

Swags, Plains and Cranes: A Response to Adam Kotsko

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REJECTING THE CANON REQUIRES AN AMOUNT OF CULTURAL CAPITAL. THE DADAISTS provide an example from a century ago. They created a place for themselves in the canon of movements, the canon of avant-gardes, although they are probably more likely to be referred to, institutionally, in an art context than a literary one. Their success/failure is perhaps linked to them being largely 'straight white males', but their poetics were pretty queer. The canon is an idea, not a law, or stone. It exists as a historical construct, which students of literature perhaps see as moribund, but literature and history are not the enemy. Perhaps we should be more worried about what are canonical subjects and why, and the othering of Literature as a subject. Loving books gets queerer all the time.

I was sympathetic to both of the main aspects of Adam Kotsko's text: of wanting to connect with students; and with his own story, and feeling, about the canon. He seems to have come up with good solutions to his own problem, but, as he indicates, how does what his students are learning connect with those in the rest of the U.S.? Should it? Could it? Kotsko doesn't mention the name of any subjects: framing seems to me to be crucial in engaging students.

I have been asked to give a response along the lines of queer and contemporary poetry: to a large extent this will be an Australianist's perspective also. I write as a poet, scholar, examiner, sometime supervisor, but not otherwise, currently, as a teacher. Although I have some experience in teaching literature, the subjects I have taught have been primarily, expressly, diverse and contemporary. The problem seems to be, how do we deal with history?

If we are interested in literature, or have a specific interest within literature, we have our own more or less static, more or less mobile, notions of the canon, or canons: regardless of whether they are part of curriculum or not. They function as a means of communication. In poetry terms that might mean we can talk about Shakespeare or Emily Dickinson, Banjo Paterson or Judith Wright, to someone outside our field, much in the way a poet might talk about O'Hara or Eliot or Plath when they meet poets outside the Anglosphere: the canon of translation. We might think of these as vernacular or counter canons, but as the names I just cited indicate, they are likely to overlap with what is taught, and, the popularity of a text puts pressure on its likelihood of being taught.

If we are inside the academy we also have a subjective sense of what's being taught: what we were taught as students, what we teach, what our friends teach at other universities. We know that, generally, poetry is taught as poems photocopied in a reader, whereas novelists are taught by the book. This convention counters the possibility of the canonical poetry book, and also effects the status of the author: arguably 'Five Bells' is more canonical than Kenneth Slessor. Someone like Wright becomes a symbol of the Australian canon, without too much attention being paid to her poems. Biography (iconology?) takes over, which helps the poems stay in print.

In terms of the classroom, I think it would be an interesting exercise for students to argue for chosen poems to join a broader, transnational, Western if you like, or Anglophone, canon. This would require thinking about teaching the poem outside its immediate context. It would emphasise the separation that exists, the different orders of global cultural capital, between local and British and North American literatures.

There seem to me to be several possibilities for a tradition-based, or historicised, teaching of Australian poetry. None of these need focus on Great Books or Great Authors necessarily or exclusively.

1) A comparative traditions/poetics model, of which the West might be one (but the West can be broken down further); Chinese and Japanese poetics, for example, are clearly influential on contemporary Australian poetry.

2) The Anglophone tradition. This makes any aspect of Greek literature not a founding aspect but one of translation (and dialectic and exchange). The foundation of course goes back to England: a story of diaspora and morphing.

3) A history of writing in Australia as land. Again, issues of (Indigenous) translation, including the colonial history of translation, arise.

4) Diaspora and exile as historical aspects of literature. There are many ancient examples that deal with this theme, as well as examples of exiled writers. This approach need not of course emphasise settler experience (though it does complicate 'settler', as the term 'settler' suggests choice), as many Indigenous texts are about displacement. David Unaipon mentions arrival in Australia, as if drawing on a cultural memory tens of thousands of years long.

5) Poetry of the Self/Other. Much (if not all?) poetry deals with this dialectic in some way, whether the context is romantic lyric, narrative, dramatic or epic. Poetry forms might be read as othering different forms (think of verse versus prose poetry, or concrete or visual poetry).

6) Histories of writing and reading are also possibilities. This would of course include writing on things other than paper. Histories of interpretation.

7) Canon-making; anthologising. This could include histories of departure and arrival: what texts used to be canonical, why aren't they now? When did such-and-such first become anthologised? The benefit of such a subject would be assignments which required students to make their own canons/anthologies, something that at more advanced levels might become the basis of their own teaching.

8) History of the status/popularity of poetry, which would not I think have to be a history of decline!

This is largely a fantasy of course. There are few opportunities to teach poetry as a subject: mostly poetry is paid attention for a week or two in a more general literary, or creative writing subject. Much of the above could be applied, or adapted, to teaching literature, or Australian literature subjects. I also wonder if a poetry subject is an ideal. Increasingly it seems to me that teaching poetics, broad or narrow, is a potentially productive option. Histories of poetics. Comparative poetics. The poetics of Australian literature. Can we talk about Australian poetics as an other to Western poetics? Can we talk about canon poetics? How might a canonical case study be read as exemplary of the canon, or, as exceptional? Poetics de-emphasises the author, and demotes narrative and theme: they become an aspect rather than the representative aspect. It sends a

message: literature is art not stories. Poetics has the potential I think to provide a merger for literary study and creative writing. Poetics gives poetry a central role to play and makes its lack of commercial value irrelevant. Politicians, industry, news media: they all use poetics.

What about queer? Despite my editing *Out of the Box*, I have some resistance to the biographical model in a literary teaching context. We don't have the major gay and lesbian historical figures, associated with poetry, that the U.S. in particular has. But Australian poetry is as queer as any other national culture's! It deviates from English and North American poetry. It's about all sorts of non-normative attachments. Swags, plains and cranes. Crying rainbows in Martin Place! Queer is one way of approaching the limits of the canon. What queers the canon from without, from within? We can come up with a canon of queer poems if necessary (email me with or for suggestions); but to some extent I think queer wants to stay outside, wants not to be represented, wants not to be taught: or wants to undo teaching in some way. Queer cannot, I think, be made decorous: but neither, ideally, should the canon, or literature. Dada wasn't decorous either, but it became literature. Perhaps we need to stay alive to literature-as-an-other within literature, within the realm, or economy, of love.

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