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The Value of Endorsing Great Books

Mukesh Williams
Professor, Soka University, Japan

To valorize specific texts, and present them as an embodiment of human culture, assumes a common standard of literary taste. When books move through an endorsement of their literary value, they become powerful representations of a canon. But great books have to be read and reread. There is no escape from the fact of reading.

Today in a post-canonical age we still need both a literary "aesthetic" and "cultural" value to understand authoritative or populist texts (Damrosch 135). The Enlightenment emphasis on universal aesthetics of literature and modern emphasis on the politics of literature are two perspectives of the ideology of canon making. Both cultural relativism and postmodernism have eroded Hume's universal boundary of taste. The formalists endorse free imagination and literary value. The communitarians see texts as culturally loaded repositories of cultural knowledge. The postmodernists find no value-free position outside the framework of culture. So today we emphasize political identity more than literary aesthetics in canon formation.

Literature has the power to free us from bondage, help us to enter the skin of civilizations, and create a parallel world of aesthetic pleasure and significance. Literature may arise from many social factors, but the literary text must interact with the reader in profound ways.

Reading is an individual enterprise. Great works of literature bring to us the distilled experience of humanity which rise as unbiased "delicacy of imagination" (Hume 16). But what we read also comes to us from prescribed anthologies and textbooks created by university professors or literary elites.

Books become classics and classics acquire the force of a canon. Canons are created by literary assumptions, consensus, representative values and taste forming groups that force canon makers to believe in their veracity. Canons determine university syllabi, define anthologies, create departments and give jobs. Ideological attacks on the canon or call for their expansion are often connected to an altered demography, connected to identity politics and a desire to create a tolerant and just world.

We saw in the 1980s and 1990s canon wars in America when some wanted to teach a specific text, others to expunge it, and yet others to teach the conflict itself. American canon wars had some reverberations in Europe and Asia but by the time they arrived in these regions, they were already over.

We saw the rise of pre-colonial canon in India in the early nineteenth century, colonial canons in the twentieth century and Indian English canon in the post-1980s. The Anglophonic debates on literary canons usually dealt with revision or expansion. The German debates on canonicity were more ontological investigating the nature, mechanism and maintenance of the canon (Hartling 4).

Expanding the canon may be good only if such expansion is based on excellence not privilege. Expanding the canon by expunging old texts may be a problem. The question that remains: should canonical revision be guided by social justice or aesthetic value? The Germans tried to escape the question by investigating the principles by which canons develop., sustain themselves and disappear. Goethe and Schiller created the German canon to promote national identity (Gorak 545). Today German scholars are talking about emerging digital canon. The first MLA session in Chicago on canon in the 1970s (1973) dealt with questions of individual identity. In 2020 we see an emergence of a Far-Right canon with William Pierce (*Turner Diaries*, 1978, founder of National Alliance) and Jean Raspail (*The Camp of the Saints*, 1973) writing dystopian and racist novels.

Origins

Most canonical writings begin in religious sanction. Dominant canons carry cultural and political authority. Canon implies not only rule and list but also norm, pattern, model and interaction. (Thomassen 9). In the west the religious canon centered upon the Bible. In the nineteenth century canon became both literary and nationalistic, often excluding ethnic texts. Being excluded from the canon meant oblivion. If you were not published, you were not read.

MELOW aspires to give significance to ethic literatures in the English language, the lingua franca of global liberal academia. So, to bring ethnic representation on world stage the translation-industry must work hard. Translating cultures and placing them in ethnic canons bring them into the classrooms. It is believed that ethnic texts improve multi-ethnic understanding and reduce misunderstanding.

In the last decade American Amazon and Internet have globalized discussions of literary canons and the texts they promote. Kindle tablets now bring to you the Greek canon, the Latin Canon, the Sanskrit canon, the Pali canon, the Chinese canon, the Buddhist canon, the Pali canon, the colonial British canon, the post 1980s Indian canon, the regional language canon. We do not have time to read all canonical works in one lifetime. This is a regret.

