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## **Flowers and Thorns: Pleasures and Perils of the (Literature) Anthology**

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### **Abstract:**

The claims and conclusions I make in this article primarily address issues pertinent to anthologies of literature, and theory and criticism. The anthology has traditionally served general readership, and it has recently become an important feature of university education. Beginning with a discussion of the contradictions the anthology entails (one and many; silent and polyphonic; despised and revered), the article then proceeds to acknowledge the value of the anthology as a genre that, for centuries, has pleased readers with, as most anthologies would claim, "the best" of its subject: "the flowers of literature." Moreover, it refers to the role of the anthology in domesticating the outpouring of writers and texts by giving them some order and coherence. Then, the article moves to examine the thorns haunting the anthology. This includes a lengthy discussion of anthological claims to including "the best" writers and texts, and to comprehensive representativeness. What does "the best" mean? Who decides this "best"? Is this category of "the best" stable? These are some of the questions the article engages with and exerts some effort to answer. By drawing attention to some shortcomings of the genre, an anthology, the article concludes, should be approached with caution. It is better understood as a beginning towards more exploration of the richness of its subject which, it must be clear, cannot be fully represented in an anthology, i.e., a selection.

### **Keywords:**

Anthologies; exclusion; inclusion; literature and criticism; pleasures and perils.

The Greek origin of the word 'anthologise' is *anthologein*, which means 'to collect flowers'. It can also, when applied to bees, mean 'to collect honey from flowers'. 'Collecting flowers' implies assembling objects of intrinsic beauty. If we apply the honey aspect of the metaphor, it also implies assembling material of nutritive value. (Hopkins 287)

One does not need to stretch their imagination very far to recognize that an endless number of writers and texts identify themselves, or are identified, with one discipline or another. From this infinite number, only a *few* are selected and presented in elevating terms such as: the best, the major, the significant, the keys, or the canonical. These authors and texts come to define the discipline, shape and represent its core ideas, and give it distinct character and identity. It is usually the case that this category is singled out, assembled, and put on display in anthologies which are defined by William Germano in Arnoldian terms as "a gathering of previously published, or mostly previously published, work" with the aim to "present *the best* of what has been thought and said—and already published" (118; italics added). Indeed, almost all editors of anthologies claim that they collect and present "*the best*" writers and texts. Nevertheless, their choice of words to make the assertion varies.

Early anthologists, on the one hand, are emphatically straightforward about qualifying their selections in the superlative, "the best." Introducing his *Golden Treasury* (1861), Francis Turner Palgrave stresses that the anthology includes "*all the best* original Lyrical pieces and Songs in our language ... and *none beside the best*" ("Preface" n.pg.; italics added). The same idea is echoed by Arthur Quiller-Couch in *The Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1900* (1900): "For this Anthology I have tried to range over the whole field of English Verse from the beginning, or from the Thirteenth Century to this closing year of the Nineteenth, and to choose *the best*" (vii; italics added). The editors here present their selections in unwavering terms; the language is confident and emphatic. On the other hand, more recent anthologists avoid the strongly judgmental superlative, and instead opt for fashionable contemporary labels such as "major," or "significant" among others – examples will be abundantly clear in the following pages. Despite the change in modifiers, a stratified hierarchy privileging anthologized authors and texts over others is maintained. The same old doctrine of binary opposition between the (anthologized) best and the (excluded) lesser ones persists and resurfaces in new rhetorical guise.

Now, while the basic argument of this article may apply to the genre of the anthology in general, my main interest lies in anthologies related to literature which, for centuries, have been produced for general readership, and are being increasingly used in teaching by departments of English at universities worldwide, and particularly in the West. In the academic context, anthologies "may be divided into two categories: the anthology of

primary texts, and the anthology of secondary material (criticism, analysis, readings, and so forth)" (Germano 132). The claims and conclusions I make in this article primarily address issues pertinent to these since they are the anthologies I am most acquainted with. Because, as I have just mentioned, anthologies have increasingly become prevalent in the university, this article is, in part, a reflection on the politics embedded in relying on them as a teaching material offered to students who would usually, if not always, accept them uncritically. They are attracted to the anthology as a collection of flowers, forgetting that flowers and thorns are parts of the same plant. The article is, therefore, an exercise in and an invitation to thinking about the implications of the use of the anthology. This exercise becomes more urgent when we know that the genre of the anthology remains understudied. There is "dearth in studies of anthology" (Di Leo 9). Although "educational institutions of all levels usually teach from anthologies, and anthologies have helped determine what poetry is read, taught, and written about," it does not attract much attention from scholars and researchers for serious scrutiny (Alderman 333). It is a paradox that merits pointing out that despite the popularity of the anthology in the world of academe, it remains on the margin of serious scholarship. In this sense, the anthology is both central and marginal in the university. This, it should be clear, is not the only contradiction that characterizes the anthology.

Indeed, the anthology is a book of many contradictions. At the same time, it is one and many, silent and polyphonic, and disdained and revered. Even when it comes in more than one volume, the anthology is still one work – most often, though not always, with one editor – that includes many texts by different authors. Moreover, it is preferable that the editor(s) of an anthology remain silent while the many voices of anthologized authors fill in the space. Although anthology editors are present through prefaces and headnotes, these are peripheral aspects of the anthology. The very *existence* of an anthology depends on the selections, not the editors' interludes. The former are essential to the point that an anthology cannot live without, the latter are not. Whereas the selections have been there before their inclusion in an anthology, the editors' interventions are given life by the selections. Editorial interludes did not exist before the anthology, and most often they cannot live independently.

