How does literary history fare in these circumstances? For the past quarter-century or so a rumour has circulated to the effect that it can’t any longer be written. Causal connections between works chosen for attention must be spurious, and special interests, not strictly literary at all, guide the historian’s hand. Yet, as Hans Robert Jauss remarks, it used to be thought that the crowning achievement of the philologist was to write the history of his national literature, to reveal its origins with pride, and to trace its stately and inevitable development. These interests in origins and development received a great fillip at the Renaissance, and they flourished well into the present century. But it then began to seem obvious that something was wrong, and that historians of literature were actually writing histories not of literature but of other things—treating literature as a set of illustrative documents, smuggling in notions of cause and connection from social and political history.¹ [...]

I can best start this section on canon by reading an item from the US Chronicle of Higher Education dated 4 September 1985. This journal is widely circulated in American institutions of higher education. On this occasion, at the beginning of a new academic year, it ran a symposium in which twenty-two authorities in various fields told readers what developments to expect over the next few years. This is the forecast for literary studies:

The dominant concern of literary studies during the rest of the nineteen-eighties will be literary theory. Especially important will be the use of theory informed by the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida to gain insights into the cultures of blacks and women.

In fact the convergence of feminist and Afro-American theoretical formulations offers the most challenging nexus for scholarship in the coming years. Specifically the most exciting and insightful accounts of expressive culture in general and creative writing in particular will derive from efforts that employ feminist and Afro-American

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A Fellow of the British Academy, English literary critic Sir Frank Kermode has taught at several universities, including Manchester, Cambridge, and Harvard. In this essay, he addresses the authority implied by calling literary history a “canon.”
approaches to the study of texts by Afro-American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Sonia Sanchez, Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison.

Among the promising areas for analysis is the examination of the concerns and metaphorical patterns that are common to past and present black women writers.

Such theoretical accounts of the cultural products of race and gender will help to undermine the half-truths that white males have established as constituting American culture as a whole. One aspect of that development will be the continued reshaping of the literary canon as forgotten, neglected or suppressed texts are re-discovered.

Literary theory is also full of disruptive and deeply political potential, which Afro-American and feminist critics will labor to release in coming years.

This manifesto, for such it appears to be, was written by the Professor “of English and of Human Relations” at the University of Pennsylvania. It proposes what could well be called a radical deconstruction of the canon, putting in the place of the false elements foisted into it by white males a list of black females. These will be studied by methods specifically Afro-American. The writer points out the political implications of these developments, for he knows that the changes he prophesies will not come to pass without alterations in more than the syllabus. He assumes that the literary canon is a load-bearing element of the existing power structure, and believes that by imposing radical change on the canon you can help to dismantle the power structure.

What interests me most about this programme is not its cunning alliance of three forces that might be thought to be in principle hostile to the idea of the canon—Feminism, Afro-Americanism, and Deconstruction—so much as its tacit admission that there is such a thing as literature and that there ought to be such a thing as a canon; the opinions of the powerful about the contents of these categories may be challenged, but the concepts of themselves remain in place. Indeed the whole revolutionary enterprise simply assumes their continuance. The canon is what the insurgents mean to occupy as the reward of success in the struggle for power.

In short, what we have here is not a plan to abolish the canon but one to capture it. The association of canon with authority is deeply ingrained in us, and one can see simple reasons why it should be so. It is a highly selective instrument, and one reason why we need to use it is that we haven't enough memory to process everything. The only other option is not a universal reception of the past and its literature but a Dadaist destruction of it. It must therefore be protected by those who have it and coveted by those who don't.

Authority has invented many myths for the protection of the canon. Religious canons can be effectively closed, even at the cost of retaining within them books of which the importance is later difficult to discern, like some of the briefer New Testament letters. They can be heavily protected, credited for example with literal inspiration, so that it is forbidden to alter one jot or tittle of them, diacritical signs, instructions to cantilators, even manifest errors. And every word, every letter, is subject to minute commentary. Whatever is included is sure to have its effect on the world. Suppose, for instance, that Revelation had not got into the Christian canon, as it almost didn't; it would have been just one more lost or apocryphal apocalypse, the province only of specialist scholarship; instead it has had vast effects on social and political behaviour over many ages, and continues to do so. The Fourth Gospel was