

*Canon in Formation: The 1950–60s
in American Literature*

In this essay, I shall proceed from the etymology of the Greek word ‘canon’ in its historical formation, i.e. before 900; ME, OE < L < Gk kanōn, a measuring rod or a rule, later extended to designate a list or a catalogue, and then to denote the books of the Bible recognized by Christian church as genuine.

In the later, literary context, the term was applied “to signify the list of secular works accepted by experts as genuinely written by a particular author” (Abrams 1993: 19), as, for example, “the Shakespeare canon”, “the Tammsaare canon”, to use the Estonian context, or, say, “the Kerouac canon”. During the last decades of the 20th century, however, the term expanded further, and as a result of widespread discussions and debates, its meaning shifted to designate what are generally viewed as literary works of (supposedly) lasting value, i.e. the so-called major works or classics (v. Abrams 1993: 19–22). This definition, however, entails a number of open questions. Firstly, the ‘experts’ part of it is highly debatable, for unlike the biblical canon which is established by church authorities according to long-standing rules and procedures, and recognized as such by the particular religious body, the canon of literature emerges freely and unpredictably over the times, formed and formulated by literary critics and professors, and the popular taste of readers and buyers of books, ultimately, the dictate of the book market. Unlike the religious canon which is closed and definite, the literary canon is free and subject to change, as is the degree of its credibility and/or durability. Within the context of national literary canons, Abrams states the following, “These canonical writers are the ones which, at a given time, are most kept in print, most frequently and fully discussed by critics and historians, and most likely to be included in anthologies and taught in college courses, with titles such as “World Masterpieces,” “Major

English Authors,” or Great American Writers.” (Ib. 20) The “at the given time” part of the above definition does, in a way, contradict the essence of the statement, emphasizing the transitory rather than the permanent, which, at least implicitly, forms the heart of the matter. Interestingly, Abrams quotes Samuel Johnson who, in his “Preface to Shakespeare” in 1765, delineated a century as “the term commonly fixed as a test of literary merit”, and proceeds to enumerate “some authors who wrote within the present [i.e. the 20th] century such as Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann, and James Joyce – perhaps even a writer so recent as Vladimir Nabokov”, characterizing them as already having “achieved the prestige, influence, and persistence of reference in literary discourse to establish them in the European canon; others, including Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Robert Frost seem already secure in their national canons, at least.” (Ib.) In this connection, the question of whether Nabokov belongs to the European or American canon (continent-wise) is of secondary importance, although Nabokov in his various interviews emphasized his allegiance to America rather than Europe (or Russia): e.g. the famous dictum of Nabokov, especially after moving to Switzerland, “I am as American as apple pie” (<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/socher.htm>) that (seemingly) contradicts his famous lamentations over the loss of his native tongue. Likewise, the inclusion of T. S. Eliot in his “national canon”, whether American or British, is a moot point. From the perspective of the 1950–60s, however, it is to a certain extent relevant, since the transatlantic movement of authors between the supposedly Old and New World within the context of the two world wars and their aftermath, allow one to draw relevant parallels and, perhaps, even to maintain that in those circumstances the language rather than the citizenship (the latter being more easily changed than the former) matters most.

The literary canon itself (hence simply as ‘canon’) being subject to change, so are the fates and positions of the authors (and often also their individual works) within it, either because of the aesthetic tastes of a period, the efforts of some eminent men of letters (historically, women did not possess the position or prestige in this process until the rise of the feminist criticism in the late 1960s), or the historical moment of their lifetimes or, sometimes, what seems to

be mere chance. However, the last quarter of the 20th century witnessed a marked rise of interest in the canon formation both in Europe and the United States, including feminist, Marxist, new-historicist and various other poststructuralist critics and scholars, varying in their focus and specific objectives, yet questioning the standard frozen hierarchal/patriarchal Euro-centered canons and aspiring to either change these (by opening and reshaping them) or, more radically, abolishing them altogether. In practical terms, this process centered on the college curricula, especially in the United States.

