

Canon / No Canon¹

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Abstract: In the last hundred years or so the Western Canon has been instrumental in confirming the prestige and ensuring the currency of western civilization. The condition of possibility of the civilizational prestige—the West’s conviction in the superiority of its civilization—can be traced back to Karl Otfried Müller’s overthrow—c.1840—of the *Ancient Model* of Greek historiography with the *Aryan* one. The Ancient Model which remained from the Greek and Latin Antiquity to the Enlightenment had been the Greek’s view of their history referred to by figures as influential as Aeschylus, Euripides, Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Isocrates, Pausanias, Apollodorus, Palaiphatos, Kōnon and Plato. The model acknowledged the Greek cultural indebtedness to neighbouring Ancient Egyptian and Phoenician civilizations and held the Greek achievements in fields as diverse as astronomy, law, myth, medicine, mathematics, philosophy, religion and science to be the result of *close* cultural contacts with a superior Egyptian civilization. Importantly, in the period under consideration—i.e. 1820-40—no archaeological or linguistic evidence became available for Classicists to necessitate a change in model from the Ancient to the Aryan. Consequently, the reasons for the latter model’s acceptance, as Martin Bernal contends, have to be sought in the cultural milieu of the age which was dominated by Romanticism, racism and Progress and the aristocracies’ fear of revolutions. The milieu, in addition to necessitating a shift in Aegean historiography—the new model initially denied Egyptian influences on Greece; but the post-1880 period of heightened anti-Semitism witnessed the postulation of an *Extreme Aryan Model* denying Phoenician (ancient people of West Semitic origin) influences as well—fundamentally determined the way post-Humboldt Prussian *Altertumwissenschaft* ‘science of Antiquity’ was to evolve. The academic stature of *Altertumwissenschaft* and its English counterpart, Classics, secured for an origin-obsessed Europe its absolute, autochthonous and pure—i.e. Aryan—

¹ In real terms the Western Canon denotes “a body of works of philosophy, literature, history, and art that goes from the Greeks right up to the present day” (Searle, “Crisis” 26). Here, for purposes that are essentially pragmatic, its denotation is delimited mostly to literary works. Arbitrariness, if any, of the delimiting is accounted for by the fact that the essay makes use of *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* to approach and enframe the Canon, and contrary to what one might expect from its title, the book is devoted *solely* to the treatment of literary texts. For more, see Bloom.

cultural point of origin in Ancient Greece. This retrojective fixing on Greece and the denial of external and extra-European originary influences on Greek—and by consequence, European—culture were followed by an exiling of the rest of the world from the pale of civilization. For the West's elites *civilization* made them “superior” and the superiority—endorsed by sections of the academia—was instrumental in garnering political and moral support for European imperial activities in Asia, Africa and the Americas. Domestically, subsequent to Classics' canonizing of the West as “unique and superior,” the political elite's perception of a growing revolutionary threat created the need for a means to ensure the mass adherence to “timeless western values” such as order, hierarchy and continuity. In the English context, with the identification of a national literary canon—to support the institutionalization of *English Literature* which the government-appointed Newbolt Committee recommended as the ideal means to safeguard the English national fabric and avert a proletarian revolution—the concrete means for ensuring the adherence was in place. The English canon drew its civilizational context and prestige from an overarching body of c. 2500 years of European writings and in that contextualizing a Western Canon for the English-speaking world began to take shape. The present paper, while insisting on the social embeddedness of knowledge, goes one step further, and looks at what consequences follow for the West and its Canon subsequent to the exposure of (1) the mutually sustaining and validating relationship between Classics, the West, and the Canon and (2) the conditions of possibilities *and* consequences of that relationship.

Key Words: Western Canon, Classics, English Literature, Martin Bernal, *Black Athena*.

From Plato to Postmodernism, or if you prefer, from Homer through the Pre-Socratics to the present, there runs a more or less continuous strand of self-conscious intellectual tradition and culture usefully and succinctly denoted as the “Western Tradition.” Ranged in between the extremes flagged at the back in a ninth-century BCE heroic Greece and at the front in the twenty-first-century present are a number of religious, literary and philosophical writers of varied precocities, persuasions, and preoccupations: a Plato, an Augustine, a Shakespeare—to name just three.² The novel, creative and meditative texts of which they are the scripters are reckoned to be the products of that great, expansive tradition, and those products—the texts—in turn, are thought to

² The positioning of Homer at “around the turn of the 9th” century BCE is the result of adhering to the chronologies suggested by Martin Bernal in his *Black Athena (BA)* (1: 88). For more see *BA* 1: 86-88.

produce and re-produce, extend and perpetuate that very same majestic cultural edifice—i.e. the West. The western Canon which is an intellectually and culturally approved textual aggregate from the vast body of European writing is deemed to embody and manifest not just the West and what it stands for, but is touted to carry within it—in different degrees—values and aspirations that are universal in sanction and timeless in currency: the love of liberty; the right to freedom, free enterprise and the pursuit of happiness; choice in the matters of religion and faith; the spirit of rational enquiry, etc. etc.³ In the second decade of the twenty-first century many of us—situated both in the West and outside of it—are “privileged” to be to various degrees accustomed and opened up to that tradition. Most often the fortunate few have acquired that *instructed* insidedness through university education in a liberal humanities curriculum. The particular curriculum wherever it is implemented—be it in the first or in the third world—places an enormous emphasis on the importance of Western cultural icons. It aims to impart the thought-universe that the cultural heroes of the West projected and inhabited irrespective of and disregarding the cultural affiliations of students instructed in that curriculum. It ignores the interests of the society to which those students belong; of which they are the constitutive and disseminating parts.

