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Literary History as Canon and National Identity Narrative

In many Western countries, people who go through the educational system have for generations been provided with a historical narrative designed to serve identity building. This identity to be built has been understood as a state of cultivation, of *Bildung*, in a broad human sense, or more narrowly as a national identity. However, we may not have realized this or reflected on the fact that the narrative we were given had this function. The narrative I am referring to is the paradigm underlying the way schools and universities in many Western countries have studied and taught the principal humanistic subject throughout most of the last century - the subject of, for example, English in Britain and that of Danish in Denmark.

I claim that this paradigm has in fact been based on a narrative about unfolding national identity and excellence as embodied in the national literature. With a dominant focus on the interpretive reading of the national literature, it held unchallenged ascendancy for decades, so those of us who were brought up in it easily came to see it as a matter of course.

In both of the countries I refer to the advent of this new paradigm was marked by the establishment of new programs and new Chairs for the study of the nation's literature – in Denmark (Copenhagen) the first Chair was established in 1908, in Britain we find, for example, that the Chair in Cambridge was established as late as 1918. In both countries the establishment of the national literature as an object of academic study can be seen as contributing to the constitution of an admirable national identity. In both countries this new study of the national literature came to define the prescribed way to work with discourse in schools and universities; it came to be the almost exclusive content of the school and university subjects English and Danish, respectively - something that apparently had to be like that and always had been.

It was a very conscious idea in many of the early exponents of English as an academic subject that the study of English literature had an important identity-building function. George Gordon, who was appointed Merton Professor of English Literature at Oxford in 1922, has often been quoted for this statement in his inaugural lecture: “England is sick, and ... English literature must save it. The Churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature has now a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State” (quoted from Eagleton 1983, 44-45.)

This was not a completely new idea. Before English, with literature at the centre, became an academic subject in its own right it had been seen for a couple of generations as an integrative and educative social force, helpful or even crucial in shaping the people's moral and aesthetic sensitivities. In the 19th Century, this function of English literature had been primarily meant to benefit the less educated classes, including working people and women, since the privileged classes would still draw that kind of cultivating influence from the 'real' classics. But both levels of cultivation gradually came to be seen as part of a national process of moral and cultural self-improvement. For example, Matthew Arnold, in his Preface (1875) to *Culture and Anarchy*, said: “The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world.” And at the same time as literature in English took central place in this program, there also came to be an increasing emphasis of the particular *Englishness* of the identity thus cultivated. The British scholar Brian Doyle states it like this:

The study of English in the nineteenth-century curriculum meant committing to memory the components of a historical map of the National Literature and Language,

while the work of scholarship was largely directed towards the production of a suitably detailed and documented chart of the English cultural tradition. (25)

This happened following the rise of Britain to world the dominance. One might almost say that the narrative gradually constructed by the propagation and study of English was this: "We rule the world, but that is all right because we *are* very special." Supremacy springs from superiority. So it became natural to search for what is and was particularly English in the history and the literature of the world's No. 1 nation.

The medievalist Linda Georgianna has analyzed the way English literary history, from its beginnings in the 19th Century, has tended to see "Englishness as a specifically Anglo-Saxon identity" (1998, 37). This, she claims, involved the imposition of a highly selective narrative of English literature:

In spite of overwhelming evidence that post-Conquest England rapidly became a complex, trilingual culture, with linguistic and social contact among readers and writers of Latin, French, and English, our literary histories insist on following the thread only of the last, and arguably least important, language culture in England until the fourteenth century, yet enthroned and pursued as though it holds the key to our national identity. (44)

An opposition between true Anglo-Saxon Englishness and the Norman culture of the invaders was erected by literary historians of the nineteenth century, helped along very effectively by Sir Walter Scott, whose *Ivanhoe* epitomizes the true Anglo-Saxon Englishman confronting the scheming, coldhearted Norman lords. According to Georgianna, we see a massive attempt to "reverse the Conquest," a grand narrative of a fixed national identity born in an imagined Germanic past of free institutions and individual rights, progressively perfected by trials such as the Norman Conquest, and come of age in the modern era" (39). Since English literature has been defined as

literature in English, the entire twelfth century tends to be seen as a void – separating the true Old Englishness of Anglo-Saxon landmarks like *Beowulf* from the emergent literature in Middle English. Georgianna also argues that the present configuration of English literary excludes that virtually the twelfth century in the name of national continuity obscures some very real ties between twelfth-century and modern historiography. . . . Twelfth century writers . . . if studied not for evidence of some transhistorical fixed national identity but rather for the cultural work they perform for their own times, can significantly broaden our understanding of Englishness as a rich polyvalent category." (50)

