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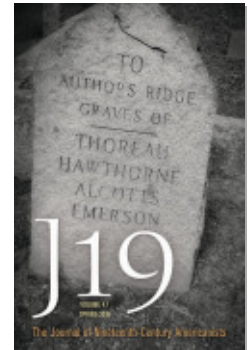
## Mere Formalities; or, How Canonicity Speaks Its Love

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## Mere Formalities; or, How Canonicity Speaks Its Love

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Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

Jack London, *Love of Life and Other Stories*,

*The Call of the Wild, The Sea-Wolf*

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

—American literary works that have influenced Xi

Jinping, the General Secretary of the Communist Party

of the People's Republic of China, as mentioned in his

talks in the Colloquium on Cultural Work 文艺工作座谈会,

October 14, 2014, and later circulated on Chinese social

media as “Big Boss Xi’s List of Books to Read

(习大大书单)”

Eine über Dogmatik vermittelte Ideenevolution ist für die

modern Gesellschaft nicht schnell genug. (Evolution of

ideas through dogma is, for modern society, not fast

enough.)

—Niklas Luhmann<sup>1</sup>

We cannot speak of the ongoingness of canons in contemporary discourse without talking about their most prevalent, banal, and embarrassing form: the rattling off of names of important and representative works in cross-cultural occasions ranging from casual conversations to state-sanctioned speeches on “cultural work.” If, as Luhmann claims, the concept of canonicity is historically singular—an inefficient way of transmitting ideas or values in modern society—then what do such formalities represent? In light of the persistence of genres of speech that invoke canonical lists, we must conclude that the canon itself has evolved—not only the things in it, or the way we feel about it, but in its very essence—from a thing that cannot keep up with modern communication to a thing that positively thrives in it. Empty forms teach us to catch the canon in its new semantic register.

Formality may not appear to be the most promising route for discovering the new criteria of meaningfulness we have imposed on the books we read or the social relationships embedded in those criteria (the

two basic concerns of canonicity). Formality is hardly the thing that will get literary scholars out of bed in the morning. For one thing, we should want to move toward less superficiality, not more. For another, we are, after all, purveyors of form—that is, meaningful relationships between the message of art and the shape that it happens to take. We are especially interested in distensions and asymmetries in these relationships—what Anahid Nersessian efficiently calls “irony.”<sup>2</sup> Reading for irony occurs at all scales of literariness, from the poetic line to global networks of circulation. Even Bourdieu-inspired sociologies of literature, working at a far distance from tropes, lineation, or narration, return once and again to form’s asymmetries. When the canon of world literature thinks it represents constituents when in fact it symbolically represents the flows of capital, so goes the Bourdieuan argument: the result is either tokenism or false consciousness, but either way we find ourselves in the realm of irony. And because of the inherent discrepancy between books and the world in which they are made to circulate, such ironies are endless.

The difference between the hermeneutics of formality and form isn’t comfort with depthlessness. One can easily read ironically in genres where canonical works are explicitly not-read. In a much publicized interview for the magazine *Outdoor Life*, Vladimir Putin also named a couple of favorite classic authors: Jack London, Ernest Hemingway.<sup>3</sup> Reading for irony, we notice the politics of this willfully selective representation of the American canon: the named writers freeze the image of American literary production into one of masculinist, rugged individualism that, in turn, makes Putin look rugged, masculine, and resourceful by association while providing certain leverage in a geopolitics that looks like passive-aggressive comparative literature. Books are tricky business in public relations. Xi Jinping’s own frequent, depthless uses of the canonical *Dream of the Red Mansions* to decorate institutional partnerships and diplomatic and trade alliances indicate a willful overlooking of content: a visit to Indonesia in 2013 that cited the Javanese exports that appear in *Dream of the Red Mansions* as an example of historical Sino-Indonesian exchange: a visit to France in 2014 that culminated in a celebration of the ongoing French translation of that novel at the Lyon Sino-French Institute. The dubious logic of such gestures notwithstanding, you’re still faced with the fact that this novel thematizes the collapse of the ruling elite. Xi’s early claim to fame is a coup in which he convinced the state broadcasting service (CCTV) to film their enormously popular TV adaptation of *Dream of the Red Mansions* in the relatively obscure city where he was party secretary. The lavish Zhengding

film set would eventually fall into disuse and abandonment, much like the family estate in Cao Xueqin's novel. But Xi, who understands how canonical works function in state media, local economic revitalization, and, currently, foreign relations, is not one to linger in irony. Where destabilizing literature—that is, good literature—meets its mundane uses, the ironies are limitless.

Reading formality means acknowledging the limitations in available forms by foregrounding the discontinuity between those formalities (here, names of books) and the environments that summon them (here, cross-cultural or cross-national encounters). Since autocrats are not the only people who call on the canon in this way, and we cannot call everyone who does “shallow,” we must recognize formality's prevalence as a kind of genre-awareness. That is, we say, rattling off names of books one has read is, as yet, the only way we have to have this exchange. Jonathan Kramnick has argued that the English canon is a historical (and therefore noniterative) event; if it lingers it is because we remain agnostic about the Habermasian correlation between reading and communicative ethics, about the tenability of the global public sphere.<sup>4</sup> If our natural inclination is to name names, we do so with the belief that this is still a kind of cross-culturalism, however thin, and one that is protected, by virtue of its thinness, from the failure, misunderstanding, and plain awkwardness that talking too much about books can bring, from being ruined by exactly the kind of cynical readings one can perform on the examples in the previous paragraph, from being disabled by irony.

