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GENUINE CORINTHIAN BRONZE: THE "WESTERN CANON" IN THE AGE OF GLOBAL CULTURE

Mary-Kay Gamel

I. Introduction

My role in the 1995 Macalester College International Roundtable is to take stock of the current status and future of the "canon" of Western literature in a changing world. At the moment, three major historical processes—globalization, democratization, and decolonization—are transforming the shape of culture, art, and literature and the ways they are conceived and studied. Iain Chambers describes this moment as follows: there is "now in play a movement of historical decentering in which the very axis of centre and periphery, together with its economic, political and cultural traffic, has, as a minimum, begun to be interrogated from elsewhere, from other places and positions."[1] In such a context the position of the "Western canon" can be seen not only as threatened from within the West by new political and social movements, but also from without by other national and transnational cultures with their own separatist or universalist ambitions. Indeed, the distinction between "within" and "without" is now challenged by the globalization of culture. As national boundaries shift, new alliances and hostilities form, new forms of expression and communication arise, two apparently contradictory cultural processes — homogenization and fragmentation—are at work. Is a global culture being created? What place, if any, will the Western canon have in this global culture? Will the global culture have a global canon? Or has the idea of a canon been superseded?

II. Gloom, Doom, and Bloom

Starting in the late 1970s, questions began to be raised about the status and use of the Western canon, the corpus of European and American literary and philosophical texts widely read by undergraduates in United States liberal arts colleges. (I am necessarily speaking from a U.S. perspective.) There were various reasons for this development, and it had surprisingly quick results: at many institutions, course requirements and reading lists were changed to include a wider range of works from both American and world literature. Consequently, toward the end of the 1980s a number of politicians and scholars began to worry that the philosophical ideals, historical accomplishments, and literary classics of "Western civilization" were being abandoned.

I will discuss a recent book by Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, as an example of one position in this debate. Although I use this book primarily as a negative example, I have chosen it because it represents views widely held, and also because it was written by a scholar who has done important work, was published by a trade press, has been extensively publicized and favorably reviewed, and has sold well. Bloom portrays the debate in terms of a holy war—the Canon (Bloom capitalizes the word) is under attack by "anti-canonizers": "Feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists," and "Deconstructors."[2] Bloom offers a sweeping, inclusive view of Western history and literature. He offers authoritative, univocal readings of a number of Western texts. He envisions only a small elite as readers of literature. His book contains no footnotes, no citations, no acknowledgments of textual variants, and no bibliography. Yet Bloom pictures himself as fighting a war he cannot win; for him, "the Balkanization of literary studies is inevitable,"[3] and the book includes an "Elegy for the Canon."

Bloom's book abounds with the metaphors that are frequently employed to describe times of transition—war metaphors such as invasion, genetic metaphors such as hybridization and overpopulation. But are these apocalyptic metaphors accurate? Is there another reading of the events now taking place? Are there other more appropriate metaphors to describe them?

Let me start with the metaphor "canon" itself. The word is Greek; it means "reed" and so "measuring stick." (The word with two *n*s also comes from this root; Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls his book on the canon debate *Loose Canons*.[4] The military metaphor contained in that pun suggests that canons that are not tied down and pointing at the enemy's ships endanger one's own Ship of State.) Although used in Alexandria in reference to literary authors and texts, "canon" has been deployed primarily as a religious term, referring to texts or laws officially approved by the church as having religious authority. Like saints, texts become "canonized" by being declared worthy of continued attention, and the activity of interpreting Great Books is analogous to Talmudic scholars investigating the Torah. So the idea of a canon still has a religious connotation, suggesting that literature is a kind of religion, with its high priests (professors), novices (graduate students), congregation (college students), and heathens (film fans, television audiences, and other non-readers). The problem, of course, is that there is no Pope to give a final ruling.

The religious metaphor suggests that an author or text is either in or out of the canon. It also implies that the texts included in the canon are touched by some kind of divine grace — canonical texts are essentially different from other texts, and canonical authors, like saints, are qualitatively different from other people: to Bloom, Shakespeare and Dante "excel all other Western writers in cognitive acuity, linguistic energy, and power of invention."[5] He treats canonical works as inhabiting a place out of time, some kind of ideal space like Heaven. As Eliot describes it in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," the great works, once aware that a new arrival is among them, genteelly make room.[6] Eliot's tranquil, idealized, ahistorical vision obscures the complex processes of cultural production whereby literary works become "great." Unless discussed in specific historical terms, the canon is an imaginary entity, a metaphor treated as if real.

Another of the metaphors often associated with the canon is unity. At the end of his book, Bloom presents four massive reading lists — his own proposed (and quite idiosyncratic) canon. The shape itself of these lists, their unity, suggests that a homogenous and overarching culture extends from the fifth

century B.C.E. to the present. The unity imposed by the list obscures enormous differences in language, genre, means of composition, and other factors, as well as the very different reading practices that have prevailed at different times. A closer look at the historical development of the canon (see Gorak[7]) shows how specious this proclaimed unity is. For example, Bloom claims that aesthetic quality alone is what determines a work's canonicity, but this has not always (if ever) been the case. In the European Middle Ages, the category of "literature" in the modern sense did not exist; a second-century C.E. reader like Tertullian evaluates ancient texts according to how they agree with the truths revealed in the Bible: "I turn to pagan literature, by which you are trained in wisdom and the liberal arts; and what absurdities I find!"[8] Tertullian's reading practice is similar to that of the Ayatollah Khomeini or of Christian fundamentalist groups who scrutinize school textbooks for signs of "Satanism" and "secular humanism." Hence, even to group the works on Bloom's lists under the heading of "literature" as we now understand it is inappropriate; this word took on its present meaning only in the eighteenth century.

