New Beginnings in Literary Studies

Edited by

Jan Auracher and Willie van Peer

Cambridge Scholars Publishing
CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

WHAT IS, EMPIRICALLY, A GREAT BOOK? OR: LITERARY DIALOGUES AND CANON FORMATION

DAVID FISHELOV

Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the relationship between literary dialogues and the process of canon formation and to suggest an empirically oriented answer to the question "What is a great book?" First, I examine different types of dialogues in real-life, communicative situations, introducing the distinction between genuine and pseudo dialogues. Then I illustrate how these categories can be applied to the literary field. Within theories of canon formation, I distinguish between two major directions: the "beauty party," emphasising aesthetic qualities as the source of a book's "greatness" and the "power party," underlining social power structures as the source of a book's reputation. After exposing some built-in shortcomings of these two prevailing "parties," I propose the dialogical approach to great books. At the core of that approach stands the hypothesis that a great book is one that evokes many and diverse types of literary, artistic and critical dialogues. To corroborate the hypothesis, I present the results of research comparing lists of works enjoying a high reputation with the number and diversity of references to these works on four data bases, representing different layers of culture and literature. Finally, I discuss possible counter-arguments, concluding that the dialogic

---

1 Ideas elaborated in this chapter were first presented at the following conferences: IAEA (Lisbon, September 2004); Intertextuality in Literature and Culture (Tel Aviv, May 2006) and IGEL (Munich, August 2006). I would like to thank participants for their critical and constructive comments.
approach to great books enables us to establish research of canon formation on empirical grounds.

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present an empirically oriented approach to the question "What Is a Great Book?" The key to the answer lies, as will be explained later, in dialogues that certain works evoke or generate. I prefer the term "dialogues" to the term "intertextuality", because this latter term is notoriously vague, embracing every conceivable relation between semiotic objects (still, one can decide to use it in specified meanings: Genette 1982; Ben-Porat 1985; Allen 2000). Further, "intertextuality" is usually employed in theoretical frameworks that reject certain pre-suppositions associated with the notion of "a great book" or a "masterpiece" (a term originally used in art history: Cahn 1979).²

The advantage of using the term "dialogue" lies not only in bypassing the undesired vagueness associated with "intertextuality" but also because it calls attention to the close affinities between dialogues in ordinary, social interactions ("real-life" dialogues) and literary and artistic "dialogues."³

I. Real-life Dialogues

The seemingly simple, ordinary day-to-day dialogue is, on a closer look, a complex and multilayered phenomenon. For a social contact to be called a dialogue we need two participants and some kind of verbal exchange taking place among them (a "conversation between two or more persons" – Random House College Dictionary).² But this general requirement still leaves great room when it comes to the actual nature of verbal exchanges occurring between these two people. Actual dialogues have a variety of goals, they involve different relationships between participants and they are conducted through all sorts of channels (Jakobson 1960). A brief, information-oriented dialogue conducted among strangers ("do you know by any chance how we get to Highway 101?") does not sound like a dialogue between two intimate friends ("What's up man?"). A dialogue between a boss and an employee differs from one conducted among peers; and a chat on the Internet greatly differs from a conversation in a café; not only in its form (written vs. spoken) and register (e.g., chat shortcuts), but also because the former provides a whole range of opportunities for playful invention of identities ("sexy Angela" is in fact middle-aged John). By adopting an empirical, open-minded approach, we should acknowledge this great variety and see how it helps us to better understand the heterogeneous field of literary dialogues, and the role these literary dialogues play in forming the "great books club".

To describe the structure of real-life dialogues it is necessary to discern two levels evident in every dialogue: the outer (or "formal") dimension and the inner (or "content") one. The outer dimension includes the actual, observable exchange of words between the two participants. This level involves questions such as "How long does the dialogue go on?" "Who is more talkative among the two?" and "In what intonation do they utter the words?" When we focus on the inner dimension, we address questions like "Do the two participants share a common language?" "To what degree do they differ in their points of view?" "Do they truly listen to one another?" "Do they actually respond to each other?"

