

Christopher Cannon.

The Grounds of English Literature

Reviewed by Andrew James Johnston

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Christopher Cannon's project is as fascinating as it is ambitious. He attempts to chart the origins of the concept of 'English literature'. This concept, he argues, is the product of the rise of the romance. According to Cannon, the term 'romance' assumes the quality of an abstract idea which begins to shape the audience's appreciation of the literary texts assigned to this category. Where previously there were simply individual texts, each of which expressed a legitimate notion of its own status, something like a concept of 'literariness' evolves. Thus, the rise of the romance, the first genre in English literary history to self-consciously identify itself as a genre, initiated a process that would ultimately lead to an understanding of literature as endorsed, for example, by T. S. Eliot or the New Critics, i.e. an idealized canon of Great Works in which each text is seen in relation to the general idea of 'English literature' rather than being regarded in terms of its own specificity and uniqueness.

Cannon borrows his theoretical framework from Hegel and Marx, which makes for a good deal of dialectics not always devoid of verbal acrobatics. Yet when readers more attuned to the current theoretical fashions have overcome their surprise, they will find that the heuristic potential opened thereby is considerable (Though, arguably, some things might have been done more straightforwardly with the help of Pierre Bourdieu.). From Marx and Hegel Cannon derives a concept of 'form' which is grounded in materiality and which is capable of sensitively registering the conditions that go into the shaping of a text, as well as the text's capacity for fashioning a consciousness of its own status as a text. Cannon insists on the materiality of his concept of form because he strives against a Western intellectual tradition beginning with Plato that devalues the particular objects we find in the world in favour of totalising abstractions, which then determine our appreciation of these objects and make us overlook their particularity. Hence we see *The Owl and the Nightingale* primarily as a (rather weak) link in the chain of the tradition of English literature and not as a highly original poem best to be understood on the dialectic terms it self-consciously stages. In short, Cannon's book is, amongst other things, a spirited attack on what he calls 'metaphysics' in literary studies.

Cannon's alternative history of English literature focuses on the writing in English which was produced in the late twelfth and the thirteenth centuries: Lajamon's *Brut*, the *Ormulum*, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, *Ancrene Wisse* and the *Katherine*-group, and the early romances *King Horn*, *Havelok* and *Floris and Blancheflour*. It is in the latter group of romances that we witness the transition from a literary field not

conceiving of itself as such to a perspective on literature which privileges a general concept of what a literary text supposedly ought to be.

Cannon's complex readings are historicist and materialist in the broadest sense, and it is difficult to do justice to their sophistication within the brief space of a review. He interprets Lajamon's *Brut* as encapsulating a typically medieval (but also early modern) mentality which defines land through law, mapping a country not on the basis of its geographical boundaries but with respect to the changing yet supposedly stable forms of jurisdiction exercised by its kings and inhabitants. The *Ormulum* is seen as a meditation on the efficacy both of language and of writing. Orm's constant attempts to correct, stabilize and improve his highly idiosyncratic orthography testify to the ultimate impossibility of the perfect text since each revision generates a new sprinkling of the kind of error it set out to eradicate. *The Owl and the Nightingale*, Cannon suggests, is not so much a debate poem than an exploration of the relations between dialectics and the issue of women. Scholastic dialectics' potential for indeterminacy helps to undermine the misogyny ostensibly furnishing the material of the poem. The *Ancrene Wisse* and the texts of the *Katherine*-group transform the geographical, political and military experience of life in the Welsh March into an analysis of the way that a notion of self is created through an Aristotelian concept of space. It is the constant threat to the boundaries of the self that helps to define them and thus shapes an understanding of that self. Cannon's final chapter on the early romances shows how these texts contribute to establishing the concept of 'romance' as an overarching form which degrades the specific texts – diverse as they may be – to mere instantiations of that form. Texts are thus given a metaphysical surplus value which is mirrored in the way the poems themselves define the value of their protagonists, i.e. when Goldboru recognizes Havelock's worthiness through the light that shines from his mouth in his sleep. This is the first step down the road which Chaucer, characteristically, will retrospectively describe in the ironic gesture of *Sir Thopas*, a poem which celebrates the romance tradition's importance for the birth of 'English literature' in an abstract or metaphysical sense.

Each of Cannon's individual chapters contains valuable insights and thought-provoking theses, though one sometimes feels that much could have been said in, say, three quarters of the space. And, certainly, Cannon has a point when he describes how later notions of the literary contributed to devaluing the achievements of such fascinating texts as the *Ormulum* or *The Owl and the Nightingale*. Yet even as he attacks the traditional teleological narrative of English literary history, he, too, seems to adhere to a powerful *grand récit*, though he does not spell it out in so many words. Cannon's account of a stage in (literary) history when everything in creation was judged on its own merits without being pressed into the Procrustean bed of some kind of grand, pseudo-objective system of value-judgements has a prelapsarian quality to it that ought to arouse suspicions. At the level of the literary, Cannon seems to be presenting a historical model similar to the one Foucault put forward for sexual identities. Just as, supposedly, there were no sexual identities before a certain point in history, but only individual sexual acts, Cannon's narrative engenders the nostalgic spirit of a time when there were no genres or notions of the literary, but

only texts. As long as one studies in isolation twelfth- and thirteenth-century literature written in English, this idea, teleological as it is, may even look tempting. If one considers, however, the multi-lingual situation of England's medieval literary field things get more complicated. As Cannon himself points out, our picture of Early Middle English literature would be incomplete if we discussed it without simultaneously bearing in mind the important roles of French and Latin as literary languages in England. To argue that certain forms of literary self-consciousness are absent from the earlier texts and can only be seen within the context of the romance, is to divorce these texts from the larger literary context they belong to. Yet this literary context was capable of providing notions of the literary which, too, were powerful abstractions and which might well have shaped our understanding of literature more strongly than the romance. After all, the literary tradition T. S. Eliot so self-consciously invoked, was European and embraced the heritage of antiquity – a large part of which always was available to the Middle Ages. It is quite possible, therefore, that the Early Middle English texts Cannon's book foregrounds, 'knew' – to use Cannon's own word – that they shared in some larger project and tradition of the literary, just as the romances later knew themselves to be romances. It is only if we raise the romance to the position of the central and all-encompassing paradigm that Cannon's image of literary history presents itself. The *Gawain*-poet did, indeed, write a highly sophisticated romance that was acutely aware of its own literariness but he also wrote (at least) three other poems which were not romances. Likewise, Chaucer depicted the English romance as a model in *Sir Thopas*, but his most important poetic investigation into issues linked to literary theory, *The House of Fame*, seeks to come to terms with problems such as fictionality, history and the classical tradition – and of course, Dante. Even if there had been no 'romance' in English literary history, Chaucer would have been capable of drawing on ample concepts and materials furnishing him with a 'metaphysical' notion of literature. Perhaps what we need, in order to counter the idealist metaphysics Cannon so vigorously censors, is just a little spot of nominalism. In the final analysis, 'romance' might just have been a word and might, therefore, have had a far smaller metaphysical impact than Cannon claims.

This said, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge the book's impressive strengths. *The Grounds of English Literature* is a powerful, clever and erudite investigation into what is still an undervalued period of English literary history. And Cannon's fundamental argument, namely that our understanding of the texts he discusses is marred by aesthetic notions developed in later eras of cultural history, cannot be denied.

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