The Canon – Inquisitive and Adaptive: A Re-Definition From the Perspective of Consistent Skepticism

Prof. univ.dr. Caius DOBRESCU
Universitatea din București

Abstract: The problem of the canon has been traditionally seen as alluding to a form of explicit or implicit consistency. The traditional meaning of the canon depends on a sense of cohesiveness of values and norms, being connected to a given understanding of the architecture of the universe, in the manner in which per- and earlyamodern political philosophy used the notion of „constitution" with respect not to a textual corpus of principles and norms, but to the very structure of o society that „naturally" embodies principles and norms. In modern times, with the rise of the nation states, the canon is seen as a collection of remarkable, ground-breaking intellectual and artistic achievements, that are supposed to convene spontaneously on basic ethical orientations, or at least similar moral sentiments.

My paper argues that this modes of construing the canon could be supplanted by a „negative" understanding of commonality and consistency. On the one hand, I propose that the mind of a literary epoch might be forged rather by the problems that the thinkers and artists resent as central (in a definition of centrality that equates it with: the most disquieting). On the other hand, I argue that the cohesiveness obtained through a literary canon is best understood as a community of doubt, a manner of circumscribing shared uncertainties and felt vulnerabilities, rather than a positive consensus.

Keywords: *Canon-building, indetermination, hazards, uncertainty, unpredictability, ambiguity, cultural conflict*

In the 1970s, the efforts of defining terrorism within the frames of the UNO charter hurt against the famous principle "the terrorist of some is the other ones' freedom fighter" (Freedman 1976). The global polemics thus ensued, as lively today as in its troublesome wake, can be related also to the problem of the canon. Being a matter not only of producing a name list, of summing up exceptional achievements, but of fundamental values, the problem of the literary canon could not be immune to larger social polemics.

Such as, if we consider the Romanian context, the post-Communist attempts, not without roots in the nationalist agenda of the Ceaușescu regime (Tismaneanu 2003), of rehabilitating marshall Ion Antonescu, the

pro-Nazi dictator that inspired the war against the Soviet Union. Even if from a Western perspective the culpabilities of WWII are definitively dispensed, the local public opinion is still split on this military dictator of the early 1940s: a patriot on the lines of Finnish national hero general Mannerheim for some, he is a war criminal and an epitome of anti-Semitism and anti-liberalism for others.

A related polemics sending waves through the entire Romanian civil society is the one concerning the Law 21/2015, "concerning the interdiction of organizations and symbols with a Fascist, racist, or xenophobic character, and of the promotion of the cult of persons that have been convicted for crimes against peace and humanity." This law explicitly forbids the celebration of persons and symbols connected not only to Fascism in general, but to its specifically Romanian instantiation of the 1930s, and to the pro-Nazi military dictatorship of the early 1940s (Totok&Macovei 2016). Highly suggestive for the topic of the present debate is the fact that the passionate opponents of this law invoked the prestige of authors with an international prestige, such as historian of religions and novelist Mircea Eliade, the philosopher Emil Cioran, or Vintilă Horia, an author who, as a political exile, won the prestigious French Gouncourt, a literary prize that he turned down consequent to the pressures made by the Communist Romanian embassy on the grounds of the Fascist allegiances of his youth. The polemics carried not only on the weight and significance of the right-wing, pro-German or anti-Semitic convictions expressed in the work ofthe above-mentioned, but also on the sloppy distinction between the agents of xenophobic hate-speech, and the alleged genuine patriots of the nationalistic movements, from the 1930s so-called Legionnaires, to the anti-Communist paramilitary resistance of the 1950s (Andreescu 2003).

