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# A WHIMSY ON THE HISTORY OF CANON

NEIL HARRIS

«Du grec, ô Ciel! du grec! Il sait du grec, ma sœur!»  
(Philaminte in Molière, *Les femmes savantes* [1672], act. 3).

Scholars of textual transmission and criticism all know what canon means, or think they know what canon means. At its simplest it is a corpus of texts: one sweeping definition might be that it comprises all texts at some point in their history thought worthy of a critical edition, so the matter necessarily interests contributors to *Ecdotica*. Canon is also a modern buzzword, chanted in unison or shouted in fierce polemic at large international conferences on things textual and otherwise. In this short piece I argue on the contrary that few, if any, of us really know what canon is, how it shapes itself, or grasp the subtle, invisible mechanisms that make it a vital force in the history and in the present of Western culture. When I say this I am not calling generations and generations of textual scholars stupid. At the heart of canon lies the paradox that you can only see it if you don't believe in it; textual scholarship on the other hand has to believe in canon, even if it cannot see it.

The claim made here is a big one and requires substantiation. Let us begin in an orthodox fashion, however, and look the word up in a large and well-regarded dictionary, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. Its definition of canon first appeared in a fascicule issued in June 1888, but it must have been deemed satisfactory, since it was hardly altered for the second edition a century later. It tells us that the word derives from the Greek κανών, meaning rule and provides a list of meanings, of which I cite the first four, omitting the numerous historical examples:

1. A rule, law, or decree of the Church; especially a rule laid down by an ecclesiastical Council. ...

- b. *Canon law* (formerly *law canon*: cf. French *droit canon*): ecclesiastical law, as laid down in the decrees of the pope and statutes of councils ... .
2. *generally*. a. A rule, law, edict (other than ecclesiastical).  
 b. A general rule, fundamental principle, aphorism, or axiom governing the systematic or scientific treatment of a subject; *e.g.* canons of descent or inheritance; a logical, grammatical, or metrical canon; canons of criticism, taste, art, etc. ... .  
 c. A standard of judgement or authority; a test, criterion, means of discrimination. ... .
3. *Mathematics*. A general rule, formula, table; *especially* a table of sines, tangents, etc. *Obsolete*.
4. The collection or list of books of the Bible accepted by the Christian Church as genuine and inspired. Also *transferred sense*: Any set of sacred books. ...<sup>1</sup>

Not everything here is relevant for our purpose, but it definitely gives us something to work on.

The *OED* entry usefully reminds us how the idea of canon derives in the first instance from the choice of a corpus of texts as the basis of a faith: a faith that subsequently generates a doctrine. In Christian history the key experience was the assembly of what we know as the New Testament. This body of texts in Greek, some translated from lost originals in other tongues, stems from an oral tradition which was written down at a later stage. A number of writings were not included and thus labeled as apocryphal. The distinction between authentic and apocry-

<sup>1</sup> In the 1989 paper second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* the only substantial change consisted in the addition to sub-entry 4 of the phrase: «also, those writings of a secular writer accepted as authentic». On the history of the *OED* in its paper versions, see Simon Winchester, *The meaning of everything. The story of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford 2003. The ongoing electronic version of the *OED*, available only through subscription, does however reveal some significant novelties, with a new draft addition, dated June 2002. If the re-definition shows the importance of canon as a contemporary critical buzzword, it is not entirely reassuring in terms of its meaning, since it states: «*Literary Criticism*. A body of literary works traditionally regarded as the most important, significant, and worthy of study; those works of especially Western literature considered to be established as being of the highest quality and most enduring value; the classics (now frequently in *the canon*). Also (usually with qualifying word): such a body of literature in a particular language, or from a particular culture, period, genre, etc.»; followed by: «b. In extended use (especially with reference to art or music): a body of works, etc., considered to be established as the most important or significant in a particular field. Frequently with qualifying word».

phal appears clear to us today; it was not so straightforward however at the time. Deciding what to include and what not to include involved some arbitrary choices: a text such as the *Apocalypse* of Saint John, written quite late on, towards the end of the First century, made it into the corpus for its visionary and (one might facetiously add) literary qualities, whereas some earlier, less exciting, works were rejected. One habitual facet of canon therefore is the monolithic status of the texts, which are viewed as enduring and unchangeable. In fact, as other essays in this number of *Ecdotica* make clear, even the most canonical texts, Homer and the Bible, under close scrutiny prove to be friable and inconstant.<sup>2</sup>

