European Review, Vol. 28, No. 4, 559–564 © 2020 Academia Europaea
doi:10.1017/S1062798720000174

A Canon? Yes, But What are We Going to Do with It?

JAN BAETENS & THEO D'HAEN

KU Leuven, Faculty of Arts, PB 3311, Blijde Inkomststraat 21, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium. Email: jan.baetens@kuleuven.be

This article deals with the age-old problem of the literary canon, from a perspective that tries to supersede the still dominating questions of nation building or mainstream versus minorities culture. Taking stock from the observation that recent debates have moved the question to the field of the creative industries as well as that of cultural policy, it asks instead questions on the actual use and use-value of the canon, which is here reframed from the point of view of both writers and policy makers.

The literary 'canon wars' that shook academia in the 1970s and 1980s have had a profound impact on the way we read, write, and teach literature. It is now generally accepted that the idea of a canon, whatever its scope and content, can no longer be reduced to the 'Western' canon (often dismissed by critics as the canon of 'dead white males'). Even if the idea, that is to say the ideal, of a universal, almost transhistorical canon, in the Arnoldian sense of culture as 'the best which has been thought and said' (Arnold 1994 [1869]), is still defended by certain scholars and institutions, more recently there has been a general preference for a more open and context-bound vision of the canon. First of all, there should be real diversity: a canon should make room for non-Western voices as well for those voices that in Western languages and traditions do not represent mainstream culture. Second, this canon, which we should now always write and think of as a 'unity in diversity', is no longer to be seen as a body of work that stands outside time, but as a permanently shifting collection of works and authors whose role and position depend on changing literary and cultural priorities. Today for instance, our aesthetic categories, to quote the title of the eponymous book by Sianne Nagai (2015), are no longer only those of 'beauty' (as in the classic canon) or 'novelty' (as in the Modernist and avant-garde canon), but those of the *cute*, the *zany*, or the *interesting*, which according to her better match the economic and ideological features of the neo-capitalist era in which we now live. An interesting elaboration of this way of thinking is given by Brian Glavey (2019) in 'Having a Coke with you is even more fun than ideology critique.' As a result,

today's canon is different from what we used to know in previous generations, not only because the actual content of the canon has changed, but also – and perhaps more importantly – because the very status and function of the canon have changed. Today, canons are not only more plural, more open, more diverse, etc., they are also less constraining, for the very prestige of what a canon represents is no longer what it used to be.

The aim of this article is not to evaluate or judge the effects of the canon wars. We believe they are generally very positive: how could we complain that Norton, with its various anthologies one of the most decisive players in the making and unmaking of canons at the level of academic teaching, has now included a graphic novel, Spiegelman's *Maus*, in its *Anthology of American Literature* (Norton 2016). More generally, it cannot be denied that the Western canon has often functioned as an instrument of elitist, hegemonic thinking that rejects all non-mainstream and minority groups, At the same time, it is equally important to underline some more problematic aspects, such as the understandable but nevertheless regrettable erosion of the traditional canon (a situation any professor of literature will easily recognize, and which has of course to do with the shrinking role of reading the classics in secondary education) or the replacement of an allegedly 'universal' canon by the exclusive address of minority canons (as if students belonging to non-mainstream communities no longer had to know or read works other than those representing their own specific minority, not to mention the fact that such minority canons cannot avoid the danger of peer pressure: one is never 'representative' enough of one's specific community, as shown for instance in the critiques of the work of Louise Erdrich, a writer of mixed Native American and German ancestry, whose books frequently feature Native American characters and settings, but in ways that some – as for instance David Treuer (2006) – deem as perhaps not sufficiently ethnically correct). What all these debates have in common is a sharpened reflection on the role of the gatekeepers behind the canon, for the canonical or non-canonical status of works and authors is no longer seen as 'naturally' determined by their intrinsic qualities, but also (and according to the most critical voices: exclusively) by a certain number of tactic and strategic decisions made by traditional and new gatekeepers. Indeed, it is no longer universities and academies that decide what a canon is or should be. Next to them, there are also the canons made by the creators themselves (even if writers tend to remain quite close to classic notions of the canon, as demonstrated for instance by Bloom's (1973) analysis of anxiety of influence: great authors are never suffering from competition with minor ones) and, increasingly, by commercial players (the Amazon logarithms have definitely a canonizing impact on what people think of what good writing is) or by grassroots stakeholders in the larger context of participatory culture as well as the many cross-overs between commercial and grassroots players in modern media culture, as exemplarily analysed by Jim Collins in the book that owns its title to the Oprah Winfrey book club, *Bring on the Books for Everybody* (Collins 2010). A last note in this regard: in the canon debate, one should also take into account the question of 'age' and consider that the canon is something that changes with the reader's age (not only in terms of content, but also in terms of

