

gian must ask also if it continues to function as canon. Is it taken as an authentic guide for the life of the community? Does the text serve to generate those adaptations which make it have continued significance? (Sanders: 539) Here again, the experience of modern literary studies may prove instructive, though hardly comforting. The study of modern vernacular literature was first proposed for the sake of those unable to read the classics, and because study of the classics had become an exercise in philology (in the later sense of that term). Advocates of these studies argued that concentration on the most inspired ideas presented in the most pleasing forms would serve to shape the moral character of the student, making the readers more liberal and humane. (Palmer: 15-40; 78-103). This romantic conception may be profoundly flawed. We will never know, because the study of modern languages and literature so nearly followed the path taken by classical languages and literature that we now have two academic majors (often of last resort), rather than arts central to the general education of all undergraduates. To the extent that biblical literature were to follow a similar course, clearly it would not be functionally canonical.

I want, however, to draw attention to a contemporary approach to literary studies in which literature is seen as a moral force, although it is spoken of as a social institution. Those who speak of literature as a social institution may be largely responding to declining enrollments and job prospects; they may also be making a realistic reassessment of the romantic literary mission in the light of a world in which it appears increasingly unlikely that salvation can come through lofty ideas and beauty. But whatever their motivation, they assert claims about the relationship of authors to their audience, and of literature to society, which make it clear that literary works constitute a significant moral force. For our purposes the best example of this approach is Kernan, who makes use of Peter Berger's sociology of knowledge paradigm, thereby standing on ground well known to biblical scholars, theologians and students of religion.

Social institutionalists follow other literary critics in treating the literary work as an artistic production, rather than focusing on literary sources as have historical critics. But in a fashion parallel to Malraux's questioning, what is art?, Kernan frames the question, what is literature? (1982:18-21) What is significant about the "art works" placed in museums is that they were not created to be "art works," but rather to be religious objects, practical implements and the like. They became "art" by being dislodged from their original settings and purposes on the basis of their fulfillment of certain standards of craftsmanship and imagination as determined by generations of collectors, critics and curators. Just as works of art became such by association with other such works, so also the literary work is what one finds in "the imaginary library," the oft-times nebulous literary canon. The literary work has been situated in that canon in an historically and socially conditioned process, in which certain critics and others have ascertained that it possesses qualities worth

being commended to the consuming public. Thus, the literary work is not just an imaginative story or a well-expressed song issuing from the creative artist/writer; it is also the product of printing, distributing, cataloguing, reissuing and commentary that together conspire with its author in the creation of a culturally significant reality. The meaning of the work is to be determined in terms of this extended process; it is discernible in part through analysis of the inter-relationships among all these works within the canon. But the complexity of this process makes it clear that this "canonical significance" is far greater than a structuralist intertextuality, for while texts are seen in terms of other texts, they are also seen in terms of a broad range of other cultural influences that have associated one text with another in the canon.

The social institutionalists suggest that the meaning of literature, and its possibility for interaction with wider social and cultural forces, lies in the relationships among the literary works as well as their individual and collective relationships with other social institutions, these internal realities being externalized in a variety of institutional arrangements. They suggest that we abandon the naive assumption that books come from the minds of authors, advertent, for example, to the transformation of texts by the introduction of printing. This suggests that the biblical scholar might advert to the fact that the biblical texts have more often been published, i.e. made public, by being read publicly in short pericopes in synagogue and church, than as a book, just as Shakespeare must be seen in the light of the English public theater (Kernan:1979). In such a perspective, there is certainly a basis for probing biblical literature as scripture and as canon, acknowledging in advance that not only does it have application to the present life of the church, but that its significance has been constituted by such applications over the centuries.

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