What Makes a Good Book? *Bonae literae* in Twenty-First Century

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The first part of the article analyses the term bonae literae *that leads us to the core of the problem of good book before the period of aesthetic separation that occurs at the end of the eighteenth century. Its second part attempts to demonstrate that even in the case of fragmented literary canon we often repeat the same "elitist" operation of power we criticize. Long before the emergence of modern literary studies organized through university departments and research institutes, properties of the good book were related to the evaluation of its rhetorical qualities, its dependence on poetic tradition and, above all, on its moral qualities. In twenty-first century there is no single criterion by which we can assess whether a book is good or not either in terms of its aesthetic or ethical properties. Thus, it seems that the answer to the question of good book would be as simple as it is paradoxical: there are good books and good books, old and new, classical and modern, good foreign and good domestic books, mostly written by great novelists and only few by great poets. In fact, the answer to the question of good book is problematic because it is difficult to find the clip that connects individual experience of the text and experience in general. Of course, the result is not disappearance of the concept of goodness (it still has certain content) but rather its vagueness. Therefore, caution is always needed in any generalizations, regardless of whether we generalize culturally or multiculturally. However, it appears that there still exists a small, almost invisible residuum of Erasmus's view of* bonae literae *in the fragmented contemporary literary canon: belief in the idea that literature has a value in itself.*

Keywords: literature and ethics / literary canon / literary evaluation / ethics and aesthetics / aesthetic experience / subjectivity / freedom / metapolitics / modernity

Long before the emergence of modern literary studies organized through university departments and research institutes, properties of the good book were related to the evaluation of its rhetorical qualities, its dependence on poetic tradition and, above all, on its moral qualities. Recall, for example, Erasmus of Rotterdam's favorite term *bonae literae* that leads us to the core of the problem of good book before the period of

aesthetic separation that occurs at the end of the eighteenth century, which says that the beautiful "pleases universally without concept". In numerous letters, Erasmus celebrates *bonae litterae*, literally translated as good literature, because it inculcates in readers and students *boni mores*, good behavior, a certain standard of ethics followed by proper moral sentiment. The request is to learn Latin and Greek from the best texts of classical writers written both in prose and in verse freed from the burden of accumulated comments. However, it is known that "a real semantic nexus" (Marino 89) *bonae literae* is untranslatable because it designs the entire classical literature, science and education, as well as the Christian belief seen as a healthy and salutary knowledge. Johan Huizinga goes so far as to say that the *bonae litterae* is the common name of a good thing for which Erasmus and his supporters have fought opposed to conservatism of those who have ignored the same good thing. Besides this connection of the idea of good book within the intellectual and moral community, for our discussion it is important to emphasize that Erasmus argues for the essential contribution of *bonae literae* in the process of purification of faith and its forms. This means that in early modern period a good book already has several goals, among which is the most important its contribution to the moral training of a Christian. Consequently, I could quite reliably assume that Erasmus knew what a good book is, or what good books are, although I could not translate the meaning of his understanding of *bonae literae* into a unified and generally applicable concept. It is important that the goodness of a book is not experiencing its fulfillment in the book itself, but outside of it, regardless of whether it is about creating privileged communities within wider Christianity or reaching the pure form of Christianity itself. The book is good in itself, but it is such only because it serves, thanks to the existence of a particular community, a better reading and understanding of the Scriptures, the best book, the book of all books.

Do these answers make sense today? At a first glance, it would seem not. After the enthronement of taste in the eighteenth century, this way of thinking about the good book was pushed into the background, because the assessment of book's goodness has been increasingly based on subjective impressions and not on an objective value that Erasmus could easily find in the Scripture. It could even be argued that Erasmus was a Christian as well as the ancient Greek, because he connected the harmony with the higher order that exists outside us: a good book is a book that confirms the external harmony, *i. e.* a good book is an expression of the pre-existent harmony. On the classical view, the work is a microcosm that allows us to think that outside of work, in the

macrocosm, there is an objective, essential standard of goodness. In modernity, such a criterion acquires meaning only by reference to subjectivity as an expression of modern individuality: a unique style wants to be the creation of a world, a world in which the artist moves, a world which we undoubtedly are allowed to enter in order to understand it, or enjoy it. However, the world of the book is not presented to us as an a priori common world. The question of what makes a good book becomes the question of the existence of a unity without any transcendent confirmation.

