

OVERCOMING DEBTS: ON CANONS, ANXIETY, AND AMERICAN POETRY

by Richard Deming



To begin I want to make a confession and a disclaimer, both of which will speak very specifically to the matters at hand. The co-coordinators of this symposium have asked that we present our thinking about canons in a manner that is not abstract discourse but serves as a concrete report on works in progress. Let me set aside for the moment the ramifications that arise in the implicit suggestion that a canon *can* progress by way of *anyone's* work. That, as I see it, reveals an optimistic and progressive stance in that such a suggestion counters both an idea of a monolithic canon and the belief that institutional forces lay outside of or in excess of the efforts of individual agents working within cultural institutions. Instead, though, let me first point out that what is bound up in that request is the belief that the two – theory and practice – can be separated. As a theorist (that is the disclaimer, not the confession) I am disposed to insist that practice is always bound up with the theories of value beneath it, the ideals that make the practice—not just my practice but the practice of practice—possible and, in a sense, legitimate. Discussions of canons and canonicity are valuable even if irresolvable because they have come to make the mechanisms of valuation in socio-cultural and/or aesthetic judgments visible for critics, teachers, artists, and readers alike.

At the heart of debates about the canon (or canons) are its claims to legitimacy and its ability to legitimate values. My confession is that my own critical and philosophical work tends to focus primarily on American literature and so my literary references, strictly speaking, will be to American poets and we can judge how the specifics of discussing canonicity and the American milieu are recognizable across national, cultural, and even linguistic lines.¹ At the same time, however, the canon in terms of American culture has different negotiations than those which occur in thinking about Italian literature in that the possibility of American literature itself was only seriously taken up in

the early part of the 1900s. Prior to that, American authors had to make repeated calls to initiate a literature that was not indebted to a British genealogy. First the battle was for a recognizable body of American national literature, one that was not comprised mostly of European texts. Now the battle is for the terms of such a canon which, by the very nature of representing the heteroglossia of the United States, is unstable. This unfixed nature and the relative nascence of an American canon also point to separate questions about distinctions between national (and in a sense nationalizing) canons and a more determining «canon of Western civilization.» The latter presupposes the possibility of a transnational, transhistorical, *universal* set of texts which includes, for example, Shakespeare and Dante, without question. Which American authors might fall into that category, however? Even our strongest contenders (Herman Melville, say, Edgar Allan Poe, or possibly Henry James – though more recently Toni Morrison seems to have a secure place internationally) might be seen as adjunct faculty, provided one could argue even that much authority for them.

Do not mistake this for diffidence or self-deprecation – this is largely a matter of American cultural belatedness. So, in asking about canons one asks about what it means to incorporate into schools and institutions a canon made primarily of classical European texts, an imperialist canon, a colonizers' canon. This Eurocentric canon results in a marginalizing condition for the United States, something that has produced anxiety in American authors since Ralph Waldo Emerson first saw Americans' cultural deferral as a crisis of subjectivity, of national identity, and even of epistemology. Thus begins the worry that a national canon is somehow inauthentic. What does it mean, then, that one's national canon can only be national? I do not want to get ahead of myself, but the question does make complex formulas that allow for various canons (those that are based

on questions of identity – determined ethnically, regionally, in terms of specific discourses or social situations) to lie alongside one another.

I take it as axiomatic that, as Wittgenstein tells us, ‘To imagine a language is to imagine a way of life.’² In that canons speak to and for a given culture, at stake in conversations of canons are not only imaginations of language, then, but even possibilities of ways of life, perhaps most especially one’s own. In other words, one might say that literature is a way of being in the world and that a canon frames certain literary works as being significant in terms broader than the personal and private would be. A canon puts a set of texts in a special, privileged relationship with other texts. This relationship and the way it marks a special status for certain acts of language sets up the possibility of seeing ‘the literary’ as what we might call, in Wittgenstein’s terms, a language game. For that reason, one needs to consider what it would mean if canons were absented altogether. In that they speak for culture – however problematically and hierarchically – canons are not only invested in by institutions but they are policed and defended. Would we want it any other way? My question, rhetorical as it is, suggests a conservatism that I would otherwise wish to distance myself from. Let me explain: that canons are defended means, I trust, that they in fact matter a great deal. This claim (or perhaps it remains too much an assumption) deserves some attention in that an increasingly globalized economy has created a whole set of *commodified* values that supplant in numerous spheres the relevance of ‘high culture’ itself. In a globalized economy, nations and literatures become obsolete and irrelevant respectively. Any cultural discourse that does not participate in the fetishized image-language of the marketplace is currently under threat. While one concern about canons is that they mask collusions with the discourse of power, the literary may at present serve as an alternative language to that of the marketplace. Thus, worrying about a canon must lead to something more than a romanticized, static (read: *monumentalizing*) nostalgia for a classical past and towards a conception of canons as active bodies of knowledge. I am aware of the moralizing force intrinsic to the imperative ‘must,’ but in raising questions in this way, canons become foci of (and as) ethical forces. Behind my argument is another fundamental claim that values are invested not only in all acts of interpretation but in all social activity. Rather than disseminating certain moral values, canons reveal moral processes in their form rather than their content. Even an empirical, sociological analysis belies some moral positions despite its rhetorical masking of an analyst’s subjectivity. And so to rail against the transformation of a canon because it indicates a generalized ‘decline of norms’ seems somehow a form of vanity. As such, all the insights and blindnesses attend.