I will skip across the North Sea to describe how national literary history became enthroned as the principal humanistic subject in a country of similar age but a different destiny. While Britain rose, Denmark was mercilessly reduced in size and power throughout the nineteenth century. Once a dominant presence in the North of Europe, we began our decline long before as Sweden gradually took our place. On the wrong side of the Napoleonic wars, we had our navy taken by the British in 1807, went bankrupt as a nation in 1813, had to accept the secession of Norway in 1814, and then, after a period of inner restoration and some skirmishes with German nationalists in the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, we lost them both in an ill-considered confrontation with Prussia that led to a traumatic military defeat in 1864. One might say that the national narrative we needed to be told, unlike the British one, was "We are a powerless nation at the bottom of the rung, but that is (somehow) all right, because we *are* very special." In the nineteenth century the main drive for the propagation of culture, especially our own national culture, as the road to redemption was due to the educator and theologian Grundtvig, who fostered the establishment of "folk high schools" for the peasant population as well as many other initiatives. He and others searched through Norse mythology, sorting out the parts of it that could be seen as particularly Danish rather than Norwegian or Icelandic, to establish the national lineage. In this he was able to draw on the Latin

work *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus, a cleric who lived around 1200, and who had been commissioned by his patron, Archbishop Absalon, to write a heroic history of the Danes in order "to glorify our fatherland."

In Denmark, as in Britain, the academic inauguration of the national language and literature as central subject came later. In 1908, the first Professor of Danish literature, the classicist Vilhelm Andersen, accepted the offer of the post. In a series of monographs he had for some years set himself the aim of charting "the history of the Danish spirit"; he sought "to determine what Danish spirit is by nature and through evolution, by juxtaposing it with and distinguishing it from kindred nationalities. Thus, since my object of study remains language and literature: by studying, first what Danish language and literature has in common with kindred language and literatures, in order, through this, to find out what is peculiar to this language and this literature alone: the Danish logos, the linguistic and literary expression of a Danish folk spirit" (1907, XIX).

As the founder of the subject of Danish Andersen set to work with prolific energy. Among many other things, he published a lucid introduction to the study of his new subject at university and school level (*Dansk litteratur: Forskning og undervisning* 1912), and, with the medievalist Carl Petersen, a monumental history of Danish literature (1924-34). An overriding concern for him and his co-author in this work was to see writers and periods as representative of a stage or a subtype of "Danishness." It is clear that any attempt to write a history of certain entity somehow presupposes that this entity has continuity through time; continuity presupposes some identity from one point to the next, even when that identity evolves; but since literature is basically a collection of separate texts, it becomes necessary to assume or construct such an evolving identity. To search out an identity that goes beyond the mere fact that texts are written in the same language is precisely Andersen's project. Here is a typical example from the four-volume literary history whose primary author he was. It is about Ludvig Holberg, the major name in Danish literary history of the 18th

century. He was in fact a Norwegian, but studied in Copenhagen, became a professor at the university and is best known for a series of excellent bourgeois comedies that are still successfully performed today. Several of his other works are in Latin. Of his comedies Andersen writes that "it is Holberg's doing that Danish literature at the entrance to the eighteenth century strikes one more strongly as being at home or having come home than any other European literature of that age" (Andersen and Petersen II, 66). Being "at home" should be understood as being what it profoundly is: Danish.

Here is another specimen from Andersen's introductory book, which set a pattern for the way Danish was taught in secondary and higher education for upward of fifty years. It discusses a closet drama by the poet Adam Oehlenschläger, *Skt. Hansaftenspil* (1802; *A Midsummer Night's Play*). Andersen sees it as "an expression of a young and struggling culture, relating it to the way leading ideas through the ages have been expressed in Danish poetical, and moral, historical and critical literature". The text becomes exemplary for national identity: "The little wicket through which I first penetrated into a corner of Danish literature, now serves me as a gateway to its open spaces. I face the task of exposing a part of the spiritual history of the Danish people, expressed in its national literature" (1970, 20). On a more general, Andersen describes how the history of a specific literary period may choose two directions. Either the literary historian attempts to draw a picture of that age - or "one tries to determine the spiritual character of a *people* by making a longitudinal cut through its national literature and show how, under the influence of changing times, it preserved its continuity with itself" (49).

