DYNAMICS OF AMERICAN LITERARY CANONS: FROM CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY TO "REVOLUTION OF PLURALITY"

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The paper addresses transformations of American literary canons from diachronic perspective. It is argued that the following principal stages in this process may be identified: transition from ancient Greek and Roman legacy to previous and contemporary British writings (18th c.); "Americanization" of the canon marked by fierce polemics (19th – early 20th c.); functioning of "protocanon" based on genteel tradition (turn of the 19th – 20th cc.); building of democratic-individualistic canon around key figures in American Renaissance and later mainstream authors (mid-20th c.); and, finally, "the revolution of plurality" entailing the opening of the canon for representatives of ethnic, racial, gender and other minorities (1960s-1990s), and on, to present-day changes in its generic parameters and pronounced cultural and intermedial dimensions.

***Key words*:** *American literature, canon, "Americanization", genteel tradition, American Renaissance, "revolution of plurality".*

Over the past decades Western and, in particular, American public discourse featured heated debates around theoretical and practical dimensions of literary canons brought about by increasing awareness of their role in the distribution of power relations and in providing access to "cultural capital" (P.Bourdieu). These developments, in their turn, triggered new interest in the canons' origins, evolution, and formation mechanisms, as well as in causes and consequences of their "explosions". It is obvious to those who closely follow recent trends in American literature that the most embittered battles in the cultural wars led in the last third of the past century were waged around the canon's contents and institutional forms (the so-called canon

debate, or canon wars). This fact gave scholars every reason to refer to this controversy as to “one of the more important events in the history of twentieth-century criticism” (Guillory, 2010: 235). This state of affairs came into being due to both new social reality joined by previously marginalized population sectors as legitimate players, and to changes in cognitive paradigm characterizing postmodern condition. Theo D’Haen concisely summarized the effect produced by heterogeneous, but interconnected factors in his description of the canon polemics as a response to “changes in the demographic make-up of the United States, to changes in the political and ideological climate of the country, to shifts in literary theory affecting American academe throughout the 1970s and 1980s and to shifts in power relations within the profession of academic scholarship in American literary studies during the same period” (D’Haen, 2011: 23).

Since contemporary US literary canon has become the subject of numerous publications by American, European, and Ukrainian scholars (the latter including Tamara Denysova, Tetiana Mykhed, and your humble), the present paper has a narrower focus offering a diachronic review of American canon’s history from its early establishment in the first universities and colleges set up in North America since the second third of the 17th c., to the 1960s ushering in the era of a cardinal canon revision.

The disagreement among researchers engaged in American canon studies begins with the way they evaluate its role in the national development. According to Sacvan Bercovitch, it was the literary canon that became “the realization of national promise” in the USA (Bercovitch,1993: 11); while «Puritans discovered America in the Bible”, and the revolutionary Enlighteners secularized the mythologem of “the city on the hill” in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, «American Studies complemented this Biblia Americana with the national classics” (Bercovitch,1993: 11). In contrast, Harold Bloom argues that «there has never been an official American literary canon, and there never can be, for the esthetics in America always exists as a lonely, idiosyncratic, isolated stance” (Bloom, 1994: 519). As in most cases, the truth can supposedly be found somewhere in between these extremes.

Today, as is to be expected in the age of cultural pluralism, a whole bunch of historical and literary narratives constructed in compliance with their authors’ political and esthetical preferences offer their visions of national canons’ dynamics. It is my belief that if we draw upon “openness/closure” criterion in approaching American canons, their general trajectory in time can be charted as moving towards liberalization (“opening”), with the reservation that within this continuous motion

there were “freeze-frames” – periods when the “closed” canon was absolutized, hypostasized, or fetishized. It is the waves and quanta of these processes that shape the dialectics of American literary canons. And facts seem to bear out the idea (expressed by a number of scholars) that multicultural canon reshuffling was not a unique and unprecedented occurrence, but rather one more, though pretty radical, link in a chain of previous revisions.

It should be noted from the outset, that the logic of (de-)canonization of American writers and works has been largely determined by the need to build a literary tradition of their own recognized by American intellectuals at the early stages of the nation’s establishment. Consequently, (proto)canons formed at various historical periods could not but reflect this need as it was currently perceived by canon-makers. As a rule, the canon make-up tended to lag behind the actual literary situation, since canonization is a time-taking process.

