

THE CANON(S) OF WORLD LITERATURE

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Although the actual roots of the word canon are obscure, scholars believe it is a Sumerian concept with parallels in Babylonian/Assyrian *kannu* and Semitic *kaneh*, indicating “a measuring rod” (Ezekiel 40:5). In the ancient Greek, *kanōn* means “a standard or norm by which all things are judged or evaluated, whether the perfect form to follow in architecture or sculpture or the infallible criterion (*kritērion*) by which things are to be measured” (McDonald 2007: 38–39). I single out this definition because it alerts us to the concomitant idea of *criterion*, present already in Epicurus (341–270 BCE), who wrote *Of the Standard, a Work Entitled Canons* (*Peri Kritēriou ē Kanōn*), and implicitly reminds us that with the establishment of the standard goes the necessity to exercise critique. This key term in Greek (*krinein*) is usually rendered as “to judge,” which entails the identification of the proofs in jurisprudence before judgment is passed, in a sense determining what the standard is, what is right and what is wrong. It also extends to medicine, as in the determination of the symptoms of a disease. In the same semantic field we find the Latin word *cernere*, which in agriculture means the activity of separating the wheat from the chaff (Starobinski 1970: 114), and from which we derive the English verb “to discern.” The polyvalent notion of determining what is right, or just, or proper, subsequently took shape as an icon, a rule, a practice or even a myth, against which to determine what is worthy of conservation and circulation for the collective memory and, conversely, what was deemed acceptable to be excluded, left by the wayside, or ignored at a particular juncture in the life of a given culture.

There have always been fierce battles between competing canons, since antiquity, as the case of the Bible makes patent (McDonald 2007, Levinson 2003). And it is no different today, where different splinter groups, recently emerged, vie for inclusion into what constitutes a common Hebrew canon (Levy 2009). It took centuries for the texts of Western monotheism to coalesce into a stable Text, the *Septuagint*, a canon that is now closed, with its writings assumed to have come from, or to have been revealed by, God. They are not subject to change or criticism, only to interpretation of possible latent meanings according to the *regula fidei*, or canon of faith, similar to what we call “in the spirit of the letter,” a critical attitude which has been extended

to such disparate texts as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the Constitution of the United States of America. Thus the sacred text, of any culture, tends to become authoritative, or a *norma normata*, having achieved a fixed shape, and is ideally unchangeable. What bears on our discussion is, rather, the function these "eternal" texts exercise on succeeding generations, as they inscribe a process and its protocols, or a *norma normans* (McDonald 2007: 56), whereby all extra-canonical texts about the primary text constitute the tradition which becomes authoritative for the community. Referred to as hermeneutics, this process of interpretation has long been associated with paradigmatic authorities, ranging from Philo (25 BC–50 AD) to Schleiermacher (1768–1834). The interpretive tradition that these prototypical figures of interpretation exemplify has developed techniques of reading that have by and large condensed around the figure of allegory, or the search for hidden meanings.

Applied to secular texts, this process makes the *norma normans* the real issue, for the "normalizing" and therefore perennially homogenizing (and/or "nationalizing") process is now compounded by the presence of the author as a fallible human being subject to the vagaries of time and place. Still, we must recognize that a canon becomes central to establishing the identity of a people and, more to the point, the specific values – be they aesthetic, ethic, political – which the given community refers to in determining whether a particular text functions constructively, albeit subtly coercively, within or outside the community. The history of nationalisms and nation building bears this out spectacularly, as the processes of codification of specific texts which occurred in the nineteenth century as European and South American countries became formally independent nation-states are typically reproduced, *mutatis mutandis*, in post-World War II Africa. A canon, then, clearly exercises a legitimizing and a censorship function, even while it constantly generates one or several splintered anti- or extra-canonical "minor" or "marginal" textualities.

