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Introduction

A Can(n)on in Need Is a Can(n)on Indeed

According to dictionaries, a 'cannon' is a device usually employed to break walls, whereas the slightly shorter word 'canon' seems to imply the opposite. Built out of fragile and composite raw materials such as rules, norms, measurements, conventions, names, judgments, beliefs, contentions, and much more, with the help of sophisticated machineries that include exegesis, gossip, salons, universities, magazines, academies, encyclopedias, and publishing houses, aesthetic canons are meant to make objects of art endure. Obviously, not all of them – just the ones supposed to deserve it. How is it possible to decide in a legitimate, acceptable way, on such a delicate matter?

Let us imagine a world with just a couple of dozen artists of all times: writers, painters, musicians, and so on. In this world, the sheer idea of an aesthetic canon would be considered a bizarre fantasy. Fortunately, this is not the case. We need canons – if we really need them – because we need to choose.

Raising immaterial or even material walls – libraries, museums, theaters, concert halls –, canons, past and present as well, are a matter of choice: value per square meter. But value itself, the core of all canons, is a highly controversial notion. Some would say that it is arbitrary, that it depends on our individual needs – the rest is either pretence or politics. Others would blame it, even worse, for being circumstantial; meaning that agreement upon value is controlled by the particular context in which this agreement is reached. From this point of view, politics becomes a central issue – it is no longer 'the rest', maybe just all there is to canon formation.

That is why most often canons resemble fortresses, both protective and defying strongholds, both vulnerable and menacing citadels. Many of them exhibit, above the entrance, the more or less conspicuous coat of arms of some local landlord.

'*Der Zeit ihre Kunst. Der Kunst ihre Freiheit*' – is written under the gilded dome of the Sezession building in Vienna. In order to render this highly problematic equation functional, time has to build and demolish simultaneously. 'To every epoch, its canons. To every canon, its cannons.'

What does the present-day battlefield of canonical encounters look like, after the fierce campaigns fought in the late sixties and during the eighties?

What is the impact of recent changes – in terms of (cultural) politics, literary production, and distribution, the status and mission of academic institutions etc. – on the structure and orientation of literary studies, reconsidering both their past and their future prospects? What are the gains and the losses, the opportunities and the perils, enhanced by the current tendencies to blur or even to suppress vertical as well as horizontal boundaries – between literary and literature-related genres, between aesthetic levels, between cultural communities? These were some of the major questions addressed by the participants in the international conference 'National Literatures in the Age of Globalization: The Issue of the Canon' organized at the end of 2008 by the Faculty of Letters, of the University of Bucharest. The papers delivered and the accompanying discussions at this meeting gave an impetus to the construction of the present volume. This explains why the primarily theoretical purport of this collective work is enhanced by a special focus, mainly in the last section of the volume, on the dynamics of Romanian literature.

I would like to emphasize from the very beginning that the arrangement of the materials in three separate sections does not impede at all the dialogue among essays with different main topics. The various streams of ideas which irrigate the surface and the depth of the volume across individual contributions are a natural consequence of the thick intertwining of the matters under discussion.

Not only do intersecting ideas and opinions bring the individual essays closer to each other, but they also outline a common approach, shared by most of the contributors. Instead of assertiveness, they would prefer to highlight the intricacies and even the paradoxes of the problems dealt with.

The first section is dedicated to the literary canon as such: its dilemmas in the contemporary world, especially related to endeavors to identify common denominators capable of (re)shaping the identity of European culture as a whole; its troublesome connection to theoretical thinking; its historical links to contiguous fields like fine arts and religion and their present-day relevance; its sensitivity to changes in sexuality and in politics; its possible affinity with other explanatory frames of cultural evolution; and, last but not least, the alleged criteria of canon formation, put under the scrutiny of on-going criticism.

The debates on canons of Dutch-language literature in recent years give *Theo D'haen* the opportunity to sketch a suggestive picture – tinted with a dash of charming irony – of the surprising, apparently highly idiosyncratic complications which arise when the task of canon formation is assumed rigidly. The comparison with the similar phenomenon, viewed on a larger scale, starting with the 1920s, in the United States – undoubtedly the most notorious example – reveals illuminating common traits. The most spectacular one is that the process of canon building is oriented not only

towards the past, but also towards the future. Very often canons are rooted in a societal 'ideal', in a collective project, much the same way that 'imagined communities' are born. We may learn a lot from the American experience, Theo D'haen suggests, especially about the particular hindrances to the attempts to construe – and construct – a European canon. The road towards such a daring, yet unavoidable enterprise is blocked not only by the feebleness of mutual contacts among the national cultures in Europe, but also by the absence of a 'European dream' comparable to the American one(s).