I have tried to show that in Britain as well as in Denmark the principal humanistic subject in secondary and higher education through most of the twentieth century relied on an identity-building narrative. Also, the identity that this narrative built was to a large extent a national one that constructed the uniqueness and the implicit or explicit excellences of the national "spirit" that was

meant to be in evidence in the national literature. I now come to the second major point I wish to make.

As rhetoricians we should be particularly awake to the fact that disciplines like English and Danish, which still hold central positions in the academe and in schools, and which still rely to a large extent on the paradigm I have described, are only about a hundred years old. When they were established they represented a major turn away from pedagogical and critical practices which had been dominant for centuries, and which were based on the rhetorical tradition.

As rhetoricians will know, the tradition that the new paradigm replaced had seen texts as primarily something you *produce* rather than something that you interpret; it had emphasized the production of texts in *several genres*, not just the literary ones; and as for the texts that were read rather than produced it had seen them not as links in a continuous national lineage, but as objects of joy, admiration, and *imitatio*. As for the ultimate purpose of the two paradigms, the new paradigm substitutes identity formation, either a broad humanistic sense or in a more narrowly national sense, for what we might call the cultivation of skills of citizenship.

Through most of the twentieth century the principal language subject in universities and schools, which was also the principal humanistic subject, was the chronological, hermeneutical study of the national literature as an embodiment of an underlying national identity which was seen as evolving but also, precisely for that reason, as continuous. Until around 1970, the reign of this paradigm was only sporadically questioned although it was just a few decades old and represented a radical departure from a tradition that had existed for centuries.

From the 1970's onwards modernist and critical orientations gradually began to challenge the reigning paradigm. The rise of these trends partly explains why political authorities have recently been reluctant to consider the humanities a worthwhile investment. And in some countries we have seen a countermove by the believers in an essential national identity: the revival of the concept of

canon. In Denmark, a conservative-led government in 1992 commissioned a committee of scholars and educators to prepare a literary canon for schools by charting "a main road through Danish literature from the Middle Ages until 1960". The "main road" metaphor is significant because it nicely captures the central idea, that of a historical continuity in which national identity is embodied. However, the committee's report was shelved when it appeared in 1994 came out because a new, left-leaning government had come into power. But right-wing rule, now secured by the anti-immigrant Danish people's Party, returned in 2001, probably helped along by the 9/11 terrorist acts. A new committee actually did establish a canon of prescribed literary authors to be studied in schools. The notion of a canon as an instrument of identity formation supplanted the ancient idea of canon as a craftsman's tool and was soon taken to a higher level by the establishment of cultural canon, covering Danish classics in all the fine arts, including design and architecture, such as the Sydney Opera House. This move was part of an effort on the part of the ruling parties to confront multiculturalist trends and promote the old narrative of a national essence. Now, the canon was not a set of admirable models in several genres that might be used for inspiration, but a chronologically ordered narrative of our common national identity. All this was stated in almost so many words in several debate pieces and declarations in parliament. The conservative Minister of Culture, Brian Mikkelsen, wrote as follows in a carefully worded debate article in 2004:

The first years of the new century have been exceptionally dramatic. The attack on the Trade World center, the invasion of Afghanistan, the struggle against international terrorism and the war in Iraq are just some of the events that have flickered our TV screens and created an impression of a world on the verge of chaos. we conservatives have proposed the introduction of a canon in primary schools, that is to say, a list of a number of authors that students must become familiar with. ... our literary authors are in many ways the voice of the nation. They are our shared

memory. They are our insurance against becoming ahistorical. By preserving our relationship to them we preserve our own identity. (13)

I conclude here. My final suggestion is that we as rhetoricians should consider the differences between the kind of humanistic tradition that we represent on the one hand, and on the other a humanistic culture centered around identity-forming narrative of a literary canon. The latter is a sort of culture which, in working with discourse, tends to tell citizens what and who they are or should be; the rhetorical tradition is one that, in working with discourse, is more concerned with will teaching citizens what they can do.

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