Another metaphor Bloom treats as fact is "universality." The spatial spread is often joined to the temporal by assertions of "timelessness," as when he asserts that "Shakespeare's aesthetic supremacy has been confirmed by the universal judgment of four centuries...."[9] Shakespeare is acted and read everywhere, in every language and circumstance."[10] (Of course, for a work to be truly "universal," beings on other planets must join in the applause!) Just as all who are exposed to the truths of a universal religion must/will adhere to that faith or be judged as heretics, so the text of Shakespeare is (tautologically) proven to be holy by the fact that it has been revered. But think of other entities to which these metaphors may also be applied. How about blue jeans? Millions of people in many countries for quite a number of years (not four centuries, I admit) have wanted, worn, and loved blue jeans. Does this reflect a "universal" aesthetic?

Shakespeare's universality quickly becomes questionable if we look more carefully at what "Shakespeare" meant during those "four centuries," even in England itself. During the eighteenth century, for example, radical adaptations of the plays of

other authors were presented as "Shakespeare." The most notorious of these is Nahum Tate's version of *King Lear*, which rewrites the play so it ends happily. And what about translation into other languages? In what sense is Shakespeare in German or Japanese or Swahili still "Shakespeare"? Historical and cross-cultural studies such as those by Bohannan[11] and Taylor[12] offer specific examples of how "Shakespeare" means very different things in different times and places. Even Bloom acknowledges that Shakespeare's supremacy has not always been universally acknowledged: "Voltaire begins the French tradition of resistance to Shakespeare…[B]y the final third of the nineteenth century, most of the mania for Shakespeare had spent itself . . . . France retains a literary culture relatively un-Shakespearean . . . . Spain, until the modern age, had little need for Shakespeare."[13] But somehow the canonical author remains the star of the show; what counts is *his* (Bloom uses the "universal" male pronoun) "genius." All else — including the pedagogical structures that enable (or disable) reading, the material production and distribution, which affect the availability and status of works—is irrelevant.

As religious entities, canonical works must be untouched by political, social, ideological questions. Hence, Bloom finds Shakespeare "almost as free of ideology as are his heroic wits…. He has no theology, no metaphysics, no ethics, and rather less political theory than is brought to him by his current critics."[14] Note the metaphor of "freedom" here, which, when combined with "ideology," suggests Western democratic freedom of thought against dogma (whose?). But there is no way to be free of ideology; Bloom's metaphor is part of his conservative ideological stance.

Bloom's canon speaks only to individuals: "[T]he reception of aesthetic power enables us to learn how to talk to ourselves and how to endure ourselves. The true use of Shakespeare or of Cervantes…is to augment one's own growing inner self…. All that the Western Canon can bring one is the proper use of one's own solitude."[15] Authors and readers are not part of a community or network, but seek isolation, originality, uniqueness. Because Bloom insists on individualism, he lumps together his "opponents" as mindless members of a group (the "School of Resentment") to denote their inferiority. Works that have been chosen

on the basis of their originality and difference from the mediocre mass of "period pieces" confirm this focus on individualism: "[I]f we read the Western Canon in order to form our social, political, or personal moral values, I firmly believe we will become monsters of selfishness and exploitation."[16] In his economics of scarcity, only a few have access to the few great works, and they literally buy them: "[I]t seems clear that capital is necessary for the cultivation of aesthetic values . . . . [The] alliance of sublimity and financial and political power has never ceased."[17] In both form and content, his book does not invite the reader to join in a dialogue; it delivers a sermon.

III. Digression on Method

My focus in the preceding pages on the canon as a metaphor is connected to one of my fundamental assumptions: that fictions, art, creations of the imagination are valuable because they enact and embody human experience, offering a different kind of understanding of that experience from that offered by "scientific" description and analysis. By juxtaposing apparent dissimilars, creating strong visual and aural images, they stimulate both intellectual and emotional responses and offer alternatives to what is accepted as "real." Metaphors are an example of poetic language in constant, everyday use, even in apparently "objective" scientific and philosophical discussions. One of the intrinsic qualities of poetic language is its polyvocality; it can be read in different ways. Investigating the different meanings of metaphors (as used by oneself or by others) is a technique that can be employed by any user of a language, not just a small elite.

IV. Funeral or Party?

Taking a historical rather than "timeless" perspective quickly shows that anxieties about social, cultural, and artistic transformation are not unique to the late twentieth century. The transformations now taking place, and the emotions they provoke, have many analogues in the European past. When the study of Greek was first introduced at Oxford in 1516, students who called themselves "Trojans" denounced it, seeing correctly that this new study threatened to destroy medieval scholasticism.

Later, anxieties similar to Bloom's were expressed as the vernacular canons of emerging nation-states took the place of Greek and Latin authors.

