

BARTON, BROOKS, AND CHILDS: A COMPARISON OF THE NEW CRITICISM AND CANONICAL CRITICISM

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One of the more fruitful approaches to Biblical interpretation is the use of tools from other intellectual disciplines. An example of interdisciplinary perspective is that of John Barton, who argues that Brevard S. Childs' canonical criticism has been significantly influenced by the new criticism of English literature. He observes their shared emphasis on an "autonomous text," their deemphasis of authorial intent, and their interest in placing texts into an historical framework:

On all three counts—emphasis on the "text itself" as a finished product rather than as a vehicle for expressing an author's ideas; indifference to authorial intention; and concern for the integration of individual texts into a literary canon, which contributes to their meaning—Childs stands very close to the New Critics.¹

I will examine Barton's proposal with special attention to his three points of comparison. Finally, I will conclude that Barton's conclusion is highly overstated and that canonical criticism only bears superficial resemblances to the new criticism.

I. SUMMARY OF BROOKS AND THE NEW CRITICISM

1. *Autonomy of the text.* Barton is essentially correct when he describes the new criticism as a corrective movement.² It was a conscious reaction to romanticism in the field of English literature, which held sway roughly between 1770 and 1850. While the pens of romantic poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Burns and Blake turned to nature and exalted individualism, the critics of that era were intensely interested in the personal lives of the poets. Scholars searched biographies and noted contemporary history, looking for new insights to the meaning of poems. The following excerpt from the romantic period shows the biographical and historical orientation of literary criticism before the advent of the new criticism:

Moreover, [Coleridge's] acquaintance and ripening friendship with Wordsworth in 1796 and 1797, immensely quickened his intellectual powers, gave a

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¹ J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 154.

² *Ibid.* 142.

profounder resonance to his emotional life, and deepened his sympathy for individual and concrete things in life and nature. As a result the religious poems of 1797 and 1798 were born of personal experience rather than of abstract speculation. . . . The abstract "God diffused through all" of the *Religious Musings* becomes in *Fears in Solitude* (1798) "All sweet sensations, all ennobling thoughts, all adoration of the God in Nature," that keep "the heart awake to Love and Beauty."³

It is such analysis that all of the new critics—for example, T. S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, and especially Cleanth Brooks—sought to correct. They noted how the poetical texts were only taken seriously insofar as they lent the reader insight into the life and mind of the poet. Texts were not being seriously addressed for their own artistic merit. Brooks states the new-critical position:

There are good reasons for stressing the importance of the work of art as such. In the first place, unless genetic and affective criticism are anchored to specific literary texts, we may find ourselves dealing with irrelevancies of every kind. What Keats had for breakfast on a particular morning in 1819 might be interesting to know but would probably have nothing to do with the form and structure and value of the "Ode to a Nightingale" that he wrote that evening.⁴

Reaction against "genetic and affective" criticism and movement toward an emphasis on "the importance of the work of art as such" is the heart of the new criticism. Later in his career Brooks states the case somewhat less polemically:

The study of the author's life and a study of the origins of the work are well-worth undertaking in their own right, but if they are substituted for a thoughtful examination of the work, they become a threat to any literary criticism that is concerned with matters of art. . . . We may become so engrossed with the author's dates, place of birth, biography, and position in the canon that we hardly look at the work he accomplished.⁵

While it is clear that Brooks and the new critics sought to free literary criticism from slavery to sentimentality and biography, it is also clear from their writings that they did not ignore the poet. Brooks readily acknowledged the poet behind the poem: "A reader soon realizes . . . that behind the poem always stands the poet, and that the poem is his, that it comes from his life and his imagination."⁶ The writer is one of "the three R's of criticism," along with the writing and the reader.⁷ Brooks upholds the importance of the writer of literary art (witness his choice of title for a journal article: "The Primacy of the Author"). He explains the enigma succinctly:

³ S. F. Gingerich, *Essays in the Romantic Poets* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) 27–28.

