Canonical art as informational paradox[1]

Juri Lotman

In historical poetics it is regarded as ascertained that there exist two types of art. We proceed from this as from a proven fact because this idea is confirmed by extensive historical material and a number of theoretical considerations. One type of art is oriented towards canonical systems ("ritualized art", "the art of the aesthetics of identity"[2]), while the other – towards the violation of canons, the violation of prescribed norms. In the second case, aesthetic values emerge not as a result of the fulfilment of norms, but as the effect of their violation.

The possibility of the existence of "non-canonical" art has at times been doubted. It has been pointed out that unique, non-repeating objects cannot be communicative and that any "individuality" and "originality" of a work of art arises as a result of the combination of a relatively small number of fairly standardized elements. At the same time, the existence of "canonical art", that which is oriented toward the fulfilment of rules and norms, is such an obvious and seemingly well-studied fact that sometimes researchers may not notice the paradoxical nature of one of the principles of our approach to it.

It is regarded as quite evident that systems serving for communication, having limited vocabulary and standardized grammar, can be likened to natural language and studied by analogy with it. This is how there appeared the tendency to treat canonical types of art as analogs of natural languages.

Numerous researchers have noticed that there have existed whole cultural epochs (including, for example, the ages of folklore, the Middle Ages, classicism) when the aim of the act of artistic creation was not to violate the rules, but to *fulfil* them. This phenomenon has been described many times (concerning the Russian

---

[2]   "Aesthetics of identity" is a neologism coined by J. Lotman. It signifies the type of art composed according to pre-established rules. A text belonging to the "aesthetics of identity" (e.g., a fairy tale, *commedia dell'arte*, etc.) is characterized by numerous elements common to all of the texts of a similar type. "Aesthetics of identity" should be distinguished from the "aesthetics of opposition". The texts of the latter type do not follow the pre-established rules, but break them. – M. S., O. S.

Middle Ages, for example, in the works of D. S. Likhachev). Moreover, in the study of these types of texts structural descriptions have been the most successful, as far as it appears that we can apply the skills used in the analysis of common-language texts to them with the best results.

A parallel with natural languages seems quite appropriate here. If we assume that there are specific types of art fully oriented towards the realization of a canon – the texts of which are the fulfilment of its pre-established rules, and the meaningful elements of which are the elements of a canonical system given beforehand – then it is quite natural to liken them to the system of natural language, and to the artistic texts created with it – to the phenomena of speech (in the Saussurean opposition "language-speech").

However, this parallel, which seems so natural, creates certain difficulties: during the production of a text written in natural language its plane of expression is completely automatized and does not have any independent value for the participants in communication, while the freedom of the content of an utterance is very high. In this respect, artistic texts that belong to the "aesthetics of identity" are constructed according to a completely opposite principle: the domain of the message here is maximally canonical, but the "language" of the system remains non-automatized. Instead of a system with automatized (and, therefore, inconspicuous) mechanisms capable of transmitting almost any content, we have a system with a fixed domain of content and a mechanism that remains non-automatized, i.e. constantly perceptible in the process of communication.

When we talk about art, especially about art of the so-called ritualized type, the first thing that bursts upon the eye is that the domain of its message is very limited. In Russian, Chinese or any other language, we may talk about anything, but in the language of folk tales we may talk only about certain things. The relation of automatization of expression and content here is completely different.

Moreover, if people speak in their native language without mistakes and correctly, they do not notice it – the language is completely automatized and attention is paid to the sphere of content. But in the domain of art the coding system cannot become automatized. Otherwise art will not be art any more.[3] In this way, a paradoxical thing takes place. On the one hand, we do have a system represented by a huge number of texts, which is very similar to natural language – the system with

---

[3] Lotman's approach to art is similar to the approach of the Russian formalists. His understanding of art as "deautomatization" follows the definition of art originally given by Viktor Shklovsky, who asserted that the main principle of art is "estrangement" (Russian *остранение*), that is making usual things, i.e. the things we perceive "automatically", strange. Estrangement renews our perception of things, it gives us the possibility to see an object as if for the first time. – M. S., O. S.

the stable canonized type of coding; but, on the other hand, this system behaves in a strange manner – it does not automatize its language and does not have freedom of content.

