Struggles over the canon: Culture preservation and culture transformation[1]

Rakefet Sela-Sheffy
Culture Research
Tel-Aviv University

I have been asked to say a few words on the occasion of the forthcoming publication of this important volume about the canon, which is actually the first of its kind in Hebrew.[2] The subject is vast, and what I can try and do here is give you just a glance at a theory of the canon from the perspective of Culture Research.

Roughly, there are two main (and basically opposed) motivations for the scholarly interest in the idea of the canon: On the one hand there are historical culturologists and philologists who have always looked for manifestations of a *longstanding, widely shared cultural heritage*. On the other hand, in recent decades the notion of the canon has forcefully penetrated the intellectual consciousness precisely as part of a new discourse about culture *struggles* and *transformation*.[3] In this latter context, known as the *Canon Debate*, the notion of the accepted canon is morally discredited as a fabrication used for social domination and exclusion, a vicious mechanism that should be deconstructed and displaced. This canon controversy, which originated in American universities in the 1960s and 1970s, actually emanated from a power struggle within the academia, in which newly arrived professors fought against the Wasps who controlled the university curricula. Speaking in broad political terms, in the name of democratization of the intellectual capital and the empowerment of the repressed, this was a struggle not only about what Culture is, but more importantly – about who is in position to tell us what it should be.

This canon debate has had an enormous impact on the Western intellectual world. Not only has it challenged the distinction between "highbrow" and

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[1] Talk delivered at the Annual Ceremony of the Moshe Dorf Fund for the Publication of "Te'uda" Books, Tel Aviv University, March 24, 2008

[2] *Canon and Holy Scriptures* [in Hebrew], ed. Yaacov Shavit (Research Series of the Chaim Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies, Vol. 23).

[3] The Russian Formalists view of the canon, already in the 1920s, was similarly about struggles and transformation, but the context of their views was acadmic rather than socially-involved, and, in addition, it has had no impact on western thinking while completely eradicated by the Soviet regime in Russia itself.

"popular" culture, but it has actually legitimized and brought to the focus of attention whole fields of culture production that until then had been rejected, such as mass culture, or gendered, raced and ethnically excluded cultures. Naturally, this agenda of "opening up the canon" has provoked aggressive reactions on the part of highbrow gate keepers, who saw in it a dangerous trend of culture decline (and a threat to their own intellectual monopoly). However, it would be safe to say that by and large, this self-proclaimed "progressive" canon debate has gained ground and changed the prevailing intellectual discourse.

And yet, for all the impact of this debate, from a broader historical perspective it appears to have been just another battle between culture gate keepers and 'culture dissidents' that eventually has generated a *shift* of culture authority and culture repertoire, but not a displacement of the canon. In fact, this debate has proved, almost contrary to its own agenda, that in order to change the canon, the old canon must be preserved. Today it is just different groups that monopolize the canon. As Leslie Fiedler, himself one of the leading voices in this debate, put it already thirty years ago: the outsiders of the 1970s are now the insiders who have become the culture policemen, but they still keep on teaching the old masterpieces.[4] So that while this debate has been successful in promoting *ideological* change, as a theoretical framework it tells us not much more than what we are actually predisposed to hear. In the final analysis it does not offer much to *explain how* a canon is formed or changed, and *why* it is so important in the first place.

So let me sketch here very briefly my understanding of the canon in terms of a more general theory of cultural dynamics. Let me stress, moreover, that while very often the term *canon* is used restrictedly to refer to a list of sacred *artifacts* (notably scriptures), from the viewpoint of Culture Research it indicates more broadly the general aspects of *norms* and *status* that apply to *all* kinds of culture production. As dictionaries tell us, the canon is both (a) a set of *rules*, accepted models for doing things, as well as (b) a set of highly valued *tangible objects* that exemplify these rules. The relationship between these two aspects – rules and values – in all areas of life, from everyday habits to the so-called highly spiritual spheres, is what lies in the concept of the canon. Let me now suggest three major points that pertain to this concept, as follows:

1. **The *longevity of the canon***
The canon debate focuses on cases of conflict and radical change, and thus promotes the view of cultural history as a chain of *dramatic innovations*. However, a closer examination of any cultural revolution – be it the Romantic turn some 200 years ago or the post-communist age in Eastern-Europe today – will show that the changes are never as sweeping as we often tend to believe.

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4 Fiedler, Leslie A. 1981. "Literature as an Institution: The View from 1980". In *English Literature. Opening up the Canon*, eds. Leslie A. Fiedler and Houston A. Baker Jr., 73-91.

Many things change, yet at the same time a lot is being continuously retained for longer periods of time. The aspect of culture *inertia* is therefore no less vital than that of change. This inertia has been perhaps best described by the social historian Norbert Elias, who analyzed the gradual formation of European civilization as revealed by books on etiquettes and manners over several hundred years.[5] Elias showed, for instance, that Western table manners and eating tools have remained, despite minor transformations, more or less the same ever since the 17th century. In other words, he has shown that even if not always observed, we still have a durable *canon* of 'civilized eating manners'.

