

Canonicity, canon, canonizable and the implications of transcultural communication

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Abstract

Harold Bloom, in the Western Canon, selected only twenty-six sine qua non writers and, invoking Giambattista Vico's New Science, where human history was distributed in three phases – Theocratic, Aristocratic, and Democratic – introduced another one, the Chaotic Age (represented by Freud, Proust, Joyce, and Kafka).¹ Bloom did not expel this newly proposed Age, as it was also the container of beauty and strangeness, as Walter Pater desired for Romanticism.

What has happened since 1994 to the status and condition of the canon? The article takes aim at describing the implications of the science of communication for the process of selecting values. At the same time, it follows the role played by various intercultural concepts in valuing cultural heritage and contemporary creations. The main purpose of the study is to configure the blueprint of an arch-canon founded on interdisciplinarity and the latest advances in different sciences, with a special touch on linguistics and discourse analysis.

Keywords: *canon, Harold Bloom, aesthetics, transdisciplinarity, hierarchy.*

In the epoch of convergence and performativity, the competition, but also the interpenetration of disciplines, have become inevitable. Is it a loss from the point of view of aesthetics? It may be for the aesthetics of the 17th century, when an artistic product had to involve wholeness, sublimity and assimilation of tradition. In postmodernity, the manifestations of beauty became versatile and pluralistic. Contemporary culture would adopt an incompatible position if it scorned the contributions of cultural studies, translation studies, performance studies, critical media studies and so on and so forth. The former canon made room for an

¹ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 2.

interpenetration of canons. The new modality of realizing the selection for the canon requires open-minded and well-read critics, able to promote the most vital values resulted from the study of cross-sections through the concentric canonical sphere. The new arch-canon is a “canon-in-the-cloud” that lets in and out elements of excellence coming from the satellite-like and interdisciplinary canons.

This complex and heterogeneous canon is informed more and more by poles of radiation and influence, for instance by translators and anthologists, not only by critics: “A translator and an anthologist (who not infrequently are one and the same person) are coauthors of the canon to a degree that has never been sufficiently acknowledged”.² Besides, media are the most important propeller of the value-engine. At the same time, in a media-dominated frame, the game of offer and demand implies fast and unpredictable moves. The privileged position of being listed at the stock exchange of the arch-canon will be shorter than it used to be during the Canon contemporary with the Theory. The new canon has to face the plethora of multi-field theories. To ignore the fact that media will play an increasing role in promoting (non)values would mean to abandon the fight for intellectual authority in a heterogeneously constructed world. Even a pillar of modernism like T. S. Eliot has been recently perceived as connected to the values of postmodernism – i.e., to the open text, to the solicitation of the reader’s participation, and to the indeterminacy of meaning.³ Every *-ism* seems to be related to a new form of communication.

Intercultural and transcultural communication --reception

Conditions of communication are inflected by habitus. Apart from Bourdieu’s definition of the notion, Rapport and Overing⁴ emphasized those transposable dispositions which generate structured social practices. Understanding the conditions of habitus allows the generator of discourses, endowed with agency, to insert in them manipulative or propagandistic ingredients. Thus, literature can very well function as a platform for public relations or advertising. Every author / publisher assesses readers’ objectives and needs before elaborating narratives. Postmodernism also resorted to multi-layered

² Piotr Wilczek, “The Literary Canon and Translation. Polish Culture as a Case Study,” *Sarmatian Review* (September 2012), 1689.

³ Jennifer Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism. American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

⁴ Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing, *Social and Cultural Anthropology. The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003), 19.

discourses in the post-totalitarian epoch and revived the importance of cultural symbols (flags, statues, and religious icons), exactly as in the medieval epoch.⁵

In order to deconstruct the toxic discourses of a MacDonaldised and Disneylandized postindustrial society, reception has to resort to mediated discourse analysis, as it includes the social identities and social relationships made possible by certain discourses.⁶ Actions are transformed into texts and texts into actions in a never-ending entextualization. The reception of literature is basically intralingual translation and every literary-encoded message is decoded in panoplies of meanings, depending on the level of communication between the works of art and their readership. Respecting the pattern of everyday communication, the feedback offered by readers is influenced by context, noise, mood, level of decoding, filters and so on.

