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Tales of Merit, Inequality and Hubris.
Grigore Alexandrescu as a Critic of Meritocracy
and the Enlightening Potential
of the Fable in Populist Times

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Abstract

The present article opens with a brief remark on populism. And yet it is neither about populism nor about political events. It is simply about an important challenge that arises from populism – the need to bridge the gap between winners and losers in a meritocratic society. By using Michael Sandel’s critique of meritocratic pride (hubris) to interpret two representative fables of nineteenth-century Romanian poet Grigore Alexandrescu (“The Ox and the Calf” and “The Dog and the Puppy”), I mainly seek to draw attention to Alexandrescu as a critic of meritocracy and to reassert the actuality of the fable, i.e. its utility in cultivating a strong sense of community from an early age, by drawing on German Enlightenment thinkers such as Johann Christoph Gottsched and Christian Wolff.

Keywords: meritocracy, fable, Grigore Alexandrescu, Michael Sandel, Christian Wolff, Johann Christoph Gottsched

Introduction

During the last two decades, populism has become a sociopolitical phenomenon of undeniable relevance. The causes for the rise of populist waves not only in countries of Eastern Europe but also in

the richer countries of the Western world are extremely complex and differ from region to region, although the emotions fueling them are often the same: a certain resentment and frustration of the presumably ‘less educated’ directed at elite classes, a feeling of social neglect or, from an economic perspective, the lack of a sense of stability in the context of the globalization of markets – a context which tends to foster deep inequalities and radical individualism while at the same time weakening communal bonds.¹

While the present article is not concerned with political events or the populist phenomenon as such, it takes its starting point from the populist backlash and the implicit arrogance of elitist behaviour towards people lacking ‘higher education.’ This implicit arrogance of elites towards the governed as a trigger of populist resentment represents the main subject of American philosopher Michael Sandel’s book *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020). While Sandel does not intend to provide an overarching explanation for events such as Brexit or the triumph of Donald Trump at the 2016 US presidential elections, his philosophical approach sheds light on complex issues which are at least implied in the phenomenon of populism and which require much broader debates on all levels of society. Such issues include: promoting the sense of belonging to a certain local community in light of the pursuit of a common ideal or common good; and, furthermore, a discussion of the inevitable limits of meritocracy due to the role of chance and luck² in human life.

In what follows, I would like to touch upon these two issues by highlighting a possible role literature – i.e. the fable as a literary genre – might play in correcting unjustified elitist arrogance and, implicitly, in promoting a sense of the common good from an early age. More specifically, I would like to show how some of Sandel’s ideas regarding the so-called ‘meritocratic hubris’ are already reflected in a paradigmatic and accessible way in two fables written by nineteenth-century Romanian poet Grigore Alexandrescu, namely “The Ox and the Calf” (1838) and “The Dog and the Puppy” (1842). In bringing together and comparing Sandel’s views and Alexandrescu’s fables, I have set myself

multiple objectives. The first main objective is, as already suggested, a hermeneutic one, namely to interpret Alexandrescu's fables as a critique of meritocracy by relating them to Sandel's ideas. The other main objective is to plead for the fable as a literary genre able to shape political thinking from a very early age. Last but not least, the analysis will indirectly serve two other secondary purposes: firstly, to draw attention to the work of a writer still very little known outside Romania, and, secondly, to prove that older literature may still be of practical relevance beyond the context in which it was written.

In order to achieve all the objectives listed above, the article will be divided into three parts. The first part will consist of a brief discussion of the main ideas exposed by Sandel in *The Tyranny of Merit*, especially the notion of meritocratic hubris. The second part will contain the analysis of the aforementioned fables written by Alexandrescu. Finally, the third part will briefly summarize the ideas of the first two chapters and will formulate a plea for the topicality of fables by drawing upon the high status ascribed to the fable in the eighteenth century during the Enlightenment.

Sandel's Critique of Meritocracy in *The Tyranny of Merit*

Sandel's *The Tyranny of Merit* was written mainly in response to the 2016 US presidential elections and the Brexit referendum – two main events that brought populism to the forefront during the last decade. By quoting articles or declarations of journalists and academics as well as discussing and comparing public statements by famous US politicians, Sandel tries to account for the populist triumph in the USA and the UK by pointing out the inherent flaws of the meritocratic ideal of Western societies. To this end, he also references sociologist Michael Young's satirical dystopia *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958), hereby remarking that a meritocratic society offers no guarantee for the reduction of social inequality as long as it tacitly favours some occupations over others in terms of merit and money while simultaneously implying that people get

what they deserve according to their abilities: “Allocating jobs and opportunities according to merit does not reduce inequality; it reconfigures inequality to align with ability. But this reconfiguration creates a presumption that people get what they deserve. And this presumption deepens the gap between rich and poor” (Sandel 117). This remark aptly captures one of the central theses of Sandel’s book, namely that current meritocratic societies tend to broaden the gap between elites and the governed, thus creating a ruthless ethics of success which divides society into rich and poor, winners and losers.

