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Historical Canons

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People whose product is ideas — teachers, intellectuals, writers — normally consider themselves discoverers of new understandings and organizations of reality, explorers in the history of ideas. They naturally reject the view that the production of ideas has transcultural regularities, similar to those found in the organization of the family or of religious life.

Recent attacks on the literary canon and on the wider canon of "great books" offer good examples of this ahistorical approach to intellectual activity. It has been assumed that the canon of great books is the product of a particular political and cultural system and that therefore canons as such can be eliminated from intellectual activity. Sometimes the attackers want simply to enlarge the old canon to include works of previously excluded groups, as in the attempts to improve the status of neglected women writers like Frances Burney or Kate Chopin. In other cases the effort is to establish a new multicultural canon that will exclude the old sexist and imperialistic writings. At the extreme, however, canonicity is itself treated as an intellectual rigor mortis blocking the free play of thought, limiting a stimulating infinity of texts to be continuously rearranged and organized in ever different ways. As Paul Lauter describes this view,

the very processes of canonization necessarily reflect the structure of social and political power and thus embed in their product an unrepresentative, if widened, set of texts organized even at best along hierarchical lines. Does it not follow, then, that the goal must be to abolish canons altogether and to substitute, rather, the authority of various individual or ethnic group experiences freed from the constraints of any official discipline? (158)

It is difficult not to sympathize with this intellectual Maoism. Who would not like to feel, especially in America, that the mind is totally free to confront an unmediated reality? But it is also impossible to ignore the fact that intellectual life in the more advanced cultures, including our own, has historically been organized around canons, and that most of human thought has not been free intellectual play but the interpretation of canonical works often treated as sacred truth. As Wolfgang Bauer puts it, in the majority of premodern cultures "the most important thoughts emerge in Hermeneutics" in which "not system but commentary is the legitimate form through which truth is approached" (Henderson 3).

The central place and function of canons in intellectual life appears most clearly and extensively in a number of older canons, Confucianism in China, the Jewish Bible, the Christian Bible, the Veda in India, the Koran in the Muslim world, Homer in the classical west, and Vergil later, Aristotle in the Middle Ages and the classics in general beginning in the Renaissance and continuing in some degree to the present. Shakespeare in the nineteenth century offers a recent complete model of establishing a canon. Canon making has been a standard feature of intellectual life, and the Confucian tradition, one of the oldest and the most thoroughly worked canons, offers a paradigm of the shape that thought takes in legitimating and interpreting a limited body of texts thought to contain the truth of existence. Lifetimes have been given to trying to interpret the smallest details of the Confucian canon, but the overall pattern still stands out sharply enough to reveal something about our own situation in regard to canons.

During the fifth century B.C. Confucius had been the spokesman in China for the values of morality and dignity in private life and in government, righteousness and loyalty, reinforced by correct rituals that would place a given individual in proper relationship with the cosmos and with his contemporaries. Die if necessary for principles. Concentrate on the problems of the world, while being properly religious. Faith in the possibilities of virtuous action. (Spence 59)

Moral example, generosity, obedience, thrift, hard work and education were prime values. Not an organized religion, though there were temples in which Confucius was sacrificed to, Confucianism was an ethos of self-improvement and service in which the cardinal virtue was *jen* or humanity, and the basic sins were opinionatedness, dogmatism, obstinacy and egoism. The patriarchal family was the central institution providing the model for all other social organizations and supporting the absolute rights of parents over their children, of husbands over their wives and of rulers over their subjects.

Confucius was a teacher, not a writer, and his life (551-479 B.C.) "plain and real" became a model for later ages. He resisted the temptation to abandon social life, "to herd with birds and animals," and mastered the six arts of culture (wen), ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy and arithmetic. Works he was believed to have edited — the "Five Classics": *The Book of Documents*, *The Book of Songs*, *The Book of Rites*, *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, and the famous *I Ching*, the *Book of Change* — were the center of intellectual discussion from early on and were officially canonized some centuries after Confucius's death.

In 136 B.C. Emperor Wu set up at court five Erudites of the Five Classics and in 124 B.C. assigned fifty official students to study with them, thus creating a de facto imperial university ... those with a Confucian education began to staff the bureaucracy. In A.D.