function: the idea that readers have to critically engage with the canon is perhaps more relevant for adult readers than for children, whom we do not have to 'protect' against the 'evils' of tradition, for instance).

The actual trigger for our current intervention is, however, very different, for one has been able to observe for quite some years a kind of *paradigm shift* in the debate on the canon.

On the one hand, this debate transcends the purely literary and academic field. Although academic and literary debates always have a political dimension as well, recent canon debates are no longer focusing on the canon in artistic terms in order to reframe it in cultural terms, in the very broad sense of the word *culture* as a 'whole way of life', as Raymond Williams (1958) and cultural studies liked to put it. Instead of defending the mere Western classics, canon defenders offer an all-encompassing definition of the canon, which they consider the foundation of a community. Lack of knowledge of this canon, which mixes artistic and non-artistic elements (reading Shakespeare and drinking ale, for instance), prevents someone being part of a community, and in light of the ongoing globalization and the subsequent memory crisis of local cultures, this is not just an issue that pits traditional Western citizens against non-Western immigrants and newcomers, it also puts a lot of pressure on traditional Western cultures (many 'minor' cultures feel, for instance, endangered by 'Americanization'). This debate clearly displaces the discussion from the *educational* role of the canon in the *Bildung* of the individual as a responsible and autonomous citizen to the *political* role of the building of a political community (a 'nation' in the nineteenth-century approach of political communities, but also other forms of communities in the more modern sense of the word, as discussed for instance by Benedict Anderson (1991) in his influential work on 'imagined communities').

On the other hand, the very notion of canon has moved from the artistic field, in the conventional sense of the word, to the cultural-industrial field, where it refers to the body of works that respect the so-called 'bible' (not with a capital B, as in the case of the traditional canon, with its clearly religious underpinnings) that serves as the reference document used by screenwriters for input on characters, settings, and other elements of a television or film project. Such a bible is a legal document that makes a sharp distinction between authorized (canonical) and unauthorized (non-canonical) uses, a distinction well known in fandom communities. As demonstrated by the existence of non-canonical works, which with some exaggeration one could link to the phenomenon of 'copyleft'[1] if not hacktivist culture, this new type of bible-based canon is also open to discussion and critique, but not in the same way as the traditional canon. The scriptwriters' bibles and canons are not challenged for ideological reasons, namely as tools of a Western ideology, but for purely legal and commercial reasons, namely as tools preventing freely re-using copyrighted or trademarked works (and here it is important to stress that such a free re-use is

1. 'Copyleft, distinguished from copyright, is the practice of offering people the right to freely distribute copies and modified versions of a work with the stipulation that the same rights be preserved in derivative works created later.' *Wikipedia*, 'Copyleft' (accessed 8 February 2020).

a creative re-use, not a mere copyright-infringement reproduction or plagiarism). In a certain sense, the debate on bible-based canons, which originates from actual creators – either actual writers or amateur and would-be creators – is not at all a general, ideology-driven debate, but a kind of hands-on discussion on what to do with norms and models. From this point of view, one might even say that this type of debate does not challenge the idea of the canon at all.

In light of these vital changes in the canon debate, we think it can be useful to rethink the debate in a more radical way. Instead of asking questions on the utility or necessity of the canon or the way we should determine its very content, it may be time to ask a different question: whatever one thinks of the question, one should never avoid questions on how to use the canon (even those who refuse not only the Western canon but also the very idea of canonization are confronted with the question of how to practically implement this refusal).

Four main ideas come here to the fore, which all implicitly tend to remind us of the fact that canons are inevitable – and thus of the necessity of continue to worry about them.

