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The Self-Deconstructing Canon: Teaching the Survey Course Without Perpetuating Hegemony

Randy Laist

Abstract
To teach a survey course in any discipline is, almost by definition, to construct and propagate the kind of grand narrative of history that has been discredited by postmodernism, deconstruction, multiculturalism, and, in fact, by most contemporary theory. Certainly, to perpetuate unthinkingly an authoritarian reverence for “Great Books” is antithetical to the spirit of a humanist education today, yet survey courses with titles like “Masterworks of English Literature” (the class I teach at the University of Connecticut) remain staples of most undergraduate plans of study. A similar pedagogical challenge accompanies introductory courses in philosophy, history, and the sciences. Starting from the assumption that it is possible to teach from the canon without merely promulgating it, I consider three ways in which canonical texts can be employed in a survey course setting as a means of teaching the canon and deconstructing it at the same time.

Keywords
survey course, canon, pedagogy, hegemony, deconstruction

To teach a survey course in any discipline is, almost by definition, to construct and propagate the kind of grand narrative of history that has been discredited by postmodernism, deconstruction, multiculturalism, and, in fact, by most contemporary theory. Although survey courses are frequently maligned as hierarchical, exclusive, and reactionary, the persistence in university curricula of classes like the one I teach at the University of Connecticut, “Masterworks of English Literature,” attests to a general agreement that, as Glenn C. Altschuler (2000) has argued, “Survey courses are the best way to provide the basic context that in turn permits productive learning in more advanced courses” (p. B24). According to this view, survey courses are necessary to provide students with the “raw data” that will become the subject of more nuanced consideration in more advanced courses. In the field of literary studies, efforts to mitigate the perceived political incorrectness of survey courses by repopulating them with women and minorities represent, as Susan VanZanten Gallagher (2001) explains, “not so much an exercise in the eradication as in the creation of a canon” (p. 56). As a finite list of privileged texts, the syllabus of a literature course is itself unavoidably a signifier and vehicle of canonicity. The question...
is not whether the instructor of the course will promote a canonical block of texts, but the style in which she will do so. Beverly Peterson (2001) observes that "In constructing a syllabus, teachers and professors may act as if the choices had been made for them, sanctioned by tradition" (p. 380), but Gerald Graff (1992) and others have explored the possibility of presenting canonicity itself as an arena of conflict. Graff encourages teachers to take pedagogical advantage of disciplinary disputes by "teach[ing] the conflicts themselves, making them part of our object of study" (p. 12). Starting from the assumption that it is possible to teach from the canon without merely promulgating it, I would like to consider the possibility that canonical texts may be employed in a literature survey course setting as a means of teaching the canon and deconstructing it at the same time.

The situation in literary studies is an explicit case of a more abstract problem that haunts survey courses across disciplines. While literature students are assigned a literal collection of texts that constitute the course content, survey courses in history, philosophy, and even the sciences tend to be misleadingly centralized around grand narratives which are more invisible than they are in literary studies and so, perhaps, more cognitively entrenched in the worldviews of both teachers and students. The facts that other disciplines also have lists of canonical texts and that literary studies similarly has an invisible guiding ideology illustrate that problems of canonicity are all-pervasive at many different levels in a wide variety of pedagogical situations. Linda K. Kerber (1997) has lamented the typical American History survey course "in which the lessons already seem to be well laid-out, marching in sequence from Columbus to as close to the present as we can get before the class sessions are used up" (p. 15). Ladelle McWhorter (2000) observes that "Most undergraduate philosophy majors take a course in modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant. However, postmodern philosophers have questioned the practice of turning philosophical history into a grand narrative as survey courses like Modern Philosophy tend to do" (p. 1). Biology textbooks are commonly organized around an anthropocentric narrative rather than foregrounding ecological diversity, and physics textbooks continue to describe the history of science as an ascent of incremental accomplishments rather than as a succession of Kuhnian paradigm shifts.

