

Meditations on a Queer Canon

Michael Lipkowitz

THE question occurred to me last week while making my way through Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*: How many works of famous literature can I name with a gay protagonist? I ask around; I get blank stares. It seems, at first glance, that the Western canon must be too heteronormative.

There's *Rainbow Boys*, a friend says—but no, that's not “literature.” What about *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, or *Harry Potter* (if you count Dumbledore)? No, I'm talking high literature, literature you would study in class. *Moby Dick*, another friend argues. No, I want protagonists that are out, to the extent that it doesn't even occur to them that they *need* to tell us, the readers. Cunningham's characters, for example, never explicitly mention their sexual identities.

Is this problematic? Do we need to queer the Western canon? Or can we make our own queer canon?

John Searle argues, contrarily, that the Western canon essentially is the queer canon:

Earlier student generations, my own for example, found [...] [the canon] to be liberating from the stuffy conventions of traditional American politics and pieties. Precisely by inculcating a critical attitude, the “canon” served to demythologize the conventional pieties of the American bourgeoisie and provided the student with a perspective from which to critically analyze

Michael Lipkowitz is a fourth-year in the College studying English Language and Literature.

This essay was originally published in another form in the *In Our Words* blog (inourwords.com).

MEDITATIONS ON A QUEER CANON

American culture and institutions. Ironically, the same tradition is now regarded as oppressive. The texts once served an unmasking function; now we are told that it is the texts which must be unmasked.

Ed Wynn
Prohibited.



According to Searle, the canon once did the opposite of what its fiercest critics accuse it of: It helps to “unmask” and break down the institutions and ideologies that many now accuse it of supporting or reinforcing.

But why was the straight canon so attractive to begin with? I belong to the digital generation, not to Searle’s. So why do I, a modern gay man, believe in an antiquated straight canon? In order to explore this question, we must explore several questions: 1. *Where does the canon come from, and what does it provide us as individuals?* 2. *Why do we need a canon to begin with? What is it about über-lists that we find so compelling?* 3. *With our knowledge of literature broadening and deepening, we must ask that aching question: Can there be a queer canon? If so, which canon should we support, if any at all?*

★

The Western canon provides us with an outlet for spirituality, subjectivity, and our own interiority. These basic provisions of the Western canon blossom organically out of its own beginnings. The work of creating a Western canon didn’t come about until the beginning of the Renaissance. Pre-Renaissance, literacy was not a concern—most reading occurred in monasteries. Classical texts were not *read* like they are today. In fact, there was no notion of the “classical”.

With the advent of academia, a sharp line is drawn between our BCE Greco-roman “roots” and the 14th century Western European present. The idea of the “dark ages” is invented; in order to combat against ignorance, one must read works of the classical past in order to cultivate oneself as a citizen. Literacy grows; reading is no longer just for monks and the nobility.

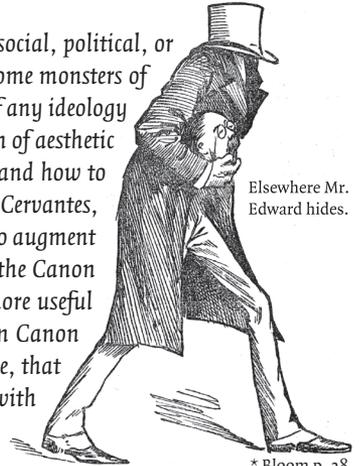
For the first time since Ancient Greece, Aristotle is read, and studied.

Before the Renaissance, there were no mirrors in Europe—at least, not the vanity mirror as we know it. As such, people weren't familiar with their own appearance. So it makes sense that there wasn't a fully formed notion of subjectivity until the Renaissance rolled around. I propose that the advent of the vanity mirror came conceptually paired with the rise of higher education—in other words, the growth of literacy brought with it a form of “reflective” reading that, likewise, gave us a new way of seeing ourselves.

Reading provides us with that same self-consciousness—the pages of neatly typed words seem to reflect our own souls back at us. We leave our favorite books by our nightstands; they travel with us, they keep us warm. We sustain them through our reading, as much as they sustain us. Before the printing press, communities had one copy of a text, usually to be read collectively. After the printing press, invented in the 15th century, with multiple copies of the same book, an individual could suddenly read *alone*. Through reading, one could shy away from the people around him or her and cultivate his or her own individuality.

