The Bad Penny of Contingency: Literary Anthologies and the Test of Time

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In this article I shall analyze a recent attempt, made by David Hopkins,[1] at theorizing Samuel Johnson's test of time principle as a criterion for composing literary anthologies. I believe that Hopkins's idea is definitely worth exploring since in developing it not only does he try to restore the value of Johnson's principle in an interesting, if ultimately unconvincing, way, but also touches on some fundamental problems pertaining to aesthetics and literary studies in general.

Hopkins presents his idea in an article that is divided into two parts[2]: the first (and larger) section consists of a concrete, insightful analysis of the content and underlying assumptions of some existing anthologies of English verse, while in the second, he puts forward "a speculative suggestion which connects some of the issues connected with anthologising with the larger question of 'personal' or 'contingent' versus 'objective' critical judgement" (290). Given the topic of this paper, I am interested in that latter part of his article, but in order to prepare the ground for my arguments, I need to recall what Hopkins does in the former.

To distill Hopkins's argument, he levels two main objections against the anthologies that he scrutinizes (which objections he extrapolates to all existing anthologies of English poetry): namely, that their criteria of selection are (a) not objective and/or (b) inconsistent. The charge of inconsistency need not concern us here, because the weight Hopkins puts on it in his article is lesser, so let us take a closer look what objection (b) actually boils down to. Hopkins stresses that even though various anthologies are often conceived (and advertized) as presenting a comprehensive account of "'the best' writing" within English literature, or as being "neutrally 'representative'" of a given period, or are designed as providing "'timeless' and permanently valid a presentation of each poet," they actually constitute "a highly selective interpretative overview" of the matter, and reflect various "short-lived fashions," which happen to dominate in literary community at a given time, or even "highly polemical and personal views of their [i.e. the editors'] subject" (292-3, 303, 297). What makes the situation even worse, to Hopkins's mind, is that these views very often do not concern aesthetic matters, being instead merely "ideological commitments" and "political" stances (299, 300). Note that the case here is not simply that there exists a contradiction between what the anthologies present themselves, or are perceived, to be, and what they really are (although this discrepancy is surely something to be avoided), as Hopkins finds problematic even those anthologies whose authors *explicitly* declare their judgments to be slanted in this or that direction. The problem is simply this partiality itself (personal, communal, political, historical, aesthetic), whether it is concealed or not.

Therefore it is no wonder that the anthology Hopkins hopes for is one that would be able to escape the contingency of the editors' personal tastes and the wider historical context in which they are embedded, by being "objective," based on "trans-historical consensus" and capable of doing justice to the poetry that represents the real artistic value (301, 304). I believe that many of literary scholars would approve of this ideal, yet the question remains: How could that ambitious plan be realized? As often happens in such cases, Hopkins's solution is based on the wisdom of old, namely on the aforementioned principle of the 'test of time,' as coined by Samuel Johnson. Dr. Johnson's idea is that an appropriate touchstone of the literary excellence of a given work would be the continuous "esteem" it enjoys for at least one hundred years.[3] Hopkins, in turn, is convinced that such a "principle" can well serve as a criterion for compiling his envisaged anthology (300).

Now, this all looks quite clear and neat at the first sight, but becomes more obscure and problematic after closer scrutiny. The source of the problem, which is a very general one, affecting not merely anthologizing but practically every other aspect of human existence, was perfectly described by the American literary theorist Stanley Fish in his book *The Trouble with Principle*. And I cannot think of any better way of summarizing the gist of Fish's argument that by quoting the following words of Richard Rorty, taken from the blurb he wrote for that book: "The trouble with principles is that they are either so abstract and contentless that all the work is done filling in the details, or else sufficiently concrete as to be very controversial indeed."[4] To be sure, Hopkins seems to be aware that there may be some problems in applying the principle of the test of time, but he apparently thinks that these can be resolved by sufficient amount of "hard labour" and with the help of some "tips" and "hunches" (302). I, however, believe, and am going to argue below, that there is some important aspect, which concerns the very foundation of Hopkins's main idea, in which they cannot be resolved at all.

