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Canons, Poetics, and Social Value: Jeremy Bentham and How to Do Things with People

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Frances Ferguson

In the recent book *The Western Canon,* Harold Bloom takes up a position similar to one that Allan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch have adopted before him. Learning is in decline, he says, and he lays the blame at the door of virtue, claiming that "We are destroying all intellectual and esthetic standards in the humanities and social sciences, in the name of social justice."[1] Of course, it quickly becomes apparent that "we" are not destroying standards at all, except insofar as we haven't been standing up and distinguishing ourselves from what he calls the "six branches" of "the School of Resentment: Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, Semioticians" (557). From the scope of that list, one can tell that standards have been in trouble for some time; and Bloom's later attack on T. S. Eliot's Christian humanism and its academic exponents—the New Critics who ushered in the techniques of close reading that dominated literary studies for at least three decades—makes that point even more clearly.

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[1] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994), p. 35. Allan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch's analyses and antidotes to the putative decline of knowledge differ from one another, as well as from Harold Bloom's. Allan Bloom, in *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), calls up a classical and classicizing tradition of education; E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know* (New York: Vintage, 1988) is more involved with the liberal project of making knowledge available to previously disadvantaged groups.

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In the service of a campaign to restore standards, Bloom offers not only readings of various literary works but also a list, in four appendices in thirty-six pages, of the works of Western literature that he regards as canonical—or, as one reviewer put it, "potentially so."[2] Like Chicago's Great Books or the Harvard five-foot shelf, the Western Canon is a collection of items chosen by time and by Bloom on account of what he describes only as "greatness." It broaches the question of value directly, in that neither subject matter nor genre guides the selections. Like a magazine feature that identifies the "bests" in a variety of categories, the Western Canon includes top-rated epics and lyrics, in an assortment baggier than the realist novel itself.

What interests me here is less the polemic—Bloom's defense of literature against the charge that "what is called aesthetic value emanates from class struggle"(527)—than the peculiar oscillation in its emphases. Bloom, on the one hand, describes the canon as if it were a merely personal and individual matter and, on the other, publishes the contents of his canon as if it were useful for other people to know it. In the former mode, he suggests that we view the Canon "as the relation of an individual reader and writer to what has been preserved out of what has been written, and forget the canon as a list of books for required study"; and in that mode he urges us to recognize that it is "identical with the literary Art of Memory, not with the religious sense of canon" (17). In the latter mode, it seems to matter whether people recognize the positive value of Alvin Feinman and the limitations of George Eliot, and we can hear Bloom speaking in that mode when he claims that "we need to teach more selectively, searching for the few who have the capacity to become highly individual readers and writers" now that "we no longer live in a society in which we will be allowed to institutionalize memory" (17).

There is nothing wrong with Bloom's commitment to the literary works that have been important to him; as Wordsworth put it in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, everyone feels "an habitual gratitude, and something of an honorable bigotry for the objects which have long continued to please them."[3] If the list is seen as an inventory of one's past experience of various works, an experiment on the order of Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading* with its contempt for Virgil and its praise for Fulke Greville, then it is probably worth imitation. Yet that rationale for Bloom's canon-making would shift the significance of the list from its content to its broad outlines. The importance of the particular items is, in a sense, sacrificed to the emphasis on the general project of assembling a canon. From that perspective, it may be personally satisfying to you to inventory the contents of your own memory, but knowing what Harold Bloom knows and values is on the order of knowing what Martha Stewart is doing next Tuesday, its greatest use is to someone who happens to be Harold Bloom or Martha Stewart.[4]

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[2] Norman Fruman, "Bloom at Thermopylae," *New York Times Book Review*, October 9, 1994, 9.

[3] William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 266.