Even the aestheticians at the turn of the eighteenth century clearly pointed out how personal, or in fact intersubjective experience is important for judging art, but this experience is no longer accommodated in religion, but in a system of supposedly shared human values. From the very beginning aesthetics attracted authors of broad intellect and general knowledge, not specialists for literature, who therefore looked for connections by which the experience of the beautiful aligns with other mental faculties. Lord Shaftesbury tried and managed to impress as the seeker of wisdom and harmony, while at the same time claimed that wisdom cannot be attained by the intellect, but by a balanced and harmonious personality that is able to grasp the beauty and order of the world. Philocles from *The Moralist* believes that the idea of possessing what we like is pure nonsense, trying to convince us that we actually possess different possibilities to achieve satisfaction. Thus, Philocles separates intellection of the beauty of a tree or the ocean from mastering it. According to Shaftesbury, the experience of beauty is devoid of utilitarianism, or the desire for possession.

For example, we are certainly able to contemplate the beauty of the ocean, though we cannot posses the ocean (Shaftesbury II 127). Of course, the idea of beauty liberated from the utilitarian urge will leave an irrevocable mark on the philosophical and later on a popular experience of beauty (and, a fortiori, on the concept of "good book"), although Shaftesbury as a practical man thought that "the admiration and love of order, harmony, and proportion, in whatever kind, is naturally improving to the temper, advantageous to social affection, and highly assistant to virtue, which is itself no other than the love of order and beauty in society" (I 279). In short, Shaftesbury sees the experience of the beautiful as something that occurs within a broader totality that includes harmonious character, moral interest and human education. Today this linkage of interested and disinterested experience of the beautiful may seem contradictory, but the aesthetic theory of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century did not see any problem

in it. Consequently, Shaftesbury's possible answer to the question of what makes a good book is related to the properties of a non-utilitarian contemplation of the beautiful, which helps the development of virtue, love of order and beauty in society, even if it is obvious that his society differs from Erasmus's, Joyce's or, say, Sebald's. There is no doubt that ethics and aesthetics from the beginning make a strong but complex alliance, but this alliance is historically variable, which also inevitably changes the nature of our arguments about the relationships of literature and ethics.

For example, today the argument similar to Shaftesbury's often serves to justify the activity of reading in the contemporary utilitarian world, or in our garden of Adonis, whose fruits grow rapidly, but also quickly wilt and die. If the world is quite pragmatic and market-oriented, the act of reading literature is even more valuable, or ethical, because it leads us to the personal fullness offered by good books. Although this attitude sounds like a good advertisement for the study of literature in the contemporary world, it associates the traditional argument of aesthetic value and the notion of autonomy, freedom and (im)possible harmony of modern individualism. Categories like order and harmony, so significant for the aestheticians of the eighteenth century remain, in various forms, very influential today, but without pretensions to validity within the universal community. It is important to underline that this conception of literature is radically immanent, because its value is based on subjectivity: read to be different, read to be what you really are, read for the sake of an authentic experience, or simply – just read (without special reasons why, the great metaphor of *bonae literae* will implicitly take care of your reasons). After all, more than it addresses the transcendent value of aesthetic experience or understanding of the question of what makes a good book, the reference to harmony has a tinge of consistent ethical affirmation of the well-balanced individual. Consequently, it seems that when one says that this or that book is good for him or her, this functions both as an ethical projection and aesthetical judgment.