At the heart of this harsh ethics of success – and, implicitly, of Sandel’s critique of meritocratic ideals – lies the notion of ‘meritocratic hubris,’ which the author describes as follows: “Meritocratic hubris reflects the tendency of winners to inhale too deeply of their success, to forget the luck and good fortune that helped them on their way. It is the smug conviction of those who land on top that they deserve their fate, and that those on the bottom deserve theirs, too” (25). In other words, the main defect of a meritocratic society lies in the individualist and often arrogant attitudes generated by success, attitudes which have no reasonable justification as long as merit is at least partly conditioned by luck as well as favorable material and social conditions.

At this point, it is important to note that the factor of luck/chance does not only subvert the idea of merit at the individual level, i.e. as far as the particular conditions in which individuals grow up are concerned. Luck and arbitrariness are also involved in the way that merit is being distributed with regard to the jobs available in a society at a given place and time. In this sense, a famous basketball player or a pop star are certainly worthy of praise because of their achievements, yet neither of them can fully assert that they deserve the special attention and social prestige which they receive just because they happen to live in a society where pop stars and sports personalities are better paid and more popular than healthcare workers or janitors (Sandel 122-123). It is simply not their merit that they live in a society where they can thrive. The fact that some talents and skills are more highly regarded and rewarded

than others at a given time and place cannot therefore establish by itself an idea of merit which is conducive to a fairer society. Instead of assessing merit according to wealth, status or popularity, one should, Sandel argues, ascribe merit on a moral basis, i.e. according to the contribution of a certain occupation to the common good, i.e. to a more just society (191-193). In this way, there is no danger of overestimating or underestimating the value of a certain type of work, since every occupation which strengthens the sense of community and solidarity between members of society has its own dignity.

So far, it can be inferred from above that Sandel attempts to expose the structural problems of the meritocratic ideal on a theoretical level. Thus, chance may not only determine merit according to the particular conditions in which a person grows up and develops her talents; at a collective level, chance is also involved in job stratification or, more precisely, in the fact that some people who exert a certain profession are more fortunate than others due to the positive way in which their occupation is perceived compared to other occupations.

To make matters worse, however, a meritocratic society tends to betray its own ideal in practice as well when it spawns mechanisms that foster the perpetuation of social inequality over generations. Sandel suggests as much when he discusses the problem of credentialism: thus, credentials such as college degrees tend to become part of a mechanism which legitimizes the credibility of political figures and which also pressures children from rich and well-educated families to go to college (82-89, 97-104, 164-170). As a result, the gap between rich and poor widens and the solidarity between credentialed people and those lacking higher education dwindles, so that the meritocratic ideal – which should allow every individual to achieve high social status regardless of preexisting material conditions – is eventually undermined.

Apart from Young, Sandel also discusses Max Weber's theory of Protestant ethic (39-41) and stresses the importance of humility towards things one cannot control by invoking the biblical

story of Job (36-37). He further analyzes and questions the theories of John Rawls and Friedrich August von Hayek, slightly favoring the former (124-132, 141-146). For the purpose of the present article, however, there is no need to delve into these aspects of Sandel's book, some of which also bring to light its weaknesses.³

From a purely philosophical standpoint, Sandel's philosophical arguments are cogent and convincing, even when he does ignore major references which could have helped him frame his arguments better. From a sociological point of view, the author could have benefitted from applying Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron's theory of social reproduction – most notably exposed in works such as *Les héritiers* (1964; *The Inheritors*) or *La reproduction* (1970; *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*) –, theory according to which the dominant classes (roughly spoken, the rich and the well-educated) tend to secure and pass on their privileges to the next generations. Moreover, references to Jürgen Habermas's theory of social consensus – discussed mainly in his *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1981; *Theory of Communicative Action*) – or to Richard Sennett's work on social cooperation as outlined in *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (2012) would have been welcome as well.

All in all, however, Sandel's "merit" lies in exposing the structural drawbacks of the meritocratic ideal. The most valuable contribution of his book probably lies in the notion of 'meritocratic hubris,' and in the way this hubris can be tied to populist discontent and to the erosion of the sense of community on a broad sociopolitical level. For the purposes of the present article, it suffices to retain this central notion of meritocratic hubris which denotes the temptation of mistaking one's own successes for the sole result of individual effort, while at the same time ignoring the role of luck and chance. As a result, the winners of society often tend to become elitist, arrogant or self-sufficient, viewing their success entirely as their own doing, whereas those who fail are lured into believing that their lack of success is only their fault. To put it even simpler, the danger of meritocratic hubris lies in

excessive individualism, lack of humility and the temptation to forget one's own origins as soon as success – be it wealth, popularity or high social status – has been achieved.