An equally telling and salient example is the discord surrounding the heritage of the Communist epoch. The attitudes toward this highly uncomfortable but unavoidable section of national history range on a rather large spectrum, with total condemnation at one end and indiscriminate apologyat the other. But what profoundly influences the canonical debates is the understanding of the nature of the intellectual and literary hierarchies of the Communist time. The canon established in the aftermath of the orthodox Stalinism of the 1950s is the expression – so the argument of one camp – of the gradual autonomization of the literary field, and of the uphill battle carried by liberal literary critics against the official nationalist-communist cultural policy. The literary charts drown under the

Communist regime, even in its moments of relative liberalization – replies the other camp – bare the marks of a totalitarian regime, and justice shall be made for authors who either where marginalized/expulsed form the public sphere (and canon) because of their open opposition to the government, or chose radical, allegedlyaestheticist,marginalization over anydalliances with state propaganda. Contemporary research attempts to bring these debates within the frames of theoretical models such as the one that premises the dynamics of social order on cultural-political "negotiations" (Fătu-Tutoveanu& Cordoş 2010)

Accordingly, the canon is more often than not built on the quick sands of passions and interests. A moralizing perspective on this process, hard as it is to avoid, has the distinct disadvantage of suppressing the intricacies of actual canon-emergence. In my opinion, avoiding one-sidedness has to lean on a serious consideration of the moral experiences involved by this complex social-cultural process. There is, I assume, a quasi-natural tendency of associating moral experience with intellectual transparency, but this also alludes to a transparency of the psyche, to a clarity of our basic moral sentiments and intimations (see for instance Moore 2016).

It is true that a community might reach for a period of time, through slow evolution or as a direct consequence of a historical commotion, a widely shared sense of convergence between ethical reasoning and moral empathy. But such instances of equilibrium are rather the exception than the norm of moral intercourse, and they seem to depend on configurations of determinacies that are not, and could not be controlled or planned in advance. If we are to consider a solution for making complex societies morally stable and predictable, if we are to imagine a sort of safety net destined to prevent the drift toward institutionalized forms of cruelty, such as those experienced under dictatorial and totalitarian governments, we should rather start form a "negative" representation of collective moral experiences.

A representation, that is, which realistically and cautiously accommodates notions such as rivalry, contradiction, uncertainty, ambiguity. In other words, the articulation of the moral life of a complex society might have to do less with shared moments of moral clarity and intensity, distilled around transparent exempla of good and evil, and more through its concentration on problems, on moral, intellectual, aesthetic conundrums, questions that defy preset solutions or the candid reliance on self-evidence. The emergence of the canon should, therefore, not be

imaginary located in the paradisiac garden of obviousness, but rather in a world of the enigma, the charade and the arabesque.

Let's begin by considering those areas of cultural heritage that resist both attempts of critical distancing and of moral identification. An example would be the attitude of the majority towards the cultural legacy, literary canons included, of ethnic minorities. Is it morally acceptable to consider them as parts of a collective national canon/heritage? Is it morally acceptable to ignore them, to reify them as irrelevant "otherness"? This matter is of course closely connected to larger issues concerning human rights (Silvermann&Ruggles 2008).

Let's consider, for the Romanian case, the case of the cultural heritage of Transylvania, which massively mirrors the fact that for centuries on end the high culture of this province has been Hungarian and German. As far as monuments were concerned, the national identity discourse of the Communist epoch systematically played on the ambiguity of "Romanian" in the sense of belonging to the Romanian culture, and of having been created on the territory of modern Romania (which included the former Austrian-Hungarian province of Transylvania only since 1918). Meanwhile, the far less assimilable literary legacies of the Hungarian- and German-speakingcommunitieswere completely ghettoized, eliminated form the common presentation and re-presentation of national identity and relegated to minimal references in scholarly works that were not accessible to the public.

The most disquieting implication of downsizing, ignoring, obnubilating or even obliterating canons that distillate minority cultural memories – a tendencythat today is kept in check only by Romania's external obligations, as a member of the European Union – is the fact that Romanian cultural identity misses the civilizing benefits of being profoundly permeated by inner Otherness. The literary canon might be an instrument of addressing the tensions between the hard cultural borders drawn on our mental maps, and the soft ones exposed by the actual history of inter-ethnic conviviality. The politics of the literary canon might help ease identity anxieties (or outright panic) through courageously integrating the ambiguity of an otherness that simultaneously isinseparable form what we perceive as our own. This pleads actually for a skeptical canon, since the skeptical tradition in philosophy opens the perspective of distilling the moral and intellectual experience of intercultural ambiguity into a science (and art) of subtle equilibria.

