

Had We but World Enough, and Time: A Response to Adam Kotsko

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ONE QUESTION I CAN NEVER QUITE ACCURATELY ANSWER IS THE FOLLOWING: WHAT IS the precise relation between books and the history of the present? Just how far do ideas (progressive or otherwise) shape the politics and actions of humanity, such that we live forever in their aftermath? Hegel's owl of Minerva, perpetually taking flight at dusk, tells us that wisdom comes later, that thought and history are led by events. But we know that many thinkers, Hegel himself included, have done far more than simply reflect on things, but have actively contributed to the very way we conceive of the world, the very frameworks and concepts and terms we use to describe our lives—for better or (often) worse. The 'Canon' question seems to me to oscillate very delicately between two major poles: firstly, what Kotsko describes as the simple fact of the desirable 'greatness' of the canon (as pleasurable—if sometimes difficult—works of art, as exemplars of the capacity of the human mind and heart), and, secondly, as texts that *must* be read in order to better understand the shape of the past and present. The question of who gets to read these texts is always central: the ruling class who have a possessive relation to everything also and predictably have a possessive relation to art and culture, all the more so if they believe it justifies or invigorates their current tawdry practices—why admit that you a vile, greedy human being when you can pretend to be the modern-day reincarnation of a Roman leader or Greek god?

In the type of school attended by 93 percent of the population in Britain, the Classics are almost completely neglected. Educational reform in the 1960s, which involved the near-abolition of grammar schools where Greek and Latin were taught to a select few who passed the 11-plus exam, included the phasing out of such subjects as education became more and more geared towards the supposed needs of a technical and vocational economy and society. Yet for those who wanted to (or were expected to) enter the most elite institutions, a classical education was still a requirement. This could only be acquired at a cost at private schools where confidence was taught alongside the sorts of knowledge deemed to benefit future rulers. The Canon is always a class issue. It is an issue of envy and deliberate exclusion, of cultural capital and state-enforced ignorance. It is also historically, as Kotsko notes, a question of auto-didacticism and public libraries, of the time to read and the time to reflect, all of which are being destroyed and eroded by those who govern.

For those deemed to be minoritarian or marginal, even if these groups are factually globally very large—that is to say, women and people of colour—the Canon is also presumed to be distant and irrelevant, even though many great works of literature are themselves responses to the Canon, and/or attempts to expand or create new Canons (or anti-Canons). But do we need to read the Canon in order to understand the responses to it? Can we read Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) without reading Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847)? Frantz Fanon without Jean-Paul Sartre? Chinua Achebe without Joseph Conrad or William Butler Yeats? In an ideal world, with infinite time, one would read everything at once, dispensing with claims about beginnings and selections, primary and secondary, originals and responses, overturning geographical hierarchies and outdated claims to superiority. If today we read Kant and Hegel for their philosophical genius, when do we stop such that we can then turn to the critical literature that traces how Eurocentrism and damaging conceptions of race follow from their work just as much as our thinking about space, time and dialectics? Which of their ideas, in the end, has had more impact on the way the world is? I do not have a straightforward answer to this. All I can think is that we must understand why those we both admire and oppose make the arguments that they do, and that to refuse to read something for fear of being 'corrupted' or 'tainted' or because it is written by a dead white man may mean that we do not understand how it is that dead white men continue to hold all the power, especially when some of these dead white men are very much alive and powerful in their current zombie reincarnations.

Kotsko states that in his expanded course on the Canon he includes 'contemporary works of scholarship that themselves count as "primary sources," with a preferential option for women—particularly women who aren't writing solely on "women's issues.'" This seems to me to be something of an

uncharacteristic slip in Kotsko's approach, celebrating only those works by women deemed not to be 'partial' or 'partisan'. Yet 'women's issues'—and what does Kotsko imagine here? Feminist criticism? Work that focuses on misogyny? That discusses female biology?—is hardly of minor interest to half of all humans, and should therefore be of interest to the other half too. A Canon that pertains to some fantasy of neutral masculine universality, even as it includes women and people of colour is still an exclusive endeavour: it makes an implicit claim that some topics (war? justice?) are more important than others (peace? childbirth?). What lies behind the construction of any Canon, whether classical or Biblical, postcolonial or philosophical, is perhaps a fear of structurelessness, a fear of the impossibility of having some kind of hold on an image of the world, the absence of a mirror. Kotsko suggests that any Canon is the starting point for 'reasoned deliberation', and I tend to agree, certainly in practice—we cannot carry out critique if we do not understand the parameters of an existing mode of thought. But again the question of the *time we have* comes back to haunt me: reading for the vast majority of people will always be a random hodgepodge of material, not an imposed elite, structured classical education, whether Biblical or classical, or scientific etc. How do we make our way through texts that were not written for us but shape our lives in obscure ways? With vigilance, with empathy, with critique. We might begin by asking—what is it that the ruling class would prefer you didn't read? And why, exactly, is that?

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