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SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THE CANON DEBATE FOR COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

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Some Implications of the Canon Debate for Collection Development

by Brian Quinn

INTRODUCTION

Canons have been of interest to librarians dating back to the days when Robert Maynard Hutchins instituted the Great Books program at the University of Chicago. Hutchins did so at the suggestion of the popular philosopher, Mortimer Adler. When Adler later helped to popularize the program with the public, public libraries around the country became the sites for meetings of Great Books discussion groups.

The authority and influence of the canon remained strong until the late 1960s and early 1970s when undergraduate survey courses on Western Civilization came under attack as part of the widespread academic upheaval during that time. Many curriculum requirements were loosened or dropped as a result.

Critical theory has become so important that literary works are often seen as mere data for critical analysis and of such secondary importance to theory as to be virtually interchangeable. This results in an extreme relativism that equates Plato with Peanuts. Devisive arguments continue to rage as some scholars defend the traditional canon and others criticize it.

These arguments have not escaped the attention of the library community. In particular, they have had significant and far reaching implications for collection development. Yet, in the last three years, only three or four articles on the topic of canons and collection development have appeared in the library literature. So far, these articles have focused largely on calling attention

to the problem, offering little in the way of concrete suggestions to solve it.

For example, a recent article on "The Literary Canon and Collection Development Building" discusses canon formation, canon determiners such as faculty, publishers, anthologists, journal editors, and the rise of cultural studies. When the author mentions the intention of critical theorists to go beyond the canon to encompass all texts including popular culture, he can only say "Exactly how we in collection development are going to furnish library resources if the study of popular culture gains momentum, I am not sure." He concludes by predicting a trend toward smaller canons of previously marginalized groups, but does not suggest what the implications of this trend might be for collection development.¹

In another study entitled "Academic Libraries and the Culture Wars: The Politics of Collection Development" the author discusses the relation between canon formation and identity formation. Literary canons have excluded whole groups of people, which has had a major impact on how people view themselves and their history. Libraries play a role in this process through collection development decisions which determine the subjects, topics and authors that are included or excluded from the collection, and thus what kind of individual and collective identities are authorized and legitimated. Yet the author does not go on to explore the implications of her analysis for collection development practice. The only suggestion offered is for librarians to consult alternative bibliographic and review sources for neglected materials to collect.²

A third article approaches canons and collection development from the perspective of the rare books librarian. The article, "Literary Canons, Literary Studies, and Library Collections: A Retrospective On Collecting Twentieth Century Writers," documents the role that research libraries have played as active agents in the formation of canons. By betting on the reputations of less solid authors and frequently solidifying or enhancing them, collection development librarians become part of the social process by which authors and works become valued and established. They also wield influence by not selecting certain authors or works.³ However, the study does not offer any specific ideas for how librarians can exercise this power in judicious ways.

This view of collection development librarians as co-creators and enforcers of canons is reiterated in a recent article on "Canon Formation, Library Collections, and the Dilemma of Collection Development." Subject specialists, by virtue of their subject expertise, are products of established canons, as well as contributors to them. Collection development librarians that evaluate their collection using established lists like the RLG Conspectus, which are created by a consensus of academic user groups, also reinforce canons.

The article goes on to suggest that collection managers face a dilemma between acquiring materials to meet the needs of their present patrons or those of future user groups, which may reflect different needs. A compromise solution is offered that involves paying special attention to collecting interdisciplinary materials and undercollected areas outside of traditional canons. Librarians must first assess what genres, formats, and subjects are not being collected. Based on this knowledge, they could then form a union for special collections perhaps modeled on the RLG Conspectus. Member institutions would develop and maintain collections of materials of minimal interest to current researchers, but that may be of value to future societies.⁴ This notion of warehousing marginal materials represents one of the few concrete proposals in the library literature for reducing the problems that canons pose for collection development.

