors from the English past. In a neglected passage of his essay "On The Standard of Taste" (1757), David Hume writes of the difficulty of "reconciling" oneself to the otherness of canonical texts. Quoting Horace, Hume remarks how the old "poet's *monument more durable than brass*, must fall to the ground like common brick or clay, were men to make no allowance for the continual revolutions of manners and customs, and would admit of nothing but what was suitable to the prevailing fashion." Religious or philosophical "errors" of earlier ages, Hume contends, are the easier to cope with: "There needs but a certain thought or imagination to make us enter into all the opinions, which then prevailed, and relish the sentiments or conclusions derived from them." But, Hume adds, the mores and moral values of generations past are a great impediment to the enjoyment of writings from the past: "a very violent effort is requisite to change our judgment of manners, and excite sentiments of approbation or blame, love or hatred, different from those to which the mind from long custom has been familiarized."⁶⁴ Hume is reluctant to include among these impediments the literary values of the past, for it is the premise of his essay that a

consensual standard of taste has, however ample the evidence to the contrary, "been established by the uniform consent and experience of nations and ages." ⁶⁵

It becomes, in the later eighteenth century, the hermeneutic task of critics, editors, literary historians, critical biographers and philologists to enable the reader to make this imaginative, violent, *defamiliarizing* effort at making allowances for the inevitable alterity of writings from other ages and cultures. Such an effort, in theory, will bring the reader to an adequate understanding and proper appreciation of the entire, plural canon. Hence Johnson on the need to assess Dryden's work in the context of the Restoration: "To judge rightly of an author we must transport ourselves to his time, and examine what were the wants of his contemporaries, and what were his means of supplying them." ⁶⁶ Yet to maintain a historicist perspective like Johnson's is to allow for the potential relativity of cultural standards. It is also no longer clear whether the reader "transports" her own values to the text, or whether value is "intrinsic" to the text from the moment of its composition. The hope in the eighteenth [End Page 414] century, and into ours, is that this aporia of judgment will be resolved when our shared cognizance of difference will eventually and paradoxically reveal a powerful mental faculty innate to all, or, at least, a fundamental conformism to elite values: "in consequence of the growing intercourse between all the nations of earth," Joseph Priestley predicts, "and all the *literati* of them, an uniform and perfect standard of taste will at length be established over the whole world." ⁶⁷

We have learned to doubt such essentialism. But the humanist belief that literature may help us transcend our own provincialism is still heard to this day: "art, poetry, fiction can sometimes lift us out of ourselves, as when we see or feel experience, or a portion of it, from the perspective of another. Solidarity can be achieved in no other way." ⁶⁸ To define "literature" as a body of imaginative writings may, in this way, be misleading, for it locates the imaginative act in the work and not the reader, the object and not the subject. Literature designates, then, those canonical if secular writings whose reproduction and transmission necessitates, or perhaps encourages, an act of imaginative sympathy, a creative reading that leads to "dialogic" understanding. ⁶⁹ It is misleading, as well, in the way it ignores how critical and academic institutions mediate this transmission and so control these acts of understanding and judgment. Measuring, however, the extent of this mediation, whether as it exists at present or in the eighteenth century, remains no simple matter: though the change from making to reading the canon in the eighteenth century may have brought about only limited democratization of canon-formation, literary canons are the products of complex identity politics that only with reduction can be equated with hegemonic authority.

Poetry is composed and spoken, literature read and studied. The inevitable consequence of the shift from production to consumption is the loss of any coherent theory of invention within the cultural field. The Romantic theory of the poet-genius who, in Wordsworth's version, creates "the taste by which he is to be enjoyed" is, as Eagleton remarks, spiritual compensation for the degradations of commodification, and poor compensation at that: not only is Wordsworth's claim something that Jonson, Milton and Pope might have taken for granted, but even to speak of "taste" is to abide by the terms of consumption. Likewise, Wordsworth's sympathetic reader who evinces a "co-operating power" with the poet's emotions is little more than spiritual kin to the learned reader of old. ⁷⁰ Perhaps this is [End Page 415] why Wordsworth's final court of appeal is a suprahistorical audience far removed from present-day readers: "Towards the Public, the Writer hopes that he feels as much deference as it is entitled to: but to the People, philosophically characterised, and to the embodied spirit of their knowledge, so far as it exists and moves, at the present, faithfully supported by its two wings, the past and the future, his devout respect, his reverence, is due." ⁷¹ Only an immortal audience is utterly free of presentist complacency, and utterly receptive to all literature, regardless of its age or culture of origin. In this, we can recognize the next stage in the movement Foucault traced in Western culture, a movement that saw the attribute of heroism pass, in an emergent world of representations, from the hero to the poet-maker whose task it had been to represent him. ⁷² In an emergent world of reproduction and

consumption, those epic dimensions of heroism and immortality pass finally from the poet-maker to the reader.