Getting closer to Cultural Studies, communication implies an exchange of points of view, if we take into consideration genuine communication, non-biased and detached from agenda setting schemes. Even in the cultural field we are trapped in what J. Habermas called *communicative actions*. Culture would be blocked at the level of samizdat without being helped by communication to establish its context.⁷ Thus, intercultural communication relies on rationality, especially linguistic rationality. In order to gain access to dialogue – and what is reception or hermeneutics unless genuine dialogue? –, communicators have to be able to perceive different cultures from a perspective of informed understanding.⁸

The interdisciplinarity of the new arch-canon relies even more on the fluency of communication with the consumers of values. In the context of a liquefying world, the questions of transitoriness, relativism, and contingent values suggest a versatile and negotiable canon. Obviously, the conflict with the old Canon, cumulative, shared by intellectuals and specialists around the world, is unavoidable. One argument in favor of the new system of valorization is that the old-fashioned way of sanctifying artefacts actually sidelines their impact on the cultural market. The “classical” way of legitimating works for their inclusion into an ever-lasting pantheon may be a cultural practice of the past. Some fields have

⁵ cf. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1997).

⁶ Ken Hyland and Brian Paltridge, eds., *Continuum Companion to Discourse Analysis* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 10.

⁷ Knoblauch in Aldo Di Luzio, Susanne Günthner and Franca Orletti, *Culture in Communication Analyses of Intercultural Situations* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001), 5.

⁸ John Corbett, *An Intercultural Approach to English Language Teaching* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd, 2003), 2.

always been more exposed to canonicity than others and, consequently, more acutely informed by political and social forces.⁹ On the other hand, many ideology-driven influencing factors cultivate the confusion between a valuable product *per se* and its effects on the commercial or ideological market. That is why communication theories can be helpful in telling apart the genuine value-consumption from the artificially stimulated one. By “artificiality” I understand mundane criteria used in the selection of and promotion of sub-values as first-hand values.

Communication and canon projection

The construction of every canon necessitates interactivity/communication but also hedging measures so that the selected values would not have their position too early disputed by other competing would-be values. Genuine communication is founded on a hierarchy of hypotheses, although the top-down distribution inside the canon is suspect.

The probability of misunderstanding intervenes when the factors involved in negotiating the canon lack mindfulness, as they are not able to refresh their grid of selection and to be open to new information and multiple perspectives.

If we want to maintain the creation of the canon at a dialogic level, we have to strive for obtaining a flux capable of achieving aesthetic elevation. Social constructionists state that the constitutive dialogue creates and alters not only relationships, but also the entire social construction. Thus, our discussions are part of the all-comprising competing discourses, but also of the on-coming discourses. Present and future communication forms a dialectical flux which makes impossible the predictability of an issue. Nothing manages to preserve its autarchic state. This is quite normal if we admit to the spiraling inversion of the contrasting voices in a relationship: the dominant role is assumed in turns, depending on the circumstances.

The usefulness of the theories of communication for the explanation of canonicity is undisputable. They prove that everything in the universe comes under representations of communication. Likewise, they make explicit the complexities and obstacles that inform the process of communication. Building the canon coincides with investing continuously in communication. The impasse is that communication can be genuine – in a utopian representation – or – more often than not – fake, biased or mimicked.

⁹ Rakefet Sela-Sheffy, “Canon Formation Revisited: Canon And Cultural Production,” *Neohelicon* XXIX, 2 (2002): 141-142.

Ableism, enculturation, and mixophobia

Local and non-didactic canons are more predisposed to ableism, paying significant tribute to social success. The process of acculturation intervenes periodically and with the merging of cultures canons blend too. Ageism can affect the structuring of the canon. Many works of art become dated and later epochs do not find them irreproachable. For instance, some works can be banned from the canon under the accusation of chauvinism. Canons are informed by political correctness too. Even aesthetic selections are a matter of chronemics, evolving under specific temporalities.

