

EDITOR'S NOTE

Canons and Canonization: From Theory to Practice

Thematic Cluster

The Canon

Edited by / Edité par Milan V. Dimić

The papers presented here, by Alvin Kernan, David S. Reynolds and myself, as well as the response by Anna Balakian, were presented on Friday, 27th of December 1991, as one of the special sessions at the annual meeting of the Modern Languages Association of America. Although these talks were subsequently edited by their authors, especially in terms of additional bibliographic and other references, no attempt was made to change the meaning of the contributions, to consider more recent publications, or to remove traces of their original oral delivery. While I acted as session leader and am now acting as editor of these statements, the initiative for the panel — as for so many other endeavours in *Comparative Literature* — came from Anna Balakian. From the beginning, we agreed that we should favour the formulation of a range of opinions instead of presenting a "unified" approach. That was also the understanding we had with the two distinguished colleagues, who were so kind as to join us, at short notice, for this occasion. We also agreed — and this was clearly indicated to the audience as well — that our brief papers are tentative explorations of a vast and complex question, explorations which do not pretend to be complete, definitive, and authoritative. Nevertheless, there are, I believe, some common elements in our otherwise very varied reflections about Canons and Canonization as expressed in the papers: we seem to agree, in principle, on the cultural value of Canons (changing and partial as they are), the importance of historical and critical inquiries into all questions related to Canons and their formation, and the impact of Canons on the teaching of literature.

Although the time and place allocated for the session were rather inconvenient (9:00 to 10:15 p.m. on the first evening of the MLA convention, in a somewhat remote and hard to find hotel suite), the audience was remarkably large. We had a very lively and prolonged discussion. Unfortunately, the improvised questions, comments, and answers were neither taped nor recorded in any detail. Therefore, I can only report on them here in a summary and subjective way. My most striking impression of the discussion was the strong opposition to all canons expressed by some members of the audience in measured, albeit clear terms; these colleagues were, in all likelihood, much more inclined to reject both past and present teaching canons than the four

speakers on the official programme. Nevertheless, it seemed to me that even colleagues having fundamental objections to canons agreed with the idea that they cannot be changed arbitrarily and instantaneously, because they are the result of a long and incessant interaction between various forces, some literary, others external to literature, and therefore the outcome of an ever evolving series of negotiations which take place under determined institutional and social conditions. There was also a shared opinion, I trust, that a better historical knowledge and understanding of the functioning of canons is quite essential and that new canon(s), which are arising today, broader and more sensitive to diversity as they may be, will inevitably create their own contradictions and blind spots. In any case, personally I found the debate most enlightening and invigorating; I hope that the reader may be similarly interested in the papers which follow.

M.V.D.

Why Study Canonization?

MILAN V. DIMIĆ

When asked why he was climbing Mount Everest — instead of doing something more useful or, at least, more pleasurable — the British Alpinist Edmund Hillary replied: "Because it is there." In the heady days of positivism, such an answer could have also been given to our question: "Why study canonization?" Today, although both literary scholars and critics of academe seem to be talking and writing about canons, their formation and function, I suspect that a different and more complex justification is required.

If the literary, and non-literary canon, is understood as a list of writing (and other matters) accepted to be of genuine and valid meaning and quality, corresponding to a general principle or to a set of criteria, then canonization means the admission to the list, authorization, and acceptance that something has canonical status. This broad definition, derived from standard handbooks such as *The Pocket Oxford English Dictionary*, can be rendered more specific. After being applied to the diverse lists of books in the Bible which were recognized in divergent and changing ways by the Christian churches, the term canon was first used in literature to signify the list of works accepted by experts as authentic texts of a particular author; more recently it came to denote those authors of world literature, of the European or some other cultural tradition, of a national literature, or of a subgroup (such as Black or woman writers) "whose works, by a cumulative consensus of authoritative critics and scholars, as well as by their conspicuous and continued influence on later authors, have come to be widely recognized as 'major'" (Abrams 20). The process by which an author or a work are durably recognized is called "canon formation" or, more colloquially, "canonization." Defined in this, or in any similar way, canons and canonization processes existed — and can be, to various degrees, observed and studied — in all known human communities, a long time before the very concepts of literature and aesthetics were coined and defined in certain Western societies of the eighteenth century.

Logically and pragmatically, the essential features of the phenomena involved in canons and their formation can be classified according to the opposition between inside and outside (belonging and not belonging); in the inside a similar opposition can be established between the centre and the periphery (margin). Both canons and canonization can be best seen in dynamic terms of almost perpetual change. Since the Russian Formalists (Ėjxenbaum, Tynjanov, Jakobson, and others) and the Prague School of Structuralism (Mukařovský,