Self-sufficiency, Hubris and Luck in Grigore Alexandrescu's Fables

I now turn to Grigore Alexandrescu. To this day, Alexandrescu – who was born in Târgoviște in 1810 and died in 1885 in Bucharest – is regarded as one of the canonical Romanian poets of the nineteenth century. His main body of work consists of several poetry volumes which comprise satires, elegies or Romantic patriotic poems such as “Mircea's Shadow. At Cozia” (a poem dedicated to the famous Wallachian Voivode Mircea the Elder). Nevertheless, he is most notably remembered for his fables (39 in total) – indeed, Alexandrescu is commonly regarded as the greatest fabulist of Romanian literature. Although he draws his inspiration from Western as well as Eastern European authors (Jean de La Fontaine and Pierre Lachambeaudie from France, Ivan Krylov from Russia), what sets Alexandrescu apart is his preference for political fables and the injection of a local flavor which aptly captures the mores of Romanian society at that time.⁴ To put it another way, Alexandrescu is not simply interested in creating allegories of moral virtue or vice which are meant to be applied or rejected on a purely individual level; rather, his main purpose is to depict and criticize relations of power which undermine the peaceful coexistence between members of different social and political strata. As a consequence, Alexandrescu's fables turn out to be political in the true sense of the term *polis* – they tend to shed light upon the hypocritical or proud attitudes that hinder people from coexisting peacefully in a society.

It is this antagonistic relation between the hypocrisy and pride of individuals, on the one hand, and the sense of community on the other, that a parallel between some of Alexandrescu's most famous fables and Sandel's critique of meritocratic hubris becomes possible. In order to illustrate this point, I shall shortly discuss

Alexandrescu's texts "Boul și vițelul" ("The Ox and the Calf" (1838)) and "Cîinele și cățelul" ("The Dog and the Puppy" (1842)).

Boul și vițelul

Un bou ca toți boii, puțin la simțire,
În zilele noastre de soartă-ajutat,
Și decît toți frații mai cu osebite,
Dobîndi-n cireadă un post însemnat.

– Un bou în post mare? – Drept, cam ciudat vine,
Dar asta se-ntîmplă în oricare loc:
Decît multă minte, știu că e mai bine
Să ai totdeauna un dram de noroc.

Așa d-a vieței veselă schimbare,
Cum și de mîndrie boul stăpînit,
Se credea că este decît toți mai mare,
Că cu dînsul nimeni nu e potrivit.

Vițelul atuncea, plin de bucurie,
Auzind că unchiul s-a făcut boier,
Că are clăi sumă și livezi o mie:
"Mă duc – zise-ndată – nițel fin să-i cer."

Fără-a pierde vreme, vițelul pornește,
Ajunge la unchiu, cearcă a intra;
Dar pe loc o slugă vine și-l oprește:
"Acum doarme – zice – nu-l poci supăra."

– "Acum doarme? ce fel! pentru-ntia dată
După-prînz să doarmă! Obiceiul lui
Era să nu șază ziua niciodată;
Ast somn nu prea-mi place, și o să i-o spui."

– "Ba să-ți cauți treaba, că mănînci trînteală;
S-a schimbat boierul, nu e cum îl știi;
Trebuie-nainte-i să mergi cu sfială,
Priimit în casă dacă vrei să fii."

La o mojiție atîta de mare,
 Vițelul răspunde că va aștepta;
 Dar unchiu se scoală, pleacă la plimbare,
 Pe lîngă el trece, făr-a se uita.

Cu mîhnire toate băiatul le vede,
 Însă socotește că unchiu-a orbit:
 Căci fără-ndoială nu putea a crede
 Că buna sa rudă să-l fi ocolit.

A doua zi iarăși prea de dimineată,
 Să-i găsească vreme, la dînsul veni:
 O slugă, ce-afară îl vedea că-ngheață,
 Ca să-i facă bine, de el pomeni.

“Boierule, – zise – așteaptă afară
 Ruda dumitale, al doamnei vaci fiu.”
 – “Cine? a mea rudă? mergi de-l dă pe scară.
 N-am astfel de rude, și nici voi să-l știu.” (Alexandrescu 169-170)

The Ox and the Calf

An ox like all oxen, without too much heart,
 Assisted by good fortune in our times
 And standing out among his fellow brothers,
 Acquired in the herd a rank of high importance.

– An ox of high status? – This does indeed seem strange,
 And yet it happens everywhere:
 For rather than big brains, it certainly is better
 To always have in life a little bit of luck.

Thus taken in by life's good fortune
 And equally by pride, the ox believed
 Himself to be above all others and
 That no one was a match for him.

