

Canons: Indispensable and Disposable— A Response to Adam Kotsko

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IT HAS, OF COURSE, BECOME VERY DIFFICULT TO THINK ABOUT CANONS. ONCE RELATIVELY simple things—we just had them, they were just *there*—, from the seventies onwards they have become increasingly contentious and hard to get your head around.

They came under attack almost simultaneously from two different directions.

First, from marginalised groups who, demanding political, social and cultural emancipation, thought, rightly, that received canons did not sufficiently consecrate their own achievements and experiences, and, further, that these received canons protected white men's historical dominance. This kind of intervention need not imply a rejection of canonicity as such however. People belonging to marginalised 'identities' sometimes established new, more limited canons which expressed only their own group's achievements. Or they pushed for more representation of works from their own heritage inside broader, more universal canons.

Second, and more radically, canonicity came under attack from cultural populists who thought that what creative works are (or are not) great is just a matter of personal opinion, and (drawing on (a misreading of?) Pierre Bourdieu's work) that

to recognise a small number of masterpieces as a canon is to shore up prestige or cultural capital for and from a privileged class-position.

So it is hard to deal with canonicity neutrally because it seems to be more a political debate between a conservative side (supporters of old-style canons) and a democratic side (those who reject canonicity as such or old-style canons at any rate) than something we can usefully reason about.

With one rather important exception. What seeds canonicity—i.e., judgments about what works are better or worse than others—is actually constitutive of the practices in which literature (or music or art or any creative work) are produced. Such judgments happen at the most basic and mundane moments of the creative process—for instance, when a writer jettisons a draft (of a phrase, of a line, of a sentence, of a paragraph, of a whole piece) because it doesn't quite jell, and starts another one. Qualitative judgments happen at a more general level too when those most deeply engaged in a creative form intuitively recognise the power of some particular works or oeuvres, and in their own works begin to be shaped by them, not necessarily consciously. They happen too when readers or music lovers (say) begin to draw up lists of top tens etc. as a form of expressing their love for a genre or medium. And the patterns that appear from out of these various levels of judgement turn out not to be random or chaotic. There may be room for a great deal of individual disagreement (and often profoundly influential works are not later canonised) but within a particular field of collectively engaged works a rough consensus is always (I think) established about which are the best works, and which of them are especially great.

So canons of a kind are central or organic to creativity, not extraneous to it.

But all this does not much help Adam I think. He is wondering about what to teach in a curriculum in a conservative liberal-arts college. It is a pedagogical question. The canonical works of world literature that he is concerned with—*Gilgamash*, *Orestes* and so on—never shared a tradition. They do not emerge from, or constitute, what I have just called a 'field of collectively engaged works'. Today, they turn up alongside one another in, and only in, academic curricula, and indeed this kind of list was developed as a result of early twentieth-century debates in the US about the future of liberal-arts pedagogy during the period when it was breaking with pedagogies based on teaching Latin and Greek. So the organic or constitutive canonicity that I have just pointed to does not apply to it. This is indeed one problem with the 'world literature' concept more widely: it is invented at a distance from its objects, and these days, as I say, almost always for pedagogical ends.

So I would agree with Adam's response to his situation—by which I mean his decision to finesse Shimer College's official, founding philosophy so as to meet his students' actual needs. As I suspect we all know, what really counts in the classroom is vibrant communication between teacher and students—that is where learning happens. This is, however, hard to achieve, and you do not get there by worrying about canonicity and, especially by worrying about forced and artificial arrangements of masterpieces within a universal, a-historical, abstract cultural heritage. You get there by matching your particular capabilities and interests as a teacher to your student's particular capabilities and interests. And, I'd suggest that that is, in fact, more easily done by tapping into hierarchised fields of collectively engaged works as they currently exist outside the academy. Indeed, so long as the decline of literary interest and subjectivity can be brushed aside, we just might be able to posit a canon something like F.R. Leavis's 'great tradition', namely a body of great works that can pass as organically constituting the collectively engaged field we call 'English literature' itself. That, I think, marks the far limits of what is possible for an effective pedagogy based on an extensive canon.

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