



## POETIC CANON AND PRACTICAL PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper developed on observed classroom practices catalogues problems as poetry teaching confronts when canon question is addressed. Poetry teaching classes in this context look important as potential sites both vulnerable and powerful to handle the canon issues. Classrooms as sites for eclectic experiences need to have the canon approach tailored to our emerging trends in social and political/cultural evolution. The poetry class modelled on such an exercise could then deliver what is called student empowerment in the sense of students on their own being effective to claim access to meaning of reality as encoded in literary works.

Key Words: canon questions, pedagogic concerns, student empowerment, poetry classrooms

This paper seeks to work on certain observed classroom practices as it further engages itself in cataloguing problems as poetry teaching confronts when the canon consideration forms the basis of the critical pedagogical exercise. In relevant turn, it seeks to judge on a notional approach if there is a perceived justification behind classroom practices to do authorised/prescribed poets and poetical works for general official /national taste-building. It is a fact that most syllabus boards, with representatives from various social and cultural formations or affiliations, caste, creed, community bases, political commitments and ideological subscription, and in some cases sympathisers and supports of students' and other interest groups' issues, in prescribing poets and texts, have come in definite ways to set up a canon. And that is a matter to ponder over with certain seriousness if tastes of aesthetic, cultural and literary kinds are matters having to do much to various identity goals and priorities of patriotism and nationalism or by an aggressive market economy to invasively negate and frustrate the same thus raising further serious concerns on many fronts. The complex times have in fact raised questions on canonicity ,canon, canonisation especially when formal education with fixed syllabus, time, examination, marking schemes, teacher and students in allotted classrooms are practices by which value and visible meaning of exercises by universities and councils or school boards are evaluated to show how the said institutions deal with public money in leading students into or away from politically, socially and culturally meaningful tastes and goals and collective economic destinies and national futures or individual successes. Poetry teaching classes in view of these considerations look important as potential sites both vulnerable and powerful to handle the canon questions.

With the above in the background as worrying questions, there is a need to draw up prescribed reading lists to offer proper taste for poetry and literature and art to develop refined cultural ways in vast sections of our youth in our educational institutions. Certainly, the challenge in this case is voluminous and volatility in circumventing it is not going to help. The canon question in its historical evolution and application from church and religion to neoliberal state and secular education and polity needs to be very sensitively handled. That would ensure the due representation of dynamic elements that growing evolutionary aesthetic and social practices and experiences suggest while not actually in entirety dispensing with the



established and time-tested usefulness of canon considerations regarding which poets and what works should be recommended as authorities and standards.

T.S. Eliot's eminent culture sense in this seems to hold good to be followed as a rule despite contrary stands taken by activist and ideological formations and followers. Classrooms as sites for eclectic experiences need to have the canon approach tailored to our emerging trends in social and political/cultural evolution. Literature as the warning and signalling and potentially saving intelligent system that it is needs to be recommended with such canon as accommodates on critical explanation those writers and writings that make seekings and struggles their stuff and use mechanisms and methods to forge union and integration of a range of possibilities for the humanity. To ascend higher with commitment and collaboration to end suffering everywhere and of all forms and to ensure sustained zeal and enthusiastic participation in celebrating life creating scope ever for happiness to come and abide to illuminate existence granting pride and aura to generations that get educated in taste to do a bit of good turn to leave our world a better place to live in and to die for are among ideals and practical goals that canon-bound pedagogy and syllabic choices have to base on .

#### What is canon?

Canon as a word, as in the Oxford dictionary, has its Origin in Old English. It is from Latin; from Greek *kanōn* that means 'rule'. The Middle English also continued the word canon considering its use as in line of the Old French. Further, in the context of literature, canon refers to principles and the criteria behind judgements, verdicts and pronouncements on the abiding nature of works that issue from the great masters who are known for singular merits that characterise their celebrated creations:

"A list of authors or works considered to be central to the identity of a given literary tradition or culture. This secular use of the word is derived from its original meaning as a listing of all authorized books in the Bible. William Shakespeare, John Milton, and William Blake are frequently found on lists of canonical literature in English." (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-term/canon> Accessed. 14-06-2015)

Leslie Fiedler observed on both literature and canon in *What was Literature? (quoted in Golding 1995)*: "literature is what we effectively teach in departments of English" (p.58) and "canon is broadly what is read, taught and written about in the academy" (p.141) Thus, canon is to be related to a set of rules and convention-given best and recommended practices that guide later writers and become the yardstick for their evaluation as good, great and standard authors with such works as could be reckonable for more purposes than just writing training. T.S.Eliot considers tradition to be the source of canon. Text books, Leslie Fiedler holds, are definite and powerful sources for imparting knowledge of canon in poetry. Canon, as it stands out, has its scope spread over such diverse areas of practice, prescription and pedagogy.

