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A Mongrel Canon

Joel Whitney

In 1994, the critic Harold Bloom mounted a vigorous public defense of the western literary canon, which was then under siege. In his volume, "The Western Canon," Bloom lauded the tradition of great western books, portraying himself as a singular reader in a one on one reverie with each of twenty-six canonical authors. No aspect beyond aesthetics, or influence, should count. Or so he argued from one side of his mouth.

But the Bloom-related buzz came from the very theme he pretended his readers should ignore—the political context surrounding the book, a context which, sadly, belatedly, persists. For the main problem with Bloom's stance is that, as many writers with origins outside or partly outside the West can tell us, the Canon is universal in ways Bloom simultaneously grasps and discounts. Bloom's is a one-way universality found when productions of Shakespeare travel to Tehran. But all too rarely does Tehran get to Stratford-upon-Avon.

Indeed, all writers who came after Shakespeare have stood in the shadow of his influence. And all, willfully or almost willfully, misread him—as a result of their "anxiety of influence" and as a way to cast him off and find their entry point into the Canon that Bloom and his school of thought would hold. In Shakespeare's case, you can only work around him. He contains all of us. He invented us, anticipating all the scholarly breakthroughs in philosophy and psychology that would follow.

This argument risks being buried under the multiculturalists' program—a veritable "School of Resentment," populated by Marxists, feminists and other fellow travelers. The anxious defenders of the long-standing Western Canon come to rest on the notion that opening the Canon dilutes it. There simply isn't enough time

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to read key parts of the Canon—even less after we include works merely for their multicultural values. Bloom, that pied piper of the Western Canon, was clearly wrong to see fidelity to the tradition of great writers as fundamentally incompatible with multiculturalism. It shows a deep misunderstanding (by this icon of western culture) of multiculturalism's corrective impulses. It shows how much he misdiagnosed the true threat.

Who Rules?

In 2010, the Berlin Wall is still down. Markets rule, though tentatively. The world's straight-jacketed superpower has its first black president, with roots in Kenya and a youth spent in Indonesia. Suddenly, the great agenda of multiculturalism holds sway, despite the strains imposed by large-scale immigration in Europe and the United States, and the backdrop of the war on terror, with its latest "ground-zero mosque" frenzies. Multiculturalism will overwhelm these threats, too, because it has already found consensus. The United States, Europe, Africa (notably Nigeria), India and other parts of Asia, notably the Philippines, are all flush with brilliant writers who may write in English but whose parents or grandparents spoke the language only second, or not at all. Then there are the great Japanese and Chinese writers who come to us in translation.

Many of these writers remain rooted in their original birthplace, but have a relationship with the West via language, work, schooling, exile or immigration. Others reside in the West, and tell stories of double-life, double identity—the here before here was here. Largely, it's the back and forth, literally and figuratively, that initiates and drives many of these authors. How to be your own doppelganger, culturally speaking, is the great subject of the global age—how to be at odds with yourself as you toggle between cultures.

In today's atmosphere of an all but moribund publishing industry, immigrant fiction is one of the steady pulses. Especially in the United States, foreignness or otherness is both familiar and strange, almost at once—valued in the arts, scapegoated in populist politics. A foreign or bicultural writer's strangeness—that is, our collective estranged-ness from the world—will continue to drive us toward discovering it in our books, with a nudge from publishers who need something to market. This happens for better and worse: better when a culture or subculture is illuminated brilliantly from within; worse when it leads to tokenism.

But even given this scale, the principle that has always held—and that ought to have heartened rather than agitated those who plump for the Western Canon—remains intact. An author's greatness comes from his or her relationship with prior greats, western or not. These are the individuals who keep our attention in the long run. The multiculturalist mantle, despite how the paranoid have seen it, has not ignored the past. It has merely spread the past around. It has found authors whose relationship with a great—if not *the* great—tradition is healthy, vibrant and sufficiently anxious.

Hopes and Impediments

Five years before Bloom's "Western Canon" appeared, Chinua Achebe brought out his book of essays "Hopes and Impediments." Achebe shows up on Bloom's appendix of writers who aspire, promisingly, to the Canon. As a Nigerian, Achebe is eligible for canonization apparently not by virtue of being "Western" per se, but by writing well in English. He was also one of the multiculturalist resenters. "Hopes and Impediments" opens with "An Image of Africa," which is his critique of another canonical writer in Bloom's appendix, Joseph Conrad, who as a Brit, albeit writing much about the non-western world, fits the stereotype of the western creative genius. In the essay, Achebe makes the case that Europeans see Africa as a kind of shadow-Europe, a perpetually savage "other." Conrad, a racist at the height of this tendency, Achebe argues, was perhaps at his most explicit in "Heart of Darkness."