Dalhousie University

Notes

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 300. See also René Wellek, "What is Literature?," in *What Is Literature?*, ed. Paul Hernadi (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978), 16-23; Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, 2nd ed. (London: Fontana, 1983), 183-88; and Clifford Siskin, *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988), 84-93.

² Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), 344-45.

³ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), 18.

⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics* 1.6-7, in *Ancient Literary Criticism*, ed. D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom, tr. M. E. Hubbard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 91. Editorial interpolations are the translator's.

⁵ Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie* (c. 1579), in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, 2 vols. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1904), 1:160.

⁶ John Dennis, *Critical Works*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1939-1943), 2:35.

⁷ Sidney, 1:173.

⁸ I note, however, Derrida's remarks on how the theory of literature recorded in *The Republic* and the *Poetics*, a theory that held mimesis subject to truth, inaugurated a history of literature that would come to an end precisely at the moment when the name of "literature" was finally declared (*Dissemination*, tr. Barbara Johnson [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981], 183).

⁹ Ben Jonson, *Timber; or, Discoveries*, in *Works*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925-1952), 8:636.

¹⁰ In an argument that anticipates mine generally, M. H. Abrams has linked the emergence of "literature" to the rise of aesthetics, in particular to the shift from what he calls a "construction" to a "contemplation" model of literary value, in "Art-as-Such: The Sociology of Modern Aesthetics," in *Doing Things with Texts* (New York: Norton, 1989), 135-58. I would suggest, though, that this emphasis on construction, on theories of art that presuppose "the maker's stance to his work in process" (138), is somewhat limited insofar as it ignores the broader cultural economy within which poetry was valued and valorized.

¹¹ On this point, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, "'Phoenix from the Ashes' or: From Canon to Classic," *New Literary History* 20 (1988), 141-63. Though Gumbrecht deals with the making of the French literary canon, his argument anticipates mine in indentifying a change in the way literary value was defined: beginning in the eighteenth century, Gumbrecht suggests, this value "is now being measured less by the functions it performs for society than by its effects on individual readers" (151).

12 Perhaps the most prevalent myth of authorship prior to the Romantic valorization of genius held that civil society was itself the offspring of the poets and orators. In Cicero's much-cited version, no other force approaches the power of poetic eloquence in helping "to gather scattered humanity into one place, or to lead it out of its brutish existence in the wilderness up to our present condition of civilization as men and as citizens, or, after the establishment of social communities, to give shape to laws, tribunals, and civic rights" (*Of Oratory*, 1.8.33, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg [Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1990], 204). For Puttenham, poetry was "th'originall cause and occasion of [men's] first assemblies," and as poets "were from the beginning the best perswaders," they acted as "the first lawmakers to the people, and the first polititiens, deuising all expedient meanes for th'establishment of Common wealth, to hold and containe the people in order and duety by force and vertue of good and wholesome lawes, made for the preservation of the publique peace and tranquillitie" (*The Arte of English Poesie* [1589], in Smith, 2:6-9).

13 Thomas Hayward, preface to *The British Muse* (London, 1738), vii.

14 The phrase is Richard Lanham's, in *The Motives of Eloquence* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976), 1. Stanley Fish adopts the phrase in his *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1989), 482-85.

15 Longinus, "On Sublimity," trans. D. A. Russell, in Russell and Winterbottom, 467.

16 "In the history of the arts," Hans Robert Jauss has argued, "there was little investigation into reception. The canon of works and authors was extended to their posthumous fame, passing over in silence their impact on recipients, the very bearers of tradition." Jauss cites the notable exception of Aristotle's *Poetics* (to which might be added book ten of *Plato's Republic*) but concludes that "classical aesthetics saw any inquiry into the effects of art as outside the purview of art" ("The Theory of Reception: A Retrospective of its Unrecognized History," in *Literary Theory Today*, ed. Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990], 60).

17 Ross, "Just When Did 'British Bards begin t'Immortalize'?", *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 19, ed. Leslie Ellen Brown and Patricia Craddock (East Lansing, Mich.: Colleagues Press, 1989), 383-98. Douglas Lane Patey offers the counter-argument in "The Eighteenth Century Invents the Canon," *Modern Language Studies* 18 (1988): 17-37.

18 Frank Kermode has related one aspect of early canon-formation, the nomination of classic texts, to an ideology of empire, in *The Classic*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), 15-80.

