

Canon omnibus

RAREȘ MOLDOVAN

I REMEMBER A well-known Romanian writer's intervention about the canon at a literary colloquium years ago. It was funny, or so it appeared to the dozens of people present, bar a few critics and academics of the more morose persuasion. He said that the canon was like a "bus" ambushed by a great many people trying to get on, while others were clever enough to overtake it in sleek luxury cars. Although there may have been some truth in this playful analogy about the smart circumvention of canonic authority in the Romanian cultural (and political, for that matter) imaginary, it does seem somehow incongruous with the, so to speak, canonical view upon the matter, which is generally shared by the academia and which decrees that nothing travels faster than the Canon Omnibus. In fact, it travels so fast, that once you've managed to scramble onboard and found a seat in the small section still unoccupied—most seats containing the sanctified and mummified remains of venerable people—you've *already*, as they say, arrived. One wonders if the Canon Omnibus actually needs to move at all, and whether there is a discernible destination at all.

Maybe the writer was merely joking to annoy the critics, or maybe he was referring indirectly to an infusion of fresh blood in the Romanian literary canon, which was at the time faced with the destinal question: "Who should make it into the textbooks?" In other words, his analogy was perhaps a response to the issue of the relation between the canon and the present, which rings acutest in a pedagogical sense, rather than in a theoretical one. The problem of the canon today (that is, as related to a present) appears to be of importance for the history and teaching of literature rather than for its theory or for the social dissemination of literature. This restricts, but not by much, the range of the problem: in fact, the literary canon was always only a problem and a stumbling block within the academia, its wars waged in this small combustion chamber, while other systems—first of all the publishing system, then the literary criticism outside the university and the system of promoting and distributing literature via media and bookshops, as well as reception by the general readership—moved quickly past it. But the fact that it was only "academic" does not make it immaterial.

The canon as a theoretical problem seems to have been put to rest. The canon wars, spanning the late 1980s and the 1990s, were fought on a "dialectical battlefield," to borrow a Kantian phrase, on which numerous theoretical rounds were fired, and a great deal of homonymous fun & pun was had by all: "loose canons," "firing the literary canons," "canon fodder," "aiming a canon at the curriculum," "canons to the right of them, canons to the left," to quote just a few examples.¹ It is less clear if the war

was won and by whom, especially because the meaning of victory changes from one combatant to the other, even for people supposedly on the same side.

There is no need to go into details; the history of the phenomenon has been already told, concisely and convincingly, for instance by E. Dean Kolbas.² Incidentally, the fact that we already have histories about this, and that we have had for some time, indicates perhaps that the conflict has ceased, that the problematic nature of the canon has been neutralized or “absorbed” into a cultural history.

Nevertheless, the question arises: in the canon wars, was it the canon as a *theoretical* problem that was at stake? The very possibility of a partition between the purely theoretical and the ideological is doubtful, even if we disagree with the well-known assertion that every theoretical position is (in)formed by a subterranean or manifest ideological stance. With the canon being a hotspot of recent cultural agitation, it is likely that the theoretical physiognomy of the canon was going to be “always already,” as the famous phrase goes, imbued with cultural politics. One should not forget that the whole debate began as a political reflection on the state of the humanities.³ In fact, Kolbas goes on to show not only how each round and each point of view can be traced back to their respective ideological biases, but also—more surprisingly—the “ideological proximity” between the two sides:

In conclusion, despite their apparent antinomy, the liberal-pluralistic and conservative-humanistic arguments for preserving or revising the literary canon betray several striking affinities. Essentially, they either conceive of the canon in idealistically aesthetic terms, with little or no reference to objective historical and material conditions, or they appropriate the canon for the purposes of political or pedagogical pragmatism, without regard to the functionless or mediated aspects of art in modernity. What tends to be neglected in eager claims to open the canon are the material constraints of canon formation.⁴

Directing the spotlight towards the material constraints of canon formation gives Kolbas the chance to rebuild an interesting critical theory of the canon in the footsteps of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. It also indicates one of the ways out of the canon problem, which is concomitantly an opportunity to reshape the canon as a theoretical problem. In reviewing the story of the canon debate, one cannot fail to notice that the things that were passed over most easily—as is to be expected in the heat of the battle—were theoretical attention and rigor, often rendering the argument mere interest couched in an ersatz of theory. It is when the cannons have fallen silent that the inspection of the battlefield and the clear view of what remains become possible. Thus, the aftermath of the canon wars constitutes the terrain on which several developments can be observed. Mapping this terrain is an ongoing endeavor in the academia, and I would like merely point certain effects of the late debate around the canon, which provide openings for a further theoretical understanding.