We do not read to become “learned” or better; books are not moral or political documents. This is a central tenet of Harold Bloom's canon, as expounded in *The Western Canon*:

*If we read the Western Canon in order to form our social, political, or personal moral values, I firmly believe we will become monsters of selfishness and exploitation. To read in the service of any ideology is not, in my judgment, to read at all. The reception of aesthetic power enables us to learn how to talk to ourselves and how to endure ourselves. The true use of Shakespeare or of Cervantes, of Homer or of Dante, of Chaucer or of Rabelais, is to augment one's own growing inner self. Reading deeply in the Canon will not make one a better or a worse person, a more useful or more harmful citizen. [...] All that the Western Canon can bring one is the proper use of one's own solitude, that solitude whose final form is one's confrontation with one's own mortality.**



* Bloom p. 28.

We do not develop our individuality in the context of a society that surrounds us—as a citizen, as a moral being, as a political body. Rather, we develop our individuality within the context of ourselves. We learn how to know ourselves—not in any practical sense, but in the sense that we learn the limits of our own identity. The ultimate limit of our identity that the canon brings us to acknowledge is our own mortality.

★



“Clean up, m’boy! This is the Academy.”

But why do we *need* the canon? It’s a fancy Top Ten list. Why not just explore the oceans of books out there at our own leisure, without guidance? Bloom argues against this when he writes,

If we were literally immortal, or even if our span were doubled to seven score of years, say, we could give up all argument about canons. But we have an interval only, [...] and stuffing that interval with bad writing, in the name of whatever social justice, does not seem to me to be the responsibility of the literary critic.[†]

[†] Bloom p. 30.

So the canon is basically a friendly recommendation, like your friend’s mixtape, or your mom’s recipe book. What if you spent your whole life listening to Backstreet Boys? What if you ate Ramen every night for dinner? We need guidance, from our

elders, from our loved ones. We can criticize their pretense; we can decide which bands we dislike and which recipes turn out poorly. But that doesn't change the fact that our days are numbered — our mortality spurs us to respect and use the canon. These are the books into which people looked and saw their own souls reflected. The pages were mirrors. We owe these books a chance, queer or not.

It's almost as if the creation of an über-list is more than just a recommendation — it's automatic, involuntary. After all, the über-list makes order out of chaos. It's an inevitable part of being human, that we look toward these lists and love them or hate them (always polarized, never indifferent). What is it about the über-list that compels us so, that hypnotizes us?

Umberto Eco says in a *Spiegel* interview about his book *The Infinity of Lists*:

The list is the origin of culture. It's part of the history of art and literature. What does culture want? To make infinity comprehensible. It also wants to create order — not always, but often. And how, as a human being, does one face infinity? How does one attempt to grasp the incomprehensible? Through lists, through catalogs, through collections in museums and through encyclopedias and dictionaries. [...] The list doesn't destroy culture; it creates it. Wherever you look in cultural history, you will find lists. [...] We have a limit, a very discouraging, humiliating limit: death. That's why we like all the things that we assume have no limits and, therefore, no end. It's a way of escaping thoughts about death. We like lists because we don't want to die.



Cultura mea, biçi.

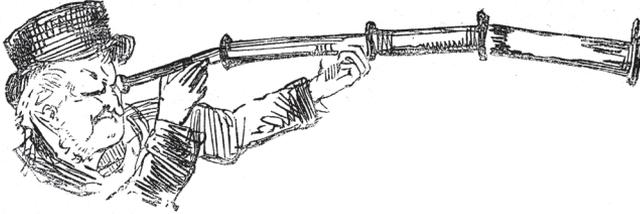
To wit, we like lists because they contain and define the infinite, thereby imposing order on that which we can't account for. Eco says it is a human need "to make infinity comprehensible." Since death itself is a confrontation with the incomprehensible, we can infer through Eco's logic that lists must help us combat our fear of death as well. Through lists we escape the unaccountable, the irrational. Through lists, we escape death.