Two distinct and competing accounts vie for attention here. Either an individual's canon is just that, individual and purely personal, in which case there's not much point in someone else's knowing what the exact contents of that canon are because the project is one of encouraging others not to repeat this set of evaluations but to reproduce the general project of identifying and collecting one's preferences. This version is *a* canon, one among various possible instances. Or, to pursue the other option, this personal and particular canon is presented as if one might generalize its particular contents to other people, as a version of memory produced for you by someone else. This version is *the* canon, a collection whose particulars remain constant despite the changes in its users.[5]

Bloom doesn't exactly imagine that the canon enables you to have someone else's memories, any more than he imagines that magazine subscribers will start meeting Martha Stewart's appointments. Yet just when he seems to settle for a description of the canon as a record of one individual's previous experiences of aesthetic pleasure, he suddenly expands the account, asserting individuality only to resurrect it in conspicuously nonindividual form. "I myself insist that the individual self is the only method and the whole standard for apprehending value," he writes (23). But that individual standard clearly does not feel as self-sufficient as Bloom frequently if inconstantly presents it as being. If it were, there would be no reason at all to regret the sense that we "no longer live in a society in which we will be allowed to institutionalize memory" (17), because society (or popular opinion, or popular academic opinion) would be a thing of such indifference that it would be hard to muster outrage against it. Instead, the book's tone of righteous indignation is one that emphasizes individuality and individual consciousness and continually presents them as simultaneously individual and societal. A list of the virtues celebrated in and by literature thus becomes a testimonial to opposition ("originality becomes a literary equivalent of such terms as individual enterprise, self-reliance, and competition, which do not gladden the hearts of Feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists, or Deconstructors. . . ." 20). Bloom can string together "individual enterprise" and "self- reliance" with "competition" in a list of synonyms because he keeps crediting to the account of individuality even the idea of competition, which would seem on almost any view to involve other people to compete with.

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[4] I am glancingly referring here to the way that Martha Stewart, in her magazine, *Martha Stewart Living*, prints what purports to be her personal calendar for the season of a particular issue. She thus includes entries like the veterinary appointments for her own dogs (called in the calendar by their proper names) and similar kinds of activities.

[5] See John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 55.

Bloom's way of talking about the canon thus replicates a curious feature of his way of talking about literary works—that he treats them as if they were simultaneously individual and particular works, on the one hand, and composite and general, on the other. Because of his conviction that "the meaning of a poem is always another poem," that a new literary work is always created in direct response to a previous work, his account of literary works necessarily involves an alternation between the sense that an individual work is unique and self-subsistent and the sense that its existence is derivative and dependent, in that it continually points outside of itself if only by building other poems into its existence.[6] If literary works are themselves both individual and particular *and* composite and general, it should be no surprise that a collection of such works should have the same tendency to expand and contract by turns before our eyes. For Bloom locates literary value in two places at once—literary value is, on the one hand, in the great works themselves; it is, on the other, in the subsequent works that attest to their value by actually or apparently responding to them.

[6] This general characterization of Bloom's work applies to his work from *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford, 1973) onward. See Peter de Bolla, *Towards Historical Rhetorics,* quoted in Bloom, *The Western Canon,* p. 8 and Frances Ferguson, "Romantic Studies" in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992), pp. 100-129, esp. pp. 111-14.

An individual work, therefore, already is a canon in this account, in a way that begins to make sense of that peculiar reference to institutionalizing memory. For Bloom is basically claiming that the personal *is* the institutional. It is not simply that Bloom takes institutions and specifically elitist institutions to be a necessary condition of the kind of work he does, as when he says that "the institution that sustained me, Yale University, is ineluctably part of an American Establishment. . . . All my passionate proclamations of the isolate selfhood's aesthetic value are necessarily qualified by the reminder that the leisure for meditation must be purchased from the community" (23). Nor is he simply making a mistake and imagining that his own personal memory, which he repeatedly describes in terms of its prodigious range and volume, is itself an institution. Instead, he is advocating memory (and specifically literary memory) as an art that can and should be institutionalizable and institutionalized because he sees memory as the basis for cognition. The self in Bloom's account does not merely recognize aesthetic value; it also, as the passage I just quoted demonstrates, *has* aesthetic value, the aesthetic value of the "isolate selfhood."

