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John Kerrigan

TRUMAN CAPOTE AND THE CANON

When I had a phone call a few weeks ago to say that *Revenge Tragedy* had won the Truman Capote Award, I experienced a rush of elation only slightly tempered by the doubt that the man at the other end of the line—who did *sound* like my idea of an eminent American writer—might not really be Frank Conroy but a transatlantic hoaxer. A fax from Connie Brothers at the Writers' Workshop convinced me of my good fortune, but, once I'd got used to that, I found something else to worry about: why did my big study of literature and violence since antiquity make no reference to Truman Capote, my benefactor? He was, after all, the author of a famous book about multiple murder.

As I quickly discovered, that factual novel of 1965, *In Cold Blood*, is a remarkable work—psychologically penetrating and brilliantly written. On the face of it, the murders which it deals with aren't about revenge at all. Though cruelly planned they were arbitrary: the work of a couple of drifters, Dick Hickock and Perry Smith, who got it into their heads that the Clutter farmstead, in rural Kansas, was a good place to steal cash from, and who, in their frustration at not finding the money they expected, committed a series of killings which left most of a family dead. Interestingly, though, as so often in representations of violence, the principle of retribution significantly structured events. For many of those involved, including Hickock, the executions which ended the story were a form of legitimate "revenge." And as Capote searched for motives, he found himself examining the traumatic early life of Perry Smith. Like one of the psychologists on the case, and like Smith himself, he concluded that, in killing Mr. Clutter—the murder which triggered off the carnage—Smith was paying back all the people who had treated him badly in life, especially his own father.

By the time I'd finished *In Cold Blood*, the paradoxes and perplexities which had prompted me to write *Revenge Tragedy* were clamoring for attention again. What penalty (as Hamlet wonders) can adequately punish murder without

The 1998 Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism in memory of Newton Arvin was presented to John Kerrigan at The University of Iowa last May. These were his remarks on that occasion.

repeating the initial atrocity? How far does vengeance shape the way mixed-up people punish their circumstances? Or do we invoke “revenge” too freely in cases like the Clutter murders, as a way of rationalizing actions which are frightening because obscure? What are the aesthetics tied up with that impulse to coherence? Is there a correlation between the revenger plotting violence and the activity of a writer giving form to a novel or play? Capote certainly felt drawn to the frustrated artist in Perry Smith, who arrived for his execution with paint and ink-stains on his fingers. He saw in Smith’s murder of the Clutters a dark expression of the insecurities and resentments which found creative scope in his own work.

Those of you familiar with the state of literary criticism will have noticed that I’ve been asking a number of unfashionable questions. They lead towards moral philosophy rather than politicized historicism or cultural studies, and they prompt thoughts about psychology—including the psychology of the author—which some would rule out of court as mimetic or intentionalist. So perhaps I should confess at once that I’m a stubborn critical pluralist. I believe that those who have been trained to read texts sensitively and precisely can do innovative work beyond the traditional limits of criticism, right across the Humanities, and that the issues raised in the process will inevitably be various. The only thing to avoid is the orthodoxy of a fixed agenda. In my own research, for instance, I’ve obviously not been tied to thinking about crime and punishment while working on Keats, mathematics and chance, on editing and literary theory, or the history of comic noses. But I do think that the life-and-death questions which stirred me to write about tragedy must be permissible if criticism is to remain relevant to those who still read literature to find out about the conditions of existence.

It would be pleasant to stop at that, with a pluralistic gesture; but anyone who teaches young people knows that cultural experience is changing so quickly that the question of *what* should be read to find out about existence is far from self-evident. In *Revenge Tragedy* I tried to write an intellectually promiscuous book, tracking plots and situations from English fiction into French, reading Toni Morrison in the light of Euripides. One of the nicest things that was said to me about it came from an Italian medievalist who ignored the American passages and praised its range as “truly European.” What struck me as I prepared to fly to Iowa was that it might by contrast seem, from your side of the ocean, *Eurocentric*: more limited than libertarian. As my subtitle—*Aeschylus*

to *Armageddon*—shows, I start from Greek tragedy and talk about the Bible. Shakespeare, Mozart, Nietzsche and other Dead White Males play a large part in my argument. Is this not the old canon, the list of *hoi enkrithentes* first drawn up in ancient Alexandria and celebrated by cultural conservatives all the way to Allan Bloom?

