Arnold’s Legacy: Religious Rhetoric of Critics on the Literary Canon*

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In his famous response to T.H. Huxley, “Literature and Science,” Matthew Arnold argued that despite the scientific revolution in the nineteenth century, letters should still form a significant part of a person’s education. In the Middle Ages, said Arnold, religion had satisfied certain innate parts of the human psyche. Subsequently, when scientific discoveries made it no longer possible to believe in religion, these instincts would have to be satisfied by something else, namely “humane letters.” Physical science, wrote Arnold paraphrasing Huxley, proved fatal “to the notions held by our forefathers.” Only “humane letters” could “establish a relation between the new conceptions [of science], and our instinct for beauty, our instinct for conduct” which religion had previously allied itself to so profoundly (66).

Arnold’s point that “letters” would replace religion seems to have been proven true by the pervasiveness of religious rhetoric in criticism today. As Edward Said writes,

When you see influential critics publishing major books with titles like The Genesis of Secrecy, The Great Code, Kabbalah and Criticism, Violence and the Sacred, Deconstruction and Theology, you know you are in the presence of a significant trend. (291)

The trend is especially significant in the debate that has been raging among literary theorists about the canon because to talk about a “literary” canon is to use terminology taken from theological discourse. The “canon,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is “the collection or list of books of the Bible accepted by the Christian Church as genuine and

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inspired” and, by extension, “any set of sacred books.” The word is borrowed by scholars and students of literature and refers to those texts that are valued more than others. It is significant that “canon” is preferred and not the “tradition” that T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, and Raymond Williams used, because it signals that the discourse about which literary texts are authoritative is virtually the same as the discussion about the religious canon. What is more, critics who write about the literary canon do more than just borrow the word “canon” from religious discourse; they adopt an attitude of reverence towards their subject that is proper to the religious devotee. My argument is that the prevalence of this attitude proves all the more that Arnold was right; literature has indeed attached itself to people in the way Arnold said religion used to.

In order to give a proper account of some of the forms this reverence takes, I propose to consider the theoretical writing on the literary canon of a variety of critics: Frank Kermode, Harold Bloom, Terry Eagleton, and Jane Tompkins. In respect to the literary canon, these theorists can be divided into two camps. Bloom and Kermode are really explicators, historians, and theorists of canonization; their projects are to produce a model of what brings about a canon. Because they do not castigate the elements of the traditional literary canon as part of their project, I label them “right-wing” canon theorists. I label Tompkins and Eagleton “left-wing” because they are representative of feminist and Marxist attacks on a traditional canon that they would like to replace with something radically different.

The religious attitude of the right-wing canon theorists takes two forms; on the one hand, religious texts and the institutions that use and control them become a point of reference for what happens to literary texts, and on the other hand, literary texts and their authors become the outright objects of reverence.

Frank Kermode is exemplary of the point of reference approach to the canon. In his “influential” article (Altieri 38) “Institutional Control of Interpretation,” he offers the canonizing and exegetical labors of the Church as “a model we would do well to consider as we attempt to understand our own practice” (172). While the Church made its “nomination” (172) of texts centuries ago, and has permitted virtually no variation since, canonization of Christian texts has had two results that have clear parallels in literary studies: the text, and its author, becomes sacred, and it is subjected to “repeated exegesis” (172).
The first result is clearly what has happened with James Joyce and Ulysses, the early readers of which Kermode calls "an enthusiastic cult" (Gen esis 49). In 1921, The Observer spoke of Joyce's "restricted" but "intense ... cult" (quoted. in Magalaner and Kain 165), and John Galsworthy reflected "bitterly in 1925 on the changing tides of taste, in which Dostoevski replaces Turgenev, Proust is seen to usurp the place of France, ‘and a Joyce replace the Deity’" (Magalaner and Kain 169).