In this context, Italian literary history can furnish us with an exemplary case in point. Under the influence of philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), the canon of Italian literature was required to meet the standards of his particular brand of idealism and historicism. Despite some variations and elaborations, for over six decades the literary canon systematically kept out of the schools texts identified with movements of the avant-garde and social realism. This situation lasted until the second half of the twentieth century, when various Marxist, neo-Marxist and structuralist approaches opened up to a broader range of authors and perspectives (Carravetta 2005). Most recently, the Italian literary canon is facing the difficulty of dealing with textualities produced in Italian by authors who come from as far away as Senegal, Iraq, Argentina, and the Philippines. More than that, attempts are underway to minimize the attachment to (northern) Europe and explore the long-ignored impact of the Mediterranean world (Gnisci 2001).

The creation of a single canon of world literature, however circumscribed, cannot realistically be construed, although critics have at different times essayed to do precisely that, inevitably starting from within one national perspective. Insofar as literature is concretely made up of words which are always given in specific languages, one must immediately ask: in *which* language is the canon cast, from within what tradition, and in terms of *what kind* of relationship to the collective memory of a group, a people, or a nationality is it built upon? These questions elicit the further

critical question: what is the proper, or at least suggested, itinerary through this canon? In different ways, and with a transnational sensibility, both Jean Starobinski (1970) and Edward Said (1983) have drawn attention to this critical issue, namely: in the name of what values, aesthetic or otherwise, and in view of what social purposes, is a canon authorized, or become authoritative enough, to select and propose its "best" or "great" books such as to claim world-wide resonance or viability? A discussion on canons must from the very start set in motion a methodology that accounts for the social and ideological position of the critic, the specificity of the text, and the circumscribed environment in which they interact.

A salutary reminder for students and readers at large is that they are always reading and therefore interpreting a work from a very specific socio-historical location in the world. Critics have long recognized that we interpret from the point of view of the present, *our* present, and it is only through a second process that one can claim to understand how, for instance, Montesquieu interpreted Persian culture *as if* the following two centuries had not occurred. That task, which is carried out through exegesis, is still in the end brought to bear on our present, where one might conceivably ask: to what degree does the Enlightenment conception of Eastern cultures contribute to our present conceptions of the East? This line of reasoning has been amply explored in postcolonial studies, and is responsible in part for relaunching the question of the validity of any one canon.

We thus introduce students and other readers to a set of interconnected problems which bear upon our inevitable involvement in the text that we happen to be discussing: historical relativity, the multiplicity of interpretations, and the necessity to place the ideas, symbols, and suggestions that arise during the reading in the mental encyclopedia we happen to bring to class on any given occasion. Inevitably, then, we seek an understanding in view of *our* social reality, *our* world. A world, once again, which is not an ideal or universal bubble but, in the case of myself and my students, a twenty-first-century Anglophone and urban society with a particular geo-history that cannot be confused with the collective memory of someone who lives in Iran or China. Even the very medium, the material support of the text, is often radically alien from what some readers might be accustomed to (see Kirby in this volume). One need only recall that for extended periods of time, from antiquity and often down to our own age, literature has been written literally in stone, on wax tablets, on papyri, in different alphabets, handed down orally, and most recently may exist only in electronic format.

Here, translation itself becomes a topic of analysis, spurring reflection on the role it has played over time in determining the modes of transmission and incorporation of literary works in the weave of canons from different countries, across continents and centuries (see Venuti in this volume). We must confront the fact that, by and large, the majority of students cannot realistically be expected to read canonical works, however defined, from other cultures in the original languages, and that therefore their interrelation with the literary text must occur in a translation. The question of the relationship of the literary text to the literacy of the intended audience plays into social and pedagogical specificities and language registers of the society of provenance of the text as well as those of the target language (Guillory 1995: 238, 241). One need only recall that classics such as Homer's *Odyssey*, Dante's

Divine Comedy, and the Bible have become standard bearers of world literature in translation, in fact through numerous translations and redactions within the same national language. Thus the question that canon formation compels one to ask is: why is a given, and to all effects "foreign," work translated, and how is it presented to a specific society, to us? Who translated it and when? And how does it compare/contrast with works written by, say, a writer of one's own country and deemed important in the receiving culture at this juncture in time? And what supporting materials help to explain the relevance of this particular canonical import?