Now this sense that aesthetic objects—particularly poems—have aesthetic value and that they produce aesthetic value in their audience has an uncanny ring to it. For it sounds strangely like the rhetorical figure of personification, in which an allegorical representation of a particular emotion or faculty both presents that emotion or faculty and also stimulates it in the experience of its audience. If Bloom's unit of personification is the canon rather than a more local figure, he is imagining that it performs the same function; representing greatness in itself, the canon will also produce greatness in those who encounter it. Being able to point to something outside of oneself (the personification of a local trope, the personification of a canon) is the ability to apply it to oneself, to do what Bloom continually calls "striving" with its example.

The use of the canon that Bloom would prescribe repeats crucial features of personification as it has appeared in "European poetry at least since Homer"—"as a manner of speech endowing nonhuman objects, abstractions, or creatures with life and human characteristics."[7] Thus Bloom personifies not pity or fear but the notion of literature itself: "A poem, novel, or play acquires all of humanity's disorders, including the fear of mortality, which in the art of literature is transmuted into the quest to be canonical, to join communal or societal memory" (19). He can be understood to be talking about something as simple and plausible as the view that "literature speaks to us," but historical accounts of the figure of personification help to explain why he thinks that the Canon needs defense against the rabblement that he identifies as Feminist, Marxist, Lacanian, New Historicist, Deconstructionist, and Semiotic—against all those who do not see literature exclusively as an expression of and an incitement to self-consciousness. As the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* usefully notes, personification has been crucially involved with questions of the place of reason from classical antiquity. Cassirer, Cornford, and others observed that classical personifications "replaced mythical figures when rational attitudes superseded the primitive imagination," and that process of rationalization renewed itself in the eighteenth century as "personifications lost much of their emotional and quasi-mythical power to the degree that poetry subscribed to the anthropomorphism of deistic philosophy" (902).

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[7] Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan,co-editors, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 902.

Most of Bloom's work has suggested that literature does not simply use personification incidentally but that literature is to be defined essentially as personification. The self-consciousness that Bloom continually stresses, that is, is repeatedly identified as a response to another writer's consciousness, with the clearest model being the series of quasi-identities that Bloom described in his catalog of the various kinds of anxious influence.[8] Wordsworth or Shelley or Keats becomes himself by being more or less Milton. In this view the notion of misreading continually allows for exactly the same kind of slippage that classical personification had: identity can be preserved between persons who are continually being described as greater or lesser than one another, just as identity can be preserved between a mythical Fear and an individual who reacts in fear. But the construction of a canon alters the force of this relationship completely, because it no longer exists as an intersubjective one in which one person (on his/her own behalf or with the aid of a literary critic) points to another and says with greater or lesser explicitness, "That's me over there." If the poet Wordsworth thought that he was recognizing himself as a poet when he was most like Milton (or if he could be persuaded by a literary critic that he "really" was most autobiographical when most Miltonic), the canon encompasses relationships that do not plausibly register such a claim. No amount of self-consciousness is ever really going to make your resemblance to someone you have never heard of look like an expression of individual identity by way of identification with that other person.

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[8] As in many of the Marxist accounts which Bloom dismisses, Bloom's version of consciousness is supplemented and expanded by recourse to an unconscious that continues the work of the consciousness, so that one can speak of unconscious memories and so forth.

Yet if I am suggesting that Bloom keeps resorting to an indexical model of identification in which one can only imagine oneself in terms of previously constituted entities, that suggestion requires some qualification. It is certainly the case that Bloom has long recognized the extent to which he is continually imagining the self and its consciousness as doing things well beyond the bounds of the things that selves customarily do. In trying to address that issue, he has gone so far as to imagine that poets might anticipate their own descendents' thoughts enough to experience a kind of reverse influence, and he has as well waxed eloquent about societal or cultural memory as if it were simply the longer and stronger version of personal memory. What we see, in fact, is that Bloom's version of personification enables him to imagine that the best way of exciting and intensifying the operation of various faculties—be they memory, cognition, or emotion—is to hang various pictures of those faculties on the imaginary walls of our culture.