Rodica Mihăilă's essay completes and deepens Theo D'haen's discussion of the American canon. The author insists on the two final stages of canon building in the United States, the multicultural and the transnational one, as they reveal an evolution that might be considered symptomatic by/for the entire world. Canons have been always used not only to evince artistic 'peaks', but also to circumscribe the 'territories' which support their ascent. As aesthetic hierarchies are gradually levelled, the traditional implosive cultural – i.e., roughly speaking, national – geographies turn into explosive 'imaginary geographies'. 'American literature read as world literature, obsessed by the world and fully engaged in the world' – is this merely a new hypostasis of the already acknowledged 'American exceptionalism', or is it the premonition of a planetary 'new order' in the literary field, among others?

According to Theo D'haen, a successful European literary canon 'might serve as the catalyst for a newly emerging "world" literature'. The inverted commas, referring to the already obsolete notion of 'world literature', are significant. *William Franke* also underlines the contemporary necessity to rethink the notion of 'universality', the one which laid the foundation of *Weltliteratur* in Goethe's time. The 'transhistorical communicability of value', a basic prerequisite for writings to enter the canon, does not necessarily lead to the positing of landmarks beyond time and space, but rather to 'a universality that can be apprehended always only *in the making*', which 'might be more accurately called *omni*versality'. The redefined concept would no longer operate by exclusion, but 'rather by inclusion potentially with no restrictions', in the same paradoxical way in which theory, designed to forge and reshape concepts, is 'never merely theory. It is always also, at the same time, a practice'.

Quite in the same line with William Franke and with Theo D'haen runs *Caius Dobrescu*'s suggestion of a 'federalist phenomenology' aiming at the construction of a European literary canon. In order to 'promote supranational context-free "cold" values and at the same time preserve the "warmth" of a context-bound communal memory', the trumpeted 'celebration of diversity' will not suffice. A European canon should rather bring to light the 'European-ness', 'as a genuine and innerly-cohesive event of consciousness'. Therefore, it should be inclusive, by means of relevance, rather than exclusive, by means of abstract value hierarchies. Dobrescu's view of 'value-

as-experience' mirrors Franke's idea of 'universality *in the making*'. The phenomenological stand brings to the foreground works that have hall-marked deeply and persistently the intellectual life of the continent – the intellectualization of emotions, the exploration, and the exploitation of the Greco-Roman heritage, utopian thinking, alternative patterns of processing experience, and the interplay of various identities. A phenomenological approach also favors writings and writers who could aid to the construction of an imagology of Europe, perceived either by insiders or by outsiders.

Delia Ungureanu's comprehensive overview of criteria involved in critical controversies over the canon – Harold Bloom, Frank Kermode, Robert Alter, Geoffrey Hartman, John Guillory –, deployed under the provocative motto 'Is it necessary to have a literary canon today?', reaches the conclusion that 'the literary canon is not only useful nowadays, but also necessary'.

A survey of the canon both in visual arts and in literature enables *Adina Ciugureanu* to detect the (relatively) concurrent courses of both forms of artistic representation, although there may seem to be little in common between the perspectives of the two theorists the author of the essay mainly relies upon, Michel Foucault and Harold Bloom. The same difficulty is encountered by *Simona Drăgan* in her explicit attempt to compare the *episteme* model elaborated by Foucault in *Les mot et les choses* and the sequence of 'ages' identified by Bloom in *The Western Canon*. As a matter of fact, the very scarce, passing citations of the former by the latter are invariably polemical and deprecatory. Nevertheless, in spite of the blatant, admitted differences between the two thinkers, 'what suggests a strange similarity between them is this curious, *coincidental four-age division*' of the 'archeology of knowledge' and the panorama of the Western literary canon.

Zakaria Fatih's essay reminds the reader of the constant overlapping of literary studies and theological scholarship – e.g. in hermeneutics, the practice of interpretation of exemplary texts, be they secular, as Homer's epics, or sacred, as The Bible. Religious canon building has its closest counterpart in literature in the attempts at shaping the notion of the 'classics' – illustrated, in Fatih's paper, by the criticism of Saint-Beuve, T. S. Eliot and Kermode. These 'critics have relied, consciously or otherwise, on tools that have been used to define the religious canon; they also considered the corpus of literary classics as limited and sacred as if it were a body of Scriptures' – states Fatih. Is this position, overtly – and sometimes radically – exclusive, still defendable faced with the much more generous, but somehow vague, visions of inclusive canonicity, that prevail in present times? The cross-reading of the contributions in this respect may prompt further reflections on the inclusion-exclusion dialectics of canon formation.