I hope there's no danger of that. I wrote my book believing that we should keep open our supply lines to the distant past not just because of the intelligence of many of the ancient texts, nor because of the extraordinary tenacity of certain elements in Western culture, but because (on the contrary) there is much to be learned from the otherness of antiquity. I sympathize with the pessimists who think that our sense of history is getting thin, though I can't decide whether it's because intellectuals take postmodernism too seriously or because everyone watches too much TV. Certainly, the new historicism in literary studies hasn't reversed this trend, despite its many achievements, because it tends to exaggerate "epistemic breaks" in the flow of events while thickly describing the particularities of London in 1604, when *Measure for Measure* was performed, or the Wye Valley in 1798, as the context of "Tintern Abbey." Unless young people are encouraged to see that the present grows out of such pasts they will not grasp what is contingent in modernity, and they will overdevelop that sense, which you already find too much of in criticism, that in so far as the past exists it is to provide a foil for demonstrating the superiority of modern ideologies.

But it doesn't follow from this that students should be told a story about the West which blandly accepts the authority of Plato or Jane Austen. A willingness to contest the basis of the canon which is providing the grounds for debate has to be integral to what we do when making decisions about what should be read. That is why, instead of taking a long march through the elite works which the Romans called classics, I seek to make strange both the past and the present in *Revenge Tragedy* by juxtaposing Aeschylus with Stephen King, Sophocles with Sherlock Holmes, and Medea with Andrea Dworkin. Of course, such collocations couldn't be thought-provoking if they were random: the effect of estrangement is itself a demonstration of that volatile connectedness with antiquity which shouldn't be lost sight of.

At the moment it may be more natural for a British scholar to do this sort of work than it would be for an American. European integration is uncertain, because, beneath the surface convergence of currencies and political machines, there is a resurgent and often ugly nationalism at work from Poland to the

Basque country, and the UK version of Euroscepticism is peculiarly unstable because post-imperial. Diversified by the music, dress and cuisine of Afro-Caribbean and Asian immigrants, Britain is looking beyond Europe to a Commonwealth and Anglophone internationalism which might be the seed-bed of a global literature, while, within the so-called “British Isles,” the end of empire is reviving separatism in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Even so, there is a feeling among many that Europe—that witches’ cauldron of colonialism and war—should now be brought together, and that means that when I write a chapter which connects (say) Euripides, Delacroix and Pasolini I can feel that I’m knitting up a heritage of grandeur and suffering which has a positive future.

All that helps me sympathize with the American critic Newton Arvin, whose friendship with Truman Capote attaches his memory to the award which I’ve received. Arvin taught Capote a great deal in the fifties, encouraging him to “read Proust and the Nineteenth Century American classics,” late Henry James and American poetry from Whitman to Wallace Stevens. Those emphases are significant. Though Arvin was a formidable linguist with a detailed grasp of European literature, his major books (on Hawthorne, Whitman and Melville) entrench an American canon for the melting-pot democracy. His fine account of Whitman, for instance, which was published in 1938, against the background of Fascism in Europe, praises *Leaves of Grass* for its ability “to fortify the writers and the men of our time in their struggles against a dark barbarian reaction, and to interest and animate the peoples of a near future in their work of building a just society. To such men it is and will be clearer and clearer [he writes] that, from our recent past, we inherit no fuller or braver anticipatory statement than *Leaves of Grass* of a democratic and fraternal humanism.” This is a political language with obvious blind-spots—where, for instance, are the women in this fraternity?—but it strengthens Arvin’s book that it has such a sense of purpose, such a vigilant confidence in the future of the American way.

This, as I say, can be seen as rhyming with the situation of the British critic who, while aware of globalization and the neo-nationalism paradoxically bound up with it, thinks that his or her work can help Europeans towards a better-integrated understanding of their collective culture. But it couldn’t characterize the outlook of an American negotiating the fissile dynamics of multiculturalism. From where you stand today, the progress which Arvin believed in must look altogether more complicated. Browsing The University of Iowa

website I found an address by President Mary Sue Coleman which sets out very interestingly the challenges facing young Americans in the “diverse, multi-ethnic, multicultural work force” of the 21st century. As surely as their European contemporaries they will face “the globalization of virtually every field of human endeavor” in a scene of technological change where solutions will have to be “multi-dimensional . . . multi-disciplinary.” And this has to be achieved in a country which is still (to Old World eyes) happily new, yet racially divided, a society in which affirmative action remains painfully contested.

The connection between those socio-political realities and the question of what should be read goes to the heart of the culture wars which raged here in the late eighties and early nineties. As a long-range eavesdropper on those quarrels, much of what I’ve heard has taken the form of academic horror stories and jokes in the media; but I can make out enough of what’s been said to side with those who want to diversify the canon. I take it as axiomatic that, if the Louisiana Purchase had not been made, and the French had settled Iowa, my speech today would be larded with quotations from Racine. There is nothing inevitable about the canon (if anything so single can be said to exist): it doesn’t descend from on high, or rise up from the book-stacks by asserting its innate quality; the sort of literature which is felt (in Arnold’s magisterial phrase) to be “a criticism of life” is bound to modulate as social circumstances fray, evolve and revive. That is why the American canon has changed several times in the last century or so, from the Greek and Latin classics, through the New England tradition favored by Newton Arvin, to its current multicultural ferment.