The calf then, filled with joy at hearing
That his uncle has turned into a wealthy man
With loads of haystacks and orchards a thousand,
Suddenly said: "I'll go and ask him for some hay."

And without wasting time the calf sets off,
He turns up at his uncle's, seeks to go inside;
Yet suddenly a servant comes and halts him:
"He's taking a nap now, I can't disturb him."

"He's sleeping now? How odd – for the first time
To sleep in the afternoon! His custom used to be
To never sit around all day; this sleeping of his
Seems odd to me, and I'll tell him so."

"You'd better mind your business or you'll take a beating;
The boyar's changed, he's not the one you knew;
In reverence it is that you must walk before him,
If you should wish to be received into his home."

With such great insolence confronted,
The calf responds he'd wait;
But then his uncle wakes up and goes for a stroll;
Past the calf he walks, not even looking at him.

With sadness the young calf witnesses all,
Yet thinks his uncle has gone blind;
For no way can he bring himself to think
That his beloved uncle has avoided him.

On the second day, the calf returns
Still very early, to give his uncle time;
Seeing him freeze outside, a servant
Made mention of his name so as to do him good.

"Master," he said, "your relative is waiting
Outside for you – the son of Mrs. Cow."
– "Who? My relative? Go kick him down the stairs.
Such relatives I don't have, nor do I wish to know."⁵

The meaning of the fable is at first sight pretty straightforward: the allegorical figure of the wealthy ox is generally considered to embody the typical parvenu of nineteenth-century Romanian society (Marcea xvii; Loghin 378). The parvenu is, of course, a mere profiteer whose social ascension does not reflect his merits or capabilities. On the other hand, it is possible, in my opinion, to read the text as a meritocratic fable as well, since it is said that the ox 'acquires' his high rank (line 4) and that he did not use to sleep during the middle of the day nor sit around lazily before having attained his high position (lines 21-23). In this reading, the ox would represent the ambitious, competitive person who, having achieved wealth and high status, becomes lazier, blinded by pride and indifferent towards those he once knew, including his poorer relatives.

If this alternative 'meritocratic' reading holds as well, then not only the figure of the ox, but the whole text gains in complexity. It becomes, for instance, possible to interpret the rejection of the calf (the poorer relative) in two ways which do not necessarily exclude one another. Firstly, the dismissive gesture of the ox can be interpreted as a sign of arrogance and indifference towards one's own relatives and acquaintances or simply towards people of lower rank: corrupted by power, the ox has become estranged from his own kind. Secondly, the dismissal of the calf can be read as a sign of elitism towards people who have not achieved the success the ox has and yet wish to partake in the ox's merits.⁶ Of the two interpretative variants regarding the attitude towards the calf, the first one appears to be the more plausible. However, the second variant is not to be dismissed, since the text implies that the ox, in spite of his heartlessness and pride, has genuinely struggled to obtain a position of high rank (even if aided by good fortune too). Being corrupted by success can, therefore, entail both aspects mentioned above: one becomes blinded not only by the power and wealth guaranteed by success, but also by one's own merits in the light of the achieved success. In short, the ox's arrogance consists in both his arrogance toward the poor and in a distorted view of his own merits.

By taking into account the ‘meritocratic’ interpretation outlined in the previous paragraph, Alexandrescu’s fable gains in complexity and provides a literary illustration of unjustified meritocratic hubris. Similar to Sandel, Alexandrescu highlights the unfounded pride which comes with wealth and high status (lines 9-12). He also stresses the role of chance and good fortune with regard to the ox’s social ascent (lines 2, 9) while also suggesting a certain proneness to effort (the ‘acquiring’ of the high rank mentioned in line 4, the initially active nature of the ox in lines 21-23). Once the ox becomes wealthy, his hubris increases – the poor calf, son of Mrs. Cow, ‘deserves’ to freeze outside, since he belongs with the ‘losers.’

It is true that, as a satirist, Alexandrescu tends to exaggerate the ox’s character defects. Consequently, blatant inconsistencies of the ethics of success are also exposed, since the ox becomes lazier after having achieved power. Sandel’s critique of meritocracy does not target this particular inconsistency of the meritocratic ethics of success – as a philosopher, Sandel criticizes the meritocratic ethics of success while at the same time resisting the assumption that meritocratic hubris implies a significant alteration of work habits (e.g. laziness). Nevertheless, “The Ox and the Calf” does emphasize how the social distance between the well-off and the poor increases when people who acquire wealth and high social status forget about those left behind. The critique of the unjustified (meritocratic) hubris which fosters social inequality by downplaying the role of good fortune can therefore be said to be a theme common to Sandel and Alexandrescu: what Sandel expresses directly as a political philosopher, Alexandrescu expresses indirectly and more radically through his fable.