In recent times the liberal intellectual and the liberal humanist framework’s emphasis on the notion of the “West” have faced increasing intellectual opposition from various quarters within the Literary Studies establishment. To these “philistines” the West is a canonical and textual universe populated mainly by white, European, male, heterosexual, “Christian” authors. The detracting camp, one which is loosely identified as the Cultural Left, is dominated by critics of as various persuasions and theoretical commitments as feminist, Marxist, gay-lesbian, postcolonial and deconstructionist. They point mainly toward the absence and exclusion of the “other”—the sexual, the gender, the ethnic, the religious and the “racial”—in the Western Canon. In the opinion of these critics, the other, who has been the marginalized and excluded, has contributed toward the development and sustenance of the West;⁴ and yet, that other and the significance of its

³ According to Silvia Federici, most often, “‘Western Civilization’” is identified with a unique predisposition to defend individual liberties, scientific objectivity, moral and cognitive universalism” etc. (“God that Never Failed” 71).

⁴ Silvia Federici writes on the other’s contributions to the Western Tradition: [M]any of ‘Western Civilization’s alleged achievements—for instance, the conquest of political liberties—were not handed down to us, as if through a legal transaction, by qualified representatives of the ‘Western Spirit.’ Far from it, most of ‘the West’s’ celebrated gains, particularly at the level of political rights, were worked and fought for

contributions have systematically been ignored and deemed ineligible to merit mention or presence within the framework of the canon. The West of which the liberal intellectual and the conservative politicians are so proud came to be that, if we are to trust the dissenters, through the suppression and exploitation of the others within. It was supplemented and supported in equal measure at various points in history by the imperial occupation of and extortion from the generic other—the rest—lying outside of its geographic borders. The canon, in the opinion and evaluation of its critics, is ever “complicit with power” (Kermode 29); and as the collected and approved aggregate of valuable texts from the West it is the eloquent voice—the class propaganda—of its dominant and exploiting classes.⁵ The exclusion of the other within the canon, both in the cross-section of authors included and in the re(-)presentation of the other’s experiences, has led to the silencing of their “authentic” voices; the erasure of the other’s intellectual and cultural history. The other has consequently been forced to lead a precarious and displaced life: a life in which the gaze and propaganda of the dominating classes define the marginal other’s identity for him/herself. The life lived then is the life of an other-to-oneself in which the “I” is the condemned-other gazed at and evaluatively experienced through a canonically tutored inferiority-inflicting consciousness.⁶ For that displaced self, *to be* is to think and think-of itself through the voice of the other: the canonical.

At the beginning of our inquiry it is useful to concede it is the notion of the West that lets the Western Canon to assume its nominal place and cultural significance. Such a concession lets us to have the provisional, yet pragmatic

by many who were not considered ‘Westerners.’ Indeed, many of our political rights were wrenched into existence against the resistance of the most typical ‘Westerners.’ The ‘Western Civilization’ ‘legacy’ metaphor also hides the role European and non-European workers [both were considered outside the pale of “civilization”] have played in building the wealth and culture of Europe and America. Typically, credit for technological development is laid at the doorstep of Greek Rationalism or is presented as the logical unfolding of a Promethean inner ‘Western’ predisposition; rarely is it asked . . . ‘Who built the factories?’ (“God that Never Failed” 76)

⁵ For the Cultural Left “the notion of a shared culture is a lie, because it means presenting as universally meaningful and politically neutral books that reflect the interests and experiences and values of privileged white men at the expense of those others—women, blacks, Latinos, Asians, the working class, whoever” (Pollitt 1031). The entire Western Tradition “is thus originally an ideology, in so far as it is a ruse designed to serve the interests of a particular group of people” (Hawkes, *Ideology* 156).

⁶ The other “inevitably sees herself from the *outside*, as an object, a character, a small figure in a large pattern” (Gilbert and Gubar 44). For the other “‘I do not think, I am thought. You do not speak, you are spoken. Thought and speech . . . are located elsewhere’” (qtd. in Hall 87).

leeway to move ahead and interrogate the structural configuration of the widely recognized entity, the “West.” The West—whether realized and granted as such, or not—is let into being through a geographical cordoning-off and cultural exiling. The spatial exclusion lends credibility to the claim of definite territorial situatedness; and the emptying-off of the unwanted—the cultural rest: the other—lets the positing of a continuous, singular “3,000 years of European culture” tenable and maintainable (Butler 22). But it does not require much thinking to figure out that at maximal topographic and cultural proximity there may be nothing radically apart to permit such an *absolute* carving out of a West and the rest.⁷ Such absolute compartmentalization of porous-bordered, rough-edged and inter-penetrating entities speaks more of a severance carried out for the purpose of exercising political, cultural, religious and intellectual control, than of any specific demarcation that is out-there by itself, in itself and of itself. To that extent these borders are *the* permitted by the ever-interactive systems of thought; the systems of thought that let the present *be*. The present—the world ordered in, by and through word—can then be understood as innumerable, powdered and osmotic peels of micro thought-universes blooded-through, layered and accreted on each other, than as binary and self-contained monoliths opposed to each other. In continual due turn they mutually force and shape each other.