It is not, then, that Bloom is simply conceding that the isolate self needs to live high on the food chain; it is also that the very possibility of individual faculties and actions comes to seem to require images of persons in the past having exercised those same faculties and performed similar actions. The personification of the canon, like the personification in individual tropes, continually insists upon role models; on the example that must be set and cherished. Otherwise, this account suggests, consciousness would encounter vacancy, and, bereft of material to absorb and direct it, would become a blank.

On the one hand, Bloom is making a very straightforward and plausible affirmation—that reading is a process that enables us to have acquaintance with things that would be otherwise unavailable to experience. On the other hand, Bloom becomes so committed to identifying the canon with the personal act of valuing literary works that he leaves it for Denis Donoghue to notice that Bloom is no longer reading off the same pages as other people, that *The Western Canon* is rife with what other people might think of as misquotation.

This might seem like a trivial enough gesture, a little freedom with the actual words of literary texts. Yet the misquotations matter because they help to make it clear that the powers of memory that the Canon represents and produces don't have anything to do with memory as one might ordinarily conceive it—as an image of actual texts or events in the past. Rather, Bloom's account of memory both acknowledges the judgments individuals make on individual works and also inscribes those judgments as substitutes for more publicly available versions of those works. What we have, then, is a peculiar phenomenon—a plea for preservation of the Canon that moves by way of corruption of its texts, an assertion that canonical works have become canonical by having "survived an immense struggle in social relations" (38) and a constant alteration of those texts by the process that purports to preserve them.

Bloom's approach is surprising for two reasons. First, he is repeating, in the guise of an argument about memory, a central argument of the New Criticism (which he repeatedly disavows) about the nature of literary identity. As Wimsatt and Beardsley had argued, in what is probably the most important essay of the New Criticism, "The Intentional Fallacy," the "design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art." The "designing intellect" was, they granted, the "cause of a poem," but the question of what had caused the poem to come into existence was, in their view, not particularly important for criticism. Advocating "objective criticism of works of art as such," (6) they had insisted on a different consideration: success—"If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do" (4); "Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work" (4).

Wimsatt and Beardsley had famously gone on to draw a series of inferences from this basic claim. The poem should not be regarded as property, either the property of the author or that of the critic; instead

> the poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge.(5)

Neither an author's testimony about his/her personal associations nor the gossipy bits of information that members of a coterie might be able to provide could actually represent privileged information about the meaning of a poem. Indeed, struggling too hard to be self-explanatory and unpack its own arcana might disqualify a portion of a poem altogether, might make it cease to count as poetry. *The Waste-Land* might thus, they argued, have been intended by T. S. Eliot as a poem that included its footnotes, but the exact place of the notes—inside or outside the text—was not, to them, clear: "whereas notes tend to seem to justify themselves as external indexes to the author's *intention*, yet they ought to be judged like any other parts of a composition, . . . and when so judged their reality as parts of the poem . . . may come into question" (15). If the notes were seen as written by Eliot, they might be part of the poem; if they merely made reference to "already existing things"(15), they might be bound in the same volume with *The Waste-Land* and appear on the same page as a portion of the poem but, for all that physical proximity, not be part of the poem.

Wimsatt and Beardsley's position was one that might be used to justify a host of practical decisions about texts: Samuel Johnson's repudiation of Shakespeare's ending for *King Lear* and F. R. Leavis's decision to publish only the first half of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and to call it by its newly proper name, *Gwendolen Harleth*, come to mind. The crucial point of the Wimsatt-Beardsley position was the indispensability of pleasure, or aesthetic satisfaction, in deciding what a literary work was; and the corollary to that point was that the reader developed an explicitly important role in collapsing his or her perceptual evaluation into a statement about the text's ontological status. The poem became what readers could see it as being.[9] Although poetry and prose fictions alike had to have been written in order to have been read, the fact of the writing—however, much work had gone into it, however much it might follow the conventions of previous literature—gave an insufficient account of a literary work. Poems and novels had been made, but only partially made, by a writer's work. As the specters of a *Waste-Land* without its footnotes, a *King Lear* without its tragic ending, and a *Gwendolen Harleth* without Daniel Deronda make clear, what Wimsatt and Beardsley called "the true and objective way of criticism" (18) was objective not because it claimed to produce impartial accounts of what poems really meant but because it identified the literary work's existence with the evaluation of it, and essentially claimed that seeing a literary work is impossible without seeing that it is good ("that it works"). The New Criticism was, that is, an "objective way of criticism" because it produced objects.