As is well known, the most notable result of the canon wars, taken by many as a sign of victory, was the revision or the opening of curricula to previously non-canonical subject areas, authors and texts. While this may satisfy the demands for pluralism, diversity, non-elitism, and the integration of marginals, it leaves the format of the canon—more importantly, its implicit understanding—virtually unchallenged, and in a way it leaves the theoretical spoils to the defeated. The canon is still the old Omnibus. The Omnibus is still the destination. The pleasure of recognition and the pleasure of arrival are still the main

goals. If the newly arrived make it on board, who cares what the bus looks like from the outside. The same bus that yesterday seemed so outdated and urgently in need of replacement. However, having arrived, having a place in an enlarged “canon”—*omnibus* in its Latin meaning here—does not automatically imply *canonization*, as Kolbas poignantly argues:

The gesture of liberally claiming recent or “recovered” texts to be deservedly or spontaneously canonical—whether for exciting sudden critical interest or for representing culturally disenfranchised groups—is therefore misleading to the extent that it underestimates the control of institutions upon which canonization depends.

Canonicity requires an historical quality that is not so quickly obtained. What newly acclaimed works lack—no less than those that have belatedly become, or had once been, popular—is a cumulative history, a continuum of judgments and rewritings over extended periods of time.⁵

The concept of *cumulativity*, which Kolbas borrows from Bourdieu, points to something that cannot be changed by the mere opening of the doors: the very mechanics of its formation is its quality of being historical (an idea that Frank Kermode explores in *Forms of Attention*). The canon can therefore be re-appraised theoretically from a *hermeneutical* vantage point, one that can be discussed in the light of what Gadamer called a “history of effects,” and *canonization* as the final effect of “judgments and rewritings.” Such an operation does away with the dubious ahistoricity of the canon, and opens it to histories of its formation and operation. The Canon Omnibus doesn’t run on an eternal power-source, rather it is pushed along by all the people that it passes by.

Is an enlarged canon still a canon? It is and it isn’t. It retains—ideally, that is, as a cultural projection—some of its attributes (as *the place to be*, and *that which shall be taught*)—it loses others, not just ahistoricity, but the logic of selection as well. It replaces this with the logic of inclusion, of course, but this term proves under scrutiny to be just as ambiguous. Inclusion, or incorporation may satisfy group identity claims, but in the academia it comes also from other, ultimately incalculable variables (just as the ones of selection used to be), although of a different nature: affinity for instance. It’s an issue that deserves attention, but one that might require we abandon the Omnibus altogether and walk alongside others for a while. What I’m trying to say is that some of the things that are included and some of the people that want them included are not grouped like political parties or ethnic groups, but like a fandom.

To give an example: a collection of essays entitled *Science Fiction, Canonization, Marginalization, and the Academy* was published in 2002, and by reading some of these essays one would think that there are regions where the old front is still active. Let me quote from one of the papers, “Literary Gatekeepers and the Fabril Tradition,” by Tom Shippey: “All of us who work with science fiction, I am sure, have a store of insults to record from those in authority. Perhaps the award for the crassest example should go to Sheila Finch’s senior colleague, who said to her, after she published her first science fiction work, ‘I hope your next book is a real novel.’”⁶

Are the sci-fi people to be the Preterite of the Canon Omnibus? Has the news of the imperial peace not yet reached the farthest provinces and its obtuse gatekeepers? Is there

guerilla war on (quite the sci-fi scenario)? It's more than just *Star Wars* with academics, though, because even if the canon were "widened," Shippey muses, if it truly became "an omnibus," or *omnibus*, the position of the newcomers would still be marginal. Shippey sidesteps elegantly this position of eternal plaintiff that often mars the efforts of cultural theory, by providing a wonderful analysis of a seminal text for sci-fi, Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* in relation to the canon itself, to canonic writers, from Homer to Horace, to Milton, to Swift, by displaying the literary text itself as the accomplished undermining of a "hegemonic canon," by beginning to shape what he calls "the fabril tradition."⁷

