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## **Religious Canon and Literary Identity**

Plenary lecture Nijmegen, Conference 'Literary Canon and Religious Identity'<sup>1</sup>

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### Résumé

Le titre de cette contribution constitue un retournement, ou une perversion, du titre du colloque pour lequel elle a été conçue. L'auteur retourne à une analyse antérieure de Genèse 39, ainsi que de la version du Quran de la même histoire telle que Thomas Mann l'avait prise comme source dans son roman "Joseph und seine Brüder". Le retour à ce travail antérieur sert à une prise de conscience des changements historiques de notre présent. Là où, dans les années quatre-vingt, la perspective féministe dictait une attention spécialisée à la position de la femme de Potiphar comme sujet de désir, à l'époque actuelle le choix du texte islamique dans un playdoyer implicite pour le droit des juifs à la différence prend un sens nouveau, pertinent pour l'idée d'une "identité littéraire".

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The craze for myth is the fear of history (Rahv 1953: 114)

### **Literary Canon and Religious Identity**

Let me put my cards on the table. Two cards: first, I am not religious; I am not even sure I understand what religion is, outside of the institutionalised religions of which I want no part. Second, I find the subject of this conference, 'Literary Canon and Religious Identity', an important and timely one to which I fully subscribe. Reversing the conference's title into my own is not to be construed as an opposition to it. If I may take a guess at the motivations underlying the organisers' choice, I assume – and am happy about it – that the impulse is political, progressive, and revisionist. It must be. Why?

The entire notion that 'canon' is an object of study, as it has been brought under scrutiny during the last decades, presupposes a *political* grounding for what we read as 'canonical' – not in party politics but in a movement against partisanship. From measuring stick to law and rule, the Greek word *kanon* speaks to the desire to regulate social cohabitation, a desire that institutes the political domain. Speaking about canon, then, implies a recognition that the cultural domain of reading and literacy on the one hand, and of reading and following religious texts on the other, is a political one, and that studying, or rather, analysing, elements of that domain is an activity that is by definition of a political nature, at least in part.

That political concern in the present company can only be *progressive* and critical, aiming at real interventions, because it is from that side that the canon has been made to shed its innocent self-evidence.<sup>2</sup> The preservers or curators of the canon don't even think

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<sup>1</sup> The Tenth Conference of the Society for Literature and Religion, 7-9 Sept. 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Canons may be and work differently in the various cultural domains, but some of their features, especially tenacity, exclusion, and lack of reflection, are common to most. In this respect, critiques of the canon in art history are just as instructive for the topic of our conference as strictly literary and religious contestations. See Salomon (1991) for an

about 'canon', at least not as a term of analysis. They simply 'do' canon; they teach, analyse, and frame the canonical texts 'canonically', without questioning their choices and the self-serving methods of reading that leave the selection unquestioned. This unreflected self-evident repetition is the defining feature of canonicity.<sup>3</sup>

The project must be *revisionist*, finally, because the point of discussing the canon as a politically conservative force is to change its status – from self-evident power to a phenomenon to analyse, and thereby, by definition, to transform. The magic word *identity*, pointing to a feminist, queer, and/or multiculturalist perspective and connoting on its own a progressive politically inflected perspective, relates the need to subvert that exclusionist and oppressive power to the recognition that it is wielded by a narrow group of people with an identical identity. The word 'identity' indicates that it is precisely that social-political dominance, of certain *kinds* of people over all 'others', that the formation and maintenance of a canon facilitates.<sup>4</sup> But such a critique and revision of the canon goes hand in hand with a critique and revision of the ways we read the canon. This other side of the double move is indispensable, if we are to *understand* the power of canons.<sup>5</sup> But there is more, something more specific, to the conference title than this larger project of opening up.

The conference's title specifies a trajectory along which this cultural process of power-wielding functions. For it connects the *literary* canon to *religious* identity. Two cultural domains usually perceived as distinct if not opposed – one worldly, the other spiritual – are brought to bear upon each other. What we read, for fun, beauty, learning, or personal self-transformation, contributes to the formation of who we are in terms of that specific cultural-political domain called 'religion'. This analysis of the work literary canons do, including shaping religious identity, is valid. One only need think of one of the canonical examples of an indisputably canonical text, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, to see this work, so that it must indeed be critically analysed.

This work's major thrust is a Christian revision of Hebrew Scriptures fit for Milton's time and place, and thus, precisely because it is such an artistic masterpiece, it helps streamline the social environment in its ongoing Christianisation. Its artistic success is never in doubt. Its religious content is obvious. But it has no status in any *religious* canon. And, interestingly, Charles Altieri's famous article on the universal values of literary canons alleges this example in his larger argument that canon formation is *not* political – or religious, for that matter.

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early critique of the art-historical canon that acutely articulates the 'sins of omission' perpetrated by that canon. See also Pollock (1999)

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that such lack of reflection is 'innocent'. As Karen R. Lawrence wrote in her introduction to a volume of essays on the 'British' literary canon: '... the formation and revision of literary tradition and the canon reflect ideological struggle rather than a natural aesthetic order'. Hence, she articulates her volume's thrust in the following words: 'Perhaps it is more accurate to say that these essays explore the way literary canons disguise their own histories of violence ...' (1992: 2)

<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the conference participates in a larger project already well under way, at least since, say, the late seventies. An institution, itself as canonical as the annual English Institute held in the United States, produced a famous collection of essays in 1981 called *Opening Up the Canon* (Fiedler and Baker 1981).

<sup>5</sup> This is not only a political necessity, but also, let's say primarily, an intellectual, academic one. For understanding is the 'official', 'canonical' task of the academic endeavour.

Indeed, there is good reason to insist on the differences between religious and literary processes of canon formation. The former are fixed forever, the latter are in flux. The former constitute the basis for thought and behaviour in a congregation whose membership has official status. The latter are primarily conveyors of aesthetic and formal value, and the group-formation they promote is repressed, sometimes fiercely denied. For now, however, such denials as Altieri's call for a counter-move. There is a tight bond between artistic and religious canonicity, and the indisputable literary canonicity of an indisputably religious text like *Paradise Lost* proves it. This bond serves an interest that I want to put on the table before proceeding further. It is even more obvious in visual culture: the interest in *representation* as a social-political tool. This notion will be important in my analysis below. And whereas I urge you to think of literature as close to visual art in its cultural 'work', in spite of the fact that its medium is more acceptable for religions holding a taboo against visual representation, I will, for now, limit myself to the written text.<sup>6</sup>

In this bond, posited by the conference's title, a *social agency* is claimed for literature. What we read transforms us, or confirms us, specifically, our religious identity. The title, then, can be read as announcing the project of transforming the canon of what the Western world sees as great literature, in order to liberate and include forms of – here, religious – identity not captured by the mainstream institutionalised religious systems predominant there. If Milton's work was able to further 'push' a religious identity that included social divisions according to lines of gender – and on a different level, to which I will return, of class – then all those groups who feel not valorised, inspired, and confirmed by such texts in their religious identity may benefit from the work of opening up the canon.