But rejection, anxiety, and sorrow are not the only possible responses to such times of transition. Anthony Grafton begins his book on the intellectual impact of the discovery of previously unknown lands in the Renaissance by quoting José de Acosta, who had a revelation while traveling by sea:

> Having read what poets and philosophers write of the Torrid Zone, I persuaded myself that when I came to the Equator, I would not be able to endure the violent heat, but it turned out otherwise ....I felt so cold that I was forced to go into the sun to warm myself. What could I do then but laugh at Aristotle's *Meteorology* and his philosophy?[18]

For Acosta, as for Tertullian, looking critically at accepted truths is enjoyable, energizing, empowering. Participants in the current debate about the Western canon may experience surprise, joy, and triumph, depending on their (literal) position — geographic, social, economic — in relation to the events.

V. Degeneration or Recycling?

As an example of a particular historical moment of transformation, and of different ways of interpreting that transformation, I want to discuss a scene in Petronius's *Satyricon*, a text written somewhere around 65 C.E. This scene occurs at a dinner party given by a former slave named Trimalchio, who, now free, has become fabulously wealthy as a merchant. His dinner party is extravagant in all ways: he invites people he barely knows, he serves incredibly complicated and expensive dishes accompanied by vintage wine, and he provides entertainment of all sorts, including music, games, acrobats, recitations from Homer, and practical jokes. Trimalchio acts as the master of ceremonies throughout, providing a constant commentary of maxims, philosophical observations, and anecdotes from his personal history. At one point, a guest admires a platter, and Trimalchio explains that it is made of Corinthian bronze.

I'm the only man in the world who owns genuine Corinthian bronze . . . . It's because I have it made by a craftsman of mine called Corinthus, and what's Corinthian, I'd like to know, if not something Corinthus makes? And don't think I'm just a stupid half-wit. I know very well how Corinthian bronze got invented. You see, when Troy was taken, there was this fellow called Hannibal, a real swindler, and he ordered all the bronze and gold and silver statues to be melted down in a pile. Well, the stuff melted and made a kind of mixture. So the smiths came and started carting it off and turning out platters and side dishes and little statues. And that's how real Corinthian began, a kind of mishmash metal, and nothing on its own.[19]

Trimalchio's dinner party reflects the significant social, political, and cultural transformations taking place when Rome, as the center of a vast empire, became the intersection of many different cultures and races, upsetting established hierarchies. Trimalchio himself and the guests, servants, food, drink, and entertainment at his party come from every point on the map of the Roman Empire. To Roman traditionalists and aristocrats, the rise to wealth and power of such trash was a disaster. "For years now the Orontes River in Syria has poured its sewage into our native Tiber," growls one of Juvenal's characters. And many readers of Petronius assume that the *Satyricon* ridicules Trimalchio. The Corinthian bronze mentioned in the passage above was a real kind of metal, but the story Trimalchio tells about its origin is not the usual one. Here is how a modern commentator on this passage corrects Trimalchio's mistakes:

Trimalchio's history is as defective as his mythology. He is probably thinking of the false story that Corinthian bronze was discovered by accident when Corinth was set on fire in 146 B.C. by Mummius, but he confuses this sack with the sack of Troy (c. 1184 B.C.) and replaces Mummius by the great Carthaginian general Hannibal who died c. 183 B.C.[20]

One of the most influential works of comparative literature ever written, Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, also discusses Trimalchio's party. Auerbach believes that Petronius

looks from above at the world he depicts. His book is a product of the highest culture, and he expects his readers to have such a high level of social and literary culture that they will perceive, without doubt or hesitation, every shade of social blundering and of vulgarity in language and taste .... [t]he vulgarity of language is not designed to arouse laughter in a large crowd but is rather a piquant condiment for the palate of a social and literary elite accustomed to viewing things from above with epicurean composure.[21]

So Auerbach concludes that Petronius is satirizing the pretensions of a vulgar buffoon. Looked at in this way, "genuine Corinthian bronze" must be read as a figure for social, cultural, and literary transformation as degeneration. The great works of Western art have been melted down to make garish tableware and *chotzkes* for philistines. Corinthus the metalsmith has replaced the great artists of the past. And the vulgar, pretentious, stupid Trimalchio has usurped the place of more discriminating audiences.

In its sweep, confidence, and claims to truth, *Mimesis* has been seen as reaffirming the value of the Western literary tradition. "The driving implication is that the West has its own Bible, although a secular one, which is its literary canon."[22] Yet it is crucial to note that Auerbach does not support what he takes to be Petronius's attitudes toward Trimalchio. Instead, he criticizes Petronius for what Auerbach sees as a narrowness of vision shared by all Greek and Latin literature: "[t]he literature of antiquity was unable to represent everyday life seriously, that is, in full appreciation of its problems and with an eye for its historical background; ... it could represent it only in the low style."[23]

But does Petronius's portrait of Trimalchio have to be read as a picture of vulgarity and artistic degeneration? The text offers other possibilities. Trimalchio's statement that he is "the only man in the world who owns genuine Corinthian bronze" is odd both syntagmatically and semantically: Corinthian bronze was used widely, and how could a mixture of materials be unique in any case? His listener anticipates Trimalchio's answer: "I expected him to brag in his usual way that he'd had the stuff imported directly from Corinth, but he was way ahead of me." But Trimalchio has anticipated *his* listener's interpretation