For Christian culture a distinction is of course posited between the theological canon and the educational canon, which is not always true for other cultures. In Islam, for instance, the Qur'an is both the foundation of belief and the archetype of classical Arabic, so that education consists in committing to memory the sacred text: a rule which holds true, in Madrasah schools from Hyderabad to Bradford, even, or especially, for non-Arab speakers who do not understand the language of what is being learnt. In the West, when the declining Roman empire adopted as its official religion the beliefs of an obscure Galilean sect, the corpus on which the credence rested was not a suitable linguistic model (i.e. the already mentioned New Testament, to which was added the Hebrew Old Testament in the version of the Greek Septuagint, all rendered subsequently into the Latin Vulgate). The Roman school system was founded on the Greek and Latin classics and schoolmasters are conservative beings, so that a distinction evolved between the two canons, which persisted into the so-called Dark Ages in which the knowledge of Greek was lost.

All this makes for a paradox that has run through Western culture ever since. The system of values expressed through the classics exalts sex and violence; that expounded through the New Testament advocates chastity and peace, so that these opposing attitudes had to be reconciled, leading to imaginative allegorical creations such as the Medieval and Renaissance Ovid. At the same time, as Latin transited from being a living, spoken language to a fixed, written, dead language, the reciprocal, complimentary status between the theological canon on the one hand and the educational canon on the other became clearer and sharper.

<sup>2</sup> See in this issue the essays by Giovanni Cerri and Gian Luigi Prato on the theme of «liquid canons», from the seminar held in Rome in June 2010, introduced by Domenico Fiorimonte.

On its own a body of texts is not enough to constitute a canon. The next stage consists in interpretation, i.e. reading, discussion, and commentary in order to formulate a creed. What becomes necessary is the complication of the interpretation. In other words a caste of mediators (or scholars and teachers) introduces itself in order to expound and elaborate the canon, leading quickly and inevitably to a concept of orthodoxy (and equally quickly and inevitably to a concept of heterodoxy, i.e. anybody who doesn't agree with you, whether in theology or in textual criticism).

At this point we jump forward some seven or eight centuries to Venice at the height of its Renaissance magnificence and very specifically to the year 1495. What is happening in lagoon city? Most public and political attention is focused on the aftermath of the French conquest of Naples and subsequent retreat up Italy, with a large battle at Fornovo at the foot of the Appenines, which both sides claimed as a victory. The city has accustomed itself to a new way of making books with a machine, imported from Germany, which has put a number of scribes out of work but is making the booksellers prosperous. After the initial excitement, with those who swore that this ground-breaking technology would transform mankind and a more sensible majority who held that, like iPads in our century, it was a fad that would not last, familiarity has bred a nuance of contempt. But now there is a new development with a man from Rome who wants to print books in classical Greek.

Here we reach a key moment, possibly *the* key moment, in the history of canon, or the figure and personality of Aldus Manutius. Who was Aldus and what was the importance of being Aldus? Surely we all know the answer to these questions. But again, do we? How many people have read something written by Aldus or handled something he printed? Given the specialist readership of the present journal, the answer is probably quite a few. But it is hardly a typical readership and, if I were to put the question to a wider public, the expected answer would be hardly anyone. More importantly, there is little or nothing to read. Aldus' thoughts are communicated almost exclusively through the prefaces and postfaces of his editions, which in 1976 were collected, with an accompanying Italian translation, in two hefty, expensive volumes edited by Giovanni Orlandi and published in 850 numbered copies, mostly bought by libraries.<sup>3</sup> It has not proved a bestseller and there has

<sup>3</sup> *Aldo Manuzio editore: dediche, prefazioni, note ai testi*, introduzione di Carlo Dionisotti, testo latino con traduzione e note a cura di Giovanni Orlandi, Milano 1976. The literature on Aldus is enormous and for the most part hagiographical. Useful biographical portraits are available in Martin Lowry, *The world of Aldus Manutius, Business*



not been a paperback version. So the widespread perception of Aldus' importance does not rest on anything he wrote.