Emerson once wrote, «Books are the best of things, well used: abused among the worst.»³ A canon, at its best,

is at its most useful (and part of my argument is that they should be viewed as tools to use and not to be used by) as a means by which – and in response and resistance to which – discussions of value can occur. Rather than mystifying cultural capital, canons can reveal the mechanisms by which cultural capital is created and invested. In the conclusion to *Cultural Capital*, John Guillory writes, «In a culture of [...] universal access, canonical works could not be experienced as they so often are, as lifeless monuments, or as proofs of class distinction.»⁴ He further asserts that the point of debates about canons «is not to make judgment disappear but to reform the conditions of its practice.» What this reformation calls for is looking again not at what gets included in a canon but what a culturally privileged set of texts means to individuals as well as to national and transnational worldviews. The poetics of canons, their canonicity, reveal the *processes* of value, not just values themselves.

And yet that being the case, in considering the formation of canons, the fact that we can discuss how they are formed, how they inform and what their reformation entails, means that they are no longer the closed, sacrosanct lists that they once were. The books, so to speak, have been reopened. That suggests a relative freedom in how value is determined – and literary value is never simply literary – but with that freedom comes responsibility, for the proliferation of canons needs to entail greater investment and responsibility for articulating the parameters of a canon. A canon is not ‘natural’ (and ‘universal’) nor self-evident. It is a made thing, though not made usually by any clearly discernible body. As such, it is important to interrogate the principles that determine what ideals and ideologies it affirms and validates. We might consider reversing the question. How is a canon recognized, in other words, as a coherent, cohesive, and above all legitimate constellation of larger acts of aesthetic-cultural representation? In the absence of a state-sanctioned or otherwise institutionalized centralized literary pantheon of texts, we need more theorizing of aesthetic values, not less in order to have conversations about what is and is not valued, and what the purposes of literature might be. This conversation – and it may be as much dissensus as consensus – becomes crucially dynamic in charting out a canon of the contemporary, in that canons shape a past to form an estimable and identifiable present, allowing for the present to branch out into its history, rather than the other way around. From the genealogy we seek, we get the present tense that we deserve.

Let me ground my discussion in particulars with brief mention of a particular reading of recent American poetry. In creating a retrospective critical frame for recent American literature, a sense of a canon shatters after World War II. Prior to that, due to the specific shaping of universities in the form of New Criticism, certain authors and their works became cultural touchstones. Among the poets one would count Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, William

Carlos Williams, and chief among them T. S. Eliot. Other contenders might be Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein; however, although both are absolutely central to the developments of modernism as an aesthetic and social formation, they can be problematic figures for the canon. Pound's work never fully enters the canon in part because of his anti-Semitism (though this sadly proves not to be a substantial reason if we look at Eliot and others who were also anti-Semitic) but mainly because of his fascist politics; because the American canon is supposedly reflective of American democratic ideals, Pound would be consciously excluded as dangerous. Interestingly, even his exclusion becomes pedagogical: the lesson being, diverge from American ideals and you will be marginalized.