The canon being always in the making, and although only half a century or so separates us from the emergence of the Beat movement/phenomenon (not to mention the one hundred years' criterion set by Dr. Johnson), one could still look at it as having stood the test of time, and view it, accordingly. As to the other generally accepted criteria, the works of the Beat authors are certainly kept in print, have been so since the appearance of both "Howl" and *On the Road* in 1956 and 1957, respectively. They might not, as it happens, live up to the requirement of being most frequently and fully discussed by critics, though, yet with the passage of time this situation is improving, and a number of eminent critics, writers and scholars (e.g. Ann Charters, Donald Allen, Lee Bartlett, Michael Davidson, Jason Shinder, Jonah Raskin, James Breslin, to name only a few) should be mentioned in this connection, let alone the writers/poets themselves (Lawrence Ferlinghetti, in particular). As to the inclusion in anthologies (unless specifically of Beat authors), there seems to be room of improvement, certainly, and even more so as to the college courses on American campuses. For instance, it seemed somewhat surprising to find that an outstanding university like the University of California, Berkeley (with its excellent library facilities, among these, the Beat archives in the Bancroft Library) did not offer, specifically, any courses on Beat literature (in 2007–08, for example). This might seem puzzling in view of the fact that Berkeley was at the very centre of the movement, not to mention the proximity to San Francisco, the locus of the San Francisco Renaissance, with its readings (including the first reading of part of "Howl" by Allen Ginsberg at the Six Gallery on October 7, 1955), and the City Lights Bookstore, famous for its wide choice of poetry and various literary

events. One should also mention the more recently established Beat Museum with its permanent exhibition and a lively literary life very near the City Lights in North Beach, San Francisco. In view of the above, it could be of interest in this connection that the Department of English at the University of Tartu, Estonia, does offer an elective course on Beat Literature since 2008, attended by students of different fields and countries. On the other hand, though, as Dana Gioia has observed,

One might easily view the history of recent American poetry as a series of rebellions against and reconciliations to the writer's cultural predicament. Most major innovations have originated in the frustration generated by poetry's sequestration in the academy. Each significant new movement has attempted to form some meaningful coalition outside the university – both to link its poetry to a living cultural tradition and to revitalize it with genuine social purpose. The Beats, for example, linked their literary vision to the nonconformist attitudes of the counterculture Left. (Gioia 2002: 223–224)

The feelings, then, might have been reciprocal, both sides to an extent at odds with one another, the Beats questioning the “conventional American cultural values during the cold war” (Charters 1993: 582), including the ones represented by the academe. In the hindsight, though, there is no doubt that there was a major breakthrough in American literature in the 1950s and the early ‘60s, not a smooth one, to be sure, but one that started “with a bang”, to reverse the famous Eliot quote, as the “Howl” trial with all its consequences could be called, the battle for free expression, the emergence of a new kind of spontaneous, passionate, somewhat freewheeling intimate voice in American writing, both in poetry and prose, in fact, a kind of merging of borders between the two, as “On the Road” clearly testifies, a book of poetry in prose, to put it more precisely, perhaps the highest kind of praise prose could earn, especially in an age when what is considered to be poetry (judged by its typographical layout, mostly) only too often resembles prose, and prosy, flat prose, at that. Without needing to go into the theoretical intricacies at this point, one could remember the way Martin Heidegger

characterized the relationship between prose and poetry, “The opposite of what is purely spoken, the opposite of the poem, is not prose. Pure prose is never “prosaic”. It is as poetic and hence as rare as poetry.” (Heidegger 1975: 194) Or else, the lines of Lawrence Ferlinghetti in his “Poetry as Insurgent Art”, “Prose masquerading in the typography of poetry is not poetry.” (Ferlinghetti 2007: 52) Consider, for example, a random extract from “On the Road”, Part I/3 (not the original scroll) in English and in the Estonian translation (by Peeter Sauter):