But the difficulties of canonizing Otherness are not limited to ethno-cultural difference. They might be even greater (especially because they are hardly perceived, let alone conceptualized as problematic differencies) with respect to the inner diversity assimilated and comprehended in the construction of modern Romanian culture. The tendency of avoiding or suppressing everything that might cast the shadow of ambiguity on the national identity is obvious also in the politics of literary canon/canonization. A proper and relatively consistent understanding of "Romanian-ness" emerges only since the 19th century, while for prior epochs this should be understood in rather figurative terms. The obsessive invocation of common origins and common legacy has been traditionally used by canon-builders as a rhetorical device of counteracting the evidence of the different historical, cultural, economic, political differences between the provinces that aggregate modern Romania.Accepting these differences, as absorbed in different walks of cultural and intellectual history, implies the evolution from the use of ambiguity as a rhetorical devicemeant to create an effect of unity, continuity and homogeneity (a strategy attentively deconstructed in Martin 1981), toward assuming ambiguity as a major experience which, through the interplay between sameness and difference, between impulses of assimilation and impulses of differentiation, brings about a significant refining of the ethical sensitivity (a strategy suggested for instance in Pleşu 1988).

Understanding of moral experience as distilling rather then suppressing ambiguity is equally relevant for thinking the relationship between Romanian intellectuals/authors and the Communist regime. Canon-building policies could and should attempt to mediate between, on the one hand, the theory that, given the impersonality and transcendence of social institutions with respect to individual agency, no one can be personally blamed for the abuses and failures of RomanianCommunism; and, on the other hand, the theory that, precisely because its totalitarian character that closely knittedtogether its consisting elements, all the members of society are "stained"with guilt.Finding a balance between these two perspective implies a continuous intellectual and ethical work, but what matters here is construing this underlying, basic ambiguity not as an accident or a contingent nuisance, but as the substance of a rich and authentic moral experience (this ethical and critical complexity is, for instance, exemplary managed in Andreescu 2013, 2015).

Perceiving the constitutive uncertainty of the relationship with our natural, social, cultural environment is a precondition for lucidity, and at

the same time a fringe emotional experience. But from a political perspective, uncertainty could be seen as one of the foundations of democracy. The condition of equality of all the individual consciousnesses that convene in a society is given by their virtually equal distance from the possibility of possessing absolute certainties with respect to their common environment (these matters are extensively discussed in Connolly 1987). From this perspective, the capacity of assuming ambiguity, not only at a technical-instrumental, but also at a moral and symbolic level, is one of the most important tests for the modernity of a society.

A vivid and productive cultural memory is nothing like a realm of pristine harmony. Social memory consists to a rather high extent of traumas, breaks, catastrophes, be they natural or political,that triggered spectacular adaptive reactions, more often than not unpredictable with respect to the immediate data of social experience (a topic that has been, for instance, covered with respect to the imaginary and ethical impact of earthquakes – see Folin&Preti 2015).

In my view, the literary canon has an ethical nature, and rests on a moral experience, also because it perpetuates the memory of such "catastrophes".With respect to which the canon should inspire an ethos of moral courage, responsibility, and lucidity. Most of the modern historical narratives tend to produce a sense of century-long if not millennial moral continuity. On the other hand, everything that could count as "catastrophic" turns in society's evolution seem to be seen as inconsequential and non-representative for an allegedly trans-historical national consciousness. But a really vibrant culture is not one that tries to suppress its "catastrophes", that willingly ignore the reality and effects of historical hazards. The incongruent character of a literary canon could well nourish a positive cultural dynamic, by transforming historical "accident" into the difficult but highlyinstructive moral experience of uncertainty.

Actually, a patrimonial discourse that over-emphasizes consistency and coherence intertwined in an alleged high level of moral homogeneity and predictability might generate nothing else but deeper vulnerability when confronting the *coups de théâtre* of empirical reality. Cast in the form of a moral experience, the canon could be a school of adaptive quick reactions to unpredictability, it could provide the essentials for an aesthetics of risk and opportunity(some Western critics consider that the attacks of managerialism on higher education is a hazard that calls for a creative ethical response – see Macrine 2009). Somewhere along these lines, it has been suggested by architects and urban plannersthat the picturesque

restoration of monuments or sites fallen into ruin, destroyed by cataclysms or dismantled by human havoc may make us impervious to the real reasons for which monuments, and sometimes entire civilizations, fall prey to ruin (Arnold 2011).