There is a tipping point, there comes a moment of understanding that the Omnibus must go, that, really, who would like to get on *that* thing? The case of science fiction is a telling symptom of the situation, one that reveals, quite against the apparent grain, that the war really is over, or rather, to borrow an apt phrase from Thomas Pynchon, that the war was "reconstituted as peace." This means that the situation of the canon conflict is taken up again, and taken in a different direction, utilized as a reconstructed basis for new theoretical work. The problem of *the* Canon might have been exhausted, but, encouragingly, this leaves the form of the canonical situation as a possible theoretical tool, and also as a territory fertile for true historical exploration. It is not by chance, I would argue, that in the aftermath of the 1990s an increasing number of books about the making of the canon, or to be precise, the making of certain canons, for instance Trevor Ross's very interesting study about the *Making of the English Literary Canon: From the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century*.⁸ We witness, therefore, a shift of emphasis, in which the canon ceases to be a center of dispute for cultural politics and becomes a theme of peaceful cultural-historical morphology. The break-up of the Canon omnibus into multiple mini-canons to be explored dispels tension in the cultural force-field, and ensures the continued operations of the system of cultural practice. Culture as system is the great pacifier, because it can swallow up old conflicts and churn out new "constellations." The situation, quite surprisingly, echoes the time of origin when the canon was in the making. If canon-making as a modern enterprise goes hand in hand with the affirmation of national literatures, we also see today a return of discourses about national and local canonicity: the Canadian canon, the Australian canon, the native-American canon, and so forth. Is it, then, a return of the modern under new guise? This is another question that our round table might consider.

Since I used the word modern, let me refer very briefly to another point on the agenda, the relation between canon and modernity. To a detached observer, the canon wars do indeed appear to bring forth the final throes of something modern: a vision upon literature and a whole and wholly modern conception of culture as cultivation struggling against their embedded improbabilities, politically unmasked by the adversaries, who expose the shifting sand under these edifices. These improbabilities include the refashioning of aesthetic theory and a general theory of literary value that would exclude historical and cultural contingency. The "older dispensation," as Frank Kermode called it in *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon*,⁹ which used to enable modern criticism, is untenable, to preserve it would be a gesture of Kantian stubbornness. The residual *Aufklärung* in the project of the literary Canon (which was made *omnibus*, i.e. "for all") could never compete with an economy of "pleasure" and "change," an economy of desires, interests and preferences that cannot be satisfied by the logic of the

modern canonic list. In this line of thought, the history of the canon debate can be seen as “the dissolution of a form,” to use Hegel’s phrase from his lectures on aesthetics, and the emergence of a sphere or system in which players on the field observe the desires, preferences and observations of other players in a recursive and ceaseless motion. The theoretical problem of the canon here becomes the problem of observing theoretically a dynamics of endless receptions; we either “play ball” or decide to leave the field, but there are no penalties whatever we decide. Even “resentment” is a mode of reception that can be integrated, even stubborn moderns are welcome to observe and play.

In turn, this raises questions about legitimation, or rather if legitimation is still an issue in this game. The Canon was the modern legitimation game with everything vested in it, the stakes were high; under the “new dispensation,” all cultural contents are pre-legitimated, the limits of the expanding field are, to use another Kantian syntagm, “mere negations,” negated every time. One cannot control or forbid access to content, one cannot de-legitimize the desires, interests and affinities of others, but one may never discard the issue of value resurfacing, or of any other “modern” trait returning. One observes that this is what happens when we have dismantled the omnibus and scattered its parts all over the parking lot. □

Notes

1. See also Lilian S. Robinson, “Firing the Literary Canons,” in *Insight on the News*, 29 (1994).
2. E. Dean Kolbas, *Critical Theory and the Literary Canon* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2001), 25–59.
3. Kolbas, *Critical Theory*, 26–7.
4. Kolbas, *Critical Theory*, 58.
5. Kolbas, *Critical Theory*, 77.
6. Tom Shippey, “Literary Gatekeepers and the Fabril Tradition,” in *Science Fiction, Canonization, Marginalization, and the Academy* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 7.
7. “Fabril is easily defined. It is the dark, alien, Other of pastoral ... Pastoral is about people, in a state of nature, with animals and plants. Fabril is largely about made things, artifacts. Pastoral is of course based on the pastor, the ‘good shepherd,’ fabril on *the faber*, the maker: often the blacksmith, the metal-beater, but also the Moreau, the manipulator of biology and even of society,” in Shippey, “Literary Gatekeepers,” 17.
8. Trevor Ross, *The Making of the English Literary Canon: From the Middle Ages to the Late Eighteenth Century* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998).
9. Frank Kermode, *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Abstract

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The paper explores the dismantling of the problem of the literary canon in recent years, after the canon wars of the nineties, the resurfacing of replicating canon problems in specialized areas of “literature,” and the relevance of the canon issue in a literary landscape that no longer abides by the mechanics of canonic selection.

Keywords

literary theory, literary canon, canon wars, legitimation, modernity