**On Poetic Canon:** Classification used to be the way that the classical thinkers employed to define and assess the quality of poetry. Aristotle's *Poetics* describes three genres of poetry—the epic, the comic, and the tragic—and offers rules to distinguish the highest-quality poetry in each genre, based on the underlying purposes of the genre. Later aestheticians identified three major genres: epic poetry, lyric poetry, and dramatic poetry, treating comedy and tragedy as subgenres of dramatic poetry.

Eliot with a much more dynamic and progressive conception of the poetic process held it important to delve into tradition to be able to chance upon or even to consciously arrive at Novelty while creating a new work. The literary tradition already available to him offers an aesthetic "ideal order". Very much thus a work, even as a new work, coming closely following the tradition alters the cohesion of this existing order. A new work sets into pace a process of readjustment of the old in its bid to accommodate the newness coming as an extension of or even going beyond the existing in terms of taste, fashion, promises, expectations, and literary experience. The newness in a new work when getting accepted goes to alter the way in which the past is seen, elements of the past that are noted and realised. Thus, the idea of canon in established practice in the context



of the reigning tradition obviously, but in due course as the old and abiding in terms of rules, principles and prescriptions make room for the new that assumes for it a place all on its own strength of appeal and merit changes. Eliot thus is aware of historical processes of powerful new works that set traditions of taste and work out powerful new agenda for art that literary artists go to accept and follow or even question and express their sense of dismay at how new-fangled notions in strange ways make striking inroads and come to stay replacing what perhaps from the tradition in force could yet be held to be good. A look at the history of poetry and of criticism could be profoundly useful in appreciating Eliot's stand since it is very much in his stance Eliot seems to be stressing on the historical sense in continuity and change of people's and times' ideas of what literature pre-eminently must offer and how best it could be made to achieve the set standard. Canon thus has to be understood as historically being formed with conscious attention focussed on how literature must be made to render its services to the best of satisfaction of the readers of literary art works and also for purposes of doing humanity great and confirmedly good turn. Here is where Eliot is further significant in his sticking to the culture promotion and shaping role of critics and thereby insisting if that should practically be a consideration in arriving at the canon idea in literary matters. Of course, canon is about performance and ever reviewed and recommended additional set of criteria for the practitioners of literary art to follow.

Eliot says: "What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it." When Eliot refers to an organic tradition, he has verily the idea of the developing canon in mind which he calls as the "mind of Europe." The role in this canon building for the private mind is quite singular even as it may be subsumed in that more massive national or universal mind which directs, decides and defines what that nature of the larger canon could be. Eliot thus suggests the power that criticism enjoys to handle this literary canon while suggesting how dynamic and subtly democratic the process of canon formation is when the present, the past and the future of peoples and places are enmeshed in the course chart for literature that is sought to be drawn through canon creation efforts. Generations and changing equations and pressures on them have free and forceful role thus to play in canon building.

Understanding to Eliot's much praised "Impersonal Theory" of poetry with canon consideration as above is facilitated when explaining the dynamic process of critical opinion bordering on judgement that application of canon means, we take the concept of Eliot's voluntary and well-meant "continual surrender" of the poet to the flowing order of tradition. Artistic creation thus follows a process of depersonalisation under canon-mindedness when the mature poet offers by choice and conscious illumined decision to undertake the role of a medium, through which tradition is to be both channelled and elaborated, to be conveyed, communicated and explained. That in due course would go to develop a universal consensus, as it may be, to broaden the scope and purview of tradition. Thus, stagnation, rot, obscurantism, conservatism would be kept at bay. The spirit of progress in tandem with the current ideals of aesthetic needs could happily inform the poet to work as a catalyst in a chemical reaction of feelings and emotions to capture and relay the said feelings and emotions using an artistic image. Handling the reactants of emotions and feelings in creating that image to communicate the same to the readers is a sensitive job. A sure lack in skills at this would jeopardise the artistic exercise of handling feelings and emotions to grant meaning to the art in question. Meaning must in art arise through an arousal of the feelings and emotions with which as raw material the artistic product is created. The canon thus is to be about how to hold the mind of the poet in the art production process in its total unaffected state. The mind that is affected is likely to seriously affect the work, making the contribution of the art questionable. Canon thus could expand in its operational jurisdiction from just performance of art to the production principles and processes which the artist must follow to be able to achieve the dynamic conditions of the canon itself to regulate a work at all its stages of production by training the artist in the rules of concentration on and consolidation and combination of the host of feelings and emotions that make the artistic product possible. What lends greatness to A great work of art is simply not the feelings and emotions