There is even a point to make against the presence of editors' interventions in the first place. Given that editorial interludes are usually limited to providing contextual information and simplified summaries of the selections, they can be seen as a distraction, an unnecessary diversion. While an anthology is/should be all about the selected texts, interludes may attract attention away from these texts. Editorial interventions are more of a statement of presence on the part of the editor than essential part of an anthology. Without these interludes, the editor will be sent into oblivion.

This oblivion is sometimes most wished for. Although editorial prefaces and headnotes are conceived and written as aids to a better reading and understanding of the selections, their inclusion can be detrimental. Some readers, particularly students, may be lured into relying on the editors' summaries and explanatory simplifications rather than wrestling with the density of ideas in the selected texts themselves. It is not difficult to imagine that this would very likely be the case with challenging texts. Therefore, it is perhaps better to leave the reader with the voices of selected authors rather than the mediating voice of editors. In other words, a better anthology is one in which the silence of the anthologist leaves the textual space for the voices of the anthologized.

Furthermore, the anthology is an undertaking which is not highly regarded. It does not get its compiler the credit or esteem a single-author book would. It is dismissed as a second-rate endeavor. "The term," Germano argues, "is unfairly regarded with some disdain, as if the anthology were in itself a middlebrow enterprise" (132). While a creative work or a critical study is an achievement for its author, an anthology is not for the editor. In the university, for instance, anthologies are not considered an enviable item on an academic's list of publications. Unlike other publications, they are not of great help to secure tenure at (Western) academic institutions. Anthologies, Jeffrey Di Leo affirms, are "second-class citizens" in the world of books (7). In the field of literature, for example, unlike writing a novel, a poem, or a well-researched critical study, editing an anthology is taken lightly. This is perhaps because it does not *directly* speak of a talent or intellectual prowess on the part of editors in the way a novel or a poem reflects on its author. After all, the anthologist is not a *maker*, a creator; s/he is rather a collector, one who preys on the *already made* by others. But what is paradoxical in this regard is that while the anthology as a form is looked down upon, its contents are highly regarded. Although "they themselves have little cultural value," anthologies "collect texts of presumably high cultural value" (Williams 208). The anthology, thus, generates both contempt and esteem at the same time. This is a point which is shared by Di Leo:

Anthologies represent a repackaging of primary sources, and it is this repackaging that is so offensive to scholars – not the anthology readings themselves. The *medium* presents the problem, not the contents. (9; italics in original)

Ironically, scholars' disdain for the anthology as a medium continues at a time when publishing houses race to produce anthologies for university classrooms. Indeed, university academics and students have become anthology publishers' favorite consumers to the point that Germano advises would-be anthologists to "keep one eye—if not both—on the classroom. For academic publishers, almost all anthologies are by definition teaching tools" (132). This is an advice that seems to have been heeded by many

contemporary editors of anthologies. In both *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (2005) and *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001), the editors are keen to cater for campus needs. The editors of the former state clearly that accommodating the needs of teachers is a priority to the point that the content of the anthology is directly influenced by the criticism and suggestions of teachers and instructors:

In assembling the new edition, we have aimed to respond to the practical criticism and informed suggestions provided by teachers who have used the anthology. Our goal has been to make the anthology an even better teaching tool for their classes. In response to instructors' requests, a number of important works by major poets have been added to the Fifth Edition. (Ferguson et al. lix)

Unlike its poetry sister, the editors of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* do not seem to be directly influenced by the opinions and suggestions of classroom users. Still, they make it clear that their selections are partly guided by classroom interests: "In choosing the selections the editors have been guided by a range of criteria. We have looked for readable and teachable texts that reflect the scope of the history of theory" (Leitch et al. xxxv). Other anthologists share Norton's interest in appealing to classroom requirements. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, editors of *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (2004), argue that the selections are influenced by what "we felt would be exciting or helpful in the classroom" (x).

Of course, teachers and students are not the only users of anthologies. There is, first and foremost, the general reader: the traditional audience of an anthology. But singling the classroom out points to its importance as a potentially profitable market for anthology makers and publishers. Here lies one of the grave dangers of anthology-making: the collusion between the aesthetic and the commercially marketable. While it is always a good thing to revise the contents of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* and add new poems and writers, it is worrying that this is done, even if partly, at the behest of marketing profitability rather than on purely aesthetic grounds. There is, of course, nothing novel or unusual about revising and reconstructing the contents of an anthology. Earlier anthologists such as Palgrave and Quiller-Couch revised theirs in subsequent editions, and they made changes to the anthologies contents by addition or omission. "Some poems, especially in Book I, have been added:- either on better acquaintance;- in deference to critical suggestions;- or unknown to the Editor when first gathering his harvest," explains Palgrave in the 1897 revised and enlarged edition of *The Golden Treasury* ("Preface" n.pg). Quiller-Couch makes a similar statement in his 1939 new edition of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*:

The editor would stand convicted of dullness indeed if in these years he had not learnt, revising his judgement, to regret some inclusions and omissions; of indolence, moreover, the industry of scholars having rescued to light meanwhile many gems long hidden away in libraries, miscellanies, even scrap-books. In this new edition, therefore, I have risked repairing the old structure with a stone here, a tile there .... (xii)

Palgrave's and Quiller-Couch's revision of their respective anthologies is dictated by the editors' self-criticism, reassessment of anthology inclusions, and the discovery by other scholars of new texts which merit selection. The process of anthologizing is still based on aesthetic worthiness. The editor remains the sole gatekeeper who judges the ins and outs of an anthology. Unlike more recent anthologists, they do not revise their anthologies with a specific segment of readers in mind.