Another form of hubris which undermines equality of chance can be found in “The Dog and the Puppy.” In this didactic poem, however, Alexandrescu does not present characters who have achieved a transition towards a more privileged state, but rather characters who espouse certain views of equality:

Cîinele și cățelul

“Cît îmi sînt de urîte unele dobitoace,
Cum lupii, urșii, leii și alte cîteva,
Care cred despre sine că prețuiesc ceva!
De se trag din neam mare,
Asta e o-ntîmplare:
Și eu poate sînt nobil, dar s-o arăt nu-mi place.
Oamenii spun adesea că-n țări civilizate
Este egalitate.
Toate iau o schimbare și lumea se cioplește,
Numai pe noi mîndria nu ne mai părăsește.
Cît pentru mine unul, fieștecine știe
C-o am de bucurie
Cînd toată lighioana, măcar și cea mai proastă,
Cîine sadea îmi zice, iar nu *domnia-voastră*.”
Așa vorbea deunăzi cu un bou oarecare
Samson, dulău de curte, ce lătra foarte tare.
Cățelu Samurache, ce ședea la o parte
Ca simplu privitor,
Auzind vorba lor,
Și că nu au mîndrie, nici capriții deșarte,
S-apropie îndată
Să-și arate iubirea ce are pentru ei:
“Gîndirea *voastră* – zise – îmi pare minunată,
Și simntimientul *vostru* îl cinstesc, frații mei.”
– “Noi, frații tăi? răspunse Samson plin de mînie,
Noi, frații tăi, potaie!
O să-ți dăm o bătaie
Care s-o pomenești.
Cunoști tu cine suntem, și ți se cade ție,
Lichea nerușinată, astfel să ne vorbești?”
– “Dar ziceați...” – “Și ce-ți pasă? Te-ntreb eu ce ziceam?
Adevărat vorbeam,
Că nu iubesc mîndria și că uresc pe lei,
Că voi egalitate, dar nu pentru căței.”

Aceasta între noi adesea o vedem,
Și numai cu cei mari egalitate vrem.
(Alexandrescu 148-149)

The Dog and the Puppy

“How hateful seem to me some brutish creatures
Like wolves, bears, lions and a few others more
Who think they’re really something worth!

 If they come from a noble species,

 Then it is mere coincidence:

I may be noble too, but I don’t like to show it.

In civilized countries, people often say,

 There is equality.

Everything changes and the world makes itself,

But only in our case, pride never lets us go.

For my own part, everyone knows

 That I am very glad

When every wild beast, even the most dumb,

Calls me plainly ‘dog’ and not ‘Your Lordship.’”

Thus spoke the other day to an ordinary ox

Samson, a big yard dog who barked very loudly.

Samurache, the puppy, who stood apart

 As a mere spectator,

 Having heard their conversation

And that they had no pride or vain caprices,

 Immediately approached them

To show them his appreciation:

 “Your way of thinking” – said he – “I find it lovely.

And I respect your sentiment, my brothers.”

– “Us, your brothers?” retorted Samson filled with anger.

 “Us, your brothers, you mutt!

 We’ll give you a beating

 To remember.

Do you know who we are? How dare you,

Address us in this manner, impertinent scoundrel?”

– “But you were saying...” – “And what do you care? Did I ask you what I
was saying?”

 Indeed I said the truth,

That I reject pride and despise lions,

That I desire equality, but not for little puppies.”

Events like these we often witness,

And yet desire equality only with the great.

In this second fable, first published in 1842 and presumably inspired by Lachambeaudie's "Le léopard et le renard" ["The Leopard and the Fox"],⁷ the dog criticizes the arrogance of allegedly 'nobler' beasts (wolves, lions, bears), while simultaneously looking down upon more powerless animals who belong to the same category (the puppy and the dog belong to the same species, just like the ox and the calf). In comparison to "The Ox and the Calf," where Alexandrescu does bring up the notion of success as a partial result of competitive behaviour and hard effort, the problem of success in "The Dog and the Puppy" seems to be mainly a matter of birth privilege. Accordingly, Samson the dog criticizes the fact that lions, wolves or bears are regarded as leaders of the animal kingdom (i.e. of society) simply because they are born the way they are.

At first sight, this kind of discussion seems to preclude the idea of meritocracy – yet even in the context of this second fable, the problem of inequality in the animal kingdom seems to be tied to the question of merit. The reason for this is the fact that Samson discusses the role of chance in the establishment of social hierarchies. Consequently, it is possible to reframe Samson's arguments in terms compatible with a critique of meritocracy (Sandel's included). This time, however, the argument concerns not the individualistic ethics of success, but the fortune of being born in a social context which holds some jobs or innate qualities – and, implicitly, some categories of people – to be more valuable than others just because they are better paid or are linked to higher skills or a higher social position.