But let us first take a look at one potential historicist objection Hopkins himself considers in detail. Namely, that Johnson's idea is invalid since we simply cannot talk about the continuous esteem that some works have enjoyed through centuries, and this is because the standards of taste changed drastically during that time. As a consequence, even though these works might have been admired, they were esteemed for different reasons at different times, which makes any talk of continuity in this case rather dubious. Alluding to Fish's theory of interpretation Hopkins responds that *even if* it is the case that different "interpretive communities," in evaluating various works of literature, have relied on different, often incommensurable and conflicting, principles, the principle of the 'test of time' does not itself need to be concerned with the reasons those works were esteemed in the first place. It can work sufficiently well when limited to the sole fact that they were held in esteem at all. The reason I emphasized the words "even if," is that Hopkins apparently thinks that it is actually *not* the case that we, today's readers, are separated from the interpretive communities of the past by some insurmountable cultural barrier. As a proof, he evokes his firm belief that he actually understands, and agrees with, critical judgments of his noble predecessors such as "Alexander Pope… , Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Matthew Arnold" – and of course, Samuel Johnson (304). Yet, as we have seen, Hopkins does not let his refutation of the historicist critique of Johnson's principle rely solely, or even mainly, on this evidence. I believe that he is right to do so, and this is because for historicists, Hopkins's firm belief would constitute not a refutation, but a confirmation of their views. After all, what else could Hopkins's declaration of his complete agreement with Samuel Johnson et al. be, but evidence that he simply imposed his own categories and presumptions on their views (which, for historicists, must *by definition* be different than his since they emerged in a different historical context)? Of course, Hopkins, quite rightly, would see this argument as begging the question, but let me stress that the other side would see his counterarguments in exactly the same way, i.e. as guilty of circularity. Therefore the whole debate, at least when staged in this way, is pointless and this pointlessness is in fact due to an important feature of historicism to which I will return in the conclusion of my article.

For now, let me point out that when Hopkins refers to the theory of interpretive communities, he misses one of its key points: namely, the gist of the theory is not that different interpretive communities evaluate the same texts differently (which would be a rather mild claim that surely would not have been able to make it as famously controversial as it in fact has become); it is rather that we cannot even talk about *the same text* here, as each text assumes a different identity in different communities, even though it may bear exactly the same title.[5] This thesis has important implications for the notion of the identity of the literary work, and it has lead thinkers such as Richard Shusterman to propose a distinction between the work's referential (or "logico-grammatical")

identity, which is preserved in different interpretive communities, and its substantial identity, which changes respectively.[6] Given that, one could object that it is indeed problematic to talk about the continual esteem for a given poem in different interpretive communities, since although we can talk about the same poem in referential terms, when it comes to its "substantive nature," there are indeed only different poems. But this argument would, again, result in an impasse, since Hopkins could reply that his reading experience tells him something quite different, to which a follower of the interpretive communities theory would object that Hopkins's experience is merely an illusion.

Therefore, even though I discussed these arguments not without reason (their importance will become clear by the end of this article), I will not enter this path, just as I will not try to attack Hopkins's position by undermining the validity of the general notion of trans-historicality and objectivity. This would not only be boring, as we have heard such debates for countless many times before, but it would also reduce itself to an exchange of invectives (even if very polite, academic ones). What I am going to do instead, is to show how the bad penny of contingency turns up in the very details of Hopkins's project that aims to avoid contingency in the first place.

As I said, the trouble with all principles seems to be that when they are sufficiently unproblematic, they are too abstract to be useful, and when we try to make them concrete, they become controversial, mostly because they get automatically involved in distinctions and decisions that are enough particularistic and biased to be opposed by those who happen to occupy different positions. Let us see how this mechanism works in Hopkins's case. To begin with, he realizes that the task of his hypothetical anthologist "would not be at all a straightforward", but rather a "tricky" matter. After all, even though, "[s]ome leads would be provided by explicit declarations of a particular poem's or passage's continued esteem," others "would emerge from more oblique kinds of evidence" (301). One of the latter would be "what Tom Mason has usefully described as the 'consequential' properties [of poems]: the ways in which their phrasings and rhythms, and the thought which those phrasings and rhythms convey and embody, have reverberated in the minds of later poets and have left their mark on the texture of those poets' work" (302). Hopkins stipulates that the "tracking down" of such properties would demand a lot of "hard labor" – which can be now fortunately facilitated by various "electronic resources" – but I have major doubts that we can be really even that optimistic.

The question of influence is indeed a rather tricky game, because one cannot really know where to break the 'consequential' chain. For instance, if at some point we realize that we have to include in our anthology poem *x* (unjustly neglected by previous anthologists), because it influenced a widely respected poem *y*, then shouldn't we be also looking for poem *z* (or poems *z, p, r, q*) that

might have influenced poem *x* in the first place? And then the poems which had influenced poem z (or poems *z, p, r, q*)? And then… etc., etc. And should all of them find a place in our anthology because of that chain of influence (if they were not meant to be included for some other reason)? If not, what would the criteria be to decide to what extent the influence exerted on the famous poem *y* actually counts?