In the early 1950s a core set of aesthetic values and identities fractures within universities due to the changing face of higher education and to the influx of students in the wake of the GI Bill in place after World War II and because of the shift in the economic profile of the U. S. The splintering in its literary dimension is most clearly illustrated by what has become known as "the anthology wars." The principle collections in this agon were, on one side, *The New American Poetry* (edited by Donald Allen, published in 1960) and, on the other, *The New Poets of England and America* (a book appearing in 1957 and edited by Donald Hall, a poet who has recently become America's poet laureate, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson). The latter brought together young (and then unknown) highly talented practitioners of received form. For this group, one might see as the central figure Robert Lowell, who combined a recognizable tradition of poetic form with frank and personal subject matter that defined itself against monumentalized notions of elevated poetic discourse in a Keatsian mode, and while the diction and subject matter might seem radical, the use of traditional form indicates a fundamental continuity of aesthetic investments. For Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* (and we should note that the British are excluded from the title as is not the case in Hall's anthology), Charles Olson was the ratifying figure. Olson famously insisted, 'form is never more than an extension of content' and maintained that the poetic line was measured against units of breath of the poet him – or herself, rather than by set, predetermined (and traditional) metrical units. Moreover, Allen's anthology included not only poems but poetics statements as well from Olson, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Frank O'Hara, LeRoi Jones, and others. These figures were representative of various poetics movements – the New York School, Black Mountain poetry, the Beats, and so forth – that were developing at that time, all of which were alternative to if not antagonistic towards 'academic poetry.'

The reductive reading is that this was a battle between the raw and the cooked, with the avant-garde tenor and commitment of the New American poets being 'unsanctioned' and ultimately seen as illegitimate by cultural institutions. To offer a trite but in this case etymologically

appropriate trope, the 'New American' poets were the barbarians at the gates. In any event, these two anthologies respectively offered a contemporary canon and its antithesis. Yet, as I say, the *New American Poets* collection included as part of its anthologizing the theoretical discussions of its own practice. That inclusion makes a telling difference since it makes the articulation of poetics part of poetry's practice. While other factors are also in play, the initial splitting from a central set of values continued to fracture – usefully, generatively, provocatively – *because of* and not despite those statements of poetics. Because each poet's principles were autotelic and not beholden to a shared, classical aesthetic there was the challenge of constructing and initiating a readership. The essays on poetics allowed for that, and yet the essays had further ramifications as well. By allowing the poets to discuss and set their own values and by contesting reified traditions and poetic orthodoxy in public, so to speak, discussion and debate became a part of poetry's discourse and enabled personal, individual agency of poets and readers. As the possibility of discussing and wrestling with values is made more valuable, the more likely it is that multiple perspectives will become accessible. What this engendered was the possibility of a countercanon or a canon that existed alongside a more classically ratified one. Acknowledging aesthetic variants and teaching an audience how to read avant-garde practices gave readers tools to question tradition and by which to fashion their own genealogy and lay claim to dissenting values.

Despite the appearance of a certain degree of flexibility in choices, one must not forget how economic, institutional, and ideological forces clearly motivate and perpetuate canons. On one hand, the canon is meant to present those texts deemed most representative of larger ideals of beauty, culture, and thought. If literature is one way – indeed a foundational way – that a culture says itself to itself, there is good reason to protect that which is deemed the height of expression and thought. At the same time, this perpetuation is a preservation rather than an interrogation of, for instance, class values. The stalemate over the importance of a canon is obvious by now in its being overfamiliar and can be detailed thusly: as social and cultural values change, ought not that pantheon of texts deemed canonical continue to change so as to reflect contemporary ideals? There are generally two types of response to this question: A) No, because the canon reflects universal and timeless ideals; it must resist fashion as well as political machinations. The existing canon can address social changes because it represents our best thinking, our best imaginative acts, and so forth. The continuity is what allows for ideals to be transmitted across time, from Plato until now; B) The canon is elitist, patriarchal, and serves the hegemony. Its changes are of degree not kind and insistence on 'excellence' only serves to mystify and exclude those voices (and modalities) that stand outside those practices. The canon needs to be reconstituted in such a way

that it is demonstrably inclusive and duly representative of the constituent identities that comprise heterogeneous society. With this we have the canon to the right and the canon to the left. But why should a canon represent either excellence or identity? Might it not present something else as well? To *be* is to be *in conflict* – certainly a condition not limited to poets in the U. S. – and insofar as a canon is representative and exemplary it is not a reflection but an enactment of the various contesting voices and ideals within any community – from the local to the national to the global – and literature is that which circulates and embodies that conflict and tension. Literature disseminates the conscious and unconscious values, ideals, and desires of a culture and so this idea of a generative dissensus of canons informs and forms this condition of multiple canons and of multiple modes of being. Indeed, it provides difference itself as that which is most in need of being represented. What works against the valorizing of differing aesthetic and cultural judgments are market forces.