Types of Dialogue (and Monologue)

Using the distinction between the inner and the outer dimensions of the ongoing verbal interaction a scheme with some basic types of dialogue emerges (Table 1). The emerging scheme provides basic coordinates for describing the structure of actual dialogues and also brings into the picture a dialogue's (lonely) counterpart – the monologue. The parameters for such a scheme can be formulated in terms of voices – referring to the outer, audible (or readable), concrete level, as well as metaphorically (indicated by inverted commas) to one's points of view, ideology, sentiments etc. ("in what you're saying I can hear your wife's voice").

---

² For some of these pre-suppositions, see Clayton and Rothstein (1991), 3-36.
³ The principles discussed here may be applied also to multi-participants conversation.
Table 1: Real-Life Dialogues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inner Level</th>
<th>One &quot;Voice&quot;</th>
<th>Two &quot;Voices&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One Voice</td>
<td>Genuine Monologue</td>
<td>Pseudo-Monologue: Dialogical Monologue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Let us provide a brief explanation for the emerging categories:

**Genuine Monologue**: represents a situation where only one person is heard, and his/her voice gives expression to one point of view or sentiment or ideology. Note that, whereas it is relatively easy to determine whether we hear the (outer) voice of just one person, it is more complicated to decide whether this person expresses only one point of view, and this decision depends on a certain extent of contextual factors (e.g., acquaintance with the speaker).

**Pseudo-Monologue** or **Dialogical Monologue**: represents a situation where only one person is heard, but his/her voice gives expression to different points of view or sentiments or ideologies. Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" could be invoked here as a prototypical example for such "dialogic monologue".

**Pseudo-Discourse** of the type of **Echo-Discourse**: represents cases where two persons are engaged in an exchange of words, but when we listen to what they are saying, we realise that actually only one point of view is being expressed. Whereas a typical case here would be a simple reiterating verbatim the words just heard; this category may cover also cases where an interlocutor repeats what s/he has just heard, albeit in different words. It may also refer to cases where the interlocutor simply nods in consent. A literary example of a represented echo-dialogue can be found in Hamlet's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: two (outer) voices of two characters are heard, but only one "voice" is being expressed.

**Pseudo-Discourse, Dialogue of the Deaf**: represents cases where the two interlocutors utter different points of view, but because they lack the ability or the will to engage in a genuine dialogue, the (outer) conversation may go on, but no dialectical give-and-take takes place. This category can be described as simply two parallel (genuine) monologues.

**Genuine Discourse** or **Dialectic Discourse**: represents cases that we usually associate with serious, true dialogues, where the two interlocutors give expression to different points of view, are attentive to each other and engage in meaningful exchange of ideas, sentiments etc. Sometimes, such dialogues reach a happy conclusion, sometimes not.

Note that the distinction between the two types of pseudo-dialogue may also be described as a function of the question to what extent the interlocutors share a common "language" (ideology, point of view): the higher the degree of overlap, the closer we get to the realm of echo-dialogues; the more they come from two radically different worlds, the closer we come to a dialogue of the deaf. These types are not meant to be understood as exclusive classificatory categories: a concrete, real-life dialogue may illustrate characteristics of more than one type and certainly can move from one type to the other ("Sorry, I wasn't listening; could you please repeat your question?").

II. Literary Dialogues

The dynamics of literary dialogues seem to parallel those of real-life dialogues. These parallels should not hide the obvious differences: oral vs. written, continuous conversation vs. one-time "réplique."

**Genuine Literary Discourse**

It is not difficult to apply the concept of real-life genuine, dialectic dialogues to the literary arena, namely to cases where an author, after reading attentively a literary work, responds to it in a dialectical way, taking issue with some aesthetic and/or ideological dimensions of the inspiring work. An author may write a parody of the "triggering" text or develop its parodic work. To call, for example, a literary (or artistic) work a parody means: (a) that the writer of the text is familiar with the "triggering", parodied work (or style or school or genre), (b) that s/he does

---

4 My distinction between genuine and pseudo dialogue is inspired by Buber's discussion of "I and Thou" (Buber 1970) and Bakhtin's dialogic approach to language (Bakhtin 1981).
Owen, who experienced the horrors of World War I (in which he was eventually killed on 4 November, 1918), loathes the patriotic sentiment embedded in Horace's lines and, as a rebuttal responds by portraying in gruesome details of the actual face of "sweat" dying. Here is the poem's last stanza (Owen 1973: 79):

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we fling him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, —
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria morti.