Of course, there is no single criterion by which we can assess whether a book is good or not, either in terms of its aesthetic or in terms of its ethical properties. It is clear that we will not evaluate in the same manner a novel, a collection of sonnets, tragedy or a narrative poem. Even when it comes to the genre of novel it is certain that we will apply variety of criteria in assessing the qualities of realist or modernist, detective, romance or postcolonial novel. Moreover, I suspect that for most readers today, unlike their known and unknown ancestors, it is easier

to estimate the value of a novel than of a collection of poems. Thus, it seems that the answer of true literary ruminants would be as simple as it is paradoxical: there are good books and good books, old and new, classical and modern, good foreign and good domestic books mostly written by great novelists and only few by great poets. In fact, the answer to the question of good book is problematic because it is difficult to find the link that connects individual experience of the text and experience in general. Of course, the result is not disappearance of the concept of goodness (it still has a certain content) but rather its vagueness.

The roots of such an understanding of good book lie in the transformation that was very well documented by French nontraditional philosophers of the eighteenth century. In the famous *Essay on Taste* Montesquieu almost axiomatically diagnosed the problem of the formation of taste by pointing out that sources of the beautiful, the good, the agreeable, are inside us (119). And to look for the reason for this means to seek the cause of the pleasure of our souls. The facts that I like summer and the goldenness of grain, that I am interested in the history or geography, or that I love intrigues and stories that do not begin *ab ovo*, or my melancholy, make me ultimately different from you and give me the right to say that Thucydides's *Peloponnesian War* is a good book for me. But at the moment I am saying this to you I would like to affirm my possible resemblance with you. Otherwise, I would prefer to remain silent.

It is clear that the idea of a general judgment of a good book is based on a short circuit. The point is that when I say "this book is good," it does not mean that at the same time I give a definition what a good book is either in ethical or in aesthetical terms. Actually, it seems that I mix ethics and aesthetics without determining what they are. My subjectivity considered that the characteristics of which I speak are indefinable. But when I say that a book is good, I still do not want to just say only that I like that book. Actually, I want to tell you that this book is beautiful, but that it also contains certain issues (including moral issues) that might be important not only for me but for you too. In fact, I want to tell you that the book I like also has something more, some features that go beyond the relation of which I speak. If there is, at least according to Gérard Genette, a subjective meta-aesthetician that always must see the field of representations that he or she creates about himself or herself (85), then our attention must be also directed to a kind of meta-ethical position characteristic of literary discourse's morality and its notions of type, empathy, plurality, politicality, concrete universality, perfection etc. Thus it seems that I am entering the

field of subjectivist meta-ethics and/or meta-aesthetics which believes that our ethical and/or aesthetical sensibility work best when they are immersed in a specific context which might be offered by a (good) book. This component of *meta* inside my subjectivity thinks that its description is objective and that its act of assessment is correct, but it does not take into account the subjective manner in which it recognizes a (good) book.

It is obvious that we need a hypothesis of generalization, we need to legitimize the linking of individual and general – be it humanity, common well-developed imagination, shared ideology, belonging to this or that imagined or real community. My assumption is based on the belief in the idea of a "higher" order, or instances of understanding that are fundamentally non-cognitive or at least they do not need to be explained every time when I speak about a good book. There are some analogies by which I judge, although they do not have the required objective value. Is this seemingly untenable position a necessary condition of my answer to the question of what makes a good book? Is the *goodness* of a good book just one inevitable working hypothesis?

Unlike Erasmus, who could count on the objectivity of *bonae literae,* which is based on its connection with the Bible as best book, the best book for us is, at best, doomed to be only a working hypothesis. In fact I would say that the answer to the question of what makes a good book is still tied to the existence of the supposed but never achieved existence of the best book. Like in Erasmus, the best book arises in relation to a good book (about which I speak), as the hypothesis that gives itself the task to determine the conditions under which a book can be a good book. In this respect, as in the case of Erasmus but with different consequences, the best book looks like an attempt of deduction of a priori intuitions that universally condition the perception of a good book.