themselves, but the way the artistic process is followed to achieve the grand synthesis and visible in the qualitative shaping of the artistic image or the work of art as a whole. The pressure to which in his total awareness of its importance in directing the consummation of art he has willingly surrendered is "the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place." And, it is the intensity of awareness on the part of the artist that makes tradition fully to be available to him to both follow it and surpass it into newer dimensions of thought, feeling and expression that is critical in allowing synthesis or fusion to take place and in turn thereby to render the art produced in consequence admirably great. It is thus to see how canon as a shaping awareness as a systematic channelling out of tradition in force is able to contribute to the creation of great art.

Further, it may be that Eliot's "escape from emotion" as against expression of emotion in the Wordsworth's formulation to grant literary art power to assume universality as further a matter of canon could be understood. Great works are obliged not to express the personal emotion of the poet. The poet, instead of exhibiting his own unique and novel emotions, dwells on the ordinary feelings universally flooding is enabled to make statements in surprising ways where he is well efficient to transcend his personally experienced emotion. If this is what Eliot means by impersonality, we may quite find it still consistent with his idea of the artistic surrender already discussed above and in fact his surrender idea in itself is explaining his impersonality canon.

#### Use and Problems of Canon:

Harold Caplan in the book *Poetry, Politics, and Culture: Argument in the Work of Eliot, Pound, Stevens and Williams* (2006) quotes Harold Bloom as saying that the use of canon as aspirin is to cure head ache of unreality. The idea is that clarity in grasping reality is satisfactory and soothing. When reality is not within view, there is a lot of confusion about what a text means. That plunges the reader into a mental state where one is puzzled, worried, frustrated and irritated. Canon, in Bloom's sense, is a help. Its use puts the matter in a good general perspective. That leads one into the realm of meaning. Headache due to confused state thus ends in canon-bound approach to appreciate works and authors.

Goucher on the issue of problems of doing canons explicitly contends: Canonization also distorts literature and introduces predictable biases in interpretation. Canons of literature may fossilize their subject and reduce its study to dry memorization for its own sake. The rules by which the canonical texts are selected tend to favour the powerful and to exclude or marginalize the powerless, regardless of the merits of their work. Or, rather, "merit" will become unconsciously identified as a property "naturally" belonging to the powerful, and "naturally" unavailable to the powerless. The values and tastes of the powerful will turn the process of canon formation and its product into a cultural prison. But does this mean we cannot have informed discussion of canons without allowing them to imprison our values and tastes? Think about what rejecting any serious study of tastes and values will do to our understanding of literature. ([http://faculty.goucher.edu/eng211/canon\\_of\\_english\\_literature.htm](http://faculty.goucher.edu/eng211/canon_of_english_literature.htm) Accessed.14-06-2015)

Also, to follow Goucher, it is to realise that canon-consciousness affects poetry production: "One also can argue that canons and the scholarship which produce them are not good for literatures, themselves, and that those habits of close observation and careful definition can produce a kind of self-awareness that will kill poets' creative force and the empathic appreciation of their audiences. That kind of scholarship is not what I am trying to teach you. Scholarship which respects the mystery in poets' minds and the central role of emotional affect in audiences' responses, even while it tries to learn more about how literature works, is the only kind worth pursuing." ([http://faculty.goucher.edu/eng211/canon\\_of\\_english\\_literature.htm](http://faculty.goucher.edu/eng211/canon_of_english_literature.htm) Accessed.14-06-2015)



