THE CRYPTO-CANON:
WHAT LIES BELOW AND WHAT SPEAKS BENEATH

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Abstract

When we talk about the canon in the 21st century, I believe we need specificity, that the ideological, pedagogical, and economic changes in the academy have rendered the notion of a single list of "must reads" obsolete. Rather than a unified body of work, today we have canons, plural, and each seeks to represent its niche or genre or school or historical period or cultural identity or ethnic perspective through books, through literature, through writing.A rather arbitrary listing pulled from a rather arbitrary internet site[i] (the modern equivalent of picking up the most popular resource) gives us on overview of the accepted canon for English Literature, the academy's core reading, if you will, the material with which an educated person in Western Civilization, such as it is, should be familiar, the material a scholar should know intimately. Let me read the list as quickly as possible…And, I'm sure as I rambled through the list, we all recognized names and titles. But we also know that there are many canons, as many as there are fields of inquiry, any number of other canons.

Keywords*: Crypto-Canon, canons, pedagogical*

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-ROBERT MASTERSON

I am a writer and a professor of literature and film, of writing and reporting.So, for this presentation, I will hope that you think of me not as an academic scholar but something more like an "investigative poet." I look at literature, film, and culture for patterns, for commonalities, for connections. I hope then to demonstrate and argue for something I've called The Crypto-Canon.

When we talk about the canon in the 21st century, I believe we need specificity, that the ideological, pedagogical, and economic changes in the academy have rendered the notion of a single list of "must reads" obsolete. Rather than a unified body of work, today we have canons, plural, and each seeks to represent its niche or genre or school or historical period or cultural identity or ethnic perspective through books, through literature, through writing.

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An American Feminist Literary Canon[iii], a Marxist Literary Theory canon[iv], an African-American Literature canon[v], a Post-Modern canon[vi]...after the big break up of the "dead white male" monopoly in the 1970s and 1980s, canons multiplied like canons will, and we find ourselves now faced with multiple, specialized canons that reflect the multiplicity of perspectives and perceptions in the contemporary academy. While it might have been nice for the dead white males to have become inclusive rather than force academic Balkanization, to have opened its lists rather than create more lists, it is what it is. Perhaps there is a future where all significant books carry equal weight, but that future is not yet ours.

So, what then am I doing this morning? I hope to introduce the idea of yet another canon, a Crypto-Canon, a hidden body of work that lies far outside the academy and its lists of accepted and acceptable canons. In fact, these works have been essentially banned from any canon. Censored, excoriated, bowdlerized, and weaponized, these works hover beneath the surface of accepted literature, but their influence on literature, society, and culture is undeniable and undeniably strong. If we can accept the notion that the canon represents the best of what is within us, what we as a species could and should strive toward, is worthy of study and critical analysis, then the obverse should just a well hold true. I propose that, compared with or perhaps even most acutely *when* compared with the canon, when placed for examination next to our best and brightest, this Crypto-Canon, this literature placed so far outside most conventional canons, represent a body of work worth understanding because it does represent the basest, most vile, and most hopeless possibilities of the human condition.

I would like to start with the most accessible work, the piece of literature that hovers just beneath the surface, acceptable here and deplorable there, relevant to this but dangerous to that, brilliant to these but offensive to those. The one thing everyone seems able to agree upon is that it is pornography. Whatever else it may be, whatever feelings, thought, ideas, or philosophies it may evoke, provoke, inspire, repudiate, or advance, the book is pornography and the author was, by any measure, insane.

And what book is this? *120 Days of Sodom.* It's mad author? The infamous Marquis de Sade, the man for whom Western Civilization named sexual violence for sexual pleasure. While Rousseau and Jefferson and Swift and Defoe created a body of work that was critical, satirical, and aspirational regarding the human condition and the condition of humans, de Sade took the lowest of roads to delineate the wretchedness of humans, the baseness of human desire, the absence of any meaning in life, and its ultimate reward of degradation and ignoble death.