And here for the first time in my life I saw my beloved Mississippi River, dry in the summer haze, low water, with its big rank smell that smells like the raw body of America itself because it washes it up. Rock Island – railroad tracks, shacks, small downtown section; and over the bridge to Davenport, same kind of town, all smelling of sawdust in the warm midwest sun. (Kerouac 1999: 12)

Ja siin nägin ma esimest korda armsat, suvises leitsakus madalaks kuivanud Mississippi jõge, mis lõhnas võimsalt nagu Ameerika elus ihu, mida ta pesi ja endaga ühes kandis. Rock Island – raudteevõrgud, putkad, väike äärelinnaosa; ja siis üle silla Davenporti, mis oli samasugune soojas päikeses saepuru järele lõhnav linnake. (Kerouac 2006: 16)

By and large, the English version is highly poetic as to its rhythm, diction, occasional alliteration (e.g. ‘for the first time’, ‘smell that smells’, ‘small downtown section’, ‘smelling of sawdust’), rhyme (‘tracks’ and ‘shacks’, ‘my’ and ‘dry’), abundance of monosyllabic words (e.g. the first eleven words of the passage) that are emotionally more charged than longer ones, repetition, the euphony and musicality of sounds, the overall endearing tone, fragmentariness, associative transitions, etc. In short, prose with poetic qualities. Taking the liberty, we could easily imagine it in what is generally regarded as free verse form:

And here
 for the first time in my life
 I saw my beloved Mississippi River,
 dry in the summer haze,
 low water,
 with its big rank smell
 that smells like the raw body of America itself
 because it washes it up.
 Rock Island –
 railroad tracks,
 shacks,
 small downtown section;
 and over the bridge to Davenport,
 same kind of town,
 all smelling of sawdust
 in the warm midwest sun.

It is more difficult to ‘reshape’ the Estonian version of the extract for a variety of reasons, touched upon further on.

Ja siin nägin ma esimest korda
 armsat, suvises leitsakus madalaks kuivanud Mississippi jõge,
 mis lõhnas võimsalt nagu Ameerika elus ihu,
 mida ta pesi ja endaga ühes kandis.
 Rock Island – raudteevõrgud, putkad, väike äärelinnaosa;
 ja siis üle silla Davenporti,
 mis oli samasugune soojas päikeses saepuru järele lõhnav linnake.

To begin with, the number of words in both examples varies to a noticeable degree, the original containing 68 words, the Estonian rendering just 47, mostly due to the specific nature of the two languages (Indo European, i.e. West Germanic and Finno-Ugric, respectively, ultimately synthetic and analytic languages). However, the translator has omitted certain words (e.g. “in my life”, thus reducing the degree of personal emphasis in this sentence, “my beloved Mississippi” has been rendered simply as “the river Mississippi”, to the same effect), rendered “with its big rank smell” as “smelled powerfully”, “the raw body of America itself” as just “American live body”, thus again

flattening its emphasis, has modified the part containing the verb phrase “because it washes it up” as “which it washed and carried with it”, thus implicating a past action, translated “railroad tracks” as “railroad network”, omitted the pronoun “all” in “all smelling of sawdust”, and the important geographical name “midwest” altogether. Midwest, as it happens, is one of the four geographic regions within the United States, an important part of the country. In addition, the city of Davenport has been rendered as “townlet”, which is especially misleading in the Estonian context. As we know, the various places passed “on the road” are very significant in this book, alongside the rivers, oceans, and landscapes, cities and towns. One could even call this beautiful book a love song to America, no matter how crude the contents at times, a lyric and inspired hymn to this continent. However, the front cover flap of the Estonian translation informs us (anonymously so) that “The narrator of the novel *Sal Paradise* tells his simple and realistic story in a colloquial and relaxed manner – “off-the-cuff” (“Romaani minajutustaja *Sal Paradise* räägib oma lihtsat ja realistlikku lugu kõnekeelsel ja ladnal moel – “nagu torust tuleb“.) One could presume, perhaps, that the “off-the-cuff” method was used while translating the book into the Estonian, but it certainly cannot be applied to the original work. Nor is the story itself simple or realistic, if by ‘realistic’ we mean the attempt to present things as they are, rather than what they seem to the perceiving mind, less so as conforming to the conventions of the so-called realistic novels, or literary realism in general.