⁴ C. Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis and R. P. Warren, *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (New York: St. Martin's, 1973) 1.2851.

⁵ C. Brooks, "The Primacy of the Author," *The Missouri Review* (Fall 1982) 171.

⁶ C. Brooks, J. T. Purser and R. P. Warren, *An Approach to Literature* (5th ed.; Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1975) 475.

⁷ Brooks, *American Literature* xiv.

"We may say that, in the end, we go to the poem for the meaning of the poet and not to the poet for the meaning of the poem."⁸ No other new critic has made the distinction clearer.

2. *Authorial intent.* The second of Barton's "counts" is the new critics' devaluation of authorial intent and the revolutionary proposal that a poem can mean something other than what its poet meant. John Crowe Ransom pioneered this theory, in which "the composition of a poem is an operation in which the argument fights to displace the meter and the meter fights to displace the argument."⁹ The completed poem is a combination of what the poet meant to say (which Ransom called "determinate meaning" [DM]) and what the poet did not mean to say but was forced to by the meter (called "indeterminate meaning" [IM]).

He was fascinated by a meaning that emerges from this almost mysterious process and not from the consciousness of the poet. The very existence of indeterminate meaning proves that the poem has a separate ontology from its creator. And it is up to the literary scholar to isolate examples of that separateness and explain their significance. "I cannot but think that the distinction of these elements, and especially of DM and IM, is the vocation *par excellence* of criticism."¹⁰

Brooks followed the same position but felt it necessary to defend it against the charge that the new critics cared nothing for authorial intent:

From the very first, their essay has been widely misunderstood. It and its companion essay . . . have become notorious as expressing . . . the credo of the so-called "New Critics" and their alleged obsession with seeing the work of literature as standing naked, shorn of an author or an audience—just standing there in beautiful isolation. "The Intentional Fallacy" is often interpreted to mean that [the New Critics] Beardsley and Wimsatt considered the author to have been a kind of inspired idiot who had no intention at all in writing the poem; that the poem somehow mysteriously wrote itself; or less radically, that one need pay no attention to the author's intention, even if it is ascertainable—in short, that the author's purpose is not worth bothering with. The Beardsley-Wimsatt position, of course, does not involve any such absurd view of the relation of the work to its author.¹¹

Clearly, Brooks states unequivocally that the author has an intention when he writes, that intention is discernible to the reader and critic, and that intention is important to the full understanding of the text.

3. *The role of canon.* The new critic most interested in comparing a particular text with the canon of other recognized literature was T. S. Eliot: "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead

⁸ Brooks, *Approach* 363.

⁹ J. C. Ransom, *New Criticism* 295, 299.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 301.

¹¹ Brooks, "Primacy" 166-167.

poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead."¹²

But Eliot did not view the tradition of literature as exclusively defining the individual poet. The poet influenced the tradition as well. He cannot simply quote famous lines written before by others. He must distinguish himself from them. "It is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else."¹³

Ultimately Brooks saw a dialectical relationship between literary ancestors and their descendants. The past and present are meaningless without each other. "Indeed, every past is dead which is unconnected with the present—the past of the literary vacuum. Conversely, a present which is nothing but the immediate present of sensation—the present unrelated to history—is not even the present. It is apt to be merely a collection of sensations, or at best, unrelated images."¹⁴ Therefore it is clear that, while Brooks and other new critics were indeed "concerned for the integration of individual texts into a literary canon," as Barton observes, that concern was also balanced with a concern to integrate the canon into individual texts.

Furthermore it is also clear that Barton's three "counts" of comparison between the new criticism and canonical criticism do not even accurately describe the new criticism. Like others who misunderstand the new critics, Barton oversimplifies their call for "the text itself." For them the poetic texts were both "a finished product" and "a vehicle for expressing an author's ideas," and not merely the former. Moreover Brooks and the new critics were far from indifferent to authorial intention. They were actually dependent on it. Finally, they did recognize the influence of the artistic present on the canon of the past. Therefore because these three counts are poor descriptions of the new criticism they are even poorer bases for comparison between the new criticism and canonical criticism.

