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THE CANON OF (IM)PERFECTION(S). A COMPARATIVE
APPROACH

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Abstract

Although seemingly exhausted, the “hot” subject of the canon continues to be of interest and is constantly brought to the attention of the public. Seen from (non)canonical angles, such an object of study is doomed unless we set some clear methodological boundaries, in relation to which the corpus addresses its various challenges either in a conformist or polemical manner.

Trying to avoid any excessive approach, this research project aims to revisit the canon from a comparative perspective, using the argumentative principles of New Historicism, by carefully selecting its samples and organising them in a coherent and credible montage, despite the subjectivity it is exposed to. This is why, instead of a global interpretation of the texts under consideration, I propose a sequential close reading analysis, through the selection of certain image-ideas (ideas that acquire a visual component) or illustrative scenes for the representation of the canon, with all its variations. In this study, the (non)canonical history of the concept becomes fundamental for the understanding of the meanings and the semantic mutations which it goes through. This is precisely why I do not definitively align either with a conservative definition of the canon, or the kind of relativism which completely deconstructs its relevance. Instead, I prefer to look at it as an object in motion, throughout its fluid history.

Thus, this endeavour involves two fundamental strategies. On the one hand, we need to consider their different angles of analysis and problematisation, as well as the trajectories that connect them. On the other hand, by investigating the various meanings of the canon up until its contemporary perception, we view it as a literary institution with multiple pillars: the sedimentation criteria of the Biblical canon and their laicisation after the aesthetic canon started “borrowing” from other sources; the role played by taste and axiological judgment in determining a text’s “correct” position in the canonical hierarchy; the consolidation of the genius as a form of access to authority and influence; the difficult process of formulating a set of principles which define a masterpiece (*i.e.*, an aesthetically perfect work of literature).

The comparative approach to these reflections goes hand in hand with the interrogation of the manner in which, starting from the 20th century and up until now, literary theory has understood and methodologically appropriated the concept of the canon. From the formalist tendency to resuscitate minor genres and the quasi-absence of the concept from the

discourse of structuralism to the canon wars taking place against the backdrop of deconstruction and the quantitative reconsideration of the concept, the canon becomes a nucleus in motion, accumulating Brownian energy as it goes from one controversial position to the next.

Beyond these heated theoretical debates, the goal of a balanced perspective on the aesthetic canon is motivated by its contemporary relevance and, more specifically, its relevance for the education of the current generations. Without proposing a definitive set of instruments, this research project is interested in as diverse a map as possible, from its use of literary examples to its practice of conceptualisation and critical reflection.

Thus, the idea of the (re)emergence of the (counter)canon as a concrete manifestation of the struggles between the established generations and those who are seeking validation today (*i.e.*, tradition vs. modernity) is nuanced starting from Matei Călinescu's thesis from the subchapter "The Avatars of the (Counter)Canon." If the canon wars between generations are, according to Matei Călinescu, a cyclical resurgence of the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, then the entire vocabulary of crisis and conflict should also be revised, paying attention to the meanings of the modern(ist) concepts. The famous *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* is not specific only to the 17th century (as proven by Boileau's *The Art of Poetry*), but it carries into the 18th century through Jonathan Swift's allegory from *The Battle of the Books* and, *mutatis mutandis*, through Schiller's dichotomy between the *naïve* and the *sentimental*, and even later on, through the transplantation of this polemic in the religious discourse (see Chateaubriand's 1802 *The Genius of Christianity*).

The subchapter "The Canon(ical) without Canonicity" questions the consecrated/ing conceptualisation of Dostoyevsky's prose, according to which *The Brothers Karamazov* constitutes the summit of his work, (re)ordering themes such as madness, paternity, the perfection of cruelty, as well as the (counter)canonical dichotomies determined by the *presence* or the *absence* of Biblical references. In this system, the couple Zosima-Ferapont occupies a central symbolic position. The survival of such leitmotifs and Dostoyevskyan references in fictional (re)interpretations such as Nobel Prize winner J.M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* is further proof that not only is the Russian author *canonical*, but that his themes are still relevant in today's world.

The section about Lewis Carroll, "The Canon of the Prize-Winners. With Alice in the Land-of-Pointless-Contests" reconsiders the *function of literary prizes* in the process of canonisation, which provides an opportunity to reopen the apparently closed cases of certain noncanonical categories (children's literature, fantasy literature), while also deconstructing

the myths surrounding fame or the economy of prestige. The former can even lead to a *canonical scandal*, which often occurred in the case of those literary works which fractured the public's comfortable expectations and were then reevaluated as representatives of aesthetic value that were simply "ahead of their time." *Madame Bovary* is one such text with a nonconformist trajectory, as the protagonist's reading of literature oscillates between the fascination of forbidden texts ("poisonous") and the regime of the "canonical" ones, in the strictest religious sense. The intensive exploitation of Bovarism in the unfinished novel *Bouvard and Pécuchet* highlights the dangers of exaggeration and of a lack of selectivity. Also visible in the case of Austinian protagonists, Bovaric reading determines certain typologies and characters, which are capable of (re)tracing the articulations of the canon, while (also) taking into consideration the dichotomy of male/female authorship.