This is why the arch-canon needs to be as cosmopolitan as possible. But in spite of the existent lingua franca at a certain moment, cultural noise invariably influences the climate of selection. Translations are salient in this case, and they are the result of biased negotiations. Canons develop their own “languages” as they target larger or restricted categories. Lateral canons intently assume different structuring principles in order to highlight injustice and marginalization; but, without aesthetic buttressing, they get outdated sooner than later.

On the other hand, colonialism takes the form of enculturation. The ethos of a group is absorbed into a more central culture at a certain moment. The center invades the peripheral canon. As in pragmatics, a certain culture attains the felicity conditions when its canon gets to be the most successful. The confrontation of canons (colonization and reverse colonization) moves from heterophily to interlanguages as an intermediary stage in intercultural communication.

The initial mixophobia of the central canon has made more and more place to the melting pot approach. Thus, the canonizing process is ever-changing and includes, besides aesthetic/truthful contributions, ingredients that belong to various sociolects.

Liquefaction to deconstruction: a world of fractals

The elaboration of the canon comports distinctions in terms of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism. Jennifer Ashton insisted on the transformations suffered by the regime of texts. The Eliot-type modernism adopted the autonomy of the text (or what postmodernism would call the “closed text”) and the determination of its meanings, whereas the postmodern text will be “open” and indeterminate in terms of meaning.¹⁰ Reader-response theory tries to reduce ambiguity, but ultimately this is an issue related to the cultural level of the

¹⁰ Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 1.

readership. The acceptance of an increased openness for our messages implies a reduced intention of dominance in the act of communication. If we take serious account, though, of Jürgen Habermas's description of modernism as a sequel to the Enlightenment project, it results that the canonizing process relies solely on rationality and equity.

Conversely, the multi-faceted profile of postmodernism, under the umbrella of a complex and contradictory postmodernity,¹¹ attracts a softened approach to conceiving the canon. In such conditions, there resist no solid, impenetrable frontiers between stylistic and socio-cultural phenomena. Zygmunt Bauman contested the cultural dams built by high modernism. For him, modernity was a process of liquefaction from the start. If solids cancel time, liquids, on the contrary, boost time perception.¹² Mainstream canon is thus overflowed by tributaries which melt the "solids".¹³ Building up the canon could be fueled up by liquefaction or, oppositely, could be pulverized into countless petty, irrelevant selection criteria. Even Bauman warned about the decomposing blabbering of culture industry. The "exhilarating freedom to pursue anything" and the "mindboggling uncertainty" as to what is worthwhile pursuing induce a state of "all-deriding, all-eroding, all-dissolving destructiveness".¹⁴ The key word here is "all". Without it, we could consider the creative destruction's utility, as it dismembers fossilized structures and invites to a more flexible reassembling.

Liquefying structures may help the process of canonization as much as they may break it into countless exchanges of insignificant content. Too much freedom to pursue anything in a society enjoying destructiveness leads to axiological confusion. This abyss of relativism engenders irony as defense in front of confused axiology.

Irrespective of individual preferences, one cannot reject the fact that contemporary culture has become polycentric and pluralistic. Quantum physics, the theory of chaoplexity, theories of chaos, and theories of the fractal have all contributed to put the previous epistemological certainties into perspective. Nowadays it is plausible and scientifically sustainable for opposed paradigms to coexist: creation is accompanied by destruction, randomness by determinism, disorder and unpredictability by strict rules (especially in coding). We speak more

¹¹ Adam Sharman, *Tradition and Modernity in Spanish American Literature: from Dario to Carpentier* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), XI.

¹² Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press and Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 2.

¹³ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 4.

¹⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992), VII-IX.

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and more about a posthuman body and about cyborgs, together with the correspondent ethical sets. How could we maintain the same criteria, centuries-old, for constituting the canon? This is a world more and more perceived as a media-projected concoction. Resisting to the new developments coincides with the sheer disputation of the necessity of a canon: “Deconstruction's effect on the canon has been to open it, or it should be. Indeed, it should be more radical than that. Under the aegis of deconstruction there should be no canon.”¹⁵