Thus, the paradoxical situation: although the communication scheme of natural language seems to be very similar to the "poetics of identity", the functioning of these systems is diametrically opposed. This makes us assume that the parallel between "common-language" types of communication and the communication scheme of, for example, folklore, does not extend to all the essential forms of organization of these kinds of art.

How is it possible that a system consisting of a limited number of elements, which tend toward a high degree of stability and have strict rules of combination, tending toward canonicity, does not become automatized – that is, maintains informativity as such? There can be only one answer: when describing a piece of folklore, medieval literature or any other text based on the "aesthetics of identity" as the realization of certain rules, we take into account only one structural layer. The activities of specific structural mechanisms that provide deautomatization of a text in the minds of listeners seemingly escape our field of view.

Let's imagine two types of message: one is a note, another – a handkerchief with a knot tied in it as a reminder of something. Both are supposed to be read. But the nature of "reading" in each case will be very different. In the first case the message is contained in the text itself and can be fully retrieved from it. In the second one the "text" has only a mnemonic function. It has to be reminiscent of something that the one who recalls knows even without it. In this case the message cannot be retrieved from the text.

The handkerchief with a knot can be compared to many types of texts. And here not only "talking knots"[4] should be mentioned, but also the cases in which a graphically recorded text acts only as a specific memory hook. The *appearance* of the pages of the Book of Psalms played such role for the illiterate readers[5] of the 18th century, who were reading psalms from memory, but always looking at the book. According to the authoritative testimony of academician I. J. Krachkovsky, due to the peculiarities of the script, the reading of the Koran in certain phases of its history presupposed *prior* familiarity with the text [Koran 1963: 674]. But, as we will see further, the range of such texts has to be extended significantly.

Recalling is only one particular example. It belongs to a wider class of messages in which information is not contained within the text and subsequently extracted

---

[4] "Talking knots" [Russian "*веревочное письмо*"] or "*quipu*" was Inkan system of communication, which used different combinations of cords and knots. – M. S., O. S.

[5] "The reader" [Russian "*дьячок*"] in the Orthodox Church is responsible for reading aloud excerpts of the scripture during the liturgy. – M. S., O. S.

by the receiver, but in which information is, on the one hand, situated outside the text and, on the other hand, requires the presence of a certain text as an obligatory condition for its emergence.

We can examine two instances in which the information possessed by an individual or a group increases. The first one is the receipt from outside. In this case the information received is produced entirely outside and then passed on to the receiver. The second instance is different: only a certain portion of the information is received from outside and it plays the role of a stimulus that triggers an increase of information within the consciousness of the receiver. In the self-increase of information leading to the structural organization of the amorphous signs in the consciousness of the receiver, the addressee plays a much more active role than in cases of the simple transmission of a certain amount of data.

In cases of the receipt of informational stimuli, it is usually a rigidly organized text that creates conditions for the self-organization of the perceiving individual. Reflecting on the rumble of wheels, measured, rhythmic music, the meditative mood summoned by the discerning of regular traceries or completely formal geometric drawings, the charming effect of word repetitions – these are the simplest examples of the increase of inner information influenced by the organizing impact of external information.

We can suppose that in all cases of art belonging to the "aesthetics of identity", we face more complicated examples of the same principle.

Now the above mentioned paradox can be explained. When comparing folklore and medieval art, on the one hand, and the poetics of the 19th century on the other, we find that in these cases graphically fixed texts relate differently to the amount of information contained in a work. In the second case – by analogy to the phenomena of natural language – it contains all the information of the work of art (message); in the first case – only a small part of it. Hyperorganization of the plane of expression leads to situations in which the link between expression and content loses the definiteness typical of natural languages. The content-expression link then becomes organized in accordance with the principle of the knot and the recollection associated with it.

The receiver of a 19th-century work of art is, first of all, a listener – he is prepared for the reception of information from the text. The receiver of a folkloric (and also medieval) artistic message is on the contrary predisposed to listen to himself. He is not only a listener, but a creator as well. This is connected to the fact that such a canonical system does not lose its capacity to be informationally active. The folklore audience resembles the audience of a musical performance more than the reader of a novel. It was not only the emergence of written language, but also the reorganization of the total system of art according to the scheme of common-language communication, which gave birth to literature.

Therefore, in the first case the "work of art" is synonymous with the graphically fixed text: it has clear boundaries and a relatively stable amount of information. In the second case, the text (fixed graphically or otherwise) is only the most perceptible, but not the most significant portion of the work of art. It requires further interpretation, incorporation with certain much less organized contexts.