Teachers of history, philosophy, and science are generally well-versed in the epistemological and cultural complexities which characterize the discourse of their fields, but when it comes to communicating "the basics" to non-specialists, these complexities tend to be set aside for the sake of pedagogical efficiency. As teachers, we find it easy to convince ourselves that the critique of disciplinary meta-narratives is something "added on" to the core content of the discipline: an eccentric coda to the conventional history. But I think if we are honest with ourselves, it is clear that the challenge represented by the "postmodernizing" of our disciplinary assumptions has genetic implications for our most fundamental attitudes about what it means to think about literature, history, philosophy, or science. Following my explanation of how I address the challenge to canonicity in my literature class, I will suggest possibilities for analogous applications in other disciplines.

Canonicity is not only a list of texts, but a way of thinking about what the list signifies. The limited number of texts that can be reasonably included in a literature survey course constitutes a necessary canon, but it is the pedagogical approach to these texts that will determine the degree to which they will be characterized as transcendent and inviolable or contingent and provisional. There are three interrelated levels at which what we might call the "ontological status"—the aura of metaphysical authority—of texts under study is determined. Most concretely, there is the status of the text itself. The permanence and mass-production of the printed page suggest an apparent authority that we naturally tend to personify as a confident and
decisive speaker, unified in his intentions and unwaveringly deliberate in his speech. Familiarity with close reading accustoms students to conceive of the author as the all-powerful God of the text-world, dexterously manipulating every aspect of the text. But in fact, many of the most conventionally canonical works lack any such relation to this kind of author, and expose in their very existence the mutability and haphazardness of the processes both of creative activity and of textual transmission. More subtly, the ontological status of a text will be determined by its perceived relation to a historical and literary context. In a survey course, where an entire historical period might be represented by a single text, there is a strong possibility that a text may seem to spring up out of nothing as an independent, self-sufficient jewel of disembodied imagination. In the interest of communicating a more accurate understanding of the pervasive significance of literary influence, a responsible pedagogy should take steps to dispel the *sui generis* assumption of literary genius and emphasize the degree to which literary texts partake in a dense interrelatedness to other texts. Finally, there is the level of the syllabus itself and the ontological assumptions it represents. If it is true that you cannot write a survey course syllabus without engaging the canon debate, then it is the intellectually honest thing to do to bring canonicity into the thematic foreground of the class itself. The explicit interrogation of how canonicity has taken shape keeps the syllabus from taking on an aura of self-evidence. In the rest of this article, I will address myself to specific strategies I have employed to de-hegemonize my teaching of canonical texts on these three levels.

Many of the canonical texts which populate survey syllabi have erratic textual histories that are hidden by the apparent order we perceive in their finished form. Although the instructors of survey courses may be aware of these histories as part of their professional expertise, students are frequently surprised and even, perhaps, disturbed to discover the chaos beneath the ordered lines of type. Shakespeare is always at the center of canon studies and Shakespeare’s most famous creation, *Hamlet*, is the very personification of the Anglo-American literary canon. And yet, who is Hamlet the character and what is *Hamlet* the play? The famous unreadability of the character finds a fitting metaphor in the obscurity of the play’s textual history. Famously, the so-called *ur-Hamlet* has been lost to history. We know it existed, because it was criticized in 1598, but no one knows or will likely ever know how the lost play handled the material or who wrote it. The play that we think we are familiar with is an updated revision of this vanished original. Like Hamlet himself, the script of *Hamlet* has a ghost father, and just as Hamlet has a secret history of what his personality was like before the play begins, so the play’s own origins are cloaked in historical obscurity. Furthermore, our *Hamlet* is not only one updated revision of the vanished play, but rather, as the textual scholar Paul Werstine (1995) has called it, “a thing of shreds and patches” (p. 236) stitched together from three different manuscripts of unknown provenance, among which there are only a few hundred lines in common. Most shocking is the wonderfully bad Bad Quarto of 1603, with its ham-handed parody of the famous soliloquy. “To be or not to be, I there’s the point, / To Die, to sleepe, is that all? / I all: / No, to sleepe, to dreame, I mary there it goes …” (Foster, 1998, 51). In my class, we read the Bad Quarto version of this play side by side with the one in the students’ Dover Thrift editions in the interests of speculating on their relative merits and weaknesses. Inevitably, some students maintain that the Bad Quarto version is better, whether because it’s more concise or because the less frilly language more effectively conveys Hamlet’s bafflement and despair. Such skepticism is vindicated by recent scholarship suggesting that the Bad Quarto is not just a botched pirating of a pristine original, but was in fact a playwright-sanctioned condensation for travel-
ing performances. Shakespeare wrote for the stage, not for the definitive anthology. It is possible that he wrote scenes for some performances of a given play and not for others. He appears to have revised his plays over time, and it seems likely that he composed two completely different versions of King Lear and neglected ever to finalize a definitive draft of his masterpiece. This perspective restores a kind of porosity and elasticity to the Shakespearean text that disarms the intimidating quality of the exotic language and famous names.

