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THE RISE AND FALL OF LITERARY AND ARTISTIC CANONS

1. THE CONCEPT

As we all know, there are no naïve or innocent readers. A truly original interpretation of a work of art is almost impossible to develop since we are always under the influence of judgements made by others prior to our actual experience, These preconceptions are related to what sometimes may be referred to as canons.

One may be tempted to believe that canon formation in the West is a concept borrowed from Biblical scholarship. This is not so. Scholars who study the development of the Biblical canon admit that the model for the canonization of Christian writings was "the Alexandrian custom of drawing up lists of authors whose writings in a given literary genre were widely regarded as standard works. These exemplars were called 'canons'."[1] The grammarians of Alexandria gave the name "canon" to a collection of Greek texts "worthy of being followed as models because of the purity of their language."[2] Having reached a fossilized form, the prestige of this standard collection was unquestionable; it provided people with a referential criterion or standard by which the rectitude of opinions, value-judgments, and even actions was determined.

A canon decides what books are significant for us. Based on a sense of tradition, it is a large body of knowledge, an incarnation of history. The stabilization of tradition into a canon

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[1] Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1987), p. 111.

[2] Metzger, pp. 289–290.

means that a set of texts gains a reputation for being a treasure. A catalogue or list is compiled and a fixed collection of texts makes its authority felt. A line of succession is established which assumes that the earlier works are major facts in the background of their successors, although, "what one great original artist learns from another is the hardest kind of 'influence' to define, even when we see it to have been of the profoundest importance."[3]

A canon is a concept used in cultural history. The term stands for a standardized corpus which represents an organic whole with rules of its own. There are two pitfalls to be avoided when defining canon formation. A canon is neither a mere flourish of popularity nor an isolated body of great works devoid of any contextual character. Ezra Pound seems to have been aware of both dangers when he defined the concept in such terms: "Certain books form a treasure, a basis, once read they will serve you for the rest of your lives." The dynamic aspect is certainly not absent from his statement that those works can be considered canonical which "grow ever more luminous as one's experience increases."[4] More static and even normative is T. S. Eliot's approach. For this more conservative canon shaper the concept represents a "permanent standard, by which we can compare one civilization with another, and by which we can make some guess at the improvement or decline of our own."[5]

As to the criteria for determining the canonicity of a literary text, the first thing to be remembered is that every canon is based on value-judgments which constitute a system. All confirmations and disconfirmations of a value-judgment take place within this system. All the values underlying a canon are held

[3] F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot—Henry James—Joseph Conrad* (New York Univ. Press, 1969), p. 9.

[4] Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (New York: New Directions, 1970), pp. 312, 317.

[5] T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York–London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968), p. 91.

to be self-evident. Supported by unreasoned habits, canonicity is always settled by convention, it is "a necessity that is not chosen, but chooses, a necessary paramount to deliberation that admits no discussion, and demands no evidence."[6] In other words, canonicity has a certain resemblance to the status of proper nouns. You do not try to prove the greatness of a canonical text, you simply name the work. The value of Dante's *Commedia*, Goethe's *Faust*, or Homer's *Iliad* is taken for granted.

Just as the Bible as a whole is more than the sum of its parts, so a canon as a whole may be more than the sum of the works it includes. A canon must have a significant unity. Believers in a canon are convinced that they can understand and enjoy one part of it better for having read another. Since all canons depend on established values, they cannot be created by conscious, that is, intellectual, effort. No individual can compensate for "what his ancestry and his country for some generations have failed to do."[7] The certainty involved is bound up with the idea of hereditary succession, and thus it cannot be willed, but must happen, for it is the outcome of tradition, and "Tradition ist nichts, was Einer lernen kann, ist nicht ein Faden, den Einer aufnehmen kann, wenn es ihm gefällt, so wenig, wie es möglich ist, sich die eigenen Ahnen auszusuchen."[8]

There is no denying that canon formation is related to temporality. In literature, the ideal of the canon fell into disrepute when Latin ceased to be the language of learning. In music, canon formation became possible only at a fairly late stage. As a musicologist argues: "In the previous centuries the repertory consisted of music of the present generation and the

[6] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1955), p. 140.

[7] T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co. 1934), p. 51.

[8] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 76.

one or two preceding generations [. . .]. Under such conditions
of evanescence the idea of a canon is scarcely thinkable. After
around 1800 or 1820, however, when new music entered the
repertory, old music did not always drop out. [. . .] Increas-
ingly the repertory assumed a historical dimension."[9]

Canons may have been more static in non-Western cultures
because in the Western world artistic developments were often
a history of changing generations—at least since the Renais-
sance—whereas the Asiatic developments extended over greater
stretches of time. A much more rigid patriarchal and despotic
socio-political system may explain why canonicity played a
more important role in Asian than in Western culture. *The
Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius,* a collection of 305
poems which existed more or less in the present form even
before Confucius, has been a canonized anthology for the
past twenty centuries. With the possible exception of the
Bible, there was no book in the Western world that could
exert such a profound influence on virtually all cultural
products.

Taking its temporal aspect into consideration, it is possible
to view a canon as a grammar of institutionalized expectations.
Since there are "social roles canons can play as selective mem-
ories of traditions or ideals,"[10] they can also be defined as
strategic constructs by which communities maintain their own
interests.

