WHAT'S THE POINT OF TEACHING CANONICAL LITERATURE TODAY?

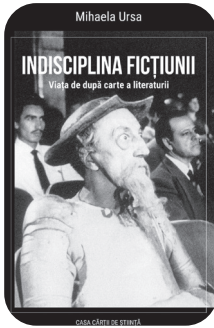Mihaela Ursa, *Indisciplina ficțiunii. Viața de după carte a literaturii*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2022

There is no doubt that all debates around the aesthetic canon consequently imply reflections upon the pedagogical one. John Guillory notices that "evaluative judgements are the necessary but not sufficient condition for the process of canon formation, and that it is not only by understanding the social function and institutional protocols of the school that we will understand how works are preserved, reproduced, and disseminated over successive generations and centuries"[1]. In other words, the main purpose (and even the starting point) of the canonical battles is represented by the more or less extensive list of the authors from the (national) curriculum. The conflict between the two sides engaged in such disputes (the conservators and the relativists) is accentuated by the so-called "popular culture" that integrates a wide range of "products" (*id est* "goods", in a literary sense), distinguishable in their predictability and standardisation[2].

Generally speaking, two answers and attitudes are possible. On one hand, strictly defending a canonical and an inflexible repertory means neglecting the most of the readers that could find pleasure in a contemporary (and obviously noncanonical yet) book. This position feeds serious lamentation regarding the reading crisis, especially among students, this fact sustaining most of the decisions in order to protect the list of "dead authors". For example, a brief analysis of the curricula for Romanian literature in the twentieth and twenty-first century demonstrates that the actual "canonical list" of works is the most

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conservative curriculum in the entire history of Romanian education[3].

On the other hand, renouncing the canon altogether cannot be an adequate solution either. Cosmin Borza offers a relevant example of the Swedish and Finnish education systems that proposed a curriculum constituted only by simple "recommandations". As a consequence, in 2006, Horace Engdahl pleaded for the reintroduction of the canon in the literary studies, because the previous inexact "list" has proved inefficient, emphasising the fact that "either the canon driven out on the front door returns through the back door, the teachers thus choosing to study an approximately fixed and identical suite of texts, or a sort of interpretative anarchy is formed, most of the students' reading tastes leaning towards the 'thin books written in large letters'"[4].

In such a context, a study like Mihaela Ursa's recent *Indisciplina ficțiunii. Viața de după carte a literaturii* [*The Indiscipline of Fiction. The Life after Book of the Literature*] has all the chances to be rejected by the conservative side of the Romanian scholars. Published in 2022, the book confirms the author's interest in comparative literature, noticeable also in most of her previous studies, namely *Scriitopia*, *Eroticon. Tratat despre ficțiunea amoroasă* [*Eroticon. Treatise on Romance Fiction*] or *Identitate și excentricitate. Comparatismul românesc* între *specific local* și *globalizare* [*Identity and Eccentricity. The Romanian comparatism between Local Specific and Globalization*]. Far from falling in any of the already mentioned extremities, Mihaela Ursa proposes a new way of accessing the canonical literature, starting from the premise that the need and consumption of the stories have actually not changed entirely despite the complaints that accompany the so-called crisis or even death of literature.

The study begins with a fertile solution in order to counterbalance the readers' decrease in number, *id est* the intermediality or transmediality, namely the analysis of the artefacts that combines more semiotic mediums. It is obvious that all famous stories and characters migrate between literature, film, video games or other artistic systems. All these products of the disclaimed popular culture could be used in order to reinvigorate the reading taste for the canon: "I explore here the possibility that involvement in a video game or watching a film adaptation before reading the book could be [...] just the perfect starting point for the motivation of literary reading, but also a catalyst for increasing interest in classical literature (in a broad sense)"[5]. For example, the screen adaptations of C.S. Lewis' or J.R.R. Tolkien's novels caused an impressive book request. In other words, the customers can access the narratives not only by reading, but also through an interaction with different secondary artefacts that could determine a return to the literary origins.

