Multiculturalism and the Literary Canon[*]

Toma A. Sava[**]

Abstract:
The article discusses the relationship between multiculturalism and the orthodox theory of the literary canon, forwarding critical points pertaining to the theoretical/conceptual canon and the academic/pedagogical canon. The multicultural perspective offers a representation key for the processes that ultimately determine the structure of the canon.

Keywords: multiculturalism, pedagogic canon, cultural radicalism, repression

The multicultural context

Multiculturalism plays a crucial role in understanding the inner setup of the literary canon through both the forwarded critical content[1] and the contestation of its traditionalist views (*i.e.* of the literary canon).

The very enterprise of describing a literary canon, given that the canon reflects or expresses power relations[2], involves partisanship with, or the rejection of certain aspects of it. If the canon's main feature is taken to be its representativeness for a certain community "it is quite natural, then, that a number of speculations on the nature of the canon nowadays concentrate on the issue of the particular community forming and/or making use of specific canons" (Kalman, 1995: 1).

Representativeness itself is a complex mater since "every representation exacts some cost, in the form of lost immediacy,

---

[*] Paper presented at the International Symposium "Research and Education in Innovation Era", "Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad, 5–7th of November 2014.

[**] Assistant Lecturer PhD, "Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad, toma_sava@yahoo.co.uk

[1] Multicultural critique is not only necessary but mandatory when it addresses multicultural educational systems. This is more than relevant considering that, for example, *modern* British/American literary canons have taken form as a direct result of post – colonial multicultural tensions and the attempts to (re)define a national literature and its authors (Fairer, 1974).

[2] As it always does in a multicultural environment. For example, the argument is valid for all the Commonwealth countries as well as former British protectorates. The process, however, requires a few differentiations: if for the former colonies and protectorates the primary agenda is to accede to the British literary canon using the representativeness argument, for the commonwealth countries the main concern is to forge a distinct literary and cultural identity.

presence, or truth, in the form of a gap between intention and realization, original and copy" (Mitchell, 1995: 21).

From a pedagogic standpoint multiculturalism accentuates two main points: (1) the critical content is subordinated to the pedagogical canon and (2) the text selection process ultimately determines the pedagogical canon.

Therefore, addressing the above points in order, the pre-eminence of the pedagogical act over literary criticism as canon determiner is considered to be erroneous because a viable literary canon theory cannot be based on the centrality of a given institutional force (Hassan, 2011: 301). More to the point "there cannot be a general theory of canons. Canons support institutions and represent their effect. Canons ensure institutions and vice versa" (Spivak, 1993: 271).

Even if the present context supports the argument pertaining to the canon being based on the pedagogical act, the latter must be reformulated into a culturally relevant pedagogy. Such a pedagogical approach implies more than a simple reflection of a reader group's cultural choices and argues towards a collection of texts present in the literary, socio-cultural and popular practices of the minority it addresses (Marsh, 2004: 259).

These two arguments express the fact that as long as texts do not belong to the classic (conceptual) canon, they are taught as "postcolonial literature or are made to represent a postcolonial perspective within the canon, the disciplinary structures of formal, historical, and cultural differentiation will remain in place" (Hassan, 2011: 303).

At the same time all that the canon gains in critical openness through the introduction of themes, works and postcolonial/multicultural approaches is undermined by the pedagogical canon's traditionalist character, based on an "outmoded conceptualizations of author, period, genre, and nation" (*Ibidem*: 303).

A critical theme common and related to the arguments above is the proliferation of an ideological orientation which is both un-representative and insufficient for the 21st century. By ideology I mean "a more or less coherent set of ideas that provides the basis for organized political action, whether this is intended to preserve, modify or overthrow the existing system of power" (Heywood, 2002: 12). If we exchange *political* for *cultural* the definition gains even more relevance (for the canon's multicultural critique) from the perspective of the ideological systems' function. This is because an ideology is understood to be necessary in supplying "*a plausible* account on the basis of which one should be able to project the *stability* of the given order" (Meszaros, 2005: 15).