Some potted biography might help resolve the query. Aldus was born at Bassiano, near Rome, some time around 1450. In 1495, having reached Venice some five years earlier, he published his first book, a ponderous Greek dictionary, the *Erotemata* by Constantinus Lascaris. At the beginning of 1496 (or still 1495 *more veneto*) he printed the *De Aetna*, a Latin dialogue by a young Pietro Bembo, with a supremely uninteresting content, but with a new design of Roman type which is the grandfather of the default version of the word-shapes on our computer screens. The Greek Aristotle in five volumes also kept him busy from 1495 to 1498 and was followed in 1499 by the extraordinary visual experience of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. Another landmark date, which appears in all histories of the book, was 1501, when Aldus launched his series of *enchiridia*: Latin, Greek, and Italian classics in pocket-size format and cursive type. All these achievements brought him fame and, to a lesser extent, fortune in his lifetime, while, after his death in 1515, his heirs continued to market his name and image through a publishing house that endured to the end of the century.

Here is another, more helpful pointer of a question. How did Aldus make a living before, aged over forty and thus almost an old man by Renaissance standards, he settled in Venice with the determination to become the best-known publisher of the age? In my opinion readers of this volume ought to know the answer, but I have posed it on various occasions to audiences of librarians, book-historians, historians *tout court*, and rarely, if ever, obtained a satisfactory response. So let me treat it as a rhetorical question and answer it myself. Aldus was a school-teacher, or an expensive live-in private tutor in a number of aristocratic Italian establishments, especially that of the Pio family of Carpi. It is an important answer. Education is the key to the whole Aldine experience and it is what sets him apart from all his rivals.

So let us go back now to the other, earlier, and as yet unanswered question: what did Aldus do to deserve his huge place in history? Quite simply, he invented canon.

Of course that is too big a statement.

No one person in time and space has entirely invented canon. It is too big, too all-embracing a phenomenon. But there are always key moments

*and scholarship in Renaissance Venice*, Oxford 1979, and Martin Davies, *Aldus Manutius, printer and publisher of Renaissance Venice*, London 1995.

and key passages. In the history of Western civilization the educational canon stems from Petrarch's insistence on the *studia humanitatis* in the Fourteenth century, while at Ferrara towards the middle of the Fifteenth Guarino da Verona (1374-1460) introduced Greek into the curriculum. His youngest son, Battista Guarino (1434-1515), who inherited his teaching post and wrote a short treatise *De ordine docendi et studendi* (1459), was Aldus' teacher, thus establishing an educational line of descent.

The dominant, unspoken basis of what I term the Aldine or classical canon is that the formation of a gentleman (in modern parlance your ruling élite or governing class) passes through the study of a remote dead language, which does not even use a Latin character set and whose texts have reached us only in a fragmentary and corrupt form. This concept rests on three fundamental tenets, which can be summed up as *uselessness*, *inaccessibility*, and *invisibility*, as follows:

*Uselessness.* In modern universities the humanist faculties, which draw their lessons and materials mostly from the past, have to confront themselves with their counterparts in the sciences, that tendentially look to the future. With the wit, charm and grace that are their distinguishing feature, the latter often reproach the former for teaching subjects of no practical utility. The uneasy conscience of the humanists is shown by the way in which they either accept the critique or shrug it off, instead of seeing it for what it is, their principal strength and thus an overwhelming compliment.

The great bugbear of modern educational theory – or what passes for modern educational theory – is that learning should have an immediate practical consequence. The idea is a compound of silliness and misapprehension and goes only to show how little politicians, who are the most vociferous advocates of this objective, and many people who are supposedly teachers, really understand about education. Usefulness (or direct applicability of what is learnt) certainly has a function where technical skills are to be acquired, i.e. those indispensable to become an electrician or a plumber (this statement is not to be taken as social snobbery, given that the electricians and plumbers of my acquaintance earn more than I do). If on the other hand the purpose of education is to teach the student to think (or abstract inapplicability), quite frankly the more useless the subject the better.

Is there anything more useless than ancient Greek literature? or anything less relevant to modern daily existence, given that the language is not even the vehicle of an extant religious creed? One might suggest Sanskrit, but this is mere quibbling in front of the tumbril. The correct

answer is: Of course not. One might also ask, just for the record, if there is anything more eternal than ancient Greek literature? And again the answer is: Of course not.