The phrase "enthusiastic cult" is equally applicable to the prolific activity that Ulysses inspires today. The abundance of guide books, which give "literary pilgrims ... guidance through the cities associated with Joyce" (Staley 238; italics added), note-books, concordances, and study-aids to Ulysses is unequalled in any twentieth century literary work and has a clear parallel in the many concordances, guides, and geographies to the Bible. The checklists of the James Joyce Quarterly announce titles such as: Joyce and the Bible, "James Joyce, Heretic," "Torn by Conflicting Doubts: Joyce and Renan," "The Voice of Esau: Stephen in the Library," "James Joyce: the Advent of Bloom," "The Way of the Cross in Ulysses," My Brother's Keeper, and "Ulysses the Divine Nobody." Frances Restuccia, in an article on "secular typology in Ulysses," calls Joyce an "artist-god" (441) which suggests that Joyce is no less revered today than in 1920, when Sylvia Beach "worshipped James Joyce" (Beach 35), and "Joyce was, of course ... god" for Robert McAlmon, William Bird, Ernest Hemingway, Archibald MacLeish, and Scott Fitzgerald (Beach 40). For many years, two Jesuits were on the editorial board of the James Joyce Quarterly – William T. Noon and Robert Boyle – and the religious ties of Harry Blamires, Chester Anderson, and Kevin Sullivan are well known.

Even Joyceans of more secular backgrounds take part in Joyce studies as in a religion. Certainly no modern author – and perhaps none in English literature – is the object of as much ritualistic behavior. June 16 is the single most important day of the year, and the name "Bloomsday," with its apocalyptic ring (contrasting with the evocation of spring), is very appropriate. One cannot doubt that the annual meetings of the James Joyce Society or the biennial International James Joyce Symposia that always occur on and around Bloomsday are ritualistic. The description of the First International Symposium in the James Joyce Quarterly sets that event on "Bloomsday, Dublin, 1967" and not on June 16, clearly showing that the symposium did not take place in anything as vulgar as calendar time.
The second result of the canonization of scripture, according to Kermode, is "repeated exegesis." Once the words in a text are held sacred, they become open to commentary and interpretation at the same time that their authenticity can be questioned less and less. The situation is the same in literary studies; it is unfashionable now to argue that an inconsistency in a text is caused by an inaccuracy (the clocks in Julius Caesar, for example), but it is quite acceptable to make it the basis of an intricate interpretation.

Kermode's writing on canonization and academic literary criticism abounds with religious terminology. He calls interpretative power, "the power of divination," those who do not belong to the academy are "the laity" ("Institutional Control" 169), and Louis Kampf is one of the "boy bishops." F.R. Leavis — or is it Yvor Winters — "is the Marcion of the canon" (179), his impact Kermode describes as "evangelical success," and "New Criticism and Scrutiny were (and still are) pretty successful heresies" (180). In The Genesis of Secrecy (the title itself has religious implications), Kermode describes the difference between readers of the "spiritual sense" and readers of the "carnal sense" (1-21). The latter read only the text's surface, while the former, who are also described as having "circumcised ears" (Genesis 5), are interested in a text's concealed meanings.

Harold Bloom's use of religious language is perhaps the most extensive of all, despite his having been one of the last holdouts for the word "tradition" over "canon" (although he often borrowed the word "Kabbalah" from Jewish theology). Bloom begins his 1984 article on canon-formation, "Criticism, Canon-Formation, and Prophecy: the Sorrows of Facticity," like the Gospel of John, with a word: "I begin with my search for a word" (1). Bloom finds his word, but contemporary criticism, he feels, is not so successful in its quest:

The quest of contemporary criticism is for method, and the quest is vain. There is no method other than yourself. All those who seek for a method that is not themselves will find not a method, but someone else whom they will ape and involuntarily mock. Poetry and fiction share with criticism the mystery that poststructuralist speculation seeks to deny: the spark we call personality or the idiosyncratic, which in metaphysics and theology once was called presence. ("Criticism" 9)

This passage would only seem slightly mystical, rather than explicitly religious, if the author had not pointed out a few pages earlier that God's
“name is presence” (6). Thus, the personal, idiosyncratic, and mysterious spark that criticism shares with poetry and fiction was once called God. Contemporary criticism seeks and does not find method because it is seeking for the wrong thing, but Bloom is saying that if critics seek the deity (or, at least, what was once called such) within themselves, their quest will be successful.

When writing about specific critics and critical schools, Bloom’s language is full of religious and reverential vocabulary. On feminism and its effect on canon-formation, he writes:

I prophesy that the first true break with literary continuity will be brought about in generations to come, if the burgeoning religion of Liberated Woman spreads from its clusters of enthusiasts to dominate the West. (Map 33)

Bloom makes this statement as a prophecy, depicting feminist criticism as if it were an eastern god like Jesus or Dionysus whose enthusiastic followers were bringing it to, and conquering, the West.