First, it should be clear that canons can and should be used in the larger framework of benchmarking, a way of working that is part of any creative endeavour whatsoever. From the point of view of those who produce as well as from those who commission, fund, judge, evaluate etc., the canon is a key instrument in the benchmarking process (in the field of artistic creation, a comparison with 'best practices' or a description of the 'state of the art' do not suffice in this regard). In this sense, benchmarking and canon are notions that largely overlap. We truly need a list of best practices, good examples, functional models, in short: a canon (albeit a permanently shifting canon) if we want to know whether something is good or not. Without a quality norm, traditionally summarized by the canon, currently framed in terms of benchmarking, it is not possible to engage in any real discussion. Writers for instance cannot work without a canon: granted, in certain circumstances they may need a bible-driven canon and not much else, but generally speaking the canon is part of their working tools. They need this as an echo chamber as well as a springboard (first they try to do 'as good as X', then to try to do 'better').

Second, the (traditional) canon is also a wonderful instrument to resist commercially imposed works and norms, which tend to be presented as 'new canons'. In other words, the canon is an instrument capable of tackling the deleterious effects of logarithms determining what we 'like' or 'should like' and thus buy online From this point of view, it is possible to argue, perhaps in a rather paradoxical way, that canons are in practice what helps keep culture diverse (and not the other way round, which the canon is often theoretically reproached for doing!). Today, the traditional canon has been replaced by a new, commercial one (the global bestsellers), a change not many seem to care about – see for instance the widespread cultural acceptance of the 'influencer' phenomenon, a purely commercially driven and highly top-down marketing tool.

Third, the reflection on canons and how they change can be a wonderful instrument of self-criticism, not a detail in the often heated and one-sided political

discussions on the link between canons and community-building, not only in terms of content (with even attempts to define 'pure' canons and a one-to-one correspondence between community and canon), but also at a more general level. Notions of authorship, community, ownership, etc., strongly vary over time and place and the study of canon changes may help disclose and thus creatively reshape these kind of differences that hinder the cultural dialogue between groups and communities.

Fourth, but certainly not least, a more hands-on approach to the canon is a great opportunity to start thinking of the relationship between culture on the one hand and cultural policy on the other. Canon debates focus too much on the ideal of culture in general and do not pay enough attention to cultural policy. In modern societies, however, the former is no longer thinkable without the latter and any discussion on what the canon is or might be used for should be accompanied by a discussion on what this might involve for a canon policy. The theoretical defence of a canon (or, why not, the rejection of a given canon) is only meaningful when one also has a policy to start working with (or in the other case: against) this canon. One may think that it is important to read *X*, *Y* or *Z* (the concrete examples do not matter here), but such a conviction remains empty if one does not keep these books or authors in print, preferably in an attractive, updated, and not too expensive format, and if one does not build an environment where new readers can be familiarized with these works, be it via formal education or through the more informal channels of today's mass media. In other words: instead of merely discussing what the canon is, politicians should create possibilities for the presence of the canon in the public sphere (for instance, by funding heritage collections, specialized TV shows, content-rich public events, etc.)

References

Anderson B (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Revised and extended edition). London: Verso.

Arnold M (1994 [1869]) Preface. In *Culture and Anarchy*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press.

Bloom H (1973) *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Collins J (2010) *Bring on the Books for Everybody*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Glavey B (2019) Having a Coke with you is even more fun than ideology critique. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America (PMLA)*, October, 996–1011.

Nagai S (2015) *Our Aesthetic Categories. Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Norton (2016) *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Ninth Edition, Volume **E**. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, pp. 1049–1066.

Treuer D (2006) *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual*. St. Paul: Graywolf.

Williams R (1958) *Culture and Society*. London: Chatto and Windus.

About the Authors

Jan Baetens is Professor of Cultural and Literary studies at KU Leuven (Belgium). His main research interests are visual narrative in print and contemporary French poetry and literature. Among his recent publications are: *The Graphic Novel*, co-authored with Hugo Frey (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), *Novelization. From Film to Novel*, translated by Mary Feeney (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2018) and *The Film Photonovel. A Cultural History of Forgotten Adaptations* (Austin, TX: Texas University Press, 2019).

Theo D'haen is emeritus professor of English and Comparative Literature at KU Leuven and Leiden University, Chang Jiang Professor at the University of Sichuan and Distinguished Visiting Professor at Shanghai Jia Tong University. He is the author of numerous publications on postmodernism, postcolonialism, popular fiction, and world literature.