("don't think I'm a stupid half-wit") and changed the referent of the word "Corinthian" from a well-known city to an unknown person. In this way Trimalchio undercuts his listener's assumption of intellectual superiority. Hence his mishmash of history may be intentional rather than mistaken. We do not have to accept the narrator's view (a snobbish intellectual who sneers at Trimalchio while eating his food). A reader who really thinks about what Trimalchio is saying instead of viewing him "from above" and prejudging his words might find that his conflation of the mythic and historical wars suggests that the distinctions between myth and history, between epic and historiography, are not so firm. The image of Corinthian bronze as "a kind of mishmash metal, and nothing on its own" resembles the *Satyricon* itself as a formal entity, in which Homeric and Vergilian epic, Greek prose romances, Plato's *Symposium*, Horatian satire, and many other texts are dismembered, distorted, and recombined. The result of this mixing, however, is not destruction, homogenization, loss. I read this textual mishmash as a celebration of continuity and vitality, of the flexibility of artistic materials as they are reshaped for different needs by different users. Such a reading puts in question both of the standard narratives that describe the transition of Mediterranean political and cultural hegemony from Greece to Rome: (1) intellectuals demoted by vulgar slobs; (2) impractical dreamers superseded by realists. As a text, the *Satyricon* embodies the paradox of "genuine Corinthian bronze" by being both a collection of fragments of previous texts and a unique work whose genre has never been definitively established, a text that has been read by readers of all kinds who have reacted not with epicurean composure but with both laughter and serious thought.

VI. Is "Canon" the Right Metaphor?

In his book *Cultural Capital*, John Guillory discusses the recent debate about canon formation in economic rather than religious terms. It is not the ideas or aesthetic form of the works themselves, he argues, that canonizes them, but the way in which they are used: "Canonicity is not a property of the work itself but of its transmission."[24] Canonical texts have often been "appropriated as the cultural capital of a dominant fraction,"[25]

which can be stored away "as lifeless monuments, or as proofs of class distinction."[26] Alternatively, this capital can be made accessible to a larger number of users: this results in a "disarticulation of cultural capital from the system of class formation, and thus from 'distinction' based on inequality of access to cultural goods."[27] Anxieties about "invasion," "hybridization," and "contamination" can be traced to the patriarchal need to control property, including women and slaves, to avoid miscegenation and inappropriate reproduction. Stephanie Jed elegantly connects these anxieties (which she calls "chaste thinking") with the Renaissance humanists' project of "chastising" texts so as to keep their genealogies "pure."[28] But the genetic metaphor may remind us that genetically, hybridization can be superior to "purity." Authors such as Gerald Vizenor, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Louis Owens — Native Americans of mixed-blood ancestry — have used the metaphor positively. "Crossbloods are a postmodern tribal bloodline, an encounter with racialism, colonial duplicities, sentimental monogenism, and generic cultures. The encounters," Vizenor insists, "are comic and communal, rather than tragic and sacrificial . . . . Crossbloods are communal, and their stories are splendid considerations of survivance."[29] Racine might disagree with this formulation, but "crossbloods" like Dante and Milton would agree, I think.

The intellectual tremors caused by a reconfiguration of the cultural world map via globalization, democratization, and decolonization destabilize more than the Western canon. To Rey Chow (among others), they challenge "the sacredness of nationhood by showing 'nation' and 'nationalism' to be products of imperialist, puritanicist fantasies…. This kind of question would imply that not only the classics of the European canons . . . but also the 'masterpieces' of China, Japan, India, Arabia, Persia, Russia and so forth would have to be fundamentally rethought."[30] To rethink is not necessarily to discard. A metaphor often used these days is that of colonialism, according to which non-Western authors and audiences are colonized subjects whose imaginative work is made to serve the master. We might turn this metaphor in another direction and see older texts — the "masterpieces" — as colonized territory whose multiplicity of meanings is restricted to those which serve the master. For example, during the last half of the nineteenth century and

into the twentieth, Vergil's *Aeneid* was mostly read as a tri-umphant celebration of the Roman imperial design, seen as analogous to that of Britain. In the 1960s, responding to the political and social debates, especially those concerning the Vietnam War, American readers began to focus on the darker side of the poem, particularly its insistence on the high price of empire in terms of human suffering. W. R. Johnson deftly traces the history of these readings in the first chapter of his *Darkness Visible*.[31]

VII. Use, Not Worship

Bloom's pessimism about the survival of the Western canon as he defines it is justified. But let me offer another alternative to the religious metaphor. Anthony Grafton suggests that "the classical texts and concepts have been, for the West, above all a set of tools. Like any other tools, they perform different — and sometimes contradictory — tasks. Some of them are primitive and some sophisticated; some are simple and solid, others complex and brittle. Some of them have proved to be as irreplaceable as they are ancient, and others have proved adaptable to jobs that their inventors could not have imagined."[32] As a test of this metaphor, I will look now at some recent literary texts in which non-Western authors use older materials in their work. (I have chosen examples from poetry and drama, partly because brief quotations from these works can give a better sense of them, I think, than can quotations from fiction.) My first example is Derek Walcott's long narrative poem *Omeros*, which blends West Indian with Homeric (as well as African and Native American) characters, incidents, and motifs. Walcott's ambition is large, his method synthetic: the poem shifts from present to past, from vision to memory to dream, via gorgeous images and masterful control of language. Its supple metre and terza rima rhyme scheme both move the poem forward as a narrative and slow it by slant-rhyme echoes. In the process all consciousness, all times and places seem connected, so that psychological, social, and historical differences melt into outlines:

> …oblong silhouettes racing round a white vase
> of scalloped sand, when a boy on a pounding horse
>
> divided the wrestlers with their lowering claws
> like crabs. As in your day, so with ours, Omeros,
> as it is with islands, and men, so with our games.
>
> A horse is skittering spray with rope for its rein.
> Only silhouettes last.[33]

The connection between the Homeric and the West Indian world is aesthetic. About Helen, for example, for whom Achille and Hector are rivals, the narrator says, "These Helens are different creatures, / one marble, one ebony" but the gaze of male desire makes them the same: "their classic features / were turned into silhouettes from the lightning bolt / of a glance." Notice again the use of "silhouettes": the aestheticizing gaze sees only outlines, transforms the woman "here and alive" into a statue, and finds that the differences between women, between statues, are only superficial.