Speaking of Emerson, Bloom writes: “I revere him” (Map 28). M.H. Abrams and Northrop Frye are “two of my heroic precursors” (“Criticism” 11). The Hebrew Bible is “consumed in Frye’s great Blakean Code of Art, a fiery furnace worthy of the authors of The Four Zoas and Fearful Symmetry. Even the uncanny originality of [the] J[ahvist] is melted down in the visionary flames of Toronto” (“Criticism” 12). It is no surprise that Bloom says about Frye: “I worship that great critic’s stance and style” (“Criticism” 15). Bloom’s most reverent rhetoric is reserved for Freud: “We pay tribute to Freud involuntarily, as we do to all the powerful mythologies and idealism. ... Our Elijah or Supreme Critic was Freud, who preferred to see himself as Moses” (“Criticism” 2, 17).

When Bloom writes about the canon and its formation, religious discourse is as abundant as in his remarks on critics and criticism in general. The literary canon consists, he says,

of individual parts, those strong enough to force their way against facticity [i.e., taking metaphors, such as Freud’s model of mental processes, literally and actually believing our heads are made up of objects called ego, superego, and id] into a canon that is complete without them, and must be compelled somehow to need them. (“Criticism” 13)
To illustrate the formation of the literary canon, Bloom, like Kermode, looks to scripture: "I turn to the one inevitable work in Western literary culture, the Bible" ("Criticism" 4):

But to describe just how any revisionist struggles against facticity from within, I need to resort to the authentic precursors of so dialectical an agon. These precursors were the line of Hebrew prophets, from Elijah to the Jesus of the Gospels, which returns me to J, the Jahvist, as the textual founder both of this facticity and the prophets who emerged from it. ("Criticism" 10)

Bloom turns to the Bible for the same reason as Kermode; the similarity between the literary and the sacred canon is so compelling. Bloom sees Stevens and Shelley, for example, struggling against, and from within, the influence of their tradition just as he pictures the Hebrew prophets struggling with the influence of Genesis. Like Kermode, Bloom posits the same model for scriptural and literary canon-formation. Kermode concludes that canonization of a literary text licenses the interpreter to engage in the same kind of commentary as the exegete of scripture, but Bloom shows us, by the religiousness of his own language, that texts belonging to the literary canon are candidates for reverence.

Bloom only somewhat acknowledges the canonizer’s role:

Gossip grows old and becomes myth; myth grows older and becomes dogma. Wyndham Lewis, Eliot and Pound gossiped with one another; the New Criticism aged them into a myth of Modernism; now antiquarian Hugh Kenner has dogmatized this myth into the Pound Era, a canon of accepted titans. (Map 28; italics added)

For the most part, though, Bloom (and T.S. Eliot even more so before him, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”) understands the better or stronger poets as prevailing automatically, independently of any political activity of those – today the academic community – who shape the canon. He downplays the role that the institution plays in forming its canon, a role that Kermode does recognize. This is an important point, for the politics of the canon-forming institution are fundamental to the arguments of Marxist and feminist critics when they propose radical changes in the literary canon; for them, too much attention is paid to Lewis, Eliot, and Pound, and not enough to Kenner’s role in making them as important as they seem.
Pointing out the religiousness and reverence in Joyce criticism or in Kermode's and Bloom's writing on the canon may not seem a great discovery, because several—predominantly Marxist—critics have already railed against the reverential tendencies of traditional literary scholarship in general. In fact, these critics would argue that not only is literary study a displaced religion but that is precisely what is wrong with it. However, these critics only rail against the broad tendency; they do not examine specific critics or groups of critics. Such attacks have been evolving over the last fifteen years, at least, but in the last five years have turned into assaults against the canon and the limitations caused by a narrowing of focus onto a body of texts distinct from all other culture. Unfortunately, these attacks on the reverence of traditional literary criticism, whether allied to an attack on the literary canon or not, typically offer no alternative to the reverence itself, simply an alternative reverence.

Frederic Jameson writes that dialectical literary criticism is "an intensification of the normal thought processes such that a renewal of light washes over the object of their exasperation" (307). Marxist criticism means redemption and rebirth, in other words; it will make us all "see the light." Richard Ohmann, in *English in America*, urges his colleagues to "teach politically with revolution as our end" and "oppose the tyrannies of this culture and lay the groundwork for the next." This argument "is, among other things, a specimen of the literature of conversion" (*English* 335). The significant word is conversion. Ohmann begins his book with the story of his own conversion to the radical of the subtitle. The MLA's resistance to discussing politics and the Vietnam War revealed to Ohmann that an apolitical stance was really a conservationist and conservative one. At the book's end Ohmann proclaims with appropriate missionary zeal his new proselytizing project, his intention to convert the whole institution. In other words, he simply wants to replace one displaced religion with another.