A small excursus is required here, since it is often implied, rather than argued, that ancient Greek literature is 'better' than more recent and more modern literature; it is higher, it is more poetic, it is nobler, reading it will make you a finer person, and so on and so forth. One could say that to refute this argument unequivocally, it is sufficient to scrutinize the personalities and mating habits of the denizens of an average classics department, but I do not want to be thought polemical. The said prejudice is, if anything, a symptom of the spell with which canon inevitably enthralles its adepts, since reflection shows how will-of-the-wisp any such judgement must be. Few, if any, scholars possess the deep knowledge of different literatures in their original forms needed to formulate such an opinion with authority and conviction. Even a genuine critical *tour-de-force*, such as Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946), which offers close readings of numerous texts in different European languages, avoids value judgements. Canon in reality excludes comparison, since it only considers what falls within its own explicit parameters, so that questions such as whether Homer or Virgil is a greater poet than Dante or Milton or whether Aristophanes is a greater dramatist than Shakespeare are deemed irrelevant or speculative. It is necessary, and very necessary, to accept that canon will never work unless its chosen corpus has an intrinsic literary worth, but otherwise the 'finer person' argument confuses the content of canon with the action of canon.

*Inaccessibility.* You cannot teach yourself ancient Greek (or at least it is rare that anyone does so with any degree of success: I speak here from bitter experience). You have to have a teacher who provides a spur to and simultaneously anchors the learning process. It is difficult moreover, indeed well nigh impossible, to learn ancient Greek in adulthood; it is best acquired at school.

For most of the period covered by the Aldine canon, from the Renaissance to the early Twentieth century, access to schooling was governed by heredity and wealth in a general context in which only a very small percentage of the population, prevalently male, was taught how to read and write at an advanced level. Only the aristocratic, landed classes (and the upper layers of the urban bourgeoisie who aspired to the next echelon) could afford the monies to have their offspring spend years learning something useless. But that is precisely the function of canon: the contents have only a relative importance; what signifies is the simulta-

neous mental exercise, since these children grow up to be adults who share the same mind-set. From this perspective ancient Greek literature has some useful characteristics: first, the surviving corpus of texts is relatively small and thus easily circumscribed; second, it has a strong internal homogeneity, so that philosophers such as Plato are nevertheless read and studied as literary works.

In Catholic Europe the classical canon dominated the curricula of the Jesuit and other teaching orders from the end of the Sixteenth century onwards; it was the foundation of scholarship in the German universities of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, and even in the English-speaking world, both in the great Public schools and in the traditional universities, it was the equivalent of a dogma. One penetrating depiction of the workings of canon in the school system of the age is in *Stalky & co* (1899) by Rudyard Kipling, based on his own experiences at the United Services College at Westward Ho! in North Devon. As the name suggests, the school prepared young men for service in the numerous colonies of the British Empire, especially India, and the narrative revolves around the escapades of three boys who will become respectively a soldier, a landowner, and a writer (the third explicitly being Kipling himself). Canon has a essential, unspoken function. Through oblique references to the curriculum, we notice that the idea that future administrators and soldiers should spend a substantial portion of their time poring over texts in dead languages is never challenged by the characters, nor by the author, nor – one should add – by the reader. Kipling suggests that the real ‘education’ of the boys consists in this process of action and reaction, in which they obey unwritten rules (direct lies are not allowed, but an omission is not an untruth) in an exhilarating battle of wits against the world at large, including the other boys and the masters. As the final story of the collection reveals, the shared experiences in school, especially the tricks and subterfuges, equip the future adults with a common understanding. The viewpoint is still that of a late Victorian age, willing and able to reconcile canon with the vast changes taking place in society, while the sinister happenings, in a very similar setting, of Lindsay Anderson’s *If. ...* (1968) are still years in the future.

*Invisibility.* Third, but not least, you cannot see and at the same time believe in canon; or, if you do, you are a hypocrite. Canon calls for unquestioning faith and therefore, if someone, as I am doing here, maliciously and with intent, exposes its workings, showing the reasons for its existence, the action is tantamount to heresy. Of course scholars of textual transmission, whose daily activity in both teaching and research is very

much bound up with the issue of canon, are, like Molière's Monsieur Jourdain, rather disconcerted to discover that they have been speaking prose all their lives without knowing it. Put in these terms it seems a rather undignified, even unpalatable, truth; but, no matter how unpalatable, a truth is still a truth.