These considerations lead us to confront, at both the theoretical and the pragmatic levels, the issue of the definition of literature itself. A proven approach is to draw up a list of features, or qualities, which a literary work is traditionally expected to embody. The discussion about whether literature represents in various guises universal or eternal values has a very long and tormented history. We have all been exposed to certain notions which have themselves become canonical at different periods in history. These include: literature is essentially an aesthetic construct, or it embodies the spirit of the people, or is concerned with humanity's tragic destiny, or represents the story of freedom, or what lasts in a transient world. Each of these ideas, however, implies a metaphysical assumption about reality itself, one which cannot be ignored (Carravetta 1996, Anderson and Zanetti 2000: 341). The emergence and great influence in Euro-American academic and literary groups of post-colonial studies, feminisms, ethnic studies, and neo-historicism has had a salutary impact in cutting down to size the notion of a canon with a capital C which pretended to speak for the whole of humanity, and has introduced texts previously ignored or literally expunged from reading and publishing lists.

An unintended consequence of this ideological swerve, however, is that there is now a generation, perhaps two, which has never read Percy Shelley or Victor Hugo or Thomas Mann. In the case of Hugo, for example, it is important to know that if we wish to understand the evolution of the French literary canon, he sits at the juncture between romanticism and nationalism, and that Baudelaire's early career was marked by what Harold Bloom would call the "anxiety of influence" vis-à-vis this literary giant. One need only re-read Hugo's *Contemplations* (1855) to assess the range and breadth of this monumental figure. This was a time when poets in countries such as Italy, France, England, and by extension in some of the newly independent countries such as Greece, Argentina, and Mexico, were considered *vates*, prophets and speakers of and for the people of that particular country. Their inclusion in a world literary canon would have to downplay their more "nationalistic" texts and emphasize their more "universal" themes. But as claims to universality have in recent history also been considered, if not ethnocentric, then certainly Eurocentric, some formerly canonical authors – such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Alfred (Lord) Tennyson, Gabriele d'Annunzio, Theodore Dreiser, and Émile Zola – have faded from our attention.

This situation may be seen as symptomatic of how a canon, and a universalist world canon in particular, changes over time and not only functions as analogue to internal, national traditions, but also supports and exemplifies concerns which the previous generations did not and could not have. A case in point is the appropriation and institutionalization of the Classics from antiquity. There have been distinct

periods in which a culture has turned back to ancient times in order to construe literary values for its present and future generations. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Italian humanism rediscovered, translated, and set as canonical standards texts from the Greek and Roman traditions. Literature here was conceived not only as a strictly literary and aesthetic model, but as an ethical and civic one as well. This process established the premises for what would become the "quarrel between ancients and moderns" in the following century, as European cultures dealt with the stimuli coming from interfaith clashes, growing secularization, the opening up of the "New World," and the nascent scientific revolutions. There were of course occasional radical voices that reached beyond the Greco-Roman *oekumene*, such as Pico della Mirandola (1463–94), who would have wished to include in his syncretic canon texts from Persia, the Hittites, the Chaldeans, the Sumerians, the Alexandrians, and so on. Similarly, during the heyday of Romanticism, it was the medieval texts which were the rage and influenced to no small degree the values, the styles, and the ideologies of the early nineteenth century. The rise of the novel during the Enlightenment period displaces the epic to some extent, allowing for various levels of subjectivity to be explored in more detail and draw attention to the contemporary as opposed to the perennial. The question is crucial when dealing with literatures from countries which did not have a parallel evolution in this particular genre, once again placing the onus on the critic who wishes to offer a representative palette of the prose production in various extra-European contexts.

During the epoch of nation building, the Classics were reintroduced and interpreted in terms of what they said about nationalistic tenets, such as love of country, language, territory, allegiance to the people – *das Volk*, *el pueblo*, *la raza*, *il popolo*. Here again one might find such concerns in the literature produced in countries which achieved statehood only in the twentieth century. Much more all-encompassing were the ideologies behind the grand projects ushered in by Columbia and Harvard universities in the 1920s and 1930s, though retrospectively one would be hard put to find sustained references to texts such as the *Ramayana*, *Sundiata*, *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, or the *Norse eddas*. Yet, despite these constant revisions and often profound revolutions, clearly a world literature canon remained essentially a Eurocentric canon until well into the 1970s (see Puchner in this volume).