Born Donatien Alphonse Francois de Sade in 1740 to a noble, aristocratic family, the Marquis entered the world predestined with a rich family history and long, hereditary good-standing with the French court and people. He was educated, performed military service as a Colonel of Dragoons in the Seven Years War. In 1763, after returning from war, he made Renee-Pelagire de Montreuil his wife. What followed was crime, scandal, imprisonment, and ignoble death[vii]. And books.And stories.And outlines for more books and stories.His was a vision of libertine dissolution as the ultimate outcome of the philosophies of freedom and universal human rights that began to flower in the rest of the world and that would culminate in the beginnings of world-wide democratic revolution. I look to my own country's founding fathers—Jefferson, Adams, Paine, Franklin,

Washington—who, if not solving these problems, outlined the manner in which slavery, women's suffrage, and universal rights at birth could be addressed in the future. These writers, these members of the accepted canon and more, many, many more, raised their eyes above the mundane, the dirty messy truth of human existence, and stretched their words to include the possibility of something better, of a future improved and made a better place for all with equality, liberty, and universal brotherhood.

De Sade, much like these other great thinkers and writers,was a member of what we today call the "1%," those few on the planet who hold so very, very much. He could have, was born to, and probably should have fought for the status quo to retain his position of power and privilege. Instead, [and incidentally, he was the match that lit the fuse that ignited the French Revolution. While being transported from his cell in the Bastille, the Marquis dashed to a window and screamed to the mob below that "They are killing us in here! They are killing us!" Within a day (or two, accounts differ) the mob stormed the Bastille.], instead, by that time, de Sade had been spirited to the insane asylum in Charenton outside Paris (where he would remain until his death), but the damage had been done and the rest is, as they say, history.

But, back to the book, this crypto-classic just visible from the corner of the literary eye, *120 Days of Sodom.*Begun on October 22, 1785 and completed 37 days later and written in one continuous scroll,the Marquis himself considered the book lost; he had hidden it in the walls of his cell of the Bastille, and was sure it had been destroyed in the looting and destruction of that hated prison, but the manuscript survived the mob. Suppressed by his embarrassed and ashamed family, the book languished until the mid-20th century when it was introduced to the world of letters.

If we may, however, I would ask to set aside its thesis of the libertine taken to an ultimate extreme, and, instead, examine the text as a social allegory that remains applicable today. In English and American literature, de Sade remains *outré* and, while the outsider is more and more included as subject of study, the Marquis has not yet received proper attention.

Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is offered up as the origin of modern satire, of the artist's ability to point his words toward power using disguise, gross exaggeration, symbolism and metaphor. Magnifying the situations ensnaring his modern Ulysses, LemuelGulliver is beset by tiny people with petty problems, arrogant giants, and becomes a slave to horses. De Sade, on the other hand, dispensed with such fancifulcaricature and proclaimed the protagonists (if the word can be used for such characters and such a text) for what they were—General, Bishop, Aristocrat, Merchant—and for the class they represented, the 1% of 18th century, Western Culture. Given license to indulge themselves without regard to law, ethics, or morality, they remove themselves to the dungeon of a fortress and, as they

have imprisoned themselves by their own perverted passions, consume as material objects the youths and maidens kidnapped to fulfill their new masters' depraved attentions. The ending of *120 Days of Sodom* brings no great revelation, no truth is revealed, no lessons are learned, and no characters are changed. Instead, we are left with an accountant's tally of the dead awash in a fetid pool of excrement, bodily fluids, and blood, a simple laundry list of material used and material remaining.

Presaging Marxism, Leninism, Existentialism, Nihilism, and a host of other –isms, despite the numbing, repetitive unpleasantness of its seemingly never-ending catalog of sexual perversion, *120 Days of Sodom* vividly represents what de Sade saw as the ultimate goal and state of mankind and our venal willingness to succumb to every vice and blasphemy in the name of ego and narcissism. The Marquis created a document that reverberates with the modern reader because of its still apt portrayal of those who oppress and victimize the 99%. A cursory glance at any form of media shows us the oppression and continued victimization of entire populations juxtaposed with mind-numbing, ostentatious, offensive displays of wealth beyond comprehension. And surely, then, the Marquis' prescience deserves our attentions. In his own blasphemous and thoroughly offensive writing, de Sade shows us the cruelty of the marketplace and the ultimate outcomes of consumerism, commodification, and materialism. And we needn't go far to see the battles that continue and intensify.

Very nearly lost to history, even with much of his work burned by his family before it could ever see publication, with all of his work branded smut of the lowest order and banned, burned, restricted, and reviled, there is still much to wonder at the workings of this madman's mind, the words he placed on paper, and their continued impact, application, and applicability to contemporary letters and society.