Let us think about publication and its role in canon formation. If publication has a built-in authority – as, say, the Norton anthology does in the United States – not only are there aesthetic forces to be reckoned with but sociopolitical and economic ones as well. Moreover, more capital invested in a canonizing anthology means that there is more weight upon each editorial decision because of that visibility. In fact many have argued that aesthetic choices play less and less of a role in the editorial choices in such anthologies, which by their size, scope, and market are primarily commodities. Such an anthology as the Norton series offers needs to be ‘teachable’; it needs to represent as many groups as possible so as not to alienate, as not only does such alienation exclude buyers, it causes animosity and risks sales even to those not alienated. In contrast, the editorial efforts by Donad Hall and Donald Allen, no matter how divergent in aesthetic agendas, were marshaled to create a canon of contemporaries, to define their moment.

What authenticates the Norton anthology, which is the single biggest selling anthology in the United States and which is named for its publishing corporation W.W. Norton, is its budget and visibility. The more visible it is, the more capital it has behind it. In other words, the more important it looks, the more seriously it is taken. The company affords the permissions and production costs to form an all-purpose reading text to cover literature surveys. All these factors, along with its size and scope, also insure that the Norton anthology is adopted by classrooms at the high school and college level. Thus, capital as much as anything else is the means of creating and circulating that anthology’s authority. We can then see the way that aesthetic values are co-opted and commodified. If in another era political regimes once shaped and policed that which would be designated as a literary canon, now it is Amazon, Borders, and Barnes and Noble that perform this function, both reflecting and shaping public taste. We know the canon because its authors are painted on the walls of the

bookstore cafes, and their faces and names emblazoned on paper cups of half decaf, skim milk lattes. We may begin to ask questions about our canon: do we want one that is consoling, comfortable, and conciliatory? Or do we want one that is disquieting, one that asks more from us than we otherwise would be willing to give? These questions speak most directly to our sense of a canon of the contemporary, for it might be difficult to invite such challenges into one’s life when they are so near at hand, when they walk amongst us, so to speak.

Yet, what legitimates certain forms of literary production, what underwrites our authority to name certain poets as ‘important’? Does it need the processes of legitimacy? If it was just ourselves as individuals with sole cultural agency, then no. But to ‘count,’ that is, to be seen as serious and valid within a larger poetic continuum, there are mechanisms in place that convey or affirm validity. These mechanisms are schools most obviously but the marketplace as well. Thus, to give but one example, an anthology published by Burning Deck, a small poetry publisher in Providence, Rhode Island, does not have the same cultural capital as an anthology published by Houghton Mifflin, which has a dazzling amount of money to make their anthologies – and so their representation of a canon – into recognizable brands.

One argument for a canon is that for whatever its good or ill, it serves not a cultural, economic elite but instead offers a series of texts that all the citizenry has access to and has read. This commonality of references underwrites a cultural cohesiveness. Let us not underestimate the immeasurable longing to feel as if one belongs, to be acknowledged by the Other. Let us also not fail in seeing when some try to control the drift of that belonging. The canon matters because it shapes a form of life. The Wittgensteinian concept of a ‘form of life’ (*Lebensform*) that I am borrowing from does not mean biological life but instead refers to historical groups of individuals who are bound together into a community by a shared set of complex, language-involving practices. The community is formed not by agreement but by a pattern of activity and mores. The *Lebensform* Wittgenstein describes is the frame of reference we learn to work within when initiated into the language of our community; learning that language is thus learning the outlook, assumptions, and practices with which that language is inseparably bound and by which its expressions come to their meaning. A canon, as a shared body of texts, a text of texts, is a network of relations that has a broadly pedagogical function. It is the context of a form of life in the form of ideals, insights, and negotiations of culture. It is the measure of proximity and distance from our own culture.