19 [Daniel Defoe], *A Vindication of the Press: or, An Essay on the Usefulness of Writing, on Criticism, and the Qualification of Authors* (London, 1718), 12. Defoe's authorship of this pamphlet has been much contested. See the evidence collected by Laura A. Curtis in "The Attribution of A Vindication of the Press to Daniel Defoe," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 18, ed. John Y. Yolton and Leslie Ellen Brown (East Lansing, Mich.: Colleagues Press, 1988), 433-44.

20 "Reproduced" here is meant to imply the means of both physical preservation (printing, libraries, etc.) and cultural transmission (the institutions of criticism, pedagogy, etc.) This is the sense in which John Guillory uses the term in his entry for "Canon," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1990), 233-49. Guillory rightly notes that canon-formation (at least in its modern conception) involves both the evaluation and the preservation of literary works: acts of judgment, he suggests, "are

necessary rather than sufficient to constitute a process of canon-formation. An individual's judgment that a work is great does nothing in itself to preserve that work, unless that judgment is made in a certain institutional context, a setting in which it is possible to insure the reproduction of the work, its continual reintroduction to generations of readers" (237).

21 Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York: Norton, 1990), 157. See, however, Eugene R. Kintgen, "Reconstructing Elizabethan Reading," *Studies in English Literature* 30 (1990): 1-18.

22 Richard Tottel, pref. to *Songes and Sonnettes, written by the ryght honourable Lorde Henry Haward late Earle of Surrey, and other* (London, 1557), rpt. as *Tottels' Miscellany*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), 1:2.

23 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Merrit Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey Press, 1935), 7.31; Jonson, *Works*, 5:432.

24 The quoted phrase is Howard Caygill's, in *Art of Judgement* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 1.

25 William Webbe, *A Discourse of English Poetrie* (London, 1586), in Smith, 1:298.

26 Bertrand Harris Bronson, *Facets of the Enlightenment* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1968), 302. See also Jane P. Tompkins, "The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response," in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), 211-16.

27 Alexander Brome, *Songs and other Poems* (London, 1661), A7v.

28 Of course, such gentler, more sophisticated versions of the fiction continue to mask didactic designs, as J. Paul Hunter notes in *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: Norton, 1990), 236-39.

29 David Bromwich, "The Invention of Literature," in *A Choice of Inheritance: Self and Community from Edmund Burke to Robert Frost* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989), 2.

30 Bacon, *Of the proficience and aduancement of Learning, diuine and humane* (London, 1605), A3v. As Patey notes, Joseph Warton could quite easily oppose "literature" in this older sense to the "poetry" generated in earlier times by "ignorance and superstition" (19). "Literature," Warton remarked, "and a better sense of things, not only banished these barbarities, but superseded the mode of composition which was formed upon them," in *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*, 4th ed., 2 vols. (London, 1782), 2:462.

31 John Clarke, *An Essay upon Study*, 2nd ed. (London, 1737), 5-6. Patey quotes from the first edition of Clarke's work an aside that, according to Patey, reveals Clarke's contempt for much of the English poetic canon: "As for our own Nation in Particular, it produced very little of any kind, in my Opinion, before the Reign of King Charles the 2nd, which is at this Day worth Reading. The English till then, were but lazy in their Application to Letters" (18-19). Clarke's statement strikes me as utterly typical of the presentist thinking that characterized English canon-formation in its early phase. So Defoe: "Literature is in a flourishing Condition, and Poetry seems to improve more at this Time than it has done in any preceding Reign, except that of King Charles II" (*Vindication*, 22).

32 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 47.

[33](#) Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets*, ed. G. B. Hill, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 1:143-44.

[34](#) James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, ed. G. B. Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934-1950; with corrections, 1964), 1:57.

[35](#) Boswell, *Life*, 3:332-33.

[36](#) Jonathan Swift, *Prose Works*, ed. Herbert Davis, 14 vols. (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1939-1968), 4:217.

[37](#) Defoe, *Vindication*, 34. Reading, for Defoe as much for Swift, primarily serves cultural production: "Writing is the only Test of Literature" (35).

[38](#) See J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, And History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), 37-50.

