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CANON, CLASSICS, TRADITION: DEMARCATION OF THE TERMS

Abstract

The canon is a concept with a long history. The religious canon was eventually re-established on secular grounds, where it was comprehended in the categories of official literary (general) and personal (individual) canons, educational canon (reading lists) being correlated to the concept of tradition (canon as selective tradition) and the classics (canon as synchronicity, the classics as diachronicity). These aspects have different features in each national literature, particularly in Ukrainian literature. The necessity of standards and hierarchical classifications remains important after postmodernism, when new concepts, such as corps, collection, postcanon, succeed or keep up with the concept of the canon.

Keywords: canon, classics, tradition, national canon, collection, postcanon, Ukrainian literature

Etymologically the canon (“core”, “measure”) refers to sacred texts of certain religions. In addition, it stands for a certain selection of texts out of religious context, which is done on a regular basis in a society because of their aesthetical values. Accordingly, the presentation of aesthetical values becomes the reason for canonization, and, as it looks, the cornerstone of glory, and absence of these values is the sign of “non-canoncity”.

In the Spanish theoretical and critical studies, there is the thesis of the various canons, for example the literary, the scholarly, and the occulted (Cerrillo Torremocha, 2013). Specifically, the canon is interpreted because of the selection of texts with high literary value at a time (synchrony is important), and sometimes with a certain (pedagogical or ideological¹) purpose, as it is in the scholarly canon in Spain. It follows that the canon is variable, requires repeated reading, and causes the distinction of the polysystemic canon (where the canonical/universal works are central and the differentiated works are on the periphery; since the system of the canon presupposes internal circulation, i.e. the ability to get from the centre to the periphery and vice versa) from the classics, which implies text patterns which are constantly repeated and imitated, works that are consistently read and translated by many a generation. The product of creation can get right to the canon, but it takes time to evaluate such artefacts as if they were classical (CerrilloTorremocha, 2013: 17-31). This demarcation helps us understand that the definition of tradition is close to the concept of the classics through their joint diachronous nature, while the canon is rather synchronous, being referred to as a moment of the current aesthetic standard (Laverde Ospina, 2006: 46), which is only partially comparable to tradition and the classics. In the study of Greek literature, the term “tradition” (or

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¹ On the one hand, there is a hidden canon, which is prohibited by the official canon. On the other hand, there are also examples of ‘apocryphal’ texts, which are given the status of canon literature.

“history”) was considered hitherto as a resource apt to ensure an “uninterrupted” national past. The term “canon” has been involved in the theoretical and critical discourse since 1990 (Stamoglou, 2009: 27), and it shows an attempt to mix the past with the modern cultural needs, as the “selective tradition” is marked by superior eclecticism, which is more than the proper tradition (*Ibidem*: 30).

In the context of the thesis of selectivity, the canon displays a dichotomy in which this selectivity is interpreted as an alternative between the modern/rustic; ideological/ aesthetic; limited (in the absence of “exemplary” as a form of transmission of tradition) / limited (in the sense of “reduced”, which is centring on pluralism, seen as a means of increasing power). To resolve this ambiguity, one must attempt not to appeal to the definition of the canon as to the concept of the “classics”.

Actually, the question of who is a classic has long worried critics and writers alike. For example, Charles Sainte-Beuve did not interpret the classics narrowly – as ancient authors (Greek first, and then Roman) – but widely: a classic is he “who has enriched the cultural heritage, who has spoken in his own style that was common at the same time, no new neologisms, new and antique, in the style that easily becomes a contemporary of all epochs” (Sainte-Beuve, 1970: 311-316). Not only solemnity is important, but also passion (inspiration), as well as the presence of the ideal toward which the writer should strive (*Ibidem*: 320).