Terry Eagleton comes closest to acknowledging Arnold's legacy. In *Literary Theory*, he attributes the rise of English studies to "the failure of religion" in the later nineteenth century (22). English was "to provide the social 'cement'" that "religion progressively ceases to provide" (23). In England F.R. Leavis (Eagleton would probably call him the Eusebius rather than the "Marcion of the canon," as Kermode does) and *Scrutiny*'s "moral and cultural crusade" made literary works into "sacrosanct objects" (23), while in America "the ideology of New Criticism" turned the...
...poetic response into "an affective affair which linked us to the 'world's body' in an essentially religious bond" (46). "Leavis sought to redeem criticism by converting it into something approximating a religion" (44).

In his first chapter, Eagleton argues that it is impossible to say what literature definitely is. He then maintains that what is considered literature is considered as such not because of any inherent superiority but as a result of the politics of the institution that designates what is worthy of its study.

The fact that this canon is usually regarded as fairly fixed, even at times as eternal and immutable, is in a sense ironic, because since literary critical discourse has no definite signified it can, if it wants to, turn its attention to more or less any kind of writing. (201)

The reason for the exclusion of films, parties, and advertisements "from what is studied is not because they are not 'amenable' to the discourse: it is a question of the arbitrary authority of the literary institution." As a result, "Shakespeare was not great literature lying conveniently to hand, which the literary institution then happily discovered: he is great literature because the institution constitutes him as such" (202).

Rather than "the dogmatism which would insist that Proust is always more worthy of study than television advertisements," Eagleton prefers "any method or theory which will contribute to the strategic goal of human emancipation, the production of 'better people' through the socialist transformation of society" (211). Rather than literary studies, Eagleton proposes cultural studies,

but it should not be taken as an a priori assumption that what is currently termed "literature" will always and everywhere be the most important focus of attention. Such dogmatism has no place in the field of cultural study. (213)

The study of Proust and Shakespeare will not be replaced, but will be revitalized by "the broader and deeper discursive formation" of cultural studies (213).

It is important to understand that Eagleton, while condemning the "dogmatism" – and, by extension, the reverence and religiousness – of traditional literary criticism and its current canon "piously swaddled with eternal verities" (217), proposes to replace them with nothing other than a
dogmatism and a religiousness of a different sort. Rather than participating in the ritual worship of Joyce and other authors in the literary canon, we will become missionaries proselytizing for ‘human emancipation’ and “the production of ‘better people’.”

Ironically, as Eagleton himself points out, this mission is in some respects as conservative, politically speaking, as the apolitical stance of the liberal humanists that he criticizes: “Like all the best radical positions, then, mine is a thoroughly traditionalist one” (206). His belief that the socialist transformation of society will “produce ‘better people’” gives away his reactionism, for liberal humanism, with its “suburban moral ideology” (207), claimed that “dealing with literature is worth while [because] it makes you a better person” (207). Thus Eagleton is not asking that literary studies change in any way but one. He is not against the morally edifying value of this study, nor is he against the methods or manners in which this study is conducted, nor does he wish to end the reverence toward that which is studied; all he wants is the name of that study to be “cultural study” and not “literary study” and for “television,” “the popular press,” and “Robert Tressell” to receive as much reverence as Shakespeare and Proust (216). The results will be “human emancipation” and “the death of literature,” which will, in fact, be its “liberation” and “redemption” (217). Thus Eagleton is trying to do exactly what he said Leavis did: “Redeem criticism by converting it into something approximating a religion” (44). From the apolitical (i.e., covertly political) redemptive power of literature that Ohmann criticized, Eagleton has taken us full circle to overt – and left wing – politics that are going to redeem literature.

Jane Tompkins, in the two penultimate chapters of her book, Sensational Designs, uses arguments similar in many ways to Eagleton’s to propose a feminist canon. The villains in this attack are the authors of the “American Renaissance,” and the heroines are Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, Sarah J. Hale, Augusta Evans, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, her daughter Mary, and Frances Hodgson Burnett. The first group authored “succès d’estime” (122) that had limited commercial success, while the second group, “whose names were household words in the nineteenth century” (123) wrote sentimental novels that were “tremendous hit[s]” (148) and “sold in the hundreds of thousands” (146). The works of the first group today constitute the canon of American literature of the 1850s, while those of the second group are considered “trash” (123). Most importantly, the first group is made up entirely of men, while women make up
the second. This explains, for Tompkins, why Hawthorne, Melville, *et al.* are the canonical writers of today, while Stowe, Warner, and the others are ignored.