Prescribing a canon and making money from selling canonical texts was done by ancient libraries. Today digital libraries and universities do the same. Ptolemy's The Great Royal Library of Alexandria (during the second and third century BC) functioned as publisher, bookstore and library housing over 400,000 books. The Library recommended exemplary books to be read by students. It made money by selling canonical texts which they produced in-house. It had its first library catalogue and data warehouse procuring canonical texts from docking ships. Later Roman rhetorician Quintilian used the Alexandrian canon to provide a reading list of style, models for imitation and knowledge references.

Ancient canons selected religious and moral texts which had little scope for change. The Chinese canon or jing (tying together with silk books of great reverence) had six classics— Poetry, Documents, Rites, Music, Changes and The Spring and Autumn Annals. It was called the Confucian canon. It was burnt in China during 1973-74, accused of prompting elitism, exploitation, hierarchy and status quo. Only after the Cultural Revolution in 1989 Confucius canon was restored. The tripitakan Buddhist canon contained the recorded teachings of the Buddha in Pali. They continued to be schematized and debated later.

Moving away from a dominant canon and creating a minority canon can be helpful. It can boost publication of marginalized texts, increase readership and bring revenue. MELUS shares this history. But new canon running parallel to established canons must not compromise on aesthetic excellence, which they often do.

1960s to 1990s America

The American social movements in the 1960s criticized the sexist, racist and ethnic biases in the western literary canon and took it to the university classrooms. Expanding the canon meant attack on canonical "values" and "makeup." It meant making it more "inclusive" and "representative" by bringing in marginalized writers—female, minority, historically elided, and oppressed groups. The revised canon was not debated (Lautier, *Heath Anthology*). It is

somewhat debatable if the aesthetic quality of literature can be measured by its representativeness.

The exercise of expanding the canon raises a question: Is it possible to create a "democratically inclusive canon" by dismantling an existing one? To make a canon mirror nationalist sentiment is often a right-wing agenda (Guillory 46) and we do not like it.

The 1990s made America more multicultural. The neoconservatives and the postmodernists got mixed with multicultural groups and identity politics. American literary canon became "a wicked myth" that endorsed "oppression of minorities" (Kermode 15). Even "aesthetic pleasure" that qualifies a literary text to become canonical was considered "necessary" but not "an obvious requirement" (Kermode 20).

Reading literature means we still care about the world, we still feel the pleasure in honest reading without prescription and ideology. Often canons erase people like the Native Indians, Dalits or minorities. Macaulay took the Indian canon out of its context by undermining Sanskrit and Persian literatures and claiming the supremacy of English literature. He created a cultural amnesia where Sanskrit and Persian texts lost their popularity.

Abrams, Mirror and the Lamp

In the 1970s when I was studying literature in India it was an age of innocence. The School of Resentment—Marxist, Afro-American, New Historicist, Feminist, Post-Structuralist and Post-colonialists—looking for class, race, bias, gender, sexuality, language, history and empire in literature had not arrived. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) had not arrived either. Indian teachers had not tasted the joys of orientalist discourse on India. There was some inkling of the presence of the Empire in the critical theory of M. H. Abrams' *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953). In the book Abrams argued that from the beginning of criticism to the Romantics, literature was seen as an intellectual reflection of the real world, a kind of mimesis (Abrams 32). But with the coming of the Romantics in the nineteenth century, literature began to be seen as a lamp, a light emanating from a writer's soul that illumines the world. The *Mirror* saw four literary paradigms through which to study literature: the mimetic which saw a work of art as imitating real world and human experience: the pragmatic which understood the effect of art work on the audience: the expressive which

explored the relationship of art work with its producers: and the objective which saw the relationship between different parts of the artwork (Abrams 6-29). In the 1970s Abrams got involved in debates about the "unsolvable contradictions" of deconstruction and humanistic criticism: he felt that poetic theories discredited theorizing itself (Abrams 29). But our world continued to be innocent.

Plato, Aristotle and Value of Poetry

Greek philosophical assumptions about literature continued to shape canonical discussions well into the twentieth century. In his ideal state Plato did not allow literary canon to exist as he privileged philosophy over poetry. Aristotle reversed the equation and made poetry superior in value to philosophy. Theology was considered divine poetry during the middles ages and its value increased. The sublimated self of the poet became important (Longinus).