The need for this rethinking has become urgent because of the social phenomenon of world-wide migration, which has made the near-exclusive predominance in the Western world of Christian and Judaic traditions less obvious, and has imposed participation in the social organisation of, most visibly, Islamic traditions. The reality of migration has, more generally and vaguely, but also more incisively, made us aware that religious identity is precisely not self-evidently Christian or anything in particular. What the title of the conference contributes to that process of de-naturalisation of religious identity is to discuss the subliminal and therefore perhaps, sometimes insidious, contribution to the false and exclusionary stabilisation of religious identities of that seemingly frivolous or lay instruction called 'literature'.

Literature, the title suggests, helps exclusion and mainstreaming by means of its own canon and canonisation, which are by no means identical, either in content or in process, to the canons of established religions, and which may therefore appear as relatively 'innocent' of imposing religious identity. Precisely because religious canons are established once and for all, the more fluctuating literary canons may have a greater power for social shaping.

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<sup>6</sup> The reason I insist on this affiliation between the two arts is that the interdiction to make graven images has realism, not vision per se, as its target. I will return to this below.

## Religious Canon and Literary Identity

I wholeheartedly underwrite the goals that such a topic implies. I also share the logic that allows it to be a good intellectual project. If I have given my contribution a title that reverses the terms of this topic, it is not to challenge or criticise it. My reversal implies an attempt to demonstrate, as an element within the conference's larger project, that the logic of the conference is tenable, precisely because of a deeper, even more invisible and therefore insidious power game that consists of binding the outcome of the process, the religious identity based on canon, to a less visible because less institutionally defined *form of identity* that is, strictly speaking, literary. This 'literary identity', still to be defined, infuses the religious canon in many different ways.

Representation plays a central role in it, although not the only role. And, as I will argue, the promotion of and through literary identity is connected to representation as a form of *incarnation* or embodiment. I mean this much in Richard Dyer's sense, of promoting a particular way of considering the body as site of spirit, not as defined by spirit *qua* body. As Dyer has brilliantly observed in a critique of the unspoken self-evidence of a predominant 'white perception', this tradition insists on that curious notion so central to Christianity: *incarnation*. This tradition includes representing the body in suffering and sacrifice, while *qua* visual representation it counters the two other monotheistic traditions that resist visual representation of the body. Christianity has a stake in this that goes beyond just wishing to be liberal about art. Dyer claims, as the primary stake, the attempt to put forward a specific sense of *embodiment* of spirit. This is a specifically 'white' endeavour to the extent that, if it is to be *self-evidently* predominant, the white body must be put forward but not foregrounded. Hence, these representation are about something that, in Dyer's words, is 'in but not of the body' (1997: 14).

I will defend this thesis through an act of revisionism of my own, by revisiting an earlier analysis that I published in my book *Reading Rembrandt*, from the perspective of the double knot of identity and canon on the one hand, and religion and literature on the other. There, I confronted the biblical canonical story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, with the equally canonical story, in the Quran, of the 'same' fabula. The issue was the representation of women, the term of comparison was Thomas Mann's literary work *Joseph and His Brothers*, and the goal was to demonstrate that even such oppressive and rigidified mythical cases of women-bashing as Genesis 39 and its aftermath, are not unified and need not be perpetuated in their massive misogyny. Since then, Alice Bach, among others, has taken this case up and confronted the story with other versions of it, in a gesture that had as one of its goals to de-canonise the religious canon.<sup>7</sup>

The issue for me in this self-revisioning, obviously, is neither quite different nor quite the same as it was when I first studied the case. Religion, religious canon and religious identity were not at stake in the earlier piece as they are at this conference – and, I wish to acknowledge from the start, as they are in today's Western culture. In fact, I purposely excluded them from consideration then. But the interest in revisiting this analysis is not specifically to supplement it with such considerations as we are discussing at this

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<sup>7</sup> For a critical reading of the story that also criticises the ongoing tendency to read the Genesis version alone, see Bach's *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative* (1997: esp. 34-127).

conference. Rather, and in a sense following both Dyer's plea for studying what seems *unmarked*, hence 'natural', and the Midrashic tradition of filling gaps on which all literary commentary is modelled, I am interested in the *self-evidences* it contains, which prevented me from making the move to a more complex sense of identity, one of whose importance I am now much more clearly aware.<sup>8</sup>

The confrontation with this earlier work of my own is further informed by the, by now, classical, let's say, canonical, work of a cautious and slightly revisionist defence of the literary canon, Charles Altieri's 'Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon'. This piece alleges the example of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. It seeks to articulate the universal values on which canons are based, and denies the political in what he seems to consider conspiracy theories that historicise and pluralise such criteria.

Altieri's focus is literary, and therefore, it is not so shocking when he claims the exact opposite as the article that follows his in the collection, Gerald Bruns' 'Canon and Power in the Hebrew Scriptures'. For Altieri, canons are heritages of cultural values that help produce 'strong identities'. He dismisses the political-historicising theory advanced by new historicists such as Jerome J. McGann (1981), which is of the signature that John Guillory calls the liberal critique (1995). Bruns, in contrast, claims the important politics underlying canon formation that Altieri denies. The difference in status between literary and religious canons – the one being produced in an ongoing and socially unlocated process, the other definitive and decided upon by religious leaders – , although not addressed by either author, silently accounts for that opposition, and mitigates it. As I announced earlier, to sharpen our focus I will question that opposition.

Altieri proposes an intelligent argument in favour of canons of works we 'idealise' and of the possibility of articulating and promoting common principles of judgement on whose basis a form of valuable 'idealisation' is recognised (46). Thanks to that recognition, canonical texts will be preserved and read. This gives them the power to shape public, moral identities through identification. He then proceeds to specify, according to the age-old fallacy of a form/content distinction, that the values inherent in canonical texts concern literary 'craft' (form) and 'wisdom' (content) (51). And whereas my case study below urges us to question such distinctions, here I will mention only three disturbing problems with the article, which make it, in itself, unacceptable as a basis for our discussion. First, Altieri's argument is entirely based on the assumption, neither spoken nor argued, *that*. Nowhere does it discuss *why* literary canons would be both important and productive enough to be defended. Second, he sketches the process of canon formation as an entirely rational, directed process, thus ignoring institutional powers and wider ideological issues that contribute more diffusely to that process. Third, his criteria remain profoundly, even literally, conservative. This makes them a priori unfit to help break open the self-evidence of conservatism, which any discussion of the canon pursues.

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<sup>8</sup> A preliminary word on methodology. I call my blindspots and omissions self-evidences rather than gaps because I consider the latter word insufficiently clear on the repressions that go on in so-called gaps, while I also object to the suggestion of their empirical status. This is the focus of my discussion with Perry and Sternberg, and Fokkelman in *Lethal Love* (1987, ch. 1). The notion of gaps has been put forward by phenomenology (primarily Ingarden) and put on the map of literary studies in the updated version of Wolfgang Iser (1978).