By choosing to deal exclusively with American literature in the 1850s, Tompkins loads the deck in her favor. The opposition between male-authored, commercially unsuccessful, yet now canonical texts and texts that were written by women, highly popular, and almost entirely forgotten today falls readily to hand in this period and permits Tompkins to argue easily that male-dominated academic literary criticism is responsible for the ascendance of the men and the near disappearance of the women authors. One wants to ask: where does Emily Dickinson – the most admired American poet for many, yet entirely neglected in her own lifetime – fit into this picture? Will Tompkins extend her attack to a British canon that today favors *Frankenstein* over the works of Mary Shelley's more influential and famous contemporaries, Matthew Lewis and Charles Maturin? Would she favor John Galsworthy and H.G. Wells to Virginia Woolf?² I believe not, for, as we shall see, only in American literature of the 1850s can Tompkins have texts with all the necessary attributes: successful, non-canonical, written by women, and – most importantly – religious.

The two texts that Tompkins especially commends are Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Warner's *The Wide, Wide World*. The reason that these novels are considered “trash” today has nothing to do with their inherent worthlessness or the intrinsic esthetic value of the texts of the American Renaissance authors, according to Tompkins. It is because the traditional judgments of “the male-dominated scholarly tradition” (123) are “amplified versions of what Hawthorne and Melville said about their sentimental rivals” (148). A “long tradition of academic parochialism” (125) began with Hawthorne and Melville “who – successfully as it turned out – strove to suppress” (148) the work of these popular women writers.

The argument, here, is very similar to Eagleton’s, above. “Shakespeare was not great literature lying conveniently to hand” and neither were the writers of the American Renaissance. Just as Shakespeare “is great literature because the institution constitutes him as such” (Eagleton 202), so, too, Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman are great literature because “the male-dominated scholarly tradition” has successfully suppressed any contenders.
According to Tompkins, "the enormous popularity of ... the popular domestic novel[s] ... is a reason for paying close attention to them" (124). After all, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she says, "helped convince a nation to go to war and free its slaves" (141). Aside from this simplistic idea of the historical causes of the Civil War, there are two problems with Tompkins’s argument that the initial popularity of a text is a justification for considering a text important. In his article, "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction 1960-1975," Richard Ohmann shows that the commercial success of novels today is the result of as powerful, albeit very different, political forces as those that affect the canonical status of a text in the academy. Therefore, popularity is no more due to anything intrinsic to the text than is canonicity. If Tompkins is to argue that the nineteenth century sentimental novels require our attention simply because of their popularity, then she is implying that popularity is in itself a value. But if popularity is as much the result of the popularizers’ successful activity as canonic status is due to successful canonizing strategies, it cannot be held up as a value any more than any other. Tompkins would have to convincingly establish that no political forces, of the type Ohmann describes in his article, were at the root of the commercial success of the novels of Stowe and Warner before she could begin to claim that these novels’ popularity is sufficient reason in itself for them to be considered important today.

The second problem with Tompkins’s attack on the canon of 1850s American literature comes from the success of her critique of the standards of literary evaluation that shape the canon. If one argues that we cherish certain literary texts over others because we have been indoctrinated to value particular kinds of literariness by "the male-dominated scholarly tradition" that trained us, and if one claims, therefore, that what we value is not inherently better in the context of the institution that determines literary value, then one has to consider what would happen if the institution should change sufficiently and reject the values it holds to now for those that Tompkins proposes. Would not the new system of values be just as liable to the same critique as the old one? If everybody were to subscribe to a new system of values, would it not be as a result of the same sort of institutional conditioning that has lead us to subscribe to the old values? In other words, if I have been conditioned to prefer *Moby Dick* to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, then would I not have to have been conditioned just as much in a different way if I were ever to prefer *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to *Moby Dick*? If esthetic superiority cannot be inherent to any text but only
the result of the conditioning forces of the reader’s cultural and historical environment, then it becomes impossible to argue that any text – and any cultural artifact, by extension – is better, more important, more worthy of attention, study, inclusion in a curriculum, or publication than any other.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith has shown in “Contingencies of Value” and “Fixed Marks and Variable Constancies: A Parable of Literary Value” – that last title shows that even Smith has to express questions of canon formation in religious terms – that it is the accrual of many decisions to include one particular text as opposed to another in a syllabus or literary anthology, to re-publish a text while letting another go out of print, to study and write about one text rather than another that contributes to the formation of a literary canon. If, then, literary (or cultural) study rejects a canon on Tompkins’s and Eagleton’s grounds (that canons are created by interested parties and not discovered “lying conveniently to hand”), it must study with a uniform degree of attention and make equally accessible to readers absolutely every cultural artifact. Otherwise the series of unavoidable choices that Smith describes will come into play and a canon will form inevitably (though not disinterestedly). Of course it is impossible to devote equal attention to all cultural artifacts, and, therefore, a situation in which an acanonical cultural study existed is inconceivable.