The canon in relation to hyper-literature

Innovations inside the canon have never been so accelerated. As the mainstream culture, the hierarchy was pulverized into many hierarchies. A few decades ago, many writers were still nostalgic as to the function of the arch-critic; nowadays they realize that such a dream is anachronistic. This transformation has been supported by the multiplication of printing houses, fact that induced both anarchy and democracy. In order to be persuasive, literary critics have to assume a propagandistic role, too. The new public consumes literature and quasi-literature in an undifferentiated way. A mannerist and ultraconservative methodology for assembling the hierarchy affects the readers' response. Hiding behind untranslatable jargons trammel the communicational process and mutual influencing. Contemporary life may be less elevated, but it surely is more complex and heterogeneous. We all live under the “Harlequin countercultural umbrella”.¹⁶ In such conditions, the intellectuals responsible for shaping the canon should be in possession of an encyclopedic cultural background. Decentralizing the critical action assures the avoidance of the tendency towards the unjust eliminations and the preservation of arthritic cultural products.

The canon-makers, as leaders of opinion, are bound to take into account the new forms of creativity and agency. We live in a culture bombarded with computer-generated movies and wherein readers benefit of choices of narrative trajectories and endings in virtual space. The “participant novel” or “interactive fiction” informs a larger-than-life space which integrates asymmetrical fractional dimensions, infography, holography, informatics, supersonics and many others. Long ago deconstruction dismantled Saussure's binary model of the sign. Inside

¹⁵ Adams Hazard, “Canons: Literary Criteria/Power Criteria,” *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 4 (Summer, 1988), 760.

¹⁶ Christopher Gair, *The American Counterculture* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 9.

the experimental space, the most creative one, of course, should signifiers play freely.

Although Theodore Nelson published the book *Literary Machines* in 1981 – here he launched terms like *hypertext* and *hypermedia* – very few writers and critics fathomed these concepts. Nelson hoped that with the help of *Xanadu*, a specially designed software, he will be able to unify the electronic literature. Hypertext can be understood as non-sequential writing able to branch out. The readers would have thus the possibility to choose their reading itinerary. The interactivity of the digital literature is assured by the links which connect bits of text which can be accessed in a fortuitous order. Readers create their own fictional texts in a nonlinear manner. Hyper textual fictions emerged at the beginning of the '80s.¹⁷ Chronology, spatial vicinity and fluent plots, distributed in chapters, were abolished. The text became a gallery of signifiers, instead of a structure of signifiers. There is no end and everything is reversible.

In Nelson's opinion, this new type of text arrangements is a *docuverse* that is the sum of all texts existent in the global network. The reader is transformed into an author-dispatcher. Some textualist ideals are shared: texts are capable of self-generation and there is no clear boundary between the author and the reader. The new type of communication implies that nobody reads, but everybody writes. The aesthetic appraisal becomes a difficult enterprise. The reader is invited to become a combinatory writer.

Additionally, in the last two decades SMS poetry has developed vertiginously. There are competitions and prizes offered for this new literary branch. Mobile phones become books. Espen Aarseth baptized hyper-literature "ergodic literature". There is an increased liberty of reading following different vectors. The work upon the form influences the content, too. The archetype of this dislocating literature can be found in Charles Dickens's serials wherein plot and characters were changed depending on the reader's will. By offering the reader the possibility to mix fragments, the author establishes a literary partnership. The slogan of the hyperwriters is "Screening is way up!".

B.S. Johnson, in 1969, used in *The Unfortunates* unbound pages which were to be shuffled and read at chance. Every page becomes a *texton*, and the chosen orders are called *scriptons*. This non-linear chaotic reading order offers readers the chance to become "readers-as-authors". There is, then, an intertextual version of hyperliterature which is named *derivative work*. In *Ftrain*, Paul Ford included

¹⁷ Michael Joyce, *Afternoon. A story* (1987).

thousands of links, references, and fragments from other text which could be *remixed*.

Nora Boyle dwelled upon the digital reading in connection to hypertext (HTML). She invoked Einstein's theory of relativity, which specified that time can move backwards and forwards. The on-line cyber-writers are called Digerati; they don't write, they transmit. Could the building of the canon ignore these new developments? In 2005, the Dutch Government appointed a Committee for Developing the Dutch Canon.¹⁸

We may be heading towards a "low frequency" literature, as Jonathan Carr, editor at *Minima Magazine*, warned. The medium does not simply wrap the context: they intertwine now. But hyperliterature is not only about shuffling chapters and pages, but also about intensifying the written material with the help of sound and image. The leap from one narrative hub to another, with the help of links, announces many potential stories. The text is not possessed but rented. The original becomes fluid and generates simulacra.