If we transfer this idea to the policies of the canon, we can propose the latter as a way to problematize, both pedagogically and therapeutically, the ineluctable historical importance of sudden, traumatic civilizational mutations. The predominant canonical strategy in our part of the world intensively thematizesorganicity, continuity, and homogeneity. The 19th century "Westernization"of the Danubian Principalities, later fused in the Kingdom of Romania, was shaped by the political and cultural elites that managed it as a return to the genuine Roman-Latin and European origins of the Romanian people, to the point that these rhetorical topoi came to replace the dramatic reality of changing civilizational orbits.

The creation of "Greater Romania", in 1918, represents in many ways another break, or mutation, carefully packed in the discourses of organic growth. The tensions induced to the institutions and the overall social structure after the assimilation of former Hapsburg provinces Transylvania and Banat suggests that rather than a prolonged collective euphoria, the Unification represented a massive and extreme adaptive effort (Livezeanu 2000). The same pattern can be easily discerned in the epoch of Romania's refurbishing as a Soviet satellite: social "catastrophe" has been exorcised through a language of return to the roots. In his classical Stalinist phase, the regime pretended to fulfill aspirations to social justice allegedly passed from one generation to the other. In the second, nativist phase, the legitimation rhetoric swayed to the projection of Communist collectivist agenda into different historical epochs, from ancient Dacia, to the medieval Principalities of Moldova and Walachia. This rhetorical practice officially suppressed all serious reflection on the unpredictable, catastrophic nature of post-bellum social and civilizational changes.

Last but not least, an unprecedented mutation took place during the lifetime of the present adult generation of Romanians: the 1989 fall of the Ceaușescu regime and the collapse of Communism as a social system. Those who consciously experienced this process are perhaps best situated to set forth, with new conceptual tools, the reflection in uncertainty, indetermination and historical hazards. This is, in other words, a position which creates the possibility of experiencing cultural legacy, as well as the process of canon building, not as a summation of diaphanous continuities, but rather as the convoluted memory of unpredicted dramatic fractures

and moral paradoxes. The cultural and literary canon is derived from a heritage of catastrophes, justified by both the ethical obligation of exposing to the young generation a historical truth inescapably (dis)figured by cruelty and hazard, and the opportunity of implying this memory of abrupt mutations in a pedagogy of moral self-awareness and self-composure.

The process of canon building also catalyzes the emergence of a sophisticated scale of forms of life of the consciousness. Among these, skeptical hesitation and prudence, the perpetuation of a self-questioning spirit, the stoic acceptance of uncertainty,or the courage to confront the fuzzy indeterminacy built in historical and social evolutions. The canon-building process is a means of shaping our relationship with the past, and accordingly with ourselves, into the "negative" experience of cognitive and ethical doubt. This calls forthe wisdom of understanding of the oscillations and *embarrass de choix* of our critical consciousness not simply in terms of hazards, weaknesses, or flaws. Canon building might be a way to allow creative uncertainty, unpredictability, ambiguity to work on our collective consciousness, to continuously deepen and refine our moral sensitivity.

The conflict hubs or the "polemical matrixes" of a cultural and intellectual history, that integrates also the literary one, should not be seen as threatening, as disruptive. On the contrary, the awareness of different sets of values, non-coincidental, disagreeing even on founding values, but that we came to equally internalize as tradition and canon, to perceive them as constitutive to our own selves, is an essential condition for the developing the ethical culture of our communities.Confronting the contradictions interwoven in the texture of our social-cultural history, and especially on our modernity, implies a high degree of self-awareness and moral stamina.

In my opinion, we cannot uncouple our understanding of the canon, as highly structured literary and cultural legacy, from the heritage represented by specific forms and fora of moral deliberation. A heritage, that is, that encompasses the culturally molded tools of personal introspection, as well as the public culture of deliberation.

The conflicts of ideas, of core values, of existential attitudes are part and parcel of our heritage, and the canon-building policies might represent the poetics of introducing these complexities, together with the notion and value of complexity, in our own collective sense of identity, freedom and dignity.

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