Another technique for breaking up the surface of a text is to draw attention to the manner in which poets have revised and reconceived their poems over periods of time. In his discussion of teaching “Ode: Intimations of Immortality” alongside Wordsworth’s various drafts of the poem, Jeffrey Robinson (1987) observes that “the study of revision … teaches the student that every stage of thought has its own substantive reality” (p. 113). It is easy enough to pass out a photocopy of Milton’s Trinity Manuscript draft of Lycidas (Patrides, 1983, 12-13) as a way of teaching that literary texts are not vatic pronouncements from disembodied voices, but are the products of struggling individuals thinking in time and space. Milton can sometimes sound as if he writes with the exclusive purpose of intimidating students, but seeing his excisions and rewordings makes him appear less all-knowing and more fathomable.

The glimpse into Milton’s mind provided by his drafts has the quality of one of those DVD featurettes that accompany movies these days; an apparently self-sufficient text is re-presented as a series of choices, accidents, and inspirations. In addition to providing the poem with a compositional background, Milton’s draft sheds light on the finished poem. The list of flowers, which seems intrusive and indulgent toward the end of the finished poem, turns out to be one of the first passages that Milton wrote, whereas the central movement of the finished poem—Lycidas’s deification—comes across in the Trinity Manuscript, as Merritt Y. Hughes (1957) observes, as an “afterthought” (p. 116). Even more provocative are the minor changes. To ask why Milton (1993) thought that “well-attir’d woodbine” (p. 60) sounded better than “the garish columbine” (Patrides, 1983, p. 13) is to catch Milton in the process of his craft as a wordsmith in a manner that is rendered deliberately impossible by the glossy aura of the finished work alone. It is easy to see that, although there is a rhetorical flair to starting two lines in a row with “Young Lycidas … Young Lycidas” (p. 56). On a thematic level, it is interesting to see Milton, in his description of Orpheus’s severed head, cross out “divine” and substitute “gorie” (Patrides, 1983, p. 12).

Other canonical staples of the survey course syllabus also have easily locatable revisions and alternate versions. Most famously, Whitman’s “Song of Myself” has a number of passages which Whitman removed, revised, and replaced throughout his forty years of reworking his life’s work. Whereas Milton would probably want us to consider Lycidas as the published draft in and of itself, Whitman would certainly want students of his masterpiece to appreciate the mutability which is the essence of his poetry, and recent Norton editions of the poem obligingly include appendices of passages excluded from the Leaves of Grass poems (Whitman, 2002, 544-560). Eliot’s (1996) “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” casts a textual shadow known as “Prufrock’s Pervigilium,” 33 lines of text that Eliot cut from the published version of the poem and then published separately in Inventions of the March Hare (pp. 43-44). Awareness of these parallel texts deepens our appreciation not only for these poems as creative objects, but for the nature of texts themselves as human projects as opposed to scriptural pronouncements.