II. SUMMARY OF CANONICAL CRITICISM

Like the new criticism, canonical criticism is a corrective movement. Childs expresses dissatisfaction with a variety of aspects of the intellectual status quo, but the primary target of Childs' polemics is the reigning historical-critical method of Biblical study.

In spite of some impressive gains, the application of historical-critical methodology has resulted in some serious weaknesses in the handling of the biblical literature. First of all, the legacy of the historical-critical method in distinguishing between "genuine" and "non-genuine" oracles has continued to interject a pejorative category into the discussion. Secondly, the form-critical analysis has increasingly atomized the literature and continued to rest much

¹² T. S. Eliot, "The Tradition and the Individual Talent," *The Sacred Wood* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1964) 49.

¹³ *Ibid.* 48.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 75.

of its analysis upon fragile and often highly speculative theories of original settings. Thirdly, the redactional and sociological methods have tended to politicize the biblical material and render it into a type of political propaganda.¹⁵

To Childs, the folly of modern Biblical criticism is that it is obsessed with the "true" events behind the Scriptural accounts—that is, "what really happened." In its zeal to escape unscientific religious dogmatism, theology has come full circle and evolved into a secular, technocratic tyranny. "In my judgment, the advocates of the historical-critical method fall into their own type of dogmatism in laying exclusive claim to the correct interpretation of the Bible."¹⁶ It is upon this ugly landscape that Childs seeks to erect a new approach to interpretation.

How did a [religious] writing exert an authority and on whom? What lay behind a particular collection of books at a given historical period? How were the variety of claims of authority related to one another and adjudicated? What groups were involved in the process and how were they affected by their historical milieu?¹⁷

The answers to these and other fresh questions constitute the basis of canonical criticism. Its theory presumes a sequence of Biblical development. (1) God intervened in the history of ancient Israel. (2) Religious writings arose in faithful testimony to God's acts. (3) The religious writings received various degrees of acceptance among the "community of faith" as normative. (4) As time passed, the more accepted writings were revised, redacted and "shaped" to communicate the record of God's acts to future generations. (5) The writings were sufficiently shaped so as to be declared by the community of faith as "canonical"—that is, they are capable of expressing the fact and meaning of God's historical acts to all future believers. Canonical criticism is primarily interested in the third and fourth steps in the above sequence, the shaping and eventual acceptance of religious texts by the community of faith. It is the dynamic of faith that Childs feels has been destructively missed by prior scholarship. His approach seeks to restore the element of Israel's faith to its proper role in exegesis.

1. *Autonomy of the text.* Childs claims that his method practices textual autonomy. His exegete is free from the obligation to secure an imprimatur from either the higher critic or the bishop.

Canonical analysis focuses its attention on the final form of the text itself. It seeks neither to use the text merely as a source for other information obtained by means of an oblique reading, nor to reconstruct a history of religious development. Rather, it treats the literature in its own integrity. . . . It is a misunderstanding of the canonical method to characterize it as an attempt to bring

¹⁵ B. S. Childs, "The Canonical Shape of Prophetic Literature," *Int* 16 (January 1976) 47.

¹⁶ B. S. Childs, "The Old Testament as Scripture of the Church," *CTM* 43 (December 1972) 713.

¹⁷ B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 67.

extrinsic, dogmatic categories to bear on the biblical text by which to stifle the genuine exegetical endeavor. Rather, the approach seeks to work within that interpretive structure which the biblical text has received from those who formed and used it as sacred Scripture.¹⁸

Despite Childs' disclaimers, however, his canonical critic does not come to bury the higher critic but to praise him:

In my judgment, the results of the historical-critical study of the Pentateuch have demonstrated conclusively that the Old Testament can be studied historically and critically from a perspective outside that of the tradition. Moreover, I believe that from this historical perspective the main lines of the reconstruction of the development of the Pentateuch are basically correct. The present shape of the Pentateuch emerged only after a long history. Many of the earlier stages, especially the early literary strands of the Pentateuch, can be reconstructed. . . . As the issue of the formation of the Pentateuch emerged in the history of scholarship, I would judge that the arguments of the critical scholars won over those who wished to defend the traditional view.¹⁹

Canonical criticism emphasizes the primacy of the final canonical form as the most significant text, but in practice it must have precursors to that final form. The dynamic interaction between the original, redacted, and eventually canonized forms of the Biblical texts is at the heart of his program. And since precanonical forms of the Biblical texts (such as Q) are the products of modern criticism, Childs' call to "the text itself" requires some qualification.