The (non)canonical evaluation of the literary text, done through comparison and even by looking for its "hidden" meanings, is the goal of the subchapter about Henry James's prose, in which the short story *The Figure in the Carpet* (1896) plays a fundamental role. Neither aesthetic taste, nor the (im)perfect literary text can escape novelistic fictionalisation, and Emile Zola's novel, *The Masterpiece*, allows us to revisit certain cordial or polemical dialogues which have consecrated new aesthetic communities and have led to the emergence of new aesthetic schools or directions, and, implicitly, to the expansion of the canon. At the same time, Zola retraces the evolution of the artistic genius and the creative, impulsive, and contradictory personalities that were associated with this title, all of which can also be found in Balzac's prose.

"In the End There Was the Canon" is a subchapter about the postmodern reimaginings that, without dismissing the previous literary traditions, give new meaning to the classics, thus confirming their canonicity. Whether they are characterised by intertextuality, rewriting, or influence, with its specific mechanisms, the texts written by J.L. Borges (*The Library of Babel*) or Umberto Eco (*The Name of the Rose*) consecrate a *relativising* view of the canon through their representations of the library, be it universal or censored and restrictive.

The difficult relationship between art and the political (in the broad or narrow sense of the word) is discussed in the subchapter "Literature Under Attack. The Blind(ed) Canon," starting from the anticanonical retaliation of the historical avant-garde and its "isms," as politically committed movements which end up being included in the canon, although these authors had repudiated the very notion of canonical tradition. At the same time, the subchapter considers the opposite dynamic, politics impacting literature and the canon, both of which have been suppressed and silenced by those oppressive ideologies which refused to

recognise aesthetic value. Whether we are discussing the avant-gardist manifestos or the struggle of various “official” canons against the aesthetic one (nuanced through the analysis of multiple relevant texts, be they classical or not: Solzhenitsyn’s well-known *The Gulag Archipelago* and *Cancer Ward*, as well as the more recent novels by Julian Barnes – *The Noise of Time*, by Lyudmila Ulitskaya – *Imago* or by Azar Nafisi – *Reading “Lolita” in Tehran*), the lessons and the rules of canonisation seem constant, regardless of time and geography.

Virginia Woolf’s last novel, *To the Lighthouse*, can be read through the prism of the canon as measure (*i.e.*, balance *and* instrument) and, at the same time, as measurement (process), thus confirming the regime of inequalities and inequities, the tendency to judge the value of literature comparatively (which Henry James also points out) and to exaggerate when evaluating one’s own work (see “Madam Ramsay’s Measurement(s). Procrustes and the Canon”).

Seen as the creator of the first aesthetic canon, Dante suggests in Canto IV of the *Inferno* that there is a hierarchy of the disciplines and the arts, in which literature holds, predictably, a privileged position. At the same time, this is an attempt at self-legitimation or canonical homologation, by claiming a connection to a literary “family” that he wishes to be a part of. Moreover, the Italian poet is a significant name in the historical search for the perfect, universal language, turning this linguistic reflection into a defence of a people’s natural language. At the intersection of literature and Christianity, Dante’s work is also a good opportunity to meditate on their interferences in the 20th century and even today, when the laicisation of society in all of its aspects seems to ignore the fundamental sacred texts which shaped the character of our culture, past and present. As a later response to *The Divine Comedy*, C.S. Lewis’s *The Great Divorce* confirms the connection between literature and the Biblical canon, without eliminating the essence of the aesthetic. It questions the celebrities from “here” and “there” in the spirit of the problematisation of our inheritance (*i.e.*, the canon), which could be viable in other, unknown worlds, as well.

Then, the paradoxical nature of the canon can be justified through the publication of *Don Quixote*, the negative image of the chivalric novel, which stands at the intersection of convention and nonconformism (or even the rejection of the contemporary literary fashion). The blocked-in library in the hero’s home is the result of the distinctions drawn between various literary genres, as well as the hierarchical censorship which is supposed to save Don Quixote from madness. The creative potential of the classical story is resuscitated by Borges,

in *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*, where Cervantes's alter ego gains canonical authority by resorting to the prestige of his real-life double.

The final subchapter proposes an analysis of the mirages enacted by the canon(isation process), discussing once again the (non)conformist specificity of the authors and their exemplary texts. This time, the representative is the canonical Balzac. The mirage of success is illustrated by the protagonist of *Lost Illusions*, who is searching for fame no matter the cost or the risks (but who does not always embrace the consequences). His trajectory from the exoticism of the province to the fascination of the metropolis gives a new verdict in the still-ongoing debate regarding intercultural dialogue and, specifically, the peripheral voices coming to the fore as various inferiority complexes are finally exposed. The "feminine" talent is extrapolated in *The Muse of the Department*, a part of the same *Human Comedy*, where one's vocation is overshadowed by her gendered condition; the author turns this intrinsic disadvantage into a eulogy of the woman writer. A misunderstood genius, just like his protagonist from the short story *The Unknown Masterpiece*, Balzac contrasts the brilliant artist with the mediocre, uncomprehending public, showing that one's responsibility to the literary text only exists in relation to the ineffability, intangibility, and abyss of perfection.

Thus, the mirror(ed)-canon can only reveal its true depth when it is properly confronted, and when the reader is fully aware of their own position when analysing a literary representation or its reflections, renouncing all prejudice, which might otherwise obscure the desired image.

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