Biblical Canon as Reflection and Reality

The Bible introduced the mirror reflection to prepare us to understand reality--"for now we see only a reflection as in a mirror, then we shall see face to face…" (1 Corinthians 13:12). The reflection prepares for direct observation, but the reflection alters observation. Literature does the same. The Italian poet Dante (1265–1321) used the mirror metaphor in Divine Comedy (1308-20) to capture the distilled experience of a vision almost forgotten:

> I am like one, who sees in dream, and when the dream is gone an impression, set there, remains, but nothing else comes to mind again, since my vision almost entirely fails me, but the sweetness, born from it, still distils, inside my heart. (Paradiso Canto XXXIII: 49-145).

The sweetness of good literature emerges from visual metaphors—the hellfire of Inferno and inner turmoil of Purgatorio.

Auerbach's Figural Representation

Erich Auerbach's *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* brings out the unique fate of each individual in poetry. In *Mimesis* he connects human representation and fulfillment to literary history. His genealogical model was based on literary representation. It helped us to understand the short story and epics from Homer to literary Moderns. Auerbach (1892-1957) helped us to see an organic and historical connection between works in different centuries.

Canons are deeply connected to language or philology. Language is used to both center and decenter cultural texts. Auerbach saw a close connection between philology and ideology in Nazi Germany. The introduction of new anti-humanistic and anti-Biblical legends like blood, volk, and soil created new origin of western civilization along racist, anti-Semitic and nationalist lines. Such conceptions eliminated the Old Testament from the Christian canon and implicitly elided European civilization. Both *Figura* (1938) and *Mimesis* (1946) were responses to the European crisis in Germany.

Arnold's Touchstones Method

The misuse of language and subjectivity in selecting vocabulary was understood by Mathew Arnold (1822-1888). Arnold found the historic or subjective value of literary work fallacious and introduced the touchstone method. He compared selected poetic passages from great writers like Homer, Sophocles, Dante, Milton and Goethe with passages from new writings.

Leavis 'The Great Tradition (1948)

Leavis (1895-1978) was a great force from the 1920 through the 1970s in creating the English canon. He changed our understanding of English literature. He gave the study of literature a professional tone tracing English poetry from the Metaphysical like John Donne and not from the Romantics like Wordsworth. Leavis believed that an ideal critic is an ideal reader who reads and rereads a text and then acquires full command of the literary text and ability to interpret from different angles. When we expand literary assumptions, we enter a world of belief and ideology. He imagined the great tradition of the English novel that could only include Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad in in it, but not Dickens. Dickens lacked the "mature standards and interest" of Conrad (except *Hard Times*). Leavis ' canon now seems conservative and moral, but it was a force to reckon with.

T.S. Eliot and Tradition

Leavis by emphasizing the Metaphysical poets, critical disinterestedness and poetic independence followed Eliot. For Eliot (1888-1965) canon functioned through the classics and embodied universal and orthodoxy values. Canon was tradition itself. He symptomized the fragile nature of human existence with hopeless metaphors of rebirth and resurrection. Homer, Dane and the troubadour poets of the Middle Ages were canonical for Eliot. Modern writer should write with literature in his bones and escape from personality (Tradition and the Individual Talent, 1919). But it is for the minor writers to persevere and keep the flame of orthodoxy alive.

Cultural Study of Literature, French Anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu (1913-2002)

Both Leavis and Eliot gave the text social acceptance and institutional endorsement. Bourdieu believes that a work does not become canonical by itself but through a power struggle where social agents fight for legal control of a text. Publishers, biographers, literary historians, translators and university professors all create canon by privileging art and literary texts. A canon is ideology, political interest and values of an elitist class.