It seems natural to ask why so few articles have appeared in the library literature on the implications of the canon debate for collection development. Part of the reason may be because of the relative recency of the phenomenon. Many librarians may simply be unaware of the debates which often take place within the insular confines of the particular disciplines, such as departmental meetings, professional conferences, and journals. Another reason may be the complexity of the

issue. Much of the discussion can take place on an abstract theoretical level that utilizes the highly technical jargon of literary criticism and deconstruction. The dialogue may at times seem impenetrable to the non-specialized reader.

DISCUSSION

The library literature and the literature of the humanities and social sciences seems to offer few specific solutions to the canon dilemma. After conducting a selective review of the vast literature offered by MLA Bibliography and Sociofile under the heading "canons," which consisted of nearly 1,000 articles and books, the lack of specific proposals was clearly evident.

Given the difficulty and complexity of the issues at stake in the canon debates, perhaps it is unreasonable to seek a neat resolution. Nonetheless, an attempt was made to at least extract some practical implications for collection development from all the theoretical posturing and offer a tentative response to some of the questions left unanswered by previous articles in the library literature. These questions include: Does postmodernism render the canon obsolete? What are the implications of relativism for collection development? How does one assess quality if inclusion in the traditional canon isn't a criterion?"

The absence of concrete proposals is particularly true with regard to challengers of the traditional canon. Anti-canonists criticize the existing canon but are often unwilling to propose an alternate set of liberating texts. One result is that editors, in the face of lack of specifics, have stuffed anthologies to overflowing in an attempt to accommodate and include everyone. After a certain point, literary "worth" becomes devalued or meaningless as the point of infinite expansion is approached. Anti-canonism itself is weakened to the extent that it becomes a reaction against rather than a statement for something. At times, anti-canonism seems more concerned with focusing on social issues and problems such as class, race, and gender, rather than celebrating the creative contribution of an exemplary writer or work that might replace an existing canon incumbent.⁵

The implication is that some kind of canon seems inevitable. One reason is because one cannot read or teach everything, so one is forced to be selective. The very time limits imposed in a course of study or an academic semester demands that choices be made. This leads to the formation of some kind of select group, along with a much larger group of "outsiders." As soon as certain works are called central, they create a canon or a hierarchy.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the inevitability of canons is the anti-canonist movement, which itself forms a canon. The prominent theorists within its ranks tend to be largely white male Europeans like Derrida or de Man or Foucault. They form a hierarchy of privileged theoreticians and texts that resembles a contemporary version of the established canon.⁶

The anti-canonists are clearly faced with a dilemma. How far is it possible to mount an institutional challenge to the traditional canon without merely reproducing an alternate canon? Critical theory often does not define a fixed subject matter but instead produces a series of questions and problems that are more akin to a method of analyzing texts. But any educational system, as well the libraries that support it, demands explicit syllabi and curricula.⁷ Critical theorists may be able to propose alternate texts based on the implications of their analysis, but they are still faced with the difficulty of how to explain how these do not constitute a canon in itself.

Thus, while a key question among anti-canonists is whether or not they should be engaged in the process of canon formation, or whether they should abandon the canon altogether, the latter option does not really appear to be viable. Despite postmodernism, the canon, in one form or another, is likely to endure.

It has been suggested that the canon debates consist of more than the simple opposition of canon defenders and canon critics. One observer has claimed that there are in fact three positions commonly taken. Canon purists seek to defend and preserve the canon in its current form. Canon pluralists seek to change the existing canon by introducing the works or canons of groups that have traditionally been excluded for what they believe are social or ideological reasons. Canon anarchists want to do away with canons altogether by expanding the universe of discourse to any text, to language itself. This last position could create considerable difficulty for collection managers.

Based on the existing evidence, the position of the canon anarchists seems rather untenable. If canons will always exist in some form, then the debate really centers around canon purists versus canon pluralists.

The debate is complicated by the fact that the canon purists and canon pluralists often use two different evaluative criteria to determine what constitutes a canon. Both of these have some validity. Canon purists are defending quality as a selection criterion. This usually refers to factors such as superior craft, reasoning, and execution. Canon pluralists are attacking the content of the

canon, the biases of certain authors as reflected in their works.