### Why is academic effort crucial to canon conception?

Christoph Bode (2000) considers students need to be given lessons in poetic canon so as to be better able to read, appreciate and judge poetry and literature. In the essay "Re-definition of the canon of British Romantic Poetry", Bode observes that anthologies even for school textbooks are important sources of poetic canon to guide the judgement of students and maturing readers of the later years in life.(p.265) Natalie M. Houston in "Anthologies and Making of the Poetic Canon" in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry* (2002) holds in connection with Victorian value of culture that literature/poetry anthologies are a powerful means of setting in pace what poetic canon should be to make poetry useful in an industrial society.(p.361) Thus, it is that texts that are taught are a very definite source for the acquisition and consolidation of the canon sense that has to make application of it possible in consonance with the contemporary social choices and even preferences for all societies everywhere.. Pedagogical implications of such a realisation are quite crucial since without effective participation in the dreams and future aspirations of people, teachers are likely to be utterly irrelevant in their approach to poetry and other art works. Research into how damaging unawareness on part of the teacher about any big picture in the unfolding in the context of any society could be is a vital part of an armoury with which the teacher has to decide the later strategies to be adopted in actual classroom text transaction business sessions. The pedagogical value of such critical investigation into the ultimate clientele benefits in the classroom and those of emanating future social conscience on a different estimate being tremendous, handling canon-appropriate conducive teaching of literary text books requires the best judgements of the executing teacher. Canon-sensitive teaching hence turns out to be the solution in all cases where traditional practices, present reviews of the same in light of the future goals of societies from which classroom populations spring and the road-map to harness the critical energy available today are all to be majestically rolled into one.

**The context of the Poetry classroom:** The great need in the context of a classroom that seeks to bring freshness of mind and experience while doing poets and poetry in English is to answer if the poets and their poetic creations are ever to be approached as conforming to canon consideration at all. The very fact that their being in the syllabus in some accepted ways confers on them canonical status is something some may not find easy to digest and the particular ways in which syllabus boards are formed to frame the syllabus for secondary and postsecondary courses upwards have much to answer in this regard when a host of social, political, and economic factors going to grant a syllabus the green signal play determining roles regarding who should be kept and who to be kept out and which pieces should be kept and for what weightage of marks in the scheme of examinations. The power play at the syllabus meetings and the whims and fancies in exercise being what they are ,there remains much to expect about how canon question needs to be handled when literature classes primarily as occasions for respite and enjoyment are considered important when an academic calendar is prepared and classes are given their routines with a deft eye neatly kept on when the literature class needs to be held to relieve the students of the burden of doing subjects that are considered to be dry . The fatigue factor taken care of, there is scope to leave the students recharged with vitality and vigour with which they could exploit other subjects to follow in the day's academic exercise to great advantage. What thus is interesting to see here is how the classroom poetry teaching in such a background is to take place in our conditions of crowded classrooms, understaffed departments, ill-equipped libraries and reference sources, technology-hungry campuses and variously pitched student expectations regarding amenities that make academic atmosphere in institutional settings conducive. Classroom composition of students with different motivations at play outside the campus, in the community or the larger social space that directs political climates even in today's institutional fixed locations .The teacher in a poetry classroom thus is severally challenged to address the complex problems that are around with the basic job expected of him to still make teaching enjoyable and ensure total content delivery under a perceived realisation that the poet with his





creation has been given the due to the best with the total collaboration pooled in from the students' collective active and shared knowledge resources. The canon aspect in relation to the classroom active situation/poetic context rebuilding to lay bare the language in its revealing potential against a highly elusive reality in reference needs to be addressed so that the canon in poetry to make stuff poetic using elements from Nature and life as obtaining in our world at a given time with literary devices that come handy to the poet is satisfied and the classroom as a whole is led with the picture that the words constantly create to the very intended set of meanings in grasping which there lies the true satisfaction of the class and the teacher's success in communicating the poem in question as the entire message for the discerning reading community of students. Asking questions, answering already disturbing individual and collective issues, exposing reality lying submerged to help withhold meaning from announcing itself, elaborating points with examples to fit equations and comparisons – in many more such ways poetic craft conceals in a pack what interestingly at a later time the reader by regular and persistent enquiry and inquisition, investigation and inventiveness and collaborative effectively planned raid into the fortress of the poet's life and language and cultural resources has to unravel. The poetic canon – what makes poetry itself?, how does poetry retain the key to explain life and the world posing and solving riddles?, how does language resourcefulness with the poet make his business of sustaining a communication easy and achieved effectively?, what complexities deliberately the poet has used to make the reader labour and sweat before stumbling upon meaning possibilities till from out of a host of these some he firmly accepts to be in conformity with the leads available during the intellectual exploration into the meaning mine?, where and how the poet has gone overboard to point to events and issues about which he enlists intelligent indulgence of his readers and why in that he adopts subversive strategies at places?, what form and features makes poetic stuff eminently readable?, etc. – needs to be established in the poetry classroom to let the class partake of the experience of the ease and the wonder and the awe that led the poet to the lines of his composition. Unless that canon in its code is adequately satisfactorily identified and examined in due detail, poetry classroom's promised pleasure to leave the exhausted students replenished with fresh vigour and energy will remain undelivered.

