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POETICS OF THE RETURN:
ON THE FORMATION
OF LITERARY CANON

The canon debates of the 1980s and 1990s have divided the Western academic world into traditionalists and relativists. The traditionalist aesthetic theory of canon formation is based on the underlying notions of value and quality. Thus, Harold Bloom's classical books 'The Western Canon' and 'The Anxiety of Influence' may serve as examples of the traditionalist approach. According to Bloom, the strong authors form the literary tradition by *creative misreading* of their predecessors' work. Bloom's description of the tradition as an imaginary field of mutual attraction-repulsion goes back to T. S. Eliot's and the New Criticist understanding of great authors as contemporaries who exist simultaneously in reader's consciousness. Informational (semantical) 'density', openness to the interpretation and the multiplicity of interpretations provoked by the text are the other signs of canonicity for traditionalists. The politically biased traditionalists may resort to the criteria of cultural literacy and social stability. In this case praxis becomes the main criterion of canon formation: the texts which are appropriate for reading in the class or which ensure linguistic homogeneity of the society are defined as 'canonical' texts. The ethically biased traditionalists underscore pluralism of the canon: the canon is seen not as an ideological monolith, but as a flexible formation. It itself is the subject of critical debates and is liable to different interpretations and practical usages. The diversity and the range of ethical positions available within the canon make its main value¹. Traditionalism bases itself on the representative role of the classical text: the text is representative of certain aesthetic and ethical values mediated by

¹ This approach is discussed, for example, in: Merold Westphal, „The canon as flexible, normative fact“, in: *Monist*, October 1993, vol. 76, issue 4, 1993; М. Д. Гронас, „Война за канон в американской академии 80–90-х годов“, in: *Новое литературное обозрение*, nr. 51, p. 6–18.

tradition and thus relatively independent of the immediate social context. An emphasis on the critical function of literature is typical of the 'negative' version of traditionalism. Thus, according to T. Adorno's conception, art imitates the forms of the outside world to erode them from the inside, to free them from the compulsory identity.

The relativists argue that the canon is only a cultural artefact, a matter of social agreement. They emphasize that literary value is socially constituted and constantly variable. It is constituted differently for different groups and communities at different times². The relativists-reformers demand inclusion of the verbal art of the marginalized groups into the canon. Famous John Guillory ('Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation', 1993) employs Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the cultural capital to explain the functioning of the canon. Guillory argues that the absence of canonical texts is the problem of cultural and educational monopoly, i.e. institutional practices that underlie canons: it is the consequence, not the cause. The case when marginality as such becomes a major criterion for literary value is highly questionable. Actually the so-called marginalized groups, e.g. ethnic minorities most often have their own canonical texts, although not necessarily written ones: oral stories, elements of folklore and epics, etc.

One may notice certain regularity in the alternation of the conservative and the radical, or otherwise traditionalist and relativist, positions in the society life: the relativists who initiated the academic revolt of the 1980s and 1990s and formally won the case were people who studied in the academy in the 1960s. The contemporary rise of neo-conservatism creates a market for cultural reassurances and brings forth a new wave of interest in the traditional values. It seems that each approach supplements the others and would be one-sided without them. The canon controversy overgrows the narrow political framework. It embraces complicated cultural issues and discloses some hidden nuances of literary canonicity.

In what follows I am going to outline some basic implications of the canon controversy and make a few additional remarks on the immanent logic of canon formation. Even semantics of the word 'canon' provokes different readings and multiple definitions. As E. R. Anderson and

² S.H. Olsen, „The canon and artistic failure“, in: *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2001, p. 261–262.

G. Zanetti have shown in their interesting article³, the 'canon' refers either to the 'model' (a collection of rules) or to a set (a selection) of the authoritative texts. Or, otherwise, from the point of view of semantic analysis, 'within the extensional mode of discourse, a canon is expressed in terms of examples or specimens; within the intensional mode, a canon is expressed in terms of attributes'⁴. Within the intensional mode, the 'bird' might be defined according to its 'birdness' understood either as the form imposed on every one of its material examples or as an ideal made manifest in its material examples in varying degree of perfection (imperfection). From this point of view, there are 'model birds' and 'bad birds' or 'non-birds' (penguins, ostriches, etc.). On the contrary, within the extensional mode, the 'bird' is defined as the set of individual examples or a conventional label for anything that is specified as a bird: penguins and ostriches are as much birds as are 'model birds'. As Anderson and Zanetti argue, the notion of the 'canon' is to be defined only within the intensional mode, i.e. according to the rules and degree of canonicity. Yet it seems to me that in the real historical praxis and especially within the broader understanding of the canon as a 'corpus of the classical texts', literary 'penguins' and 'ostriches' have equal chance to enter the canon. Both the author who consciously constructs his literary behavior as marginal and the author whose work is subordinated to the established set of norms may be canonized.