It is well-known that the onset of university education in America was heralded by the opening of the Harvard College in 1636, followed by William and Mary College, Yale College, and the others; by late 18th c. their total number amounted to thirty four. Early colonial universities were modeled after Oxford, Cambridge, Scottish institutions and were intended, primarily, to train priests of various denominations. The course of studies relied upon traditional European “liberal arts” curriculum, thus comprising a substantial Humanities component. “Despite the intense piety of the Puritans”, the present-day historian points out, “the arts were considered essential to the culture of an educated gentleman” (Geiger, 2014: 3), due to which students obtained “broad literary education” in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. As a result, the earliest “literary canon” in the New World included, in addition to the Bible and theological treatises, the works by Greek and Roman classics, “and not solely orators, historians, philosophers, rhetoricians, but poets as well” (Коренева, 1997: 329), mostly used as sources of language material. It goes without saying that being based on European standards of classical education, this (proto) canon bore no traces of national specificity.

The first step towards canon expansion was made in the 18th c., when the intellectual alertness of the Age of Reason galvanized the public thought by fueling young Americans’ interest in writings in English, including, along historical texts, essays, fiction, and drama, that is, belles letters, previously scorned as pernicious nonsense. The universities started to host not only chairs of rhetoric and literature, but also literary associations and reading clubs facilitating eventual ousting of orthodox Calvinism by the culture of Enlightenment. At first fiction performed exclusively

pragmatic functions serving as an instrument of honing rhetorical skills necessary for preachers and politicians to be. However, soon it transcended these narrow limits; stirring up the students' imagination, European (primarily, British) literature brought the culturally "raw" continent within the ambit of the Old World's refined culture. The new canon was dominated by British classics (mostly Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, and Spenser), and this status quo – with the addition of several new names – has persisted over the following century. So, the first "revolution" to have overturned the American canon was the transition from Greek and Roman classics to later European legacy which ended in the enthroning of metropolitan literature. The transformation was far from smooth – the first university chair of English was not in place until 1857, and its founder, Professor Francis Marsh, referred to this venture as an "experiment".

But the problems of this period seem miniscule compared to lasting and painful process of introducing American writers to the curricula, to say nothing of their canonization. "De-anglicizing" the national canon may in all truth be referred to as the second "revolution" spanning nearly a century and a half (it is dealt with, among others, by Marietta Mesmer, Lawrence Levine, Frank Kermode, Gerald Graff, and Russell Reising).

It will not be amiss here to remind ourselves of one of the most important functions of the canon, i.e., to serve as both a mouthpiece and a constituent of national self-awareness. Since the 18th c. was the age of nation and identity formation in America, including cultural identity, it is no wonder that the dream of creating national literature inspired the chief figures of American Enlightenment celebrating their land's spiritual independence long before it gained political autonomy. Timothy Dwight and John Trumbull, Philip Freneau and Noah Webster, Benjamin Rush and Hugh Henry Brackenridge, so different in their political and aesthetical views, all associated future thriving of arts in America with her unparalleled historic mission. For them "America's rising glory" comprised original artistic creations by her "genius" generated by her unique nature, history, and sociopolitical life. Therefore, in their quest for literary works that were "useful" for Americans (and thus potentially suitable for "canonization"), humanitarians of the period combined the Enlightenment criteria of "universal norm" with "declarations of literary nationalism" (Апенко, 2000: 559).

As Ukrainian scholar Tetiana Mikhed aptly remarks, "sporadic calls for creating national literature gained scope and momentum in 1830s-1840s" (Михед, 2006: 47). The author links this tendency to both political (the victory over Great Britain in the

1812-1814 war), and spiritual and aesthetic developments, primarily, the diffusion of Romantic world view promoting its new vision of nations as subjects of history. Considering the way these ideas resonated with American belles-lettres' striving for ontological and artistic independence from the metropolis, it is but logical that the spreading of Romanticism would have modified the demands placed upon "Great American Writer".