Based on an examination of the current literature on the canon debate, there is a compelling argument to be made for both retaining the traditional canon and for expanding it to include canons of other cultures. The very fact that the traditional canon is generating so much controversy suggests that it is still very much alive and should be retained. If it were truly insignificant or irrelevant to current scholars, it would probably die a quiet death due to neglect or apathy. The fact that it has not is in some sense an indication of its vitality.

Other reasons for retaining the traditional canon is that it manages to raise and answer important issues, and that its texts serve an exemplary function. In this view, canon texts represent such heuristic masterpieces that they are valuable regardless of their specific contents. Their overall structure and method serves as such an ideal of intellectual daring and ambition that readers benefit from exposure to it.

A further benefit afforded by the traditional canon is that it enables one to see that some of the problems and issues people wrestled with in the past are still with us today. This is true despite certain historical and cultural biases of the past. The traditional canon fosters a realization that classical texts have a certain relevance for readers today.

Great canonical works should also be collected for their historical value. In a sense, they can prevent one from reinventing the wheel. Not only are they able to show the reader that many of the problems of the past endure into the present, but familiarity with them keeps one from thinking he or she has discovered an original solution when it may have been proposed centuries ago.

Thus it can be seen that there are good reasons for the collection development librarian to refrain from weeding *The Illiad* or *Moby Dick* from the collection. There is still much to be said for the value of the traditional canon. Yet there are also a number of good reasons for expanding the canon to include the works of other cultures.

Canon purists might raise a cry of protest, but canon pluralists challenge the notion of a single monolithic measure of excellence as being the only criterion to base the canon on. They have proposed other criteria to augment those commonly used by the literary establishment. These criteria would open up the canon so that it could accommodate selection by culture, race, gender, or class.

If the inclusion of non-Western cultures seems like a break with canonical tradition, pluralists would argue that it is because purists have ignored

"tradition" in a broader sense. They view the European American tradition as being something less than the cradle of civilization. It is closer to a chapter in a historical perspective that spans a much greater length and breadth than is encompassed by the traditional canon. The views of one pluralist faculty member toward a more conservative colleague epitomize this perspective:

"Why had he never been taught that Socrates, Herodotus, Pythagoras, and Solon owed much of what they knew to African cultures in Egypt, or that many of the words of Solomon were borrowed from the Egyptian writer Amen-En-Eope?"⁸

In addition to the observation that the traditional canon is itself part of a much older and more encompassing non-Western tradition, pluralists would offer another argument why the canon should be opened up. The notion that the understanding of one's own culture is more important than the understanding of other cultures is not necessarily true. In fact, the pluralist position would hold that the opposite is nearer the mark.

The idea that non-Western texts can serve as substitutes for Western ones may be extreme. Perhaps a more reasonable argument could be made by us that ethnic literature may help put European American texts in perspective. In this view they would act as a check on some of the erroneous excesses of the canon.

A further argument has been offered that the study of non-Western canons may play a role in reducing racial prejudice. The evidence regarding these claims is mixed, with some research indicating that such study has little effect on attitude. Other studies, however, indicate a reduction in prejudice can occur.⁹ Certainly, none of the research suggests that such study does any harm. Such findings lend a moral dimension to the pluralist position. In some ways, a large part of the pluralist argument may involve the partial substitution of ethical criteria for aesthetic criteria in canon selection.

The preceding evidence suggests that the traditional canon should be both retained and expanded to include other non-Western canons. Collection development librarians can help students and faculty with this expansion in several ways. First, by focusing their efforts on discovering what noncanonical works exist in the first place, by doing research, checking bibliographies, and consulting with bibliographic specialists. They can also share discoveries of out of print books, and perhaps even start up a newsletter or SDI service to circulate such bibliographi-

cal data. Tracking down journals that explicate texts disregarded by the critical establishment might also be helpful.¹⁰

Another way in which the collection development librarian might contribute to pluralizing the canon would be through a piggybacking policy of selection. That is, for each canonical work ordered, the librarian might try to locate and acquire the closest non-canonical equivalent. If the works are similar enough in subject, if not in treatment, they might be shelved in reasonable proximity to one another without doing violence to the cataloging scheme. Readers who may be shelf browsing among the more traditional titles might be alerted that a variety of perspectives exist.¹¹