In view of all this, the common denominator between Altieri and myself is surprising, to me even worrisome. Whereas I focused on women and Altieri on literary masterpieces, I on bodies and he on transhistorical values, in short, I on the political and he on the literary, we share a significant negligence of religion. Just as I discussed the bits from the Bible and the Quran as if they had nothing to do with religion, Altieri's example, similarly, remains silent on the religious identity that his literary canon promotes. Until this conference was called, he got away with it, too. And so did I. Not any longer. The point of my reversal of the title is to reconsider that silence.

### **Ethical Non-Indifference and Artistic Merit**

The first issue I wish to revisit is *the relation between ethical and artistic merit*. When studying the conjunction of Rembrandt's representation of the story with the later literary version, I was quite struck by the fact that Thomas Mann, in his preface, is explicit in his attempt to overcome the mythical reification of misogyny that he found in the traditions surrounding the episode. He is quite proud of

... the humane vindication that I had undertaken in it, the humanisation of the figure of Potiphar's wife, the mournful story of her passionate love of the Canaanite major-domo and her *pro forma* husband. (xi)

On account of this uplifting political undertaking, Mann claims literary success for the episode, which he calls 'unquestionably the artistic zenith of the work' (xi). Importantly, then, Mann claims a 'protofeminist', *humanist* ideology as an argument for aesthetic accomplishment. What he claims for his retelling of a story from the religious canon is literary canonicity on ethical, political grounds.

Here is my first unargued self-evidence: instead of examining how this claim could be justified on principle, I cast it aside, typically, in a concessive subclause, by writing 'Although I am reluctant to endorse such a conflation of aesthetics and ethics ...' (1991: 97), while the rest of my analysis remained silent on the aesthetic, say, the specifically literary merit of Mann's defence of Potiphar's wife. At this point (and on the basis of the bond between literary and religious identity, and between canon and identity that we are probing in this conference), I would wish to revise this dismissal and withhold judgement on this general issue. Not that I did not have good reason for that dismissal.

My reason for reservation was the *ethical indifference* commonly shown in the face of artistic success. Such indifference has been displayed, for example, in enthusiastic receptions of wildly misogynist novels full of rape scenes presented as masculine value, by Norman Mailer and Arthur Miller, an example which marks the beginning of feminist critiques of the literary canon by Kate Millet in the sixties. Or in the naturalisation of the literary value of South-African literature, in which racist representations of black people were not even noticed. Or in the infamous case of Céline's brilliant anti-Semitic novels. This suspicion of ethical indifference was not wrong, and I still hold it. But *now* I wish to refine that view. I will not retrospectively endorse the *conflation* but first revise and then promote Mann's claim – otherwise.

Usually, this problem of the severed relation between ethics and aesthetics is resolved, albeit uneasily, by severing the link between them. Acknowledging that some literature is politically disturbing yet aesthetically ‘great’, the problematic works have never, to my knowledge, been cast out of the canon. My solution, which was to focus only on the ethical element, now strikes me as escapist. This time, I would take the opposite perspective, and examine how ethical *non-indifference*, far from being indifferent to aesthetics, informs the novel’s artistic merit on its – the novel’s – own terms. This will be the first step in developing a notion of *literary identity*. It is only after that reflection that I will feel equipped to further define the latter term, so as to substantiate my reversal of the conference’s title.

In the sentence from Mann’s preface, the vindication is already broached, on two levels: that of the story and that of the fabula. I noted that ‘[b]y writing about him, Mann includes Potiphar’s presence in the story, signifying his absence differently in the adjective *pro forma*. As a husband, Potiphar is only a signifier, an empty form, and it is the absence of the signified that triggers the story and makes it “mournful”’ (96). *Then*, I was sensitive to the understanding Mann displayed for the woman’s desire. That desire is the motor of the fabula, but the description of the character of Potiphar, however brief, gives that desire a reason, a motivation, an excuse. ‘Mourningful’ gratified me as an acknowledgement of her plight at the story level.

Now, I am sensitive to the underlying endorsement of monogamy, to the suggestion, ‘With such a husband, what can you expect?’ As I have argued elsewhere, monogamy is not indifferent to either religious or, I now add, literary, identity, and biblical metaphors of ‘whoring’ for religious unfaithfulness prove it.<sup>9</sup> Without going into this now, the semantics of the verb *zanah* and the noun *zonah* around the notion of the stranger does bear out the *ethnic protectionism* that the ‘metaphor’ conveys.

More disturbingly, Mann’s statement regarding the motivation of the woman’s desire in her husband’s inadequacy deprives that desire of its ‘desirousness’. An implicit moral consideration – say, excusing her adulterous desire because of the husband’s malfunctioning – overrules the simple but profoundly subversive fact that the desire is both inalienably hers and at the same time weakens her identity – makes her, as the saying goes, go weak in the knees. In other words, the figure of Mut-em-enet in Mann’s novel and the woman in the Quran version on which it draws, insists, more than Mann takes credit for in his preface, on a desire that is hers, while depriving her of her powers to act socially and morally according to the rules. This may also sound like a lame excuse, lamer than her husband’s inadequacy as a husband, but it is surely hers. And, it is the site of the tangled relationship between elements that are usually distinguished – such as, first, body and spirit, and second, private and public – a relationship that I wish to foreground.

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<sup>9</sup> I argued that the metaphor of whoring, for ‘going after other gods’, in parts of the Hebrew Bible should be taken much more literally than it usually is. If we accept that the verb ‘whoring’ has a much more social, anthropological meaning than prostitution, then, when it is used in the masculine form, it is not, or not only, metaphorical. The bond between the imaginary but obsessive concern for monogamy (of women) and the imagery of prostitution in biblical indictments of polytheistic wanderings was an important element in my study *Murder and Difference* (1988a) and, more extensively, in *Death and Dissymmetry* (1988b)

The unexamined term is *body*, in the culturally specific sense of Christianity. Importantly, Mut's being weakened by desire is her state according to a conception of the body that does not play the game with spirit that Christianity promotes in its representations narrativizing the embodiment of spirit. Just think of the bodily iconography in Christian art, so thoroughly in opposition to Islamic and Judaic rules against such representations. Suffering and/as sacrifice is valued through narratives such as the *Pietà* (Scarry 1985: 216). This scene stages nativity and death in conflation, to convey the sense in which Christianity sees the bond between body and spirit. Mary is body in the sense of a vessel for spirit, Christ is body in which spirit is *incarnated*, *placed*; together they promote the body as site of embodiment. The antiquated Aristotelian gender division involved in the *Pietà* imagery is further enhanced – but again, *not* foregrounded, remaining unmarked – by the youthfulness of Mary in many such images. This suggests a heterosexual love relationship as the middle term between nativity and death. Representation, of the kind the other two monotheistic religions reject, is vitally important as a tool for promoting a sense of the body that is specific, politically suitable for enhancing domination, and paradoxically, at the same time, invisible, because *unmarked*. Dyer argues that the representational 'ideologeme' (my term, based on Jameson 1981) of incarnation invests unmarked white bodies with self-evident power through the conception of spirit it implies, in combination with the use to which that spirit is put politically as 'entrepreneurial' and imperialist (14-40). This conjunction between a Christian conception of body and an imperialist politics makes a critical reconsideration of both literary and religious canons, such as the one I am engaged in here, urgent, relevant, and timely.

