



Charles Darwin University

The Wisdom of the Western Canon

Cristaudo, Wayne

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The Wisdom of the Western Canon

The Revelation of Imagination: From Homer and the Bible through Virgil and Augustine and Dante by William Franke, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-8101-3119-4

This is one of those rare and wonderful books that reflects a life-time of learning and thinking. It is at once a powerful mediation upon five literary bulwarks of the Western tradition, as well as the advancement of a philosophical argument about the meaning of world-shaping literature. And, while the last fifty or so years has seen the institutional and disciplinary defeat of the idea of a Western canon and the kind of literary analysis of classic works that this book so glisteningly exemplifies, *The Revelation of Imagination* amply demonstrates why Homer, the writers of the Bible, Virgil, Augustine and Dante have been invaluable and inexhaustible conduits for the revelations of the human imagination. There is not a page where Franke's ability to enter into the crafting and language of the work he is discussing does not profoundly enrich one's appreciation of the text. That he is able to take works and writers of whom so much has been written, and yet make the reader feel how much more there is still to say and see, how inexhaustibly open these works are, is testimony to the mastery of his craft. His attention to stylistic detail, his ability to savour the intricate interweaving and balance of textual elements, and to identify the semiotic ricochets and resonances of a text, to call upon the most brilliant and apposite insights of philosophers, theologians, and literary critics, to show the sheer power and grandeur of inventiveness and attentiveness to the human and divine conditions which elevates the work of these authors to a plane where they shaped the times, and subsequently human possibilities that followed in their wake, are all combined with a style that is at once devotional and enthusiastic, panoramic and nuanced, authoritative and humble.

In his Conclusion Franke notes that "This study of great books of the Western tradition has focused to a considerable extent on epics, not because of any generic predilection per se, but rather because in their attempt to achieve a certain universality of vision, epics represent this tradition at its most ambitious and comprehensive." (p. 380) Like the best works of Erich Auerbach, Meyer Abrams, Northrop Frye, and Harold Bloom - the literary critics/ theorists whose work Franke most resembles - this is as much an 'epic' of literary criticism as a reflection upon that 'universality of vision' which is the core characteristic of the epic.

As with all 'epic' literary criticism, *The Revelation of Imagination* defies intellectual compartmentalization. It is every bit as much a work of philosophy, religion, history and linguistics as it is a work of literature. Unlike so much of today's literary criticism, which is so often a peacock-like exercise in 'performance,' Franke's erudition is deft and his sensitivity splendidly attuned so that we are ever directed to the labyrinthine intricacies and perpetual vitality of the texts being discussed.

To speak of the vitality of Homer, the bible, Virgil, Augustine and Dante is not to resort to some stale formulation of a canon – as if a canon were some sort of critics' literary list of their favourites akin to those lists of 'best films' or 'bands' of 'all time'. These books have indelibly shaped the peoples of the West, and their formative character of the works is not simply a prejudice of taste. It is much rather a matter of historical record: the Greeks without Homer, the Jews and Christians without the bible, the Catholic Church without Augustine, the Italian peoples and Renaissance without Dante are all unimaginable. Which is also to say that Europe and the Americas, and the world today, which – and irrevocably after the world wars - is inexorably melded by the explosive energies of Western Civilization, are equally unimaginable without Homer et. al. In this respect, the reason for studying the Western canon is not, as Harold Bloom has argued in *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, primarily to cultivate or enhance the aesthetic sensibility of the self by reading works of great quality - with such a mistaken notion of the canon, it is hardly surprising that Bloom's canon becomes so crowded that it bursts apart as he tries to accommodate the vast number of dazzling literary works of the twentieth century. It may well be that there are thousands of twentieth century writers who are 'better writers' than Virgil or Augustine or any of the writers of the Bible.

What makes books canonical are not simply or even primarily the quality of the crafting. Although canonical works tend to be well crafted – and the ones discussed by Franke certainly are – there are exceptions such as Goethe's *Faust*, which is simultaneously a canonical work of the German people and a stylistic blancmange. What sets apart canonical books are their activations, the fields of vision and ways of being human they open up – or in Franke's limpid phrase 'the regeneration of culture that they foster' (p. 375). Thus the reason for studying truly canonical works of the Western tradition is the urgent and compelling one of knowing the formative and incubating powers that are constitutive of one's own tradition, and thus to an important extent the potentialities (albeit often unstirred) of one's imagination and one's own self. And like Charles Taylor who is referenced by Franke, Franke is indeed

identifying *Sources of the Self*. This is a task that is of no small importance when so many narratives and practices of higher learning in the Humanities today operate on the basis of an aspirational utopia of norms and an astonishing ignorance of what powers are constitutive of one's own tradition.