The systems of thought, which exist in language and are *the* permitted of language are closed orders that never break into presence: the out-there, the in-itself. The failure to break into presence does not make the permitted in language, or language as a system *per se*, less important. It draws attention to the fact that language is what lets this world be; and the non-relation to presence is the condition of possibility for language and the permitted in language—the present—to become operational. Language marks the absence of presence, the in-itself, within it. The absence of an absolute and self-identical referencing let by a linguistic master-marker—a supra, break-through term that is co-terminus with presence—is compensated through a differing within the system of language. This differing is not an absolute differing engendered by presence, but one achieved through the maintenance of an illusion of centred-difference by means of a deferral: a constant postponement in arriving at a definite meaning. Differing has to happen in time, since time—deferring—is the condition of possibility for difference. Yet, for deferring to take effect, the effected—differing—has *to be*. One implication of this logical conundrum is that the world—i.e. the textual universe that is scripted in and through difference,

⁷ These entities “are rough at the edges and do not have sharp boundaries” (Searle, “Literary Theory” 637).

that is brought-forth via and traced-out along by means of difference—has to exist in time. There is no such a time that cannot be further delved into. There is no such a tradition that cannot be traced further back into. The claim of an absolute and simple origin for the West of the sort “[o]ur history begins with the Greeks,” the aim of which is to refute “there had ever been any significant extra-European influence on the formation of Greece,” is deeply problematic (qtd. in Detienne 1; Bernal, *BAWB* 8). The Ancient Greeks with whom the history of the West supposedly began were not ahistorical beings or outsiders to history. They themselves—Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Isocrates, Plato, Pausanias, Aristotle, et al—acknowledged the indebtedness to Egyptians and Phoenicians for Greek achievements in fields as diverse as astronomy, law, myth, mathematics, philosophy, religion, science, etc. (Bernal, *BA* 1: 88-120).

Attempts to carve a geographically and culturally distinct West out from the rest and to posit its origin in an ahistorical Homeric or Classical Greece are fraught with contradictions. In addition to the problem of limits involved in such a separation, the continuity within those hypothesized limits needs to be addressed. Greece belongs to the Mediterranean world. Geographical continuity between the Greek mainland and the lands of the Anglo-Americans, the Gauls, the Teutons and the Nordics—the titans and torch-bearers of the West—is imaginary. It follows that geographical continuity can never be and is not a criterion for the formal organization of the West. The principle of grouping then can only be a cultural continuity among the constituent sects.⁸ But until late into

⁸ Silvia Federici has this to say on historical continuities within the West:

‘Western Civilization is . . . constructed both by reference to an alleged historical continuity (between the institutions of classical Greece and Rome, those of medieval Europe, and those of modern/post-Reformation Europe and America), and by the identification of specific values presumably responsible for the uniqueness of ‘the West.’ This implies imputing a qualitative uniformity, or at the very least a spiritual kinship, to the historical periods, countries, and institutions the concept identifies. However, as George Barraclough has shown . . . the existence of a continuous ‘Western tradition’ is not supported by the scholarship in the field. . . .

Barraclough argues, for instance, that the Roman Empire (one of the pillars of ‘the West,’ together with Christianity and the ‘classical tradition’) could hardly provide the basis for Western/European coherence, being itself increasingly sustained from Eastern, non-European lands. . . . He adds that the direct heir of Rome was not ‘the West,’ but Byzantium, where Roman civilization and the very structure of the Roman state continued down to the fall of Constantinople. . . . By contrast, ‘classical civilization’ was extinct in Rome, as shown by Christian art, whose anti-classical character gives evidence against the continuity of the classical tradition. . . . Barraclough adds that, far from seizing on what is vital in the Roman world, the Church was hostile to the Roman

the Renaissance, knowledge and proficiency in Greek and a recognition of “the charms of the Greek” were rare among Western Europeans (Gibbon 27). In the Middle Ages the Latins in general and the Roman Church in particular beheld Greeks and the Greek Orthodox Church with animosity and disdain. Their censure of “the apophatic theology of Byzantium with its stress on silence, paradox and mystery” as being contaminated by heresy is well-documented (Armstrong 255).⁹ Hostilities and the resultant schism with Greeks existed through much of the Latin’s secular and ecclesiastical history. It took a turn for an appreciation and empathetic understanding of Greeks only with the Romantic Philhellenism which attained its zenith during and after the Greek War of Independence (1821-30). It’s obvious that the fascination with Greeks and the positioning of them right at the so-called beginning of the West is a recent intellectual phenomenon. It was not an uninterrupted and self-evident event of history. What we recognize as Western Civilization is a retrojection; a discontinuous and invented tradition for which it is claimed: “Greek achievements in literature, art, and architecture set norms for . . . two thousand years!” (Crompton 1). The Western Canon finds its value and import within the framework of such beginnings and continuities. For such an imposing edifice its foundation is on ever-shifting subterranean sand dunes—the sand dunes of history that has no simple and absolute origins or continuities lying anywhere around; that continuously traces itself discontinuously along in “a field without origin” (Barthes 261).