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[9] The closest analogue to the Wimsatt-Beardsley position in modern French criticism is that of Roland Barthes in *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974). See particularly Barthes's insistence upon the importance of reading in order to forget, in which he stresses the way in which a text may be described as enduring not in spite of its changes but because of them, p. 11. See Steven Knapp, "The Concrete Universal," *Literary Interest* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 49-87; and also Frances Ferguson, "Romantic Studies," *Redrawing the Boundaries.*

It is odd to find Bloom adopting the practice of a critical school he so often mentions to disagree with. Yet it is perhaps even odder to find him linking the New Critical test of individual examples of literature—that they work as individual units—with the systematic requirements of a Canon—that these units continually be related to one another.[10] For there are two essentially opposed accounts of the identity and value of literary objects that emerge here. The first, the one that Bloom is most often drawn to, insists that we value literature because it gives us an externalized image of ourselves. Like the totems that Lévi-Strauss identifies in *The Savage Mind*, Bloom's literary works are byproducts of an incessant process of analogizing that searches out meaningfulness and represents its own motives indexically—by pointing to something whose sacredness to a particular group is demonstrable (and particularly demonstrable because of the implausibility that anyone outside that group would recognize its power). The second is one that I can get at most easily by referring to Lévi-Strauss's brilliant description of how "Everything takes place as if in our civilization every individual's own personality were his totem."[11]

The process that Lévi-Strauss identifies here is one that moves quite differently from an indexical model. It does not treat either abstractions or literary objects as if they interacted with individuals to extend their own personal powers of memory and perception; instead, it treats individuality as an artifact of a group relation:

> What disappears with the death of a personality is a synthesis of ideas and modes of behaviour as exclusive and irreplaceable as the one a floral species develops out of the simple chemical substances common to all species. When the loss of someone dear to us or of some public personage such as a politician or writer or artist moves us, we suffer much the same sense of irreparable privation that we should experience were

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[10] I am here suggesting an analogy between Wimsatt and Beardsley's way of recruiting readers to complete the work of making a poem an actual object and Bloom's way of recruiting additional poems to perform this task.

[11] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 214.

> *Rosa centifolia* to become extinct and its scent to disappear for ever. . . . Among ourselves this 'totemism' has merely been humanized.[12]

We have here two diametrically opposed accounts of personification. The first establishes a connection between persons and abstractions in terms of a circular process: an essentially religious (and irrational) belief in deities who represent certain powers—even when those deities come to be self-reflexively literary figures like Pity and Fear rather than Mars and Venus. The second, Lévi-Strauss's description of personality-as-totem, may initially sound merely like a witty characterization of the passage from religious belief to secular humanism and its commitment to discovering gods within persons. (The faculty psychology that Bloom seems to imagine his memory encountering in embodied form in the Western Canon would, on this account, be at least superficially, a rationalization and migration of religious belief.) But the paradox that drives Lévi-Strauss's joke—that makes it a joke—is that the belief in personality appears not as a manifestation of reason or self-consciousness but as just another version of irrational belief. For personality—or "mono-individualism," as Lévi-Strauss will call it in a subsequent portion of his discussion, is nothing other than a way of talking about singular individuals. Lévi-Strauss is interested in personality and proper names as versions of the same phenomenon—the tendency to collapse naming with pointing (indexicality, ostensiveness, deixis) that he attacks Peirce and Russell for in their accounts of naming. And the fact that one is pointing to a person one is seeing does not make the process of using the proper name any less irrational than the process of addressing otherwise invisible entities (Pity, Fear, Melancholy, the Canon).[13]