Being an inspired and inspiring book that has all the makings for belonging to the American canon of the 20th century, one could well remember Nietzsche’s description of inspiration:

– Does anyone, at the end of the nineteenth century, have a clear idea of what poets in strong ages called *inspiration*? If not, then I’ll describe it. – With the slightest scrap of superstition in you, you would indeed scarcely be able to dismiss the sense of being just an incarnation, just a mouthpiece, just a medium for overpowering forces. The notion of revelation – in the sense that suddenly, with ineffable assuredness and subtlety, something becomes *visible*, audible, something that shakes you to the core and bowls you over – provides a simple description of the facts of the matter. You hear,

you don't search; you take, you don't ask who is giving; like a flash of lightning a thought flares up, with necessity, with no hesitation as to its form – I never had any choice. (Nietzsche 2007: 68)

In view of the above, there is not that great difference between (out-standing) prose and poetry, especially since one of the definitions of the latter is “prose with poetic qualities” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/poetry>). Bearing that in mind, we would take a glimpse at “Howl” by Allen Ginsberg. According to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, “When poets are treated like dogs, they howl” (Ferlinghetti 2007: 62). The circumstances and consequences of the “Howl” trial being well documented and generally known, let it suffice to quote Lawrence Ferlinghetti at this point,

The “Howl” that was heard around the world wasn't seized in San Francisco in 1956 just because it was judged obscene by cops, but because it attacked the bare roots of our dominant culture, the very Moloch heart of our consumer society. (Ferlinghetti 2006: xi)

The meticulously recorded and documented history of the case includes the full text of the poem, introduced by a quotation from Walt Whitman, “The dirtiest book of all is the expurgated book.” A canonical book by now in not just the Anglophone world, “Howl” was translated into Estonian by Tõnu Õnnepalu, and appeared in a collection entitled *Ameerika (America)* in 2003, containing a fair selection of other poems by Ginsberg, complete with notes and a longer afterword by Hasso Krull, editor of the collection. The Estonian rendering has omitted certain peritextual elements that traditionally belong to the poem, such as the Dedication to Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and Neal Cassady, and the Introduction by William Carlos Williams,

Dedication To – Jack Kerouac, new Buddha of American prose, who spit forth intelligence into eleven books written in half the number of years (1951–1956) – *On the Road*, *Visions of Neal*, *Dr. Sax*, *Springtime Mary*, *The Subterraneans*, *San Francisco Blues*, *Some of the Dharma*, *Book of Dreams*, *Wake Up*, *Mexico City Blues*, and *Visions of Cody* – creating a spontaneous bop prosody

and original classic literature. Several phrases and the title of *Howl* are taken from him. (...) All these books are published in Heaven. (Ginsberg 2006: 3)

Williams gives a brief summary of the family background of Ginsberg, mentioning his father as a well-known poet in Paterson, New Jersey, praising the spirit of love that

survives to ennoble our lives if we have the wit and the courage and the faith – and the art! to persist. (...) But this is in our own country, our own fondest purlieus. We are blind and live our blind lives out in blindness. Poets are damned but they are not blind, they see with the eyes of the angels. (Williams in Ginsberg 2006: 8)

He then focuses on the familiar theme of the *poète maudit*, transplanted into “our own country”, seeing the poet as possessing the courage to contain it, claiming the horrors around him “as his own” and laughing “at it” and having “the time and affrontery to love a fellow of his choice and record that love in a well-made poem.” (Ib.)

Consider the very expressive opening of the poem:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by
madness, starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn
looking for an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
connection to the starry dynamo in the machin-
ery of night,...