Using Eco's logic, the list is an escape from death rather than a confrontation with it. For Bloom the canon is the opposite: an acknowledgement of death, a confrontation with our own

mortality. But while Bloom defends his über-list, Eco takes neither a positive nor a negative stance on the value of lists. His role remains that of a collector, of the perennial researcher, detached but always intellectually engaged.

*

Removed
examination of
the prostrate
vultures, sec.



So why not Genet; why not Goytisolo? What if we find different books and authors that meditate on the same canonical themes, only through the lens of queer identity?

Michael Cunningham decided to do just that. He took Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*—already a book dealing with queer characters and subthemes of queer identity—and made it even gayer. AIDS, queerspawn, coming-out in pop culture, queer partnerships; you name it, Cunningham added it. So at first glance, we might think that Cunningham trashes the canon, saying to us: *look, I can do it better; forget the classics.*

Cunningham himself is aware of this function of the canon, as an immortal series of books that hopefully will continue to reflect us throughout time. His book not only serves as an assistant to appreciating the canonical original, but also a standalone addition to the canon in its own right (see: its Pulitzer Prize, PEN/Faulkner award, Oscar-winning movie adaptation, etc). In *The Hours*, Cunningham writes about Richard's relationship with such a canon, which we can interpret implicitly as the author's own:

Richard may (although one hesitates to think in quite these terms) be entering the canon; he may at these last moments in his earthly career be receiving the first hints of a recognition that will travel far into the future

(assuming, of course, there is any future at all). [...] While there are no guarantees, it does seem possible, and perhaps even better than possible, that [...] Richard who observed so minutely and exhaustively, who tried to split the atom with words, will survive after other, more fashionable names have faded.*

*Cunningham
pp. 64–65.

Richard, the dying AIDS patient, can find escape from his own mortality through the canon. As for Eco, the canon—that supreme List of all lists—is a panacea against death, only this time for a queer author. In writing *The Hours* Cunningham himself seeks a way to assert himself in the canon while simultaneously suggesting its impertinence.

Cunningham knows Woolf's work isn't perfect. If he thought it were, he would never have felt a need to write *The Hours*. Clearly, Cunningham felt there was a gap between *Dalloway* and the present, that needed to be bridged by a more relevant text. But by creating intertextuality with Woolf's work (and Woolf herself!), he raises her up, affirming her relevance while simultaneously creating his own work that speaks more closely to the modern queer condition.

Following this seemingly paradoxical logic, a heteronormative canon and a queer canon can exist simultaneously. The canon we are left with is amorphous and changing, one that is determined by the needs of the individual, rather than by the needs of the society that surrounds him or her. This reminds us of Bloom's idea that the purpose of the canon is not to develop the individual as a social being, but rather as an individual with his or her own interiority. The purpose of books is not to direct us toward our Western society, but toward ourselves. It is as if Cunningham says, *what we need is a canon that shows us as we are.*



*Cunningham

As much as the canon chooses us, we can choose a canon—but only after we have given consideration to what has come before us. We owe the Western canon that—we have too little time on this earth. Instead of focusing on how the Western canon is outdated, we should remind ourselves what it is all about:

* Bloom p. 11.

writing “that clears space for the self, or that so works as to reopen old works to our fresh sufferings.”*

But at the end of our interior struggle, the choice of the works that govern our subjective, interior lives, can itself only be a subjective one. We choose whether our canon is Western or queer, or some mix. If the works of the Western canon do not answer to our “fresh sufferings,” we can pitch them to the side and make our own canon.

What we need to find are books that reflect our souls back at us. The canon that we adopt should help us to do that. For without books, without reading, there is no “I”; as much as we create and discover the books that we dive into, they create and discover us. With a task so weighty, we had best pick our books carefully—for in such a choice, we choose our very own soul.

WORKS CITED

Susanne Beyer and Lothar Gorris, “SPIEGEL Interview with Umberto Eco: ‘We Like Lists Because We Don’t Want to Die,’” *SPIEGEL Online International*, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/0,1518,659577,00.html>.

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

Michael Cunningham, *The Hours*, (New York: Picador USA, 2002).

John Searle, “The Storm Over the University,” *The New York Review of Books*, December 6, 1990.