To further expand the canon, the librarian could make a concerted effort to acquire works that are not on the reading list of any faculty member in a given department. Perhaps a goal of one new work per faculty member per year. A further step might be to try to acquire works not on the syllabus of members of comparable departments in one's home state. For those librarians wary of expanding the canon too rapidly, this represents a modest and measured response, the proposal of which should not threaten even the most conservative of collection managers.¹²

For the more adventurous librarian, canon expansion should entail serious consideration of works outside the boundaries of traditional genres. Librarians, like faculty members themselves, are accustomed to thinking of certain media as being traditional and appropriate for certain disciplines. Thus journals are emphasized in the sciences, monographs in the humanities. The canon busting collection manager must exercise more creativity in the selection process.

For the collection development librarian who is serious about expanding the canon, the task does not end with selecting non-Western texts. Indeed, some scholars have suggested that adding non-white, nonmale, nonclassical writers to traditional courses has resulted in a somewhat superficial overhaul of the canon, and that more sweeping change is needed.¹³ These critics would argue that reading new works is not the same as arriving at new readings. According to this view, the canon isn't the only problem, how one interprets it is crucial as well:

"... we should not assume that a more pluralistic choice of texts—Frederick Douglass as well as Emerson, Virginia Woolf as well as Proust—will automatically advance progressive or liberal goals. On the other side, while classes devoted to Homer and Virgil could lead to dabbling in unexamined humanist pieties, they might also

trigger powerful reflection upon militarism and imperialist conquest. . . why abandon them to Bloom and Bennett, as though these texts can only be interpreted in a conservative or reactionary way?"¹⁴

The genuinely pluralist view would expand not only the texts to be included in the canon, but the variety of interpretations of it. Instead of acquiring only traditional interpretations of canonical works, the collection development librarian would seek other readings that challenge the canon purist's view of the Great Books as being eternal defenders of the status quo. Such interpretations would cast canonical texts in a radically different light than canon defenders like Allan Bloom have chosen to view them:

"Not only do such texts for Bloom embody unchanging human values, but, for the most part, socially conservative ones. Bloom's is an image of the Western cultural heritage in which the radically utopian implications of Plato's *Republic*, of Euripides, of the *More of Utopia*, of Milton's political writings, of Blake, Shelley, Wollstonecraft, Thoreau, simply go unacknowledged."¹⁵

The new need of librarians to acquire diverse interpretations does not mean that they should go about collecting only radical interpretations of the classics. True pluralism means that, along with unconventional criticism, they should try to select books that present all sides of the debate. The overall goal is to acquire works that will most attract readers to the canon in order to make it seem alive and accessible.

Because of the flood of contradictory readings of texts that the canon debate has generated, some canon purists have reacted by proposing that all interpretations be dispensed with. This may be at least partly a reaction to the enormous emphasis that postmodernism has placed on interpretation. But relying solely on the canon leads to shallow readings and loss of understanding. The important point is that collection librarians must make an effort to acquire the best interpretations available.

With all the attention being devoted to the various positions in this complex debate, it is easy for librarians to take sides. One can quickly get caught up in supporting one position or another in one's collection development practices. What often gets overlooked in the process is the necessity to capture the conflict itself in the collection. Some observers have argued that the most effective way to deal with the conflict is to acquire as much information about it as possible so that readers can better understand it and

decide for themselves. This solution recognizes that conflicts are here to stay and that librarians should look for ways to make them educationally productive.¹⁶

The collection development librarian needs to select more works that debate which works should be part of the canon, and even whether there should be a canon. Such debates are part of the intellectual adventure and are educational in themselves. Even though there is no easy resolution, one learns from the search itself.

Canon pluralists have criticized the use of the Great Books in education because of their use for inculcating a set of eternal virtues in students. This indoctrination is seen as anesthetizing consciousness. It makes students adaptable and pliable, rendering them "ambassadors of the status quo."