A case study by *Frédéric Canovas* is meant 'to retrace the emergence of Cocteau's written and visual discourse on homosexuality as well as his

original role as a homosexual role model and perhaps the first global figure of what was going to become a new literary canon: the gay canon.' The essay focuses mainly on the most difficult task Cocteau had to face throughout his life in order to be able to freely and convincingly affirm his own vision of homosexual identity: parting with André Gide.

Magda Răduță scrutinizes the evolution of the literary field in the decade before and in the year after the collapse of communism in Romania. She finds that exceptional political circumstances, such as the rise and fall of a radical dictatorship, trigger unexpected effects in the literary community, such as the fact that, by the end of the '70s, the older, authoritative critics warmly encouraged the younger writers who rebelled against their generation, or that the abrupt end of the regime immediately put its former enemies among the writers under pressure to choose between an ethical and an aesthetical position regarding both the past and the future.

The studies collected in the second section of the volume deal with the present situation of comparative literature and the historical roots of discipline separation in the humanities.

'World literature is often regarded today as a global phenomenon, sometimes even seen as a cultural expression of an emerging "world system"' – states *David Damrosch* in the opening of his essay. The trouble is that this 'global phenomenon' – a 'work in progress', one may say – is perceived in strikingly different ways from various points of the globe, in various institutional contexts. Moreover, even in the same place and in the same milieu, localism and globalism may confront each other, generating contradictory vectors of perception. In the United States, David Damrosch remarks, comparatism is simultaneously Americentric – in the American anthologies of world literature, for example – and Amerifugal – e.g. in the contents of specialized periodicals. Analyzing the scholarly comparatist practices in India and China, Damrosch recommends a multicentric view on world literature, sustained by 'a double movement, both inward and outward', enabling the strengthening of the links to one's own culture, on the one hand, and the widening of the scope of inquiry to the 'varieties of comparatist practice' on the other hand.

Scrutinizing a rich set of definitions of the term 'globalization', *Dumitru Radu Popa* argues that the reality referred to by this 'buzzword', 'even a treacherous word' is not as recent a phenomenon as one may believe. The author refuses to take the idea of globalization as a skeleton key to open all the either alluring or disquieting doors of the future, parallel to the refusal of the current 'exceptionalist' image of the present – itself not an utterly new state of mind. Instead, Popa supports an invigorating and balanced view of the changes comparative literature has been undergoing in contemporary times, neither as an agonizing discipline, nor as the awaited savior of mankind.

Oana Fotache adds to the discussion of the relationship between globalization and literary studies an analysis of the various meanings the notion of 'global literature' has acquired in different cultural and academic fields: literary sociology, postcolonial and diaspora studies, popular culture and, last but not least, comparative literature. Contrasting 'global literature' with the more familiar concept of 'world literature', Fotache proposes that the former 'gestures towards its general readership', whereas the latter 'is a matter of critical response and canon'. Roughly speaking, 'global' points to present time, while 'world literature' is oriented towards the past. The two related notions may be regarded as the result of a continuously gliding focus, with the 'present' permanently turning into the 'past', giving thus a profitable theoretical insight in the ambivalent process of canon formation and preservation.

Although she is an academic deeply involved in the advances of interdisciplinary cultural studies in Romania, *Mihaela Irimia* advocates the status of disciplinarity in researching literature. In her opinion, the specific disciplines of literary studies derive from a long-term process, comprising 'the emergence, sedimentation and institutionalization of *literature* and the accreditation of the *classic modern canon*', both phenomena described 'as embedded in (cultural) history'. Following the path of what is called 'the long modernity', Irimia notes that 'In the mid-1700s the disciplines, like the literary canon, come into being as they are still with us, albeit undergoing sea changes like never before'.

Stefan H. Uhlig pushes the history of disciplinarity in literary studies a step further. Mainly interested, in the first part of his essay, in the metamorphoses of intersecting and competing notions such as 'literature', 'letters' and 'poetry', Uhlig argues that a crucial phase is the first half of the 19th century, when German and English universities 'largely start to teach the subject "literature" by way of, or indeed through literary history', while American and Scottish colleges (and, in their own fashion, the French universities, too) choose rhetoric as the appropriate frame for teaching literature. One of the consequences of the fact that the German and English approach gradually won out over the alternative choice was the modeling of *literature* as 'an overwhelmingly descriptive, academic concept quite unlike, say, *poetry* or *rhetoric*'.

The contributions gathered in the third section of the volume pinpoint multiple facets of the contemporary obsession with 'borders': the ups and downs of the allegedly 'high' versus 'low' or 'popular' forms of art, the paradoxes of value assessments when cultures with different value criteria or frames of reference come within touching distance of each other, and the cultural politics and strategies to promote the 'marginals'.