The situation in US literary process at that time was somewhat paradoxical: even though American self-identification underwent its transformation from colonial to national by the end of the previous century (Кореневa, 1997: 331), the canon was substantially behind in its evolution being still predominantly British. Transcendentalists (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau) and Romantic writers (Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Edgar Poe, James Fenimore Cooper, Walt Whitman), proceeding from the premises of "Americanism" made titanic efforts to lay the groundwork for the national cultural tradition. In the framework of the present discussion it is essential that in the course of active literary polemics they did not solely design common principles that would chart the country's literary route for decades to come, but also indicated individuals who implemented them to the utmost in their writings, and, consequently, might have claimed their places in the national canon (a vivid example being Herman Melville's review of Hawthorne's short story collection *Mosses from an Old Manse,* 1850). It can be reasonably argued, therefore, that in their theory and practice the Enlighteners and the American Renaissance generation have laid the foundations for the national canon building in the view of the "cultural work" it was destined to perform.

In spite of Emerson's and Whitman's influential nationalist literary proclamations, over the entire 19th and the first third of the 20th cc. one could still hear loud voices insisting that American writing as an independent branch of literature was simply non-existent. This conviction did not seem to run contrary to a spate of publications declaring in their titles the intention to draw readers' attention to local literary production: these include, for instance, John Neal's *American Writers* (1824), S.K.Knapp's *Lectures on American Literature* (1829), R.W Griswold's *Prose Writers of America* (1852), and G. and E. Duyckincks' *Cyclopaedia of American Literature* (1855). All of them, however, proceed from the belief laid down in an early university textbook (1873) and defining US literature as "that part of English literature which has been produced upon American soil" (quoted in Levine, 1996: 82). Doubts concerning originality and authenticity of American literature were still expressed in late 19th c. Writing in 1896, the professor of Columbia University

Brander Matthews calls it “the record of the thoughts, and the feelings, and the acts of the great English-speaking race”. No matter where the authors live, be it New York or Montreal, London or Calcutta, he goes on, “what they write in the English language belongs to the English literature” (quoted in Messmer, 2000: 194). As late as in 1920s, majoring in one’s native literature was looked upon as dubious, with universities having very few appropriate chairs or departments. This fact gave Lawrence Levine grounds to conclude that “just as a little more than one hundred years ago American college students studied a canon in which English literature had a minor role, so as recently as fifty years ago they studied a canon in which the literature of their own culture played a negligible part” (Levine, 1996: 85). It would be only World War II followed by the “cold war” that would give impetus for radical canon nationalization, since the latter, as Alfred Kazin observed, resulted, among other things, in America’s unexpected promotion to the role of «the keeper of Western culture».

But even earlier, due to the US emerging as a world power at the beginning of the 20th c. and especially in the 1920s, the need for revising national literary tradition canalized the struggle for Americanizing the canon into new river-beds. At the turn of the centuries, literary histories (such as E.C.Stedman’s and E.M.Hutchinson’s *Library of American Literature* (1888-1890), F.H.Underwood’s *Builders of American Literature* (1893), Barrett Wendell’s *Literary History of America* (1900) and others) popularized a kind of national “protocanon” (works by W.C. Bryant, H.Longfellow, J.R. Lowell, J.G.Whittier, O.W.Holmes). The fact that most of these authors worked within “genteel tradition” or belonged to “Boston Brahmins” determined this early canon’s reliance upon European (Victorian) ethic and aesthetic standards and its inability to reflect new American reality that could not but arouse protests on the part of younger generation of writers and critics.

Most of present-day canon scholars agree in their high assessment of the role played in its “resetting” by the seminal essay authored by “literary radical” Van Wyck Brooks and entitled *On Creating a Usable Past* that saw the light in the *Dial* magazine April issue, 1918.

Van Wyck Brooks champions the autonomy and independence of spiritual realm from considerations of material interest and moralizing didactics characterizing, in his opinion, the accepted literary canon established by long lasting efforts of narrow-minded (unlike European) American faculty. Embellished version of national literary history, the critic claims, deprives it of any value for modern writers “pathologically” scorned by the university establishment (Wyck, 1918: 337). Opposing the Philistines’

"commercial philosophy" to creative impulse, Van Wyck Brooks calls for the rejection of "genteel tradition" that had outlived its time, as well as local color writings in order to discover (or even, if need be, invent) America's different literary past, because "the spiritual past has no objective reality. It yields only what we are able to look for in it" (Wyck, 1918: 338). What should the new version of national tradition look like? It should foreground not "success stories", but the meaningfulness of creative impulse. In the 1930s Brooks' ideas were further developed by Edwin Greenlow (*The Province of Literary History*, 1930) and C.Van Doren (*Toward a New Canon*, 1932). It is symptomatic that in his essay laudably reviewing Ludwig Lewisohn's voluminous history of American literature (1931), Van Doren prophetically traces a link between institutionalized canon and "the vested interests of publishers who had issued collected editions, or of teachers in schools and colleges who know how to "teach" Longfellow, but not E.Dickinson, Howells, but not Dreiser, Irving, but not Mencken" (Doren, 1932). "New Criticism", too, played an important part in the canon revision shifting the focus to a text's formal aspects as an autonomous aesthetic entity. Canon reassessment from varying perspectives was carried on by V.L. Parrington, L. Mumford, K. Burke, L.Trilling, and others.