My little case study concerns desire. Why? Desire, I would think, is the systematic opposite of embodiment. It is that happening between *act* and *state* that is, in Dyer's terms, *of* the body, not localised *in* it. A new look at the scene in Mann that 'explains', by way of a 'literary masterpiece' written by a canonical white male author, what the novel's 'vindication of the rights of women' amounts to, may help towards understanding how literary identity and religious canons can be inflected together, so as to open up my own and Altieri's silencing of the religious element in this conference's conceptual knot.

I am alluding to a scene where the bodiliness of desire and the impossibility to separate spirit and body becomes painfully clear, in the most literal sense of the adverb. It is the scene of the little knives that is absent from the Biblical story. Extensively represented in Mann's novel, it is present in that rival canon, the Quran. Mann's novel, then, does more than vindicate the woman as if he were her ideological *cavalier servant*, turning her into a near-virgin by claiming her husband's inadequacy. In one sweep – a complex but effective alternation of focalising positions, distributed between the woman Mut-em-enet, the Joseph figure called Osarsiph, and the other women in town – the novel accomplishes its literary greatness, its contribution to religious identity, and its 'opening-up' of the religious canon. Let me explain this judgement.

It is based on what happens following the woman's failed attempt to seduce Joseph. The scene, in other words, of the vindication of her desire. To assess what Mann accomplishes here, the difference with the Genesis text is important. In the Genesis text, after the fateful



ultimatum that will lead Joseph to prison, the nameless woman calls upon ‘the men in the house’ to slander him, using ethnic slurs to entice the men’s solidarity with her:

And she called unto the men of her house and said to them saying: see, he made come to us a Hebrew man to laugh at us, he has come to me to lie with me and I called in a loud voice. (Gen. 39: 14)

In my earlier analysis I paid no attention to the woman’s choice of arguments. It now strikes me that, to phrase it harshly for the sake of clarity, the woman appeals to racial sentiment and class subordination to disqualify her husband’s management of the house in the eyes of his subordinates, by promoting envy of the latter against the higher-placed Joseph.<sup>10</sup>

The argument will be repeated to the husband, who, without discussion, takes Joseph into custody. No wonder such a story has contributed to the further rigidifying of misogynistic mythology, as well as – let’s not forget it – to a further rigidifying of the opposition between the intended Hebrew readers of the story and their ‘others’, to which this woman ethnically belongs. Note that it is the husband whom she accuses of disrespect toward herself and the other men in the house. The Hebrew man is just an instrument, as are the other servants. The woman uses race and class to get to sex. Conversely, the story uses sex to disqualify femininity, while putting forward, ‘self-evidently’, without foregrounding, race and class as well as the straightjacket of male bonding in a hierarchically organised society. The excuse a humanist feminist perspective could allege is that the woman’s strategy appeals to the only instruments available in a predominantly man’s world to a woman confined to the house.

But Mann’s ethical non-indifference is artistically motivated just as the artistic quality of his work is ethically non-indifferent. Although I would need much more time to substantiate this claim, if framed within their own aesthetics, each of the three stories has literary brilliance. And, in each case ethical issues are involved in that literariness. Because the means of especially narrative literature touch upon the intricate connections between private and public aspects of subjectivity, attempts to pass off objectionable ethics under the cover of literary brilliance are doomed. So are attempts to separate the two, condemning a work on ethical terms while continuing to read it canonically on aesthetic premises – through ethical indifference.

Here, I will only touch on aesthetic concerns in Mann’s text. These are both explicit in the author’s preface and known to the readers of the novel who share the kind of canonical form of literary literacy within which the novel was conceived, written, and read.

The issue is *realism*. To write a novel – hundreds of pages, realistic detail, psychology, and all that entails – Mann’s vindication needs a richer source. As Mann complained, the

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<sup>10</sup> This puts her in the category of an ill-understood Delilah, who calls on the tribesmen to defeat Samson, and distinguishes her overly sharply from her *narrative* sisters, Yael and Judith, who deploy the same feminine whiles but stand on the ethnic ‘right’ side.

biblical meagre ‘what’ was lacking the ‘how’ and the ‘why’: life's circumstantiality was missing (Yohannan 1982: 431).<sup>11</sup> This is, at first sight, a literary issue, and what Mann gives expression to is the novel's realistic needs. The circumstantial detail is a notable feature of realistic narrative, and an important element in aesthetic judgements on such narratives that may even decide their status in or outside the canon.<sup>12</sup> Realism in literature and art requires detail. Please keep in mind, though, that realism as a *belief* in the reality of the representation is also the ground for the iconophobia in Judaism and Islam. I submit that these two concerns knot together religious and literary concerns. What leads to *idolatry* in religion leads to *sympathy* in the novel, and both are equally dangerous as lures to transgression. The difference is the conception of the body – as site of embodied spirit versus as defined by spirit. This bond between religious and literary taboos on the one hand, and conceptions of body-and-spirit on the other, becomes clearer when we realise that there is also a legal point to Mann's complaint. Circumstantial evidence, although legally ‘meagre’ and problematic, is often the only evidence there is to indict or declare ‘not guilty’. Hence, the artistic consideration – how to gain a place in the literary canon by doing an aesthetically good job with details? – *inevitably* entails considerations that bleed into the social domain, where politics and ethics meet before the law. There is a sense in which we must not forget that the Greek word *kanon* means ‘law’.

Mann's search for circumstantial detail in a story where guilt is at stake, is, therefore, in and of itself an act of merging aesthetics and ethics; an act, that is, *against the ethical indifference of aesthetics*. This is how his statement in the preface deserves to be endorsed, say, as a philosophical position. Against a Kantian disinterestedness, Mann, on the eve of the unequalled crimes against humanity, poses an aesthetics of ethical non-indifference.

### **The Cutting Edge of Literary Identity**

In this section, I will argue two further points that follow from the need for ethical non-indifference as an element of aesthetics. First, *literariness* is the tool for identity formation. Second, religious canonicity is not premised on that formation but allows, even facilitates, it. I will argue these points by following Mann in his search for detail.

Mann will find his circumstantial evidence in the rival text, the later and abducted version, so to speak. The episode figures in the Quran Sxii. 23-35, where the follow-up of the seduction attempt is different and more extended. Yet the Quran is not a novel, no more than Genesis is. While adding ‘detail’, part of the circumstantiality of Genesis is also eliminated, which is why I don't find the terms *gap* and *gap-filling* useful. They fail to account for repression and elimination, and end up accounting only for supplementation. There is no equivalent to Gen. 39: 14, no interaction with the other men in the house, no racial slurs, no appeal to class subordination to solicit sympathy.

This omission, especially of ethnic denigration, is easily explained away by the respective ideological and religious identities of the intended readers, and by the context within which each text functions. I am most certainly not interested in further sharpening the

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<sup>11</sup> See also Yohannan's earlier thematic study of the story (1968), which is based on the kind of mythifying thematics I aimed to undermine in my study of the case.