The theory of cybertext considers that all texts are machines projected to accomplish certain actions. For instance, Mark Eskelinen's *Interface* from 1997 is a tripartite work that begins as a novel and is taken further on internet in an equation built on the authorial input and the readers' feedback.

Interactivity tackles combinations with kinetic techniques, as in Jim Rosenberg's *Intergrams* (1997). Here, the *simultaneities* (the layers of text are juxtaposed so that by moving the cursor one can read separate layers) build a syntax "externalized" in graphic symbols which interrelate the fragments of text. In Robert Kendall, *A Life Set for Two*, 1996, readers can select "the atmosphere" of a text from a "menu".

The first hyper-textual novel, *Afternoon. A Novel*, by Michael Joyce, consists of 539 lexias and 951 links that connect them. This structure enables various styles of reading (a different set of lexias, in various orders), which engenders different stories, or a frame-story which includes the reader's stories too. This process was coined *humanistic computing*. An acronym for these innovations was created: MUD (multi-user-domain).

Several mainstream writers strove to trespass the boundaries of traditional literature. Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* contains a *Foreword* followed by a poem, whereas the plot consists of an extensive commentary and an *Index*. The reader can go through and interpret the four sections assuming an optional order.

¹⁸ <http://cntcoen.nu/informatics.Aspx?id=5&ean/=e>.

Julio Cortazar's *Rayuela* has 155 chapters. The author proposes in the beginning a certain reading order, but the reader may ignore it and opt for other approaches.

There have been more than twenty years now of experimentation in a field which affects not only the form, but also informs the content of literature. A canon neglectful of these developments would be on the brink of obsolescence.

Discourse theory approach in shaping the arch-canon

There are state-of-the-art studies about practices, utterance interpretation and processing, and about acts of speech. The pragmatic inferences begin to rely more on analyses of non-assertive acts of communication. The pragmatic turn, as we know, values sentences in communication more than isolated sentence structure. The new developments in the realm of the philosophy of language connect it overtly to communication theory. The phenomenon is closer to continental European pragmatics than to the Anglo-American one. The former is interested macro-pragmatics, which includes socio-pragmatics, cross-cultural and intercultural communication, and ideology. This integrative development is very useful for hermeneutics, especially when, allegedly, the researcher tries to clarify Gricean implicatures, which are haphazard sayings or meanings without a limpid expression, or "the speakers implicate while readers infer".¹⁹

If linguistics is informed by idealizations, then applied linguistics is accountable for linking languages to the process of thinking in matter-of-fact everyday life situations. The same happens with literature: the reader-response approach is preoccupied with the transaction between the artefact and its readership in relation to the context wherein this is accessed.

Postmodernism showed that literature and language are not self-contained, neutral systems, but politicized forms of thinking and feeling. In order to identify and understand these cultural ingredients we need a multifunctional hermeneutics. Noam Chomsky pleaded for a universal grammar but nobody could plead for a uniform reception and assessment of literary products. The mediated discourse analysis posits that all actions are mediated through cultural tools. It results that our discourses are both *situated practices*, tied to quantitative and qualitative configurations, and *community practices*, tied to various communities within particular disciplinary narratives.²⁰ Through entextualization we reify language as

¹⁹ Keith Allan and Kasia M. Jaszczolt, eds., *The Cambridge Handbook of Pragmatics* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4.

²⁰ Ken Hyland and Brian Paltridge, eds., *Continuum Companion to Discourse Analysis* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 13.

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text, much in the same vein as a structuralist approach. Structuralists were more preoccupied with the structure of language, which made possible the linguistic performance, than with the actual performance in its multiple representations. *Langue* was more important than *parole*. Signs, in the Saussurean tradition, generated sense through reciprocal reference and not through interaction with an external and hybridized world. Selection and combination were realized strictly syntagmatically.²¹ It was Roland Barthes the one who understood to subsume all cultural practices to semiotic analysis.