Even with the recent controversy, a great deal of prestige has built up around the canon, much of it accumulated over centuries. There is a danger that students will approach it with a reverential attitude. Librarians need to counter this sacred aura by selecting works critical of the canon. Otherwise, study of the Great Books will not induce genuine reflection among students because the canon will encourage passivity and reverence rather than active critical reflection. The pluralists, one study noted:

"argue against the "banking" form of pedagogy often implied in prescriptivist models of cultural literacy. The authors argue that simply to deposit into the memory banks of students tidings from the most esteemed minds of Western culture inhibits the development of a critical consciousness."¹⁷

Not only can librarians select works critical of the canon, but to balance the collection, they might also select works critical of the anti-canonists. This is necessary to balance the collection to insure that the canon is not only pluralistic in point of view, but the criticism is equally diverse. The librarian cannot simply assume that anti-canonists should have the last word bibliographically in the debate.

There is much to be critical of in the anti-canonist position. In some ways, the anti-canonists practice a crude form of over-simplification by reducing everything to politics. Such a narrow view overlooks frames of reference offered by canonical works be they moral, practical, or imaginative.

The extreme relativism that the anti-canonists often resort to, if carried to its logical consequences, is itself relative and not absolute. It has in fact been challenged by one critic, Anna Bal-

akian, who claims that the critic is *not* an artist but rather an intermediary creating a bridge between two very different forms of human cognition. The critic possesses an apriori code of values against which he tests artwork and recasts it in terms understandable to non-artists. There is a discernable difference between art and the rest of the world:

"She holds to an absolute distinction between art and non-art, one which depends on the belief in the "life" of the author, who is the artwork's "god," "spelling out" its values, its hierarchy, the relative functions within an integrated whole, satisfying his own and readers' holistic yearnings."¹⁸

The artist's intention constitutes a restraint upon the possible appropriate meanings the reader may construct in his apprehension of the work. There may be different meanings, but not an infinite number. Relativism is thus only one position in the debate and not an absolute. The librarian is therefore not obligated to acquire everything. Based on the above anti-canonist critique, the librarian might, however, leave a little space on the shelf in anticipation of a possible post-post-modernist movement in the offing.

The idea that the anti-canon movement might be eclipsed by some as yet unseen trend is not at all inconceivable, given the long and constantly changing history of the canon. Since it is continually in flux, with authors, works, and whole genres' fortunes rising and falling as predictably if not as suddenly as the financial markets, there can perhaps be no truly permanent canon. The recent reevaluation of George Orwell's reputation illustrates this phenomenon well.¹⁹

Given this instability, the question naturally arises whether it is possible for the librarian to seek out and identify potential canon contenders. To some extent, every collection development librarian wants to select the most important works of lasting significance, to the degree that he can. Due to the labile nature of canons, gambling on literary reputations has some of the characteristics of Wall Street or even Las Vegas:

"Anyone aware of the chancy, controversial process by which the canon of the so called New Testament came into being is unlikely to place much faith in literary canons as repositories of timeless unquestionable value. The history of literary value is notoriously contentious; the same work may be valued by different generations for quite different reasons; what was great literature for the 18th century is not necessarily so for us. My own 10 "indispensable" books would not be the choice of a Parsee or a

Peruvian; they may not even be the choice of an "educated" English person in 50 years time."²⁰

How is the librarian to seek out and identify potential canon contenders as well as discover lost or overlooked ones? One way is to trace influences. This involves collecting works that are influencing other writers. Artists and critics are often the first to spot these.

An author's reputation may be more likely to undergo a renaissance not as a result of a group of professors deciding he has been "marginalized," but because other writers acknowledge, praise, or incorporate his work into their own. One reason some works seem to endure longer than others is because they engage the minds of individuals who themselves have authored works that are recognized or admired.