Authority and legitimacy are not given: the recognition of
the canonical status of certain works is almost always the result
of a long and gradual process in the course of which some
texts, regarded as authoritative from some perspective, are
separated from a much larger body of literature. A text can
start its journey toward traditionhood only if it represents

[9] Joseph Kerman, "A Few Canonic Variations," Robert von Hall-
berg, ed.: *Canons* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 181.
[10] Charles Altieri, "An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon," Robert
von Hallberg, ed.: *Canons*, p. 41.

certain communal values. Canon formation consists of taking apart and putting together. It is a constant process which proceeds by way of selection moving from many books to few and which may include fluctuations during its growth and gradual recognition. During some periods it can be narrowed; in others broadened, resulting in complex interrelations between conservation and correction which reflect a wide range of different degrees of canonical authority, rather than a mere dichotomy of canonical and noncanonical literature. It is at least partly because of the rise and fall of canonical works that literary history must be rewritten at regular intervals. "Die Werke der grossen Meister sind Sonnen, die um uns her auf- und untergehen. So wird die Zeit für jedes grosse Werk wiederkommen, das jetzt untergangen ist."[11]

There are, to be sure, competing works that possess temporary and local canonicity, and some texts may even be withdrawn from canon usage before the limits of the canon become progressively clarified. Some critics aim at closing, others at opening the canon. For György Lukács, F. R. Leavis, or Yvor Winters the temptation to make a sharp delineation with regard to the canon was stronger than for their contemporaries, Dezső Kosztolányi, Virginia Woolf, and Ezra Pound. In their search for the highest authority, the former showed a far more lively feeling for an uncompromising Yea or Nay; they were more often disposed to assert that the books which they rejected possessed no authenticity.

Canonicity and the rise and fall of artistic movements are interrelated. At the peak of a literary current, the previously unsettled elements of a canon become crystallized and fixed so that the distinction between recognized and disputed works becomes clear-cut, and the canon ceases to be open-ended. In contrast to such periods of consolidation, transitions from the dominance of one movement to that of another may be characterized by elasticity in the boundaries of the literature

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[11] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 15.

revered and used by a given interpretive community. In the last decades of the 18th century the rise of Romanticism in England awakened doubts concerning the authenticity of the Neoclassical canon. Burke's description of this period is true for all ages of unsettled beliefs: "Duration is no object to those who think little or nothing has been done before their time, and who place all their hopes in discovery."[12]

Canons cannot exist without creative forgetfulness and constant restructuring. Literature is not an immanent essence but a pragmatic concept. What is memorable for one community will not necessarily reflect artistic or even historical value for another. Only history decides what to preserve and what to exclude. All movements decanonize texts; in their early stages the fringes of the emerging canon may even remain unsettled for generations. Yet, it would be a misunderstanding to believe that updating accompanies the complete destruction of the previous canon. Mere conformity is the death of a canon, whereas absolute novelty does not make the new text recognizable as a work of art. I would therefore accept T. S. Eliot's more flexible interpretation of the transformation of the canon: "What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever slightly, altered."[13]

Along with composition, canonicity also involves another activity, which I would call transmission. The question as to how a canon can be tested is quite difficult to answer. When I call *The Ambassadors* a great novel, what gives me this cer-

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[12] Burke, p. 127.
[13] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World 1960), p. 5.

tainty? What kind of grounds can I have for trusting a canon? I can give reasons or refer to value-judgments made by others, but ideally these two forms of legitimacy are complementary to one another. A canon is alive only if it is based on a historical sense which is a heritage that is never given or directly accessible, but must be obtained by great labour. To clarify this ambiguity, one could rely upon psychological, sociological, and historical considerations. In other words, canonicity can be defined only with the help of the concepts of value, community, institution, and history.

2. CANONS AND VALUES

Canons create a hierarchy, not a chronological sequence. All evaluation is bound up with the idea of the canon. The critic has certain criteria, and with the help of these he draws a line between masterpieces and works which are well outside the mainstream. Thus, canonicity is based on a distinction between the essential and the accidental. Pound, for instance, in his *Guide to Kulchur* tried to teach his reader to discriminate between the man of genius and second-rate or "suburban" minds who are the recorders of an age.

Ideally, there is a correspondence between real value and conventional respectability, but no historian of culture can ignore the drastic revaluations which have been made in the past. Cultural conservatism may involve a concern for a preexistent canon, but it always finds itself in opposition to currents which propagate some kind of counterculture. Protestantism certainly undermined earlier canons, and later on Liberalism played a similar role. The struggle for democracy was a struggle for self-government; it had to reject the idea of canonicity, which is always based on authority.

In our own age it is often suggested that even the greatest masterpieces are dated because there are no transhistorical values. The idea of a post-canonical form of culture may have

been anticipated by Heidegger. Following his lead, some Deconstructionists are wont to observe that Postmodernism means "taking for granted that there was nothing essentially human which had gradually been realized, gradually emerged from heteronomous rule, in the course of history."[14]

The eclecticism of the Postmodern age may indicate that the distinction between the essential and the accidental is a vestige of the metaphysical tradition. The old and the new, the canonical and the noncanonical coexist in unpredictable ways, and the juxtaposition of varied cultural forms tends to collapse their historical specificity. As a result, the idea of the canon may be replaced by the cult of *bricolage*.

There is a poem by John Ashbery which first appeared in his volume *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975). Its title — *The Tomb of Stuart Merrill* — is symptomatic of Postmodern eclecticism. What Ashbery insists on is his admiration for the poetry of a noncanonical Symbolist. "The canons are falling/ One by one," as the poem says. The idea of an ordered tradition is discarded as irrelevant. The past "only builds up out of fragments." While earlier iconoclasts aspired to undermine the existing canon with the intention of establishing a counter-canon, the Postmodern artist does not believe in permanent values. The close of Ashbery's poem reads as follows:

> "Father!" "Son!" "Father I thought we'd lost you
> In the blue and bluff planes of the Aegean:
> Now it seems you're really back."
> "Only for a while, son, only for a while."
> We can go inside now.