The basic idea of talking about the good book is that the object is "inert." However, this inertia belongs to my reception of the text, to the belief in the continued presence of values, in a sort of canon, but also to the belief in the working hypothesis that a book that is good maybe sometimes, through the experiences of others, will become the best book. For example, if my experience of a good book is matter of the heart or spirit, as was thought by Pascal, Rousseau, Gombrowicz and many others, then the heart and spirit must become the subject of my knowledge, not the good book, which leads me into the short circuit, because my superior instance is rather vague and non-literary. Or, let us consider one contemporary example: if I am saying that a book

is good from the postcolonial perspective, obviously my experience of its goodness is matter of its political or even ethical virtues according to recently developed attitude that colonialism was wrong. Then, the subject of my knowledge again finds itself in a short circuit, because the goodness of a good book is again something outside the book, which I try to universalize in the name of its particularity. However, it does mean that when I tell you that a book is good, I cannot escape the assumption that I canonize my spirit ("heart," "politics" or "ethics") as a representation of understanding of the universal and eternal value (the best book), and so in a manner that this representation my spirit creates about itself and its judgment takes into account this field of self-representation seriously (meta-aesthetically, meta-ethically). Since there is a short circuit, speaking about the good book cannot be grounded, but can only move in the sphere of working hypotheses. Thus, it seems that the reasons – spiritual, political, ethical – that lie beyond the good book itself remain resistant until today, although it is hard to canonize them in a single notion of understanding related to the universal value.

Therefore, caution is always needed in any generalizations, regardless of whether we generalize culturally or multiculturally. Namely, the good book as a work of framing cannot take the place of the imaginary best book, *i.e.* it cannot attain the pure value of the sign or signifying effects of the best book. In a certain sense, familiar to the German Romanticism, it is always on its way to the absolute. The answer to the question of what makes a good book is based on the assumption that is exhibited in a curious and unexpected way by deconstructivist Paul de Man:

> Therefore I have a tendency to put upon texts an inherent authority, which is stronger, I think, than Derrida is willing to put on them. I assume, as a working hypothesis (as a working hypothesis, because I know better than that), that the text *knows* in an absolute way what it's doing. I know this is not the case, but it is a necessary working hypothesis that Rousseau knows at any time what he is doing and as such there is no need to deconstruct Rousseau (Rosso 118).

Once again, the good book is made out of the assumption that it knows what is the best book, because it has a basis of its functioning. Thus, as proposed by Adam Zachary Newton, we might talk about ethics of literature only in the alternative sense that "signifies recursive, contingent, and interactive dramas of encounter and recognition" (12). Thus it seems to me that the idea, expressed among others by Northrop Frye, that every act of evaluation is simply "one more document in the his-

tory of taste" (Booth 384) is an oversimplification both of the concept of taste and the place of literature. In the words of Terry Eagleton, as long as "art was extricated from the material practices, social relations and ideological meanings in which it is always caught up, and raised to the status of a solitary fetish" (19), false elitism will be a dominant position from which we pose the question of taste in literature. Thus it appears that even in the case of fragmented literary canon (feminist, postcolonial, multicultural…) we often repeat the same "elitist" operation of power we criticize.

However, from the same point we can go in a differrent direction. According to Jacques Rancière, romantic conception of literature is a striking example of the axiom of equality characteristic of the modern era (*The Politics* 26–27). The premise of there no longer being a strict division into genres and styles that follows the lines of the social hierarchy characteristic for ethical regime now operates on the assumption that everyone talks to everyone, that every form of discourse, in principle, is available to all. Rancière relies on the continuity between individuals in the political equality and equality of materials and themes in the aesthetic (*The Politics* 81). If we accept this, then we quickly come to the conclusion that the problem of the good book is actually a political problem. According to Rancière, who appears to be fond of the described short circuit of the good book, modern literature is democratic because it talks about things in a prosaic style that is indifferent to what is being processed. Indeed, everything could be the proper subject of literature. It seems that we can also agree with late Jacques Derrida who has affirmed writing as an unconditional right to say everything and/or the right not to speak at all – and to ask any deconstructive questions that are imposed by the subjects of human being and his sovereignty (Derrida 28; see also Robson 88–101).