Genuine literary dialogues form perhaps the most significant dimension of the dynamics of literary history; through the dialectics of partial acceptance and partial rejection – using either parodic humor or serious rhetoric. But in addition to various forms of genuine literary dialogues, one can also find various manifestations of "pseudo" literary dialogues, similar in structure to real-life echo-dialogue and dialogue of the deaf.

Echo-dialogues in Literature

The main characteristic of a real-life echo-dialogue lies in the fact that the words of one participant are "re-heard." A literary parallel of this can be seen in the ubiquitous phenomenon of literary life – translation. The basic meaning of the term "translation" – "A version in a different language" (Random House Dictionary) – reminds of the situation of a real-life echo-dialogue: a reader of a literary work "repeats" or "echoes" a source text in a different language. As the theory of translation has demonstrated, the term "translation" in fact covers many different phenomena and can be seen as an umbrella concept. Every translation

---

5 For the important role played by parody in the "mechanism" of literary history, see Tynianov (1975).
6 I would like to point out three important discussions of literary translation: Robinson (1991), who introduces the concept of dialogue into translation studies,
can be seen as a "compromise" between two poles: an attempt to faithfully replicate the original source-text but at the same time to create an original text in the target language. In translating or "imitating" Juvenal's Satire X, Samuel Johnson, for example, tried to "tailor" Juvenal's opening lines—"Search every land, from Cadiz to the dawn-streaked shores / Of Ganges" (Juvenal 1970: 205; for the original Latin, see Duff 1970: 58)—to contemporary English readers by changing the geographical pointers: "Let Observation, with extensive view, / Survey mankind, from China to Peru" (Johnson 1958: 51). Johnson's "The Vanity of Human Wishes" is one possible "compromise" between two poles. The specific nature of the achieved "compromise" depends on the norms of the literary period, constraints of the target system and, of course, on the talent of the individual translator. Still, despite the extremely heterogeneous and complex nature of literary translation, it resembles the structure of real-life echo-dialogues.

Despite this structural similarity, literary translations differ from real-life echo-dialogue in two important aspects. First, linguistic variations that are usually considered insignificant in real-life dialogues—e.g., the specific choice of words, register, formal patterns—may acquire greater significance in literary translations, designed to produce aesthetic effects ("the translator chose a higher register to elevate the poem's tone"). Secondly, and most importantly, whereas an echo-dialogue in a real-life situation is usually regarded as dull and unsatisfactory ("it is only an echo"), literary translations can fulfill an important innovative role in the target literature and culture. The very decision to translate into a given language certain works can have far-reaching consequences for the target culture by introducing new modes of expression, literary forms, ideas and sensibilities. Furthermore, there are cases where the translator takes many liberties, bringing the translation close to the realm of genuine literary dialogue.

Literary abridgments and adaptations can also serve as examples of literary echo-dialogues: their raison d'être is to "replicate" the source text, changing only the length or the wording or the medium. And, like in literary translations, in addition to simple manipulation of the source text according to certain known principles, producing predictable texts (e.g.,

Lefevere (1992), and Toury (1995). Lefevere's study (especially pp. 1-10) makes the important connection between translation and other forms of rewriting and the forming of the canon.

Lefevere (1992), while putting a strong emphasis on the coercing power of the target system, does not sufficiently acknowledge the role of translations and other forms of rewriting to re-shape, in their turn, the literary target system.

moving "sensitive" issues from adaptations for children), there are cases where abridgments and adaptations take certain liberties that bring them closer to the realm of genuine dialogue (e.g., the hilarious show by the Reduced Shakespeare Company: http://www.reducedshakespeare.com/).