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[12] Ibid., p. 214. See pp. 214-15 for Lévi-Strauss's account of the relationship between proper names and classification, in which he would seem effectually to withdraw some of the claims implicit in his account of names as within the classificatory system, as when he says that "To say that a name is perceived as a proper name is to say that it is assigned to a level beyond which no classification is requisite, not absolutely but within a determinate cultural system. Proper names always remain on the margin of classification." If Lévi-Strauss's criticism of Peirce and Russell is that they argue for "a continuum in which there is an imperceptible passage from the act of signifiying to that of pointing," Lévi-Strauss's designation of a visible difference—established variously by various cultures—between signifying and pointing similarly tends to minimize the difficulty of talking about the relationship between names and entities.

[13] My use of the term "rationality" here requires some comment, because I am pointing less to irrationality as such than to the arbitrariness that seems to beset Lévi-Strauss's thoroughgoing application of a rationalizing account of naming and indi-

The *tour de force* of this section of *La pensée sauvage* will be an elaborate discussion of the naming of animals—not under their generic names as birds, cows, dogs, and race horses but under their particular individual names, such as Pierrot, Bessie, Rex, or Dancer's Image. And it will be a major point of this discussion to argue that what might look to Peirce and Russell like the occasion for acknowledging the limits of linguistic system involves a mystification of the operations of that system itself. For the uniqueness and irreplaceability of the proper name and the individual personality is, in Lévi-Strauss's account, exposed as a very strange belief in the urgent necessity of the existence of someone whose uniqueness can be (and frequently is) announced by the proleptic naming *in utero* and by the retrospective naming of mourning. In treating "every individual's own personality" as "his totem," then, Lévi-Strauss gestures towards an account of the celebrated emotional effects that had been tied to an earlier era of personification (the "emotional effects like those in medieval morality plays or in Milton" that the *Princeton Encyclopedia* entry refers to). Whereas the personification of abstractions might once have affected persons, personification, he suggests, no longer proceeds by endowing "nonhuman objects, abstractions or creatures with life and human characteristics." Rather, we personify persons now. It is a process that has obvious emotional effects (creating "sainted mothers," "honored fathers," and "cherished offspring," among others), but personification no longer involves participating in or responding to a humanized abstraction. It has now become the vehicle for identifying the emotional effects of the formal analysis of a social unit—the moment in which the progression from genus to species to individual ceases to feel formal and comes to feel like "personality" itself—the fount and end-product of emotion.[14]

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viduality. Were one making this point from a deconstructive perspective, one would doubtless want to point to the eruption of factitious sentiment that accompanies Lévi-Strauss's autobiographical description of the place of the anthropologist in relation to his subjects, as Jacques Derrida does in his discussion of *Tristes tropiques* in *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1967), pp. 149-202. For my present purposes, it is sufficient to note that Lévi-Strauss quite rightly recognizes the tension between naming in the context of naming systems and naming as an act of pointing.

[14] The question of the relationship between a generally systemic account of naming and some version of continuity has been revived by Saul Kripke in his *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1980). Kripke famously employs the notion of the "rigid designator," the name as the mark of individual continuity, to indicate how our ordinary linguistic practice acknowledges such a continuity that we do not feel obliged to imagine that persons really become different persons from having had temporarily taken on different descriptions. What he is specifically not

The importance of Lévi-Strauss's account lies precisely in its making the things that people regularly cite as alternatives to abstraction look just as abstract as any universal statement, but, because Lévi-Strauss's concern is to demonstrate that cultures and their products can be usefully submitted to classificatory analysis, he stops with noting the distance between how people feel and the structures that assist them in having those feelings. Indeed, the rationalism of classifying looks primarily like a technique for distancing ourselves altogether from the irrationality of emotion. It seems, that is, merely like a tool for disillusionment—a way of looking at ourselves with at least as much detachment as the anthropologist might view the Nambikwara—or whoever. Persons come to look purely fictitious.[15]

Yet if a classificatory system like Lévi-Strauss's might seem from this vantage to point to the groundlessness of any claims on behalf of persons, that view can only arise from imagining that the classification stands apart from the things it classified (leaving them supremely unaffected). And we should look to the work of Jeremy Bentham for an instance of classification that continually suggests how insoluble—or inexact—epistemological identifications can be when considered apart from the classifications that enable them to produce actions.