Meanwhile, the literary genre which has lent itself most easily to anthologizing is poetry. Although anthologies of drama, particularly one-act plays, short stories, and novel excerpts are not unheard of, they have not enthused editors, and have traditionally remained marginal to the proliferating, market-savvy industry of anthology-making. These literary genres are not very often anthologized; and when they are, such anthologies come nowhere near the prominence and popularity of their poetry, and more recently theory and criticism, counterparts. No anthology of the novel or drama would rival the massive popularity of a Norton or an Oxford collection of poetry. That the anthology does not make comfortable home for these genres did not go unacknowledged by a number of critics. Frank Hook, for instance, argues that "[t]he novel, may I say dogmatically, has no place in anthologies" (107). A similar sentiment is echoed by Patrick Scott who claims that the novel is "inherently unanthologizable" (112). While other critics did not go that far in denying the novel an abode in the anthology, they admit that "poetry was the most popular form for collections" (Benedict 234). And it is not very difficult to see why anthologies would play the perfect host for poetry. By definition, the anthology is based on a promise of plenty. Its genesis is built on an offer to bring the reader much of what it anthologizes. It is no wonder, then, that it can live up to its own definition, honor its pact with the reader and keep the promise of abundance with poetry more than with other genres:

Since poems compact language, they can pile meaning in layers rather than through narrative, and thus remain short without losing significance. Anthologies, which by definition hold more than two works, could therefore expand to include a lot of poems, and offer literally more to readers. (Benedict 234)

In addition to this formal aspect behind the hospitality the anthology offers to poetry, there is the no-less-important, and closely related, aesthetic one. Since a poem is most often, though not always, anthologized in its entirety, the whole text becomes available for wrestling with its full meaning and significance, if *full* meaning and significance are ever attainable. This is not the case with other literary genres, particularly the novel and longer plays. These are usually aggressively excerpted in order to be accommodated in an anthology. The inevitable result is that since the text is not wholly included, the chances of making sense of its meaning and significance are compromised. Robert McLaughlin points to this problem in the following way:

Would this piece stand alone for a student reader – or, for that matter, any reader? Would the point I wanted to make by including this chapter be clear to anyone who had not already read all of *Tom Jones*? And if one had already read *Tom Jones*, would he or she really need to have this chapter in the anthology? (94)

#### **A Bouquet of Flowers; or, on Pleasures**

Nevertheless, the anthology remains popular and continues to enjoy enthusiastic support from many critics and readers. Coming in all shapes and forms, ranging "from those targeted to a popular and commercial readership, to those directed to the more restricted field of 'serious poetry readers,' to those aimed at further and higher educational audiences, to those designed to be used by elementary and secondary school readers," anthologies cater for diverse interests and heterogeneous tastes (Alderman 333). Admirers point to the broader scope one anthology can cover. A collection can give a panoramic view of English verse over a number of centuries. There, one can read and appreciate the distinct voices of authors, identify what is common and what is not so common among writers and texts, and literary periods. In an anthology of world literature, the horizon gets even wider. Readers can study the similarities and differences, and the reciprocal influences among diverse national literatures. They can also think about how literary history and language have developed over the centuries. In this regard, the anthology emerges as a unique type of book-form. It is a genre that crosses tempo-spatial borders. It traverses both time (by bringing together in one book writers and texts from different ages) and space (in the case of anthologies of world literature, writers and texts from different countries are placed side by side). To this effect, one supporting critic, though not without some remarkable exaggeration at the end of the extract, argues:

Between the covers of the *Oxford Book of English Verse* one can roam at will through seven centuries of the English lyric. *The Greek Anthology* gives us the passion and thought, the

seriousness and sportiveness of the Greek mind at the birth of modern civilization and tells us how Hesperus bringeth all good things. Take such books as these away from literature and it becomes impoverished overnight; the loss proves a greater disaster to civilization than anything that happened at Alexandria or that Hitler can bring to the libraries of Paris. (Hibbard 649)

And given that etymologically speaking, as the epigraph at the beginning of this article makes clear, anthology originally means a collection of flowers, it becomes the book that picks the flowers of literature. Interestingly, the association of anthology with flowers can be traced in Arabic too. Suffice it in this regard to cite Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Husri's *Zahr al-Adāb* which is translated as "Flowers of Literature" by Clement Huart in his *A History of Arabic Literature* (124). Also, the word anthology (most often translated as *mukhtarāt*) is sometimes rendered as *muqtatafāt* – the verb of which *yaqtef* (pick or collect) generally collocates with flowers. Thus, the investment in anthology inclusions as flowers is trans-cultural. And whether clearly stated by editors or not, the anthology is conceived as a gathering of the beautiful, the best, the major, or the canonical writers and texts. Addison Hibbard, for example, thinks of the anthology as "a literary pantheon" without which our literary record would be much poorer (644). This view strengthens further the idea that the anthology is the home of the best. As the pantheon is a sacred place, the temple of all gods, the anthology becomes the book/the home where the best and the greatest writers, or rather literary gods, assemble. What makes the anthology-as-pantheon a more fitting metaphor is that the writers and texts it houses are taken to represent the canon – itself originally a religious word referring to the set of authoritative texts constituting the Biblical scripture. Thus, as a bouquet of flowers and a pantheon, the anthology becomes the collection of the beautiful and the powerful. In this sense, the anthology does a great job for its users:

English literature is vast, and life is short. No-one, however hardworking, however retentive his or her memory, can hold the complete works of any single writer, let alone the whole of English literature, together with the diverse body of 'contextual' material necessary to the understanding of that literature, constantly in the forefront of his or her mind. (Hopkins 286)

The point is that if no one can read the whole literature of a period, let alone that of a nation, and identify literary *flowers* for themselves, the anthologist, one assumes, does this job and presents the best authors and texts to the reader. Hence, no one needs to read "all of Thomas Gray to find the *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*" (Hibbard 647). The reader, in this sense, is saved time, effort, and the likely disappointment of reading *unworthy* texts.

Moreover, the anthology imposes some sense of order on an overwhelmingly infinite body of literature. It identifies, classifies, and gives definition and coherence to what is otherwise a bewildering outpouring of authors and texts. It brings a chaotic scene under control by breaking it into manageable categories such as periods, movements, or genres. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, for example, sifts through more than two millennia of the history of its subject, and, through a process of inclusion and exclusion, identifies the major figures and the main texts, groups, divides and subdivides them into distinct schools and approaches. The very long history of theory and criticism is domesticated and made relatively easier to understand by a wider readership. It is fair to say that without help from an anthology such as *The Norton*, making any real sense of such history becomes really difficult. At best, acquaintance with such a history will be an exclusive privilege for a handful of people, the experts and professional specialists.

Furthermore, some anthologies are edited with the intent to make a political statement. Editors of such anthologies believe in the power of the anthology to bring about social and political change. They argue that since anthologies propagate themselves, and are generally accepted, as presenting "the best" authors and texts, this does not go without social and political implications. For instance, anthologies dominated by white, male, European figures privilege this category. Presented as authors of the best cultural artifacts, the ones worthy of remembrance and passing down to many generations to come, this category becomes privileged both socially and politically. The assumption here is that cultural privilege translates into social and political privilege. Conscious of the politics of inclusion and exclusion, these editors think of anthology-making as one way of changing conservative attitudes towards what is considered "the best". They think of the anthology as an important tool for bringing into light experiences other than those of white male worldviews dominating cultural consciousness. Given its important role in the formation of the canon, the anthology can be deployed to change people's awareness of this tradition. Altering the inclusions of an anthology would eventually lead to a change in national consciousness of certain groups. By including women and minorities in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, its general editor, Paul Lauter, thinks that this would place the real-life experiences of these categories on the social-political agenda:

For the reasonably overt objective of our project [*The Heath Anthology of American Literature*] was social change: by altering which American literary texts were seen as important, and thus taught in classrooms, we hoped to change what people saw as significant in the wider society. "Out of sight," we thought, meant "out of mind," and if we could

bring into sight the writing and the lives of women and minority men, then we might help place the real-life experiences and concerns of these people on the social and political agendas of our country. We therefore designed the anthology to be far more inclusive than any other collection had ever been. ("Taking" 29)

In the academic sphere, Lauter explains, anthologies such as *The Heath* can help validate and enable change as well. On the one hand, through digging into the forgotten wings of the cultural archive, they can make available material which instructors may have wished to teach, but they could not find easily. They resurrect and give visibility to texts by those writers – women and minorities – who have been marginalized and left out. On the other hand, these anthologies can give support to an academic's wishes to teach writers and experiences other than the mainstream. Since attempts to destabilize the curriculum are likely to be met with protest, condemnation, and hostility, academics can rely on such anthologies as an authority and a reference to justify their novel inclusions. In the face of likely opposition from academic superiors, *The Heath* could be cited to bear witness to the appropriateness of teaching marginal figures:

And it [*The Heath*] has also become a kind of tool for people to teach things they might have wanted to, but were restricted from doing so by the unavailability of the texts, or because of internal pressures to conform to a particular curriculum. Somebody can now lay this massive book on the desk of the department chair or dean and say, "Here, this is why I'm doing this course this way." Here is a recognized and legitimate publisher putting out this book. (Lauter, "Canon" 144-45)

An anthology, Lauter implies, can succeed where an academic cannot. The former's powers of persuasion supersede those of the latter. While an academic's efforts to teach uncanonical figures or texts are likely to be dismissed as personal eccentricities, their inclusion in an anthology seems to persuade the academic administration of teachable worthiness. The anthology, in this sense, enables and legitimizes change in both curriculum and canon. Interesting here is Lauter's representation of "the department chair and the dean" who are, first and foremost, academics. Their assuming of administrative roles, Lauter's argument seems to suggest, transforms them into more of bureaucrats than intellectuals. The administrative academic becomes more interested in maintaining the status-quo by defending the teaching of canonical figures and texts than encouraging innovation and unorthodox interventions.