Yes, the teacher of poetry following the poetic canon, the sterling commandments, and making a virtue of analysing or deconstructing the poetic creation of different periods and establishing amalgamation of experiences that look pertinent and plausible in definite well spelt-out frames and formats is likely more at ease to meet the challenges that his classroom initially in its intimidating posturing as listed above may be posing. Yes, the fact that like fashions change, in fit rhythm with changing taste with time poetic canon changes – responding to history's insistence, geography's contingencies, culture's biddings, in one word – the social change. But the fact remains that the classroom poetry teacher in fine tandem with times in flux is under obligation of his profession to update himself to make the past contemporaneous, the remote in geo-spatial terms compatibly contiguous and the culturally dissimilar familiar and indigenised to help the students for whom the poetry class as a matter of teaching, interpreting, explaining and deciphering critical canon has to be at the end of the day relieving, de-fatiguing, and refreshing.

What is called student empowerment, the poetry class could deliver that – and if knowledge is power and education is that which makes the much dreamt-of liberation realisable in truth, if power as the single shining determinant of who are truly free and happy, then poetry classroom in line of the dictum of all-knowledge is the perfect site with ripened potential to make our journey in the preparation for life easy with our power to grapple with murky mysteries of arduous meaning search ultimately culminating in cracking the code and the canon of life that all art aspires and strives to imitate and emulate and illustrate.

### Conclusion

Thus, when the canon consideration forms the basis of the critical pedagogical exercise, authorised/prescribed poets and poetical works in most teaching syllabus meant to carry the notion of canon



could do much to further various identity goals and priorities of patriotism and nationalism confronting the aggressive market economy that invasively negates and frustrates the same. Thus raising further serious concerns on many fronts in our complex times, canon-oriented literature teaching can engender politically, socially and culturally meaningful tastes and goals in the readers to effectively direct collective economic destinies, secure and national futures or stimulate individual successes. Poetry teaching classes in view of these considerations as important potential sites need to be handled consciously with great care under total realisation of the fact that canon questions leave literature/poetry/art classes both vulnerable and powerful – mishandling makes bad examples of literary masterpieces and classics responsible for bad ‘taste’ in Eliot’s sense whereas sensible and effective handling is very richly capable of engendering good taste and thereby sustainable critical reading culture whereby discerning the good and constantly insistent upon the vision and harvest of the good, humanity could have its well-earned coveted claim to lasting and perennially proliferating good.

#### NOTES & REFERENCES

- (1) This paper has been re-written with feedback available on an earlier version presented (under the title – “The Poetic Canon and The Classroom: Consideration of Practical Problems”) at the National Seminar held on 14-15 June, 2015 at Hotel Akbari, Cuttack under Researchers’ Association, Odisha on *Canonical World Poetry in English in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* with Accent on W.B. Yeats.
- (2) Ideas of Christoph Bode taken from *Anthologies of British Poetry: Critical Perspectives from Literary and Cultural Studies* edited by Barbara Korte, Ralf Schneider, Stefanie Lethbridge (Ropi, B.V., Amsterdam-Atlanta, G.A.2000); of Leslie Fiedler as in his essay “What was Literature?” (as in *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* by Alan Golding, University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, USA, 1995); of Natalie M. Houston in “Anthologies and Making of the Poetic Canon” (in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry* by Ciaran Cronin, Blackwell, Malden, USA, 2002); of Harold Bloom discussed in Harold Caplan (*Poetry, Politics, and Culture: Argument in the Work of Eliot, Pound, Stevens and Williams*, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey, 2006); of Goucher; of Aristotle (*Poetics*), Wordsworth (“Preface to Lyrical Ballads”), and T. S. Eliot with reference to his works -*The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, “Tradition and Individual Talent”, and “The Function of Criticism” have been drawn from the web-sources as mentioned below:
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