Now, to turn to the second book I wish to compare with the accepted canon. If Sade's work was deemed corruptive to the mind, an infection to be contained or eradicated, *The Turner Diaries* by Dr. William L. Pierce writing under the name Andrew MacDonald, is seen by the mainstream as both incendiary and provocative. Pierce, the head of what was then called the National Alliance and affiliated with any number of violently right-wing, white supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, wrote the book as a recruitment tool for his ultra-right wing, white supremacist organization while toiling in the world of physics as a day-job. Outright banned in some countries (Canada and Britain, for instance), *The Turner Diaries* is a science-fiction fantasy set in what was then the near future,1991 or 1999 depending upon the edition. Nearly 500,000 copies are reported to have been sold; the book is available on Amazon.com, but there is a certain amount of paranoia associated with ownership. It is commonly believed that documented purchase or ownership of *The*

Turner Diaries will be flagged by the United States' FBI or United Kingdoms' MI5, internal intelligence agencies. My own copy is a third-hand, pirated .pdf download. Photocopying and, later, electronic social media have, no doubt, contributed to *The Turner Diaries* reaching a much larger, much broader, and, perhaps, even more vulnerable audience online.

A generally unremarkable narrative, the supposed diaries of one white American, Earl Turner, a member of The Organization, a terrorist association dedicated to the overthrow of the U.S. government and an adherent to the ideals of Adolph Hitler (Though clearly referenced as "Our Leader" and celebrating his birthday, 20 April, a significant date in American history, Hitler is never directly mentioned. A reader familiar with Nazism could easily recognize the references; a reader unfamiliar with Hitler will not be immediately repelled by the mention of his name.) The story describes the armed overthrow of the United States of America's democratic government by The Organization which, to Turner's surprise, is actually led by The Order, a secretive, almost occult elite who direct the ethnic and ideological cleansing of America, and, ultimately, nuclear war to create a racist, fascist, totalitarian regime of "pure-blooded Aryans."

What has earned this novel its labels as "the most dangerous book in America" and "a blueprint for revolution," is the blatant racist and white supremacist framing the motivation for revolt. This book is not an argument for white supremacy, and there is no attempt to justify or reason through the actions and results portrayed. The author seems truly to be preaching to the choir, to assume the reader already holds or is receptive to the ideology of white supremacy and presumptive acceptance of Hitler's disastrous fascism and racial identity politics.

Predicting a collapse of society concomitant with stricter government regulations including a ban of firearms in the USA, *The Turner Diaries* is prescient in the way all utopian/dystopian works are prescient; the year 1984 has come and gone without Big Brother, yet a kind of Big Brother has emerged to keep an eye on us all, a kind of Big Brother with which George Orwell would have been quite familiar. Plato's *Republic* has been the model for societal structure, and aspects of that blueprint for that ideal state may be seen in some form or another, but the republic remains ideal, unformed, and unrealized in any concrete manner. Our nations appear unsuccessful.

What has so disturbed and frightened so many governments around the world is *The Turner Diaries* apparent influence on and motivation for right-wing, neo-Nazi terrorists to turn literature into deadly action. Timothy McViegh, Roof, and all the other actors propelled, at least in part, by the imagery and action of *The Turner Diaries* are looked upon as symptoms of a societal malady, as aberrant outliers unduly influenced by the wrong

ideas at the wrong time in their young lives. Toward the beginning of the book, Turner rails against the Jews:

> "...why didn't we rise up 35 years ago, [sic] when they took our schools from us and began converting them into racially mixed jungles? Why didn't we throw them all out of the country 50 years ago, instead of letting them use us as cannon fodder in their war to subjugate Europe?...why didn't we rise up three years ago, [sic] when they started taking our guns away? Why didn't we rise up in righteous fury and drag those arrogant aliens into the streets and cut their throats then? Why didn't we roast them over bonfires at every street-corner in America?"
> *The Turner Diaries*, pagination unclear

Turner's long-standing grudges against a changing society predate his birth (he is nowhere near 50 years old), and they are the hypocritical inheritance of white privilege. When challenged by its own democratic and inclusive ideals as expressed in ancient Greece, The Renaissance, The Age of Enlightenment, Abolitionism, Women's Suffrage, and the Civil Rights Movement, Western Culture's beleaguered citizenry increasingly turns to tribalism when confronted with dramatic social upheaval, environmental collapse, population explosion, and unraveling economics. As emblematic, Turner contemplates the loss of his own humanity, sacrificed to fulfill The Order's vision of a "pure" future.