Brooks 'Form and Content and Wimsatt's Intentional Fallacy

The ideology of the canon cannot take away the pleasure of reading and the structure of the text. It is not possible to summarize a poem and still retain its meaning. The meaning of a poem lies in its very form. There is no substitute to a good reading of a poem. But then is the language of poetry the "language of paradox," or the "language of the soul?" (Brooks, 1973 3).) We should not look for what the writers meant to say in a text but go to the text and measure our conclusion based on the literary devices used. The 'design 'or 'intention 'of the author is not available nor 'desirable 'as a standard to judge the success of literary art (Wimsatt and Beardsley, 1946 468-488). Archibald's McLeish (1892-1982) in "Ars Poetica," a 1926 spin on Horace's Art of poetry 1 AD, says:

> For all the history of grief
> An empty doorway and a maple leaf.
> The image and metaphor explain it all.

Harold Bloom (1930-2019) and Aesthetic Experience

Today we see ulterior motives in literature, exclusion in a text, discrimination in translation. We measure the value of literature by judging if it contributes to social justice. We do not want to overhear ourselves in reading aloud, in observing changes in ourselves, in traversing seamless paths between life and death, between reality and artifice. We do not see poetry as "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" or "emotions recollected in tranquility" (Wordsworth Preface to Lyrical Ballads, 1800). Today poetry is seen as imperialist view of the world (Said, Orientalism). In literature we look for a message, a motive, a misdemeanor. (Harold Bloom's Warning to the World Stanley Fish October 19, 2019). Are we "destroying all intellectual and aesthetic standards in the humanities and social sciences" (Bloom)?

German Debates

Debates about literary canon follow social, ideological and linguistic compulsions and often lack interaction amongst linguistic groups. There is a need for closer dialogues between Anglo-American, German and Indian canon formation to understand historical, social and archeological processes. American canon debates were more passionate based on reorganizing the canon while continental debates were detached, focused on the archeology and genealogy. The Indian debates followed the process of redefining the canon emphasizing nativist and nationalist sentiments and at others elitist and global. The German debate on canon was more detached and interrogative observing shifts from print to digital media and elites to. They were quick to see changes in society and technology and gave new directions to the process of canon making.

In Germany from the 1960s to 2000s deutschdidaktik or method of teaching language and contemporary literature, youth literature and functional literature were debated. Teaching world literature was ignored. American discourse on canon dealt with redefining the canon and including world literature. The different ways of dealing with the pedagogy of canonical literature between the Anglo-American and German require an intense dialogue between the two. The dialogue will enrich canonical debates in both America and the Continent.

Henry Derozio (1809-1831)—A New Aesthetics

Derozio felt that a literary canon must select aesthetically satisfying works which have a moral purpose. Texts should give hope and happiness. The despondency of the English Elizabethans and Romantics must give way to devotional mysticism of the Sufi and Bhakti. This could create a syncretistic culture and bridge the gap between adversarial communities. He felt literature should not be art for arts 'sake but used in the service of the nation. The strong anti-status quo position of the Romantics, especially their criticism of the policies of the British government, the position of the Anglican Church and the exclusionary politics of the English elite, was used effectively by Bengali intellectuals to create their discourse against colonialism. His manifesto on new aesthetics asked the poet to elevate the moral and intellectual nature of men in society (*India Gazette*, January 22, 1830). He felt that much of English poetry written by Milton, Shakespeare, Dante, Burns, Byron, Shelley, Wordsworth and Campbell tended to be despondent when life itself was "invested" with "buoyancy and elasticity." He argued that most of English poetry up to now has flowed through "poisonous

channels." It was time that it opened new springs and engaged the mind in "voyages" of "discovery and "happiness." In 1828 Henry Derozio wrote a poem "The Harp of India" imagining a country which needs to be free:

> Where is that glory, where that reverence now?
> Thy eagle pinion is chained down at last,
> And groveling in the lowly dust art thou!

Derozio delved into the past to recreate the glory of a nation "groveling in the lowly dust" and implicitly wished the "beauteous halo" and godliness to return. He did not see literature as art for art's sake but in the service of the nation. He wanted a new aesthetics which could provide harmony and sweetness and create music uniting diverse religions and races.

In an essay in *India Gazettee* on January 22, 1830 called "On the Influence of Poetry" Derozio felt that poetry purified "the springs of life," and improved "man's moral and intellectual nature." His belief in the improvement of man's moral and intellectual nature was based more on the ideas of the Scottish philosopher David Hume.