The main point forwarded by multiculturalism consists in the fact that most of the works and authors included in the canon support patriarchal and Eurocentric values (Insko, 2003: 354). More to the point, the ideological direction taken by an educational model based on such a canon consists of a nationalist pedagogy oriented towards *producing* citizens living in a democracy (Jay, 1997: 149). All these arguments have suffered major transformations and are not sufficiently representative in a multicultural context[3].

The necessity to rethink the canon is based on the fact that most of its critical apparatus (*i.e.* the canon's) is based on sociocultural intersections, on the cultural space shared between western and outside values, fact exemplified by the accession of authors that provide western values critique from the *outside*, adopting a multicultural, feminist etc. position (Celik, 1996: 202).

In this context, theorizing about the canon in a neutral way is no longer sufficient or possible. Although a series of modern critical theories still perceive the theorizing mechanism as being based on universal premises, multiculturalism requires a perspective change in order to better understand the phenomenon in relation to the literary canon (Mignolo, 1992: 68).

Radical revisionist arguments (pedagogical or conceptual) provided by multiculturalism have provoked various reactions. The moderate critique wing has offered a series of alternatives and arguments regarding the conceptual difficulties of implementing a multicultural canon model.

The proposed alternative, particularly relevant for countries which have a national literature with a strong multicultural and multi-ethnic layer[4], consists of an academic systematization of the curicular material around three major principles. These principles should be based on (1) the integration of thematic literary groups that contribute to the formation of a shared civic culture, (2) take into consideration ethnic diversity and (3) offer proper integration of materials from a large pool of cultural traditions (Stotsky, 1994: 27).

---

[3] For example in its classic form, liberal democracy defines citizens as being equal, free and sovereign. Historically this definition excluded women and colonial subjects from the "citizen" group. Such an idealized citizen model is based around moral absolutes but it ignores in most instances contextual, cultural and historical problems which determine the citizen's relation with the state and his/her status modifications (Olson, 2008: 41).

[4] Immigration plays an important role in the formation of the contemporary British literary canon. Modifications to the canon are produced through the introduction in the curicular system of authors belonging to different cultural traditions in order to provide an inclusive cultural education for all students (Trueba, Spindler & Spindler, 1989).

Returning to the difficulties of the multicultural model, a first part of the critical discourse addresses the change in the reader's reference criteria towards canonical values. Therefore "any argument over canonicity is inevitably an argument that avoids literature, but there cannot be such a thing as literature without the idea of a canon" (Kronick, 2001: 41). Starting from this premise, the particular problems within a multicultural paradigm are: the increasingly difficult interpretative practice given by the change in the traditional reference model (classic values *vs*. multicultural values) and determining the relationship between cultural origin and affiliation. Therefore eradicating a reading method based on a pronounced multicultural interpretation might cause the work to become even less accessible to the reader (Eaton, 2011: 312).

Multiculturalism transforms books into *texts* that do not belong exclusively to literature anymore but are turned into cultural documents intended for sociological research[5]. In this new paradigm the text's value is no longer based on thematic and historic coherence but refers to the author's social class, gender and race (Howland, 1995: 38).

However a literary canon does not reflect diversity simply by incorporating works that belong to authors with diverse racial, ethnic and critical backgrounds because "vulnerable to the ubiquitous values of the dominant culture, they may not always create from their unique perspectives as members of a minority" (Pace, 1992: 34).

A plausible, effective, solution would be the establishment of a representative literary canon that functions effectively in disclosing cultural repression present in the vast majority of texts from an academic curricular programme. This implies the canon's expansion through incorporating alternative texts, centred on the same themes as the traditional ones, however offering a sensible perspective for cultural diversity. This would prevent the dissemination of a singular, comfortable, version of the traditionally accepted variant (Goebel, 1995: 48).