In the article “What Is a Classic?” (1944), T. S. Eliot clarifies the thesis of the homonymous article by Charles Saint-Beuve (1850). He distinguishes between the absolute classics (such as Virgil – the ancient “exemplary author”, and the priority of poetry) and the relative ones (the classics of a certain period). Moreover, the critic not only expands the concept of ‘classic’ to individual writers, but also to certain literary epochs:

The age, which precedes a classic age, may exhibit both eccentricity and monotony: monotony, because the resources of the language have not yet been explored, and the eccentricity because there is yet no generally accepted standard – if, indeed, that can be called eccentric where there is no centre. The age following a classic age, may also exhibit eccentricity and monotony: monotony because the resources of the language have, for the time at least, been exhausted, and eccentricity because originality comes to be more valued than correctness. (Eliot, 1944: 13-14)

The exhaustion of language and form is a consequence of classical activity, which forms a new language as well as forms that are emerging as a standard. As such, T. S. Eliot shows a narrow understanding of a classic as correctness, primarily linguistic. For Eliot, the classic (understood as a token of maturity) stands for: 1) the maturity of the mind, its historicity; 2) the maturity of language and style; 3) an all-encompassing character; 4) the universality of the writer; and 5) the maturity of the period. Without historicity, as the critic argues, there follows

a distortion of values, the exclusion of some, the exaggeration of others, which springs, not from lack of wide geographical perambulation, but from applying standards acquired within a limited area, to the whole of human experience; which confounds the contingent with the essential, the ephemeral with the permanent. (*Ibidem*: 30)

A review of the canon as selective tradition (in other words, the sample story) demonstrates to researchers the problem of the definition of ‘canon and memory’. The selection may be done in several ways, either as an assortment of texts and authors defined as worth remembering/ canonized or as a suite of topics: “Themes, like periods, derive from and are determined by a previously canonized set of texts and authors [...] Thematic classification can be especially discriminatory since themes are by definition repeated elements of totality or metanarrative centered in an historically limited point of view” (Stamoglou, 2009: 36). The thematic approach imposes far more restrictions, because it is linked with the question of how the rigidity of the canon is defined (during the period of Classicism, for example), and with an irreversible ideological order, in terms of which specific works and authors are conceived as canonical.

The canon as construction and deconstruction of memory “is attributable by the relationship between father and son, between authority and obedience. The canon serves as a link between the legitimate heir and heritage, which he accepts and which cites” (Guzmán Méndez, 2014: 25). However, art is not a static object or a monumental historic and dynamic scenario. It follows that

memory is built and designed to advance conservation in frozen form; it cannot fully satisfy the researcher (*Ibidem*: 26). For example, Colombian scientist Diana Paola Guzmán Méndez treats memory as a movement that is covering several stages: from monument (*who* must be remembered) to the document (*what* must be remembered); from the document (*what* must be remembered) to the heritage (one remembers both); from the history of ideas (concepts) to experienced history (heritage) (*Ibidem*: 13-33). The conclusion is that any work can be part of the canon, provided it advances the thesis of the potential canon (all that *ever* will be written), and that it is singled out by the available canon (available works that could fall into the canon) (Wendell V., 1998: 42).

The latter notion is extremely subjective; as such, extreme manifestations are the basic objections to the requirements of the canon. In particular, Ukrainian Philology Department students can find the opinion that ‘every writer is an individuality’, and, therefore, that ‘speaking about hierarchy is inappropriate’. The belief that the existence of a hierarchy is a step towards uniformity could be found also among the students of Ukrainian philology in this university: “A hierarchy is unwanted because it will lead to unification, mass culture², and this thing will adversely affect the development of art”, says the first-year female student (Gavryliuk, 2010: 88-97). It allows a full display of the problem of “tradition and individual talent”, which applies to the question whether the national canon of world literature is a hierarchical structure. T. S. Eliot stated that:

It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting. His particular emotions may be simple, or crude, or flat. The emotion in his poetry will be a very complex thing, but not with the complexity of the emotions of people who have very complex or unusual emotions in life. One error, in fact, of eccentricity in poetry is to seek for new human emotions to express; and in this search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the perverse. The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him. (Eliot, 1921)

Consequently, a tradition is analysed by the critic in its historical aspects, which, as we remember, is the first feature of the classic. In some historical periods, the demand for a canon was questioned for a variety of reasons: primo, its *subjectivity* comes to be impugned (including categories such as the aesthetic quality of the work or its degree of originality and literary prestige). As stated by Daniel Kontowski in the article “The Literature Canon and Humanities: Social Content Discussion”, this determines the pretences of *multiculturalists* to the academic level canon (applied and/or educational). According to them, the canon is exclusively an Eurocentric narrative, which eliminates even the works of authors who are not Europeans by descent: a narrative that eliminates mass culture. Meanwhile, as multiculturalists consider, such selectivity is a prerequisite for the stereotype of the superiority of a particular cultural model that complicates the understanding of the Other in a foreign culture, as well as in our own. Contrary to them, *traditionalists* deny the relativism of the canon because they see in it eternal ideas that are important for many generations. They do not bind them to the problems of modern society. For example, traditionalists believe that the emphasis on the literature of national minorities reduces the national standard of the canon because this practice is inherently political (Kontowski, 2014: 404, 406).