Certainly, such an approach implies not only a new perspective on reading, but also on teaching literature. Accepting the fact that the digital turn is irreversible, the teachers should find those appropriate resources and methods which could be used in an interdisciplinary overview in order to attract the contemporary generations on the side of literature and of stories, in particular. Such an endeavour is not be quite simple, but neither impossible. The author motivates her concept by three case studies interested in revealing the intermedial

character of the constellation built around some canonical stories.

The first case study proposed by Mihaela Ursa is dedicated to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Taking into consideration that Austen is one of the most transmediated canonical authors, it is obvious that the general interest in her works is also due to the large number of the adaptations and reinterpretations based on the novels even in very recent years (see, for example, the adaptation of *Persuasion* by Netflix in 2022). Mihaela Ursa speculates that the demand for the author's prose is motivated by Austen's symbiosis between a realistic view and the irony upon the world, an irony that could deconstruct the romantic illusions of the epoch.

Being one of Austen's most popular novels, *Pride and Prejudice* benefits from multiple rewritings, parodies and pastiches, one of them published almost recently, in 2009. *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: The Classic Regency Romance – Now with Ultraviolent Zombie Mayhem!* by Seth Grahame-Smith represents an example of the *mash-up* approach that influenced the sales, but also the transmediations in other contexts, such as the graphical novel, video games (both in 2010), interactive e-books (2011) or cinematography (2016).

The interplay between the so-called *Austenmania* and *zombimania* is an essential factor in the increasing number of readers that seek the primary story. This return to the origins is, in fact, an appropriate way to access the canonicals: "the popular genre with zombies forces us to ask ourselves how the revisitations of the classics are possible nowadays. It is not only a question for literature teachers, but also one that exceeds academical borders,

challenging to the mass culture and *popular culture*. [...] the *mash-ups* with zombies even manage to reactivate the interest in 'dead texts' and to wake up to an artificial and grotesque life. [...] these *mash-ups* run as triggers of the literary reading and latches of curiosity for the source-text."[6].

Mihaela Ursa analyses in a detailed way the beginning of both the novels, arguing that all these transmediations with zombies emphasise a perfect opportunity to discuss the formal mechanism of the mix or of the transmediality, because *Pride and Prejudice* is a pattern that shows us how some "dead" texts still live even after the books are forgotten through all the constellations that share the same narrative world.

The second case study outlines the traces preserved in the transmedial (re) interpretations that place Don Quixote in the centre of their attention. Two main reasons stay at the base of these Don Quixote remakings. On one hand, the memorable character survives due to the so-called "cinemitifications". On the other hand, the hero becomes a privileged figure of the fandom or of the fan fiction culture. The last one is responsible not only for the character's conversion from an unknown to a star, but also for a general literary consumption: "we are situated nowadays in a generalised fandom, because, without belonging to the same group of cultural consumption, we offer daily representations of the fan fictions on the social platforms, through our own posts and stories"[7]. Of course, the content transfer is almost easy to make because of the multimedia shape of Cervantes's novel.

Don Quixote's example (the same as Shakespeare's, the third case study of the book) is relevant even for the powerful

relationship between elitist (*id est* canonical) literature and popular culture. In fact, the idea of using popular culture in order to support the value of literature (canonical or not) is not recent at all. The famous character from the seventeenth century is a sample from the popular culture and, at the same time, a transmedial work before the century of media technologies and mechanisms.

The last case study investigates a double process of transmediation, starting from Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* up to the film remakes and further to movie posters. The entire evolution suffers due to ideological appropriations and misinterpretations, especially when the poster that should "sell" the movie takes into consideration the values appreciated by the public instead of the faithfulness to the original. Mihaela Ursa renews some observations regarding the Shakespearean unfinished masterpiece, remarks included in *Eroticon*'s chapter entitled "Despre cum ajunge teribila Catarina o biată păsărică"[8] ["About how terrible Katherina became a poor birdie"]. Consequently, there are more possibilities of remaking the play, conceiving the main character such as tame, ironical or rewarded Katherina.