Another indicator of a potential classic is a concern with important themes. One researcher has divided themes into two broad categories. Topical thematic concepts are of local and temporary significance, such as manners or problems particular to society, a given era, or a group. Such works typically do not outlast the topics that they deal with, although exceptions have been known to occur, such as Dickens' *Hard Times* or Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. There is another kind of concept that is more characteristic of enduring works, however:

"Contrasted with topical thematic works, are perennial thematic concepts or mortal questions. The latter are typically philosophical or theological concepts if one understands both the term "philosophical" and the term "theological" in a broad sense. Such concepts do not date, at least not to the extent that topical concepts do. Sophocles' *Antigone* is a good example of a work animated by perennial thematic concepts."²¹

Another way that a librarian can distinguish a potential classic is by its ability to yield new meanings or interpretations with each rereading. Italo Calvino once remarked that "a classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say." So important is this capacity, that once a work loses it, the work's very status as canonical may be threatened.

Canon pluralists have challenged the idea that canonical texts really have the capability of yielding many meanings. They argue that it is not the text that yields different meanings. Rather it is the reader that imposes different meanings on the text. Once a work is perceived as canonical, it remains in the canon almost by a process of self-perpetuation.

Whether generated or imposed, the ability to

yield a variety of meanings is nonetheless a characteristic associated with canonical works and librarians would do well to look for it in seeking potential classics. It has also been suggested that trying to speculate about which works will or will not make it into the canon is too difficult a calculation to engage in. Lionel Trilling argued that contemporary literature should not be taught in universities because we cannot be sure about our judgements of contemporary literature. The easiest way to judge a classic may be to wait and see.

Even when new books are added to new editions of the Great Books, the addition is only provisional. The books are more nominations than they are actual admissions. These tentative admissions are regarded as such because they may or may not survive the test of time.

If identifying native canons seems daunting, the identification and selection of cross cultural canons may be even more difficult for the collection development librarian. When selecting books on non-Western cultures, how is one to determine which ones are worthy of study? The problem of bias immediately becomes an issue because it is so difficult to avoid.

One researcher has suggested that there may be a canonical bias at work in aesthetic evaluation. He suggests that most of us can probably recognize this bias in ourselves at a simple intuitive level. As an example, he offers the process of reading a book:

"If we read a work and dislike it, we are far more likely to put the fault down to our insensibilities if the work is canonical than if it is not. If I find *The Prelude* displeasing, I am unlikely to say it should be dropped from the canon. On the other hand, if I find *The Sorrows of Satan* displeasing, I am likely to view its exclusion from the canon as justified."²²

This inherent predisposition toward the canon may cloud the librarian's judgement of works from non-Western cultures because they are not traditionally considered canonical. One will be tempted to make subtle, or even not so subtle comparisons between the work of other cultures and the best of Western culture. As Saul Bellow has asked, is there a Tolstoy of the Zulus? Has there ever been a Socrates of the Orient, an African American Proust, or a female Shakespeare?

In response to this challenge, canon pluralists point out that there are indeed equivalent Great Works in many non-Western cultures, including India, China, and Japan. They would argue that the *Upanishads* are as important as *The Repub-*

lic, and that *Tales of Genji* is as significant a work as *Canterbury Tales*. Can anyone really say that the works of the Buddha or Confucius are less profound than those of Socrates?²³ Saul Bellow, Allan Bloom, and other canon purists seem to have chosen to selectively ignore such works to bolster their defense of the Western canon, since it is inconceivable that persons of their erudition would be unaware of them.

The issue of non-Western book selection has generated several arguments over the relative weight given to ethical versus aesthetic considerations. Canon defenders are critical of what they see as a kind of literary affirmative action. They fear that canon pluralists will force works into the canon that are politically correct but aesthetically weak. Canon purists believe this results in a kind of reverse racism or ethnocentrism.

Canon pluralists counter by arguing that it may not be valid to evaluate the works of non-Western cultures using Western criteria. Aesthetic judgements are always relative to culture. The notion of a universally valid set of aesthetic criteria is not possible, because aesthetics are ultimately based on social consensus.