The Postmodern condition has undermined the very basis of evaluation. "Denn wenn die Umstände heute wirklich so anders sind, als die frühern, dass man sein Werk der *Art* nach nicht mit den früheren Werken vergleichen kann, dann kann man

[14] Richard Rorty, "Comments on Castoriadis's 'The End of Philosophy'," *Salmagundi* 82–83 (Spring–Summer 1989), p. 26.

auch den *Wert* nicht mit dem eines andern vergleichen."[15] The
new conditions are the results of a decline of historical con-
sciousness, a loss of belief in the end of history. "Still, it re-
mains to be seen how far man can do without teleology,"[16]
whether the Postmodern condition represents a new era marked
by the relativity of all values, or a transition similar to earlier
crises which led to a restructuring of cultural heritage. Ro-
manticism, for instance, also seemed to have invalidated earlier
canons and placed great emphasis on individual experience,
Erlebnis; yet in the long run the change proved to be far from
decisive: canonicity had not lost its relevance.

Most people would argue that the statement "*The Ambas-
sadors* is a great novel" has more credibility if the speaker can
recall the pleasure he felt when reading the book than if he
is induced to believe in the greatness of that work merely on
the basis of what someone else has told him. Yet it would be
misleading to forget that even individual, original, or subjective
value-judgments presuppose canons. "Das Spiel des Zweifelns
selbst setzt schon die Gewissheit voraus"[17] so that even when
I deny greatness to a certain work of art, I have a canon in my
mind. As readers we learn to judge, and experience teaches us
to discriminate; but our activity is always a hermeneutic process
through which we adapt some canon to reflect these activities
and experiences. Because of this, it is more appropriate to say
"I believe *The Ambassadors* is a great novel," than to assert
that "I know *The Ambassadors* is a great novel." " 'Ich weiss'
soll eine Beziehung ausdrücken, nicht zwischen mir und einem
Satzsinn (wie 'Ich glaube'), sondern zwischen mir und einer
Tatsache."[18]

[15] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 67.

[16] Mihály Szegedy-Maszák: "Teleology in Postmodern Fiction," Matei
Calinescu and Douwe Fokkema, eds.: *Exploring Postmodernism*
(Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1987), p. 56.

[17] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Über Gewissheit* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell,
1974), p. 18.

[18] Wittgenstein, *Über Gewissheit*, p. 14.

Whether the value-judgment I make is truly mine or belongs to others, the canon makes its influence felt. On an abstract level, it is possible to make a distinction between two types of readers. Some tend to believe a reliable person. They regard him as trustworthy because he knows the rules, and they fear they may err in applying those rules. These people turn to others for advice because they believe in authority. Others dedicate themselves to ideals of their own making. They could be called the shapers or rather reshapers of the canon.

In both cases, the mechanism of transmission is based on imitation. The reader's response is always to a precedent set by his predecessors. It rarely occurs that I can consider myself to be the very first reader of a book. Even if I am a *déraciné*, I cannot help being influenced by others who are deeply committed to the values underlying a canon. I must always interpret their intense belief, their caring or concern as the proof of authority, even if I decide to distance myself from that belief. Stability and adaptability are both essential to the canon, although the normativity implicit in the former can have an alienating effect upon the new generations — they may feel impatient with the idea that no discoveries are to be made since everything was understood long before they were born. Nevertheless, the active presence of a canon in a man's mind can give him a resource against the merely fashionable. It is certainly a *sine qua non* of culture, because at the close of the twentieth century, so much is accessible to us that continuity can be sustained only if we all make use of second-hand information and take a great deal for granted. Edmund Burke's warning is more relevant today than it was two centuries ago: "Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency: it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision, skeptical, puzzled, and unresolved."[19]

[19] Burke, p. 127.

3. CANON AND COMMUNITY

Proof of the dependence of culture upon canons is that in most communities there are standard texts which people must have read, or rather lived with, to be considered educated. The type of secondary school called the "gymnasium" played a decisive role in Central Europe in the second half of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century partly because it expected all students to read the same books. Thus the gymnasium represented a social consensus. The disappearance of these schools led to a decline in the prestige of general culture. Once sharp discontinuities prevailed in the cultural heritage, the very expression "well-educated" ceased to have a meaning.

A canon often suggests some balance of values. It can have vitality only if there are various and sometimes even conflicting values in the culture to which it belongs. Excess of unity may go together with narrow-minded provincialism and lead to sterility; excess of heterogeneity may be due to confusion of values. Either extreme will prevent further development of culture.

If it is true that certain periods and regions are dominated by a *koiné*, a unified poetic, pictorial, or musical sign system, then style can be viewed as an aspect of the sharing of canons by a community. In this sense one may speak about a classical style in the music of Central Europe in the years 1780–1810. This example suggests that canon formation may lead to the consolidation of style not only in artistic creation but also in interpretation. To put it another way, canonicity is related to and heavily dependent upon conventions of reading, viewing, or listening. A canon always asks for a traditional code of behaviour.

Since canon formation is affected by the size of the community, this can serve as a basis for making distinctions between different types of canons. Ethnomusicologists speak of *small-group canons* which may "emerge as a response to modernization and a means of emphasizing more intimate cultural ex-

pression against a backdrop perceived as homogeneous." A second type has been called *mediated canon*. In this case the coherence of the style "inevitably benefits from channels of communication and the distribution of mass-produced" literature or music.[20] A third type I would call *imagined canon*, since it relies on a virtual community. Imagined canons are attempts at centralizing a repertory with the aim of giving a conscious response to the need of cultural identification. Therefore, imagined canons are often transformed into actual canons, for example in the processes of nation-building. Nationalism is certainly related to canon formation. While *Weltliteratur* is still an imagined canon, some national canons have become highly conventionalized.

Canons play a major role in creating the identity and self-image of communities. People who live in Chicago, Cleveland or New York, but who regard themselves as belonging to the Hungarian nation, often sing canonical songs or refer to canonical texts when asserting their national identity. A national canon is closely bound up with the way of life of a community whose members speak the same language. Thanks to this canon, "the artist, the poet, the philosopher, the politician and the laborer will have a culture in common, which they do not share with other people of the same occupations."[21]

In the Western world most national canons were established in the nineteenth century. In the later twentieth century environmental change tends to undermine the criteria of not only national, but all canons inherited from the past. Urbanization has not merely diminished the significance of ethnic and linguistic barriers; it has also blurred the edges between the articulate and the inarticulate, art and non-art, music and noise, cultural training and natural laws; and the new landscape has altered the concept of the poetic.