Given the present state of the world as marked by globalization, the internet, porous borders, and the waning distinction among disciplines, political ideologies, and indeed between fact and fiction, the national literature canon has been challenged. As a result there is an emphasis on a transnational and transhistorical process of formation and reformulation in which subjectivities are transacted and languages, value systems, and specific codes remapped. A similar position has been advanced by Matthew Potolski (2006: 216), who goes on to argue that what need to be introduced into any notion of a canon are "dispersed, cosmopolitan, and self-selected" communities no longer anchored in the dominant triad of race, geography, and language. We might add, in view of the past three or four decades, that there is less support today for the multiculturalist claim that every culture or subgroup must necessarily be validated under the aegis of a vague egalitarian world view, needing to be represented in the spectrum of, say, American or British literature as the

mainstream norm or *metron* of validation. The reason is that this notion of challenging and redrawing the canon essentially plays by the same rules, and in a sense obeys the same process. Vindicating a rhetoric of “we were here too,” this approach may have had its reason for being during the Cold War years, where much revisionism took center stage, but in the twenty-first century seems to have lost its edge. Paul Lauter has convincingly argued that the multicultural paradigm is being replaced by “immigration shock,” (Lauter 2010: 108) suggesting that it may be time to recalibrate the measuring rods implicit in canon formation.

A canon of world literature must reflect on this critical paradigm shift. Perhaps the concerns of identity ought to shift not to difference but to multiplicity, to hybridity, and in more practical terms, given the role of translation as an encounter, to content, to processes of assimilation, and to variable modes of relation. A conceptual and ideological transformation of a world literature canon occurs when, besides the introduction of previously unknown or ignored texts, the texts of the established canon are reinterpreted in view of a different set of issues. A text such as Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* not only shows power relations between ruler and subjects, but also the early manifestation of a colonial attitude toward non-European peoples. Studies in early modern European literatures have amply demonstrated the heterogeneous, multilayered presence of subjects which embody *avant la lettre* the condition of hybridity, dotted as they are with mestizos, mulattoes, creoles, and other multiracial, multi-ethnic characters. In this sense, a world literature canon has always existed, though it has not always been visible under the screening protocols of a national or even nationalistic literature.

A world literature canon could well begin with travel narratives and focus on travel itself, on how notions of origins and authenticity have been no more than transactional categories which *homo viator* has used as symbolic currency. Travel – of ideas, texts, values, ultimately people – ought not be considered a mere genre among others, but as an underlying modality of human existence itself. Only recently construed as a critical concept whose application extends beyond its use in economics and sociology, migration lends itself to the study of the transmission of texts and their metamorphoses through time and place, for “migration is the engine of history” (Carravetta 2004). Focusing on the different types of travelers who have criss-crossed the planet, one finds not only the more studied exiles, work migrants, refugees, and expatriates, with all the symbolisms they imply. One would find also explorers, missionaries, conquerors, escapees, spies, evacuees, soldiers, diplomats, reporters, Roma, vagabonds, traditional nomads, and so on. As literary characters, these travelers highlight a variety of interactions among languages and peoples, ethical values and world views. One has to go beyond the formula “migration literature,” which would consign certain texts to a typology wherein we can read of a negotiation between two locales, or focus on the inner drama of a character who has been uprooted and now must find some substitute real or ideal land to recompose an identity of sorts. The suggestion being made here is that literature itself, and world literature in particular, is, at bottom, an experience of migration, that is to say, of transposition, a moving from place to place linguistically, existentially, socially. The traveler brings worlds together, or at least links them within a more fluid conception of the one planet we inhabit.