“Prufrock’s Pervigilium” is almost as ubiquitous as the original poem these days, thanks to the remarkable
very different moods. In “Lycidas,” the poet’s grief for his dead friend finds a home in his pastoral allusions. The poet inhabits a poetic world which gives shape and meaning to mortality by folding it into the structures that have been provided by Virgil, Theocritus, Moschus, and Tacitus. The apotheosis Lycidas achieves in the poem is certainly as much, if not more, poetic than Christian. In _The Waste Land_, the allusions generally lack the redemptive potency evident in Milton’s poem; rather than merging into a poetic unity, Eliot’s references fragment into a disparate collage, constituting not a home so much as an improvised bomb shelter. Eliot’s allusions are so central to the structural, thematic, and poetic identity of _The Waste Land_ that I have found that whenever I teach it, I wind up trying to teach a few dozen other works at the same time: the stories of Tristan and Isolde, of Philomel, of _The Tempest_, of Galahad, of _Die Götterdämmerung_, of Augustine’s _Confessions_, and a laundry list of other things. For the survey course, as a way both of negotiating this formidable background material and of demonstrating the critical relevance of these sub-texts to the poem as a whole, I turn it into a homework assignment. I identify twenty major allusions in the poem for my students, each of whom is then responsible for researching the history of the allusion and speculating on its significance to Eliot’s poem. As the students present the results of their inquiry to the class, _The Waste Land_ takes on a succession of different shades of meaning with each presentation, as if we are seeing Eliot’s poem change progressively through the different perspectives opened up by its allusions. Frequently, these allusions open doors to other allusions and even disclose hyperlinks to one another independently of Eliot’s composition. In addition to being a rewarding technique for reading _The Waste Land_ itself, this activity opens up the class itself to an examination of other literatures—canonical and non-canonical, English and non-English, Western and
non-Western—as well as providing a vivid lesson in the hybrid referentiality of literary texts.

Finally, and perhaps obviously, the most effective defense against perpetuating a quasi-religious posture in relation to the syllabus is the inclusion of texts which themselves expose the misleading implications inherent in canon-formation. For this purpose, I have found that Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s famous short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” and Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* make excellent companion pieces for interrogating the relationship between women and the canon. Together these texts support the impression that literary history is as revealing for what it does not include as for what it does.

The self-deconstruction of the canon receives its fullest articulation with the final text on the syllabus, Ishmael Reed’s novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), a text which is at the same time staunchly canonical (having famously been included in Harold Bloom’s list of the 500 Great Works of the Western Canon (1994, p. 535)), and also one of Western literature’s most acerbic screeds against the Western Canon and canonicity itself. The novel is a kind of tool for excavating the premises of the course in its entirety and generating possibilities for alternate paradigms according to which cultural history might be conceptualized.