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[20] Philip V. Bohlman, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 113–114.

[21] T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture*, p. 198.

Far-reaching as the influence of such subversive tendencies may be, it is quite possible that their final result will be not only the destruction of old canons but also the formation of new ones. This may be true even of feminism, which offers a strong challenge to the patriarchal ideal of the canon inherited from the Church Fathers. The logic of feminist criticism "necessarily entails rethinking the entire literary tradition in order to place centrally into it not only an entire excluded sex — which is an enormous enough task — but also excluded classes, races, national groups, sexual minorities, and ideological positions, as well" — as a feminist scholar writes in an essay significantly entitled "Canon Fathers and Myth Universe."[22] From a feminist perspective, *Ulysses* may represent the closing off of one myth, whereas *To the Lighthouse* may seem to have opened up new mythopoetic areas; but it is likely that such a perspective will lead to the formation of an alternative canon rather than to the disappearance of canonicity.

Depending on the size of the community involved, there may exist more or less comprehensive canons. Their structure is closely related to their formation. Folklorists speak of "the canonic core of a community."[23] A similar distinction can be made in high culture. The canon is usually shaped by a professional group and accepted by the rest of the community. "The oral tradition of folk music depends on a canonic core that encapsulated stability and change. [. . .] The canonic core consists of musical and cultural, textual and contextual elements."[24] In high culture the canon is the core as opposed to the boundaries of the repertory. Those who frequently attend concerts instinctively know this difference. In the written culture and the visual arts of the Western world certain monuments of Classical antiquity can be viewed as such a core. The con-

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[22] Lillian S. Robinson, "Canon Fathers and Myth Universe," *New Literary History*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Autumn 1987, p. 28.

[23] Bohlman, p. 23.

[24] Bohlman, p. 30.

tinuity of Western culture has been rooted in a highly respected corpus of Graeco-Roman and Christian tradition to such an extent that one may doubt whether Western culture could survive the disappearance of this canon.

Change in the canon means that some works move from the core to the boundary, whereas others gain gradual approval from the community. Canon formation may also involve specialization. "Communities often sanction specialist-performers, sometimes to reinforce the musical canon and at other times to infuse the canon with some aspects from outside traditions."[25] Such great translators as Stefan George or Ezra Pound enlarged the national canon because they regarded it as provincial. Bartók and Kodály, on the other hand, virtually narrowed the Hungarian canon of folk music to Old and New Style peasant songs, disqualifying the gipsy music which had been considered canonical by Liszt and Brahms. These are two radically different ways of canonizing Hungarian popular culture. To take another example, the concert hall, where the orchestra or the virtuoso sits on a stage facing the public, did not emerge before the nineteenth century. This theatrical convention helped create a fairly static canon. Before the nineteenth century no such canon existed, and in recent years attempts have been made to get away from this model.

Disagreements about the canon are among the most important facts that make cultural history. Revivals which may lead to canonization contribute to the vitality of the canon which always depends on the dialectic between core and boundary. Some assume that canonicity eschews creativeness. Rather than being mutually exclusive, creativeness and representation of the canon are mutually dependent; they define each other by their balance and interaction. In the life of most canons there are periods of diversification and consolidation. Originality depends on the canon to give it direction; the canon becomes sterile without creativity to animate it. The ability

[25] Bohlman, p. 95.

with which an artist sustains this delicate balance is the measure of his significance.

Canons are closely tied to communities. That is why canonical paintings are often reproduced, canonical plays and pieces of music belong to the core of the standard repertory, and canonical texts are republished, reread, constantly analyzed, and quoted. Some would also add that those works which constitute the literary canon are often translated, but I find this third criterion somewhat more problematic. Such courses as "Major Themes" or "Characters in Western Literatures" — regularly taught by professors of Comparative Literature — are certainly indicative of the ideal of an international canon, but my perception is that the precise boundaries of *Weltliteratur* have not been sufficiently fixed. World literature has certainly more to do with different degrees of translatability than with immanent aesthetic values. Certain translations — such as the Vulgate, the Authorized Version, perhaps even Baudelaire's translations of Poe — may have attained a canonical status, but it is probably not an exaggeration to suggest that the canonicity of translations can be felt on the level of national rather than on that of international culture. To put it another way, the rendering of a text in another language involves not a liberation from, but a reconstituting of the rootedness therein. There are great works of literature which resemble wines that do not travel. "Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins. In ihrer Behausung wohnt der Mensch. Die Denkenden und Dichtenden sind die Wächter dieser Behausung."[26] If this is true, it is difficult to see how anyone could expect to understand Hölderlin without such an understanding of the German language as can only be acquired by a member of a community of living Germans. My example is almost arbitrary. Hölderlin is not only a very great poet but is well-known enough to be on the fringe of the international canon. The

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[26] Martin Heidegger, *Lettre sur l'humanisme* (Paris: Aubier, 1957), p. 24.

existence of inaccessible or badly translated works from Central
Europe or the Third World could serve as more convincing
evidence for showing how questionable the concept of a
world literature may be.

4. CANONS AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

Few readers have an ability to distinguish between the im-
portant and the unimportant works in any way other than by
the demands of the market. Only someone who takes it for
granted that the canonicity of a work is in relative proportion
to its intrinsic aesthetic value can argue like this: "If, for ex-
ample, all the academies of music in the world were to write
declaring Bach and Beethoven to be great musicians, we should
reply 'Thank you for nothing; we know that already.' "[27]

Only accessible works can be enjoyed, and taste is dependent
not only on individual talent but also on cultural institutions.
Schools and publishers play a major role in stimulating the
process of canonization, just as the high regard of the literary
establishment for certain works helps define the limits of the
repertoire. All literary histories are written with tacit assump-
tions about canons. Both the canonical process and the de-
canonizing of a text are historical phenomena influenced by
institutions that sometimes savour of superstition or at least of
prejudice. Accordingly, ideologies, movements, and even in-
dividuals may exert pressure on cultural institutions to ascertain
exactly what texts should be regarded as standard.