For the literary discourse to function at all levels, Grice's cooperative principles are still standing: the maxim of quantity (quantity of information), the maxim of quality (adequate evidence), the maxim of relation (relevance), and the maxim of manner (coherence, concision). But, of course, they are imperative only at the communicative level, otherwise, the literary discourse gladly surrenders to redundancy, deformation, irrelevance and prolixity or ambiguity. However, the phatic function would not be annihilated through these tactics, only diminished in terms of a thinned public.

Linguistic contours

Contemporary literature covers more and more frequently the full spectrum of linguistics signs (organized by C.S. Peirce into a triad: iconic, indexical and symbolic). Peirce's type of semiotics, as we know, is processual, paying attention to protean contexts, whereas Saussure's was linguistically oriented and based on the arbitrariness of linguistic sign. A triadic paradigm was opposed to a dyadic one. Then, with the advent of poststructuralism, the conditions of truth became loose, if not evanescent. As to our topic, literature doesn't have to stick to the principles of logic in order to secure a public. Literature professes an inter-discourse communication, which results in access to all milieus.²²

The *epistemic theory of vagueness* contends that there is no firm borderline between disciplines. Accordingly, a reality is neither true, nor false, everything depending on context. Thus, this theory uses concepts and ideas as "contextuality" and "accommodation" – in the wake of Grice (1975) –, cooperative principle and

²¹ Chris Barker and Dariusz Galasinski, *Cultural Studies and Discourse Analysis. A Dialogue on Language and Identity* (USA: SAGE Publications, 2001), 4.

²² Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon, *Intercultural Communication. A Discourse Approach* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 2.

the associated conversational maxims. The levels of specificity will vary depending on the situation.²³

Again, language in use flexes itself in relation to the status of language users, to the context of interactions, and to the communicative goals pursued by communicators. Truth-conditional semantics analyses sentence meaning in the light of formal rigor and logical plausibility, but in compliance with evolving states-of-affairs. To these, the meaning supplied by other sources has to be added. Language theories may enlarge their scope when they confront with the use-centred, social-interactionist views on language. We get closer hereby to speech acts and their intentionality. In much complex interactions, the speakers adjust their utterances to suit the hearers while also being mindful of the context and of the assumed shared background knowledge, otherwise hearers tend to become over hearers. From the point of view of pragmatics, an overhearer may misinterpret the message for want of appropriate contextual information. In this equation, a locutionary act is followed an illocutionary one which also assumes a performative dimension. Finally, the perlocutionary act evades the intentionality of pragmatics and enters the sphere of the theory of discourse. As we know, pragmatics includes the study of speaker meaning, of contextual meaning, and how speakers communicate more than they say. This involves presuppositions, conversational implicatures, references, deixis or “pointing”, and speech acts. Modern developments of linguistic studies confirmed Ferdinand de Saussure’s conception that language is not an organism developing its own accord but a collaborative construct belonging to linguistic communities. Theory welded to individual functional acts could create what Searle coined in 1969 as “felicity conditions”. According to these, the speaker will provide that valuable (sincere) information which is desired by the hearer.

The “social turn” in language studies and the parallel “turn to discourse”, occurred towards the end of the 20th century in the social sciences, redirected researchers and theorists towards the “processual”, “constitutive” and “ideological” aspects of the language. Culture has become gradually understood as cultures which include also institutions and mentalities. Linguistics accepted connections to ethnoanthropology in what was called the “postmodern turn”. Consequently, a cross-fertilization of discourse analysis and linguistic pragmatics became possible. The result was *discursive pragmatics*, a concept theorized by Jan Zienkorovski, Jan-Ola Ostman and Jef Verschueren in their eponymous book

²³ Ulla Connor and Thomas A. Upton, *Applied Corpus Linguistics. A Multidimensional Perspective* (The Netherlands: Rodopi, 2004), 1.

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published at John Benjamin's Publishing House Company in 2011. The accent falls on points of convergence, eclectic studies of real-life discourses and interdisciplinarity. Ethnomethodological conversation analysis also focuses on common-sense reasoning and social action work.