Dialogues of the Deaf in Literature

Are there cases that can be described as literary dialogue of the deaf, i.e., where an author evokes a source-text, but without truly creating a dialogue with what the original text is saying? Dryden's Absalom and Achitophel (1681) may be an interesting case in point. In this long satirical poem, Dryden evokes the biblical story of how King David (II Samuel xiii-xviii) was rebelled against by his son Absalom and by Achitophel, a former counselor of King David. Dryden, however, was using the biblical story to address contemporary issues, supporting King Charles II (= King David) and denouncing his rivals, who tried to exclude the Charles' legal successor, James, Duke of York (hated for his known Catholicism) and to promote the Duke of Monmouth (= Absalom) in his stead. A central figure in trying to promote this move was Lord Shaftesbury (= Achitophel). Based on the initial resemblance between the two situations—an attempt to substitute a legal heir to a ruling king—Dryden re-tells the biblical story, conjuring up many more real and alleged similarities that serve his motivation: to support and glorify Charles II and to denounce those who were trying to challenge the legal successor.

Dryden's poem may serve his moral and political convictions and demonstrate his great artistic talent. Still, we can argue that this literary tour de force does not create a genuine literary dialogue with the Bible. Dryden is only using the Bible's canonical status to enhance his satirical goals. From here ensues the "bending" of historical facts and many anachronisms: (e.g., confusing the ancient Hebrews with post-biblical Jews; referring to the Sanhedrin, line 390, established long after the times of King David). These anachronisms are symptomatic of Dryden's disinterest in the original biblical story for its own sake, but his "misreading" (to borrow Bloom's term: 1973, 1975) produced a valuable literary text.

To conclude this section, we can now draw a wide spectrum of literary dialogues, illustrating different forms. One way to present this spectrum is to move according to the degree of dialectics between the responding and the source text. At one end of the spectrum we can find minimal dialectical relations in the form of echo-dialogue, starting with the most passive way
of responding to a text, namely the act of its reading. This can be paralleled to real-life listening and nodding; the next point on the spectrum will be more active forms of echo-dialogue in the forms of re-telling, abridgment, translation, adaptation, etc.; then we will be moving into the realm of genuine dialogues in the form of allusions, parody and other ways of creating dialectical relations; finally, we find at the other end of the spectrum works illustrating also minimal dialectical relations, but this time of the kind of dialogue of the deaf: works that use or "misuse" the source text without paying real attention to its form and content.

III. What Is a Great Book? The Two Parties

After demonstrating the multifaceted nature of dialogues, we should turn now to explain the term "great book" of the chapter's title. The many concrete explanations given to that term might be grouped into two major "parties".

The Beauty Party

The first party may be named the beauty party, arguing that the status of a great book is a function of certain aesthetic qualities inherent in a literary work. There may be significant disagreements among members of the beauty party. First, they differ as to the specific nature of these aesthetic qualities. Aristotle was not speaking in modern terms of aesthetic qualities, but still one can extract from his discussion of literary and artistic works in the seventh chapter of Poetics that he considers highly a work that fulfills a double criterion: unity in variety (Aristotle 1951: 1451a10-11).

If we move to modern discussions of aesthetics and literary theory, there are still some important disagreements. The New Critics offered different formulations that put an emphasis on the literary work's semantic complexities: Cleanth Brooks (1949) suggested that the language of poetry (and, by implication, of literature) is the language of paradox; William Empson (1947) offered, in an influential book first published as early as 1930, ambiguity to be the true sign of good poetic work; Allen Tate (1949)

8 I would like to mention in this context an important attempt of Franco Moretti (see, for example in his 1998, especially 141-197), to use empirical, quantitative methods in order to connect questions related to the history of reading with literary history and literary forms.

9 The following description of the two "parties" is partly based on Adams (1988).

suggested that the existence of tension between the abstract meanings conveyed by a poem and the concrete images used in it is the hallmark of excellent poetry, distinguishing it from what he calls mass, propaganda poetry on the one hand, and "analytic" poetry, on the other. Another influential aesthetic principle was introduced by Monroe Beardsley. According to him, a good artistic work has to fulfill a dual principle, reminding us of Aristotle's dual principle of unity in variety, of congruence and plentitude (Beardsley 1958: 144-147).