Aesthetic judgements are not only relative to culture, canon pluralists would argue, they are influenced by other factors as well. Gender, race, and class may also affect how people value certain works. The current aesthetic criteria characteristic of modernist Western culture can therefore be challenged by proposing an alternative set of criteria. Jane Tompkins, for example, disputes the notion of indestructible classics and aesthetic criteria. More specifically, she questions the hegemony of:

"modernist demands...for psychological complexity, moral ambiguity, epistemological sophistication, stylistic density, formal economy."

Calling instead for attention:

"to the way a text offers a blueprint for survival under a specific set of political, economic, social, or religious conditions."²⁴

Pluralists also point out that response research has shown that people are attracted to characters similar to themselves. This narcissistic tendency results in white men preferring white male protagonists, and black women preferring works with black female protagonists. By extension, any cultural group will be predisposed toward works with characters for whom they feel an affinity.

In other words, pluralists seem to be saying that non-Western works are likely to have a strong bias against them. Given this bias, the plu-

ralists reason, the benefit of the doubt in aesthetic considerations should be given to non-Western works. This would hold true at least until the imbalance is remedied and Western readers relinquish their narcissism for a more universal aesthetic.

But the collection development librarian's task may not be as clear cut as finding out which works are most significant to non-Western cultures and then acquiring them. Canon purists have raised the concern that even if it is possible to identify and acquire these important non-Western works, readers would still not be able to understand or appreciate them as fully as many Great Books of Western culture. This is because non-Western works are only available in translation, which some purists feel tends to interfere with the reader experiencing them as they were intended to be experienced.

It may be true that many non-Western classics are somewhat less accessible to readers than their Western counterparts. But many Western classics are also only available to English-speaking readers in translation. The real issue for the collection development librarian may be the necessity for being extremely careful to insure that the highest quality translations available are selected.²⁵ The quality of translation can make a dramatic difference in the accessibility of the non-Western canon to readers.

There is one other criticism of the canon that has been raised by postmodernist critics in addition to its being labeled ethnocentric and sexist. It has also come under fire for being elitist. Critics argue that canonization enshrines high culture by excluding and marginalizing racial, sexual, and class groups. They claim that canon purists exclude mass or popular culture from the realm of serious culture. By doing so, they close off a vast realm of culture from critical discussion and scrutiny.²⁶

This is wrong, they argue, not only because high cultural texts such as Dickens, Dostoevsky, and Rabelais often originated as popular novels, but because the techniques of literary criticism can be applied just as readily to mass culture as to high culture. The work being analyzed is secondary in importance to the analysis.

This might seem to suggest that the collection development is faced with acquiring virtually everything from Balzac to Batman. But some degree of selectivity and discrimination must still be exercised, because the library cannot realistically acquire everything. Perhaps a reasonable compromise might be to focus on selecting critical interpretations of pop cultural phenomena from a postmodernist perspective, rather than actual works of pop culture itself. Thus, for exam-

ple, the librarian might order Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's *How To Read Donald Duck*, a critical analysis of motifs in the Disney comic, but forego ordering the comic itself. Since many actual pop culture texts are acquired by public libraries anyway, which is more in keeping with their entertainment mission, the academic library should not feel an obligation to duplicate what is available elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

Although the canon controversy has important implications for collection development, little has appeared on it in the library literature so far. This is in contrast to the vast literature that it has spurned in the humanities and the social sciences. Yet even this enormous body of research is largely theoretical, with few practical applications that can be utilized by collection development librarians.

The present study has attempted to rectify this situation by selectively reviewing the most practical studies available. An effort has been made to point out what some of the more important implications of these theoretical studies might be for collection development practice. The complexity of the problem defies neat and easy solutions. The following suggestions represent an initial strategy for incorporating the postmodernist critique of canons into a new approach one might utilize in developing the academic library collection.

First, since the controversy over the canon seems largely limited to the humanities, the collection development librarian need not be concerned with the sciences.

Second, based on the current debate literature, there are good arguments for both retaining the traditional Western canon and expanding it to include canons of other, non-Western cultures. Reasons for retaining the canon include the fact that it is still significant enough to generate enormous debate. Another reason is that its texts serve as models of how to ask and answer big questions. A third argument is that some of the problems and issues the canon attempts to grapple with are still with us today. In addition, study of the canon is historically valuable because it keeps readers from reinventing previous ideas and discoveries.