### **The Crown of Thorns; or, on Perils**

The pleasures the anthology offers, nevertheless, do not come unattended by some serious, often unheeded, perils. Like flowers, they come wrapped in a

crown of thorns. And as people tend to focus more on flowers and ignore the thorns beneath, they enjoy anthology selections and overlook their limitations. Earlier in this article, I made reference to two prevalent metaphors which relate the anthology to a collection of flowers, and a pantheon. Indeed, these comparisons are, as I have already shown, flattering. But up to a point. Closer examination uncovers a thorny downside that tends to go unnoticed. On the one hand, it could be argued that flowers are better not collected, and best seen and enjoyed in the garden. It is there where they are seen *alive*. While it is true that people enjoy a collection of flowers, this kind of pleasure does not last for very long. When flowers are picked, they wither and eventually die. Collecting flowers is a precursor to their inevitable death. Let's not forget that the final destination of a flower bouquet is the waste bin. On the other hand, it is equally important to note that while the pantheon is the temple of all gods, it is also used to define a mausoleum where the remains of great people are buried as it is the case with the French Panthéon in the Latin Quarter in Paris.

The point here is that anthology selections are better left to be read in their original habitat, the textual garden. It is there along the remainder of the text, or other texts of the writer, where they come alive, and where their meaning and significance can be adequately, if not fully, pursued and grasped. While this may mean spending much time and effort on the part of the reader, the rewards are greater. Instead of relying on the taste and judgment of the editor, the student of literature or the general reader becomes more self-reliant, makes his/her own journey through literature, and comes up with his/her own discoveries. Anthologies, after all, offer no more than a reprinting of what has already been published before.

But anthologies have far more perilous consequences if they are received and embraced without critical awareness of their limitations. If taken innocently, they may dangerously shape their readers' consciousness of the genre they anthologize. It is, therefore, imperative that anthology readers become aware of the inherent limitations of the anthology. This becomes even the more important in the context of the classroom where anthologies, as Germano stresses, have become "an important feature of the academic landscape" (120). In departments of English, for instance, reliance of academics and students on anthologies in the educational process is noticeably on the rise. Unless cautioned against the accompanying disadvantages, students' awareness of, let's say, literature will be limited to the content of the anthology, if not to the few selections actually taught in class. Not all readers would possess the critical consciousness to question the criteria of selection and the politics of inclusion in an anthology. Students, perhaps the largest consumers of anthologies these days, would normally accept the content of the anthology as the knowledge worth knowing about the subject. "As students," Rachel Hadas argues, "we accept

as *natural* whatever it is that poetry anthologies, like other textbooks, present to us" (127; italics added).

While some editors may base their selections on certain overt political biases, these need not disturb us here. The reader in this case can approach the anthology knowingly. What should be of interest is the anthology which propagates itself as an innocent, apolitical, inclusive *representation* of its subject, or, more importantly and dangerously, *the best* of it, and is accepted as such. This is where the pleasure of reading an anthology turns really perilous. Unknowingly, it becomes, I would venture, guilty pleasure. Many of us are aware of the pleasures we get from reading anthologies, though, alas, not of the guilt.

It should be fairly obvious that despite the noble and presumably politics-free intentions of anthology makers, anthologies can never be truly representative of their subject, nor of its *best*. The extent to which an anthology can be representative is unbelievably limited. First, there are some inherent practical considerations which undermine any claims to true representativeness. No anthology, of whatever magnitude, can re-present more than a small fraction of the long and diverse history of any literature, particularly richer traditions such as English or Arabic. Almost all editors seem to apologize for their inability to include more selections due to something as mundane as the page count imposed by publishers. This is what the editors of the gigantic (more than 2500 pages) *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* admit:

In putting this anthology together, we have faced a number of challenges. One difficulty was coping with the impossibility of including every significant theorist. Our original list of 250 figures had to be shortened to 148: even a very long book such as this one imposes limits. A few of the lengthiest selections – by Longinus, John Dryden, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Adrienne Rich, for instance – had to be trimmed, and each editor had favorite figures dropped. (Leitch et al. xxxv-xxxvi)

The previous extract is an excellent example of the process of editing an anthology. It tells of the dilemma anthologists face and the compromises they eventually have to make. Like literary history, the history of theory and criticism is vast. It is inconceivable that any anthology can accommodate this history. These able editors are left with no choice other than to limit the original list of 250 figures to 148. What the editors do not state is that *their* original list (250 figures) is itself a shortening of the whole history of theory and criticism. The result is that even significant theorists, the editors regret, are left out. The other important point here is the last sentence in the extract. The selections are their editor's favorites – a point I will come back to later.

Now, if the previous argument and some of what follows seem as an attack on anthologies, and some wonder: How can one attack something for

being what it should be? By definition, anthologies are selective; they have no option but to include certain writers and exclude others. The anthology-as-selection implies an *inherent* inclusion as well as exclusion. The process of anthologizing is equally about exclusion at the very time it is about inclusion; in fact, what anthologies leave out is much more than what they allow in. This is true, but it is a truth that makes it the more important to point out and warn against this limitation which is an integral part of the very constitution of the anthology as a genre. That exclusion is at the very essence of anthologies may leave, as it often does, the reader blind to its existence. The user of an anthology would usually remember the visible, the inclusions rather than the invisible, the exclusions. While anthology editors tend to emphasize *presence*, the point here is to draw attention to the other side that goes to the heart of anthologies formation, *absence*.