Mihaela Ursa analyses more film remakes of the *The Taming of the Shrew*, from Hollywood interpretations[9] to the films directed by Franco Zeffirelli (1967, with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton), Gil Junger (*10 Things I Hate about You*, 1999, with Julia Stiles and Heath Ledger) and so on. All of them should be understood as a proof of the prevalence of the canonics. Instead of blaming the artefacts of the popular culture, "the classic texts must be read in the logic of their time, but the logic of their time is not mandatory to contextualise in the observer's contemporaneity. In the present case, Katherina's story provides arguments to those who read it as an autodidact victory upon masculine hypocrisy, but the price of this victory is paid in the currency of the time, and her evolution is sprinkled by elements meanwhile brought to the light in all their violence and evil they express"[10]. The transmediality is, therefore, not only a way to Shakespeare's masterpieces, but also a mechanism of bringing them back to the present life and public interest.

Overall, a study like Mihaela Ursa's *Indisciplina ficțiunii* reminds us that instead of mourning the canonical literature, those who teach literature could (and should) use the recycled 'waste' in popular culture for consolidating the basic practice of reading. The transmedial approach means and involves certain benefits for literature, otherwise forced to a certain non-existence.

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Notes

1. John Guillory, *Cultural Capital. The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. vii.

2. Monica Spiridon, *Popular culture. Modele, repere* și *practici contemporane*, Craiova, Scrisul Românesc, 2013, p. 9.

3. See the detailed exposure of the changings in Alina Pamfil, Ioana Tămăian, *Studiul limbii* și *literaturii române* în *secolul XX. Paradigme didactice*, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Casa Cărții de Știință, 2005.

4. Cosmin Borza, „Canonul didactic, canonul didacticii", în Monica Onojescu, Alina Pamfil (coord.), *Receptarea autorilor canonici*, Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2015, pp. 61. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. In original: „fie canonul scos pe ușa din față se întoarce pe ușa din dos, profesorii alegând să studieze un set aproximativ fix și identic de texte, fie se naște un fel de anarhie interpretativă, gusturile de lectură ale majorității elevilor îndreptându-se mai degrabă spre «cărțile subțiri scrise cu litere mari»".

5. Mihaela Ursa, *Indisciplina ficțiunii. Viața de după carte a literaturii*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Casa Cărții de Știință, 2022, p. 49. In original: „Explorez aici posibilitatea ca implicarea în jocul video sau vizionarea adaptării cinematografice înaintea lecturii cărții să fie [...] tocmai declicul perfect al motivației pentru lectura literară, dar și un catalizator al intensificării interesului pentru literatura clasică (în sens larg).".

6. *Ibidem*, p. 179. In original: „genul popular cu zombi ne obligă să ne întrebăm cum mai sunt posibile astăzi revizitările clasicilor. Nu mai este doar o întrebare pentru profesorii de literatură, ci una care depășește hotarele academice, îndreptându-se către cultura de masă și popular culture. [...] *mash-up*-urile cu zombi chiar acționează reactivând interesul față de niște «texte moarte», trezindu-le la o viață artificială și grotescă. [...] aceste *mash-up*-uri funcționează drept declanșatori ai lecturii literare și declicuri ale curiozității față de textele-sursă.".

7. *Ibidem*, p. 216. In original: „ne aflăm astăzi într-un *fandom* generalizat, pentru că, fără să facem parte din același grup de consum cultural, oferim zilnic reprezentații de *fan fictions* pe platformele sociale, cu propriile noastre *postări* și *story*-uri".

8. Id., *Eroticon*, București, Ed. Cartea Românească, 2012, pp. 99-101.

9. The posters discussed and even the main ideas of this chapter could be seen in a study published in *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory*, 2.2/ 2016, "Lovers and Tamers: Transmediations of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* to Visual Culture", https://www.metacriticjournal.com/article/49/lovers-and-tamers-transmediations-of-shakespeares-taming-of-the-shrew-to-visual-culture (accesed: 20.04.2023).

10. Mihaela Ursa, *Indisciplina ficțiunii*, p. 265. In original: „textele clasicizate trebuie citite în logica timpului lor, dar logica timpului lor nu este obligatoriu de contextualizat în contemporaneitatea observatorului. În cazul de față, povestea Catarinei oferă argumente celor care o citesc ca pe o victorie autodidactă asupra parșiveniei masculine, dar prețul acestei victorii este plătit în moneda timpului, iar parcursul ei este presărat de elemente ieșite între timp la lumină în toată violența și răul pe care le exprimă".