[39](#) Nancy Armstrong first proposed the case for the feminization of culture in the eighteenth century in her *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), 3-27. Since then, Adam Potkay has discussed Macpherson's complex ambivalence over this feminization, noting that "the Poems of Ossian are animated, at a deep level, with male resentment toward the very ideal of polite domesticity they help to formulate," in "Virtue and Manners in Macpherson's Poems of Ossian," *PMLA* 107 (1992), 128. David Simpson has considered the masculinist backlash in aesthetic theories of the period, notably Burke's "remasculinization" of the sublime, in *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt Against Theory* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 126-31, while Douglas Lane Patey surveys the male appropriation of the "feminine" expressiveness of the lyric in "'Aesthetics' and the Rise of the Lyric in the Eighteenth Century," *Studies in English Literature* 33 (1993): 587-608.

[40](#) Ian Michael, *The Teaching of English: From the Sixteenth Century to 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), 171.

[41](#) Ann Fisher, pref. to *The Pleasing Instructor* (London, 1756), cited in Michael, 173.

[42](#) In maintaining this, I agree generally with John Guillory's contention that "the real social process" of canon-formation involves "the reproduction not of values but of social relations," in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 56. I find, however, somewhat limited his view that canon-formation in the later eighteenth century was geared primarily toward standardizing vernacular speech. This view recognizes only the older emphasis on cultural production, and ignores the fact that many eighteenth-century educators openly proposed dual canons, one for composition and one for reading. George Chapman, in *A Treatise on Education* (3rd ed., London, 1784), recommends that students who demonstrate no talent for writing poetry be nonetheless introduced both to "the most celebrated poems in the English language" and to works of English criticism, in the hope that they develop at least a "critical taste" for canonical texts (197-98).

[43](#) In the later eighteenth century, "reading" was primarily identified with elocution; the ideal of verbal productivity continued to have its many adherents, and a disgusted rhetorician like Thomas Sheridan could still confidently declare that "to refine, ascertain, and fix the English Language" through "a Revival of the Art of Speaking" might help to cure "the Disorders of Great Britain," (*British Education* [London, 1756], title page). Yet at the same time, other educators were beginning to demonstrate a new concern with teaching students how to interpret literary works. J. Butler advised his pupils that they ought to follow teachers' instructions in reading works of English literature, so as to discourage the "bad habits . . . of fancying you understand what you

don't, or understanding by halves, or of being inattentive to, or absent from, what is set before you as an object of understanding," (*Proposals for an Admendment of School-Instruction* [London, 1772], 11). Surveying manuals like these, Peter de Bolla has noted that eighteenth-century pedagogical practice underwent a "change from a voice-centred discursivity to one centred on and in the text," and that most later "accounts of the reading activity continually draw on those texts which we most commonly call works of aesthetics" (*The Discourse of the Sublime* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989], 232).

[44](#) Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 2 vols. (London, 1783), 1:4-5.

[45](#) Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), 535.

[46](#) Blair, 9-10.

[47](#) See Caygill, *Art of Judgement*, 98-102, on this point, and Terry Eagleton's *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), whose initial chapters offer a redaction of Caygill's thesis.

[48](#) Samuel Johnson, *Works*, ed. A. T. Hazen et al. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1958-), 7:61.

[49](#) Wellek, "What Is Literature?," 19.

[50](#) Elizabeth Cooper, in the preface to her anthology of early English verse, *The Muses Library* (London, 1737), is happy to let the public answer the complicated question of why England ought to form a literary canon: "Of what real Value polite Literature is to a Nation, is too sublime a Talk for me to meddle with; I therefore chuse to refer my Readers to their own Experience."

[51](#) *The Cases of the Appellants and Respondents in the Cause of Literary Property, Before the House of Lords* (London, 1774), rpt. in *The Literary Property Debate: Six Tracts, 1764-1774*, ed. Stephen Parks (New York: Garland, 1975), sig. Av. For more on how much modern notions of canonicity owe to the literary property debate, see my "Copyright and the Invention of Tradition," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 25 (1992): 1-27.

[52](#) Isaac D'Israeli, *Miscellanies; or, Literary Recreations* (London, 1796), vii, xxi.

[53](#) Joshua Collins, *A Practical Guide to Parents and Guardians, in the right choice and use of books*, 2nd ed. (London, 1802), cited in Michael, 211-12.

[54](#) Vicesimus Knox, *Essays, Moral and Literary*, 14th ed., 2 vols. (London, 1795), 1:217. Noting the immense popularity and influence of Knox's writings, Robert W. Uphaus has concluded that "No writer in the eighteenth century--other than, perhaps, Samuel Johnson--made so significant a contribution to eighteenth-century ideas of the canon as Vicesimus Knox" ("Vicesimus Knox and the Canon of Eighteenth-Century Literature," *The Age of Johnson* 4, ed. Paul J. Korshin [New York: AMS Press, 1991], 345).

[55](#) Knox, 2:171.