Moreover, it should not be taken for granted that the content of the anthology does reprint *the best* of literature. This *best* is not *natural*; it is *naturalized*. We have already seen in the case of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* that the editors had different choices, and that each had to drop certain preferred figures. Had *the best* been inherently so (the best/natural), there would have been unanimous agreement on the selected authors to include in the anthology. What is designated as *the best* in an anthology is *the best* as seen by the editor(s). Thus, the editor of an anthology is akin to a hidden god: invisible but powerful. This power is exercised through the selections s/he makes. Those s/he selects are judged as the worthy "flowers of literature" that are guaranteed value and appreciation through recirculation in schools, universities, and the wider society as the treasured literary canon:

The processes of anthologising, canon-formation, and literary judgement, are intimately bound up one with another. In the case of anthologies proper ... canon-formation is exercised in the most basic and literal way possible: by the actual presentation, or withholding, of the primary materials of study. In an anthology-based course, the 'canon' studied simply *becomes* the contents of the anthology, and the anthologist thus holds enormous unseen power. (Hopkins 287; italics in original)

If at the beginning of the article I declared "silence" as a commendable attribute of editors, I here need to make a necessary qualification. This very silence and invisibility of editor(s) are powerful sources for the influence of the anthology. The anthology speaks very effectively through muting the voice of editors. These editors' voices and the anthology's impact are achieved through the very selections *they choose* to reprint. The silence and invisibility of editors (mis)lead many readers to forget that the selections they find in an anthology are made by similar

mortals. And since anthologies tend to repeat each other – almost all of them include the same texts by the same authors – they lend support and credibility to the idea that what they include is the literature worth knowing: the best, the canon.

More recently, however, it seems that anthology compilers have become acutely conscious of and haunted by the issue of representative inclusiveness in their creations, and they have tried to redress this through various means. On the one hand, they try to maintain trust in the value of their collections by securing the service of a well-known authority on the subject, or, in the words of Kevin Barry, "established figures" (52). In fact, more recently, it is very often the case that anthologies are compiled by more than one editor. Unlike the sole, god-like figures of Palgrave, editor of *The Golden Treasury*, and Quiller-Couch, compiler of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, contemporary anthologies are more likely to come into existence thanks to the editorial acumen of a number of experts. This is exactly what Norton does with its *Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. No one can question the expertise and authority of Vincent B. Leitch, as general editor, and the editing skills of five widely-revered critics including William E. Cain, Laurie A. Finke, Barbara Johnson, John McGowan, and Jeffrey J. Williams as worthy editors of an anthology of theory and criticism. Singing the praises of these editors is a reassuring signal:

The editors of this anthology were selected because of their scholarly expertise. They combine knowledge of canonical works with awareness of contemporary trends and extensive experience as teachers. Each was involved in constructing the anthology's contents and design, and each was responsible for refining selections, drafting headnotes, compiling bibliographies, and editing one another's work. (Leitch et al. xxxvi)

Anthology editing, in this case and others I cite in the following pages, becomes more communal. It is no longer the reflection of the taste of one authority. Rather, it is the labor of many, sometimes conflicting – though eventually reconciled – voices. In this respect, it can be said that the modern anthology is more democratic than earlier ones. The process of making an anthology becomes interestingly attuned to a modern society where democracy, polyphony, and diversity among many other things are dearly cherished. This democratic sensibility is taken a step farther by *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1990). Here, the choice of editors is not restricted to their academic expertise solely, but extends to take into account their ethnic and gender backgrounds. In this regard, because it aims at "promoting diversity in literary study," *The Heath* identifies the absence of women and minorities from editorial boards of other anthologies as a weakness it works to address (Lauter, "Taking" 29). It finds that including representatives of these marginalized categories is important to the making

of a truly representative anthology:

When we first organized the editorial board in 1982, we wished to deal with the fact that never had there been a minority participant on the editorial board of an American literature anthology and, until that time, only one or two white women. We decided to insure that there were equal numbers of men and women, of white and minority board members. ("Taking" 32)

As the editorial board is made more democratic, a more democratic table of contents is also sought. While they would casually admit the impossibility of including every eligible author or text, editors spare no effort to stress the representativeness and inclusiveness of their collections. They reassure readers that they did their best to expand their anthologies and render them as inclusive as possible. The canonical classics, of course, come first. Their place is unquestionably secure. They remain the main, if not the only, interest of the anthology. But anthologists seem more eager to respond to recent reappraisals of the canon by adding "new" selections. And as anthologies tend, for the most part, to include the same classics, these "new" selections give the anthology an edge of distinctive openness to revision, novelty and freshness. The assertion of being up-to-date becomes more obvious in subsequently revised editions of an anthology. The new edition is further stretched to include more selections:

In compiling this fourth edition, the aim has been *to retain and to add* to those essays and documents which now seem to have a *canonical* place in the history of modern literary theory. (Rice and Waugh xiv; italics added)

This is also apparent in the words of the editors of one of the most popular anthologies of poetry:

Many poems in this book have been part of English-speaking culture for centuries, while the newest poems here might well lodge in readers' memories in the future. This Fifth Edition of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* brings together more than eighteen hundred such records from "the round earth's imagined corners." We have set out to provide readers with *a wide and deep sampling of the best poetry* written in English. (Ferguson et al. lix; italics added)

The previous extracts are telling examples of what a "prestigious anthology" does. It, Wail Hassan goes on to explain, "sets the trends as much as (if not more than) it reflects them" (793). This is exactly what *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* does. By including many poems which have been part of English-speaking culture for centuries, it reflects the trends, the canon; "the newest poems," which "might well lodge in readers' memories in the future," is Norton's push for these poems towards future canonicity. When

they lodge in readers' memories, they become part of the canon. It, thus, sets the trend by expanding the canon and allowing in new poems as well as it reflects existing trends by representing what is already there, the already accepted as canonical.