Canons are usually handed down in oral or written traditions.
These two are often successive stages in the transmission. A
highly sophisticated written culture may develop very specific
criteria. University curricula, translations, and secondary litera-
ture are certainly important factors in the hardening of canons.

What I can experience is not art in general but a corpus
strictly limited by institutions. It is probably understandable

[27] Metzger, p. 287.

that the songbooks used by most churches contain old-fashioned material, but it may be less admissible that great museums decide whether to present a painting to their public on canonical considerations. Art in the last quarter of the nineteenth century is generally represented by the French Impressionists, making it virtually impossible for the public to realize that the brillant and retrospectively influential artists of that movement represented no more than a kind of counterculture whose activity was confined primarily to a single country. The standard repertoire of the great orchestras is more conservative today than it was in the early decades of the century when a Furtwängler or a Mengelberg often conducted works composed by their contemporaries. With the appearance of compact discs, the availability of contemporary music has become even more difficult. What we have in literature is similar to a vicious circle: while publishers tend to focus on those works which are required books in secondary education or at the university, instructors are forced to teach material widely accessible in paperback edition. To mention one specific case, some novels and short stories by Henry James are constantly in print in several editions, whereas other works by the same witer – *The Sense of the Past* and *The Ivory Tower*, for example – have been out of print for several decades. There is only one aspect from which there may have been an improvement in recent years: the proliferation of interpretive methods has undermined the ideal of canonical reading or authoritative interpretation. The same music can be performed either on period or on modern instruments, and students can choose among a wide range of interpretive strategies when reading a literary work.

We acknowledge the existence of a canon even when we look for reading matter outside the list of "classic" texts included in a curriculum. Canons are reopened by major works, but in most cases this is the result of a change in perspective brought about by professional readers. The test of time is not an impersonal and impartial mechanism, but the functioning of cultural institutions. It is the critic who can press the

canon to open itself to works which have no established reputation.

Critics are the custodians of tradition. Whenever they theorize about art or literature, describe movements or periods, introduce concepts, or define structural phenomena, they tend to think in terms of canonicity. Just as ethnomusicologists speak of canonic formulae, the historians of art and literature distinguish between the canonic and noncanonic features of genres and trends. On the one hand, the fixing and ossification of the canon makes generic classification and periodization possible; on the other, the discourse of generic or historical classification may perpetuate old canons but may also forge new ones. Not only aesthetic but also ideological principles regulate this process. In most cases, the consolidation of a canon is a gradual process of change; in periods of political instability, however, it may occur dramatically to precipitate and then to stabilize a new ideology.

An American advertisement from the 1880s may illustrate how social, political, and economic forces are at work in canon formation. The advertisement depicts a huge canvas painted by Mihály Munkácsy (1844–1900) in 1881. In the same year it was bought by John Wanamaker for $120,000. More than a century later, in 1988 it was sold again, for $60,000. In his time Munkácsy was regarded as a living classic. His reputation was the making of critics and dealers. In 1886 the most famous art critics of the world contributed to the volume that was devoted to a single work by the Hungarian artist, this Biblical painting entitled *Christ Before Pilate*. Munkácsy was praised for being up-to-date both artistically and ideologically. As the advertisement suggests, his art was appreciated by the clergy. Yet Liberals also considered him to be their artist since they could discover the influence of Renan in the way he portrayed Jesus. His paintings were bought by the best dealers and the greatest museums.

Today most art historians call Munkácsy an academic painter, admitting that in that class he may have been one of the

very best. Some of his works are still presented in the largest museums. A smaller canvas by Munkácsy is part of the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum. It is exhibited in a smaller room next to the big hall presenting the Impressionists.

The drastic change in Munkácsy's reputation cannot be explained simply by the fact that his age overestimated his talent. It is far more important to point out that the Impressionists had changed our whole notion of painting. The art of nineteenth-century Munich, Vienna, and Budapest, the paintings of Lenbach, Makart, and Munkácsy had been de-canonized as a result of the activity of a new generation of dealers and critics. When the history of nineteenth-century art was rewritten from the perspective of the Impressionists, such painters as the above mentioned were relegated to the status of artists who did not represent the mainstream.

My intention is not to suggest that Munkácsy was an artist of the magnitude of the major Impressionists. What I wish to assert is the role played by cultural institutions in the appreciation of art. A further example of how the prestige of works of art can be manipulated is the Musée d'Orsay. This institution, opened in Paris a few years ago, may represent an attempt at re-canonizing the academic art of the nineteenth century.

In view of the fact that aesthetic judgement is heavily dependent on institutionalization, and public taste is vulnerable to manipulation, I am tempted to distinguish between organic and inorganic canons. An inorganic canon has no unity. It is eclectic in the sense that it lacks a coherent system of constitutive rules. In most cases it is based on the idea of a purely imagined community and on a strongly manipulated view of the past. Both kinds of canons are abstractions or ideal types. An extreme example of what I would call an inorganic canon is the popular culture of the international working class, inappropriately invented in the last decades of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth century.

Whatever the dangers of cultural manipulation may be, it is inherent in the institution of literature and art. Canons contribute to the transmission of culture; they govern education and the study of texts and artifacts. The political implications of these activities are quite obvious. A comparative analysis of the syllabi used at universities in different countries would reveal probably more about the political aims of those countries than about aesthetic conceptions. I could even refer to my personal experience. In the 1970s, a period dominated by post-totalitarian despotism in Hungary, I wrote textbooks on literature for secondary schools. Although my aims were purely aesthetic, I became involved in an ideological and even political debate.