In the dispute between the traditionalists and the multiculturalists, the collision of national and cosmopolitan canons is revealed as axiological and descriptive. The concept of descriptive canon abandons its axiological features (from the Greek *ἀξιός*, “worthy”), confessing only to the presence of a more or less subjective choice. These differences are observed in Ukraine and testify to aesthetic pluralism, in which there is a certain tradition of conservatism that becomes an obstacle to modernization, or, otherwise, it is something commonly treated as a foundation for the renewal of the poetic palette (Gavryliuk, 2013: 52-69). The desire of modernization sometimes leads to conscious references to European interests: attention and approval of European students is seen as a long-dreamed aim. However, the questionnaire indicates that Ukrainian poetry is often treated on a much

²Thus, mass culture is synonymous to contextual depersonalization perceived as a lack of clear literary process. A depersonalization generates a considerable amount of literary works, but scarcely turns into quality. Nonetheless, the chasing of novelty can hardly be interpreted as a univocal positive.

lower level, not only in comparison to European poetry, but also in comparison to the Russian one. This fact confirms a still unresolved inferiority complex, “a clear sense of colonialism in postcolonial space” (Syvokin’, 2006: 94). Under such conditions, “tradition is the base of national identity, providing integrity literature, which can be interpreted as postcolonialism” (Syvokin’, 2006: 104-5).

It should be noticed that the ideological vacillations and differences are clearly projected as thematic factors of poetry and its opportunities to be not only pervasive as national but also universal as European. We are talking about the same dispute that divides multiculturalists from traditionalists as readers – consumers of the canon, wherefore some topics are regarded as positive, while others are considered critical. Namely, “There are writings about our mentality, about our life, but the world – it is a pity – is interested in Ukraine less than Ukraine in the world” (the fourth-year female student of The Kirovohrad Volodymyr Vynnychenko State Pedagogical University); “The Ukrainians have specific poems, whose interests and concerns could be understood only by the Ukrainians” (the first-year female student of philology faculty in V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University). On the one hand, there is the need to apply the lyrics to the national identity and its own traditions, on the other, there is the perception that Ukrainian poems are thematically closed in themselves and have no projections on the outside world: “The main theme of Ukrainian literature is the problem of influence sidewise Poland and Russia, and laments about the unhappy fate. There is nothing positive”, – notes the second-year female student of foreign philology in V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, concisely pointing to one of that stereotypes which lives in Ukrainian; Ukrainian poetry is “...mostly imitation of someone ... Or there is too much concentration on their experiences” (the third-year female student of foreign philology in V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University) (Gavryliuk, 2010).

The respondents assert that love poems may attract the attention as well as poems on loyalty, friendship, patriotism. More appropriate, perhaps, it is to talk about the unique semantic or formal aspect of poetry (for example, through the lens of national traditions). The dynamism in the evaluations of the artistic work is determined not only by differences in attitudes of respondents to the tradition and innovation³, but also because of its conceptual instability of aesthetic value. This thesis turns us to the work of Jan Mukařovský “Can aesthetic value have universal meaning?”. He writes about the value of the spatial and temporal dimensions, which are not always overlapping: “The longer some artistic work saves its aesthetic influence, the more confidently we can say that the constancy of its value is associated not with transient aesthetic object, but with the way in which it was created” (Mukařovský, 1994: 171-186).

Time as a measure of value deploys the problem of tradition and innovation and reveals another facet of art, this time by modern and classic standards. As Jan Mukařovský postulates, “the total value of the vibrant energy makes possible the synthesis of two opposing necessities. Due to its changeability, it draws the attention of the artist” (Mukařovský, 1994: 171-186). Because of the statistics, we see that the number of those who consider the necessity of hierarchy (38.78%) and those from whose point of view it is inappropriate (38.14 %) is about the same (the difference is only 0.64 %). A small percentage (1.6 %) consider the need in hierarchy is an uncontroversial question, some more respondents (8.65 %) say that out of our relationship to the hierarchy, it exists as a fact or as a perspective, and it should not be avoided. Some of the interviewees (12.82 %) could not answer this question exactly (Gavryliuk, 2010: 88-97).