Conservatives say that history means inheritance, and that the only compromise worth discussing is between received ideas of quality and the instrumental requirement of democracy that universities teach a scattering of representative “minority” texts. But the claims of history are not acknowledged if the canon is simply seen as inherited—not just because history shows that the canon has often changed most radically during periods of intellectual vitality, but because history (as against antiquarianism) is always relative to the present (which is not a way of saying that its “facts” are subjectively produced) and it now includes, for Americans, the cultural roots of the Holocaust, which Jorie Graham has written about so disturbingly, and of the Middle Passage and slavery, as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* distressingly reminds us.

The only plea I'd enter is that the logic of all this should not be seen as pointing towards a superficial modernization—i.e., forgetting almost everything written before 1776—but towards a reassessment of what the past has to tell us through dialogue, both in what chimes between us and (say) medieval poetry and in how differences challenge our self-conception. Certainly it would be foolish to swallow the conservative myth that the Greeks and Shakespeare are good for us because they enshrine eternal verities: the problems of multiculturalism are engaged in classical antiquity from Herodotus through Euripides into the mobile and confusing world around the Mediterranean littoral which goes into late-classical romance. As for Shakespeare, I need hardly tell you that critics say bizarre things about him not just because they have their foibles but because his teeming plays are written out of a hybrid and dynamic society. If you look to him for truths, you'll find them in dissonance.

Truman Capote wasn't satisfied with the reception of *In Cold Blood*. It didn't get the prizes which mark the approval of the literary establishment—the National Book Award, for instance, which Newton Arvin won for his biography of Melville. Worse, some of the reviewers, perhaps distracted by Capote's performance as a social butterfly and gossip, overlooked the artistry which he had lavished on the book. He was, in fact, a rigorous stylist who composed slowly and with great concentration. When interviewed by those who cared to ask, he didn't talk about the latest scandals in New York high society but about the rhythms of prose. "Call it precious and go to hell," he would say, "but I believe a story can be wrecked by a faulty rhythm in a sentence . . . or a mistake in paragraphing, even punctuation. Henry James is a maestro of the semi-colon. Hemingway is a first rate paragrapher."

Those are interesting judgments, which point to something essential in the idiom of both writers—the pause and unwinding of James's syntax, Hemingway's snapshot economy. But how often do you find such remarks in criticism today? The sexy journals now carry so much theoretical and political baggage that attentiveness to the fabric of texts has almost gone by the board. Capote once said that he didn't doubt that professional critics had things to tell a writer, but complained that "few of the good ones review on a regular basis." Nowadays the fear would be that the good ones are so preoccupied with socio-economics and the epistemo-ideological reflexivity of the critical act that their criticism is not literary at all.

I have left this point to the end not because it strikes me as a footnote but because I believe it deserves some emphasis. Ventures like the Iowa Program in Creative Writing have proven their worth down the decades as a training-ground for poets and novelists, and I am glad that a prize for literary criticism is linked to it because history shows that creative work cannot flourish for long without a well-informed audience being sustained by argument and analysis. This activity can go on informally, as in the coffee houses of London during the early eighteenth century, but sophisticated literary writing needs that sort of nexus. Poets and dramatists have known this from the beginning—hence the comedy which Aristophanes makes in *The Frogs* about how to judge the relative merits of Aeschylus and Euripides; and some of the writers who have counted for most in the history of canon-formation have mattered because they combined both roles—Dr. Johnson, for example, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf. Their shapings of the canon (Johnson's exaltation of Augustan decorum, Eliot's anti-Romanticism, Woolf's feminist literary history) are undoubtedly ideological but their persuasiveness owes much to their sensitivity to style and texture.

Let critical pluralism thrive, then; let historicism and literary theory and interdisciplinary cultural studies develop; but it also seems to me important that some part of our energy and expertise should go into creating the sort of literary-critical environment for writers which Capote felt he lacked. Having read about his experiences at the hands of critics I feel a stronger resolve to carry on reviewing new poetry here and there, and not to feel guilty about doing so, even though it keeps me out of the dusty corners (which I enjoy) of the Rare Books Room in the Cambridge University Library. In fact, I have a clear conscience about contemporary writing at the moment because, although I'm working towards a book on early modern literature and state-formation—looking at the emergence of that unstable entity called "Britain" which is now, as I said, unravelling within an integrating Europe—I am also writing a study of current British and Irish poetry. Winning this marvelous prize gives me heart and stamina, and encourages me to work the harder at getting the poetry book right. I like to think that Capote would be glad of that.