For better or worse, we are all brought up on some canon and accept it on human authority. Later on we may question its legitimacy, but this can happen only after a confrontation with other canons. "Das Kind lernt, indem es dem Erwachsenen glaubt. Der Zweifel kommt *nach* dem Glauben."[28] No canon has the means to criticize itself, so a breaking away from our inheritance is always the result of a conflict between different canons. I am almost tempted to believe that it is impossible to forget the first canon. "Ja, der Zweifel beruht nur auf dem, was ausser Zweifel ist."[29] Towards the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, György Lukács turned his back on his upbringing, but his later career could be interpreted as an imperfect reaction to the canon of his youth. The difficult task is to have a creative relationship with one's heritage and to develop a critical faculty when faced with conflicting traditions.

Education, of crucial importance to culture, can teach us to recognize the demarcation of important works. As the needs of education over the centuries have been varied, and different works have spoken to and answered those needs, one obvious test of authority for a book is its continuous acceptance and

[28] Wittgenstein, *Über Gewissheit*, p. 23.
[29] Wittgenstein, *Über Gewissheit*, p. 68.

usage by schools at large. This would suggest that the role played by canons is full of ambiguity: on the one hand, they are indispensable to education; on the other hand, they can have a disastrous effect on culture because they can be manipulated. In the past, a basic prerequisite for canonicity was conformity to national, religious, cultural, and political traditions recognized as normative by certain communities. Consequently, those with political power could decide to what extent a text met the criteria of orthodoxy. There is no reason to believe that such party tyranny cannot happen in the future. Besides, the market economy of Liberal democracy can also have its shortcomings: it is capable of exercising oppression upon minorities. The danger of institutionalization is enslavement to public opinion. I can read only those books which have been sanctioned by authority. It would not be absurd to postulate an interrelation between canonicity and censorship.

There are periods of intense canonical process. In such times there may be strong reasons for setting some works aside, such as certain convictions, ideas, or values which political leaders may try to impart to or force upon a community. When canons are manipulated, one can draw a distinction between the opponents and the advocates of the canon. Liberals are prone to question, whereas fundamentalists tend to affirm the authenticity of what is officially propagated. A division between culture and counterculture might emerge, suggesting that canons can be established by force as well as created by a slow and gradual process.

In other periods the way is more open for the possible addition of a text to the canon. While in Stalin's Soviet Union the standards of orthodoxy were defined narrowly, in Gorbachev's they seem to be more elusive. Since the homogeneity of the canon is jeopardized by social tensions, most political regimes try to create a canon that would justify the changes which have led to the present state of affairs. Unfortunately, it is possible to establish a canon on the basis of a wilful misinterpretation of the past. The use of Nietzsche by the architects of

Nazi ideology is a perfect example of such a "falsification d'héritage et mystification interprétative."[30]

Exclusion from the canon can have disastrous consequences. In the decades following World War II, political oppression went hand in hand with the exclusion of many works from the national canon in countries of the Eastern bloc. This drastic form of censorship resulted in the severing of important historical roots of the nations living in that region. The removal of texts by contemporary authors who decided to live in the West, or by aristocrats, or by authors who had misgivings about Socialism or Russia, led to the impoverishment of cultural heritage. A case in point is Sándor Márai. Born in 1900, this writer established an admirable reputation in the 1930s. In 1948 he left Hungary and since that time his native country published not a single line by him until his suicide in San Diego in February 1989. In a culture which had strong gentry, Populistic, and Jewish traditions, Márai stood for a fourth alternative, representing the urban values of the non-Jewish bourgeoisie. His absence from literary life in a period of deep crisis badly hurt Hungarian culture, allowing vulgar Marxists to make sweeping generalizations about the backwardness of the Hungarian cultural heritage and the absence of bourgeois tradition.

On most canons there is a signature. They are signed by somebody "in the name" of a community. A canon is meant to be representative, so it is given authority by a spokesman (*porte-parole*, *Mundstück*, or *Fürsprecher*). F. R. Leavis or György Lukács established a canon, but both claimed that their selection had greater authority because it also bore the countersignature of an interpretative tradition. Their canons were handed down by institutions. In the case of Leavis, for instance, the journal *Scrutiny* as well as *The Pelican Guide to English Literature* played a major role in propagating his views, mak-

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[30] Jacques Derrida, *Otobiographies: L'enseignement de Nietzsche et la politique du nom propre* (Paris: Galiée, 1984), pp. 82–83.

ing T. F. Powys and L. H. Myers well-known, while excluding Bloomsbury from the circle of suggested readings. Standard series, collections, and anthologies which have the widest circulation can also contribute to the canonicity of certain texts. Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* was certainly responsible for the influence which the Victorian conception of poetry exerted upon several generations. In the later nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries the German publisher Tauchnitz established a canon of English and American literature for readers in Central Europe, and in the period following World War II Penguin Books became a very influential canon shaper.

The value of a work of art is not given: it is constantly reproduced and contested by acts of evaluation. One measure of the canonicity of a work is its availability. A novel that is not in circulation in a community has no value for it. Besides other extra-literary factors, economic considerations may also help readers have relatively easy access to a text in the form of anthologies or affordable paperbacks. Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets* was based on a canon dictated by booksellers. The conclusion is inescapable that a canon is a pragmatic concept and never an embodiment of immanent values.

5. CANON AND HISTORY

The rejection of an essentialist or normative view of canons, however, should not obscure their systematic character. The canon shaper "denounces the futility of great stores without orderly distribution".[31] He reminds us that literature is a collective enterprise and the canonical works repeatedly acknowledge one another. In most works of art there is no ownership. That is why "a canon is not a list but a narrative of some intricacy, depending on places and times and opportunities."[32]

[31] Pound, p. 18.
[32] Hugh Kenner: "The Making of the Modernist Canon," Robert von Hallberg, ed.: *Canons*, p. 373.