There are, however, some important nuances to be taken into account here. As mentioned in the previous section, Sandel stresses the fact that the popularity or wealth associated with a certain job or skill does not provide a moral criterion for assessing merit or the contribution to the common good. There is no reason why people who happen to have a certain talent at a time when those talents are highly appreciated should deserve more respect than members of that same community whose skills and jobs are less valued. In the end, pop stars or sportspersons do not have any

merit in the fact that they live in a society which gives them a more than comfortable edge compared with factory workers or janitors.

Compared to Sandel's *Tyranny of Merit*, Alexandrescu's "The Dog and the Puppy" does not discuss occupations, but rather the more direct advantage of being born stronger than others. Nevertheless, privileges of birth seem to be central to Sandel's argument as well – after all, does not the fact of being endowed with certain highly appreciated talents involve privileges of birth (that is, of being born in a particular way in a society which values being born *precisely* in that particular way)? Consequently, there is a certain equivalence between being born with certain physical traits, being endowed with certain talents and belonging to a certain existential or social category, since all these factors are not supposed to determine from the beginning whether some persons deserve greater social recognition than others.

It seems therefore just as important for Alexandrescu as for Sandel to compensate inequality of opportunity at birth with equality of opportunity at subsequent stages in life. Why should a pop star deserve more attention and respect than a healthcare worker just because the pop star appears on TV all the time? Why should a wild animal such as the lion be more valuable to the animal kingdom than a domestic one, such as the ox or the dog? In the end, the fact that "The Dog and the Puppy" also criticizes social inequality while emphasizing the role of chance makes one realize that there is again common ground between Alexandrescu and Sandel. The fact that lions, wolves or bears are born noble and possess physical strength does not mean that they have greater merits than animals of humbler origins. Their contribution to the common good is not necessarily greater just because they are stronger or freer or nobler and, as such, looked upon with greater respect.

At this point, another common ground between Alexandrescu's "The Dog and the Puppy" and Sandel's critique of meritocracy is to be found in the notion of meritocratic hubris. Here, just as in the ox's case, Alexandrescu exposes the dog's faulty logic: although the dog is right to claim equality for all animals so that the

inequality between him and the stronger, freer animals is abolished, he does not apply the same criterion to beings weaker than him. When the puppy claims the same ideal of equality in his relation to the dog (and the ox) for himself, the dog refuses to be placed on a par with the puppy. In other words, the dog rightfully asks why stronger animals should deserve more recognition than weaker ones, yet at the same time assumes that he deserves more recognition than animals weaker than him. As a result, he becomes arrogant and falls short of his equality ideal.

Despite the fact that “The Dog and the Puppy,” as mentioned before, does not criticize the meritocratic ethics of hard work as such, it does touch upon the problem of desert and the way that meritocratic hubris can often be justified erroneously by invoking or forgetting one’s origins, depending on the case. This is especially true for the dog himself, who used to be a puppy once: depending on the context, he dismisses the criterion of origin (nobility of birth, race) when it comes to his relation to stronger animals, while invoking the very same criterion of origin in order to distance himself from weaker animals more closely related to him. So, even as they do not (explicitly) stress the importance of hard work, the dog in “The Dog and the Puppy” and the ox in “The Ox and the Calf” fall prey to meritocratic hubris in that they forget their humble origins, thus deepening the inequality between members of the same group – be it on the smaller scale of the same family (the ox and the calf belong to the same species as do the dog and the puppy) or on the much larger scale of the same community (the animal kingdom in “The Dog and the Puppy”).

Concluding Summary. With a Plea for the Correction of (Meritocratic) Hubris through Fables

In the literary analysis of the previous chapter, I have tried to show how two of the most important political fables written by the Romanian poet Alexandrescu may share a common ground with Sandel’s critique of meritocracy. Both authors share genuine ideals of equality; both criticize the hubris which results from forgetting

one's humble origins and from believing that some people deserve more respect and attention than others according to extraneous criteria such as wealth, power, privilege of birth, or qualities with which one is born. Both authors emphasize the role of luck and chance in human life; in fact, one can say that Alexandrescu's fables provide an appropriate literary illustration of some philosophical arguments formulated by Sandel in his critique of meritocracy. Of course, the differences between the argumentation of the two authors should not be ignored. As a satirist, Alexandrescu tends to exaggerate the behavioral inconsistencies displayed by the ox and the dog. Thus, the ox in "The Ox and the Calf" becomes lazier as soon as he has reached high status and influence, whereas the dog in "The Dog and the Puppy" becomes very angry and arrogant towards the puppy when the latter expresses his desire to participate in the ideal of equality envisioned by the dog. All in all, however, both authors seem to display a deep preoccupation with the relationship between luck and an unjustified feeling of entitlement which eventually generates or amplifies inequalities between members of the same group or society as a whole.