I will say that I do not think canons are absent; we have a dizzying array of them, too many for anyone to be able to negotiate them all. This affects the individual because the individual becomes responsible for one’s own canon, must be able to articulate why one gives one’s assent—tac-

itly or actively—to one or the other. I want to suggest also that there are questions that impact the individual when canons are dismantled. In fact, it becomes more a crisis than a question. How do I know what I like is good? How can I prove to others what I believe is good is *really* good? If I cannot do that, might I be wrong? Might what I value not, in reality, be valuable? This may be histrionic on one hand but on the other it may be historical – the real symptom of a thoroughgoing anxiety of authenticity. Canons play their own parts in staving off existential dilemmas in that literature plays a role in fashioning one's identity vis-à-vis the Other and in recognizing the standards by which one measures investments of value. The canon provides a cluster of texts from which one learns how to identify oneself and others as well as how to resist forces which threaten to totalize away one's agency and individuality.

Let me close with some points of inquiry. Is this proliferation of canons then the result of democratization or the product of market forces that cater to individual needs?

We can see how they can be quite similar. And in speaking of canons, there needs to be a mechanism of criticism whereby we each weigh what interests are served in existing canons or the proffering of new ones. Moreover, I have not mentioned the class issues that can serve to mystify canon formation for the general populace, which is forced to accept *carte blanche* what will represent the best of a given culture. Again, building into canons a mode of self-reflexive analysis staves off reification and helps canons resist being implemented as another form of institutionalized normativity. In other words, concern can be a useful condition in its role as an openness to critique. What is necessary then is not the changing of canons but first a change in our stances towards a canon. Rather than it being the repository, the reliquary of a civilization's most profound expressions, a canon might become a provocation, a calling forth. It should be that which shames us with its accomplishments and stirs us to enact its values by overcoming it. On this side of modernism it seems to me necessary to accept our modernity. While that is generally true, we need to discover our modernity in and against our

sense of canonicity. The debt to modernism is in fact what provides a genealogical validation to the project in that the modernists sought their own means of production and dissemination, fashioned their own canons, and most importantly were invested in the articulation of their own poetics.

They took it upon themselves to reinvent their art and then educate people in how to read this new work. Thus, in the somewhat reductive differentiation between aesthetic and institutional canons (the former determined by makers of literature and the latter selected and ratified by well positioned scholars) ours might be seen as being situated as aesthetically cohesive. While this distinction still appears in debates and discussions of canonicity, it seems dubious in that each set or camp of language workers (scholars and writers) are mutually informed, even if what each values or seeks in canons are often quite different.

Here I want to underline the individual's investment in and responsibility for canons, and also to emphasize that being articulate about what one needs in 'representative texts' is crucial. If I might paraphrase Henry David Thoreau I am not one of those no-canon men but I ask for at once a better canon. The canon is that which we must overcome again and again and we need a canonicity that imparts that sense of self-overcoming. Emerson, in his essay *The Uses of Great Men*, tells us, «We have never come at the true and best benefit of any genius, so long as we believe him an original force... Yet within the limits of human education and agency, we may say great men exist that there may be greater men.»⁵ What this means is seeing a canon as the beginning of an agonistic process, not as achieved (and lost) ideals or arbiters of culture. This entails the de-sanctification of canons without dismantling them. Canonized texts are not beatitudes but provocations, that which calls us out and which by calling us out fashions a community—one fraught with complexity, beleaguered by possibility, and open to responsibility. The consequences of such change in stance will open up discussions wherein criticism and acts of reading—the work of language—can be seen not as empirical or scientific, but idiosyncratic and accountable for their own stake in values.

NOTE

¹ I will limit my use of notes for a number of reasons. One reason is to preserve some sense of the dialogical occasion of the conference from which these essays spring. Also, and more germane to my discussion, citation itself is a process by which a scholar or critic legitimates him- or herself in its deference to and invocation of external authorities. It would be problematic (I dare not say hegemonic) to question canon's role in disseminating and policing a centralized cultural authority and then participate in the very mechanisms that keep that process operating. In a different context, I would be more explicit about my engagement with John Guillory's *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993) which in most respects is the central text in the canon of canonicity. I would also like to point out my debt to Alan Golding's *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* (Madison, University of Wisconsin

Press 1995). Golding does trace out the possibilities of canons in American literature that exist prior to the twentieth century but ultimately those forerunners lack the institutional backing and legitimation that a canons needs. Moreover, canons instill value retroactively. In that way the tendentiousness of an American literature in the nineteenth century undermines its cultural force even in its own historic moment.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice 1958).

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The American Scholar*, in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York, Library of America 1983), p. 57.

⁴ Guillory, p. 340.

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Uses of Great Men*, in *Representative Men* (Cambridge, MA, Belknap 1987), p. 20.