Leaving the Anglo-Saxon tradition and moving to another influential twentieth-century school of criticism, we can cite also Shklovsky's notion of "making strange" (Shklovsky 1965). According to this Russian Formalist, every successful work of art deviates from and distorts habitual ways of perception in order to provide a fresh look on things, mores or values. An interesting development of the Russian Formalists can be found in the works of the Czech structuralist Jan Mukarovsky (1976). In his work on the aesthetic function he stresses the deviation from established linguistic and literary norms as the constitutive factor for producing an aesthetic effect.

Another interesting issue that separates thinkers of the beauty party is related to the ontological or epistemic status of the relevant aesthetic qualities: are they on the same level as other qualities of a text (e.g., its length) and hence can be discussed and even measured in objective terms (see, for example, Zemach 1997)? Or are they perhaps subjective, according to the popular saying that beauty is in the eye of the beholder?

Thus, the beauty party offers a wide gallery of specific aesthetic qualities to choose from and it contains many factions with regard to the question whether the aesthetic qualities have objective, subjective or intersubjective status. But despite these differences, all partisans of the beauty party share the belief that the status of a great book (or artistic work) is a function of its (relevant) aesthetic qualities, discerned by its readers (or spectators): the more one can find them in a specific work, the better are its chances to be included in the great books club.

The Power Party

During the past few decades, followers of the beauty party are in decline and on the defensive. The contemporary dominant tone belongs to what can be labelled "the power party", claiming that a book's reputation is determined by social hegemonies.

Like with partisans of the beauty party, here too there are some interesting variations. Orthodox Marxism, at least in its simplified version,
emphasises the role of social and economic infra-structure in determining cultural value: the decision as to whether a literary work is included in the great books club reflects the interests of the prevailing ideology, reflecting the interests of the ruling class, reflecting, in its turn, the economic and manufacturing structure in a society. A similar logic directs also Neo-Marxist thinkers, who suggest more sophisticated versions for the relations between infra- and super-structures in society. While accepting the idea that economic factors ultimately determine culture, they acknowledge that culture has a relatively autonomous status.10

Another influential faction of the power party can be found in Foucault and his followers. In fact the idea to title this party "the power party" comes directly from Foucault's emphasis on the power system underlying cultural values (Rabinow 1984). A central theme in his intellectual project was to unmask accepted cultural values and distinctions as in fact an expression of social structures of power. Another interesting contribution to the power party can be found in the thinking of Bourdieu (1992) and his concept of the cultural field and in Fish's discussion of institutionalised modes of interpretation (Fish 1980).

While these two parties shed light on the complex question of "How and why does a literary work become a great book?" they also have their limitations. The beauty party fails to explain the dynamic nature of the literary canon. If the aesthetic qualities of literary works are inherent, universal and objective (or inter-subjective), it is reasonable to assume that the list of great books would remain unchanged throughout the ages. But literary history teaches us that this is not the case and that there are shifts, especially in the relative status of certain works within the canon. The power party, on the other hand, fails to explain the stable elements of the canon. If the status of a great book is a function of changing social and ideological hegemonies, we would expect the list to change dramatically with the alternations of economic, social and ideological hegemonies. But despite such influences, many literary works (e.g., Homer, Shakespeare and many others) have kept their reputation as great books throughout the ages.

IV. Dialogic Approach to Great Books

At this point, I would like to propose a new approach, based on the concept of literary dialogues and on empirically oriented principles. The core of this approach can be formulated in the following hypothesis: A great book is one that evokes many and diverse types of literary, artistic and critical dialogues (in the form of local allusions, epigraphs, parodies, translations, adaptations, pictorial representations, scholarly interpretations, etc.). A similar investigation, namely to define the canon of artistic, musical, literary and scientific canons through traces left in print was recently undertaken by Charles Murray, resulting in his monumental Human Accomplishment (2003).