> One unknots a belt
> of yellow cotton slowly from her shelving waist,
> one a cord of purple wool, the other one takes
>
> a bracelet of white cowries from a narrow wrist;
> one lies in a room with olive-eyed mosaics,
> another in a beach shack with its straw mattress,
>
> but each draws an elbow slowly over her face
> and offers the gift of her sculptured nakedness,
> parting her mouth.[34]

In *Omeros*, the female figure Helen is used as a medium of exchange between males (either as rivals—Achille/Hector, or as partners — narrator/Omeros/male reader). The title character appears several times in different guises throughout the poem. Toward the end, he and the central narrator meet: "I muttered, 'I have always heard / your voice in that sea, master, it was the same song / of the desert shaman, and when I was a boy / your name was as wide as a bay, as I walked along / the curled brow of the surf.'" Omeros asks, "Are they still fighting wars?" "'Not over beauty,' I answered. 'Or a girl's love.'"[35] Over what are they

fighting, then? He never says. Naturalizing, universalizing, archaizing, archetypifying are ways for the poem to exclude contemporary history and political experience. And Walcott's use of woman only as a compliant object of desire is remarkably similar to colonialist narratives that feminize and eroticize non-European people and lands, as David Spurr,[36] Anne McClintock,[37] and others have shown.

The Bacchae of Euripides by Nigerian author Wole Soyinka takes quite a different tack. Euripides' version depicts the punishment of the human ruler Pentheus for rejecting Dionysos, the god of wine, sex, and pleasure. Dionysos arranges for Pentheus to be killed by his own mother. In a poignant final scene, the mother, temporarily insane as she rips apart her son, gradually regains her sanity, understands what she has done, mourns for her son and herself, and goes off into exile. Soyinka's version ends as Agave (the mother), her own father, Kadmos, and the shaman Tiresias contemplate the severed head of her son Pentheus, stuck on top of a ladder. Kadmos cries out, "Why us?" and Agave replies, "Why not?" The stage directions say, "A powerful red glow shines suddenly as if from within the head of Pentheus . . . . From every orifice of the impaled head spring red jets, spurting in every direction." Tiresias, who is blind, asks, "What is it, Kadmos? What is it?" Kadmos replies, "Again blood, Tiresias, nothing but blood." Tiresias then feels his way to the fount. "A spray hits him and he holds out a hand, catches some of the fluid and sniffs. Tastes it. 'No. It's wine.' Slowly, dreamlike, they all move towards the fountain, cup their hands and drink. Agave…tilts her head backwards to let a jet flush full in her face and flush her mouth."[38]

Soyinka calls this play "a communion rite," and there are many Christian allusions, as well as Greek historical and African elements, of which perhaps the most important is a connection between Dionysos and the Yoruba god Ogun. I would call Soyinka's technique "syncretic" as opposed to Walcott's "synthetic" method, defining "syncresis" as not a mingling of substances but a union of entities that maintain their autonomous identities. Soyinka's syncretism could be read either as a warping of the pristine "original" or as an example of intellectual colonization, as an African author continues to follow European models (in this case literally: the version was commissioned by

the National Theatre Company of Britain). But Soyinka is not passively following Euripides. By depicting Pentheus as the cruel leader of a society dependent on slavery, Soyinka makes the liberation offered by Dionysos more explicitly political. This is why he has changed the ending to create a celebratory effect: "This version of *The Bacchae* has been conceived as a communal feast, a tumultuous celebration of life. It must be staged as such."[39]

When Soyinka's play premiered, differences between his version and Euripides' were criticized, by those who did not know Yoruba myth, as a distortion of the "original." Yet Euripides' plays were not "classics" or "canonical" when presented in the Theater of Dionysos at Athens. They were ephemeral — intended for only one performance. They used myth not in order to achieve "universality" or "timelessness" or to avoid historical or ideological implications, but to let the audience make those connections instead of presenting them didactically. (They may well have used this tactic for both artistic and practical reasons; when an earlier playwright presented a play based on a historical event, the defeat of an ally of Athens, the audience was so upset they fined him.) There is no way now to recover or reproduce the meanings of ancient dramas in their original historical context. If there were, no doubt many would fall into Bloom's negative category of "period pieces." It is the absence of historical information that gives older materials their "timeless" quality. Soyinka's method resembles that of Euripides precisely because he changes the Euripidean text; if he only mimicked the "original," he would be distorting it. Just as Euripides' version helps us understand Soyinka's, so Soyinka's helps us understand Euripides'.

A number of Caribbean authors have used *The Tempest* of Shakespeare, not as Bloom suggests ("Shakespeare for hundreds of millions who are not white Europeans is a signifier for their own pathos"[40]), but as a critique of colonialism. They often focus on Caliban, born on the island, rather than on the interloper Prospero. Aimé Césaire titles his 1969 play *A Tempest* (*Une Tempête*), suggesting that Shakespeare's is not the unique or definitive version of the story. His Prospero thinks of his control over the island as art, not domination:

I am not in any ordinary sense a master,
as this savage thinks,
but rather the conductor of a boundless score—
this isle,
summoning voices—I alone—
arranging out of confusion
one intelligible line.
Without me, who would be able to draw music
from all that?
This isle is mute without me.