58 all government schools were required to make sacrifices to Confucius, and in A.D. 175 the court had the approved version of the classics, which had been determined by scholarly conferences and research teams under imperial auspices over several decades, carved on large stone tablets. These stele were erected at the capital and are today well preserved in the national museum in Sian. (Wei-Ming 123)

In the twelfth century A.D., Confucius's *Analects*, assembled from his students' lecture notes, like so many other classics, Aristotle and Saussure, for example, were joined with *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *Great Learning* and the words of Confucius's follower Mencius to form the "Four Books."

Cumulatively, these nine works [the Five Classics and the Four Books] were believed to contain the basic precepts needed for leading a moral life, and to offer a valid record of an earlier utopian period of Chinese history that had reached its apogee of enlightened government and popular contentment during the early Zhou dynasty, some fifteen hundred years in the past. (Spence 60)

Here was a canon, graven in stone, the center of education, the basis for civil service examinations, the official political theory, the still central point around which all intellectual life revolved. "Over the ensuing centuries this body of material was swollen by floods of commentaries, glosses, and reinterpretation, and modified in subtle ways by Buddhism and other types of Chinese philosophy" (Spence 60). The disparate texts were edited and annotated, their unity and coherence demonstrated in numerous ways, their history written, passages memorized and quoted. Intellectual life in China consisted of interpreting the canonical texts, and in the long history of Chinese thought all the familiar positions of western thought appear in an attempt to adjust the canon to the changing social reality. Mencius, for example, was a Rousseau who found in man a "heaven-endowed nobility," while Hsun Tzu was an Augustine who found human nature evil and not often corrigible. Other thinkers metaphysicalized the Confucian world, interrelating all its parts as in a great chain of being; while others emphasized a Bergsonian vital energy; and still others found in the basic texts a justification for empiricism. There was a "New Text School" like our new-critical formalists who found meaning by analyzing the "subtle words" of the great texts, and an "Old Text School" much like our scientific philologists who emphasized the history of words.

The long Chinese intellectual history that centered in the Confucian canon is filled with wonderful names like the school at the White Deer Grotto, the "luxuriant gems of the Spring and Autumn Annals," the "Complete Library of the Four Treasures," and the famous meeting at Goose Lake Temple in 1175 when Lu Hsian-shan denounced Chu Hsi's empiricism in the name of moral idealism. Through it all — history, psychology, numerology, anthropocosmism, natural law, phonology and philology, activism and passivity — the Five Classics and the Four Books provided the basis for intellectual and social

life. At times the system ossified, only to be broken loose and reinterpreted, but without disintegrating the canon. Even today, officially out of favor and denounced as authoritarian and conservative by young intellectuals, Confucianism and its canon remain fundamental to the Chinese "psycho-cultural construct," and there are those who still speak hopefully of a third epoch of Confucian humanism.

The Confucian canon provides a remarkable paradigm of all aspects of canon formation and how a canon functions in intellectual life over a period of time long enough to allow for a vast number of variations. Canons are not, the Confucian canon shows, for example, single books but encyclopedic collections of texts that in the first place do not have much to do with one another. The books of the *Bible*, the various epics that make up the *Veda*, or the Homeric poems assembled in *The Iliad* offer later examples of the same process. Once assembled, however, these books are treated as sacred texts, the words of the gods, the wisdom of ancient and more perfect times, the work of a man or men of original insights into the truth of things. Texts of this authority cannot be lacking in any sense, and interpretation soon demonstrates that the original works are cosmic in their comprehension, covering all that is known and everything that is. This comprehensiveness appears in an amusing form in the nineteenth-century proposition that a Shakespearean passage could be found on any subject conceivable. Canons, despite their diverse origins and chance assemblage are also said to be "well ordered and coherent, arranged according to some logical, cosmological, or pedagogical principles" (Henderson 106), in the way that, say, the diverse books of the Jewish and Christian Bibles have been shown by various theories to hang together in some orderly fashion. Even more importantly, canons are self-consistent, no matter how contradictory or at odds their various books and parts may be. They are also moral, profound, and significant in all their parts.

Most intellectual activity has had as its purpose the demonstration that the odd collections of books that make up most canons have the desired qualities of sacredness, profundity, comprehensiveness, coherence, freedom from contradiction, and so on. Most modes of intellectual activity such as classification, specification and categorizing, as well as distinction, definition and tabulation are strategies for supporting the major assumptions about the nature of the canonical works. The more pedestrian kinds of scholarly work such as textual editing and commentary as well as assembling concordances and indices, are no less in the service of assuring the perfection of the canon than are the various high-pressure interpretive devices such as the medieval four-fold method of reading — literal, moral, allegorical and anagogic — that have been developed over time to eliminate inconsistencies in the canon and demonstrate the universality of its reference. Most of what we loosely characterize as "scholarship" or even "thought" has developed to supply the required support

for the canons, often with extraordinary ingenuity. May I quote as a delightful example, the commentator on the Koran who faced with the many repetitions in the text transformed them dexterously into necessities by speaking of them as being like "the monotony of the desert landscape which has for the Beduins a charm of its own" (Henderson 187).