[56](#) This is arguably the prevalent perception of literature to this day. Literature is valuable only insofar as it helps to fashion and educate more and better readers, receivers of ever more refined sensibility, consumers of ever greater disinterestedness: "The task of the moral technology of Literature," Terry Eagleton writes, "is to produce an historically peculiar form of human subject

who is sensitive, receptive, imaginative and so on . . . about nothing in particular" ("The Subject of Literature," *Cultural Critique* 2 [1985/86], 98).

[57](#) Wordsworth, with whom we associate the inaugural demarcation of poetry from science, situated this demarcation at the end of a long line of similar "exclusions" which the reader could trace within "the revolutions, not of literature alone, but likewise of society itself." By the act of writing verse, Wordsworth explains, the poet "not only apprizes the Reader that certain classes of ideas and expressions will be found in his book, but that others will be carefully excluded. This exponent or symbol held forth by metrical language must in different eras of literature have excited very different expectations: for example, in the age of Catullus, Terence and Lucretius, and that of Statius or Claudian; and in our own country, in the age of Shakespeare and Beaumont and Fletcher, and that of Donne and Cowley, or Dryden, or Pope" ("Preface to the Lyrical Ballads," in *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, ed. W. J. B. Owen [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974], 70).

[58](#) Bromwich, *A Choice of Inheritance*, 19. Both Bromwich and Siskin treat in more detail the relation of "literature" as a concept to later valorizations of the ideal reading subject.

[59](#) William Godwin, *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners and Literature* (1797), 135.

[60](#) Archibald Alison, *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (Edinburgh, 1790), 10-13. Patey cites this work in a useful survey of what he calls the "aestheticization of literature" in the eighteenth century ("The Eighteenth Century Invents the Canon," 23-25). Alison's passive reader in effect takes to a logical extreme the man of benevolent temper whom, in earlier theories of taste, good reading had itself nurtured: "The exercise of taste begets serenity and satisfaction. When these prevail, the mind is prone to benevolence" (Alexander Gerard, *An Essay on Taste* [Edinburgh, 1759], 191).

[61](#) George Colman, "Critical Reflections on the Old English Dramatic Writers," in *Dramatic Works of Philip Massinger*, ed. Thomas Coxeter, 4 vols. (London, 1761), 1:2-4.

[62](#) Joseph Addison, *The Spectator* (no. 273), ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 2:565.

[63](#) Joseph Addison, "A Discourse on Ancient and Modern Learning" (c. 1695), in *Miscellaneous Works*, ed. A. C. Guthkelch, 2 vols. (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1914), 2:450. See, however, Kermode, in *The Classic*, 73-76, who cites this essay as an important contribution to the development of hermeneutic readings of canonical texts. "Accommodation," "allegory" and "packaging" are some of the terms Kermode uses to describe the non-hermeneutic methods of making older works seem modern by providing them with elaborate interpretations of their "enduring" meaning and significance.

[64](#) David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987), 246-47. Hume's liberalism, much like our own, chafes at the evident moral shortcomings of many long-established classics: "The want of humanity and of decency, so conspicuous in the characters drawn by several of the ancient poets, even sometimes by Homer and the Greek tragedians, diminishes considerably the merit of their noble performances, and gives modern authors an advantage over them" (246).

[65](#) Hume, 237.

[66](#) Johnson, *Lives*, 1:411. Knox acknowledges the process can tax the reader's patience. The necessity of constantly referring to critical and philological aids, he notes, "induces the tired

reader to fly to more modern books, whose gold, equally pure, may be extracted, without the trouble of an analytical process" (1:216).

[67](#) Joseph Priestley, *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* (London, 1777), 115.

[68](#) Giles Gunn, "Rorty's Novum Organum," *Raritan* 10 (1990), 103.

[69](#) This is of course a fundamental principle of hermeneutics. Jauss writes: "Literary understanding first becomes dialogic when the alterity of the text is sought out and acknowledged before the horizon of one's own expectations--with the result that instead of attempting a naive fusion of horizons, one's own expectations will be corrected and expanded through the experience of the other" (*Question and Answer: Forms of Dialogic Understanding*, ed. Michael Hays [Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1989], 207-8).

[70](#) William Wordsworth, "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" (1815), in *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, 210-11; Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 65.

[71](#) Wordsworth, 214. Quoting this passage, Jon Klancher summarizes Wordsworth's hopes for literature as they are set out in the 1815 Essay: "Literature is to be the dialectical negation of a fated world of textual commodity exchanges, a literature which never addresses itself to the social present but realizes its audience only at the end of time" (*The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* [Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987], 149).

[72](#) Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), 73.