<sup>12</sup> On the aesthetics and ethics of the detail, see Schor (1987).

divide between Judaism and Islam, the respective curators of these canonical legacies.<sup>13</sup> I only mention the omission to footnote Mann's seemingly *quantitative* complaint. For the appeal to support and solidarity, which in Genesis took the 'argumentation' we have already seen, figures in the Quran as well. Only the people called upon are different. The social setting shifts. Mann's choice of the Quran episode to aesthetically 'supplement' the meagre Hebrew text is therefore not at all a supplementation or gap filling, but a selection of ethical concern – an act of ethical non-indifference.

This selection focuses on the important difference between the two religious texts: in the Quran, the woman is not the only woman in the story. The woman, in the Quran, becomes subject to slander among her women friends, *in the City* (Sxii, 30). The scene is twice displaced, from men to women and from house to city. Significantly, the woman acquires a public status that enables her to act. And although according to the fabula she pulls the same trick on Joseph as in Genesis, and hence, lends herself to the same misogynistic mythologising, the story receives an instructively different twist that prevents such stabilisation. The women in the city assume that the woman is going crazy with love (Sxii, 30). She then acts, not to disqualify or harm Joseph, nor to deny her desire, but to gain literal *sym-pathy*: co-suffering from desire. Here is the passage of the Quran (Sxii, 31):

When she heard  
Of their malicious talk  
She sent for them  
And prepared a banquet  
For them: she gave  
Each of them a knife:  
And she said (to Joseph),  
'Come out before them.'  
When they saw him,  
They did extol him,  
And (in their amazement)  
Cut their hands: they said,  
"God preserve us! No mortal  
Is this! This is none other  
Than a noble angel!'

Then she proceeds to confess to her friends that she did in fact seduce and trick him, and that he did 'firmly save himself guiltless' (32). Potiphar and 'the men' in fact imprison Joseph for his own good, 'for a time' (35).

When I first studied this case I was interested in Mann's appeal to the Quran to vindicate the woman. *Now* I wonder what the contribution of the choice of that text offers more specifically in terms of the problematics of this conference, in literary as well as theoretical terms. As far as the text's literary status is concerned, first and most obviously, there is more to the historical position of Mann's text than I realised, especially in terms of

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<sup>13</sup> For an important argument in favour of this restraint, see Said (2000). See also Bardenstein's analysis of similar symbol in opposed traditions (1999).

ethnicity, hence, of one extremely important issue of identity. Moreover, this historical consideration – the novel's pre-Holocaust position – needs to be put in conjunction with my own, speaking from a post-Holocaust but also 'global', moment of migration and cultural mixing. I will return to this later.

Second, Mann's novel, by means of the – literary, realist – detail of oranges, adds more *pain*. Remember what I said earlier about suffering and sacrifice. Literary identity as bound up with representation – later I will argue that this is but one of its aspects – is here elaborated *in terms of*, yet in critical engagement with, Christian ideology. Here pain is *not* an overcoming of the body by a spirit only temporarily housed there, but an endorsement of a non-split body of desire. In other words, here physical pain is of a nature that, by its very metaphorical acceptance of the woman's love pain, transforms her desire from moral-political to bodily, in an acceptance that spirit and body are one.

I did realise that this pain was important when I wrote:

At dessert, oranges and very sharp little knives to peel them are distributed. And when the ladies are busy peeling their oranges, Osarsiph/Joseph comes in to serve wine. Sheer fright at the *sight* of such beauty makes all the women cut their fingers, some of them to the bone. 'My loves, what ever has happened to you all? What are you doing? Your blood is flowing' is the reaction of the plotting, lovesick virgin. Her intentionally insincere exclamation receives sincerity from the contiguous comment in which the speaker fails to distinguish between himself and this woman. For the narrator continues: 'It was a fearful sight.' (803)<sup>14</sup>

Now, this sharper pain, caused by the acid of the oranges, and its bloody visibility, appear more striking in terms of theorising identity through identification, as one form of what the title of my paper promised as 'literary identity'. This is played out aesthetically on the level of the 'detail' of representation, and ethically on the level of shifting the interpretation of the body, rubbing it against Christian conceptions.

Theoretically speaking, then, the two aspects of the differences among the versions which appear important are those I announced as the theoretical elaboration of the literary merit of ethical non-indifference. First, *literariness* is the tool for identity formation. Second, religious canonicity is not premised on that formation, but allows, even facilitates, it. Concerning the first point, the novelist adequately walks the fine line between ethical and aesthetical work by mediating on the level of the *imagination*. He does this by practising a literary genre in which evaluation of the character's action is much more common than in the ancient texts, but which aesthetically calls for such mitigating and complicating tropes as irony and such narrative devices as alternating, double, and ambiguous focalisation. In creating an imaginary realm that readers and characters can share, the appeal to other subjects is here also an appeal to different readers.

This happens on the level of the fabula as well. The women friends *feel the pain* of their friend's desire when they feel it themselves at the moment *they* hurt. This common pain produces *community* – literal, bodily community. Common ground is produced through

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<sup>14</sup> This summary is from Bal (1991: 116).

heteropathic identification, to use Kaja Silverman's term – a form of identification where the subject, rather than absorbing the other's alterity to make her the same, extols it, idealises it, and goes out of herself to share it (1996). This is the meaning of the plural as well as of 'city' in 'the ladies of the City'. Although the banquet takes place within Mut's confined space of the house, the public life of the city enters that space, opening its walls and liberating her from confinement, facilitating contact.

The Quran text already did something like this; Mann found there his circumstantial evidence, to which the oranges as, say, a modern 'effect of the real' (Barthes) were easy to add. But the point that I was not able to see when I first studied this is the importance of the conjunction of *pain* with *women* and *city* in this version. The recognition of women's public life is as important as their frail, threatened, but potentially salvaged solidarity on the basis of something so deceptively perceived as private, as desire. It is in this semantic space that the identity produced, on the imaginary level of literature, can be mobilised for a, perhaps, 'religious' identity. Not religious as in Judaic, Christian, Islamic official, regulated religion, but in another sense to which I will revert in a moment.

This identity – to put it a bit flippantly, of women collectively, hence publicly, entitled to their desires even if it does not fit public morality – *has no canonical status*. But the texts that offer it as a possibility do: Mann's novel in a secularised world has literary canonicity; the Quran in its religious function has canonical status. The two cases belong to their respective mainstreams – although it seems important that these two mainstreams are quite separate – and it seems a good guess that their canonical status is *not* due to their 'vindication of the rights of women to desire'. In other words, if you agree with me that this right to desire is ethically 'good', we must see that neither the literary nor the religious canonicity can be confined to ethical 'goodness' or 'badness'. Nor is the Biblical story's canonical status imputable to the disturbing sentiments that its more clearly wicked woman character solicits to promote her case.

My provisional conclusion, thus, is the following. Not goodness or evil in themselves, for these are culturally and historically specific, but *ethical non-indifference* is involved in literary merit, as modern Western culture has construed it and on which it has based its canonisation process. Hence, ethical non-indifference contributes to potential literary canonicity. But as the case study clearly demonstrates, the canonisation as either literary masterpiece or religiously institutionalised scripture is not directly based on the particular *ethical merit* of the positions represented.