But if I speak here of powers unleashed by a canonical work of the past, Franke is generally more concerned about the great potentials for our present and for the future that incubates in the canonical works he is mediating upon. The matter of the still living powers in Homer et. al. lays behind one of the book's central aims: to display the religious and prophetic core that is common to the works discussed. Indeed, for Franke, 'humanities texts are almost without exception religious texts' (p. 18) – a truth that could only be disputed by someone with cultural amnesia, and/or who is ignorant of how recent a severance is the one that leaves so many of us moderns bereft of divine names and rites for our most urgent supplications and deepest associations. Franke's claim that 'humanity does not exclude divinity but is defined rather in relation to it (p. 18)' is also an important one - at least for almost all peoples except the modern atheist, whose various appeals to reason or morality, 'the masses' or 'the people' rest, as Nietzsche saw with such perspicacity, upon a philosophical subterfuge and threadbare theology commensurate with the sovereignty of the self or society or some Big Other that lacks the concordant characteristics (for the monotheistic God must draw together all the discordant vital powers which polytheistic societies call upon), and historically demonstrable potency of the God of the living and the dead. (Try thinking of human history without the deeds done in the name of 'God' or the 'gods'; there won't be much left.). Likewise, just as Homer et. al. opened up the imagination of people's past by revealing something powerfully true about how their selves could be, which they then became, Franke links the potency of past, present and future that these works convey with their prophetic dimension. For each of these works, each in its own unique way, conveys 'a vision... an outlook on nothing less than the whole of human experience and its place in the cosmos (p, 380).'

In invoking totalizing visions of the real Franke realizes he is bucking against the anti-totalizing philosophies that defined so much of the philosophical climate of the twentieth century. His response to this tradition is as conciliatory as it is deft: for the kind of totalities that he sees as emanating from the works he is reflecting upon are of a sort commensurate with the philosophies of Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Blanchot and Derrida. Indeed, whereas the humanistic kind of learning and canonicity exhibited by Franke is frequently seen as the antithesis of the post-structuralists' general aversion to all authorities of meaning (except

themselves and their inspirations), Franke's enduring interest and research on the apophatic tradition no less equally make his writing share deep affinities with post-structuralism. Nevertheless, for Franke, the anti-totalizing philosophies he invokes are not at all antithetical to the grand prophetic visions that make great works of literature. For, he observes, each of the prophetic works he is discussing aspires toward a total vision in which each vision is:

not a self-enclosed system of representation but rather a piercing insight into a fathomless depth: it opens a depth dimension in which the singular becomes manifest in its unlimited relatedness with all. The vision at stake in these works has proved in each case to be a revelation rather than just a system – a revelation of imagination beyond any closed system of representation (p. 388).

Franke's conclusion about how Homer et. al. provide indispensable resources for our self-understanding, as well as our understanding of the cosmos and of the divine is itself part of a greater underlying argument which he advances in the Introduction about the nature and worth of the kind of knowledge that is opened up by the study of the Humanities.

In this respect, I am tempted to say the book is conducting a war on at least two cultural fronts – though Franke's tone and demeanour exhibit such civility and refinement, and are so utterly devoid of the slightest trace of polemic, that I am very conscious that in speaking of a 'war' and of 'fronts' I might be guilty of the interpolation of my own axe-wielding here. For his part, Franke has no axe to grind, just powerful insights and impressions and revelations of the spirit to share, although he does have an argument and alternative to current trends to make. For Franke's literary vision is the antithesis of what has now become a commonplace in literary studies: the use of literature as an occasion for moral and 'political' 'interventions'. From this latter perspective, Franke's book will seem at best quaint and irrelevant, at worse a reaction against the political and moral progress that has occurred in the study of literature within universities in North America, the United Kingdom and Australasia - I think anyone familiar with the kinds of classes and reading lists in the study of literature in universities in those countries today would agree that Franke's vision is not in step with the programme. For all his poststructuralist deftness (a deftness that is also to be found in Derrida, Lyotard, Lacan, Deleuze, Foucault et. al. but which seems to evaporate once a French text is translated and marshalled into a North American or United Kingdom classroom), he is invoking a vision of humanity as all-inclusive and ever expansive. It is an epic vision in which identities ultimately dissolve into something beyond themselves. Such acts of dissolution requiring

looking upward, outward and inward into greater mysteries than any singular identity and any kind of identity politics can grasp. Such a vision of life is one which requires developing the virtues of hesitancy, imaginative yet cautious reading, and being humble and patient with one's learning because one knows that before one has anything worth saying one needs to absorb an enormous amount of one's tradition – and that requires great effort, and a willingness to enter into tragic entanglements where such simple fault-finding as blaming the world's ills upon the capitalists, males, Anglo-Saxons, whites, Christians, heterosexuals, defenders of the traditional family, the Jews (oops - sorry that was another identity-obsessed crowd that blamed them) offers neither truth nor solace. It also means dwelling and delighting in the infinitely aporetic. It also means eschewing to set oneself up as a moral or political exemplar to a classroom of adulating students hoping that their education will give them quick fixes to shield them from the enormous uncertainties, disappointments, injustices and recurrent horrors of the world and of the life that lays before them. I have mentioned Franke's tone a few times; above all - it is not the tone of a political orator, but the tone of a lover of learning about the infinite vastness and wonders of the imagination.