Hume, Standard of Taste

David Hume (1711-1776) in his eighteenth-century essay, "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757) identified a standard of aesthetic taste and morality to recognize classics. Ethical issues function within the realm of action and responsibility. The "rules of composition" are based on "general observation" which are "universally" pleasing in "all countries and in all ages." Therefore, literary texts that transcend time and place and please readers to become great books. Homer's Iliad, Thucydides 'The History of the Peloponnesian War, (431-404 BC), Sophocles 'Oedipus Rex (429 BC), Virgil's Aeneid (29-19 BC) become classics of our times.

Hume goes on to add the five fundamental skills that a critic must possess to evaluate canonical works and they are 1. delicacy of imagination, 2. practice, 3. comparison, 4. lack of prejudice and 5. good sense. Of these five Hume singles out delicacy of imagination and lack of prejudice to be paramount. He gives the example of *Don Quixote*. Sancho Panza narrates a story of his two kinsmen who opined after drinking hogshead, or wine in a cask, that it was good. The first kinsman said it had a taste of leather and the second that it had a

taste of iron. They were both ridiculed for their judgement. But when the hogshead was emptied, they found "an old key with a leathern throng tied to it" (Hume 15). The ability to detect unexpected taste of ingredients, in this case in hogshead, only a few possess. Unlike hogshead, a work of art cannot be emptied to find evidence of literary taste. Hume adds that a delicacy of imagination is an elitist enterprise, a matter of perception, which few possess. The third skill of a critic is the ability to compare, and through comparison appreciate beauty, perfection and uniqueness of a tragedy with Oedipus Rex or King Lear. A critic can be prejudiced by his inclination and environment. He must see himself as a man in general and give up his individual being by destroying his imagination. Hume believes that prejudice perverts sentiments and therefore we must destroy ourselves to appreciate the best artistic works of mankind. A work of art becomes a classic by passing through political, cultural, technological and institutional changes. Great art liberates us from specificity. It provides us with true self-knowledge. It is our duty, our moral obligation, to appreciate, understand and discuss classical works and not allow them to disappear. Good taste of selecting a classic will help us to preserve civility and graciousness (Hume 15, 16).

Conclusions

1. Debates on traditional approaches to understanding and expanding canons in the Anglophonic world continue without providing new directions. But the pragmatic Germanic approach to the genealogy of canon formation takes into account new tendencies of the digital age.

2. New assumptions about art and aesthetics have created a post-modern critique of aesthetics. Benedetto Croce decentered the concept of beauty by prioritizing "expression," while Marshall McLuhan talked about the power of art to create a counter reality by exposing hidden facets of a society. Theodor Adorno felt that post-modern aesthetics must unravel the ways in which the culture industry appropriates and commodifies art and aesthetic experience. Since the 1980s Indian writing in English has matured and moved into different directions from the magic realism of Salman Rushdie to the deracinated prose of Stephanian writers, but still many of the Indian writers in English, canonized in *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing: 1947-1997*, do take up a moral position against their own elitist aesthetics and tradition. Much of Indian writing in English still endorses the didactic purpose tempered with love and reason as laid down by Derozio in the nineteenth century.

3. Literature creates the awareness to move from compulsiveness to consciousness. It identifies a throbbing beauty through its strangeness that repels us or absorbs us until we no longer find it strange. It creates an artifice of reality that after ages no longer seems contrived. It refurbishes the spirt and renews us. It invents the telos and agape of humanity and often confronts the regimental and regressive. Canons look for significance, some abiding human value, some literary merit that can stand the test of time. But oft- times canons are employed to create textbooks in the service of the nation, community or race prioritizing one group over the other.

4. A new interest in the canon has emerged through digital and computer technology. We call this the new media involving web, social networking, computer games and hypermedia. It is shifting authority from elites to the common users. (Manovich 176-83). The classics may still survive. Or the new digital media may become the touchstone to define literature and literary canon in the coming decades. It is hard to say.

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