2. *Authorial intent.* Childs recognizes a range of apparency of authorial intent. Sometimes it can be discerned from later accretions, such as in Isaiah 8, "when the words of a prophet were directed to a specific group in a particular situation, were recognized as having an authority apart from their original use, and were preserved for their own integrity."²⁰ But the original words can only be imperfectly sifted from the more prevalent layers of additions using speculative critical tools.

Barton claims that canonical criticism disesteems what the author means to say, but his claim is an oversimplification. Because Childs holds to form-critical presuppositions of authorship in much of the OT, true authorial intent is not unimportant but often impossible to recover. Were a new archeological discovery able to prove, scientifically and irrefutably, that the stated authors of OT books are indeed genuine, Childs would be as excited as conservatives to know that an authorial intent is available. But until then he needs more than recited articles of faith to convince him of the conservative views on authorship.

Childs may not pursue authorial intent because of his prolegomena, but he is deeply interested in what could be called "redactional intent."

¹⁸ Ibid. 73.

¹⁹ Ibid. 715.

²⁰ Ibid. 60.

Because the editors painstakingly hid their identities, their intentions must be discovered from the texts they left. Discerning what the editors of the Biblical texts meant and what they wanted to explain to their faithful readers is the essence of canonical criticism.

3. *The role of canon.* As its name implies, canonical criticism fits well into Barton's third category of canon—namely, looking to other literary works to shed light on a particular text. For example, using Psalm 8 Childs demonstrates an excellent example of this phenomenon within Scripture. He shows how the NT citations can bring fresh theological insights to the OT psalm, and vice versa.²¹ But Childs is far more interested in integrating a canonical text into a theoretical body of precanonical forms of the same text.

III. SYNTHESIS OF THE NEW CRITICISM AND CANONICAL CRITICISM

At this point the two schools of interpretive thought can be compared and contrasted. Finally, Barton's proposal that they are related can be evaluated.

1. *Similarities.* With respect to autonomy of the text, both the new critics and Childs share "the text itself" as a battle cry. For the new critics the text is to be freed from romantic biographical and affective criticism. Similarly Childs seeks to spare exegesis from both liberal bias against faith and conservative bias against free enquiry. Moreover Childs' interest in distinguishing between the original and edited portions of the Biblical text, and his dialectical theory of why it was edited, sound remarkably akin to the interest of Ransom: "I cannot but think that the distinction of . . . DM [determinate meaning] and IM [indeterminate meaning] is the vocation par excellence of criticism."²²

Both new criticism and canonical criticism share a combination of interest and disinterest in authorial intent. The new critics have commonly been accused of ignoring this aspect altogether, but the accusation is grossly inaccurate. To Ransom it is the first half of the DM/IM dialectical process that is constitutive of poetry's very creation. Similarly the canonical method presumes the existence of original, unredacted versions of the texts in which the original intention is discernible. Moreover these passages are held in high regard as baselines for later redactional deviations.

The new critics see a dialectical relationship between the literary works of past and present. A poet who writes today without any stylistic or thematic relationship with his artistic forebears is doomed to irrelevance. A similar fate awaits the poem that is so bound by its own historical time and place that it can say nothing to modern readers. Canonical criticism holds

²¹ B. S. Childs, "Psalm 8 in the Context of the Christian Canon," *Int* 23 (January 1969) 20–31.