This is essentially to point to Bentham's importance to personification in a sense that differs from either of the two I have discussed so far. For although he would easily enough have agreed with Lévi-Strauss about the fictitiousness of personality, his concern with government, prisons, and schools took the fictitiousness of personality as a starting point rather than a conclusion. In other words, Lévi-Strauss's discovery that individuation is an epiphenomenon of the classification of society in general comes to appear a productive position regarding both individuals and actions. As much as Bentham objected in his early work to the fictitiousness of Rousseau's social contract that people were said to have consented to without their knowledge, it was not so much the fictitiousness as the tacit-

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worrying about, that is, is the literary preoccupation manifested so urgently in the detective story, with its continual gesturing towards "the wrong man" or "a different man."

[15] Lévi-Strauss's account of the Nambikwara, from this standpoint, looks less like a sentimental assessment of the anthropologist's power and moral value relative to those of the Nambikwara and more like an effort to translate the structural perspective from one position to another—to transpose the anthropologist's structural analysis to the Nambikwara so that he might be able to imagine them seeing him.

ness or impalpability of that social contract that concerned him.[16] For if he read Rousseau as projecting a general will to which individuals must bind themselves, Bentham's use of classification underscored the continuing reciprocity of that relation—that government must not only offer security and other like benefits in exchange for the loss of individual autonomy but that government must justify itself by reimagining the nature of action. Groups conceived in this way establish relationships that do not revolve around agreement with an individual's views; instead, they are collections that enable individuals to be—or rather, become—individuals. Whereas Rousseau had, in his characteristic manner, described the relation between the first person and society or language by creating a first person who might encounter either another person who appeared in the form of a giant or a large abstraction like society, Bentham argued that there could not be a person, an individual without the simultaneous existence of society. In that, his view was not merely that the notion of rights could only be meaningful in relation to the notion of duties (there couldn't be a right without someone's having a duty not to infringe upon it). It was also that the relationship between society and individuals was importantly reciprocal.

Now it is the connection between the two sets of relation—between rights and duties and between individuals and society—that is worth attending to. Because the point of the effort to classify individuals changes under the pressure of that connection, a class comes to exist in large measure as both a check and a resource to an individual (not as an implicit endorsement, as with unions, religious groups, and other identity and affinity groups).

This may sound like a counter-intuitive or indeed gullible view after Foucault has folded Bentham's Panopticon and its applications to prisons and schools into his general history of penality and after the notion of assignment to stereotypical classes has come to seem the penality of every life.[17] It may sound particularly counter-intuitive when one recalls how Foucault seems to connect stereotypical class assignments with a notion of character in which certain character types are seen as identical with actions. The delinquent, the pervert, and all the varieties of criminal types thus come to be seen as punishable in advance of any wrongful action, because identity has been defined as merely a repository of actions of a certain kind.

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[16] Jeremy Bentham, *A Fragment on Government*, ed. J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). See particularly the concise statement of Bentham's doctrine of paraphrasis, which involved the aim to replace abstract terms (impalpables) with references to things which could be directly experienced, pp. xx, p. 108.