Take Conrad's description of a black mistress of Kurtz, the ivory trader turned tyrant and demigod deep in the heart of the Congo Free State: "She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent... She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose." Achebe disputes, convincingly, the apologia that would separate a patently racist Marlow, Conrad's protagonist, from the author himself. All it takes is a quote from Conrad's account of his first interaction with a black man: "A certain enormous buck nigger encountered in Haiti fixed my conception of blind, furious, unreasoning rage, as manifested in the human animal to the end of my days. Of the nigger I used to dream for years afterwards."

Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie would seem to agree there's a problem with the Canon's singularity. In a recent TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Talk, two decades after Achebe's "Image of Africa" first surfaced, Adichie warned of the dangers of what she calls a "single story" about a place or people, and discusses the early effects of reading English stories devoid of Africans. Later, writers like Achebe inspired a "mental shift" where she found that people like her "could exist in literature." She continued, "This single story of Africa ultimately comes I think from western literature… After referring to the black Africans as 'beasts who have no houses' {John Locke in 1561} writes, 'They are also people without heads, having their mouths and eyes in their breasts.'…[This} represents the beginning of a tradition…in the West…of sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness, of people who, in the words of the wonderful poet Rudyard Kipling, are 'half-devil, half-child.'"

Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower and to humanize.

But Achebe's critique starts with blind spots in the language of "Heart of Darkness," namely in Conrad's mystification of the landscape, how he makes anything African "inscrutable" and "incomprehensible." If Shakespeare invented the human, as Bloom asserts, then Europeans of Conrad's ilk helped invent and perpetuate the savage. If Shakespeare contains all humanity, all philosophy and psychology that come before and after him, all of what any of us may dream or think or be, then Achebe and other multiculturalists are right to disdain Conrad for the opposite—for removing any trace of humanity from his African characters. The point should be clear. Wanting humans to be depicted with humanity is an aesthetic argument.

And Then There's Art

Lest we think such fine aesthetics are confined to the written word, Achebe observes that "soon after Conrad had written his book, an event of far greater consequence was taking place in the art world of Europe." Gaugin had died in Tahiti. Achebe quotes Frank Willett, British art historian:

> Gaugin had gone to Tahiti, the most extravagant individual act of turning to a non-European culture in the decades immediately before and after 1900, when European artists were avid for new artistic experiences. But it was only about 1904-5 that African art began to make its distinctive impact. One piece is still identifiable—a mask given to Maurice Vlaminck in 1905. He records that Derain was 'speechless' and 'stunned' when he saw it, bought it from Vlaminck and in turn showed it to Picasso and Matisse, who were also greatly affected by it. Ambroise Vollard then borrowed it and had it cast in bronze. The revolution of 20th century art was under way."

Through several accounts, we gather it was Matisse who first showed Picasso the mask. Picasso wasted no time mythologizing it into his personal canon, for Picasso's art was storytelling as much as creating objects. He projected onto it a strong impulse to ward off evil. Cubism was born on both Cézanne's brush strokes and Picasso's sense that painting as a decorative art was retrograde. After the mask, he famously interrupted an interviewer who pressed him on this and, not to be misunderstood, wrote on a piece of paper:

> What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who only has eyes if he's a painter, ears if he's a musician, or a lyre in every chamber of his heart if he's a poet…? Quite the opposite, he is … a political being constantly alert to the horrifying, passionate or pleasing events in the world, shaping himself completely in their image. How is it possible to be uninterested in other men and by virtue of what cold nonchalance can you detach yourself from the life that they supply so copiously? No, painting is not made to decorate apartments. It's an offensive and defensive weapon against the enemy.

As for the mask, it "was made by other savages living just north of Conrad's River Congo," writes Achebe in one of many accounts of the mask and its history. "They have a name too: the Fang people, and are without a doubt among the world's greatest masters of the sculptured form."

Here, it would seem, is a prototypical story of a non-western influence streaming into the Western Canon, origins erased. Whether it's musician Ravi Shankar's pull on Philip Glass; Indian director Satyajit Ray's affect on Martin Scorsese, Wes Anderson, Merchant Ivory Films, and ET; or Akira Kurosawa's films influencing George Lucas and Quentin Tarantino, the question is how to account for these international impressions, if multicultural arguments aren't the point?