Popularity is not defensible as a criterion for canonical status of a text, and it is not, in fact, what Tompkins proposes as the real justification for seriously considering Uncle Tom’s Cabin and The Wide, Wide World. The real reason these works are important is the religious beliefs they convey.

The one great fact of American life during the period under consideration was ... the revival. Sentimental fiction was perhaps the most influential expression of the beliefs that animated the revival movement and had shaped the character of American life in the years before the Civil War. Antebellum critics and readers did not distinguish sharply between fiction and what we would now call religious propaganda. (Sensational Designs 149)

There are two points about this passage. First, the notion that sentimental fiction was an “influential expression” and that certain beliefs “shaped the character of American life” must be explained. Just as with the argument that Uncle Tom’s Cabin convinced the nation to go to war, the sense of history is highly simplistic. How much religious belief shaped (and shapes) American character, what is American character, what is an influential
expression, and how and what did this particular expression of beliefs influence are very important questions that arise but unfortunately are not satisfactorily answered. The second point about this passage is its last line: “what we would now call religious propaganda.” This phrase is ironic, which suggests that the author would rather not have religious tracts and sentimental fiction disparagingly labeled “propaganda.” The significance of this ironic tone is that Tompkins appears to be adding to her active critique of the “male-dominated scholarly tradition” an implied critique of the absence of overt religious values on the part of the group referred to as “we.”

Tompkins’s display of the formal complexity of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Wide, Wide World* is very convincing and clearly shows the relationship between these texts and their authors’ religious and millennial strategies. “Stowe’s rhetorical undertaking is nothing less than the institution of the kingdom of heaven on earth” (141). However, the basic conclusion is that these novels are great because they are like the Bible and canonical religious literature: “Warner, for instance, never referred to her books as ‘novels,’ but called them stories, because, in her eyes, they functioned in the same way as Biblical parables” (149). It is not Warner, but Tompkins, who calls her novels “Biblical parables.” Referring specifically to criticism that *The Wide, Wide World* is a fairy-story, Tompkins says: “The education of the sentimental heroine is no more a fairy-story than the story of Job or *Pilgrim’s Progress*” (184). The conclusion to her analysis of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is that “its distinguishing features, generically speaking, are not those of the realistic novel but of typological narrative” (135) and that “this novel does not simply quote the Bible, it rewrites the Bible as the story of a Negro slave” (134).

After turning *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* into the Bible, Tompkins is able to turn motherhood into godliness. One difference between *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the Bible is that “the principle of sacrifice is revealed not in crucifixion but in motherhood” (141). The god(dess) is Rachel Halliday, who Tompkins elsewhere calls “the presiding deity” (“Sentimental Power” 95) of the Quaker settlement and who “is God in human form” (*Sensational Designs* 142). Women “dominate the scene” (145), and men are reduced to “the anti-patriarchal activity of shaving” (quoted in *Sensational Designs* 146). Thus, “the removal of the male from the center to the periphery of the human sphere … the most radical component of this millennial scheme, which is rooted so solidly in the most traditional values – religion,
motherhood, home, and family” (145), is accomplished. Religious – “the sentimental writers had millennial aims in mind” (185) – and feminist – “the removal of the male from the center” – goals are achieved together in the sentimental novels, and Tompkins’s own goals are exactly those of the writers she champions: the removal of the male-authored secular texts from the canon of nineteenth century American literature and their replacement with evangelical fiction written by women.