²² Ransom, *New Criticism* 301.

a similar relationship between writings separated by time. According to its theory the canonical actions take place when the dialectic between past and present begins to break down. When a formerly accepted Scriptural text no longer speaks to a later generation of believers, it is shaped until it does. Likewise when the community of faith determines that a new religious writing cannot take its place among those already canonized, it is rejected.

2. *Dissimilarities.* We have seen that both new criticism and canonical criticism address their texts with minimal regard to extrinsic sources. They differ, however, in the number of texts with which they operate. With only rare and insignificant exception, literary scholars function with only one authoritative text of a given work. They seldom must choose between one version of *Hamlet* and another, for example. But Biblical scholarship does not have this luxury. The very existence of textual criticism as a discipline demonstrates the complications of studying works whose origins are removed from the critic by millennia. Accordingly although canonical criticism focuses upon the final, canonical form of the text it must also operate with many other possible ones. Another area in which new criticism and canonical criticism differ is the necessity with which they practice textual autonomy. When the new critics forego extrinsic sources in their study of art, they make a conscious choice. Biographies and letters remain available to them, but they are simply not used. Childs, however, has no genuine biography of Moses or letters of Isaiah at his disposal. No doubt he would gladly use them if he did. But unlike his literary counterparts he practices textual autonomy out of necessity.

Throughout their writings the new critics never argue against the existence of authorial intent in literature. They presume it is there and largely available to the reader or critic. They merely acknowledge the possibility of a meaning—which is also frequently there and immediately available—in addition to the intended meaning. By contrast Childs would consider the authorial intent to be important but only imperfectly available through mediation of higher-critical technicians. The intention of the original Isaiah must be excavated from layers of accretions. The layman cannot do this kind of work as well as he might discern the author's intent in a typical poem. Moreover by stressing the theological motives of editors Childs subtly shifts the impetus of intent away from the author and toward the redactors. He is as equally interested in "redactional intent" as he is in authorial intent. New criticism has nothing to compare with such an emphasis.

We have seen that both new criticism and canonical criticism share a dialectical view of the relationship between earlier and later texts. Eliot and Brooks see an interaction between the present poet and his "dead ancestors." His struggle is two-dimensional: to remain within the literary heritage on the one hand, but to add to it significantly on the other. But as with the category of authorial intent, Childs' equation is more complex. He sees the canonical action as taking place not between a single original

writer and later readers but between a single original writer, later redactors who shape the original message, and the audience that renders the verdict on the text's canonicity. The canonical action in canonical criticism is three-dimensional. Moreover while the new criticism compares and contrasts a literary work with different, canonically established masterpieces, canonical criticism compares the canonically established texts with its own precanonical forms. Finally, the two methods understand the term "canon" differently. The new critics use the term to describe that body of literature that is widely recognized by critical scholars to demonstrate great artistic skill. Canonical criticism understands the term to mean religious texts that are normative, regardless of their esthetic merit.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, comparing the new criticism and canonical criticism is a case of comparing apples and oranges. If the comparisons are sufficiently broad and general, the two may be said to resemble each other. Both show degrees of textual autonomy. Both show limitations of interest in authorial intent. Both refer to the canon of their respective fields.

But the more detailed the comparison, the more the resemblances break down. Both the new criticism and canonical criticism practice textual autonomy, but for the new critic the text is held autonomous from biography and sentimentality. For the canonical critic the text is held autonomous from conservative and liberal dogmatism. Both have limited interest in authorial intent, but the new critic limits his interest because he does not trust intent to exhaust the poem's range of possible meaning. The canonical critic limits his interest because he believes it is practically elusive. Both place their texts in a canonical framework, but the new critic compares the poet of his text against known poets of other known texts. The canonical critic compares one theoretical writer of a text against other theoretical writers of the same text.

In sum, new criticism and canonical criticism radically diverge in the presumptions they make about their texts, the questions they ask of their texts, and the applications of authority they draw from their texts. Therefore, with all due respect to Barton, I conclude that these two forms of analysis do not stand "very close" to each other.