Elaine Martin then discusses 'the potential demise of (serious) literature – and, with it, of the very concept of a canon – due to both the growing

hegemony of image media over text media and the overwhelming rise of popular culture as a whole'. Although experts in literature may still indulge in skepticism about the (sudden) overthrow of the written word by the image – a sort of apocalypse already prophesied decades ago – they can no longer ignore what is happening under their very eyes: the worldwide decrease of reading, the amalgamation of media – the symbiotic relation between literary works and film, the graphic novel etc. –, and the expressive forms facilitated by the new technologies – self-publishing, blogging and so on. Is this development a menace or a new opportunity for comparatists?

Ion Manolescu backs up Elaine Martin's advocacy of popular culture in more polemical terms. Deploring Romanian literary critics' and historians' lack of interest in the remarkable achievements of some of their country-fellows, creators of comics, Manolescu blames their 'blindness' on the (hidden) criteria of canonicity they operate with, firmly disavowing these criteria as 'prejudices': the elitist prejudice, the prejudice of the closed canon and the prejudice of undisputed aesthetic authority of 'high' genres.

A momentous situation of failed intercultural dialogue is studied by *Alexandra Vrânceanu*. The Romanian writer Panait Istrati was highly appreciated in France, where he lived as an expatriate between the two World Wars, while Romanian critics of the time either ignored his writings, or harshly rejected them. At the same time, the novelist, playwright and poet Camil Petrescu, the champion of Romanian Modernism, contemporary to Istrati, remained practically unknown to both critics and readers in France, in spite of the close relations connecting the two cultures at that time. The explanation, according to Vrânceanu, lies in the dissymmetry of these relations. The Romanian authors and critics were willing to enter the mainstream, which meant, at that time, French Modernism (above all, Proust), while French readers and critics expected from Romanian authors rather crude stories and exoticism.

Ileana Orlich's essay deals with Camil Petrescu's best known novel, *The Bed of Procrustes*. The complementary enigmas of the two main male characters of the novel – an old-fashioned poet fallen in love with a trivial and frivolous prostitute and a fashionable young intellectual and sportsman, unable to nourish a love affair in which he seems to be deeply entangled – are considered tokens of the crisis of masculinity also recognizable, in a psychoanalytical reading, in the writings of Baudelaire, Pound and Eliot.

Roumiana Stantcheva draws attention to the perils raised by the strategies often used by literary critics belonging to 'central' cultures in their endeavor to promote authors and writings stemming from 'peripheral' cultures. Their attempts to describe and evaluate such works by means of comparisons that bring the unfamiliar closer to the familiar – i.e. famous reference points of the Western canon – run the risk of stereotyping and leveling, in the extreme, of absorbing the richness of cultural diversity into one single pattern.

What are the most effective cultural politics to employ in order for the literary products of less-known cultures to reach a larger international audience? According to *Cristina Balinte*, one should emphasize affinities with broader, regional cultural frames and stimulate exchange programs conceived according to mutual interests.

Ioana Both criticizes the premises underlying the current strategies to promote the creation of the most celebrated Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu. According to Ioana Both, the highly apologetic, self-centered presentations of Eminescu as an epiphany of 'Romanian-ness' are less convincing than a reader-oriented comparative approach 'which would put him in the company of consecrated and accessible names from universal literature.'

Translated anthologies are a powerful means of widening cultural awareness, expanding the boundaries inherent to the process of canon formation. *Mădălina Vatcu* shows in her contribution how such literary collective volumes can miss the target, however, when they are biased by inner political demands. This is the case of most of the anthologies of Romanian literature translated into French during the communist period.

Teachers of literature tend to recommend both extensive and intensive reading to their students, in spite of the fact that reading fiction has become a rather obsolete activity nowadays. Although we are convinced that it is worth spending a lot of time with books, we encounter serious difficulties in making our point clear. What is literature meant for? Should it please? Is it meant to open our eyes towards the world we live in and towards our own selves? Should it mould our souls? Is it meant to refine our minds, our thinking? Should it expand our limited existence? Is it meant to unite different people or does it separate people in emphasizing differences, between individuals, between cultures?

Canons, disciplines and cultural borders are all spectres of our inquietude about the fate of literary reading. Recurrent in our daily questions, they continuously challenge us to find provisional answers.

For the time being, allow me to express my gratitude to Oana Fotache from the Faculty of Letters, Bucharest, to Mihaela Doagă from the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Bucharest and to Florin Bican, from the National Book Center of the Romanian Cultural Institute, Bucharest, who selflessly and expertly helped the present volume take shape.