Also, one does not need to evoke Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence to know that literary influence can also be negative, in the sense that an author may be inspired by another author's work to write something completely *different* then the latter.[7] I believe that this kind of relation also counts as an influence, and that the properties of the former author's poem surely are consequential in this case. This is because even though he tries to be different, one can only be different with regard to something else (one cannot be just different in general sense), and if he tried to write differently than yet another author, he would write differently in a different way.[8] Now how would Hopkins want to measure this, and, moreover, in a trans-historical, objective way? In addition to that, the example of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* makes us realize that the very conception of consequentiality and influence in literature is not an uncontroversial one, as there are many conceptions thereof that are incommensurable or contradictory to each other, and some of these even urge us to stop talking about consequentiality altogether. It follows, then, that we cannot choose all of these conceptions at the same time, and whatever our judgment would be in this regard, it would certainly not result in our occupying a trans-historical position, since each of those theories is a product of its own age (recall that it is hard to imagine Bloom's theory to be invented in all its aspects before Freud). Also, it is worth noting that Bloom's conception may be terribly misleading, as far as the anthologizing purpose is concerned, as the history of poetry certainly does not constitute a succession of duels between the poetic giants such as Shakespeare, Yeats and others. It has certainly happened more than once that a great figure was inspired (in a negative, or positive way), by works which we would now certainly consider as minor or unworthy of aesthetic attention. What to do in such cases? Should we include those poems, too, despite that fact that our goal is doing justice to poetic excellence?

The same question refers, e.g., to all those poems which had been widely circulating among the so-called popular audience during 15th, 16th or 17th century, yet are now known only to few literary historians and, in addition, are rather poor and primitive examples of literature from that period. I believe that there are quite many such cases in English literature (and possibly in all European literatures), and thus the question emerges: should we include them too in Hopkins's anthology? After all, they stood the test of time, and they would qualify as teaching us something new about the history of our literature. But,

on the other hand, they hardly represent what Hopkins, most of our colleagues, and I myself would consider of sound artistic value. Should we, then, solve the question by saying that they indeed were esteemed, but not universally, since only among some marginal group, and thus can be ignored? But what 'marginal' means here is a moot point at best. One could risk hypothesizing that the so-called popular audience of literature, even though its judgments have often had no chance to be represented in scholarly books, in fact has always been significantly larger (note that I include here oral literature as well) than the audience which admired the same poems we, being their inheritors, now conceive of as the best in our tradition. Moreover, as authors like Pierre Bourdieu say, the very distinction between the high and popular culture is determined not by aesthetic values, but rather by sociopolitical factors, which implies that there might be a risk that by caring for the poetic excellence of the works we include in our anthology we are in fact representing a hidden political agenda.[9]

But even if we do not believe Pierre Bourdieu, we should be aware of the various hidden, or explicit, aesthetic agendas that may be also in play here, and to understand why this may be so, let us think about the challenge that Palgrave's famous anthology poses to Hopkins's idea.[10] On the one hand, Hopkins's own principle would encourage him to include the whole content of Palgrave's collection (or at least all the poems that have survived the changes made in its subsequent editions). After all, the latter not only has been around for more than one hundred years, but has also significantly affected the "readers' minds." As Hopkins himself eagerly notes, "more than 650,000 copies [of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*] had been printed before the Second World War" and it can be taken as responsible for "the establishment of the popular assumption – still widespread, for example, among students coming up to university – that the word 'poem' denotes a piece of writing usually cast in the first person, and printable on one, or at the very most two or three, sides of paper" (291). On the other hand, that responsibility itself is a symptom of the fact that Palgrave's is not an anthology representative of "the whole of English literature," and if anything, it is representative of Palgrave's own contingent tastes. In any event, Hopkins would have to choose from the material that his principle would provide him with, which in itself is not necessarily wrong; the only difficulty is on what grounds he would make his selection. He himself admits that it would be impossible not to make any selection at all, but thinks one can be helped here by various "hunches" and "tips." But here exactly contingency strikes back. For there is no such thing as a "trans-historical" hunch or tip, because in order to be what they are they must perforce be *somebody*'s hunches and tips, and thus must be historically situated, i.e. contingent. Now, behind Hopkins's project there lies the idea that something else, something transcending our unpleasantly contingent condition, is doing the anthologizing job for us. Here, the test of time means that it is the time, not

we ourselves, which nominates the poems to be anthologized, and our role is reduced to that of carefully *reporting* time's unshaken and unambiguous decisions. But as I have been trying to show (by scrutinizing, perhaps too meticulously, some of Hopkins's claims and by multiplying all those troubling questions), we must not only interpret what the time is saying to us (for instance, by applying the category of consequentiality), but we also have to select from its nominees, and in both cases we can rely on nothing else but on our own idiosyncratic judgments, or our own historically contextualized traditions. And it does not really help when Hopkins says that the works that

> have genuinely passed 'the test of time' are those which have survived repeated examination and comparison, by successive tribunals of judges, each coming to them without (or with a variety of) professional axes to grind, with diverse aesthetic assumptions, and from widely different historical and cultural perspectives (303).

