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Norton and Longman Travel Separate Roads

Karen Saupe

Last year, the *Longman Anthology* emerged as a new contender in the anthology world of British literature, a direct challenge to the long-established *Norton*. Now that the *Norton* has responded with its own seventh edition, comparisons are in order.

The editors of the original *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (Abrams et al. 1962) promised, without explaining the terms, coverage of the “major writers” and “the historical context of the chief literary modes and traditions of their times (i), and there seemed to be no need to justify the anthology’s contents or omissions further. The sixth edition, published in 1993, still took *major* and *chief* for granted, made the usual Band-Aid revisions to reflect the “evolution” of literary interests, and confidently claimed that “the anthology fully represents English poetry in its major writers, forms, and genres” (xxxix).

But the appearance of the *Longman Anthology of British Literature* forced the *Norton* editors to reflect and retool, and the result is good news for students, teachers, and the rival publishers. Each anthology has had to assert itself as distinct, and while there is a good deal of overlap in content, the result of the contest is a pair of starting options that could lead to very different kinds of courses.

If the *Longman* initially distinguished itself by its expansiveness, the

new *Norton* has closed the size gap. Both anthologies offer more than enough material to meet most instructors' needs (perhaps creating new difficulties by offering too many choices). But the new *Norton* is not (as *Longman* personnel have charged) simply an attempt to copy *Longman*. Crucial differences lie in each anthology's conceptual approach to the material.

Having the choice compels us to consider our priorities for a survey course. What are our goals for such a course? Should it instill and inform a sense of common cultural heritage, or should it reveal the richness and diversity of cultural trends and influences? What constitutes a cultural heritage anyway? Whose heritage, which subcultures, should merit our attention? What part of history belongs to a literary survey? Should a survey of literature focus primarily on social issues, political matters, or linguistic developments? Should it encourage sensitivity toward language? What deserves more attention: style or content, medium or message?

The *Longman* preface identifies three debates—"the nature of literature itself, its relations to the wider culture, and the best ways to read and understand it" (xxix)—which are to be addressed in its contents. Its net is cast broadly in hopes of representing as many opinions and as many groups as possible in its selections. It attempts to broaden the cultural umbrella by defining its scope as "British": the organizing principle is national, and anything from any territory comprising the British empire is fair game for inclusion. This criterion and the three concerns identified above lead naturally to an emphasis on political issues in the volume's introductory essays and commentaries.

Most of the selections are written in English, with a handful of translated Welsh, Gaelic, and Irish materials. Clearly the *Longman's* contents answer a perceived need for canonical expansion and inclusivity. Its contents offer a fairer, fuller representation of the breadth of literature written by British subjects than any previous anthology. Its introductions are lively and colorful.

And so *Norton*, no doubt forced into self-examination by the *Longman's* threat to its territory, has expanded its contents as well. But it has carefully defined a different conceptual focus on roughly the same body of material. *Norton* has defined its scope by uniting works whose common bond is the English language, claiming that a shared vocabulary is essential to cultural unity. The claim is articulated and developed in Geoffrey Nunberg's introductory essay, "The Persistence of English," which appears in both volumes of the new *Norton*. Nunberg emphasizes the significance of what Anthony Trollope termed "mental culture," that part of our consciousness that is shaped and shared by way of a common language. Nunberg argues that languages

help to define nationalities; linguistic unity among nations requires that “they have certain communicative interests in common that make it worthwhile to try to curb or modulate the natural tendency to fragmentation and isolation.” Furthermore, he claims, “the continuity of the language rests on speakers’ willingness to absorb the linguistic and cultural influences of other parts of the linguistic community” (xlvi). As Nunberg acknowledges and explores the complexity of that statement, his essay provides the most compelling justification for the structure and contents of a course organized with the newest *Norton* in mind, a course that recognizes language and style, those uniquely literary matters, as its primary concerns. Nunberg argues that our vocabulary is “defined by reference to our common literature” (lviii), and that seems to be the most solid cultural bond either anthology offers us. The lexicon is an identifiable, limited site of struggle and commonality. Nunberg calls attention to the “unthreatened” hegemony of the English language in our world: it is a constant for the past several centuries and certainly for the present; the British empire’s political position is not.