Joint intellectual break-through resulted in the establishment of the "classical" canon moving to the forefront the American Renaissance writers, Mark Twain, Henry James, T.S.Eliot, and later – Ernest Hemingway, F.S.Fitzgerald, William Faulkner. It was the next canon "revolution" to have transpired in the US. It may seem a paradox that it was this very canon generated by "liberal humanitarians" who had traditionally represented the democratic stream in American civilization, that in 1970s – 1990s became the target of "reformers"' attacks as "elitist" and "repressive". Its formation was conditioned by the same factors (demographic, political, ideological, literary theoretical, and professional), that brought about its crisis, but then these factors pointed in a different direction for changes to come – "not for pluralism or multiculturalism, but for centralism and cultural 'Unitarianism'" (D'Haen, 2011: 25). T.D'Haen connects the establishment of the "classic" canon to its makers' profound awareness of their "Americanism" opposed as the true national ideal to mass and commercial nature of life and culture in the USA at that period. The postulation of democratic individualism as the all-national ideal accounts for the "elitist" result. With abstract nature of this ideal in mind, it becomes clear why racial, gender and class differences remained beyond its adherents' attention – "the avowed 'masterpieces' of American literature showed the way toward self-fulfillment to *all* (italics mine – N.V.) Americans and consequently considerations of 'representation' in the sense of 'representativeness' were beside the question" (D'Haen, 2011: 26).

This turn of thought brings to the surface the teleological constituent of American civilization embodied in the American Dream concept prioritizing personal success and in the "melting pot" mythologem.

Liberal-democratic trend in canon clashing /canon making culminated in F.O.Matthiessen's *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941). Combining in its approach the search for national specificity and New Critics' aesthetic dominants, it identified the core of American literary canon (R.W.Emerson, H.D.Thoreau, N.Hawthorne, H.Melville, W.Whitman, to a certain degree E.A.Poe and E.Dickinson) for decades ahead. According to S.Bercovitch (who does not always see eye to eye with Matthiessen), this book "reset the terms for the study of American literary history; it gave us a new canon of classic texts; and it inspired the growth of American Studies in the United States and abroad" (Bercovitch, The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History, 1986: 635).

For Matthiessen, mid-19th c. marks the era of the national literature's "first coming of age" (Matthiessen, 1969: VII). After defining his subject as "the conceptions held by five of our major writers concerning the function and nature of literature, and the degree to which their practice bore out these theories" (Matthiessen, 1969: VII), Matthiessen offers his meticulous analysis leading him to the conclusion that their works signify distinctly "American mode and theory of expression" (Matthiessen, 1969: XV). He declares commitment to democracy to be the ideological kernel of their writings. "They felt that it was incumbent upon their generation to give fulfillment to the potentialities freed by the revolution, to provide a culture commensurate with America's political opportunity […] what emerges from the total pattern of their achievement – if we make the effort to repossess it – is literature for our democracy" (Matthiessen, 1969: XV). While at the time of the book's conception the memory was still alive of the "leftist" 1930s, and so "democracy" was interpreted as individual acquiring connections with the social whole through self-fulfillment, in the minds of the radicals in the last third of the 20th c. this notion got associated with unacceptable idea of America's exceptionalism. No wonder, then, that Matthiessen's picture of the national literary development became, in the context of the canon revision, the favorite target for critical assaults. Present-day radicals believe that Matthiessen used classic works to provide aesthetic justification for the rhetoric of national individualism at the moment when it started losing its "divine providence" legitimacy in the sphere of politics.