This is not, of course, the way in which we usually understand intellectual activity. The modern West has usually thought of intellectual activity as a history of ideas in which thought is pictured at the working face of reality, producing a series of new and still newer ideas, leading on into some unimaginable future of complete Truth. It may well be, of course, that thought as the interpretation of canonical texts belongs to older civilizations than our own, and that this way of developing interpretive methods and intellectual procedures no longer has a place in the scientific society of the modern West. If this is so, and it is what most people assume, the recent attacks on the Great Books, and their literary subdivision, have been historically inevitable, a final destruction of primitive thinking in which deconstruction revealed the contradictions in the texts, Feminism and Black social movements denounced the fatal limitations of the experiences covered by the canon, while Marxism exposed the pretensions to sacred origins, locating the source of the canonical books in power and ideology.

But canons may not be so entirely out of date as this view suggests. They are not, after all, a transient feature of human intellectual activity, but widespread and long lasting. Nor has canon formation stopped altogether, despite the growing hostility to authority, in modern, democratic, rationalist society. The works of Marx and Freud still constitute canonical bodies of texts, and the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, a machine readable database containing in regularized form all the major extant ancient Greek texts, shows not only the persistence of canons but the way in which electronic culture, far from eliminating such ancient ways of organizing knowledge, is capable of locking canons even more firmly into place in the future.

Thinking by means of interpreting a group of diverse texts assumed to have a high truth value has been such a consistent feature of advanced cultures that it seems unlikely that canons will disappear altogether. Assaults on the canon are themselves familiar moves in the intellectual game played around the central texts. The removal in the Reformation by Protestant divines of the apocrypha from the Old Testament canon, where the Catholic Bible, but not the Hebrew, located them, is not unlike recent attacks on the canon and canonicity. The disintegrative attacks on Homer in the eighteenth century and Shakespeare in the nineteenth offer other examples of the kind of revolutionary anti-canonical energies that have emerged again in our own time in deconstructionist theory and radical sexual and social politics. It seems to me not unlikely that our "canonicism" may in time have no more effect on the canon than the attacks

on the nineteenth-century commentators on Confucius who tried to discredit the Five Classics and the Four Books by pointing out that they contained two fundamentally contradictory systems of land mensuration.

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The Aesthetic Factor in Canon Revision: The Case of American Literature

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I think I am in an opportune position to contribute to the dialogue on the canon. Shaped politically by the sixties, I have been instinctively drawn to noncanonical literature for years and have devoted myself to the discovery of and elucidation on noncanonical writers. Some of my conclusions with regard to nineteenth-century American literature can be applied to other literatures and cultures as well.

The canon itself can be divided into three interrelated questions: 1) What is the relation between politics and literature? 2) What should be the objects of the literary critic's attention? That is, what should we explore in our research? 3) What is good literature, or can we even ask that question?

Lately, the discussion of politics and literature has been galvanized in the expression political correctness. There is the danger of stressing politically correct texts so much that other texts get thrown out altogether. Students often feel shortchanged in such cases. There is the typical case of the Ph.D. recipient mentioned recently in the *New York Times Magazine* who said he felt cheated because in graduate school he had been assigned Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* three times but *Moby-Dick* not once. And then there is the life story of a Guatemalan Indian as narrated at Stanford which is the life story of a Guatemalan Indian as narrated to the feminist writer Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. Some have been pointing out that this story does not at all truly represent the Mayan villagers, as it purports to, but is rather a projection of western radical views onto Latin American culture, since Rigoberta Menchu was a convert to the European radicalism she picked up in Paris.

A major challenge of multiculturalism is to identify and present those texts from other cultures that are truly representative, including those which have had a demonstrable, lasting influence. For instance, how much better informed would our politicians be if in college they had read the Koran, or the Upnishads, or the writings of Confucius, or stories and poems about traditional folk life in Eastern countries — that is, writings that define the mentality of different cultures and, indeed, of an increasing portion of the United States population. In teaching multiculturally there is little point in jettisoning the study of acknowledged Western classics as well. The aim of education should be the expansion of knowledge about *all* cultures, and one should not be taught at the