The establishment of a (cultural) history is an evolutionary process of discovery, argumentation, interpretation and codification. If this premise is taken to be valid, then the very representation process of *one history* as an incontestable truth is meaningless[6]. A possible solution would argue for the presentation of alternative and opposed sources to

---

[5] E. Said argues that all critical trends from the last 30 years are no longer relevant except as academic options, being no longer connected to the circumstances that produced them (Said, 1991: 56).
[6] Of course, the relation between demographic change and its effects has been noticed as the recognized hegemony`s usurpation (Godina, 1996: 549).

the accepted standard that would allow students to create their own version about the events (Price, 1992: 210).

This canon re-formation context is grounded on avoiding author differentiation based on multicultural representativeness inside a curricular programme, however inclusive the programme may be, because such a process triggers only a greater isolation for these authors in the main literary corpus. Thus the viable alternative becomes not to present them as representatives of a minority but to provide an undifferentiated inclusion in a curricular programme (McDonald, 1997: 9).

From a representativeness perspective, the main problem faced by multiculturalism lies in determining the autonomy, the ability to self-express and the power capital available for each culture that desires accession to the canon. If all these are met then the culture in question can only be perceived as parallel to the dominant culture, therefore each attempt in cultural representation resumes itself to maintaining the *status-quo* of that culture in relation to itself (Schechner, 1991: 9).

If the cultural identity formation process is considered to be directly related to the educational process[7] then the latter must be reorganized. The educational process cannot continue to focus on socialization skills and control but must strive towards developing a new, diverse and equalitarian community (Carlson, 1995: 427).

Alongside such moderate critiques of the canon, more radical approaches argue towards a total rejection of the arguments and objections proposed by multiculturalism: "teaching in schools must be more selective, seeking the few capable of becoming well individualized readers and writers. The rest that can be determined to submit to a politicized curicula deserve to get stuck with it" (Bloom, H. 1998: 17; *p.t*).

These readers and writers continue to spread classic, and implicitly partisan, values belonging to a specific social class and exclusivist institutions referred to by an entire multiculturalist discourse. Objections to this type of position can be summed up by the following quote: „the general critical attitude toward Bloom is that he's hopelessly a-historicist,

---

[7] The pedagogic act operates with six distinct types of *knowledge*: personal/cultural knowledge (concepts and interpretations derived by the individual in his/her own family, cultural community), popular knowledge (explanations and interpretations institutionalized by mass-media and other popular culture entities), traditional academic knowledge (concepts, paradigms etc. belonging to western culture), revisionist academic knowledge (concepts, paradigms conflicting with traditional ones) and school transmitted knowledge (facts, concepts, paradigms, generalization and interpretations present in textbooks and lectures). Although all these categories are interdependent, the basis for formative knowledge gained through the schooling system is centered on popular and traditionalist academic knowledge (Banks, 1993: 6).

cares nothing about history, and cares nothing about the way in which the real world impinges on literature" (Fry, 2009: n.p)[8].

REFERENCES:

Banks, James, *The Canon Debate, Knowledge Construction and Multicultural Education*, in "Educational Researcher", vol. 22, no. 5 (Jun.–Jul.) 1993, p. 4–14. Published by: American Educational Research Association Stable.

Bloom, Harold, *Canonul occidental* (*The western Canon*), Bucharest, Univers, 1998.

Carlson, Dennis, *Constructing the Margins: Of Multicultural Education and Curriculum Settlements*, Curriculum Inquiry, vol. 25, no. 4 (Winter, 1995), p. 407–431. Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto.

Celik, Z., *Colonialism, Orientalism and the Canon*, in "Art Bulletin", volume LXXVI, no. 2, June 1996.

Eaton, Mark A., *The Cultural Capital of Imaginary Versus Pedagogical Canons*, în "Pedagogy", 12, 2001, p. 305–316.

Fairer, D., *Authorship Problems in The Adventurer*, in "The Review of English Studies", New Series, vol. 25, no. 98, May 1974, p. 137–151. Published by: Oxford University Press.

Fry, Paul, *Introduction to Theory of Literature: Lecture 14 Transcript* Chapter 1. Introduction to Harold Bloom, 2009, http://oyc.yale.edu/english/introduction-to-theory-of-literature/content/sessions/lecture14.html. Accessed on November 8th 2011.