The second front I see *The Revelation of Imagination* as 'attacking' is the front of the compartmentalisation of knowledge which ultimately would dismiss the Humanities because they do not contribute to the kind of knowledge which today increasingly *counts* as 'knowledge'. Again, Franke's case for the contrary of this position is never hostile, but Franke is direct in addressing the problem of the kind of knowledge opened by the Humanities. If it is the politicization and moralisation of literature that is tearing apart the Humanities from within, it is the diminution of the value of the knowledge of the Humanities that would have it destroyed from without. It is an instrumental view of knowledge that has increasingly gained social currency – including within the universities which are tending more and more to view the Humanities as a rather irritating drain of resources – a field that does not generate either income or socially useful knowledge. In this context, the politicisation and moralisation of the Humanities have turned out to be pyrrhic victories – for if all we need to know is what can be incorporated into an area of policy such as affirmative action, sexual harassment, equal rights, i.e. once we know that the West is a history of the oppression of various groups, one is much better off doing something about it rather than funding people to more or less say the same thing over and over again as they issue 'trigger warnings' about the sexist, racist, anti-gay sentiments in the books they teach and pick up on the endless downright oppression or micro-aggressions plaguing their society and tradition.

Changing and enforcing policy about how we speak about each other can also free up resources for the kind of education that has vocational or technological and scientific value.

The interests shaping what knowledge matters and what knowledge should be supported are multiple, and these interests are symptomatic of the kind of world we in industrialized Western societies all now inhabit. For the world requires reproducing itself; innumerable livelihoods depend upon it. This reproductive process is partly driven by companies wanting graduates to be ready to fit immediately into the techniques and processes that bring quicker profits; it is partly driven by resource competition between the Faculties; and it is partly driven by other systemic stakeholders who need their own power and 'discursive regimes' shorn up and expanded. That is to say, knowledge today that counts is what is congruent with the methods and compartmentalizations that enable the social reproduction of a technologically and managerially measurable, commercially corporate and bureaucratically driven, politically accountable and compliant society.

The human imagination as exhibited in the works discussed by Franke led the human understanding where the forces of its reproduction were vastly different to our world: Homer wrote for a society incapable of subsisting without heroes; the writers of the bible for a people who having escaped enslavement, acquired a kingdom only to see its fall, and who repeatedly found themselves and their faith tested by hostile worldly powers, which the prophets, Jesus, and the writers of the gospel would renounce; Virgil wrote for an empire of unparalleled military might, worldly achievement and infinite ambition; Augustine under the sign of a faith that would salvage souls through the ruins of that same empire; and Dante for a time in which novel kinds of social associations, liberties and experiences opened up a vast vista of new loves and human potentials, all of which were threatened by a world being torn apart by papal-imperial wars. In this respect – and irrespective of the fact that these works, as Franke rightly emphasizes, also far outshine the conditions and circumstances of their origins - the cleavage between the kinds of reality and kinds of experiences the authors discussed by Franke deal with and the modern technological/corporate/ bureaucratic etc. view and way of the world is insurmountable. The later all link up with the modern metaphysical moves inaugurated by Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza of making the imagination subordinate to the understanding, and the understanding formed around its strict attention to the laws of nature. This role of the understanding is now somewhat displaced, though expanded into a cognitive capacity serving the nature of the techniques, technicity and calculability that ensure the ongoing authority and roles of the stakeholders of the ways of their world.

The epistemological opposition to this way of thinking has a long lineage in modern philosophy – though one of its earliest exponents was Giambattista Vico, who as Franke rightly recognizes, understood ‘that all major verbal structures have descended historically from poetic and mythological ones,’ as Frye put it in his *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature* (p. 383).

In spite, though, of philosophy (at least outside the Anglo-American analytic tradition) long having reconciled itself to the power and value of the imagination - not shackled by the understanding - in our world-making, the number of stakeholders and benefactors in both the public and private sector who have investments in the compartmentalisation, mechanization and quantification of what constitutes knowledge is so vast and powerful that the kinds of truths which emerge in the study of the Humanities is easily discounted (to use the apposite term). Irrespective of the fact that such knowledge is so savagely discounted even within the space of the academy that had nurtured it for so long, Franke eloquently and succinctly makes the case for the unique kind of ‘relational and personal knowledge’ that emerges in our involvement or participation in the reality of our own making.

Given the state of literary studies, in particular, and the state not only of our universities, but of our broader culture with its increasingly intolerant polarisations and simplicities accompanied by an endless accumulation of rules and laws, on the one hand, and the production of infantile and titillating entertainment, on the other, it is difficult to see the *Revelation of the Imagination* as having an impact remotely commensurate with its value. This only shows how desperate our time is for the kind of cultural rejuvenation that Franke is attempting to contribute to. Nor does our present circumstance change the fact that this is an invaluable work on invaluable works.

Wayne Cristaudo

Professor in Politics at Charles Darwin University NT Australia

Wayne.cristaudo@cdu.edu.au