If claimed as self-contained and absolute entities the Western Canon and Civilization are not defensible. Entities are carved out of the real—the out-there—and the carved out—the present—are the permitted by the system of language. The *present* is by and because of the being-human’s object concerns, and the anthropocentricity of the world can never be progressed beyond to a non-mediated access of presence. Concepts do not exhaust presence—the not-

tradition; and that the places that really mattered in the early Christian centuries were not in Europe but in Africa or Asia Minor. . . . Most important, he warns that ‘Much of the apparent unity of thought –presumably characterizing ‘the west’ –is due primarily to the fact that the Catholic Church extirpated its opponents (e.g., the heretics), burned their literature, and had the monopoly of writing.’ (“God that Never Failed” 70-71)

⁹ It can be contented that undue significance is granted to a religious and theological controversy while making a case for discontinuity within the Western Tradition. But one only needs to be reminded of the Crusades, the Inquisition and the Reformation to accept the significant role that religion played in the evolution of the West. Lack of continuity within that religious history comes to affect any suggested continuities within the containing structure—the West.

related-to—and their validity lasts only until the non-being of presence presences itself. This built-in provisionality of concepts does not imply that they can be done away with. Since the world is the conceived of presence, the abandoning of conceptual frameworks amounts to doing the world away. Outside of structure—language—the world cannot and does not exist: structurality is the condition of possibility for textuality. Notions such as the Western Canon and Civilization, irrespective of their incapacity to exist as absolute terms, *are* because of the system of language. Within the system, since it carries no presence within, all elemental significations are relational—an element gains its place in relation to the rest of the elements. A change affecting an element effects a systemic change, and change marks out the present from its prior.

Since difference constitutes the present and the relation between the present and its prior is one of disjuncture and discontinuity, cross-cultural borrowings, once they are incorporated into their respective *presents*, effect and assume differential signification. Thus, when a concept current in Egyptian metaphysics is incorporated into, let us say, the philosophic system of Greeks the change in signification—both elemental and systemic—that the borrowing will lead to need not be contested.¹⁰ The tools by which the origin of the West is problematized can be grasped and wielded by that same West to counter any argument on the West's cultural indebtedness to its surrounding cultures. Once the West accepts the contingent nature of its genealogy, its critics find themselves forced against a wall that permits no escape. Granted that the origins and continuities suggested for Western Civilization are problematic; but they are equally so with the so-called Ancient Egyptian Civilization or any other that came before or after. One could point to (1) the discourtesy—an unwillingness to acknowledge their sources—of receptive cultures, and (2) the various political uses to which the notions of the West and Civilization have been put to during and after European imperialism. An inquiry on those counts focuses more on ethical and political issues and the consequences of particular historical worldviews than on the conditions that made such worldviews possible. Given that the categories of thought permitting the present are neither absolute, nor stable through time, it does not follow that one can abandon them. Rather, these categories need to be constantly engaged with. A critique of the tradition that lets-forth the categories is permitted by the latter itself, and only within the framework of tradition—the overarching order in word—the critique

¹⁰ In other words, “depending on the nature of the performance and the context within which it is set, the ‘meaning’ of what is ostensibly the same . . . might fundamentally alter” (Cannadine 106).

finds the meaning and place it aspires for. The critique extends the tradition as an altered-present, and this co-opted alterity is the order to which the rest of the elements within refer back and adjust themselves to in order to find their meaning and significance.

Many of the canonical authors from the West themselves had been highly critical of their respective presents. Most of them had to pay dearly for their critical positioning with their freedom and/or with their life. The apostle of the intellectual West, the Athenian Socrates, had to drink hemlock for opposing sophists and the ruling elites to preach philosophy. Most Ancient Greek philosophers, if we are to trust George G. M. James, were persecuted by and banished from their own societies (12, 27). The situation was similar in the Judeo-Christian world—the other major contributor to the Western Tradition—wherein the prophet—be it an Isaiah, Jonah, or Jeremiah—was the stand-alone stranger who railed against the moral depredations of the populace. The fate of the stand-alone in the Biblical tradition was best exemplified in the life of Jesus of Nazareth who, like his counterpart in the Classical tradition, Socrates, paid with his life for his moral convictions and died a gruesome death nailed across a tree. In the examples cited from both these strands of Western Tradition the stranger within endangers his life, reputation and freedom in critically engaging with his present. The stranger's critique destroys the certainties of the present by demonstrating the absence of an absolute ground for the present. The present, though, is antagonistically disposed towards alterity—the present that the stranger relates to and brings forth—inevitably succumbs to the altered, and the latter from there on is the world-ordered-in-word: the present. The canonization of the West's aliens provides excellent historical testimony to the phenomenon described above. For the stranger enmeshed in the present "hell [indeed] is other people" (qtd. in Frye 50); only for his "demonic" otherness/strangeness to be valued and appreciated in the inevitable arrival of its own present: the altered-present, wherein the strange is co-opted and then co-opting becomes the norm.

The prestige and compensatory feeling associated with canonization need not blind us to the politics involved in the process of canonization. Neither should we be oblivious of the historical factors which contributed to the coming into being of a Western Canon. Canon formation was more or less simultaneous with the late-nineteenth-century institutionalization of literature and specifically undertaken to serve definite socio-political objectives. The rise of the proletariat and their yearning for universal brotherhood made revolutionary threat appear real. The advent of Darwinian biology along with the spread of scientific and rational spirit led to a general loss of faith in religion. The introduction of paperbacks and the mass circulation of newspapers and periodicals complemented an increase in literacy across Europe. Together they

contributed toward creating the largest ever reading public in history. Spatial separation became increasingly irrelevant with the advances in communication and transport technologies. The rise of class consciousness, the cracks in religious fabric, the wider circulation of complex and radical thoughts, and the growing insignificance of borders and distance, all together contributed toward greater introspection, the loss of faith in Western values and the disintegration of European provincialism. The crisis reached its summit with the First World War, wherein the inhumanly technological face and self-destructive potential of reason, rationality and science were realized and recognized in destructions across the globe.¹¹ A sense of loss, doubt and gloom spread across Europe accompanied in smaller measures by an intellectual enthusiasm for culture and tradition. In Victorian England the movement for “culture” and cultural nationalism were spearheaded by the two Arnolds: Thomas and his son Matthew. The exhorted aims of their cultural education, to large extents, were shaped and defined according to the character and cultural models adopted and projected in the discipline of Classics.