Formality knows that discourse (in its traditional sense) is as easily activated as destroyed by books. We understand this precarity all too well. Imagine meeting someone for the first time, someone who does not share your cultural background or norms. You meet each other halfway by talking sincerely about the books you've read—“Oh, you're Chinese. So you know *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, great story, sweeping cast of characters”; “That's impressive you've read it. Not many people have . . . I've read Elif Shafak. Only in translation, of course, but I love her work”; “Oh really? That's wonderful!” . . . This can go on for a while. At some point, however, both parties understand that the same books that broke the ice will likely become barriers to communication. You don't quite have the same readings (to put it mildly), you detect some self-serving projection about representativeness, you have different interpretive abilities, different politics. While this is not always the case, and we as literary critics must hope for the exception, talking about books

can turn into a source of discomfort and the speakers have to move on. Literature is an extremely curious thing in cross-cultural communication, imminently conducive to it and also dangerous to its smooth functioning. When the canon manifests as mere formality—just some quick naming of names—it makes this ontological property of literature explicit and undeniable where in every other genre that property can be wished away.

The social valences of “speaking in canon” force us to accept a categorical confusion: the canon, generally perceived as a thing (to be added to, subtracted from, widened, constricted, mapped, aggregated, dismantled, reopened, terminated, and revived), often lives its life as a “generalized symbolic medium of communication.”<sup>5</sup> Luhmann defines this generalized medium as that which makes improbable communication more possible. Such things exist because, in his account of the world, communication does not want to happen, just as information does not want to flow. The preconditions of communication happening at all must be rendered neutral, reduced, and generalized. For humanists, the most conceptually jarring example Luhmann gives of such a neutralizing “medium” is love. Love, for Luhmann, is not a feeling that exists (or doesn’t exist) in human relationships; rather, love is an adaptive response that calls on other media, including literature, to normalize the problem of incommunicability. How do increasingly differentiated individuals believe that their private worlds can be shared, and shared over time? Only with much effort on the part of the semantics of love. Love conscripts literature (the eighteenth-century novel, in his example) to develop motifs, characters, sentiments, and expressions (“codes”) that fix the association between incommunicability and the belief that “this is indeed the case when one loves.”<sup>6</sup> The inability to say or speak becomes the quintessential example of being in love. Luhmann calls such codes “passion.” Love is born in the date but dies in the car; talking nurtures love but talking too much kills it stone dead. Passion means not having to say.

To adapt Luhmann’s evolutionary definition of love to the canon, we might say that the canon is the most readily available symbol of the reciprocal recognition of cultural production (as played out, for example, in the politics of world literature). Reciprocity, in its turn, depends on establishing rules for not-saying-too-much in order to secure communication for the future. Providing this guarantee involves what Lydia Liu calls “a reciprocal wager, a desire for meaning as value and a desire to speak across, even under least favorable conditions.”<sup>7</sup> Because literary-

linguistic exchange patterns itself after “the economy of historical (economic) exchange,” it will always try to reduce the prerequisites of its own happening, to proceed as if it were the case that such an “exchange” is not only logical but meaningful. This awareness of contingency (and the likelihood of failure) explains why Liu tends to use the trope of risk (wager) and love (desire) to describe the semiotics of cultural and lingual exchange. For my argument, formality is the social behavior associated with that awareness; it is an adaptive response to how difficult and unpredictable it is to use the reading of literature to proxy cross-cultural relations.

If canonicity has lingered into the twenty-first century outside of academia, it is frequently as a manner of speaking metonymically about books that limit, by tacit agreement, the extent to which we actually speak about them. We can either look for the limitless ironies in such gestures or we might consider how canonicity has evolved to repair and smooth the on-the-ground operations of an idea(1) that we know to be brimming with irony and that yet, for good reason, we cannot give up: cross-culturalism as global readership. If we cannot give up the latter, we must keep up with the mutations in the former: canonicity that has become a medium of communication that functions by way of limited, or self-circumscribed communication, that in this way speaks its love. Luhmann himself was not invested in either love or marriage, but he wanted to describe the coefficient relationship between normative conventions and the concepts to whose existence we seem to be absolutely committed. Thus he prophesized that “it is left up to marriage whether love will persist or not.”<sup>8</sup> By the same logic, it is left up to our commitment to the formality of cross-culturalism whether the significance of mere lists of classics will live on.

## Notes

1. Niklas Luhmann, *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Erste Auflage, 1980), 51.

2. Anahid Nersessian, “Two Gardens: An Experiment in Calamity Form,” *MLQ* 3 (September 2013): 74, 313.

3. Grayne C. Young, “One-on-One with Vladimir Putin,” *Outdoor Life*, May 2011, <http://www.outdoorlife.com/articles/hunting/2011/05/one-one-vladimir-putin/>.

4. Jonathan Kramnick, *Making the English Canon: Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700–1770* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

5. Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 18.

6. *Ibid.*, 26.

7. Lydia Liu, “The Question of Meaning-Value in the Political Economy of the Sign,” in *Tokens of Exchange*, ed. Lydia Liu et al. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 13, 34.

8. Luhmann, *Love as Passion*, 33.