According to the observations made by the author of the article, the canon appears as the necessity of ordering and transmitting the tradition to others, the value of which is once again increasing after the postmodern “rebellion”. Even if the need in the canon is declaratively refused, in modern literature it is present as “looking back to the classics”. The formation of a national literary canon significantly affects the so-called “educational canon”. This effect is especially noticeable now that aesthetic tastes and visualizations of young readers are not always formed and adjusted by individual reading. In this situation, for some readers (and readers-philologists too), the ‘educational canon’ would be identical to the national one.

³Tradition is a) safeguard to imperial threats to guard Ukrainian national specificity; b) the way to bring the national characteristics of this poetry and attract foreign readers; c) a synonym of provincialism that prevents the interest of world in Ukrainian culture. Innovation is a) the destroyer of stereotypes and provincialism; b) the way to approach the world poetic trends; c) the threat of globalization and the loss of national identity.

However, it should be emphasized that the educational canon is not exactly identical to the national one. There is a close relationship between them, which can be seen from the existence of various training programs and the involvement in the “reading list” of authors from certain areas, directors, and teachers of individual schools. The difference between the canon and the reading list (“curriculum” Kovbasenko) is illustrated in the thesis of V. Nemoianu, according to which the “canon” may be relevant to the concept of language in the conception of Ferdinand de Saussure, while the “curriculum” is rather speech that may deviate from standard or even distort it (Nemoianu, 1991: 215-224).

A challenge to the canon is not denying the hierarchy in itself. It is about the absence of a single vector or joint fields for defining symbolic names and famous works. In the minds of Ukrainian philologists, this challenge is associated with the unique personality of the author, which automatically leads to maximization of the canon, as if any and all authors were to be turned in a canonical writers for one reader or another. Such challenges to the understanding of the established canon are viewed in the literary studies of foreign and Ukrainian scientists. Specifically, the usual concept is outlined in the article of Walter Mignolo “Between the canon and the corpse” (Mignolo, 1991: 23-36), where the researcher has proposed the following thesis: literary studies must depose focus from the canon (literary masterpieces) to the body (the vast and heterogeneous field of language). Mobile alternatives of “canon” and “body” expand and support social space, focusing respectively on historical practices and cultural paradigms, issues of identity (“canon”) and a local study of discursive practices (“corpse”). Furthermore the discourse of the literary canon is based on two levels. One is the professional level (academic context, as a reasonable reading list) and the second is the epistemic one (in the context of scientific-research programs, as a phenomenon that must be described and explained in terms of the mechanisms of formation and change; social groups that define the canon (Pulido Tirado, 2009: 104, 106). Peruvian researches distinguish between colonial canon (which is concluded with the active participation of the colonizer, with looking back as the “centre” position of “outskirt”); cosmopolitan canon (the canon, formed shortly after independence, when instead of the lost small centre – a colonizer – becomes the great centre – the world and the desire to predict and meet his expectations), and the national canon (where the centre is its own nation and national interest) (García-Bedoya, 2007: 7-24).

As Jūratė Sprindytė notices in his article “The Challenges of a Censored Freedom”, the Lithuanians deal with the complex of small nations: in other words, with the desire to free themselves from the colonial heritage and colonial canon. After the moment of independence in Lithuania the phenomenon of substitution of one form of collective consciousness different from socialist realism began. The same is seen in Ukrainian literature – “speaking of trauma”, “identity crisis”, attraction to the cosmopolitan canon that is still more than the national canon⁴.