The second point that I seemed blind to *then* and which I find important *now* (although I still feel ill-equipped to address it) concerns the element 'religion'. None of the passages around Potiphar's wife are themselves explicitly religious, although I have argued that the scene with the little knives does revisit Christian ideology critically. Rather, one would be inclined to say, at least for the two religious canons, that these passages are ancient myths that ended up canonised for some reason that may have nothing to do with the laws of Judaism and Islam respectively. This very plausible lay view of things made it easy for me to discuss biblical texts in non-theological terms all through my work on the Bible. But since then I have learned from my feminist theologian friends that 'religion' need not be

like the institutionalised religions from which I long ago took leave.<sup>15</sup> In the historical moment of global migration we are living in, religion cannot be bracketed as easily as seemed possible then.

Jonneke Bekkenkamp wrote extensively about the problem of canon and religion. She always answered my anguished questions about what religion could possibly mean for feminism if we do not limit it to the largely women-unfriendly institutionalised religions, with the etymological insistence on *binding*. If religion is what binds, it could well be one of those domains that mediate between the terms of the infelicitous, but persistent, binary oppositions private/public, individual/collective, body/spirit, and the like.<sup>16</sup> With that understanding, what can the subversive literary identity of our woman figure(s) mean in religious terms, so that the canonical status of at least the Quran version may offer something that is not ‘merely’ literary?

### **Double Binding: Literary Identity and its Religious Effects**

Let me rephrase this question in a way that foregrounds the contribution already *inherent* in literary texts – at least, narrative texts – to what is religiously relevant. What is it that would make the triple case of Potiphar’s wife’s mishaps – her tricks, her powerlessness, her desire – ‘religious’ in the sense of offering an *imaginary* realm in which such oppositions can be suspended – a realm that would be forbidden if the imagination were visually represented? First, the pain caused by the cutting knives – or was it by desire shared? – and exacerbated by acid oranges – or was it by colourful detail? – is a metaphor for the three elements covered by such oppositions, and covered over by their oppositional structure. The pain is a metaphor, however, to be taken as literally as whoring or ‘going strange’, going with strangers, to have the Dutch expression for adultery resonate with the Jewish tradition that uses the same word for ‘whore’ – in the feminine – as for stranger – in the masculine. ‘Pain’ translates the way the irreducible difference and the subsequent loneliness of an individual, especially one not quite firmly positioned in mainstream society, *cuts*: it severs and hurts.

But, secondly, the blood thus shed also stands for the hot blood of desire that is, as such, the movement out of the autistic self into a risky, dangerous, but fulfilling and indeed, indispensable communication with another. Third, then, the pain or *pathos* is a *sym*-pathos, a pain that *qua* pain binds, by means of heteropathic identification, the lonely woman sick of unrequited love and her friends, who, a moment before, had dropped her into the hole of social loneliness like a hot potato. The blood for me also symbolises a multiple ‘marriage’, the emotional defloration of the women enslaved by imposed monogamy, potentially accepting the risks of their own desires in a social sphere where they are not alone with the one man who owns them. Through the knives, their woman friend ‘penetrates’ their bodies, releasing the blood of the ruptured hymen.

Theirs is a binding that does not cancel but only temporarily suspends the self-evidence of monogamy – perhaps even of its metaphorical counterpart, monotheism. Now, is that

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<sup>15</sup> Also, I have become a bit more intrigued – albeit, avowedly also, worried – by what Hent de Vries calls ‘the turn to religion’ (1999). I do not share in this movement but I do acknowledge its presence and cultural significance.

<sup>16</sup> As her title indicates, Bekkenkamp called the texts – canonical and non-canonical, literary and religious – that she discussed *sources* for theology.

religion? I don't know, but the place where I see that possibility opened is part of a religious canon that *as a whole* is indifferent to such issues, and such plights. This, then, opens up the conference title to its reversal. For if the religious canon does not foreground this form of identity-based 'religion', the literary one does. *Two forms of binding, then, can coexist.*

Let me sum up so far. My reversed title requires, first, a mixing up of the neat distinctions between religious and literary identities and canons. As for canons, second, recognising that religious canons are fixed forever and by political powers, and that they have oppressive power in that they police boundaries, I nevertheless claim that their texts' canonical status is also informed, strengthened, if not determined by the kind of literary, aesthetic achievement that informs the looser and more changeable literary canon. Conversely, the literary features of the texts produce effects that are ethically non-indifferent, so that the neat distinction between the two types of canon falls apart. This has led to the political need to open up literary canons even if religious canons, different in that they are definite, are beyond such revisions. This is the reason why, third, the canon cannot be truly opened up by inclusions only. Revisionist *interpretations* of religious canonical texts must therefore continue to be made.

Perhaps paradoxically, the main motivation I see for this need is *to turn religious canons into literary ones*, in order to facilitate the 'doubling binding'. The enfolding of unofficial 'shared desire' within official religion allows women to belong to their gender group as well as to their ethnic group with its religious identity, while also allowing insight into what is *of their bodies*. From a perspective not bound to established religion, the point is not to save the religious texts from ethical jeopardy – to argue, for example, that neither the Bible nor the Quran are overall misogynist texts while critiquing the way they are when and where they are – for that can lead to the kind of idealistic trappings I have called 'the politics of coherence' (1988b). Neither the Bible nor the Quran are unified texts, and no single text is ideologically unified anyway. Instead, I find it important to save these religious canonical texts' *literariness* itself from *ethical indifference*. This gesture opens up the tight boundaries that separate and thus protect from each other the distinct domains of religion and literature on the level not of their texts or the functions thereof, but of their *readings*.

This brings me to the second element in my reversal of the conference's title. If 'religion' may be extended to mean what I just said that the cutting knives and the women's pain meant, then the literary aspect of our problematic is also up for reconsideration. Ultimately, with 'literary identity', I did not only mean what came out so far – the production, through narrative and poetic art, of identities that would not have easy access to the public domain otherwise, such as the group of Mut's friends, or the male subordinates in the Egyptian house in Genesis.<sup>17</sup> So far, in other words, I have based my argument on a rather traditional *representational* conception of literature.

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<sup>17</sup> That sort of identity is 'literary' in that it is fictional: an example, a model, for what exists or can be made to exist or is at least *thinkable* in a society, but not factually present there.

This conception remains important, to the extent that what a society considers imaginable can in fact happen.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the other, more obviously and directly political sense of representation as ‘standing in for’ is never entirely out of scope when we talk about representation. Nevertheless, as is well known, ‘literature’ is more than the sum of possible, thinkable, imaginable representations. Three additional aspects of literature are relevant for a conceptualisation of something like ‘literary identity’. It is an *institution*, it is *agency*, and it is a *frame*. What I understand by the concept of *literary identity* is the composite result of the cultural promotion, if not altogether imposition – through canons – of the integrated effects of literature as representation – including the intricacies of identification that representation entails – institution, agency and framing.