But Caliban doesn't agree:

For years I bowed my head
for years I took it, all of it—
your insults, your ingratitude…
and worst of all, more degrading than all the rest,
your condescension…
You lied to me so much,
about the world, about yourself,
that you ended up by imposing on me
an image of myself:
underdeveloped, in your words, incompetent,
that's how you made me see myself!…
Your vocation is to give me shit.
And that's why you'll stay…just like those
guys who founded the colonies
and who now can't live anywhere else.
You're just an old colonial addict, that's what you are![41]

Prospero does stay, growing older and colder, but Caliban has the last word, not a curse but a celebration: "FREEDOM HI-DAY! FREEDOM HI-DAY!"

My final example is a poem from Kamau Brathwaite's collection *Middle Passages*.[42] In "Letter Sycora **X**," not Caliban but another, savvier child of Sycorax writes to his mother on a computer—"one a de bess tings since cicero o / kay?" for writing poetry. Like Shakespeare's and Césaire's Caliban, he can use his new language in order to curse. He knows that postcolonial dictators and trickle-down economic theorists are no better than Prospero, and what a hard task it is to compete with the canonized

European writers. But he perseveres, punning, breaking down English words into phonemes, using punctuation provocatively, in order to liberate himself, his language, his audience:

> Yet a sittin dung here in front a dis
> stone face
>
> eeee
> lectrical mallet inna me
>
> fist
> chipp/in dis poem onto dis tab.
> let
>
> chiss.
> ellin dark.
>
> ness
> writin in light
>
> like i is a some. is a some. is a some
> body. a
>
> **X**-
> pert or some
>
> thing like moses or aaron or one a dem dyaaam isra
> light

A text like this transmutes the "exchange value" of canonical works into "use value." Materials from older traditions have not been melted into a synthesis, but held up for inspection, disassembled, and juxtaposed with others. Like the computer, the "eeee / lectrical mallet," they are tools that are valuable only if they are used to create something of value to the users.

I am well aware that Walcott, Soyinka, Césaire, and Brathwaite got European educations and write in European languages, so that identifying them as "non-Western" is questionable. My focus, however, is not these authors' *identity* but the uses to which they put their mixtures of older and newer, more and less "Western" elements. These authors also use canonical texts to create community rather than isolation; they are more like dialogues than sermons.

VIII. Using the Western Past in the Global Present

My discussion of Walcott, Soyinka, Césaire, and Brathwaite suggests what kinds of roles "canonical" materials can play in the new global culture, provided they are used as tools to be used rather than worshipped as icons. If older texts have no use they should be ignored, and they will be. The replacement of older materials by newer ones is a standard cultural process; Bloom's lists get progressively longer as they approach the present. But there are many uses for older materials. One is "background" or "reading aids" to newer ones; this is how the fragments of Sappho got preserved. Readers who want to understand the wonderful "graphic novels" *The Waste Land* or *Tank Girl: The Odyssey* have to consult Eliot, Homer, and Joyce, on whose works they are based.[43] Older materials also offer later audiences the chance to see texts and contexts in a more complete relation than may be possible with contemporary materials. And the most important use may be not the contents or form of older texts but the very history of the different readings they have received, the different uses to which they have been put — not only admiration and emulation, but misunderstanding, distortion, trivialization, satire, travesty, rejection. Just as globalization urges the imagination to go beyond geographical boundaries, the survey of past literature and art urges it beyond temporal ones. The study of the past is a cross-cultural study. But if older texts are discarded, they won't be available for future uses that we cannot now envision. The history of the transmission of pagan texts shows clearly how others decided what was worthy of preservation, and how those decisions have narrowed our understanding. Better models are the ecological preservation of endangered species, or contemporary archaeology, which preserves sites for future, more sophisticated investigation by techniques not yet invented.

Totalizing schemes — both Eurocentric and anti-Eurocentric — involving older texts are just as suspect as those involving newer ones. The assumption, for example, that all works that have been called "classics" are works of high culture regardless of their method of composition, performance, and reception must be discarded. To suggest, as Bloom does, that all canonical texts are either empty of political implications or support aristo-

cratic privilege is wrong and obfuscatory. Political stances — explicit or implicit — play just as integral a role in (many) older texts as in (many) contemporary ones, and those stances differ widely. It is just as reductive to lump together, for example, radical Euripides with conservative Sophocles, conciliatory Shakespeare with questioning Marlowe, as to suggest that Walcott, Soyinka, Césaire, and Brathwaite are the same. In *Black Athena*, Martin Bernal has shown that construing ancient Greek culture as a "pure" "Aryan" civilization was a nineteenth-century project.[44] Ancient Greeks were ethnocentric, but not in the same way or to the same degree. Herodotus, for example, sets out to describe "the astonishing achievements of both our own *and other peoples*."[45] Commenting on how a Persian king who had conquered Egypt outrageously flaunted Egyptian religious customs, he says, "I have no doubt that Cambyses was completely out of his mind. Everyone believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, are the best; so it is unlikely that anyone but a madman would mock at such things."[46]

