You Can Have Your Canon and Read It Too: A Response to Adam Kotsko

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I BEGAN PREPARING MY RESPONSE TO 'WHAT IS THE WESTERN CANON GOOD FOR?' BY compiling a list of quotes, from Kotsko's essay, under 'Questionable' and 'Agreeable' headings. Based on this rather primitive data collection, I would have to agree with Kotsko's main argument for the preservation (of a version) of the Western canon—on my list there are 4 'Agreeable' versus 3 'Questionable' passages. Despite this evidence, however, I remain ultimately unconvinced by Kotsko's argument, and feel sceptical about the role of the Western canon in tertiary education.

Kotsko's strongest argument for granting a central place to a canon of Great Books in an education program is his view that 'many of the texts [associated, however loosely, with the Western canon] stage the advent of a new idea'. This is clearly the case with the two texts that he has cited, and the capacity for instigating 'a new idea' can also be seen in many other Great Books: in, for example, Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1831), which one could describe, after Jacques Rancière, as the novel—in both senses of the word—entry of the mundane into the literary; or in the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé which, as Alain Badiou has it, is an important literary articulation of the idea of the event. So

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would it not be indeed beneficial to enshrine such thought-provoking texts in our curricula?

I also appreciate Kotsko's call for a 'truly inclusive canon', and agree with him that access to Great Books has provided, and continues to provide, working-class students with an intellectual form of resistance against socio-cultural hierarchies. I very much personally identify with Kotsko's self-description as a 'class-aspirational auto-didact', and I recall that studying George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) was one of the very few highlights of my otherwise miserable experience of attending a rough, patently underprivileged public high school in Brisbane. Great Books—irrespective of which particular works of literature are placed under this signifier—provide a space where the rich and the poor, the powerful and the marginalised, can participate, as equals, in the universal community of reading.

Reading over the last sentence of the above paragraph, I am alarmed by how easily I can mimic the discourse of liberal humanism. And it is due to my misgivings about this discourse, and regardless of the strengths of some of Kotsko's specific points, that I remain uncertain about his overall argument. I am not as surprised as Kotsko seems to be about Soviet communists' enthusiasm for the likes of Tolstoy—as Lenin himself, and then Pierre Macherey *à la* Lenin, have very clearly shown, Tolstoy's works*, if read dialectically*, provide a radical perspective on the ruling ideologies of the author's society. But can this perspective come via a prism offered to us by a Great Books framework? Does approaching a novel by Tolstoy—or, come to that, a collection of digital essays by a contemporary queer woman of colour—with an emphasis on the work's Greatness and its canonical status help us read that work as a critique of ideology?

I very much doubt it. I suggest that for a reading to show the literary text to be—in Kotsko's own words— 'a complex and heterogeneous document', we must avoid liberal humanist ideology. I have already cited Macherey's excellent reading of Tolstoy. Louis Althusser's staunchly anti-humanist theory of art, the source of Macherey's method, is one avenue for reaching an understanding of literature, canonical or otherwise, which breaks with a simplistic interpretation that merely affirms ideological assumptions. *Le Rouge et le Noir*, for example, can very easily be valorised as the first modern realist novel, praised for its ethical messages regarding crime and desire, and so on. But does this approach challenge dominant bourgeois ideologies of either Stendhal's society or our own?

I'd like to argue that if we are to appreciate the complexity of a literary text and, precisely as Kotsko would rightly like us to, see the work of literature as something with the capacity for 'the advent of a new idea', then we need to break

with regimes of praise, adulation and canon-worship. As many a Marxist literary scholar since Althusser has demonstrated, a work of literature can show us—and hence make it possible for us to resist—hegemonic ideology only if we see the work as a *failure* and not as a masterpiece, as an aesthetic deformity and not as a work of beauty.

This means that instead of reading, say, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a powerful denunciation of communism, a celebration of the fortitude of individualistic desire and the like, we must highlight the novel's inability to represent the putative horrors of collectivised life beyond resorting to a highly speculative, far-fetched fantasy of state control and aesthetic deprivation. Instead of dwelling on the ugliness, drabness and oppressiveness of Winston Smith's world—and against Orwell's stated intentions and our own assumptions apropos of Orwell's supposed genius—we must focus on Orwell's inability to present us with a beautiful, colourful and liberating depiction of communism's other—capitalism.

A conclusion one could reach from this approach would be that, far from showing us how terribly dystopian an English socialism may appear, the novel tells us that capitalism, despite its ideological preoccupations with prosperity and pleasure, does not produce a suitably positive image worthy of literary representation. Capitalism's promises of joy, romance and happiness remain abstract and unfathomable, while, ironically, great amorous passion—of the kind experienced by Winston and Julia—is possible in the supposedly joyless socialist setting of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

I could very happily continue with this oppositional reading of a truly great work of Western literature. I shall instead end my response to Kotsko's piece by saying that my reading of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, whatever one makes of its plausibility, is a genuine attempt at studying the novel with an eye to articulating a 'new idea'. And such an attempt could not be made under the aegis of a Great Books rubric. Books by Orwell, Stendhal, Tolstoy—and, yes, by Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison and Salman Rushdie—should continue to be taught, but not as testaments to their authors' brilliance and the like (and preferably not in the pedagogic context of university subjects dedicated to the study of Great Books) but as imperfect, conflicted pieces of literary production. And why not teach these alongside other, wonderful new, obscure and underappreciated works with no claims to Greatness.

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