The term "many" in the definition should be understood as a relative term: first, to the size of the relevant cultural community and to similar, "neighbouring" literary works (e.g., of the same genre). But a sheer quantitative criterion seems to me unsatisfactory, hence the introduction of the criterion of diversity: not only many typical literary "echoes" and "dialogues" (e.g., literary allusions, translations) but also other kinds of dialogues in the form of paintings, movie adaptations, stage productions, critical discussions etc. It seems that the chances of a specific work to keep inspiring readers (and authors) throughout time lie in the fact that its "echoes" are heterogeneously distributed. If a literary work evokes many reactions but only of one kind (e.g., it is embraced by critics of only one school or period), its chances to join the "great books club" seem smaller than those of a work that inspires diverse reactions (e.g., it evokes responses from different schools of criticism). In that respect, cultural phenomena may resemble a principle that can be found in biology: the chances of a species to survive depend, ceteris paribus, on the diversity of its gene pool.11

The Dialogic Approach: Some Facts, for a Change

To examine the above hypothesis, I conducted a series of Internet searches. Some of these searches focused on "conservative" data bases (e.g., university libraries) while others address less traditional fields (e.g., images related to a work).

My point of departure was three existing, independent lists of "great books" from three "traditional" sources: the Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces (Mack 1997), Denby's Great Books (Denby 1996), tracing the curriculum of a Great Books course taught at Columbia University

10 For different versions of Marxist and Neo-Marxist approaches, see Eagleton and Milne (1996).
11 I have elaborated on that issue in my book (Fishelov 1993), especially pp. 37-39, 46-47. One should, however, be aware of significant differences between culture and biology. For some instructive warning against a mechanical application of biological principles to the literary and cultural field, see Todorov (1970) and Schaeffer (1989).
during the nineties, and the entries in *Masterpieces of World Literature* (Magill 1952) This existing point of departure has at least one obvious methodological advantage: it safeguards the searches from becoming circular. If I focused in my searches on works that I thought to be great books, chances are that these searches will only corroborate my initial knowledge about their fame. The lists from the three works mentioned above, by contrast, provided a valuable independent reference point for the searches.

Since my hypothesis stated that great books evoke "echoes" and "dialogues" on different levels of culture, I checked the "echoes" and "dialogues" found on four different data bases:

1. **Google;** I deliberately chose this popular, all-inclusive search engine to provide a rough approximation of the work's general distribution in culture. The greatest problem with using Google for this research was to avoid as much as possible getting "junk" results. To this end, I used both the work's and the author's name in the searches.

2. **Google-Image;** this search engine traces images related to a work: paintings of its major characters, book jackets, etc. Using that search engine may teach us something valuable not only because literary works do serve as a source of inspiration for many visual artists, but also because sometimes images related to a work become an important association or even "focal point" related to that work (e.g., Hamlet holding a skull).

3. **The Clio,** the library's data base of Columbia University, as opposed to the first two searches, represents a more "elitist" domain. There is a serious and meticulous process of selection, done by experts, librarians and scholars, before an item is purchased and shelved in a university library.

4. **Finally,** the *International Movie Data Base* (IMDB). This search engine traces all movie adaptations and productions based on specified literary works.

These four data bases can provide a heuristic picture of "traces" left by literary works on different layers of culture: different media, genres (literary as well as scholarly) and social strata (popular and elitist). As expected, the results obtained in the Google searches yielded the largest numbers and those of IMDB the smallest. This comes as no surprise, because to produce a movie, even a filmed version of a play, is a relatively costly business. We should note, however, that movie production involves a variety of artists (screenwriters, camera men, director, actors, etc.) and reaches a wide audience.

First, I conducted the four searches for works listed in my three source books. Then, I put in a separate table the search results of works that appear in *all three* sources. This group, representing a relatively high consensus on their merit and status, may be labeled "the hard core" of the canon. The following table (Table 2) presents the results obtained for the seventeen works mentioned in all three sources.