Neither anthology has neglected the other’s domain, of course; obviously, the English language has most often entered communities by way of political acts, and its importance goes well beyond the aesthetic. So the *Norton* addresses (more fully than in previous editions) social issues surrounding the production of literature. But the *Norton* tends to weave politics more directly and tightly with linguistic matters. For example, in a witty and lively new introduction to the sixteenth century, Stephen Greenblatt addresses gender issues in the context of the English monarchy and explores (with remarkable objectivity) the role of religious traditions and debates. He also, however, considers Renaissance self-consciousness about language, exploring the social and political tensions inherent in choosing between Latin and English and the social implications of the age’s fascination with translation. He explores the role of text and print in the development of Renaissance culture and politics. And of course Nunberg’s essay in *Norton* discusses the English language’s connections with and influence on class, region, and politics. Nunberg notes, for instance, the eighteenth-century crossroads movement when the English decided not to develop a national academy for language, a philosophical crisis for the culture—a crisis that has resurfaced periodically in the United States.

So, too, does the *Longman* occasionally note the importance of language. In his preface to the anthology, David Damrosch defines literature as “artistically shaped works written in a charged language, appealing to the imagination at least as much as to discursive reasoning” (xxx). But elsewhere

in the anthology, relatively little attention is given to the artistic or imaginative qualities of works presented. One notable exception is a section called “Whose Language?” located at the end of the second volume. Here Seamus Heaney’s lecture “Feeling into Words” articulates—more concretely, in fact, than Nunberg does—some of the ways language shapes consciousness. He writes of his literary education providing him with “a kind of linguistic hard core that could be built on some day” and the development of “a conscious savoring of words” (2847). Also in this section, in “Why I Choose to Write in Irish, the Corpse that Sits Up and Talks Back,” the English-born, Irish-bred poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill considers the sociopolitical power of language. (One hopes that students will recognize the irony of having this essay and several of her poems translated into English in this same section.)

Longman never really explains why it makes sense to emphasize the political in a literature course (though there are certainly arguments to be made). Instead, the appeal of that approach is taken for granted, and the anthology attempts to represent as many political and cultural groups as possible. Such an effort naturally includes communities resistant to colonization by British imperial forces, and that resistance to British tradition and culture is often emphasized in the *Longman* introductions and text selections. The approach suggests not so much multicultural richness as factiousness. *British* is a useful historical and political term. It seems less helpful as a literary designation, since in such a broad field it tells us relatively little about the literature we find within its bounds. The inclusion of non-English selections (in translation) broadens the picture further and underscores the emphasis on nonliterary factors in determining the anthology’s contents. One might well ask why it would not be better to replace a British survey with a course in world literature—as some schools are doing—or simply to replace it with a history course that makes use of some literary texts. In general, the *Norton* introductions manage to keep literary, political, and linguistic concerns balanced and connected; the *Longman* introductions sometimes seem to forget what they are introducing.

On the surface, there is a noncommittal vagueness about the *Longman*’s choices of texts that echoes throughout the first volume. It seems not to settle in on a perspective; instead, it attempts to pack in enough material to allow for any and all perspectives. As one of my colleagues puts it, “This is a book that uses the word *canon* but refuses to make judgments about what is canonical.” The breadth of its contents gives us a realistic picture of the literary world without offering us any dependable framework for interpreting that picture. David Damrosch’s preface notes that great literature is both rooted in

and transcendent of its time, and he freely admits that this anthology is bound in our time. He notes the challenge to know but not be trapped by cultural contexts.