In his article 'The canonical art as an informational paradox' in which he deals with folklore, classicist and other highly iterative textual forms, J. Lotman argues that in contrast with ordinary speech the canonical texts are not codified on the plane of content but are highly organized on the plane of expression⁵. Otherwise, to use Saussure's terminology, they have no 'language' system, i.e. the primary articulation, and have only speech or secondary articulation, like music and cinema texts. Therefore the role of the listener or reader becomes especially significant for the functioning of canonical texts. The canonical text aims at restructuring the addressée's experience. Its effect depends

³ Anderson, Earl R. & Zanetti, Gianfrancesco, „Comparative Semantic Approaches to the Idea of a Literary Canon“, in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 2000, nr. 58, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

⁵ Ю. М. Лотман, *Каноническое искусство как информационный парадокс*, in: *Избранные статьи*, т. 1. Таллинн: Александра, 1992, p. 243–247.

primarily on its performance. The very semantic vagueness and openness of the canonical text provokes different readings and entails the growth of information. I would add that in modern literature canonization occurs mostly via intertextual codification, which includes, on the one hand, revision, rewriting, recasting, and segmentation, formation of cycles, poetization of dates, on the other.

The canonic text functions as 'speechform' or the form of expression within the framework of the canonizing gesture. Thus, pagan gods emerge in Christian texts under the guise of demons, which testifies to the persistent authority of the pagan myth. The latter serves as a speech form endowed with the Christian meaning. There are also striking examples of religious syncretism and re-interpretation of pagan myths in the Christian tradition (Amour and Psyche as human soul's love of God, Orpheus as Christ, etc.). As the German scholars Jan and Aleida Assmann argue, 'tradition' or canonicity is never accumulated in the cultural memory of the past: it is reconstructed from the present⁶. A digression or deviation is the inevitable effect of the 'canonizing return': the kinetic energy of history itself produces the digression. According to the Assmanns, the digression or the 'creeping change' of the traditional forms of life and culture is slow and invisible: it occurs beyond the threshold of the 'collective consciousness'. Therefore a certain homeostasis, an image of *status naturalis* persists in the society despite the drastic changes within the tradition. I would add that *the very rhetorical figure* of the 'canonizing return' confirms the authority of the canonical text, establishes a virtual identity between the canonical text and the text, which refers to it and thus fixes and legitimizes the deviation.

The fact that the canonizing gesture itself establishes the virtual authenticity of the text is evident in the case of literary forgeries and mystifications, which sometimes produce long and prolific traditions (e.g. the Ossianism in Europe, Vaclav Hanka's forgery of the Medieval Czech poetry, etc.). Romantic references to the 'authentic' sources – folk stories and legends – are often only the gestures of etiquette of the commitment to the tradition. Thus, the gesture of the 'deviating return' is obvious in N. Gogol's re-workings of the Ukrainian folklore,

⁶ Ассман, Алейда и Ассман, Ян, *Канон и цензура*, in: *Немецкое философское литературоведение наших дней. Антология*, Санкт-Петербург: Издательство С.-Петербургского университета, 2001, p. 125–155.