---

12 The following results represent searches done during the period of August 25-September 1, 2005. Needless to say, since then some of the numbers have dramatically increased in the search engines of Google, indicating the extremely rapid growth of the Internet. Still, these changes do not undermine the basic approach advocated here.
Table 2: Results of Searches of the Canon’s "Hard Core"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Google</th>
<th>Google, Image</th>
<th>Clio, Columbia</th>
<th>IMDB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aeneid – Virgil</td>
<td>149,000</td>
<td>744</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antigone – Sophocles</td>
<td>119,000</td>
<td>542</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candide – Voltaire</td>
<td>186,000</td>
<td>820</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divine Comedy – Dante</td>
<td>135,000</td>
<td>582</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don Quixote – Cervantes</td>
<td>206,000</td>
<td>3,380</td>
<td>698</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faust – Goethe</td>
<td>904,000</td>
<td>4,350</td>
<td>861</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gargantua and Pantagruel – Rabelais</td>
<td>16,500</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulliver’s Travels – Swift</td>
<td>120,000</td>
<td>737</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet – Shakespeare</td>
<td>899,000</td>
<td>9,450</td>
<td>969</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iliad – Homer</td>
<td>340,000</td>
<td>2,610</td>
<td>852</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medea – Euripides</td>
<td>93,900</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odyssey – Homer</td>
<td>736,000</td>
<td>4,260</td>
<td>679</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oedipus Tyrannus – Sophocles</td>
<td>132,000</td>
<td>695</td>
<td>413</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paradise Lost – Milton</td>
<td>221,000</td>
<td>981</td>
<td>758</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prometheus Bound – Aeschylus</td>
<td>41,900</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tartuffe – Moliere</td>
<td>77,900</td>
<td>802</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13 This number is a rough approximation, because there are a few films that are an adaptation of works that are inspired themselves by Cervantes’s classical work (e.g., a filmed opera).

The search results of the "hard core" showed a relatively high degree of consistency, characterised by both high numbers of occurrences in the specific searches and a wide range of distribution among different genres and media. Further, these results formed a distinct pattern: when the search results of Google were an X digits number, the results of the Google-Image and the Clio searches were X minus two or three digits number and the results of the IMDB search were X minus four or five digits number (e.g., in searches for Tartuffe, Google results is a five digits number, Google-Image and Clio are a three digits number and IMDB – a two digits number).

Needless to say, this pattern is based on a partial and to a certain degree arbitrary choice of the specific search engines and data bases, but still I think it is symptomatic and not insignificant. To illustrate why I believe it to be significant, let us look at some results of other works that were not part of the "hard core." The following table contains the search results obtained for four works mentioned only in Magill (1952):

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Google</th>
<th>Google, Image</th>
<th>Clio, Columbia</th>
<th>IMDB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Abe Lincoln in Illinois&quot; – Robert E. Sherwood</td>
<td>32,500</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dear Brutus – J. M. Barrie</td>
<td>898</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nocturne – F. A. Swinnerton</td>
<td>1,400</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wreck of the Grosvenor – W. C. Russell</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that these results are characterised not only by relatively small overall numbers but they also show uneven distribution in different genres and media. Among other things, they corroborated my initial impression.

14 This pattern is a rough approximation, representing most of the results. 13 These were the results of a search for "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" AND Sherwood.” Results for just "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" were 90. The reason is simple: most references of the all-inclusive Google belong to a film based on Sherwood’s play, not to the play itself.
that Magill’s list was based on biased selection criteria, favoring English and American works of the first half of the twentieth century. They may also tell us something deeper about the fate of works that enjoy ephemeral critical acclaim.

Objections to the Dialogue Approach

Despite my satisfaction with this outcome, the proposal to see a great book as a function of textual dialogues may be charged with circularity. We can – thus goes the argument – define works evoking many and diverse textual dialogues as “great books” and then find the books that answer that description, but then we can define a great book any way we like (e.g., a work that won the Booker prize) and then find the books answering that description. The circularity charge can be answered by the fact that my point of departure was the lists of “great books” made by three independent source-books.

The dialogic approach can also be challenged from a different angle by what can be named: “the Harry Potter case.” If the large number of echoes left by a book is indeed an important criterion for introducing it into the “the great books club”, then the Harry Potter series should automatically be considered “a great book”, because of its enormous popularity. Further, its “echoes” are not restricted, as might be expected, to large readerships, movie productions and popular culture (games etc.); it also attracts, surely but not slowly, critical attention: the number of scholarly books and articles devoted to Harry Potter is constantly growing.16 Thus, at least superficially, this series of books also seems to fulfill the requirement of variety of dialogues and echoes.