Yet the cultural contexts in which this volume has been produced are seldom acknowledged. It is worth noting that the *Longman* introductions pack in triple the adjectives found in the *Norton*. *Longman* editorializes quite a bit, subtly and colorfully. Its background material is admittedly more interesting reading than some of the old black-and-white *Norton* introductions. But the coloring is subjective and tends toward the trendy. Take, for instance, each book's introduction of the term *medieval*. *Longman* calls the term a "condescending and monolithic label" (5). (Why perpetuate its use, then, especially when the same anthology jettisons *Renaissance* in favor of *early modern*?) *Norton* states that "the adjective 'medieval,' coined from Latin *medium* (middle) and *aevum* (age), refers to whatever was made, written, or thought during the Middle Ages" (1). The former establishes medieval literature as somehow victimized. The latter neglects an interesting but hardly fundamental point and provides a simple definition for a student who is likely to have all of two weeks to explore the territory of this literary period. Will students possess the critical abilities to recognize the *Longman*'s editorializing stance? While the *Longman* generously provides vast choices in reading material, it is subtly eliminating interpretive choices. All this is not to say that the *Longman* is not appealing. Its background material tends to be more colorful, chattier. It seems to want to complicate the picture, and of course that complexity is a more accurate view of reality than the linear view we get from *Norton*. But for the beginning student, there is too much to absorb in the *Longman* introductions. A survey course should provide a skeleton to which later study can add the flesh and organs of the literature. *Norton* gives readers some solid assertions to question later.

Both anthologies provide generous helpings of background and enrichment material. *Norton* has added time lines (divided into "Texts" and "Contexts") reflecting a relatively linear approach to literary history. These provide what may be a false sense of security, but that sense of security keeps students from drowning in questions before they can learn to swim. There are a few curious omissions, like Reformation-related dates. But such items as musical compositions in the Romantic-age "Contexts" column suggest rich connections between literature and other manifestations of cultural heritage. *Longman*'s generous use of illustrations provides a similar opportunity to explore those connections, though again the connections are not always explored in the text.

The *Longman's* noble effort to be all things to all people sometimes collapses into a diluted experience of a tradition defined by its lack of commonalities. There is too much to manage, too much danger that close reading and higher-level thinking will be lost in a chaos of superficiality. Given the relatively short time most students spend in literature courses, some sense of focus seems imperative. Ideally, instructors will build syllabi that suggest appropriate conceptual boundaries. The *Norton* offers some obvious (and clearly literary) ways to focus on what happens to the language, what happens as writers alter older forms (grammatical, poetic, and lexical), and what happens to ideas as words shift their meaning and styles come and go.

Of course, the *Norton's* linguistic focus is necessarily compromised in order to make early works accessible to undergraduate survey students; after a quick taste of Old English, they need their *Beowulf* in translation. (Much is made of the fact that Seamus Heaney's new modernization marks a union of distant generations of English-speaking voices. In discussing that modernization and others, instructors should find a great deal to say about the processes by which our language evolves through the centuries.) Another obvious difficulty in claiming a territory defined by language is that American literature, in keeping with traditional curricular design, is split off into a separate set of anthologies, which lops off a major limb of the English-speaking tree. (*Norton's* strictness in maintaining the split leads to some curiously imbalanced introductions in the second volume, where it might at least be useful to allude to parallel movements in American literature.) But of course the *Longman* also neglects the literature of British-American colonies, even though many American students' best way of understanding British concerns comes through that window.

On the whole, I find the *Norton's* focus on language appealing for two reasons. First, it provides a specific unifying principle on which to ground the study of literature. Second, that unifying principle privileges intellectual forces over physical (e.g., geographic or military) ones in defining a literary heritage. While political and social agendas emphasized in the *Longman's* selections and introductions certainly demand our attention, I would argue that an English department course in English literature has the special and perhaps unique responsibility for considering intellectual, aesthetic, and linguistic matters. Literature seems to offer the most delicate, responsive, and accurate record of the cultural and ideological skirmishes that have formed our contemporary consciousness. By making language its focus, the *Norton* keeps students mindful that it is in the language of literature that political and cultural awareness is formed and inflected. It invites us to consider the unique

role that language plays in shaping and reflecting culture—politics, gender roles, religion, everything. The *Norton* will appeal to teachers who have an interest in the history and development of our language and in what and how a common tongue makes it possible to share across time and space.