As delineated here, the Aldine canon underpinned near on five centuries of Western education and government. (I should make it clear, by the way, that I am not speaking here in favour of elitist education; I am saying instead that for a long time elitism was the principal characteristic of secondary and higher education, so that it is important to understand how it worked.) The apotheosis of the system came in the Nineteenth century at Oxford, with the Regius professorship of Greek (1855) and mastership of Balliol College (1870) of theologian and classicist Benjamin Jowett (1817-93). The direct link between this one institution and the system of government is a commonplace of English political thinking, in which a degree in 'Greats' (*Literae humaniores*) was a direct stepping stone to the Civil Service or to public life. Not all commentators however note the key to the phenomenon: Jowett was a teacher of genius, who recruited for his college like-minded teachers and who, even at the height of his academic influence, dedicated a much time and effort to his undergraduates. If however canon reached its apogee in Nineteenth-century Oxford, as often happens, the candle burnt brightest just before the end and its finest moment was also the prelude to its demise. Many factors were involved and what follows is necessarily a simplification.

Taking a brief step backwards in time, up to the Industrial Revolution less than 5% of Europe's population were urban dwellers and most people were engaged in agriculture, sometimes in still feudal or semi-feudal conditions. In such a context the self-propagation of an infinitesimal portion of the whole, the governing class, who were shaped and united by a classical education, was unchallengeable. In the Eighteenth century however the rapid expansion of literacy and consequently of education produced the first significant cracks in the edifice of classical canon. The expansion and rise of industrial technology introduced new figures such as inventors, who sought to protect their ideas through patents and thus pioneered different forms of literacy or, rather, of numeracy. Migration from the country to the towns made it increasingly necessary to know how to read and write in order to cope with urban dwelling, while the concentration of the population made it simpler to organise basic schooling. At a political and social level inroads were made into the unquestioning acceptance of the privileges of wealth and

rank. The most cataclysmic event was the French Revolution (1789), but perhaps equally significant from our viewpoint was the 1832 Reform Bill in England, which broadened the base of parliamentary democracy. Above all the impetuous rise of the Fourth Estate, i.e. Newspapers, brought a sea-change in the nature of communication and spawned the shibboleth of public opinion.

In charting the progressive disintegration of the classical canon, two titles published in the English-speaking world, to my mind, mark important milestones. The first is Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* (1859), which went through numerous editions and translations into other languages. It is the archetypal Victorian how-to-better-yourself treatise, with numerous biographies of inventors, engineers, scientists, artists and empire-builders, who by endeavour, perseverance, and clean living, find success, wealth, and happiness. The doctrine of self-improvement permeated European thought, giving rise to a new publishing genre, the manual, issued both as a help-meet for the working professional and as a learning tool for the self-educator. In Italy the largest and most famous series, still going today, was launched by Ulrico Hoepli in 1875 and soon contained over a thousand volumes. The second title is a novel, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), in which the central figure is a stone-mason who teaches himself Greek and Latin, thus infracting the second unwritten rule of canon, i.e. it cannot be self-acquired. Hardy's hero might come to a deservedly miserable end, but the portrait contains various autobiographical elements: the author did not attend university, trained as an architect, taught himself Greek in middle life, and systematically challenged establishment values.

These texts are signs of a breaking happening at many different levels. The defenders of the traditional canon in education did not of course surrender peacefully, since their cause was bound up with social hierarchies, which have never been averse to obstinate and sometimes bloody rearguard actions. But the forces set in motion were too powerful and the final collapse came, I believe, on the battlefields of the First World War, when the technology of metal proved mightier than the valour of flesh and an entire generation of young men was decimated. Their places were taken by men, and also women, who thought differently and wanted to be educated differently. In the 1920s Balliol College, feeling that traditional 'Greats' were no longer relevant for a student wishing to enter the Civil Service introduced 'Modern Greats', or PPE (Politics, Philosophy and Economics), which was soon widely imitated elsewhere in Oxford and in other universities. Of course the Aldine canon has

never altogether disappeared and still has its enclaves in private schooling and in the great universities; but on the whole it has had its day.

Canon cannot however be destroyed.