Canonicity may involve not only a teleological view of history but also an unhistorical tendency. It could even be argued that there is a link between the two. "The canon participates in the establishment of consensus as the embodiment of a collective valuation. Hence it is in the interest of canonical reformations to erase the conflictual prehistory of canon-formation or to represent such history as the narrative of error."[33]

Such an ambiguity, a view of the past that is both teleological and unhistorical, has been ascribed to Hegel and Heidegger, two thinkers whose interpretation of philosophical traditions is strongly canonical: "conflicts, contradictions, struggle among philosophers are ignored or covered up, and the whole history of philosophy is linearized so as to reach its destined result — the close of metaphysics and its thinker, Heidegger. With Hegel, all philosophies are reduced to the same in the sense that all of them represent merely 'moments' in the process of self-consciousness and self-cognizance of the spirit — and in the sense that all these 'moments' stand convicted as 'moments' of the (Hegelian) System. With Heidegger, all philosophers are reduced to the same."[34]

Those who establish a canon intend to justify their own position in history and view their predecessors as belonging to a transtemporal space. Another example would be Pierre Boulez, composer, conductor, and writer. In his writings and in interviews made with him, he repeatedly asserted that there were five major composers in the period between the two world wars: Schönberg, Berg, Webern, Stravinsky, and Bartók. While he unequivocally upholds this selection, it is quite obvious that what we have here is a kind of historical justification of the type of music Boulez himself composed after World War II. With this purpose in mind, he made a clear-cut distinction between the canonical and noncanonical works of

[33] John Guillory, "The Ideology of Canon-Formation: T. S. Eliot and Cleanth Brooks," Robert von Hallberg, ed.: *Canons*, p. 358.

[34] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The 'End of Philosophy'?" *Salmagundi* 82–83 (Spring–Summer 1989), p. 6.

even those five masters. For example, Bartók's string quartets, the two sonatas for violin and piano, the *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta,* and the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* were regarded as canonical because these were the compositions from which Boulez could draw inspiration in his formative years.

Schönberg established his canon in a similar way, several decades before. In an article entitled *Zu nationale Musik* dated February 24, 1931, he named primarily Bach and Mozart, and secondarily Beethoven, Brahms, and Wagner as the canonical composers on the basis of what he had learned from them. From Cézanne to Pollock, many visual artists reinterpreted the past, and similar revaluations are well-known in the sphere of literature: Hölderlin's greatness was established by Nietzsche and George, and Henry James or the French "new novelists" had rewritten the whole history of narrative fiction published in the Western world.

What all these examples suggest is that major artists may be the most powerful shapers of canons. They create different versions of the past, selecting works which they consider to be of historical significance. Whatever the value of contemporary art may be, it cannot be made responsible for the decline of the ideal of canonicity. What is at stake is the state of historical consciousness in our world. As one of the most influential theoreticians of Postmodernism argues, "la question préalable serait: pouvons — 'nous' encore aujourd'hui accréditer le concept de signe d'histoire?"[35]

In the final analysis, the justification for the existence of canons is that no literary or artistic work can have its complete meaning alone. The appreciation of any such text involves the understanding of its relation both to earlier and to later texts. Since the transmission of meaning is an open process, the history of art and literature must be rewritten at regular in-

[35] Jean-François Lyotard, *Le différend* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1983), p. 257.

tervals. We have seen too many revaluations to uphold the
ideal of an international canon of masterpieces selected by
some impersonal authority. In view of the profound trans-
valuations that occurred when one period or movement passed
into another, it must be taken for granted that new values
are constantly pushing out the old and reconstructing the past.
The "Great Books" conviction has been so much undermined
by cultural relativism that no field could remain untouched
by the tendency to deconstruct canonicity — not even Biblical
criticism. "The ecumenical movement has raised our conscious-
ness to see that there is a plurality of canons in the several
Christian communions. It is very difficult now to think about
canon, either as it was in antiquity or as it is today, in parochial
or singular modes. Pluralism is a part of responsible percep-
tion of the concept of canon."[36]

If this is true of religious, it must be even more so of secular
culture. The historical nature of literature makes it impossible
to settle, once and for all, what belongs to the canon. Addi-
tionally, the number of candidates for possible inclusion is
certainly increasing. Still, I would give some thought to the
caution that "the fact that there have been different opinions
about good and bad in different times and places in no way
proves that none is true or superior to others."[37] The canonical
status of certain works bespeaks the conservative nature of
communities and testifies to the members' respect for the wis-
dom of others. The very fact that in most societies there are
iconoclasts whose aim is to discredit the authority of an ex-
ample meant to be followed proves that there are people whose
attitude is governed by a close conformity to the practice of
their ancestors. A community cannot survive without some
continuity, which involves the presence of canonized texts.

[36] James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical
Criticism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 15.

[37] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York:
Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 39.

Respecting our spiritual forefathers, we recognize ourselves in the past. Liberalism can breed tolerance, which is indispensable to the development of historical sense. But many people, if not all, are brought up on a canon representing a kind of orthodoxy about the relative value of certain works. Those who undermine an ordained canon are inclined to establish a counter-canon.

If canonization is a process by which some texts come to occupy a unique or at least distinguished status of authority in a given community, it involves evaluation and so is a matter of some perspective, because "bei aller Wertschätzung handelt es sich um eine bestimmte Perspektive: *Erhaltung* des Individuums, einer Gemeinde, einer Rasse, eines Staates, einer Kirche, eines Glaubens, einer Kultur."[38] In most cases a canon is associated with the self-justification of a community and can have a shorter or longer life, depending on how enduring the agreement between the living and the dead is. Although there exist religious and political canons, the canons that may be especially interesting for students of literature are ethnocentric in character. A consensus among different nations is no more than a possible goal to be reached in the future.