The traditional canon should also be expanded to include non-Western works selected for their historical, social, and political significance in addition to the traditional aesthetic criteria. The argument that many traditional canonical works have their roots in non-Western cultures such as Egypt or Africa provides another reason

for expanding the canon. The canon should be opened up because in a rapidly shrinking world it is as important to study other cultures in addition to one's own. Expanding the canon will also help to put traditional canonical works in perspective and serve to correct their errors and excesses. A canon that is open to non-Western works may play a role in reducing racial prejudice.

Collection development librarians can help expand the canon by researching what non-canonical works currently exist and acquiring them. This information, as well as information regarding out of print discoveries, could be circulated via a newsletter or SDI service. An additional way libraries could help is by locating and subscribing to journals that interpret previously ignored works.

Another strategy for expanding the canon might include piggybacking the acquisition of canonical with equivalent non-canonical texts. To the extent possible, these works should be shelved in proximity to one another to encourage the awareness and selection of alternate perspectives by browsers. The librarian can also deliberately seek out works omitted from departmental syllabi either locally or regionally. The collection manager can further look beyond traditional genres to the creative acquisition of journals, letters, narratives, and other nonconventional forms not previously acceptable as canonical.

The breadth and depth of the non-Western collection will be determined by the size of the overall collection. The cultural or ethnic diversity of the collection should reflect that of the library users, so that particular ethnic groups are adequately represented in the collection. An inter-cultural cooperative lending plan for sharing non-Western resources among libraries could also be developed.

Third, the librarian can enhance the traditional canon by collecting new and varied interpretations of it. Works that make the traditional canon more accessible to readers are also needed. Librarians should make an effort to acquire the best expositions available as the quality directly affects accessibility.

Fourth, librarians should acquire works about the canon debate itself. The debate itself is educational, and readers can learn much from studying it, even though the questions it raises may never be resolved.

Fifth, in order to counter the almost sacred aura of prestige that has built up around the traditional canon, it is necessary for the librarian to select works that adopt a critical approach to it.

Sixth, to counterbalance this criticism, it may also help to select works critical of the anti-

canonists. The canon controversy is an ongoing debate, and the anti-canonists should not be allowed to have the last word in it.

Seventh, the extreme relativism that characterizes much of the anti-canon movement is itself, by logical extension, only a relative position. A post-postmodernist trend may be in the offing, providing a further reason not to weed the canon from the library's collection.

Eighth, given that the canon is constantly changing, it may be possible though not without difficulty, for librarians to identify potential canon contenders. By monitoring the influences of current authors, and by selecting works that contain important themes and are capable of yielding multiple interpretations, librarians increase their chances of identifying future canonical works. The most reliable method of all may be to wait and see which works withstand the test of time.

Ninth, non-Western canons, the Great Books equivalent of India, China, Japan, and other cultures, do exist and should be collected by librarians to offset the cultural bias of the traditional Western canon. Librarians should be careful, however, of being predisposed to judging the great works of other cultures by Western standards and aesthetics. Other cultures may not use the same selection criteria as the West does.

Tenth, in selecting Great Books of non-Western cultures, the librarian needs to be careful to select the best translations that can be obtained. This will help ensure that the maximum degree of accessibility of the content and possible meanings of non-Western works is achieved.

Eleventh, in order to offset the alleged elitist bias of the canon, librarians do not have to attempt to acquire every best seller, comic book, and other pop artifact produced by contemporary culture. They can instead compromise by focusing their efforts on collecting scholarly interpretations and analyses of popular culture, and let public libraries remain the repositories of the actual pop culture items themselves.

These suggestions should by no means be considered final or exhaustive. They are meant to be tentative approaches to alleviating the problems that the canon debate presents for the librarian. The complexity of the problems raised do not at present suggest definitive or encompassing solutions. Until they are found the collection development librarian will have to make do with partial answers such as those offered here.

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