The same issue of inclusiveness and comprehensive representation is on the minds of the editors of another Norton anthology. The editors here see their anthology as peerless. Not only do they include canonical writers, but also they offer an unusual, precious space to some "minor," "forgotten," or "underrepresented" ones:

The most wide-ranging and comprehensive collection of its kind, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* offers one or more selections from 148 figures, representing *major* developments from ancient to recent times, from Gorgias and Plato to bell hooks, Judith Butler, and Stuart Moulthrop. *In contrast to comparable anthologies, it provides generous selections from previously underrepresented fields*, such as rhetoric, medieval theory, and criticism by women and people of color, along with a full complement of works from canonical figures such as Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Cleanth Brooks, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Michel Foucault. *From canonical authors, it includes classic texts as well as selections newly revalued.* (Leitch et al. xxxiii; italics added)

Like most anthologies, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* is mainly, and understandably, about "major" writers and texts. Like its sister anthology of poetry, it includes "selections newly revalued". This is a sign of openness and willingness to accommodate new additions to the canon. But it does not stop here. It takes another unconventional leap by including the traditionally forgotten, and the underrepresented. This, the editors think, is a clear sign of distinction. It gives their anthology the edge over other anthologies: "the most wide-ranging and comprehensive collection of its kind." But while these inclusions do indeed deserve acknowledgment, it seems that Norton was pushed rather than jumped to house them. For the last few decades, the literary canon has been assaulted for being male-dominated and Eurocentric. Where are women? Where are minorities? People asked. One does not need to go very far into the Norton anthologies to discover their lingering bias and reductiveness. Both titles make grandiose claims to inclusiveness and representativeness on which their contents fail to deliver. Both titles, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, and *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* suggest worldwide coverage, but their inclusions come nowhere near this suggestion in different and interesting fashions. The former reduces the vast and diverse history of theory and criticism to major European theorists and critical approaches. The latter, on the other hand, is further reduced to poetry written in English.

Moreover, including women and minority authors is better seen as a hard fought and won battle by these groups rather than a Norton accomplishment. The lingering traces of bias against these groups make this point more credible. It is true that they are allowed entry into the anthology, but this entry and presence is not fully realized. The editors are still careful to distinguish between "the major," "the classics" on the one hand, and the *others*, on the other. The two categories should not be confused. Although the *others*, "the minor" are inside the anthology, they remain on the margin. While the canonical authors are singled out by name, they are individuals – each with a distinct voice, the underrepresented others are piled together as "fields". It is enough to acknowledge the presence of the latter. Whereas canonical figures are represented through an honorable "full complement of works," the underrepresented are not given equal share of textual space. They are represented through "generous selections," with generous possibly betraying the editors understanding of what they have done to the forgotten: it is their act of generosity which brings the traditionally forgotten categories inside the anthology.

Ironically, it has come down to scholars of the forgotten and underrepresented to question the claims of anthologies to inclusiveness and representativeness. Having been subject to anthologies biases and exclusions, and aware of the implication of anthologies in canon-formation, editors of categories such as postcolonial literature/criticism make it clear that they are not interested in presenting their selections as the best, the authoritatively representative or canonical. Instead, they propose to present a diverse collection of excerpts without trying to impose their canonicity. Introducing their anthology, *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (1995), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin make it clear that:

This reader is not a collection of theorists, but of ideas; *it is not interested in establishing a canon of theories or theorists* but in indicating something of the great scope, the rich heterogeneity and vast energy of the field of postcolonial studies. (xvi; italics added)

Bruised by the claims of mainstream anthologies to canonical representativeness, the "forgotten" disown this attribute when they find their own space and voice. They implicitly undermine the basic argument of anthologies on inclusive representation. Whereas other anthologists do everything to reassure the reader about the canonical nature of their selections, editors of *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* do quite the opposite. While they still propose that they include the major issues and debates, they vehemently deny any pretensions to comprehensive coverage or authority. They warn that despite their attempt to achieve as wide a representation of areas and approaches as possible, they understand the foolishness of claiming comprehensive inclusiveness:

The authors are equally at pains to insist therefore that *the title is not meant to claim some kind of completeness of coverage or absolute authority*. In a field as diverse and contentious as postcolonial studies such a claim would be particularly extravagant and foolish. However, the more than eighty extracts in this reader are designed to introduce *the major* issues and debates in the field of post-colonial literary studies. (Aschroft et al. xv-xvi; italics added)

By showing sensitivity towards involvement in canon-formation, comprehensive representation, or absolute authority, editors of *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* break away from a long tradition of anthology-making that tries to project itself as an authoritative representation of the canon. They clearly deny any interest in establishing a canon of theories or theorists, or any claims to completeness of coverage or absolute authority. While they talk much about what they exclude, other editors would normally spill much ink on their inclusions. But that breaking away does not come without a telling irony. Denying canonicity, authority, and comprehensive coverage, editors of *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* go on, the previous extract shows, to set their aim as "to introduce *the major* issues and debates in the field of post-colonial literary studies." Like other anthologies, they retain the binary distinction between major figures and issues, and other minor ones. The former category is the one worthy of inclusion, the latter left unrepresented. In other words, even anthologies of the underrepresented, the forgotten, and the minor create their own forgotten and underrepresented *other* category, which is left out.