If this is true, we may still be under the influence of the heritage of Romanticism, which popularized the concept of self-regulating national cultures. The idea that ethnocentric traditions generate their own canons with no authority above them, together with Ranke's influence and evolutionism, made some literary historians expecially sensitive to the distinguishing features of national cultures. Standard editions of national classics were published, fixing a canon for several generations. The selection was justified by prominent literary historians.

To illustrate this intimate connection between canon formation and literary history, let me refer to János Horváth (1878–1961), a pupil of Brunetière at the Ecole Normale Supérieure,

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[38] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Wille zur Macht: Versuch einer Umwertung aller Werte* (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 1959), p. 186.

who became the most important historian of Hungarian litera-
ture in the first half of the twentieth century. His organicist
interpretation of ten centuries of written culture was combined
with a quasi-dramatic, metonymical emplotment (*mise en in-
trigue*), and with a logical rather than chronological arrange-
ment, based on the assumption that the development of Hun-
garian culture was directed towards the full realization of its
national character. This assumption is illustrated in the work
of János Arany, a nineteenth-century poet, whose activity
— in Horváth's interpretation — put an end to the pull towards
foreign culture, and thus brought the ideal of self-regulation
to its full articulation.[39] Horváth was brought up as a Prot-
estant, a member of the Reformed or Sacramentarian Church,
and it is quite possible that he drew inspiration from Biblical
criticism and was influenced by the Biblical conception of time:
he viewed the work of Arany as the revelation of *kairos* ("a
point in time filled with significance, charged with meaning
derived from its relation to the end") in *chronos* ("passing" or
"waiting time").[40]

The assumption underlying an attempt to construct a national
canon is that a decisive moment can be found in the history of
each literature when it seems to awaken to itself and comes to
self-knowledge. If viewed from this crucial stage of the be-
ginning of serious self-reflection and critical as well as historial
self-consciousness, each national literature can be regarded as
a self-constituting system which generates a canon of its own.

It woud be easy to point out that such a conception has a
weakness comparable to the one which Hayden White de-
tected in Ranke's work: "He admitted the possibility of genuine
transformation, revolution, convulsion only for ages prior to
his own; but the future for him was merely an indefinite ex-

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[39] János Horváth, *A magyar irodalom fejlődéstörténete* (Budapest:
Akadémiai, 1976).

[40] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of
Fiction.* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 47–48.

tension of his own present".[41] The question is whether a similar charge cannot be levelled at all shapers of a canon. In retrospect, most canons seem to be dated. It could also be argued that it was precisely the emphasis on the history of intellectual habits and collective *mentalité* which made it possible for the Hungarian literary historian to think in terms of canonicity. From this perspective, his sociological approach meant an advance over historicist works which focussed on short-term processes and individual achievements, thus anticipating the attack of the *Annales* circle upon the cult of "le temps court, à la mesure des individus, de la vie quotidienne, de nos illusions, de nos prises rapides de conscience – le temps par excellence du chroniqueur, du journaliste."[42]

I would draw two hypothetical conclusions from this example: (a) canon formation is bound up with a teleological view of history, (b) to establish a canon, one must think in terms of *longue durée* processes. I am even tempted to go one step further and suggest that all literary historians must establish a canon, otherwise their vision will be fragmented. For the same reason, I tend to have reservations about most literary histories written in collaboration. The two basic strategies of canon formation, selection and interpretation, are inseparable and should follow the same principles within a work that intends to be more than a mere chronicle. The same values have to be observed throughout the narrative; otherwise it cannot claim to the status of historiography. These values change with the rise and fall of artistic movements. The canon developed by the Neoclassicists was deconstructed by the Romantics. Later, the Surrealists reshaped the canon. More recently, feminism has brought a new perspective. Feminist presses are reprinting works that have been almost entirely forgotten.

[41] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973), p. 173.

[42] Fernand Braudel, *Ecrits sur l'histoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1969), pp. 45–46.

What these examples may suggest is the possibility of establishing an international canon. Such an ideal could serve as a corrective to provincialism. Most Europeans certainly have a common background in classical Antiquity, the Latin and Christian Middle Ages, and the Reformation, but even this heritage is not shared by all nations between the Atlantic Ocean and the Urals, which is after all a relatively small part of the world.

I would like to make two concessions before I end these reflections on a somewhat skeptical note. The sense of timelessness associated with canonicity is in harmony with the fact that aesthetic value may be not exclusively of historical nature. It is also taken for granted that canon formation exceeds the limits of purely artistic considerations. Still, if pushed to an extreme, the ideal of canonicity may lead to an almost unhistorical conception of literature.

Another example from the same period of Hungarian literature as Horváth is the *History of European Literature* (1934–35) by the poet and critic Mihály Babits, a work available in German translation.[43] This impressive book was written with the idea that there existed a *sui generis* European value. The author was aware that he could not justify his canon with reference to any international consensus, so he rendered spatial what was essentially temporal. For him the canonical works of European literature had become independent of their original context, and thus appeared to be timeless. Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare seemed to have lived in the same period.

I can see two dangers inherent in such an approach to literature. First, the selection may be too personal. This is absolutely justified in the case of such a major poet as Babits, but cannot serve as basis for a generalization. My other objection is that the shapers of international canons tend to overemphasize extraliterary considerations at the expense of aesthetic value.

[43] Mihály Babits, *Geschichte der europäischen Literatur* (Zürich–Wien: Europa, 1949).

When it is suggested that Wordsworth and Hölderlin are greater poets than Byron and Goethe, but the latter are greater Europeans,[44] my comment is that I prefer not to go beyond the canons of national literatures, because these belong to actually existing interpretive communities, and thus might make literary evaluation a somewhat less difficult or at least more feasible task.

[44] T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cuhady, 1957), p. 247.