Considering the above, the canon is changed whenever a nation is rethinking its place in the world circuit, something that occurs at the intersection of dramatic events such as colonization, isolation, marginalism / independence, “cosmopolitanism”, centrality. This is the basis of the statement of Turkish scientists about the classics as examples of post-colonial rewriting (due to variability in the changed political history, historical and cultural conditions; changes in power relations, “the dark places of the empire” that initiates new and viable literature tradition) (Mukherjee, 2013). To tie these processes only to the specific historical date would be wrong, because these processes have also a psychological not only a socio-historical dimension. Each such reevaluation is combined with attempts to re-evaluate the canon and to increase its variety. For example, in Poland until 1989 there was a consensus in literary criticism that writers should observe what some authoritative critics have to say about literature. After 1989, everything collapsed. There was a reassessment of the canon, which was based on the existence of objections to the hierarchy; famous names such as Herbert and Miłosz came under attack. It was an attempt to change things, to demolish the old canon and create a new one or even an absence of the canons (Szachowicz). If it prevails in the community for a long time, any model is perceived as imposed and evokes a feeling of threat and

⁴Modern Polish researchers, including Michal Pavel Markowski, sometimes define the canon as an ‘instrument to create a community that talks in one and the same language, as a system of cross-references’, rejecting the notion of a national canon in favour of a particular community. However, national identity is the base for the canon.

considerable resistance. The same situation can be noticed in postmodern Ukrainian literature when “the world has lost a hierarchical system and the imperative of any centre” (Kotchenko, 2005). That loss of hierarchy in terms of a postcolonial society is perceived as a safety measure against any dictatorship (particularly the dictatorship of taste that reveals itself in the established literature canon).

Those who believe in the presence of a gradation as a positive sign of the literary process, emphasize that the *readers* are the main “consumers” of such classifications. As they say it, hierarchy helps readers to focus on an array of authors and to compare them with their own preferences, to define their preferences, to form their own aesthetic taste, to distinguish quality from unsound literature. The hierarchy serves from this point of view as a lighthouse for sailors in the sea of literature. Criticism on the other hand fulfils these functions in the “literature of the moment” although avoiding any hierarchy. Among the students of The National University of *Ostroh Academy*, there are voices in favour to the change from levels of literature to quality criticism and professional comments. Anna Nasiłowska asserts: “The canon is an idea of ideal level competence, which always faces the reader. The canon is rather a hypertext, but it is not a reading list. This is the spatial reference system, open structure” (Nasiłowska, 2008).

Nonetheless, such openness (collections of texts, and not the canon in the conventional sense) provides the understanding of the aesthetic value of the works, the role of reviews (positive or negative) grows out of the idea of the literary process as communication. The canon is treated differently in different literary theories and various researches. For example, A. Fowler identifies six types: potential, modern, formal, individual, classical, critical (Fowler, 1979: 97-119). This approach looks like an extended version of the theory of Harris Wendell, also distinguishing an available, a potential and a personal canon. The available canon is described by Fowler as modern, critical (synchronous – Wendell) and classical (diachronous). The canon is compared not only to classical concepts and traditions, but also to anti-canon and post-canon concepts (Bakula, 2011: 13-43). Bogusław Bakula distinguishes two types of anti-canon: the *official* (anti-canon, present in cultural game) and *situational* (anti-canon formed as a result of oppression) and three approaches to the canon: lustrational, essentialist and anti-essentialist. A *lustrational* approach to the canon means different types of withdrawal from the canonical series. This approach is similar to the concept of cosmopolitan canon and contains a potential threat to national canon displacement, resulting in a new type of colonization. Bakula refers to the different orientation of lustration in different post-Soviet states: institutional – in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and generational – in Slovakia and Ukraine (*Ibidem*: 20). The lustrational approach is based on understanding of the canon as a structure that is based on ethical, metaphysical criteria, that appears not only in the aesthetics sphere, but also often under the influence of ideologies it can be re-evaluated in the stream of time. As opposed to the lustrational approach *anti-essential approach* interprets canon as “artificial and pragmatic national social education beyond ethics and metaphysics: reliefs (aesthetic quality); *substrates (novelty); climate and microclimate* (discourses using literature material)” (*Ibidem*: 33). As a warning against ideological manipulation of tradition appears the phenomenon that Bakula defines by the term of *post-canon* and interprets it as characterized by de-hierarchization, de-instrumentalism, and relativism. The researcher asserts that post-canon is not the denial of the canon, but only a change of its interpretation (*Ibidem*: 33), the removal from strict rules defined set of names (classics) to the soft canon of modernity, which involves free choice. Although the researcher emphasizes that post-canon does not mean a departure from national traditions, but prevents a “patriotic blackmail”, it appears that national tradition still has to rely on a healthy patriotism.

In the case of Ukrainian literature, the basis of canon evaluation is axiological and based on the national tradition.

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