First, literature is also an institution, quite like institutionalised religions. Although canon formation occurs differently in each, both institutions ‘live by’ the deployment of some version of Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses.<sup>19</sup> As John Guillory argued in his entry on canon in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, the works from literary canons, far from representing, from the start, a body of texts sanctioned as great, initially served as textbooks for proper use of language. By the sheer fact that texts reach an older age than oral speech, the literary production of a culture stabilised language use, taught proper grammar, and created a firm, class-bound distinction between literate and illiterate language. The identity that can properly be called ‘literary’, then, is characterised as the civilised, literate, adapted, mainstreamed user of proper English, or Dutch for that matter. No *literary* model is required, only a literary identity in that sense. This is a cultural means to distinction (Bourdieu 1984) that is profoundly political. It produces the kind of identity that promotes social success, and it includes naturalising, saying, as an inhabitant of Curaçao, ‘the Rhine enters our country at Lobith’.<sup>20</sup>

This institutional aspect of literature obviously has the kind of exclusionary nature that liberal critiques of the canon indict. No critical analysis of specific canonical texts, nor any amount of adding of non-mainstream texts to the canon can really touch this effect of the canon. This is why analyses such as Altieri’s, for all its philosophical sophistication regarding the question of why canons should have authority, can never satisfy the critique of the canon. For, as I mentioned above, his entire argument is based on the unexamined cultural need to have canons in the first place. His article develops from the opening statement that

[I]f we are less in need of discovering new truths than of remembering old ones, there are obvious social roles canons can play as selective memories of traditions or ideals. (41)

The premise of this statement, from which the argument then proceeds, is that such selection can be performed by and for a collectivity. But this collectivity already

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<sup>18</sup> See the argument in *Death and Dissymmetry* for this anthropological relevance of the literary imagination.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Live by’ resonates with Lakoff and Johnson’s pathbreaking cognitive approach to metaphor (1980; 1999), quite relevant to my attempts to make metaphors more ‘literal’. Althusser’s concept (1971; 1977) remains important, as Kaja Silverman has argued for its twin concept ‘interpellation’ (1992).

<sup>20</sup> This is an old Dutch joke in anti-colonial circles. Geography books used in Dutch schools were simply transferred to the colonies, where ‘our’ country was, equally simply, that foreign country the children there had never seen.



presupposes its socio-linguistic streamlining. Hence, more important for my argument here is the way that Altieri ignores the more diffuse authority of linguistic correctness and the class elitism that pertains to it, and that *any* canon possesses.

Less obviously however – and this serves as a small cautionary footnote to canon-bashing – the linguistic elitism produced by literary canons is also a means through which non-mainstream subjects can get access to the mainstream, and thus further expand the company of the select ‘happy few’ – perhaps even subvert it from within. Of course, I would not promote this possibility as a solution, but let it stand as something that canons – as long as, and to the extent that they exist – cannot master, despite all the authority that pertains to them. As a straightjacket for identity, then, canonical literature, even in its most conservative guise, has a permeable skin. For identity, like desire, is *not* – despite all religious and cultural propaganda for embodiment instead of integration of body and spirit – confined to either spirit or body.

Because of its institutional power, literature, moreover, is also a form of *agency*. Writing and reading is a form of acting. This aspect has been extensively argued by those who took up John Austin’s radical revision of the philosophy of language from representational *model*, the result of informational or constative language use, to performative *act* (1975). Jonathan Culler, in one of his articles that make him so utterly useful and, I would say, generous, as a scholar, follows the concept of the performative from philosophy in the sixties, through literature in the eighties, to gender studies in the nineties and back to philosophy (2000). In the process, performativity from a rather special category of words, which allow special utterances that do not state but do things, became, first, generalised, to stand for an aspect of any utterance: *the aspect of an utterance as an act*. Generalising more, on the basis of the *iterability* on which all language use depends, not performativity but its ‘standard’ other, constativity, became a special case of a generalised performativity.

For the purpose of this paper, the decisive move in this has been Derrida’s insistence on the citationality that enables and surrounds each speech act. Austin explicitly excluded literature from the analysis because literary speech acts are not ‘serious’. Derrida, on the other hand, shifting the focus from the speaker’s *intention* to the social conventions that guarantee the very possibility to perform speech acts made the *iterability* or *citationality* of any language-use the standard. This reversal subordinates intention to the social – a view that Judith Butler has put to excellent use in her analysis of gender.<sup>21</sup> This citationality lies at the heart of literature’s public status, its canon’s institutional power, and its contribution to the shaping of identity. Without repetition, Butler says, no identity.

From originating, founding, act performed by a willing, intentional subject, literature’s performativity becomes an instance of an endless process of repetition; a repetition that involves similarity and difference, and that therefore both relates and enables social change and subjects’ interventions, in other words, agency. In collaboration with representation and institutional power, this agency produces, shapes, perpetuates and also potentially transforms what I call here, *literary identity*. This brings me to the last aspect of literary identity: the framing that produces it and that, at the same time, it constitutes. It

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<sup>21</sup> Austin (1975); Derrida (1988); Butler (1990; 1993)

provides frames of reference through which subjects can *make sense* – of the world, of their lives, and of the literature they read.

### **History, Identity, and Religious Canon**

This requires that I return, in conclusion (as I announced in my discussion of Mut-en-enet's shared desire), to the historical consideration of the episode from *Joseph and his Brothers* – the novel's pre-Holocaust position – and that I put it in conjunction with my own, speaking from a post-Holocaust but also 'global' moment – of migration and of the subsequent questioning of the nation state as well as of the unmarked predominance of Christianity. I will wind up by tentatively articulating, through such a double historical consideration, how literary identity as I have now defined it – as a product of the conjunction of representation-with-identification, institution, agency and framing – can inform religious canons.

There are two, distinct levels on which I see this constructive power of literature as identity-shaping, as having the possibility to impact on religious canons. I am not saying easy, mind you, but possible. Both pass through history. By laying these possibilities out, I am also trying to reply to criticism that my earlier work has received from the side of art historian: that I ignored the historical, and hence, that my work was a-historical.<sup>22</sup> The first is, the level of what Walter Benjamin would call allegory. History is a model whose otherness, compared to our contemporariness, informs what we can think, feel, and do. On this level, Mann's vindication of the female figure allegorically, obliquely, critiques the ideology of his time. I wrote about this aspect in the earlier analysis:

I would suggest that this comment on the Hebrew myth of the Jew in a foreign country, confronted by a foreigner in love with him, could only arise from a response to the historical moment. While Nazism, *with its neurotic ideology of maleness*, was beginning to make the limits between groups of subjects so absolute as to become those between life and death, the ambivalence, both sexual and ethnic, of the encounter between two ambivalent subjects became an acutely necessary alternative, an opportunity to dramatise the intensity of emotional community. (117; emphasis added)

Again, this interpretation of Mann's oblique critique of Nazism through the problematic of gender, in a move that is in turn allegorical, is not wrong; I would still maintain it. The relations between Nazism and gender essentialism are too important to be ignored.