One of the key gripes of those who cling so frantically to the concept of a Western Canon is that forcing students to read books strictly for the author's identity effectively blocks them from discovering the sublime authors of a more Global Canon. The extra-western and extra-canonical influences are already misconstrued within a canon of either description. Quite simply, we need interpreters from any and all cultures so we can cease projecting what we do know (ourselves) onto what we don't (them). Notes Adichie, "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower and to humanize."

How West is Western?

A troubling question remains. How western is the Western Canon? How essential is its western-ness? Strictly speaking, there was once a western tradition that was separate from literature or other creative arts of the East. But in a globalized age, how essential is western-ness to grouping the great western authors, artists or musicians together? Demographics may do away with the question faster than we could have dreamed.

The erstwhile British Empire produced, among many other ironies, this most delicious one: In the next decade, India will be the world's largest English-language book buying market. India already boasts the world's most populous democracy. In terms of audience, India's film industry—which includes Bollywood, the Bombay-based film industry (but others too)—is vastly larger than America's.

Nefarious Twins

Arguments regarding the dangers of Islamism center around the Western Canon's nefarious twin—some sort of multicultural plot to undermine all moral (and aesthetic) standards entirely. While a Global Canon may be seen in one camp as the world's great hope for a true universality, alongside founding documents like the Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is maligned by its opponents as the ultimate source of moral relativism. We have purportedly liberal television personalities (like Bill Maher) and Western Canon-ites alike, referring to cultures they know almost nothing about, railing about how "not all cultures are equal."

I can't help but think of Orwell's "Politics and the English Language." "The words democracy, socialism, freedom, patriotic, realistic, justice have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another," Orwell observes. "In the case of a word like democracy, not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy."

This seems to have happened with "Western." Many of the apostles of a Western Canon are forced to extend honorary western status to Africans like Achebe who write in English—though they refuse to go as far afield as other non-westerners who write in other western languages. This is an obvious conundrum for any American mono- or even bilingual critic. Where to draw the line? Bloom, for one, includes ancient Indian texts like The Mahabharata and The Ramayana in his appendix to "The Western Canon," but ignores India's Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, a renaissance man—poet, novelist, educational reformer, village organizer—who influenced T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Likewise, Bloom ignores "1001 Nights," so that while theologians include Islam, and therefore the Koran, within the spheres of western religions, Islam's greatest literary book, with its feminist liberator, Scheherezade, is walled out. In short, when we like something, when the Fang masks become Picasso's, we say western. But when Gaugin goes to Tahiti, somehow he fails to become eastern.

Blind spots appear that are resolved only by a global examination of creativity.

However multiculturalism may be maligned, what it means is omnidirectional universality. Vain attempts at putting writers or other creative personalities in tiny boxes, or making them the symbols of a vast landscape, too often come at the expense of the far more compelling, and nuanced, mongrel—or hybrid—nature of influence.

Proponents of the Western Canon, like missionaries before them, frequently ignore what we might call the pagan influences, which has the strange effect of reinforcing our cultural limitations—re-insularizing us. It's no coincidence that the literary canon as a concept was born in the 18th century in the same breath as the catch-all concept of the West.

"Paradise" derives from the Latin word for a walled-in place. When the Canon is valued for its western-ness, its purity, we wall out other great traditions. This, despite the fact that Achebe or Gabriel García Márquez or Toni Morrison or Wole Soyinka or Bei Dao have all folded seamlessly into their zealous absorption of European and American classics (whether Cervantes, Faulkner or whomever) legends from the ancestors, oral traditions from indigenous predecessors, creation myths, local and vernacular literatures, and folk beliefs. In short, blind spots appear that are resolved only by a global examination of creativity.

There's one final irony. While the so-called Western Canon adjusts itself to India's rise (and it will happen automatically, since markets rule), India's native languages are flat-lining. The Anglo-Indian author Salman Rushdie notes in his introduction to an anthology of Indian writers 50 years after independence, "Mirror Work": "The prose writing—both fiction and non-fiction—created in this period by Indian writers writing in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 'official languages' of India; the so-called 'vernacular languages,' during the same time."

Such is the enduring power of western languages, especially English, itself a mongrel—even as the West's direct influence seems to wane. Those of us whose roots lie squarely in the West will either need to find interpreters of the great changes to come, or become interpreters ourselves. ●