(Ginsberg 2006: 9)

The Afterword of the Estonian translation quotes another version of the opening as follows, not indicating the source:

I saw the best minds of my generation
destroyed by madness
starving, mystical, naked,
who dragged themselves thru the angry streets at
dawn looking for a negro fix...(Ginsberg 2003: 139)

The Estonian rendering of the this passage by Tõnu Õnnepalu reads as follows,

Ma nägin oma põlvkonna parimaid päid hullusest laostumas,
 hüsteeriliselt alasti, nälgimas,
 lohistamas end koidu ajal süsti jahtides läbi neegrikvartalite,
 inglipäised hipid põlemas iidse ühenduse igatsusest tähistaeva
 dünamoga õõ masinavärgis,...
 (Ib. 9)

Since the focus of this essay is not the analysis of the technical side of the texts touched upon, or the specific social problems related to these (or the authors), but the canon formation, a long and unpredictable process, let us at this point remember that parts of the poem were first *read* (my emphasis) to the public by its author at Six Gallery in October 7, 1955, which is to say that it was an oral performance, given by the author himself who, by reading it aloud, inevitably gave the first interpretation of it to his listeners. This took place before the book appeared in its entirety on November 1, 1956, published in the City Lights Pocket Poets Series (cf. *Howl on Trial* 2006: 1–3), i.e. the text began its (public) existence in the oral form a year before its printing, resembling in this sense what is generally called the oral tradition, a term usually related to folklore. Since then, it has been printed in different formats as to the number of lines, the so-called stepped triadic lines divided into three segments (inspired by William Carlos Williams). In view of this, the translators of the poem have felt free at handling the formal structure of the poem. Whereas an oral performance of a text is inevitably an interpretation, either by the author him/herself or by another person, so is the translation. According to Heidegger, every translation (*Übersetzen*) is an interpretation (*Auslegen*) and vice versa, a half-measure, really, that should be handled with utmost care, especially in poetry and philosophy (v. Heidegger 1984: 74–76).

In terms of the canon, though, translations are not usually included in national ones, something that might be reconsidered, actually, especially in our globalized/globalizing era, or in the parts of the world where there was/is no freedom of expression. The fact

that the two seminal works, *On the Road* and “Howl”, were published in the Estonian as late as in 1996 and 2003, respectively, nearly half a century later, is clearly associated with this as well. Speaking of Estonia, half a century of censorship is a long time, in terms of human life and otherwise, as is its aftermath. Literary canons are supposed to be forming freely and unpredictably over longer periods of time, unshackled and free from open or covert censorship. They can be forged in more than one meaning of the word, i.e. by being formed by heating and hammering or beat(en) into shape, formed or made by concentrated effort, or by fabricating a forgery (v. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/forgery>). As an example, one could consider the ad hoc rendering by the author of this essay of the last stanza of a poem entitled “Lenin Among Us” (1943) by Jaan Kärner (1891–1958), representing the new kind of literature forged and forced upon Estonian authors in the attempt to create the so-called Estonian Soviet literature after World War II (v. also Sool 2009: 337–347):

Ei ole surnud ta – ta elab geeniuses,
kes jätkab tema tööd ja kelle võimas vaim
taas kehastub nõukogulikus olemuses,
mis kannab riiki, mis maailmas tugevaim.
Kes oli Lenin eile, see on Stalin täna:
Viib rahva võidule ta tahe, tema sõna.
(Kärner 1951: 103)

He is not dead – he does survive in genius
who carries on his work, whose mighty mind
reincarnates in Soviet essence,
that bears the strongest state of all the world.
Who Lenin was the day before, is Stalin now:
His will, his word will lead the people to the victory.

In the light (or should we say, the darkness) of the above, one could contemplate the further development of the Estonian canon, whether it will continue to do so freely, unshackled from the oppressive past, open to the international influences, including the Beat texts that are

well “on the road” (if not there already) to the American canon, and their present and future translations. Time will tell.

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