especially in the 'Dikanka tales' ('Evenings on the Farm near Dikanka') and in 'Mirgorod'. Gogol's narrator often introduces the tale as the real and authentic folk story, which he is going to tell without any changes in its 'initial simplicity'. Gogol's Ukrainian tales established his reputation of the most original Russian prose writer of the 1830s. Yet critics scolded Gogol for the 'distortion' of the authentic folk material. Despite multiple Indo-European (Celtic, Ossetic, Slavic) mythological parallels to the image of Vii⁷, there is no 'authentic story', which might correspond to Gogol's tale. 'The Terrible Revenge' is a story of the ancient murder, the inherited sin, which spreads throughout generations and infects even the Ukrainian heroic 'kighthood' of Cassocks (*kazachestvo*). However, as Andrei Belyi observes in his book on Gogol⁸, the protagonist of the story – the damned sorcerer – is suspiciously similar to an alchemist or a Renaissance master of 'secret sciences'. According to Belyi, it is quite possible that sorcerer's manuscripts (neither Russian nor Polish) are written in German or French, the black liquid he is used to drink is coffee, the cause of sorcerer's refusal from traditional food is vegetarianism, etc. Thus Belyi projects all 'supernatural' details of the story onto the real objects. The dead ancestors of the damned family rising from their graves everywhere from Kiev to the Carpathians are too numerous: this is almost the whole Ukrainian people. Belyi presumes that Gogol's story is an essential modernization of the original legend and its actual topic is the hostile reaction of the patriarchal community to the European Renaissance culture. However problematic Belyi's sociological interpretation may seem, its main point is rather interesting. It aims at showing the historical context behind the 'academic allegory' of the blind bard singing of the 'glorious past'. It is well known fact today that apart from folk stories, Christian legends and medieval mystery plays the important source of Gogol's inspiration was the German Romantic literature, especially the genre of *Kunstmärchen* and Gothic horror fiction. Romantic irony is inherent in Gogol's re-valuation of the past. Yet the canonizing gesture toward the common sources of the Slavic and Western European Romanticism is also evident in his work.

⁷ See В. В. Иванов, *Об одной параллели к гоголевскому Вию*, in: *Труды по знаковым системам*, 5, Тарту: Издательство Тартуского университета, 1971, p. 133–142.

⁸ Андрей Белый, *Мастерство Гоголя*, Москва: МАЛП, 1996, p. 80–81, the 1st edition 1934.

The canonization 'through negation' is rather typical of the postmodernist fiction as well. The twofold mocking-laudatory gesture of canonization is especially prominent in literatures of the former Soviet space, where, on the one hand, the postmodern wave of deconstruction of the 'great narratives' rises in the 1990s, and, on the other hand, the need to restore and to fix the past is urgent. Hence, for example, the numerous parodic reworkings and travesties of the national epic 'Kalevipoeg' in the Estonian literature. One of the bright phenomena of the Estonian postmodernist literature, Andrus Kivirähk's fiction, is another example of the mocking-laudatory travestic 'replay' of the past. In 'The Memoirs of Ivan Orav', the epic style, mythological clichés and folklore loci communes are employed as a means for travestic inversion. The chapters, which contain the description of the Russian occupation, may be read as a thematization of the Estonian folklorist Oskar Loort's dictum about the Russians as a 'steppe people' and the Estonians as a 'forest people'. The Russians appear and disappear suddenly as the enormous, chaotic mass of microscopic and macroscopic creatures from the outside space. The Estonians hide themselves in the woods, acquire ability for mimicry and metamorphose into forest spirits. The cliché of industry as an inborn trait of the Estonian character is travestied in Orav senior's behavior: Ivan's father cannot wait for spring and starts planting potatoes in January. Estonian heroes demonstrate exaggerated courage: general Laidoner attacks the battleship 'Potemkin' on horseback. Andrus Öövel burns his hand, like Gaius Mucius Scaevola, to test his tenacity⁹. During the Russian invasion president Päts flies into sky as a bird and turns into the Great Bear constellation (an obvious allusion to the King Arthur's cycle). Jaan Tõnisson, a prominent figure of the Estonian culture, disappears in the seawater¹⁰. The fisherman tells he will come back in the golden armory after the Russians are gone from Estonia (a travestic inversion of the epic cliché: the hero comes back to free his people). The text is considerably detached from its mythological and epic canonical sources, but the borrowing of the speech form, the deviating return, the originatory gesture is sufficient to establish its canonical status in the contemporary Estonian literature: the text provokes multiple interpretations, enters the school program and is studied at the university. Thus, the canonizing return is a result

⁹ Andrus Kivirähk, *Ivan Orava mälestused*, Tallinn: Varrak, 2001, p. 21, 182.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58, 60.

of a mutual adaptation of the art tradition and institutional practice: both are liable to a „sreeping change“ in the process. Text reception, t.e. its fixation as a fact of literature, music or visual art, changes the configuration of the field of culture.

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