Godina, H., *The Canonical Debate: Implementing Multicultural Literature and Perspectives*, in "Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy", vol. 39, no. 7, Apr. 1996, p. 544–549. Published by: International Reading Association.

Goebel, Bruce, *Expanding the Literary Canon and Reading the Rhetoric of "Race"*, in "The English Journal", vol. 84, no. 3, Mar. 1995, p. 42–48. Published by: National Council of Teachers of English.

Hassan, Salah; Dean Assaf, *Canons after "Postcolonial Studies"*, in "Pedagogy", vol. 1, Issue 2, Spring 2001, p. 297–304. Published by: Duke University Press.

Heywood, A., *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

Howland, J., *Attentive Reading in the Age of Canon Clamor*, in "The English Journal", vol. 84, no. 3, Mar. 1995, p. 35–38. Published by: National Council of Teachers of English.

Insko, Jeffrey, *Generational Canons*, in „Pedagogy", vol. 3, Issue 3, Fall 2003, p. 341–358. Published by Duke University Press.

---

[8] And cares nothing about a complete world geography, as for the example the obvious exclusion of the (almost entire) Balkan region from the literary world map (Martin, 2001).

Jay, Gregory S., *American Literature and the Culture Wars*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1997.

Kálmán, G., *"Canonical" Criticism: Does It Exist?* http://mta.academia.edu/GyorgyCKalman/Papers/154140/On_Canonical_Critic ism, 1995.

Kronick, Joseph G., *Writing American Between Canon and Literature*, in „CR: The New Centennial Review", vol. 1, no. 3, Winter 2001, p. 37–66. Published by Michigan State University Press.

Marsh, J., *The Primary Canon: A Critical Review*, in „British Journal of Educational Studies", vol. 52, no. 3, Sep. 2004, p. 249–262, Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd. on behalf of the Society for Educational Studies.

Martin, Mircea, *Lista lui Bloom* (*Bloom's list*), in "România literară", no. 24, 2001.

McDonald, Ronesa, *Multicultural Literature*, in "The English Journal", vol. 86, no. 8, New Voices: The Canon of the Future, Dec. 1997, p. 9. Published by: National Council of Teachers of English.

Meszaros, I., *The power of ideology*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Mignolo, W., *Canons and Cross-Cultural Boundaries* (*Or, Whose Canon are We Talking about?*)", in "Poetics Today", vol. 12, no. 1, 1991, p. 1–28.

Mignolo, W., *Second Thoughts on Canon and Corpus*, Latin American Literary Review, vol. 20, no. 40, 1992, p. 66–69.

Mitchell , W.J.T., *Representation*, in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Olson, Hevin, *Constructing citizens*, in "The Journal of Politics", vol. 70, no. 1, January 2008, p. 40–53.

Pace, Barbara G., *The Textbook Canon: Genre, Gender and Race in US Literature Anthologies*, in "The English Journal", vol. 81, no. 5, Sep. 1992, p. 33–38.

Price, Hugh B., *Multiculturalism: Myths and Realities*, in "The Phi Delta Kappan", vol. 74, no. 3, Nov. 1992, p. 208–213.

Said, Edward et al, *Criticism, Culture and Performance: An Interview with Edward Said*, in *Interculturalism and Performance*, Eds. Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta, New York, PAJ Publications, 1991, p. 38–59.

Schechner, R., *The Canon*, in "TDR (1988-)", vol. 35, no. 4, Winter 1991, p. 7–13, MIT Press.

Spivak, Gayatri, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, New York, Routledge, 1993.

Stotsky, Sandra, *Academic Guidelines for Selecting Multiethnic and Multicultural Literature*, in "The English Journal", vol. 83, no. 2, Feb. 1994, p. 27–34. Published by: National Council of Teachers of English Stable.

Trueba, Henry T., G. Spindler and Louise Spindler, *What Do Anthropologists Have to Say about Dropouts?*, New York, Falmer Press, 1989.