
The Guns of Theory

"The Assault on the Canon" by Peter Shaw, in *The Sewanee Review* (Spring 1994), University of the South, Sewanee, Tenn. 37383.

It is more than passing strange: The academics who so strenuously object to the "canon" of the great works of Western literature never get down to cases. "Canon-busters" such as Barbara Foley, author of *Radical Representations* (1993) and Paul Lauter, author of *Canons and Context* (1991), do not challenge the standing of *Hamlet*, say, or any other particular revered work. Instead, they train their guns on the process by which the canon is formed, or on the very idea of a canon. Their assault is a *theoretical* one, Shaw, author of *The War against Intellect* (1989), argues—and defenders of the canon, instead of just singing the praises of the masterpieces, would do well to point out the theory's fatal defects.

The logic of the canon assault, Shaw says, rests on the theory of "contingencies of value," as spelled out in Barbara Herrnstein Smith's 1988 book by that name. Traditionalists contend that the canon is composed of works that have stood the test of time. Smith, however, insists that that test "is not . . . an impersonal and impartial mechanism." Biases ("contingencies") *increase* over time, as the ruling class, operating through "cultural institutions," sifts through the literature to find the works that "appear to reflect and reinforce establishment ideologies."

For that to be true, however, Shaw says, "the canon would have to be loaded with second-rate works that happen to reflect 'establishment' ide-

ology." Smith never identifies even one such work. The few attempts others have made to demonstrate her thesis—such as Lawrence H. Schwartz's *Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism* (1988)—only serve to reveal its poverty, Shaw asserts. Schwartz (who does not question Faulkner's greatness) claims that the revival of the novelist's reputation during the late 1940s was the result of the Cold War and of postwar American chauvinism. But, Shaw points out, the Faulkner revival began during the late 1930s and "was prominently led by Europeans."

The establishment's power to affect the canon is much exaggerated, Shaw notes. When T. S. Eliot, for example, "tried to lend his immense prestige to elevating the poetry of Rudyard Kipling," he failed utterly.

To Shaw, the notion that the canon somehow shores up the powers that be is ludicrous: "Not only do the canonical works not advance the interests of ruling classes at all, but they also do not primarily serve the stability of the social order." Indeed, they are, in general, works of social and cultural *opposition*. "From the resistance to settled order of Sophocles' *Antigone* and Job in the Bible, to the apostasies of Galileo, Diderot, Voltaire, William Blake, Goethe, and Nietzsche, the canon is a hotbed of heterodoxy." Indeed, defenders of the canon themselves are continually at war over who belongs on it. In fact, Shaw notes, the *only* people who are not busy arguing the merits and demerits of particular works are the canon-busters. They remain above the fray—theoretically.

OTHER NATIONS

Red Star Rising?

"How the East Was Lost" by Adrian Karatnycky, in *National Review* (June 27, 1994), 150 East 35th St., New York, N.Y. 10016.

Three years ago, AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland met with Sándor Nagy, the leader of what had been Hungary's official state-con-

trolled communist trade union. Nagy told him: "There are three major currents in Hungary today—the Christian Democrats, the liberals, and the Social Democrats." Kirkland, a veteran in the fight against totalitarianism, replied: "Mr. Nagy, tell me: What happened to all the Communists?" The Hungarian turned crimson. Now, after the decisive victory of ex-