> "In thinking of Saturday's events, what surprises me is that I feel noremorse for killing those two White [sic] whores. Six months ago I couldn't imagine myself calmly butchering a teen aged white girl, no matter what she had done. But I have become much more realistic about life recently."
> *The Turner Diaries,* pagination unclear

I would propose, however, that a comparison of *The Turner Diaries* with, say, the writings of Darwin or Spencer or Marx or Rand could show us that, far from being the turgid outpouring of a diseased mind, *The Turner Diaries* is a natural and perhaps expected outgrowth of identity politics, increasing xenophobia (even as the world "goes global"), nationalism, ethnic conflict, religious conflict, and free-range economics. An increasing number of white, working and middle class people find their lives disrupted by strangers with strange ways. They see that the world is changing and often changing in dangerous and terrifying ways. Who, then, to blame? The prepackaged ideations of racism and nationalism are the perfect plug-in that provides easy answers for complex questions and violent, final solutions for every problem.

The seizure of California by The Organization begins the wholesale slaughter of the racial and ideologically impure and leads to nuclear conflict in an attempt to start an apocalyptic event that will cleanse the planet of everyone not fit to The Order's standards. Homosexuals, people with brown skin, so-called "race mixers," liberals, intellectuals, people with brown eyes, people with dark hair, people with whatever else offends the pseudo-patriotic purist, and the book concludes with Turner blindly following the dictates of his masters in The Order and flying a small plane loaded with a nuclear device aimed for the United States military's headquarters, The Pentagon, in Washington, D.C.

The afterword of my edition, purloined from the internet about 15 years ago, supposedly written in 2099 and one hundred years after Turner's mission, makes it clear that his sacrifice was successful, and ignited the holy fire of the atom to burn the face of the earth cleanfor the New Reich. Or something like that, some fascist, black shirt, brown shirt nonsense. What is disturbing about *The Turner Diaries*, what elevates it from the morass of yet another ground-out future fantasy of gunfire and explosions is the limp philosophy so casually accepted by both author and, it is presumed, reader. There is no question here that the world would be better if its people were less brown, would be better if gay people just did not exist or, if they insist upon existing, know that their sexual orientation was also their death sentence. The world would be better if, to paraphrase an old alcoholic I once knew, everyone would just be what The Order wanted them to be. No deviation from the very strict plan. No outliers. No diversity. No deviation.

And who takes comfort in such a vision of such a future? Perhaps the book is not the disease at all. Perhaps the book is a symptom, the outgrowth of a system designed to be racist, imperialistic, capitalistic, and, ultimately, quite hollow, quite shallow. Who, then, should Anglos blame for the calamitous changes irrevocably changing their worlds? The answer is quite simple: everyone but themselves. If we lift the rock of the English Literature canon, if we look beneath and behind the lofty ideas and words of Rousseau, Locke, St. Francis, St. Augustine, Mills, Jesus Christ, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, and Mahandas Gandhi, we find squirming there the fear and anger that fuel the human condition. How better to understand the forces that keep us all from achieving our ideals than to study the enemy? What more can we understand about real people and their real fears and real reactions to their fear than by studying the documentation of that fear and those reactions? *The Turner Diaries* stands as a fundamental text for anyone seeking to understand such entities as America's Tea Party, the Islamic State, and Donald Trump. On that basis alone, it deserves critical analysis in the same way that any other document or text deserves critical analysis. To understand the terror of, say, the Islamic State destroying ancient artifacts and ruins, of Donald Trump turning ignorance into aggression, *The Turner Diaries* offers us a glimpse at the mind that finds such simple, violent solutions to human

complexity and diversity appealing. Nothing but a purge and a scourge will do; the face of the earth is literally scrubbed clean of impurities.

I now find myself at the third book I wish to introduce as part of the Crypto-Canon. It is, perhaps, the easiest book to discuss because its influence on Western Culture has been both deep and profound. It is also, perhaps, the hardest of these books to discuss because it does not exist. It. Does. Not. Exist. Let me say this again. This book does not exist.

Nonetheless, the book deserves our attention as counter point to any number of optimistic philosophies. *The Necronomicon* (variously translated as *The Book of Dead Names,* "an image of the law of the dead," and *Book Considering (or Classifying) the Dead*[viii]) was invented as a literary device within the short stories Howard Philips Lovecraft wrote and sold (most importantly to the American monthly magazine *Weird Tales*) in the early 20th century. The fictional grimoire appeared in the group of Lovecraft's short stories labeled The Cthulhu Mythos. Soon, Lovecraft's contemporaries began to include *The Necronomicon* in their own short stories, often sold to the same magazines that featured all their work. As the fictional tome made increasing appearances in increasing numbers of weird science fiction and weird horror stories, *The Necronomicon* became familiar to an increasing number of readers, not all of whom understood its fabrication.