In Kermode, Bloom, and Joyce criticism, I have tried to demonstrate that Arnold’s legacy is still with us; traditional literary criticism is a displaced religion. The example of Eagleton, however, shows that even when attacking it, Arnold’s legacy cannot be shaken off; reverence can only be replaced with a different reverence. Ironically, Tompkins is most successful at escaping Arnold's legacy because she neither criticizes the reverential attitude of traditional literary criticism nor promises that her radically different approach to reading will have a redemptive value. But while she does not fall into the trap of Arnold’s legacy as Eagleton does, her goal of replacing the canon of the American Renaissance with the evangelical fiction of the period is an open embrace of religious values.

Tompkins is not the only feminist critic whose discourse or project is in some way religious. Quite similarly to Kermode and Bloom, Christine Froula (a Joycean, incidentally) begins her “undoing of the canonical economy” by establishing a parallel between the second-century struggle over the scriptural canon of the early Church fathers and the gnostics and the struggle today over the literary canon fought by traditional male-dominated literary criticism and feminist criticism: “The revisionary female theology promoted in literary writing by women implicitly counters the patriarchal theology which is already inscribed in literature” (324). Elaine Showalter writes that (in 1981) “feminist literary critics are wandering in the wilderness, [and] as Geoffrey Hartman tells us, all criticism is in the wilderness” (179-80) and she describes the “two poles of feminist literary criticism” that Carolyn Heilbrun and Catherine Stimpson identified as “Old Testament” and “New Testament” (179).

I have proposed these samples of religious rhetoric in order to suggest how pervasive it is among a variety of critical strategies. Since I have only looked at a few critics, it may not seem that all discussion of canon formation indulges in the kinds of religiousness I have cited here. There may, indeed, be many instances where religiousness is entirely avoided, but, I would counter, the few critics I have concentrated on here are by no
means the only ones whose critical discourse is of a religious type. To paraphrase the passage by Edward Said quoted above, when Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls her examination of literary value “a parable,” when a Joycean like Gerald Bruns publishes an article about Hebrew scripture and canons, when Geoffrey Hartman writes about criticism in the wilderness, you know you are “in the presence of” (and we recall how Bloom said that God’s “name is presence”) a significant trend.

Jacques Derrida writes:

The history of metaphysics, just as the history of the West ... must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center. ... The center receives, successively and in a regulated manner, different forms or names ... eidos, arché, telos, energia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject) aitheia, transcendentality, conscience, God, man, etc. (410-11; my translation)

After Arnold, T.S. Eliot, F.R. Leavis, and the American New Critics consolidated and propagated the substitution of culture for religious scripture, and the situation today is that,

without willing the change, our theoretical critics have become negative theologians, our practical critics are close to being Agadic commentators, and all of our teachers, of whatever generation, teach how to live, what to do, in order to avoid the damnation of death-in-life. (Bloom Map 29)

The critics who attack the canon and the religiousness of literary study must realize that their own position is often equally, if not more, religious and dogmatic. “Once an intellectual, the modern critic has become a cleric in the worst sense of the word,” says Said (292), but the Marxist’s attempts and inability to alter this situation make it seem inescapable; the legacy of Arnold is still with us. Ironically, it is critiques like Eagleton’s that contribute most to making the literary canon appear eternal and sacred. Perhaps all is not lost; after all, the literary canon is not “eternal” and “immutable,” as Eagleton would have it (201); it is in a state of constant fluctuation and controlled by far less “dogma” than the canon of the Christian churches.
Notes

1. Beach is no doubt guilty of projecting her own adoration of Joyce a little too strongly onto the contemporaries she mentions here; this worship is not at all apparent in Hemingway's own memoir of the expatriate days, A Moveable Feast, but he, of course, had his own cult to think about at the time he was writing that book.

2. I am perhaps guilty of mis-representing the overall argument of Tompkins's book by limiting my attention to the two penultimate chapters and not considering the rest. However, I do not think this is unfair. The two chapters were published in slightly different form as separate articles first (“Sentimental Power: Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Politics of Literary History” and “The Other American Renaissance”), and this means that they are meant to stand on their own at the same time that they contribute to a greater overall project. The replacing of a male-oriented canon with a female one is only part of the book's overall project, which is to propose nothing less than a whole new way to read and evaluate literature, and Tompkins is to be commended for proposing specific books and for actually presenting a way of reading them. This is in contrast with Eagleton's scheme, which only mentions alternatives in the vaguest and most general way and gives no clue as to how cultural study is to be done.

Works Cited