Classics, an import to England of Prussian *Altertumwissenschaft* ‘science of Antiquity’ “became the centre of the reformed public school system, and dominant in the universities” by the second quarter of the nineteenth century (Bernal, *BA* 1: 317). Like its Prussian counterpart, Classics assumed the “contemplation of all aspects of Greek and Roman life . . . have a beneficial educational and moral effect on the boys who were to be the rulers of . . . Empire” (Bernal, *BA* 1: 317). Prussian *Altertumwissenschaft* had its origin in the educational reforms planned and implemented by Wilhelm von Humboldt. Those reforms were undertaken after the Prussian defeat in 1806 at Jena against the forces of Napoleon Bonaparte. The reforms were meant to shield Prussian society from mayhem of the sort unleashed during and after the French Revolution. The study of all aspects of Greek life was central to the newly established *Altertumwissenschaft*. Greeks “were perceived as having transcended mundane chaos and being closer to the ineffable best.” This transcendence and ineffability qualified them to offer stable and secure models of social and cultural organization to their cultural and racial descendants—the Western Europeans. To nineteenth-century conservatives living in fear of revolutions, the Greeks and their cultural productions seemed to provide the best means “to avoid or prevent revolution” (Bernal 1: 288).¹² The definite political interests that

¹¹ For a detailed treatment of the general loss of faith in civilization after the First World War, see Healy 964-65.

¹² As Thomas Healy points out:

[t]he classics . . . helped to define a certain type of civilization: rational, stable, ordered. To be possessed of a classical education bespoke breeding, maturity of judgement,

led to the establishment of *Altertumwissenschaft* and its Anglo-American counterpart—Classics—and the important role that they from then on came to have “in the ideological formation of the ruling class[es]” were to play themselves out again in the institutionalization of literature and in identifying a literary corpus (Bernal 1: 288).

Historically, the notional currency of *civilization* preceded Romantic Philhellenism and the formation of the Western Canon. The word *civilization* was used for the first time in the 1760s by the French and Scottish economists (Patterson 41). For them civilization was “characterized by social order, refined manners and behavior, and the accumulation of knowledge” (Patterson 42). These characteristics, it was claimed, attained their highest state of development among the Aryans of Northern and Western Europe. This developmental superiority along with nineteenth-century biology’s placing of Aryans at the highest level of human evolutionary hierarchy gave them the “natural” right to dominate and exploit the lesser races of Asia, Africa and America. At the same time, the Romantic obsession with race and racial hierarchies and their fascination for simple, pure and autochthonous origins made it difficult for the nineteenth-century intellectual to accept the Greek admission of their cultural indebtedness to a black Egyptian civilization. Politically, if the black origins of Classical civilization were to be acknowledged, the legitimacy of European slave trade in Africa would be undermined, since the intellectual, religious and legislative support to slave trade was built on the consensus that: (1) Blacks were racially inferior and (2) at no stage in history did they manage to produce a civilization of their own. Racial inferiority and the failure to produce a civilization justified for Europeans their colonial civilizing mission in the black and brown continents. For that justification to be incontrovertible it was necessary to deny any extra-European—especially Afro-Asian—influences in the formation of Greece.

The conservative and reactionary forces which led the way in creating Classics and in denying extra-European cultural influences on Ancient Greece raised their heads again during the general European cultural crisis of the early-twentieth century. The crisis which lasted long enough to effect a loss of confidence in the future and survival of the West curved up to its climax by c. 1917 to identify its numinous and detested enemy in the Russian Bolsheviks.¹³

composure of body and mind. A familiarity with the classics implied not just a knowledge of antiquity, but acquaintance with a certain ideal moral outlook. (964)

¹³ For a detailed analysis of the conditions that led to the institutionalization of English literature see Hawkes, “The Institutionalization of Literature: The University” 929.

To protect the rich—and therefore conservative—bourgeois interests it was necessary to prevent the spread of the Red ideology that had as its aim a classless and global proletarian republic. At a time when Christianity was no longer as effective as it used to be in comforting and blindfolding people, and where the insinuating power of *Christendom* was beginning to come to an end, the desperate search for an alternate mass super-glue led to the fomenting of a political and intellectual fervour for culture and literature.¹⁴ This enthusiasm found reflection in figures intellectually as influential as Matthew Arnold, Ezra Pound, T. S.

Eliot and Martin Heidegger.¹⁵ All of them were great enthusiasts of tradition and culture, and in varying degrees opposed to Jews—the European pariahs—and the “Jewish conspiracy” to create, what appeared to them, an anarchic and barbarian “dictatorship of the proletariat” (Gellately 68, 8). During this tumultuous and ultimately tragic period in early-twentieth-century European history the lines separating fascists and conservatives become too blurred and rough-edged, thus making any categorical demarcation between them hard to defend.¹⁶

¹⁴ Terry Eagleton in “Literature and the Rise of English” deals with the issue in some detail:

If one were asked to provide a single explanation for the growth of English studies in the later nineteenth century one could do worse than reply: ‘the failure of religion’. By the mid-Victorian period, this traditionally reliable, immensely powerful ideological form was in deep trouble. It was no longer winning the hearts and minds of the masses, and under the twin impacts of scientific discovery and social change its previous unquestioned dominance was in danger of evaporating. This was particularly worrying for the Victorian ruling class, because religion is for all kinds of reasons an extremely effective form of ideological control. (36)

¹⁵ For Arnold “culture, like religion, transcends all other interests, especially the particular interests of any social class” (Strickland 699). In Arnold’s vision “[t]he men of culture are the true apostles of equality” (qtd. in Strickland 699). Yet, his “Hellenism was explicitly linked to the vision of the Indo-European or Aryan race in a perpetual struggle with the Semitic one, or to the conflict between ‘cultivated’ and bourgeois values” (Bernal, *BA* 1: 348).