This stipulation is again too general (and thus no stipulation at all), and if we try to specify it, we will approach thousands of troubling questions, which will demand thousands of decisions based on thousands of contingent criteria. After all, we will have to choose who is worthy to be called a "judge" in these matters (and it is significant here whom Hopkins mentions as his partners from the past in the dialogue on literary matters), how many judges are necessary in each case, how "diverse" the "aesthetic assumptions" need to be, and how "widely" said perspectives must differ. Besides, the idea that in order to arrive at the right judgment in a given case, we must first consult as many viewpoints as possible, is itself an invention of certain traditions in the cultural history of the West,[11] and would be met with astonishment, if not with abomination, by many lovers of English literature in previous ages, and even by some of them who are our contemporaries.

Since the points I have been making so far are clearly indebted to Stanley Fish's theories, let me conclude, then, by making a clearly Fishian move, which consists of the following two steps. Asking the question: "Does all this mean that Hopkins, or anybody else, should forget about the idea of compiling such an anthology?" and answering it with a simple: "Of course, not." And if anyone find this answer surprising (given what I have said above), then let me explain my point by referring to one implicit distinction Hopkins makes in his article, when he says that the days of 'theory' are gone, since now we live in an age of historicism (294). There is indeed some truth in this claim, because theory, as a certain form of practicing literary criticism (and maybe this is the meaning of the term Hopkins has in mind, since he places the term in inverted commas), has doubtless lost the celebrated position it once occupied in the 70's through the 90's. But on the other hand it is misleading, insofar as it contrasts theory with historicism. And false it is, because historicism, including the one I myself have presented above, is itself a theory, no matter how eagerly some of its

proponents may want to deny that. Moreover, along with all kinds of theories of interpretive communities, relativisms, objectivisms and so forth it is one of the most general theories that one can imagine (after all, it concerns the very nature of reality and human subjectivity), something which separates it completely from any practice, including the practice of anthologizing. In other words, the thesis that everything is contingent, or historically contextualized, cannot serve as a guidance for practice (what to do and what to avoid doing), because whatever we do will always be contingent.[12] Therefore, my point is not that Hopkins should avoid compiling his anthology, but that he should not think of it what he currently does. For even though it surely would be something different from any other anthology that exists, and it would be something interesting and educating, too (and this is a reason good enough to compile it eventually) it would not be, as Hopkins thinks, different in the sense of being trans-historical and objective. But this is no fault at all, because nothing can be different in that way, i.e. nothing can prevent the bad penny of contingency from turning up.[13]

Notes and References

1. See David Hopkins, "On Anthologies," *Cambridge Quarterly,* Vol. 37, No.3 (2008), pp. 285-304 – further referred to parenthetically in the text.
2. See *Ibid.*
3. See, *Samuel Johnson: Selected Poetry and Prose*, eds. Frank Brady, William Wimsatt (Berkeley, 1978), pp. 299-301.
4. See Stanley Fish, *The Trouble With Principle* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999).
5. See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text In This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), especially chaps. 13-15. See also S. Fish, "One More Time," in *Postmodern Sophistry* : *Stanley Fish And the Critical Enterprise*, ed. Gary A. Olson and Lynn Worsham (New York, 2004), pp. 265-297.
6. See Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (New York, 2000), pp. 93-95. Cf. Joseph Margolis, *Interpretation: Radical But Not Unruly* (Berkeley, 1994), pp. 33-34.
7. See H. Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford, 1973), see also Harold Bloom, *Agon* (Oxford, 1982).
8. In my account of difference I am in debted to Stanley Fish, see, e.g. his *Doing What Comes Naturally* (Durham, 1989).
9. See, Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984); cf. R. Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca, 2000), chap. 2.

[10] See Francis Turner Palgrave, *The Golden Treasury*, ed. *Christopher Ricks* (London: Penguin, *1991)*

[11] Cf. Stanley Fish, *The Trouble With Principle*, op. cit., chap. 8.

[12] See, Stanley Fish, *There's No Such Thing As Free Speech... And It's a Good Thing, Too* (New York, 1994), chap. 14; Stanley Fish, *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change* (Oxford, 1995), especially Lecture III.

[13] Some of the main arguments of the present article were presented at a seminar of the STAR (Scotland's Transatlantic Relations) Project, which took place in Sept. 2008, at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, The University of Edinburgh (the main speakers at the seminar, which was dedicated to the "Principles for a Transatlantic Literary Anthology," were Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor). I would like to thank participants of the seminar for their comments, and also my colleagues at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (at which I was a visiting research fellow from Sep. to Nov. 2008): David Wall, for his remarks concerning the title of my text, and particularly Eric White who read the first draft of this paper and made many useful suggestions.

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