These critical processes gain momentum in 1960s – well-known sociopolitical and cultural and psychological changes erode the single national ideal entailing another

(probably, the most dramatic) canon revision. The traditional American concept of being a God-chosen nation loses ground under its feet. As the American Dream can no longer be teleologically justified, quantitatively growing minorities that had been previously excluded from its scope, claim their shares of it. It is but logical that when democratic individualism ideology found itself in grave crisis, it was ensued by the crash of the canon imbued with its spirit. Socio-ethnic groups ousted to the society's margins accused the classic canon of furthering the interests of WASPs, and embarked on a crusade against it mentioned at the beginning of the paper.

There is no doubt that new approaches to national culture /literature were also shaped by current postmodernist trends in philosophy and cultural studies. Emphasizing basic pluralism in interpreting any phenomenon, "both and" instead of "either-or", they provided theoretical background for the claim about exhaustion and inadequacy of the monistic model of America.

It is worth mentioning that questioning of the canon was inspired by the ideas of "reconstruction", "revision", "rewriting" not only of the canon, but also of the national literary history as a whole. These lexemes figure in many titles of the 1980s-1990s, while the movement's leitmotif can be pinpointed as refusal from "consensus" in favor of "dissensus", i.e. the broadest possible heteroglossia. Nothing strange about it – if we treat literary canon as a tool for rallying modern nations into ideologically and culturally monolithic entities, it stands to reason that the notion of consensus as the guarantee for the latter's existence could not but lose its appeal for a new generation of critics and literary scholars professing the creed of postmodernism and multiculturalism. Sacvan Bercovitch became one of the most articulate spokesmen for the new ideology of the canon. In his preface to the collection *Reconstructing American Literary History* (1986) edited by him the renowned scholar states: "During the past two decades, consensus of all sorts has broken down – left and right, political and esthetic – broken down, worn out or at best opened up <...>. It will be the task of the present generation to reconstruct American literary history by making a virtue of dissensus" (Bercovitch, Preface, 1986: VII). This goal is accomplished, in particular, in *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988) which, according to its editor-in-chief Professor Emory Elliott, makes "diversity, complexity, and contradiction", as well as foregoing "closure as well as consensus" » (The Columbia Literary History of the United States, 1988: XIII) its structural guidelines.

The new tendencies found their fullest implementation in the principles guiding the compilation of American literary anthologies (Heath anthology, new editions of the

Norton anthology and so on). Paul Lauter, for one, lays them down eloquently in his introduction to the Heath anthology that was innovative, or rather, revolutionary in its inclusiveness featuring a sizable body of authors and texts from outside the mainstream. He proclaimed as its guiding principle in forming a new canon capable of meeting the demands of its time not the "formal scrutiny of isolated texts" (Lauter, 1990: XXXIX), but a study of "the diverse and changing cultures of America" (Lauter, 1990: XXXV) based on the exploration of historical contexts (Lauter, 1990: XXXV). Ten years later, presenting one of the following editions of the anthology, the editor-in-chief discusses the canon refurbishing as an accomplished fact: "in the years since, most anthologies of American literature followed our lead in diversifying the scope of what constituted "American literature", moving away from the idea that the culture of this nation could adequately be represented by eight or twelve or even forty American authors. And most courses in American literature today have come to include an expansive selection of writers that would have been unthinkable even twenty years ago. In many respects, then, the "question of the canon", as it came to be called, has been resolved…" (Lauter, 2002: XXXV). It is remarkable that analyzing the theoretical foundations of the anthology ten years after its first publication, Lauter shifts the emphasis from "diversity" to "connections and interpenetrations of cultures" elaborating more timely view of American cultural and literary phenomena as "dynamically interactive, though different hybrids" (Lauter, 2001: 188). He is convinced that today scholars are increasingly interested in the "ongoing conversations among these cultures; how they engage with and influence one another", and how these conversations have come to define America as "plural, complex, heterogeneous – a chorus, perhaps, rather than a melting pot" (Lauter, 2002: XXXV). This idea of American culture as interactive and hybrid may serve as a bridge to the review of the current state of the canon issue in the USA, which is, however, beyond the limits of this essay. Let me only mention in passing that it is distinguished by the emphasis laid on the present epoch's transitiveness as the movement from multicultural to cross- or transcultural paradigm characterized by interdisciplinary and intermedial slant, by porous boundaries between literary and cultural studies, as well as by factoring in new technologies as agents in literary production and functioning. All these processes still have to be studied in their complexity and interconnectedness by Americanists all over the world, including Ukrainian ones.

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