Moreover, the considerable attention devoted to the critique of meritocracy from the 2000s onwards by authors such as Robert H. Frank (*Success and Luck*), Stephen J. McNamee (*The Meritocracy Myth*) and Sandel (*Tyranny of Merit*) also speaks for the relevance of literary works which tackle or have tackled the same subject in the past. The fact that Alexandrescu's fables also deal with the problem of inequality, privilege of birth, luck and merit should be taken as an argument for the need to study older literary works alongside newer ones. Teaching the common good is not merely a matter of finding solutions to today's problems by sticking to present contexts – it is also a matter of reconciling the past with the present, the forgotten with the actual and even the unknown with the known, since Alexandrescu's work belongs to a culture which is not as widespread as the more dominant Western ones with their richer literary traditions.

In the end, I would like to briefly return to the issue of populism and elitism from which the present article started. If there is one positive lesson to be drawn from the predominantly negative phenomenon of populism, then it is the need to reconsider the gap between elites and the governed, between rich and poor, between the dignity to which every human being is entitled and the social recognition to which, at least at this moment, only a few select seem to have a right. In this context, literature, old and new, may play a key role in teaching children respect and a sense of community from an early age. Fables, especially political fables like those written by Alexandrescu, may be of some help here.

At first sight, stressing the actuality of fables may seem surprising. Nevertheless, it is probably no coincidence that, in the period of the Enlightenment, the fable was a literary genre held in high regard.⁸ For the present purposes, it should suffice to cite two prominent thinkers from my own field of study (German philology) to prove the point, namely Christian Wolff and Johann Christoph Gottsched. Thus, Gottsched, who was the leading German literary critic at the time and a famous disciple of Wolff, saw in the fable “the origin and heart of all poetry” (“der Ursprung und Seele der ganzen Dichtkunst”) (148).⁹ Gottsched’s definition borrows heavily from Aristotle, and yet he also builds upon the work of his mentor Wolff when he suggests that every poetic work – be it a tragedy, a comedy or an epic poem – has the characteristics of a fable as long as its role is to educate people and serve a moral purpose (168-169). In his book *Vernünfftige Gedancken von der Menschen Tun und Lassen* (Engl. *Rational Thoughts on Men’s Doings and Not-Doings*; first published in 1720), Christian Wolff, the leading German philosopher of the first half of the eighteenth century, had asserted that man’s intellect ought to be led towards clear (ethical) knowledge of good and evil by means of powerful examples, real or fictional. It is in this context that Wolff considers fables to be fictional examples with a definite practical role in educating the individual:

Da nun die Bewegungs-Gründe Vorstellungen des Guten und Bösen sind (§. cit. Met.): diese Vorstellungen aber für den Verstand

gehören (§. 277. Met.); so muß dem Verstande zu solcher Erkenntniß verholffen werden, wenn man den Menschen bessern will. Weil doch aber keine Vorstellung einen Bewegungs-Grund abgeben kan, als die eine Überführung oder Überredung mit sich führet (§. 169.); so muß man auch die Vorstellungen dergestalt einrichten, daß der andere, den ich lencken will, an ihrer Gewißheit keinen Zweifel hat (§. 1. & seqq. c. 13. Log.). Und da die Exempel viel dazu beytragen (s. §. 167.); so ist es über die massen dienlich, wenn man solches entweder durch wahre Exempel, oder, wo man dergleichen nicht haben kan, durch erdichtete, (welche Fabeln genennet werden) zu erhalten suchet. Und erhellet hieraus der Nutzen der Fabeln, wenn sie so eingerichtet sind, daß der Erfolg der guten und bösen Handlungen dadurch handgreiflich wird (§ 4). (246-247) / Because motives [i.e. reasons/motivations for acting] are representations of good and evil (§. cit. Met.) which nonetheless pertain to the intellect (§. 277. Met.), the intellect must be assisted accordingly towards such knowledge [of good and evil] if man is to become better. However, since no representation can provide a motive except that which carries with it a transition towards an action or a conviction (§. 169.), one must likewise arrange the representations in such a manner that the person one wishes to guide does not doubt their certainty (§. 1. & seqq. c. 13. Log.). And since examples contribute a lot to this (see §. 167), then it is exceedingly convenient if one tries to achieve these representations either through true examples or – where such a thing is not possible – through invented ones (which are called fables). From this follows the utility of fables, if they are constructed in such a manner that the outcome of good and bad deeds becomes apparent (§ 4).¹⁰

In conclusion, if one is to promote the common good from an early age so that subsequent societies will become more just and conducive to mutual respect between citizens, then it might do good to recall the powerful interest shown by thinkers of the Enlightenment in the formative potential of the (Aesopic) fable as the genre that conveys more succinctly what all major genres (tragedy, comedy, the epic) as fables in a broader sense should. Peculiar as it may seem, the Aesopic fable qua fable in a narrower sense still holds some important practical advantages over the

lengthy novels of the fantasy and science-fiction genre which capture the attention of children of all ages. Firstly, such fables are short and easy to remember – they belong to the shortest forms of literature in general.¹¹ Secondly, they are especially suited for group learning, as they are rather meant to fulfill a practical, educational role rather than simply being read in private.¹² And, thirdly, they provide a powerful case for the timelessness of literature itself, since they operate with allegoric characters and types.¹³ Alexandrescu's political fables analyzed in this essay are a case in point – their present relevance can only be increased by the fact that the critique of inequality and meritocracy formulated in them still resonates profoundly with twenty-first century discourse on the topic.