Despite these books’ overwhelming popularity in today’s culture, our intuitions tell us that Homer’s Odyssey or Shakespeare’s Hamlet are in a different “league” than the Harry Potter series. But how can we corroborate these intuitions without renouncing the dialogic approach altogether? The answer is simple: we should stipulate that the principle of variety applies also to different periods – a test that the Harry Potter series has not yet passed. This postulate can be seen as a reformulation of the good old principle that a great book has to pass the “test of time.”

Conclusion

The purpose of the dialogic approach to the question of great books is not to deny the valuable insights of the beauty and power “parties”: certain books surely contain aesthetic qualities more than others and cultural elites do play an important role in promoting certain works. But by focusing only on aesthetic qualities or cultural power structures, we might lose sight of the actual processes of literary life. Perhaps the prevailing two “parties” could explain the data presented in the above tables, but to that end they will have to add many complicated assumptions: the beauty party will face difficulties in dealing with books which do not possess conspicuous accepted aesthetic qualities and the power party will find it difficult to explain how some books became “great” despite the fact that they were not promoted by their contemporary cultural elite (e.g., a book like Gargantua and Pantagruel can be a challenge to both parties). The dialogic approach on the contrary is attuned, first and foremost, to the actual dynamics of literary life manifested in various forms of literary, artistic and critical dialogues.17

It is clear that the search tools offered so far are in some respects not sophisticated and fine-tuned enough. More adequate search tools should provide not only gross numbers, but also some kind of an algorithm for weighing them: genuine literary dialogues (e.g., re-writings, allusions), for example, should have far greater weight than the mention of a book in a commercial advertisement. We should also be aware that not every genre generates the same kinds of dialogue: while great dramatic works, for example, keep inspiring new stage productions,18 a lyrical poem may gain its reputation when it is anthologised, re-anthologised and gets new critical interpretations. There are also important differences with regard to relevant periods: in the pre-Gutenberg era one major factor in the survival and distribution of a literary piece depended, at least in some parts of Western Europe, on its being manually copied and consequently the

16 As can be found in the MLA bibliography data base.

17 In a recently published essay, Damrosch (2006) calls attention to some changes in the canon as reflected in MLA bibliography entries devoted to certain authors and consequently suggests some interesting distinctions. His illuminating discussion, however, gives too much weight to scholarly works as a factor in canon formation without giving due attention to other, equally important forms of literary dialogue.

18 Stage productions may be labeled “interpretations” in a sense close to playing a musical piece in a certain way. Such “interpretations” are distinguished from vocal statements that purport to convey the “meaning” of a work of art (Beardsley 1958: 9-10).
number of manuscripts would be considered an important factor. In print culture the base-line numbers change dramatically and in addition to counting individual copies we should count also the number of editions. And there are also pertinent differences between cultures: some cultures (e.g., Russian) have an established tradition of reciting poetry in public, which can be regarded as a significant way for creating a "dialogue" with a text, but in other traditions the reading of poetry is done mainly privately and individually. Thus, ensuing research, hypotheses and searches should factor in, among other things, the questions of genre, period and culture. Awareness of such factors would make the search for textual dialogues more complex and nuanced and would yield more accurate results.

But even before these needed improvements and refinements are introduced, the dialogic approach with its empirical methods can contribute to our understanding of the way literary works gain and maintain their status of "great books." First and foremost because it helps us to perceive "great books" not as static entities, revered objects "sitting there" on the shelf, but to see their active role as "focal points" in culture, inspiring the minds of individuals and groups of writers, artists and critics. Consequently, the question "Is this work a great book or not?" should be substituted for the understanding that a literary work is in a continual, ongoing process of becoming a great book.

---

19 I have elsewhere advocated a similar perspective in discussion of literary genres; not as static forms, but as generating principles, "giving birth" to new works (Fishelov 1993: 19-52, and 1999).

Works Cited


What Is, Empirically, a Great Book?