The notion that literature as migration is most apt at creating or recreating a world canon draws strength from the fact that during the past several decades avant-garde texts have been more widely accepted, fueling much of that amorphous notion of the postmodern which critics still grapple with. Equally, the notion of the literary itself has been expanded and made more malleable, receptive to forms which older canonical ideas would have excluded. In other words, besides poems, plays, and novels, today we include texts written in various vernaculars, transcribed oral literature, biographies and autobiographies, memoirs, historical documents, hyper-texts, and a variety of travelogues. The idea is to make the inevitably censoring function of canon formation not a tool for literary ideologies of inclusion and exclusion, but rather a compass for selected itineraries ever open to engage the texts which literally and metaphorically speak a different language, manifest forms utterly new to us, and compel a humbling self-critique. Depending on where one is located on the globe, a good collection of travel literature can set the premises for itineraries at various levels, allowing for landings which can permit the retrieval of texts from lesser-known cultures, and emphasize the transmission of ideas and values which literature always bears along. A focus on traveling texts can allow for the relaunching of a classic, as well as for the introduction of a masterwork into a different culture where it might plant new roots or graft itself onto previously unquestioned or ossified productions. Owen Lattimore's old anthology *Silk, Spices and Empire* (1968), for example, contains excerpts not only from Ptolemy and Pliny, but also and most importantly from writers from "the other side," as it were, who were cultural mediators in their countries, such as Chang Ch'in, Ch'ang Ch'un and Ibn Battuta. Grounded on need, desire, and the lure of the different and the distant, this literature makes the entire world – or at least that huge section of it which extends some 4,000 miles across what today would be several countries – the locus of its existence and exchange, offering a window into radical cultural diversity, intertwined ideologies and transient commonalities.

With this new orientation, which implicitly includes translation and the crossing of a variety of social borders and epistemological frontiers, we may then seek to locate the existence of world canons lodged already within national literatures. Here, one could profitably take inspiration from the study of pre-modern societies through that masterwork which is Ernst Robert Curtius' *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948), where notions of topics, rhetoric, metaphors, philosophy, and symbolism become the key elements to map out and interpret the endless interpenetration of societal values above and beyond (and before) national literatures and ethnicities. An important factor here is to think of literature as a rhetorical construct which speaks *about*, and relates *to*, non-literary concerns. As such, literature both represents and creates worlds, suggesting alternative modes of understanding. To stay with the present, Richard Perez, for example, has persuasively argued that Latino/a Literary Theory has, over the course of several decades, "invented new modes of imagining the American experience," reminding us "of the limits and possibilities of American democracy" (Perez 2010: 299). A similar position has been argued for African American literature already since the 1970s, where the contribution of religious, political, and musical values to the American canon extends its roots across the Atlantic, and not just to Africa. In this sense, a world

canon links attitudes and perspectives which are no longer that distant in time and space or, and most importantly, that "foreign."

The notion of "traveling theory" (Said, 1983) is already available to strengthen this view. In fact, all national literatures ought to be rethought in this way. To give but an example, the critic who wishes to include writers such as Adonis, Elias Khoury, Naguib Mahfouz, and others whose original language is Arabic would have to contextualize in part the fact that these writers before they become accessible in English have struggled within their national or pan-national canons to revitalize their vernacular and were caught in the throes of parallel, but not identical, processes of canon formation and reformulation. Arabic literature has long been canonized under the aesthetic value of *adab*, a term that includes *belles-lettres*, but which for centuries has also meant educational literature, propriety, *Bildung*, even "*humanitas*." Clearly, here the aesthetic and the ethic were interwoven, and literature was presumed to touch upon the "spiritual." But, under successive stages of globalization, writers have been exposed to multiple non-Arabic forms of thinking and writing, and the national canons have had to make adjustments. One need only think of the huge influence of Persian and, later, Turkish literature. Once again, translation surges to the forefront as a key element in the establishment of any canon, whether national or world. The latest stage of Arabic literature, writes Nadia Al-Bagdadi, is characterized by "dispersion," (2008: 451) and issues of intertextuality, migration, and reconceptualization of any value expressed in the writing itself demand new critical approaches, a different hermeneutics of culture.

A world canon can therefore be reconstructed in any given semester by a critic/educator who rests for a while in the oasis of the classroom, sets up a flexible methodology, and directs his or her students toward endless heterologies and possibilities of understanding, none of which is or can ever be the last word.

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