These new perspectives understood individual agency and power structures as dialectically interrelated. The same type of tension persists in Discourse Studies: appeared as a reaction to structuralism in anthropology and linguistics, the discipline includes both a theory of social life and of language. Ethnomethodology preceded conversation analysis which confined itself to the study the "here and now" of interactions, which mainly described rules governing interactional patterns, that is to say turn-taking structures and specifics of relevant conversations. Umberto Eco also referred to the importance of the Dynamical Object as a *terminus a quo*, meaning of course the language in action, as a flux between interpretants.²⁴

Discourse, acceptability, and ambiguity

French poststructuralism postulated that the social space is a *discourse* containing sub-discourses which organize regimes of power and inequality. Unequal opportunities, social-leverage and marked identities are pointed and legitimized through ideologies. It is basically what Foucault understood by the historical nature of discursive practices. If there is no discourse free of ideology, free of paradigm, then it is obnoxious to speak about objectivity, progress and neutrality. From this relativism or skepticism, a more comprehensive and sincere perspective may ensue. Grammaticality is not the same with acceptability, the latter being related to the speaker's performance. The canon should be conceived in relation to the latter concept.

In Chomsky's vision, an acceptable sentence must appear natural and appropriate in a given text, besides it being grammatically irreproachable.²⁵ Acceptability has to take into account ambiguity and vagueness, concepts which have preoccupied for a while semanticists and pragmatists.

We can infer that there are two roads to follow in relation to shaping the canon: on the one hand, we face the problem of communication; on the other hand, there is the problem of assessing and valuing. For instance, performative linguists

²⁴ Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus. Essays on Language and Cognition* (A Harvest Book, Harcourt Inc., 1999), 3.

²⁵ Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1965).

will be interested in how people perform the verbal actions enacted by others.²⁶ Literary critics will tackle the axiological problem. In between, there are translators who have to fluidize and localize, but also to realize the selection in some specific situations.

Discourse theory may run the risk of reifying language by insisting on some ideologized stance. Preventively, inter-discourse communication constitutes an integrative and moderating paradigm. If we were to surpass the binary impasses of literature versus language, structural versus communicative approaches, language elitism versus language populism, and language versus culture, we should accept that languages are an issue of social justice. This means that the processes of communication and selection involve additional aspects besides competence and performance. Paradigm shifts stress the “hyphenated areas” of research, which means both interdisciplinarity and disciplinary delimitations.²⁷ Otherwise put, the relations between language and context, science and aesthetics should always be grammaticalized, whereas the formation of the canon needs to take into account the acceptability condition too.

Literary communication in postmodernism

If the modernist worldview insisted on the individuals’ sense of separateness, postmodernity produced a colorful type of alienation. The new *Zeitgeist* acquiesced comprehensiveness, even if it continued to record dystopian social models.

Anyway, postmodernity was more homogeneous than postmodernism. Hans Bertens (in *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History*) identified two postmodernisms. The first was a *familiar* one and it manifested in the early 1960s (Thomas Pynchon’s *V* [1966]). In the course of the 1970s it reached its peak (Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* [1973], Carlos Fuentes’ *Terra Nostra* [1975], Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* [1975], and George Perec’s *La Vie; mode d’emploi* [1978]). The second postmodernism would be one of *difference* and it assimilated the French poststructuralist thinking. Pynchon’s *Vineland* (1990) confirmed this turn by showing more “realistic” style and content.

Also Frank Palmieri positioned Pynchon (and Foucault) in the center of this displacement. In his opinion, the high postmodernism dominated the sixties,

²⁶ Robinson Douglas, *Performative Linguistics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

²⁷ Jacob L. May, *Pragmatics. An Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 5.

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seventies, and eighties, whereas the late postmodernism was the dominant form of production in the nineties and the beginning of the new century.²⁸

Pynchon's fiction would have evolved from representations of radical paranoia, towards an interest in local Ethicon-political possibilities. So, the climate-of-opinion changed and has been changing so far²⁹ and the criteria for delineating the canon vary accordingly.