¹⁶ The tragedy referred to is the Jewish holocaust in Germany under the Nazis. For a detailed examination of the catastrophe, see Gellately.

The intense anti-Semitism of the period had an impact on developments within Classics. At the beginning of the century the accepted model for explaining the cultural origins of Greeks was the *Broad Aryan Model* which conceded the Phoenician influence on Greek mainland. But with the spread of anti-Semitism from c. 1880 onwards, Phoenicians—who were generally granted to be Semitic—became less favoured as ancestors for the immaculately Aryan Ancient Greeks. From then on until the mid-1980s the *Broad Aryan Model* was supplanted by the *Extreme Aryan Model* and the latter, true to its name,

In England the age's enthusiasm for culture and the frantic concern to avoid what happened in Tsarist Russia resulted in the appointment in 1919 of the Newbolt Committee to "investigate what was termed 'The Teaching of English in England'" (Hawkes, "Institutionalization" 931). The political context of the investigation was dominated by the memory of a not-so-distant Easter Rising in Dublin (1916), the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia (1917) and the upheavals in French, British and German forces (1917-18) (Hawkes, "Institutionalization" 931). In the report submitted in 1921 the committee expressed its strong conviction that "the study of great literature can not only ennoble and refine but also inspire social harmony and ... forestall political revolution" (Strickland 699). From this strong conviction to the wholehearted embracing of the recommendations resulting from that conviction there was but only a short distance. With the adoption of the Newbolt Committee's "recommendation, that English should be thoroughly institutionalized and taught throughout the British educational system from primary school to university level" modern institutionalization of literature can definitely be said to begin. (Hawkes, "Institutionalization" 931).

The mould in which most modern students have accessed the academic subject *English* began to gain that shape when the Senate of the University of Cambridge decided in 1917 to commence an English tripos.¹⁷ The newly drafted syllabus of Cambridge turned away from a commitment to philological scholarship—stressed in Oxford until then—and decided instead to concentrate on *literature* and the relation between life and literature. Cambridge also decided to keep away from dealing with literature scripted before 1350. With this academic commitment to develop English in the direction of psycho-sociological explorations and close textual analysis, and the government decision to support a wholesale institutionalization of literature, there arose the need to have a definite and incontestable corpus of texts—a canon—for purposes as pragmatic as student evaluation and faculty recruitment. Along with a number of contributors to the journal *Scrutiny*, F. R. Leavis—mainly through his influential *The Great Tradition* and *Education and the University*—and his wife Q. D. Leavis contributed immensely to addressing such a need. Over the years, through Leavis' and other efforts, a definitive English literary canon representative of "distinct English values" from *Wulf to Woolf* came to be in

denied all extra-European originary influences on Ancient Greece. For more, see Bernal, *BA* 1: 337-438.

¹⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the subject, see Hawkes, "The Institutionalization of Literature: The University" 929-30.

place.¹⁸ To be deemed eligible to belong to that great pantheon of literary immortals an author had to have fashioned works of great “intellectual merit and historical importance” (Searle, “Crisis” 28). Once these men of extraordinary brilliance and calibre were identified, the next obvious task to be undertaken was the narrative scripting of an academically sanctioned and validated national literary history. True to the spirit and exigencies of their genesis the standard and prescribed texts in that genre most often committed themselves to the description and analysis “largely ... of the works of a number of towering geniuses” (Searle, “Future of Philosophy” 2079). With the identification of the canon and the scripting of a national literary history English as an academic discipline was set on a solid institutional footing.

The poets who were the perennial strangers within their respective *presents* thus became the obsessive concerns of our academic present. The outsiders within were co-opted into the pervasive operations of power to transform themselves in its tributary outlets as tranquilizers to another present. However, a total institutionalization and incapacitating were made impossible by the non-exhaustibility of the altered-present that they themselves brought-forth. The surplus existent in their literary artefact directed itself against the establishment to devastate it from within. The bard even when he ostensibly portrayed the noxious tragedy that befell an Anglo-Saxon king contrived to pack so many peelable and subversive layers into that tragic fabric. On any inquisitive scratch they gave themselves away to reveal the abyss on which the Majestic tragedy was erected and celebrated. The reference of course is to *The Tragedy of King Lear (Lr.)* wherein a vain, self-indulgent and capricious despot calls up devastation on himself through an unjust and revengeful partitioning of his kingdom. The misdeed turns itself around to consume the cause—the Majestic cause; but the ensuing conflict, by design or by accident, sucks in its *subdued* and poignant spread-around the whole of his realm to the depths of wretched anarchy. Yet, into the constellation of glorious and tragic suffering only Lear has entry; a Lear for whom the life and worth of ordinary men exist as