IX. A Four-Dimensional Map

A metaphor that seems to many contemporary observers more appropriate to the study of culture than that of the canon is the map, which keeps both the local and the global in view, which is able to change in accordance with new developments. Edward Said has called for "a world map without divinely or dogmatically sanctioned spaces, essences, or privileges."[47] Frederick Buell envisions such a map as one in which "old boundaries have not been effaced but reassembled in fluid, strategic, situational ways not to divide, to exclude, but to interface and construct."[48] I suggest that the multiple connections among the sites on this world map need to be traced in four dimensions — in time as well as space. My examples of non-Western authors consciously and explicitly making use of earlier Western texts are only one kind of connection possible on this four-dimensional map. Other connections include thematic ones (such as the treatment of infanticide in Euripides' *Medea* and Morrison's *Beloved*), functional ones (such as the political use of women's lamentation in Athenian drama and the eighteenth-century Irish *Lament for Art O'Leary*), or formal ones, such as the deployment of

rhythmic oral composition in Homer and contemporary rap poetry. Such connections would not be traced in order to find "universal" experiences, themes, or forms, but precisely to delineate differences, particularities, disjunctions, resistances. In making such connections, "we would be returning the word literature to an openness that was there before it became disciplined into the particular 'body' that it has had in the past few hundred years in the West."[49]

In the process of connecting material from different cultures and traditions, we need to consider not only texts but reigning concepts and organizational categories and their metaphorical expressions, such as "the artist," "the work," "genre," "imagination," "creativity," and many others. A historical and cross-cultural perspective shows that such categories are not universal or timeless but historically and culturally specific. Such a realization will not invalidate local descriptions and analyses; it will make them more conscious and precise. To plot the connections on such a four-dimensional map as I have proposed would require more complex models than the ones now in use, such as convention/innovation, center/periphery, authenticity/mimicry. We need a new literary "geometry" to answer Arjun Appadurai's call for "fully fractal" cultural forms and use of chaos theory.[50] Another boundary that is increasingly porous in contemporary cultural theory is that between "scientific" and "humanistic" disciplines. Taking a metaphor from computers-speak, Frederick Buell argues that "both world-systems and globalization theories show an increasing emphasis on complex, decentered interactiveness."[51] The computer can be seen as a tool of artistic liberation, just as it is used by Brathwaite's letter-writer. The decentered, multiply connected global Net seems to offer new possibilities for communication and creation, and I bet the four-dimensional map I would like could be designed for CD-ROM. In his book on the implications of electronic technology for literature, Richard Lanham argues, "We are asked to believe that 'Western culture' has been a print-stable collection of Great Ideas enshrined in Great Books.... But Western education has in its essence been rhetorical, has been based, that is, not on a set of great ideas, but on a manner of apprehension; it has taught as central not knowledge but *how knowledge is held*."

Hence the electronic word, like the printing press, can be a tool "radically to democratize the arts."[52]

X. Reality Check

Perhaps it is ludicrous to discuss literary culture in a global context when other examples of globalization, such as international economic forces and financial markets or the international mass media, have a much more immediate effect on the material lives and the minds of the world's peoples. Socioeconomic elites are "able to saturate society with their preferred ideological agenda because they control the institutions that dispense symbolic forms of communication."[53] Older works are threatened less by the study of other literatures than by a positivistic focus on language as a neutral medium for keeping technical information flowing. Deregulation has allowed a few large corporations to dominate news and book publishing and distribution. The mass media, which utilize literary and artistic creativity to stifle diversity and manufacture consent rather than to encourage analysis, have far more influence than the Western canon. Their use of creative imagination aims to drown out silence, to drug the audience with false dreams, to encourage the acceptance of the status quo instead of imagining alternatives. Violent "action" films created for the global market maintain universalist myths of "natural" hierarchies, while in fantasies like *Pocahontas*, the center expropriates the periphery, substituting visions of sexual and intercultural harmony for the realities of rape, colonization, and exploitation. As for the democratizing power of electronic communication, critics note that the Net was invented for military purposes, that it is used by a tiny elite, that efforts are underway to constrain its uses. Julian Stallabrass rejects Lanham's optimism: "[V]irtual space threatens to form the ultimate illusion of a unified understanding, not by surmounting contradiction, but by remaking the world in specious harmony."[54] Having taken to heart Herb Addo's remarks on "Creative Pessimism" delivered at last year's Macalester International Roundtable,[55] I well understand that the stance I have taken here can be seen as utopian, self-satisfied, deluded.

As James Lull, John Tomlinson, and other communications theorists point out, however, "symbolic messages are polysemic

and multisemic, and social actors interpret and use the symbolic environment in ways that advance their personal, social, and cultural interests."[56] Hence even the most "closed" mass media and advertising messages, are, like literature, art, and other kinds of symbolic communication, still open to various readings, and observers of popular culture note that local audiences read and use these messages in ways that vary considerably. To assume that the audience is incapable of understanding the commercial or ideological implications of such texts is to prejudge the audience as stupid Trimalchios, and to focus on the properties of the texts themselves rather than on how they are read—to attribute, in other words, the same kind of overwhelming power to the mass media as to the Western canon. All human schemes are mortal, including the entities that are apparently the strongest.