According to *Mumbo Jumbo*, Western culture as a whole is afflicted with Atonism, the worship of disembodiment and abstraction along with an active malice toward nature and the sensual body. Atonist writers are apologists for sterility and death. Hemingway, we are told, loved bullfighting because it is a traditional Atonist sport to torture and kill the Bull God, a symbol of fertility. Milton is also cited as an exemplary Atonist, a judgment that is used to explain his solid place in English studies: “that’s why English professors like him, he’s like their amulet” (p. 172). After a semester of talking in more or less reverent tones about Hemingway and Milton, in the midst of a course of study which seems to take for granted the inherent value of these authors’ writing, it puts both instructor and student into a pedagogically interesting position to suddenly have our interest in these authors challenged as a symptom of a foundational racism. Reed’s critique is leveled not only at individual authors, but at the logic of the survey course itself. In the novel, Hank Rolling, the Guianese art critic who specializes in Vermeer, speaks for Atonist educators generally when he tells the Vodou priest-lecturer Papa LaBas that he “must come clean with those students. They must have a firm background in the Classics. Serious works, the achievements of mankind which began in Greece and then sort of wiggled all over the place like a chicken with its neck wrung” (p. 217). Rolling’s framing of cultural accomplishment as a European venture with a Hellenic origin erases the African roots of European traditions, perpetuating an ahistorical understanding of “the Western tradition” as an upsurge *ex nihilo* in which Homer and Socrates play the roles of the Great White Autochthonous Fathers. Reed’s critique of the Eurocentric assumptions underlying canon formation extends finally to the university itself and the informational meta-canon it represents. College student Abdul Hamid’s university experience taught him that “the knowledge which they had made into a cabala, stripped of its terms and the private codes, its slang, you could learn in a few weeks. It didn’t take 4 years, and the 4 years of university were set up so that they could have a process by which they could remove the rebels and the dissidents” (p. 37). The hierarchy of knowledge inherent in canonicity and in university curricula generally is indicted as a system of obfuscation and mystification designed to distinguish insiders from outsiders, to disguise racism as culture, and to secure ideological consistency. In evaluating the legitimacy of these accusations, student and teacher alike are necessarily involved in a very personal degree of self-interrogation.
The ontological destabilization of texts which the pedagogy of the self-deconstructing canon attempts to achieve may be similarly brought to bear on the grand narratives which undergird the survey course syllabi of other disciplines. If über-canonical literary texts like *Hamlet* and *Lycidas* exemplify the arbitrary nature of canon formation, central ideas in philosophy and history such as postmodernism and globalization compel us to recognize the fallacy of disciplinary grand narratives themselves. Of course, the language and worldview of this very article is radically involved with ideas which contemporary philosophy has made available, including the entire discourse of Lyotard’s “grand narratives” (1984, p. xxiii) and the understanding of why they are problematic. Any survey-course philosophy student who does not come away with a functional understanding of postmodern epistemology has missed an overwhelmingly prominent aspect of contemporary philosophical discourse.

The historical condition of globalization poses an analogous challenge to any historical narrative which privileges Western history or indeed any model of historical narrative structured in a line rather than as a web. To understand the historical significance of globalization is simultaneously to recalibrate the priority of any particular branch on the historical bush. In the same way that *The Waste Land* is best understood as a network of linked texts rather than as, to borrow Woolf’s phrase, “a single solitary birth,” so may the narratives of history best be apprehended from within the context of the social sciences. Kevin St. Jarre (2008), responding to the challenge that globalization poses to conventional narrative-based history instruction, proposes “rebuild[ing] the scope and sequence for the social studies around the social sciences, which have long been neglected” (p. 665). In St. Jarre’s model, the content-based pedagogy of linear history would be absorbed into an instructional strategy that privileges various analytical frames such as economics, civics, and the behavioral sciences. Rather than teaching a non-contextual narrative of the Civil War as a free-standing historical incident, students in St. Jarre’s program would consider the event of the Civil War from a sociological perspective in one semester, from an economic perspective in another semester, and from a legal perspective in a third. Such a technique is analogous to my lesson in which students of *The Waste Land* consider the poem progressively from the perspective of each of its various literary and historical allusions.

In the same way that I employ *Mumbo Jumbo* to allow the canon to speak against itself, it would be appropriate for science teachers to incorporate that canonical work of science writing, Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), into their syllabus in the interest of bringing to light the teleological bias which inevitably finds its way into the classroom discourse. In the life sciences, the almost equally canonical book by Stephen Jay Gould, *Full House: The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin* (1996), presents a readable and accessible deconstruction of anthropocentric evolutionary narratives.

The fact that survey courses are frequently directed toward non-majors makes them an ideal arena for considering the nature of our disciplines from a critical perspective. In intra-disciplinary contexts, we can always assume that our engagement with our field of study has an in-built justification that never needs actually to be spoken to lend legitimacy to the entire enterprise. But faced with an audience of non-specialists, the instructor of the survey course is challenged to articulate the rationale for studying her discipline at all. In order to keep from looking like a buffoonish museum curator keeping jealous guard over an inventory of dusty relics or like a hero-worshipping sycophant spreading the gospel of Sacred Stories, it is incumbent upon the survey course instructor to present the meta-narratives which constitute her discipline as living, breathing, unstable, and even dangerous entities. I try to encour-
age my students to think of the literary canon not as some kind of crystal cathedral, but as an insatiable meat grinder that spares nothing, devouring nothing more ruthlessly than its own claims to authority.

References