[17] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), pp. 135ff. Foucault's discussion of Panopticism emphasizes, first, the completeness of Panoptic institutions and, second, the devel-

What Foucault might seem to do in *Discipline and Punish*, in other words, is to suggest that Bentham's classification involves assigning individuals to groups or categories. And a substantial portion of our language of group identity revolves around just such a notion—that finding the group with which we belong gives us the vantage from which to identify what's right and wrong, and what our rights are—or ought to be acknowledged to be. That conception of groups continually tries to answer an inevitable if unanswerable question: what does woman, man, gay, lesbian, bisexual—and so on for as many groups as we can imagine honoring or creating—want? And it does so because it continually makes it appear that individuals are always alternating between individuality and generality—as if they were called on to be individuals and collections simultaneously, to speak for themselves and as a woman, man, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or whatever.

Such an account may multiply roles for individuals, but it always keeps trying to shadow individuals with their larger collective images. What seems, by contrast with that view, most important about the Benthamite classification and the Panoptic structures that instantiate it is that classes are not diagnostic (statements of where you belong). Rather, they become instruments for individuation. The classroom that Bentham borrows from Joseph Lancaster, like the prison that he devises, projects itself as an artificial environment in which the spelling-bee model of examination and the constantly changing groupings of prisoners make all individual actions occur as assisted actions and all individuals appear as palpable byproducts of their ongoing relationship of resemblance to and difference from their companions.

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opment of the notion of delinquency in relation to the expectations of one's type. His concern with the scientific impact of the construction of stereotypical groups reappears in his *History of Sexuality: Part I: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1980), especially in the chapter "Scientia Sexualis," pp. 53-73. See "Panopticon; or, The Inspection-House" in Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. John Bowring, vol. 4 (New York: Russell and Russell, 1962).

From this perspective, the importance of organic form—in both literature and social organization—lay (for someone like Bentham) not in its naturalness but in its capacity for assembling perceptible arrangements that were both flexible (in that different outcomes were possible of every instance of a test) and self-organizing (in that each test produced a relative order for all the parties to it). This is as much as to say that what Bentham learned from literature was neither what it said nor who said it. It was, rather, the importance of its organization for adding value to its elements, the importance of groups in assisting individual action. For Bentham's recognition of the importance of organized form in society is a recognition of a significant political application of literature—not an emphasis on its content (its images, its diction, or even its "greatness") but an emphasis on its organization as a crucial example of classification as a technique for altering value—for persons, as for individual words and poems.

In this concern with social organization, Bentham specifically attempts to remedy a problem that has attached to liberalism from its inception, the problem of its abstraction. For if liberalism has seemed to reduce the importance of precedent—the historical personification that one can point to, it has seemed to have difficulty explaining how we value our experience at all. What Bentham's experiments in social organization suggest is that we value a variety of classifications—from poems to canons to schoolrooms—for giving us the possibility of concrete experience that we might never have anticipated. The behavior of his behaviorism, that is, results from the fact that he replaces the personification of the role model (the person in whom many different traits or actions may seem represented) with instruction (analyses of actions that walk an individual through those actions) and assisted action (action that derives much of its significance and value from its production within a group).[18]

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[18] By "assisted action," I mean to describe competition (among other things) so as to bring out its positive aspects. It is, on this view, a different thing entirely from both competition conceived in a popularly pejorative sense, the sense in which Catharine MacKinnon uses the term when she contrasts masculine competitiveness with feminine mutually supportive styles in "Women, Self-Possession, and Sport" in *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 117-24, esp. 121. It is also a different thing from Bloom's "striving," in that it entails not merely relating oneself to someone else's example but participating in a process of valuation in which one's own answers and omissions are continually related to the answers and omissions of others.

In the account I am proposing, Bentham's version of personification replaces the self-consciousness and self-expressiveness that we have so often associated with the Romantic period with a description of individuality that is not so much expressed as produced. And in that claim—that individuation and personification are by-products of one's membership in artificial classes with all of their mechanisms for making individual action palpable and perceptible in relation to the group, Bentham lays out what increasingly seems to me a particularly powerful account of the public sphere, in which civil rights appear less as a general acknowledgment of individuals or a respect for all persons as persons and more as a right of access to artificial environments and their mechanisms for adding value and palpability to individuals and their actions.

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