Lovecraft devised a provenance for the ersatz volume of evil, attributing its original authorship to the "mad," always the "mad" Arab, Abdul Alhazred. Around 700 AD, a seeker of forbidden places and a worshipper of strange, ancient gods, the "mad" Arab compiled the apocalyptic wisdom he'd acquired into one text he titled "*Al Azif*" (translated from Arabic to mean "the sound insects make at night or the utterance of demons")[ix]. Later, he would be torn to pieces by an invisible creature in broad daylight in front of horrified witnesses. Following the "mad" Arab's death, Lovecraft wrote, the book was translated into Greek in 950 AD, banned, burned, and suppressed. New Greek translations, a Latin translation in two printings, a Spanish printing based on of the Latin translations, an English translation of one of the Latin editions, the book has a long history of secrecy and censorship. Surviving copies in various forms, Lovecraft imagined, were under lock-and-key in various universities and private collections around the world.

What is sort of wonderful about Lovecraft's literary activity, confined to popular magazines as it was, is that he was able to construct an imaginary armature upon which to hang his authoritative text on all things occult and evil. Here then, was an imaginary history for an imaginary book full of horrifying knowledge guaranteed to drive the reader forever insane and/or call down upon an unsuspecting mankind the indifferent maliciousness of the imaginary Great Old Ones.

"The most merciful thing in the world is, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents...someday the piecing together of disassociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new Dark Age."

H.P. Lovecraft[x]

Other authors and for ever after, used and referenced *The Necronomicon* in an almost countless variety of settings for an almost countless variety of effects. Robert E. Howard, the creator of Conan the Barbarian, contributed Friedrich von Junzt's *Unasspreschlichen Kulten.* Robert Bloch, who would later pen the horror classic *Psycho*, devised Ludvig Primm and the *De Vermis Mysteriis.* The science fiction writer Clark Ashton Smith added the supposedly pre-human *Book of Eibon.* And thus did these writers toiling for something like a single cent a word create the most secret and occult canon of all, a real list of imaginary books, the proto-Crypto-Canon of them all, a library of mystery and terror to rival anything Borges created since this library is, if fact, invisible and unreal. And even more to our point of literary criticism, the core of this invisible library is a book that holds certain madness and the end of the world. The book is dangerous. The book itself is evil. Knowledge is dangerous. Knowledge is evil. Lovecraft looked to the future, reshaped it into an artificial artifact, and presented his readers, in print, the affirmation that too much knowledge is a akin to sin.

Bibliophobia is the "fear that reading is perilous, particularly reading certain arcane and occult books."[xi]Lovecraft did not invent this idea, and his Cthulhu Mythos, of which *The Necronomicon* is the bible, is a fictional religion, but it does share a central tenant of Christianity; it is a book that says knowing what is in the book is forbidden.

In the first book, Genesis, of the Christian Bible, God forbids Adam and Eve a single fruit, that from the Tree of Knowledge. After eating the fruit, Adam and Eve become self-aware and it is by that self-awareness that God sees they have disobeyed them, have lost their ignorance and their innocence, and he casts them from the garden. The glory of the Christian God, in whatever manifestation he may take, is incomprehensible to a human being.

The Necronomicon is that forbidden fruit and, in the mythology, in whatever form it may take, lies the deep human understanding that knowledge itself and the repositories, books and libraries and databases and cloud storage, of knowledge are dangerous, transformative engines that, if they don't kill us, certainly derange our minds. We are, historically, at what appears to be an increasingly crucial period in human history. If knowledge brought us to this point, is it any wonder that there are those among us who

have learned to fear technological advancement, which sees the advances in science as frightening, that the new views of new stars through new kinds of lens portend disaster? Perhaps, then, the cultural saturation we see for Lovecraft's creations is easier to understand when compared to the doomsday literatures and grim prognostications inundating contemporary media.

So, how am I to end this, to draw these threads back together? The comparison of literatures, from canon to canon, from historical period to historical period, from analytical mode to analytical mode, is what creates even richer meaning in the study of literature. The comparisons are endless and certainly should consider the high and the low, the insider and the outsider, the genius and the madman. And the study of literature is the study of the written word, and the written word is as close to magic as the human race has ever come.

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