¹⁸ The English attempts to construct a national canon had its precedents in their colonial activities abroad. The canon had a definite utilitarian and administrative function to fulfil in the colonies. When the British carried out educational reforms in their Asian and African colonies the main interest was in creating an educated middle-class who could act as the middle-men between the colonial masters and the colonized. For that interest to be realized it was essential that the British invent an English Canon to educate the prospective middle-men. The invented canon *had to* embody the values, norms and beliefs mandated by British administrative requirements. This hand in glove relation between literature and colonialism makes Tony Morrison’s contention “[c]anon building is empire building” rather accurate (132).

nothing more than the flat spread and expanse of an atlas!¹⁹ The ordinary are ever susceptible to be whimsically apportioned by the wave of his Majestic sword and are the mere dispensable to his indispensable ego. The miserable men and women who constitute the realm and *are* the realm are not given an utterance in the entire length of the play. Nonetheless, it is the absence of that realm—an absence of the *other* of the present—and its muted compliance with the demands of the present that make the tragedy of Lear possible. Once the silent breaks its silence to let itself be present as the thus far non-being of presence, the *grandeur* of the tragedy is shattered. That shattering is the moment at which the present gets forced to bump against the revelation: “no torment can be greater than what a single human being may suffer” (Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* 45e). Any attempt to unduly aggrandize the suffering of a privileged few is the result of a limited perspective. But within that same critical breath one has to add that it is the staging of a limited perspective that lets its own subversion possible, and the genius of a poet is his/her ability to weave limitless peels of subversive presents—muted or otherwise—into the textual fabric of scripted universe.

Creation of Classics, institutionalization of literature, Canon formation—everything has politics and political consequences built into it. But from the recognition that everything including something as personal and private as sex has political implications, it does not follow that politics should be the only criterion to judge human enterprise.²⁰ Politics understood as an attempt to

¹⁹ Look at these lines:

LEAR. Of all these bounds even from this line, to this,
 With shadowy forests and with champains riched
 With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads,
 We make thee lady. (Shakespeare, *Lr.* 1.1.58-61)

Again:

LEAR. To thee and thine hereditary ever
 Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom,
 No less in space, validity, and pleasure
 Than that conferred on Gonerill. Now our joy,
 Although our last and least, to whose young love
 The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
 Strive to be interested. (Shakespeare, *Lr.* 1.1.74-80)

Not a mention of any living creature and one is made to wonder what actually the tragedy is: the exclusion of men and women, or the vain stupidity of Lear that leads to his own downfall!

²⁰ As John Searle has never been tired of saying:

“[t]he conclusion does not follow from the premise. Obviously, everything has political consequences, whether it's art, music, literature, sex, or gastronomy. For example, right

engage with power implies that the subject at all times is implicated in the operations of power, and “[a] society without power relations,” as Michel Foucault was never tired of pointing out, “can only be an abstraction” (“Subject and Power” 791). Knowledge is never free of operations of power; rather, “power relations give rise to a possible corpus of knowledge, and knowledge extends and reinforces the effects of this power” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 29). Institutions such as Classics and English and validated corpuses like the Western Canon were the result of a need to address certain socio-political contingencies that arose at definite junctures in history. Those contingencies in their widely transformed guises continue to operate in our own present. The present makes specific enterprises possible and worthwhile, whereas the enterprises themselves extend and perpetuate the overarching order—the order of present from which they derive their sanction and endorsement. The mutually implicated nature of that relationship implies that hewing up a Caesar is not going to release one from the operational clutches of enmeshing power. As Shakespeare demonstrates in *Julius Caesar* (*JC*), all that it can lead to is a public catastrophe in which, though Caesar be dead in his body, Caesarism—the spirit of his ambition that has the ability “to structure the possible field of action of others”—continues its operations unabated (Foucault, “Subject and Power” 790). On Caesar’s removal, the operational relations of power break down entirely so that *force* replaces those relations to run its course of devastation for more than a decade. A sacrificed Caesar does not bring the Consular Rome back into the conspiratorial present. The sacrifice only leads to the creation of a headless state, through the byways of which the spectre of Caesar incessantly rages along to “let slip the dogs of war” (Shakespeare, *JC* 3.1.273).

The Stratford bard’s grasp of operations of power is best exemplified in the contentious title—*Julius Caesar*—that he came to choose for the particular play. Caesar, perhaps, is the least impressive of the titular heroes that

now we could be campaigning for the presidential election instead of listening to a lecture on higher education; therefore, this lecture has unintended political consequences because it prevents us from engaging in political activities that we might otherwise be doing. In this sense everything is political. But from the fact that everything is political in this sense, it doesn't follow that our academic objectives are political, nor does it follow that the criteria for assessing our successes and failures are political.” (“Crisis” 39)

Patricia Waugh has reflected on the opposing views projected on art by purists and pragmatists: “the replacement of an idealist aesthetic purism (art exists purely for its own sake) with a neo-pragmatist political correctness (art exists purely for politics’ sake) simply trades one kind of puritanism for another” (80).