### Conclusion

The anthology is more than just a collection of pieces, literary or otherwise, compiled and offered to please prospective readers. The importance of the anthology should not be undervalued. It has served to preserve literary works which might have otherwise been lost:

Whether it be through a *Phoenix Nest* of the sixteenth century or a collection of tales from the *New Yorker* in the twentieth, this handing-on to the future of work difficult of access or so ephemerally published as to be in danger of oblivion is a real service which must be credited to the makers of anthologies. (Hibbard 647)

But perhaps the most important function of the anthology is the feast of authors and texts it brings together in one work. Through an anthology, the reader can journey through a broad and rich collection of authors and texts of a certain era, nation, or even the whole world. The reader can certainly find knowledge and pleasure in a well-researched anthology. But while this is a great service, it does not come without some probable perils. Anthologies are deeply implicated in the formation of what is called the canon, those undeniably great works and authors that form a literary

tradition. The implication is so profound that: "Poets who are left out of too many [anthologies] slide away into oblivion; poets who are in most of them become the 'tradition'" (Page 20). Despite recent questioning of the claims of anthologies to inclusive representation, the anthology remains "a statement of canonical authority" (Pressman 57). The content of an anthology is presented by editors, and is generally accepted, as the best that has been thought and known. Unsuspecting readers usually forget the inherent practical and aesthetic limitations of the anthology. By definition, an anthology is an act of exclusion as well as inclusion.

Since anthologies will continue to be published, and general readers will consume them, and students at schools and universities will use them, one should be aware of the limitations of the anthology. Instead of taking for granted the prevalent notion that an anthology is a collection of the best of/on the subject, users should question what "the best" means. "This best" is not stable; it is subject to reassessment. And this is something that good anthologies do. These good ones tend to revise their inclusions in later editions, adding writers and texts ignored in earlier ones. Writers ignored in one era may turn up and become canonical in a later one. Those who enjoy the pleasures of the anthology should keep in mind that the structure of an anthology, "the choice of subject areas and the selection and excisions of the readings are naturally determined by the editors' preferences" (Aschroft et al. xvi).

Given these limitations, the onus is on editors to openly admit them, and on users to be aware of and embrace the genre accordingly. Perhaps the best way to approach an anthology is to think of it in the way Aschroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin recommend theirs: "a stimulus to discussion, thought and further exploration" (xvi). In other words, it is better to view the anthology not as an end, a final destination, but as a beginning, a point of departure towards a longer journey of research and discovery.

**الملخص****ورد وشوك: متع المختارات (الأدبية) ومخاطرها**

سمير أحمد عبدالنعم أبوالحسن

تقدم هذه الدراسة قراءة نقدية لكتب المختارات، والتي يعود أصل الكلمة الإنجليزية إلى اللغة اليونانية وتعني "قطف الورود" (تستخدم أحياناً كلمة "مقتطفات" في اللغة العربية كبديل لـ "مختارات" وهو ما يقربها من معنى الأصل اليوناني للمفردة: الفعل يقطف مصاحب للورد ويستدعيه للذهن عند ذكره).

تتأمل هذه الورقة البحثية التناقضات التي تحيط بهذا النوع من الكتب: فهي في ذات الوقت واحد وكثير، صامته وصاخبة، قليلة القيمة وجليئة. ثم تعرض الدراسة فائدة المختارات - بوصفها بوكيه ورد - فتسجل أنها توفر المعرفة والمتعة للقراء من خلال تقديم أجزاء من (أفضل) الأدب لحقبة معينة، أو لأمة واحدة، أو من الأدب العالمي كله، أو لجنس أدبي معين في كتاب واحد. كما أنها تساعد على ترويض التدفق الهائل للمؤلف (ين/ات) والنصوص من خلال ترتيبهم وتصنيفهم في حركات أو مذاهب أدبية ونقدية، وهو ما يسهل عملية التلقى لتاريخ طويل وعريض للأدب الإنجليزي كمثل. ولكن تذهب الدراسة إلى أن للاعتماد "البرئ" على المختارات مخاطر كبيرة. من بين هذه المخاطر أن المختارات بطبيعتها تعتمد على الانتقاء والاقصاء في ذات الوقت، حيث لا يستطيع أي كتاب للمختارات، مهما بلغ حجمه، أن يكون شاملاً وممثلاً لما يدعى أنه يقدمه للقراء. كما أن هذه المختارات هي من انتقاء المحرر/ة أو مجموعة المحرر (ين/ات) وهو ما يعنى أن عملية اختيار نصوص واستبعاد أخرى تخضع، إلى حد بعيد، لذوق وتحيزات المحرر (ين/ات). ولهذا يجدر أن يتم تلقي كتب المختارات بدرجة عالية من الوعي النقدي، وأنها بداية ينطلق منها القراء لاكتشاف الأدب واعين بأن ما تقدمه كتب المختارات لا يمثل كل التراث الأدبي، الذي تعد المختارات أحد مصادر تشكيله، ولا كل أفضله.

**كلمات مفتاحية:**

المختارات؛ أدب ونقد؛ الاقصاء؛ الانتقاء؛ متع؛ مخاطر.

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