

**Šárka Bubíková:** *Literatura v Americe, Amerika v literatuře: Proměny amerického literárního kánonu* [Literature in America, America in Literature: Transformations of American Literary Canon]. Pavel Mervart and University of Pardubice 2007, ISBN 978-80-86818-58-0, 190 pp.

### Do We Need a Literary Canon?: The Politics of Canon (Trans)Formation

The production of literary canon(s) has been a contentious area since the beginnings of theorizing literature. From a contemporary point of view, it remains an important issue especially in two areas: first, on a theoretical level, the formation of a literary canon can tell us something about how institutional power and ideology work towards generating and perpetuating certain social values while at the same inscribing resistance to these values through cultural, historical and political changes. Foucault's genealogy of power and knowledge may be particularly illuminating for recognizing the processes in which educational practices (such as promoting literary canons) become complicit in producing normative knowledges (e.g. in *Discipline and Punish* and *Power/Knowledge*). Secondly, on a more pragmatic level, the questions surrounding literary canons and their transformations have significant consequences for tertiary education: How often do university lecturers find themselves frustrated about having to select a composite body of readings for their literary courses? How much shall they rely in their choices on commercially produced, neatly packaged literary anthologies and the canon that they set up? In other words, the recurring question is: in contemporary literary studies which reflect, whether we like it or not, a postmodernist emphasis on fragmentation, destabilization and difference, do we need a literary canon at all?

In this context, Šárka Bubíková's book titled *Literatura v Americe, Amerika v literatuře: Proměny amerického literárního kánonu* promises to be a valuable contribution to this debate. In the introduction, the author proposes the book's ambition to explore the theories of canon formation in general and to trace the development of the American literary canon since its beginnings in particular. This topic certainly resonates with a Czech readership which, thanks to the long tradition of both American literary scholarship at our universities and the rich history of Czech translations of American literature, is familiar with canonical American works, as well as with some literary historical studies which have been either translated from English, such as Ruland and Bradbury's *Od puritanismu k postmodernismu* (1997) and Lawrence's *Studie z klasické americké literatury* (1997), or published as popular essays on American literature by scholars like Josef Jařab, Michal Peprník, Marcel Arbeit, and recently Hana Ulmanová (e.g. in the edited collection *Od Poea k postmodernismu*, 1993). In this light, it makes sense that Bubíková's text is written in Czech for the domestic audience, and relies to a large extent on Czech sources (sometimes too much, esp. in the case of Ruland and Bradbury and Jařab). Even though at least one obvious reason for this is having a Czech translation ready to use, it also gives an impression of overshadowing some interesting and perhaps more relevant and recent sources that Bubíková lists in her extensive bibliography.

The (trans)formation of an American literary canon in particular has of course been subject to profound debate, which, over the last couple of decades, has given rise to often irreconcilable attitudes – broadly, those of “canonists” and “anti-canonists” – leading to what some scholars have called “cultural wars” (for a detailed discussion see Grabes 2004: 35-36). We may or may not fall for one or the other standpoint or we may choose to ignore this discourse altogether as irrelevant and indulgent; nevertheless, it needs to be acknowledged that the theories of canon remain important in shaping our understanding of literary history and criticism. This is precisely the subject matter of Bubíková's first chapter. It offers a useful overview of the genesis of canon, drawing parallels, as well as pointing out differences, between Biblical and literary canons. The analysis of the literary canon from the point of view of power and ideology (subchapter 1.4.) proves, however, unsatisfactory, as it fails to summarize the core of the contemporary disputes and give relevant examples from the opposing camps, such as feminist, Marxist or postcolonial critiques of traditional canon as an ideological representation. It would be worth a more in-depth exploration of some of the “radical” critiques, which are apparently many and are epitomized, for example, in Jessica Munns' proposition:

We can all make our own canon: every teacher their own Norton: is this liberating and exhilarating, or just plain terrifying? I am not at all sure; but I am sure that the emergence of women's literary studies, allied with computer technology, has made this a potential future. The emergence of an infinity of canons of British literature is, perhaps, the appropriate post-modern solution (or solutions). The canon is dead: long live pick-and-mix. (qtd. in Grabes 2004: 38)

I believe that this quote aptly mirrors the recurring problems of the politics of canon formation and its conflicting values, inviting scholars to think seriously about the consequences of new media, interdisciplinarity and the increasing inclusiveness of various literary traditions. In addition, (and it is a pity that Bubíková's book mentions it only marginally on p. 28), the role of the economy and globalized publishing market comes into play as well, which is most visible in relation to the production and marketing of the two "canonical" anthologies of American literature, *Norton* and *Heath*. Finally, reflecting on the politics of canon formation and ideology, the book also fails to recognize the role of literary canons and culture generally in real political goals. This can be seen most prominently in the use of the English literary canon as a very effective tool in disseminating British national culture throughout the Empire. Within postcolonial literatures, then, a rich series of counter-canonical strategies gave rise to the so called "writing back" paradigm, which is described by the postcolonial critic Bill Ashcroft as follows:

Canonical literary texts are 'consumed' in such a way that they become the basis for resistant, appropriated versions which subtly subvert the values and political assumptions of the originals. The significance of the texts that are re-read is that they offer powerful allegories of European culture, allegories through which life in post-colonial societies has itself been 'written.' (Ashcroft 2001: 33)

The second chapter of *Literatura v Americe, Amerika v literatuře* gives a complex overview of the development of the American literary canon. It captures very well the complexity of factors that have had an impact on canon formation since its beginnings when American literature tried hard to win independence and recognition from the British literary tradition. The most revealing parts of this section include the providing of parallels between nationalistic and formalistic influences, the former promoting didactic and documentary literary forces in the process of nation-building, the latter articulating a canon founded on purely esthetic, i.e. formalistic, criteria, resulting in privileging (and therefore canonizing) poetry over prose (Bubíková 41–56). The post-Second-World-War period then initiated some profound changes in the making of the American literary canon – changes that culminated in the 1960s with the Civil Rights movement that not only politicized the canon significantly but also helped open it up to other literary traditions, namely to women's, ethnic minorities' and gay and lesbian voices. It is a pity, however, that this section, which is the most interesting topic from the point of view of canon transformation, does not comment on the more contemporary developments: the subchapter on feminist criticism ignores the influences of lesbian and Black women's critiques, the parts on Chicano/a and Native American literature finish in the late 1960s or early 1970s and fail to recognize the more recent transformations. These could be confirmed or disproved by at least a brief look at the new editions of *Heath* and *Norton* anthologies (2006, gen. ed. Paul Lauter, and 2007, gen. ed. Nina Baym respectively), commenting briefly on their new additions and inclusions, since these two vehicles for American literary canons are clearly privileged throughout Bubíková's study.

The most illuminating part of the book is the third chapter, which examines the American literary canon formation from the point of view of several central themes, namely Americanness, individualism and identity, and provides convincing arguments to support the idea that the mentioned themes are not only constitutive as the subject matter of many canonized literary works but have also themselves become the key criteria in the process of canon formation. At the same time, however, Bubíková shows how these criteria have been subverted and transformed by some writers whose work would resist canonization based precisely on these standards (the best example is given

through Morrison's *Beloved*, p. 114). The book then concludes with a short chapter which provides case studies of works that have been subjected to changing cultural values, moving in and out of the traditional canon: Bubíková proceeds here to examine the critical reception and the process of canonization of Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Chopin's *The Awakening*. Even if we keep in mind that the book's primary purpose is to serve as a general introduction, the case studies chosen for the last part could perhaps have included at least one less obvious and more intricate example.

This point brings us to a consideration of the main weaknesses that Bubíková's study raises. The first is the problem of audience; even by the middle of the book it is not clear what the target readership is. College students? Certainly, although if this was the case, there is no reason not to publish the book in English and promote it as a good source, perhaps, for other European students of English and American literatures. The general public reading in Czech? Yes, even though in this case it is undermined by a very dense, clearly academic style of writing, and by occasional references to names and events that are taken for granted and the contexts of which are not adequately explained. Czech academics? Not really, since the rigor of this work is flawed by deficiencies in editing and citation norms. These include, to take a few examples, referencing quotations in the text but not including the sources in the bibliography (e.g. Pfeiffer, p. 15; Strout, pp. 39 and 47 in footnote; Rosenfelt, p. 55; Bates, p. 95); quotations that are not referenced at all (e.g. p. 24, 3<sup>rd</sup> par.; p. 123, Toqueville's paraphrase; p. 129, Chase's paraphrase; p. 130, quote from *Herzog*); and repeating and referencing the same few sources in long passages which serve as the basis for other scholars' arguments, quotes and paraphrases, thereby giving the impression of merely compiling and transcribing someone else's arguments (especially Lauter 1983, pp. 67–70 and 84–86; Reising pp. 97–98). This is also responsible for the occasional difficulty in distinguishing the author's own voice from other sources.

To sum up, Bubíková's *Literatura v Americe, Amerika v literatuře* is a very good introduction to the topic of the politics of canon (trans)formation in the U.S., bringing into focus some of the key problems in the making of literary canons, such as the continuing opposition between the "esthetic" criteria and the "politicized" criteria, the production of normative knowledges, etc. One interesting area that is not mentioned in the book but is relevant in the Czech context, would be tracing developments in the use of American literary canons at Czech universities and analyzing the changes in the course curricula which are to a certain extent dependent on the marketing of anthologies. Intriguing questions immediately spring to mind: how has American literature been taught at Czech colleges? Do the syllabi tend to follow the traditional literary canon or rather challenge it? Do they reflect recent transformations? Are we up-to-date? Or, to repeat the question from the beginning of this review, do we need to consider the canon at all in our teaching? Bubíková's biggest contribution lies undoubtedly in foregrounding these perspectives and in inviting us to either confirm or challenge them.

## References

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Martina Horáková