So far I might have given the impression that I consider canon somehow static, but this is the unfortunate consequence of having to pin down a phenomenon in time and space. On the contrary canon is extraordinarily dynamic and has an endless capacity to reinvent itself. The Twentieth century therefore has been largely about the creation of new canons founded on the respective national literatures.

The rise of English literature, hardly considered in the world at large before that date, has been particularly impressive and naturally mirrors changing political and economic hegemonies. English has a curious and in many ways contradictory canon. Its most important author is William Shakespeare (1564-1616), who represents to a large extent a canon within the canon. The thirty-six plays comprised in the 1623 *First Folio* form a substantial corpus in their own right, which students even at university never study in its entirety. Though some preference is accorded to the four great tragedies (in a rough order of popularity: *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*), a large element of choice prevails both for teaching and for reading purposes, to which should be added the circumstance that all Shakespeare's dramas have an abundant theatre (and sometimes cinema or television) tradition. Leaving aside the likewise considerable Medieval and Renaissance poetic tradition, which includes writers such as Chaucer and Milton, the other great strength of English literature is the novel from the Eighteenth century to the present day. Here it is important to emphasise again the dimension of the corpus, the prolificity of some individual outputs (for instance, Scott and Dickens), and the absence of a single text or author dominant over the rest. The situation is therefore completely opposite to Italian literature, in which a single novel, Manzoni's *Promessi sposi* (1840-42), exercises a virtual tyranny over the school curriculum. The large scale of English novelistic fiction also means that an influential and outspoken critic can attempt to sway canon, as happened in 1948 when Cambridge don F.R. Leavis published *The Great Tradition*, arguing that the four most important novelists of English literary history were Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad. Leavis not only angered the admirers of Fielding, Dickens, Lawrence, Joyce and Woolf, to name but a few, but also displeased misogynists and xenophobes, since his list comprised two women, a Pole and, worst of all, an American. Nevertheless, despite much debate and refutation, the place

in the canon of all these writers, especially Jane Austen, was significantly altered by Leavis' stance.

The other major feature in the metamorphosis of canon during the Twentieth century which deserves comment is that, while the classical canon was almost exclusively male-orientated, the newer canons drawing on national literatures have largely and importantly involved women. In the English-speaking world indeed masculine snobbery ensured women a head-start: degrees in English at first were offered only to female students, because the classics were considered too difficult. Subsequently the huge afflux of the gentle sex to the humanist faculties has meant that literature courses often have over 90% women students. But what simultaneously happened was that the flattening out of a pyramidal society, with sweeping cultural and technological mutations, including labour-saving household devices and the breakdown of conventional family structures, imposed on women the need to acquire advanced literacy and communication skills for the workplace (a sign of the times is that lively fictional *demoiselle*, Bridget Jones, who, rather than doing classics at Oxford, has read English at Bangor). All this is to say that these 'new learners' have passed through the portal of canon.

Yet more changes and even newer technologies have seen further fragmentations and developments in other fields as we move uneasily forwards into the Twenty-first century. In the field of cinema the availability of the DVD, which allows a film to be read and taught as if it were a book, has opened the door to the construction of canon, while university courses abound in which the *oeuvre* of certain directors is defined as 'canonic'. In a society in which the principal commodity is information, children at elementary school are required not only to be literate, but also to possess IT competence at ever higher levels (to which should be added the phenomenon of grandparents retroconverting). Hidebound educationalists, like myself, might moan and groan, but the net has seen a vast upwards shift in the quality of literacy, defined as basic reading and writing skills in the population at large, including the construction and maintenance of extensive personal image and text archives (by this I mean *Facebook*), and all this affects canon.

Some things however remain the same. To paraphrase, albeit badly, Voltaire, if canon didn't exist, we should still have to invent it. It is not an ideology nor an indoctrination, though of course ideologies can seize on the principles of canon for their own obscure purposes, as we have seen to our cost in the Twentieth century. When all is said and done,



however, canon is a teaching device. It might shift, adapt, change, alter its shape and contents, even pretend to be something quite different, but as long as there are teachers who believe that students should learn to think and students who want to learn to think, canon remains an ineludible working tool.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A different version of this text is in course of publication with the title: «Now you see it, now you don't. The history of the concept of canon», in the acts of XVII International Film Studies Conference, *The Film Canon*. Udine-Gorizia, 16-24 March 2010.