In the first case the shaping impulse consists in the assimilation of a given semiotic system to natural language, in the second case – to music.

In these two types of organization of artistic texts, the correlation of the work of art to the reality interpreting it differs in principle. If in the poetics of the realistic type the identification of text and life is the least complicated task (the greatest creative effort is needed for the generation of the text), in works of the "aesthetics of identity", in the cases when such identification takes place (the text can be constructed as a purely syntagmatic construction that implies only optional semantic interpretation, no more obligatory than visual imagery in non-program music), such identification is the most creative action and can be organized according to the principle of the highest degree of dissimilarity, or by any other interpretive rules established for a given case.

Thus, if a decanonized text is used as a source of information, then a canonical one – as a stimulator of it. In texts organized similarly to natural language, the formal structure is an intermediate link between the sender and the receiver. It plays the role of a channel through which information is passed. In texts organized according to the principle of musical structure, the formal system functions as the content of the information: it is passed to the receiver and reorganizes information already present in the mind, recoding the receiver's personality.

Hence it follows that when describing canonized texts only from the viewpoint of their inner syntagmatics, we can access an extremely important, but by no means singular layer of structural organization. The question remains: what did this text mean for the collective by which it has been created, how did it function? This question is even more difficult because often it is not possible to answer it with exclusive reference to the text. Texts of 19th-century art usually contain within themselves indications of their social function. In texts of the canonized type there are usually no such indicators. We must reconstruct the pragmatics and social semantics of these texts on the basis of external sources alone.

When answering the question, "where does information come from in texts whose whole system is by definition predictable in advance (because it is the growth of predictability that is typical for canonized texts)?", we should take into account the following.

First, we should distinguish cases when the orientation towards canon belongs not to the text itself, but to our interpretation of it.

Second, we should take into account that between the structure of the text and the understanding of this structure on the meta-level of the general cultural context, there can be considerable differences. Not only separate texts, but also whole cultures can understand themselves as oriented toward canon. But at the same time the rigidity of organization on the level of self-understanding can be compensated for by far-reaching freedom on the level of the construction of separate texts. The gap between the ideal self-understanding of a culture and its textual reality in this case becomes an additional source of information.

For example, texts written by the founder of the Russian Old Believers' movement, protopope Avvakum, are understood by him as oriented toward canon. Moreover, the struggle toward a culture built as the fulfilment of a strict system of preexisting rules constituted the program of his life and writings. But the real texts of Avvakum are constructed as violations of the rules and canons of literature. This allows researchers to interpret him either as a "traditionalist" or as an "innovator" depending on the context in which his works are placed (sometimes quite arbitrarily).

We can give one more example. The statehood of Peter I considered itself as highly regulated. The epoch posed demands for a "regular state"[6] and ideals of the total normalization of the whole structure of life. The state was reduced to a certain formula and certain numerical relations, extending even to the planned canals of Vasilievsky island (which were never built) and the Table of Ranks.

But if we move from the level of the self-appraisal of the statehood of Peter I to the level of administrative activity, we will encounter something completely opposed to regularity. The Code of Laws was never even created, although the pre-Petrine Rus' codes of law had been composed without difficulty. The state after Peter I did not create any juridical codification. Only the many-volume Code of Laws, the precedent that was aimed to replace the absent codified system, was actually created.

Thus, we should take into consideration the fact that the self-appraisal of a culture as oriented towards codification is not always objective. In addition, we should remember that the meta-level and the level of the text sometimes tend to coincide, to form an adequate correlation, but sometimes the situation is opposite.

Canonical art plays an extremely significant role in the general history of the artistic experience of mankind. It is doubtful that we should treat it as a lower or prior stage. And it is even more important to pose questions about the need to study not only its inner syntagmatic structure, but also the hidden sources of

---

[6]   "Regular state" is an expression of Peter I referring to his ideal of the organization of the country. According to this approach many of the social and economic processes in Russia should have been strictly regulated by the state. – M. S., O. S.

informativity that allow a text, about which everything is seemingly known before-hand, to become a powerful regulator and constructor of human personality and culture.

Translated by Montana Salvoni and Oleg Sobchuk

References

Koran 1963 = Коран [Пер. и коммент. И. Ю. Крачковского]. Москва: Издательство восточной литературы.