Time is thus a crucial factor in the process of canon formation. This process is different from the *short-term* shifts of *tastes* and *fashions*. What we have here are two different cultural dynamics. Changing *fashions* result from competition in a fluctuating market. For the most part they are quickly replaced and fall into oblivion. The formation of a canon, on the other hand, is a *long-term accumulation* of sanctioned cultural *repositories*, which are *persistent* and *widely shared*. These culture repositories are perpetuated over generations and are being evoked time and again by different groups and opposing ideologies, to the point that they are taken as universal and congenital for a community, *concealing the particular forces that generated them* in the first place. As such, they provide a factor of *uniformity* and *stability*. In short, the status of the canon is different to that of best-seller movies or fashion magazines. It functions rather like a *saf-box*, into which, once an item is deposited, its value is almost irreversibly secured.

2. ***The canon is not generative***

In light of the above the question arises, if and how the canon influences the ongoing cultural production. Contrary to common belief, the sanctioning of certain items *suspends* their availability on the cultural market. These canonized items may be largely recognized and highly valued, but they do not serve as active models for generating new cultural options. They even may be hardly circulated at all, except among restricted circles of connoisseurs. To take most obvious examples, there is no argument about Goethe's lyrics or Mozart's music being part of the Western canon, yet they have long ceased to serve as models for producing either contemporary literature or music. The *increase* in *status* thus goes hand in hand with *decrease* in *use value*. The distinction between *status* and *use value* has obvious institutional manifestations: whereas boutique shops, radio stations, or literary periodicals are responsible for accelerating culture consumption, museums, libraries or literary anthologies – not to mention religious ceremonies – are in charge of securing the value of enduring stocks of cultural assets. These are *pantheons* within which all artifacts are equally treasured, independently of the way they had been once in use.

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[5] Elias, Norbert 1978 (1939). *The Civilizing Process*. Vol. 1. *The History of Manners*. New York: Pantheon.

It follows, then, that *the canon is hardly synchronized with the current culture production*. I find it useful here to follow the Russian semiotician Jurij Lotman and borrow his metaphor of "grammar".[6] A grammar of any language is always schematic and lagging behind the versatile linguistic behavior of a community; it neither really reflects actual language habits nor generates them. And yet we think of grammar as "the language itself", because it serves a normative standard for evaluating our actual performances. As people in the culture we acknowledge its value without necessarily employing it. *The canon is to culture as a grammar is to language*. It operates as a "shock-absorber" in a vacillating culture, a counter-balance to competition and accelerated changes.

3. *A Comment on the process of canon formation*

While all practices in every domain of human life have canonical *rules*, not all of them have tangible sacred pantheons. It is easier to "see" the canon, so to speak, in the realms of religion, law or in the arts, rather than in sport or popular music, not to mention everyday practices like culinary habits or past-time games. The formation of a canon in such popular fields is therefore an exciting case for study. I myself have worked on two different cases of such processes: was the formation of the modern canon in the German popular prose-fiction in late 18th century; and the other was the canon formation of the popular song in America and in Israel during the 1970s.[7] These historical cases are very different from each other, yet they have in common a similar situation of social unrest, which had been invested in intensive cultural production and changing value scales. What I have found in both cases, however, was that even what was seen as a total transformation involved (and *induced*) the preservation of an existing canon. In order for the interested parties in each of these cases to actually establish a canon in a popular cultural field, they had first to demonstrate high competence in perpetuating existing canonical repertoires of uncontested status, such as highbrow poetry. In other words, for these people to *change* the canon, they had first to be involved in *consolidating* an existing one. Only then they were dubbed authorized to mobilize canonical labels to sanction new repertoires. The crucial point here is, then, that loyalty to the old canon is *not* always a strategy of *conservation* but may often be precisely one of *innovation*. At the same time, as the American Canon Debate

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6 Lotman, 1977 (1974). "The Dynamic Model of Semiotic Systems." *Semiotica* (3-4), 193-210.

7 Sela-Sheffy, Rakefet 1999. *Literarische Dynamik und Kulturbildung: Zur Konstruktion des Repertoires deutscher Literatur im ausgehenden 18. Jahrhunderts*. Gerlingen: Bleicher Verlag; Sheffy, Rakefet 1989. "The Evolution of the Poetics of the Israeli Popular Song in the Beginning of the 70's." In: Ben-Porat, Z. (ed) *Lyric Poetry and the Lyrics of Pop: the Israeli Popular Song as a Cultural System and as a Literary Genre*. (Tel-Aviv: Porter Institute & Hakibutz Hameuchad), 76-98. [Hebrew]; Sheffy, Rakefet 1991. "Canonization of a Non-Literary System: The Case of the Modern American Popular Song and Its Contact with Poetry."In *Orality and Literature*. Eds. Hans R. Runte and Roseann Runte (New York, Bern: Peter Lang), 177- 186.

has demonstrated, even the rhetoric of utter heresy in fact only disguises the continuity of the canon, and sustains its power as a solid index in the fluctuating stock exchange of culture.