The Canon versus the super-arch-canon

The canon in the English speaking world has been remolded under the influence of later developments in technology. Cultural studies, post humanism, transhumanism, communication and performance studies, critical media studies, and translation studies joined efforts in demythologizing the aesthetic isolationism of the New Criticism. The new developments do not dispute the primacy of aesthetic / truthful criteria used for informing the canon, but they disclose the fact that we cannot ignore the complexity of contemporary society. My research envisages new approaches in selecting items for the new arch-canon, with reference to specialized canons and also personal canons. How much is utopia and how much is dystopia in building an arch-canon in the English speaking world? Can we create a canon which will serve pure communicative purposes and not colonialist ones?

One of the applications of the canon is the creation of anthologies, which are distinct from miscellanies insofar as miscellanies collect writings on the same topic without a selective ordering. Anthologies, in their turn, inform the canon too, so their relationship is a two-way one. The term "anthology" comes from Greek where it originally indicated a "collection of flowers". It suggests evolution, hierarchy and institutionalization.³⁰ In Spain, for instance, *Biblioteca de Autores Españoles* started in 1946 and was crucial in the designation of the canon.

The canonical wars are waged at least at two levels: the theoretical one and the national one. For example, the American canon strove, at a certain stage, to strengthen the image of democratic nationalism and praised the works of Henry David Thoreau and Mark Twain. In parallel, New Criticism encouraged those authors who stressed the formal aspects of texts.

²⁸ *apud* Ian D. Copstake, ed., *American Postmodernity: Essays on the Recent Fiction of Thomas Pynchon* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), 8.

²⁹ Gene Wise, "Paradigm Dramas," *American Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1979): 295.

³⁰ Barbara Mujica, "Teaching Literature: Canon, Controversy, and the Literary Anthology," *Hispania* 80, no. 2 (May, 1997): 203-215.

In *The Unusable Past* (1986), Russell Reising describes three paradigm revolutions concerning the American canon: the *genteel* tradition of the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, the *social and political* approach to canon supported by critics such as Granville Hicks and V. L. Parrington, and the *Agrarian/New Critics* approach. After World War II the movement for human and civil rights affected again the cultural paradigm. The monolithic tradition was fissured by the opening up of the canon, provoked by the acknowledgement of the minor traditions as integral and valuable components of the American cultural heritage.

A more flexible canon is the consequence of twists in literary and cultural theorizations. Marjorie Perloff, for instance, described the modern/postmodern divide as becoming more and more salient (*21st Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics*). However, the modernist T. S. Eliot pleaded for the autonomy of the text (for the “closed” text, as postmodernists later called it), whereas the postmodern text proclaimed its “openness” and its indeterminate meaning. Even contemporary researchers like Jennifer Ashton, a decade ago,³¹ maintained the gap between modernism and postmodernism. In this sense, the irrelevance of the reader for the existence of the masterpiece is strongly preached in modernism (by Gertrude Stein, for example) and the reader’s response is not something critical to literature. However, the reader-response theory questions exactly such autonomous aestheticisms: could an author generate a masterpiece without nurturing the thought of an ideal (and imponderable) reader/receptor at least?

Conclusion

The conclusion of this research is that today’s canon cannot be built from a unitary perspective. Even when I asked humanist academics about their opinion on the canon their first reaction was: about what? Therefore, the common denominator is somehow lost. Researchers should also take into account the fact that postmodernism as a stylistic arc is closed and there is no reigning cultural paradigm left to gather various approaches. At the beginning of the 21st century, we remain only with ideologies and, sadly enough, they nurture ambitions to inform the canon.

Postmodernism was characterized by heterogeneity, but was still capable to construe a canon, be it subjective and biased. In the interval of the sliced and islands-based post-postmodernism the only hope for a respectable canon is the

³¹ Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 13.

acceptance of a threesome palette: interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity, and cross-disciplinarity.

New concepts, specific to the sciences of communication, linguistics, and digital literature are to be taken into account in the design of a canon for a world in which art does not play a leading role any longer. Aesthetics, urbanism, ideologies, communication, technology, religions, ecology and education are much more important at the time being than artistic ambitions that show no interest in elaborating on the quality of life. After decades of debates upon art for art's sake or ideologized art, the time has come to admit that the canon has to be more comprehensive if we want to preserve a large and informed public for it. Without this public, the canon would end up pushed into a shadowy corner, whereas superficial criteria would be used for the selection of pseudo and ephemeral values.

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