But it now seems that I passed over the importance of the simple, *literal*, and institutionally relevant fact of Mann's choice of canonical source: the Quran. From the perspective of today's concerns, where gender is much more tightly embedded within a multiculturalist pluralisation of religious canons, the choice seems tremendously important, as a contribution to 'opening up the canon'. But is this not limiting the issue to the liberal critique again, and moreover, is it not an anachronistic fallacy? To begin with the latter: yes and no. It would be, if I made this interpretive claim to explain Mann's choice.

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<sup>22</sup> I have replied to that criticism at length in *Quoting Caravaggio* (1999).

This contemporary interest can easily be reconciled with the historical one, however. I would be inclined to argue that paradoxically but interestingly, Mann's foregrounding of the Islamic version de-naturalised the primacy of Christianity, and thus, obliquely, constituted a defence of the Judaic tradition that was under threat. Bringing in a canon that stands in tension with the Judaic one is an effective, for apparently impartial, way of defending the Jews' right to difference. This is an adequate historical interpretation that has contemporary resonance through the allegorical union of differences.

The literary identity at stake contains a sensitivity to difference of the kind that Mann's group of sympathising women would allegorically embody. The religious canon, by the same token, is also momentarily broken open, not really extended of course, but de-naturalised as the only one. 'Opening up the canon' is, then, not simply a matter of inclusion but of radically transforming what 'canon' means. The literary identity helps the difference between the two canons to keep, so to speak, a foot in the door of the closed religious canons.

The one drawback of this historical interpretation is that women end up, as usual, as a metaphor for politics instead of as participants in it. To remedy this problem, a second level can be examined at which the constructive power of literary identity on religious canons is visible. This level is historical in a different sense; the one I have elsewhere called 'preposterous' (1999). It consists of reversing the usual relation between past and present and articulating how the present re-envisioned the past. From such a perspective, it is all the more urgent to reconsider the Quran version, first of all literally, as a contribution, from *within* a powerful religious canon, to the literary one, Mann's novel. And through the latter's shaping of literary identity, it contributes again to a religious canon in which literary identity, as defined earlier, helps opening up, not the religious canon that is closed by definition, but the religious sensibility itself – the binding, community-making form of identification called hetero-pathic.

The desiring woman in the story, in this 'preposterous' appropriation of pre-Holocaust revisionism of religious canons, is no longer the symbol or emblem of political critique, but an agent of revision. The distinction demonstrates that the literary categories in which we think, themselves partake of the ideology of embodiment that keep *white identity* – now specified in relation to such troubling categories as *autochthonic* and *allochthonic* inhabitants of Europe – invisible because defined by a spirit that is in but not of the body, to reiterate Dyer's phrase. Allegory as a rhetorical figure is itself a case of such ideology that separates form, representation, from meaning.

Some people think this view is correct but vastly exaggerates the influence of literature on social reality. Of course, literature does not act alone; the point is that it does act, that is, can act. A powerful example of the positive potential of such a literary identity has been suggested by various Holocaust scholars. Inmates of concentration camps, so the story goes, derived strength, possibly even survival, from the silent recitation of poetry (de Roder 2000). This statement, impossible to verify empirically, is based on testimonies of camp survivors, and on that basis I will assume its truth. The question that matters here is, what does this alleged fact teach us about the meaning of *literary identity*?

I think it is of crucial importance to distinguish an elitist-humanist interpretation of this fact from a performative one. Both are based on an ethically non-indifferent aesthetics, which makes it easy to conflate them, but the difference is radical for an assessment of their respective impact on the status of canons. George Steiner, for example, would stand for the elitist-humanist interpretation. Alleging Liana Millu's 1947 testimony *Smoke over Birkenau*, J.H. de Roder ironically depicts Steiner's humanistic ideal of the classically-educated subject, his head filled with poetry that makes him unassailably strong and morally superior (2000: 4). Since not only the uneducated died in Auschwitz, this moralising elitism is blatantly inadequate.

A performative view of the importance of poetry for camp inmates – not at all, by the way, exclusively canonical – would go in an altogether different direction. Literature's contribution to the strengthening of the subject under duress would reside not in its passive absorption and subsequent recitation but in its active performing of literature that remained resilient in the subjects' cultural memories. The 'reading' – performed under specific conditions, by subjects belonging to specific, historically determined identities – to simplify, say, not Jews but Jewish inmates – produced, rather than reproduced, the 'literary identity' that was helpful.

In his study of contemporary art and thought on the Holocaust, Ernst van Alphen has analysed the negative, destructive effect of depriving subjects of the frames they ordinarily have at their disposal to make sense. In other words, trauma – the inability to experience, form, memories, and to live through events as contributions to the ongoing formation of one's identity – is the assault on subjectivity that consists of depriving subjects of the frames of reference required for processing events into experiences (1997; esp. 1999).

He explains that the nature of what happened to inmates in the camps led to a *semiotic incapacitation*. He distinguishes four types of deficient framings: ambiguous actantial position, when one is neither subject nor object of the events, or one is both at the same time; the total negation of any actantial position or subjectivity; the lack of a plot or narrative frame by means of which the events can be narrated as a meaningful coherence; and the plots or narrative frames which are available or which are inflicted are unacceptable because they do not do justice to the way in which one partakes in the events (1999).

The ensuing analysis of trauma demonstrates negatively what happens if one denies access to frames, including, importantly, those frames that shape canons. Such frames are institutional, and hence, limiting, but also indispensable mediations between idiosyncratic, potentially psychotic individuality and the community required to, precisely, and in accordance with a performative view of language, 'make sense' of things. In contrast, those inmates who felt reciting poetry helped them were able to activate the frames offered by literature, not to replace the frames denied them but to 'make sense' at all, in the face of semiotic and real death. Literary identity in this sense can, ultimately, become a matter of life and death.

Instead of using women as allegories for male concerns, and with the preposterous help of a wilfully anachronistic interpretation much like Mann interpreted the Quran for his time (in his novel but not in his preface), I can now propose a view of the literary identity based on ethical non-indifference, an aesthetics for our time. For that proposal I return one last time to Dyer's critique of racial whiteness as unmarked. Before going into the specifics of the bond between Christianity, whiteness and colonialism, Dyer writes this on the importance of overcoming such splits in general:

There is a specificity to white representation, but it does not reside in a set of stereotypes so much as in narrative structural positions, rhetorical tropes and habits of perception. (1997: 12)

Thomas Mann did a thorough job in vindicating the stereotype of the mythical wicked stepmother, but I have argued that he did a whole lot more.

To do so, he deployed, precisely, the three means Dyer mentions. In the elaboration of Mut-em-enet's narrative structural position, her agency, he also liberated her from her allegorical role, and by forcing the reader, emblematised by the woman's friends, to experience *sym-path*y, he changed those habits of perception, informed by Christian iconography, that allowed readers to take distance from her as a non-real, allegorical, trope for something else, as embodiment of a spirit.

Mann produced a female figure at history's most fraught and violent time, as his contribution to a life-with-desire because it is of the body. To perform that feat, he proceeded to undercut the tight bond between monotheism, monogamy and masculinity, by depicting for our imagination the 'adulterous' woman as a figure who *produces*, in her rather nasty, painful agency, limited but also enabled by institution and framing, the condition of possibility to think religious canons differently.

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