Philosophical aesthetics has grown from a failure of the rationalist tradition of the eighteenth century to comprehend the immediacy of the sensory relationship of the subject with the world that makes up part of the aesthetic pleasure (aesthesis). The primacy of the empirical leads Rancière to what he calls the scene of aesthetic regime, or to artistic events that are, like any scientific abstraction, constituted themselves into historically developed distinctive languages. He maintains the principle of Kantian transcendental understanding that replaces dogmatism of the truth with the search for the conditions of possibility (Rancière, *The Politics* 50). Opposite to Lyotard (via Kant), according to whom the specific task of modern art is to witness the impotence of mind when faced with the unthinkable, Rancière goes in the direction

of an-archic deconstruction of the regimes of art's perception. Art is vague, and it is its main virtue. Or, for our purposes here, the goodness of a good book is its vagueness, which is its main virtue. As already shown, this virtue actually argues for something larger than itself. It is, of course, freedom, which is still one possible condition of a good book. Rancière's work reflects something that Manfred Frank noticed about the Kant's "third Critique":

> Even when I do not produce an aesthetic product, but enjoy one, I still must use my freedom. For nothing sensuously visible and reconstructable in thought is sufficient to impress the character of the aesthetic on an object of nature [i.e. the understanding cannot produce aesthetic judgments]. I must, in order to become aware of the *freedom* represented in the object, use my own freedom (Frank 158; quoted in Bowie 57).

Aesthetic product thus becomes a utopian ethical symbol of attained freedom: this symbol enables us to see or hear a picture of how the world would be like if freedom were realized in it. We can see it in this way because of that aspect of self-consciousness whose basis cannot be articulated in concepts, if concepts are understood in the Kantian sense, as the rules for identification of objects (Bowie 57). The main feature of literature is its availability, and the purpose of reading literature is that gifted students, autodidacts and finally all those who are not destined to read this or that text became able to adapt its words to create their own text (Watts 114). However, we must warn that *bonae literae,* of course taken metaphorically, gives reasons to the people who are inclined to hear them: "[I]f we cannot be harmed by fiction, then we cannot be improved. Fictions, to repeat, preach only to the converted" (Landy 74). Literature can only happen inside an ethical life of certain kind that is often quite innocently called "literary field." *Bonae literae* lives for the people that belong to a certain presupposition. This means that the idea that literature trains ethical sensibility always has certain limits.

Moreover, according to Rancière, aesthetics from the beginning has its own politics ("The thinking" 8). This does not make him happy and he calls that metapolitics (often termed dubiously as "ethics" or "morality") to indicate the deceptive doing of politics outside the limits of politics. The aim of metapolitics is to exclude its subjects from politics or to elevate them above the political; some would even say that ethical criticism has been always searching for metapolitical status. If the main task of ethics is to give valid reasons why something is good or not, then we might ask, for example, a postcolonial literary critic can he or she justify

the ethical reasons outside the secluded space of institution of literature. And where exactly? But if the presumption of the institution of literature is a must then how he or she can reasonably defend the difference of his or her approach to the literature or to the "outside" world. This is another reason why we need to rethink the legitimacy of this kind of ethics of literature: let us remind that academic scholars do not have the monopoly on answering the question what should be; real moral position cannot be drawn from the literary studies because the good book is always just a working hypothesis, which inevitably separates our experience of the book from the experience of, say, a refugee camp.