> Sparta was rich and famous,
> and what is it now? Mycenae flourished; it's now a squalid
> hamlet of farmers and goatherds living in huts near a hill
> that once boasted a palace. Have you been to Athens? Or Thebes?
> Nothing you see is impressive, or rich, but it's all that remains
> of wealth, power, and glory; hovels and broken columns.
> Rome was nothing but fields; it's growing and thriving,
> and the Tiber is lined with buildings from which one might think
> to rule
> the world for a thousand years![57]

This mortality includes all schemes, including the ones we are now constructing. As Immanuel Wallerstein says, "We design our utopias in terms of what we know now. We exaggerate the novelty of what we advocate. We act in the end, and at best, as prisoners of our present reality who permit ourselves to daydream."[58]

XI. The Western Past and the Global Future

The central question posed by this Roundtable is "What is the place (and role) of the literary and creative imagination in this time?" My answer is that what matters is not particular texts but methods of reading. This is the crucial lesson we can learn from

studying the Western canon in all its complexity. Reading, ana-
lyzing, and evaluating texts in cultural and ideological terms are
analogous activities that can be used on various kinds of objects
in various contexts. The boundaries between "comparative liter-
ature," "cultural studies," "media studies," and others are as
porous as those between nations. Guillory calls for "intercul-
tural literacy, . . . a mode of inquiry that respects the accumula-
tion of shared symbols . . . but also invites research into the
processes by which cultures are formed and particularly encour-
ages analysis of how cultures constitute themselves by reference
to each other."[59] In accordance with his emphasis on institutions
and material practices, Guillory focuses on the school as the
locus for change: "[I]f the curriculum is to produce intercultural
literacy, in recognition of the imbricated sites of cultural produc-
tion, we must assume that the context of cultural production is
nothing less than global."[60] In such a context, the Western canon
cannot be "defended" by specious assertions of universality and
timelessness. The challenge for those artists, intellectuals, and
scholars who oppose coerced domination and totalizing
schemes (political, religious, economic, intellectual, artistic) is to
encourage an intercultural literacy that connects the present and
the past, evaluates both the local and the global from complex,
multiple, ever-shifting perspectives.

The metaphor of the canon is not a useful one for this vision
of the developing global culture. Many other metaphors —
including map, carnival, spectacle, zoo, jujitsu, and anthro-
pophagy — have been proposed (the last two by Shohat and
Stam),[61] and many more will no doubt be tried out. Those which
prove to be most appropriate will have, I suspect, a focus on jux-
taposition of different elements and contradiction rather than
"unity," on particularity rather than "universality," on openness
and process rather than closure and finiteness, on interactive-
ness and dialogue between equals rather than a sermon deliv-
ered "looking down." Attempts to distinguish the "ephemeral"
from the "immutable" will cease as a wider taxonomy of "art
forms" includes "ephemera" such as Navajo sand paintings.
"Universality" — if used at all — will refer to the variety, com-
plexity, or internal contradiction of texts, which will make possi-
ble various readings and uses. As preservation becomes easier,
there will be more emphasis on the performative and processual

aspects of cultural expressions rather than on their finished "products." Just as modern meanings can emerge more clearly when older materials are used creatively, local meaning emerges more clearly in the context of globalization. And if global cultural awareness suggests that different kinds of cultural expressions have validity, the result will not necessarily be leveling and mediocrity. Clearer understanding of the criteria used in different kinds of creative activities will make delineation of quality more, not less, precise. Umberto Eco has used the European Middle Ages as a metaphor for the cultural transformations now occurring, and not as a negative model: "[A] period of incredible intellectual vitality, of impassioned dialogue...of journeys and encounters,...At the collapse of a great Pax, crisis and insecurity ensue, different civilizations clash, and slowly the image of a new man is outlined."[62] I am well aware that my attitude toward literature in a global context is shaped by Western intellectual assumptions such as secularism, utilitarianism, skepticism. Even the model of "free competition" between works reflects a capitalistic metaphor for artistic production. But this is not an assertion of "universal" values, just daydreams spun from my present, local reality.

XII. Conclusion

As a metaphor for thinking about the use of the creative imagination, Trimalchio's party with its combinations of foods and entertainments provides more nourishment, I think, than Auerbach's "piquant condiment for the palate of a social and literary elite." As the final item in my entertainment, I offer my Corinthus — poet Joan Retallack. Her poem "WESTERN CIV" juxtaposes fragments — historical "facts," news broadcasts, casual remarks, effluvia of daily life, maxims — without apparent arrangement or hierarchy, spatial, temporal, formal, conceptual, or tonal:

> Circa 2000 B.C.: Minos' palace has light & air shafts, bathrooms with running water. Contraceptives in use in Egypt. Horse put before cart, etc. / / Tonight there is a 30 percent chance of rain, intermittent thunderstorms. Extinctions taking place all the time. / / It's hard not to think of myself as the center of the solar

system, he says, entertained by all the planets and stars. / 1500 B.C. Moses leads Israelites out of Egypt, nabs 10 commandments, etc.[63]

We might read this mishmash as the degeneration of the Western canon into meaningless babble. Or we can enjoy the fun of the fragments in themselves, or create our own connections between them. But the very lack of structure, the multiple perspectives, encourage, I believe, the reader's involvement in creating meaning. However we use it, "WESTERN CIV" treats history as a continuing presence in contemporary life — not as fact, but as reading, as an ongoing dialogue between poet, reader, and culture. And political implications run throughout: here come Moses and those Isra/lights again! As with the *Satyricon*, the elements that make up this Corinthian bronze are not synthesized into a "universal" whole. They are sticking out, advertising their incompleteness and their need for interpretation, telling readers that what they make out of this mishmash is up to them/her/me/us.[64]

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