Shakespeare created. The caricature figure of Shakespearean Caesar is never given any rhetorical brilliance or character development; he is portrayed as an easily flattered, indecisive, infirm, stubborn, superstitious and boastful potentate. His actual stage presence is minimal, and yet no other character – neither the noble but easily inveigled Brutus nor the wily Antony, not to speak of the cold and ruthless Octavian – is able to carry the plot on his shoulders. Shakespearean Caesar is not the awe-inspiring suzerain that we expect him to be; but even the genius of Shakespeare had to be content with the fact that irrespective of his dramatic diminishing of Caesar's stature, there is no other character through and around him he could weave the narrative strands of his plot to stage the sort of intrigue that he finally manages to come up with. Caesar is the intersection to which all characters and events in the play constantly refer to; he is the nodule through which individual acts in the play have to filter through to gain their authority and import. Once that point of intersection – however arbitrary – is removed, the entire constellation of power relations breaks down to let loose the violence of war and unrest.²¹ The conspiratorial dream of a final battle for the Roman republic was regrettably set in motion through a hewn Caesar only to be bitterly realized later – in utter defeat – in the open graveyards of Philippi. The dream of a republican Rome – a Rome of Romans for the Romans – was never realized, and all that it led to was murder, bloodshed and a decade of bedlam. As the final scenes of *Julius Caesar* and the plot of *Antony and Cleopatra* that builds on the former make clear, the realm knows peace only when Caesarean ambition is realized in kind – i.e. when Caesar's nephew Octavian assumes the title *Augustus* to become the monarch of an imperial Rome. With him the operational relations of power resume their normal course through the establishment of tributary outlets and hierarchies to once again set in place the mutually enforcing force-relations.

Culture, as Wittgenstein observed, “presupposes an observance” (*Culture and Value* 83e).²² In the last hundred years or so, in the field of relations occupied by the West, the Western Canon has been an effective and indispensable tool in making that observance possible. For sure, the notional currency of literature and civilization has had devastating consequences for the

²¹ It has to be stressed that power is *not* presented here as a centred phenomenon. The argument sticks to the Foucauldian framework of power wherein “[p]ower’s condition of possibility . . . must . . . be sought in the . . . the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 121-22). The relations of power are “structured but off-centred” (Barthes, “From Work to Text” 159).

²² A culture must “be constantly created and verified in social life; if it is not, it dies” (Fields 112).

colonized of Europeans, since in the eyes of the colonial master the “presence of a written literature was the signal measure of the potential, innate humanity of a race” (Gates 44). The apparent lack of written literature among Asians, Africans and American-Indians made it the racially and civilizationally superior European’s moral obligation to “civilize” these “lesser” races. But the collaborative role that literature played in the history of colonialism need not automatically lead to the conclusion that study of literature should be done away with. The question, whether literary studies should continue as an academic discipline, has to be analysed and answered within the socio-politico-economic framework of the present. Just as literary studies came on the scene due to the combined determinative weight of a number of social factors, it will continue only if it fits into the structural configuration of our present.²³ If it does not, then no amount of nostalgic and critical clamouring can get that “patient etherised upon a table” to hold on for long (Eliot, “Prufrock” 3). But if it does continue to fit in, one has to concede that for an academic discipline to remain functionally efficient, some notion of merit or quality – the inclusive criteria of the present – cannot be done without.²⁴ From that conceding it follows that the canon can be and *should be* caned, but never detonated. With the restoring of canonicity – i.e. inclusion – the problem of exclusion comes directly back into play; yet, that problem – one that is necessary and unavoidable – on being continually dealt with shall only lead to an extension and altering of the present and not to its destruction.

Irrespective of the sins one could associate with an institutionalized existence of literature, literary studies has been unique in engendering and nurturing within it a devastatingly critical self-reflectivity. Critical engagement with literary and institutional history has been one of the most distinguishing features of literary studies. Perhaps there is nothing unusual about it too. The Western Canon from which literary studies draws its life blood carries within it some of the nastiest critiques of the tradition they claim to represent and embody. From Socrates to Derrida the best of the West have been the West’s most uncompromising critics, and it is their critique – the *canonized* critique – that provides the current crop of anti-West and anti-canon theorists with their most effective tools of structural decimation. In ruthlessly engaging with their

²³ English may still have a significant role to play in the twenty-first century. “US political hegemony, and the current technological supremacy of the English language as the basis for global information” might ensure that English continues to have an economic and thus social utility (Punter 525).

²⁴ Merit/the criterion of inclusion has important roles to fulfil in faculty recruitment, student enrolment and identifying a textual corpus.

presents, the radical figures from the prior of our present have succeeded in bringing-forth their own versions of the present. In effecting that alterity, these radicals—strangers to the present—have *only* contributed toward the present's extension and perpetuation.²⁵ It is presumptuous to assume that in the onward march to many a liberating mission, the current crop of star-studded critics will achieve anything significantly different. All that they do and all that they *are* is *the* permitted by the structural configuration of the present—a present contextualized in its alterity; brought-forth by, yet accrued to its prior.

The canon, despite its terminology induced scriptural overtones and the resultant association with notions of authenticity and authority, has never been as exclusionary or inflexible as that correspondence might suggest. It has always been an evolving and compliant corpus characterized by its willingness to critically engage with its affiliates.²⁶ The canon belongs to the constellation of our present, and our discomfort with the present or with the power structures of the present does not imply that there can be a present devoid of these contingencies. The present—the textual universe: the world-ordered-in-word—is the only world we can inhabit, and any dream of progressing beyond the structurality of the present to a paradisaical present has to be abandoned. One has to accept the imperfect and contingent nature of the present and engage with it. In that engagement, the canon and the canonical which have been instrumental in establishing a “relationship among the texts” from the West shall be met critically, *but* respectfully (Foucault, “What Is an Author?” 268).

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²⁵ The extension of the present realized through the bringing-forth of an altered-present never leads to its destruction. It only results in effecting an altered-significance at the structural and elemental levels.

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