Thus, it seems to me that our secret desire for metapolitics and immunization from contemporary politics might explain why "in the last few decades ethical criticism has again become respectable, indeed widely so, ranging from the left to right politically and from traditional to avant-garde aesthetically" (Booth 384). Feminism, postcolonial criticism, "cultural" criticism, religious probings, re-emerging nationalism and spirituality have their own versions of *bonae literae*. There is nothing new if we say that their attitudes to the good remain synthetic and not analytic. Thus, it seems that the reasons – spiritual, political, ethical etc. – that lie beyond the good book remain resistant until today, although it is difficult to canonize them in a single notion of understanding related to the universal ethical value (or values). In the Kantian framework, the statement "this book is good" is not just an expression of feelings but more like a recommendation or even an order. Then we must re-think whom we are addressing (or commanding) when we speak about literature. It appears, here, that there still exists a small, almost invisible residuum of Erasmus's view of *bonae literae*: belief in the idea that literature has a value in itself. There is no doubt we share conviction that literary writing may still reveal something "deep," "meaningful" in regard to the relationship between language and the modern world, and also about the relationship between knowledge and cultural practices. Is the nature of this conviction ethical or aesthetical, or is it again difficult to disentangle them? Thus it seems that the *bonae* still has a certain content, albeit vague, wrong if metapolitical, and more acceptable if it longs for a radically egalitarian literature that will not attempt to solidify a unique and single sense of its own, but a way to deal with the tragedies of the century without forgetting to add some spicy humor, irony, parody and comedy to it. Since literature can even exist without a constant and dull repetition of the list of self-defeating consequences (of the crisis, the disintegration, fragmentation, anomie, gelatinization, loss of freedom, etc.), one who poses the question of the relationship of ethics and literature should be

more interested in a space where writing comes into collision with what enables it, thanks to which it writes.

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Kaj je dobra knjiga? *Bonae literae* v enaindvajsetem stoletju

Ključne besede: literatura in etika / literarni kanon / literarno vrednotenje / etika in estetika / estetsko izkustvo / subjektivnost / svoboda / metapolitika / moderna

Prvi del članka podaja analizo pojma *bonae literae*, ki nas povede v srž problema dobre knjige pred časom estetske separacije, ki se pojavi ob koncu 18. stoletja. Drugi del poskuša prikazati, da celo v primeru fragmentiranega literarnega kanona pogosto ponavljamo »elitistično« operacijo moči, ki jo kritiziramo. Dolgo pred nastankom sodobne literarne vede, ki je organizirana v univerzitetnih oddelkih in raziskovalnih inštitutih, so se lastnosti dobre knjige nanašale na vrednotenje njenih retoričnih kvalitet, navezav na poetično tradicijo in predvsem na moralne odlike. V 21. stoletju ni enotnega kriterija, po katerem bi lahko presojali, ali je knjiga dobra ali ne, niti v estetskem niti v etičnem smislu. Tako se zdi, da bi odgovor na vprašanje dobre knjige lahko bil tako preprost kakor tudi protisloven: obstajajo dobre knjige in dobre knjige, stare in nove, klasične in moderne, dobre domače in dobre tuje knjige, ki so jih večino napisali veliki romanopisci in manjšino veliki pesniki. Odgovor na vprašanje dobre knjige je problematičen, ker je težko odkriti, kaj povezuje individualno izkušnjo z besedilom in izkušnje nasploh. Seveda rezultat ni izginotje koncepta dobre knjige (še vedno ima nek pomen), temveč predvsem njegova nedoločenost. Zato je vedno potrebna previdnost pri generalizacijah, ne oziraje se na to, ali generaliziramo kulturno ali multikulturno. Zdi se, da še vedno obstaja majhen, skoraj neviden ostanek Erazmovega pojmovanja *bonae literae* v sodobnem fragmentiranem literarnem kanonu: verjetje v idejo, da ima literatura vrednost sama po sebi.

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