Notes:

¹ The secondary literature on populism is extremely rich and varied; any detailed discussion of it would go beyond the purpose of this article. For a relatively comprehensive account of today's populism and its causes see Guriev and Papaioannou.

² In this article, I shall use 'luck' and 'chance' as synonyms, although 'luck' generally entails a more subjective connotation, whereas 'chance' is a more neutral, objective term for a range of outcomes which determine the perception of luck.

³ For instance, although Sandel is right to stress the similarities between today's ethics of success and the Protestant ethic as a secular form of individual salvation through work (i.e. of obtaining God's grace through the accumulation of wealth), he tends to overrate the plausibility of Weber's theory, i.e. the concrete impact of a religious factor on the shaping of the actual meritocratic work ethic. For a systematic rebuttal of Weber's theory of protestant ethics, see Steinert 37-171.

⁴ Some critics such as Pompiliu Eliade have even suggested that Alexandrescu's fables are from the onset so interwoven with local realities that the problems addressed in them should be regarded as national and political, not as universal or philosophical: "Cette fable d'Alexandrescu ne sera donc ni universelle, ni philosophique, mais au contraire . . . nationale et politique" (888). However, these two aspects – the national and the universal – need not exclude each other as long as the Romanian

author's fables point towards virtues and vices present in other societies as well. Furthermore, in spite of Alexandrescu's quasianonymity outside his own culture, it should be noted that his fables have met with certain praise abroad. Thus, in an article published in a journal from Oklahoma in 1938, Alexandrescu is placed alongside La Fontaine and Krylov and described as a "fabulist of high order" (Yankwich 280). The author – Léon R. Yankwich – praises the "originality" of Alexandrescu's ideas as well as "the beauty and simplicity of his poetic diction" and goes on to say that "these qualities might have gained him universal recognition" if he had used "a language of greater universality" (280).

⁵ The translations of both fables belong to me. In both cases, I have tried to render the meaning of the texts as faithfully as possible, a decision that inevitably entailed abandoning the rhyme and metrical structure of the Romanian originals.

⁶ Researchers have indeed suggested that the calf himself may not be as innocent as it seems, since he might wish to profit from the relationship with his uncle. All in all, the motivations underlying the calf's decision to see his uncle are eventually ambiguous – he may be honest in his wish to lead a better life, but he may also be a profiteer (Loghin 383).

⁷ For the connection with Lachambeaudie's fable, see here Iosifescu 324-325. However, it should be noted that the connection is a very loose one, since Lachambeaudie's text only includes the leopard and the fox as participants (in Alexandrescu's text, there are three: the dog, the passive ox and the puppy). Moreover, it lacks the complexity of Alexandrescu's approach insofar as the problem of close relation is left out – in comparison with the dog and the puppy who belong to the same species, the leopard and the fox are not related to one another in any close way (Lachambeaudie 107-108).

⁸ For a survey of the theoretical discourse on fables during the 18th century, see Noel.

⁹ For a more thorough analysis of Gottsched's conception of the fable, see Grimm 641-651.

¹⁰ The translation is mine. For further observations regarding Wolff's praise of the fable, see Grimm 606-607n369.

¹¹ Although Gottsched does not impose brevity as a primary criterion for Aesopic fables, he does state that Aesop's simplicity and brevity are hard to match by newer fabulists such as La Fontaine or Daniel Stoppe (448-449). The ideal of brevity as a primary criterion for the quality of fables is later made explicit by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, for whom a fable must be "so kurz . . . als möglich" (410), i.e. as brief as possible.

¹² The educational potential of the fable has been emphasized over and over again even before the Enlightenment, but it was during the 18th century that the fable grew into a noteworthy literary genre, one suitable for educating children and ordinary people on a wider social scale by delivering simple moral truths (Noel 10, 12). While researchers like Noel have taken note of the declining interest in the genre starting with the end of the 18th century (144-156), this decline mainly concerns the fable's limited creative potential as a genre and not its practical utility in schools; in fact, recent pedagogical works on the topic take the formative potential of fables in today's educational environment very seriously; see for instance Seibert.

¹³ The capacity of fables to convey universal human concerns has been stressed in recent times, see Classen 156-159. Still, while Classen is right to stress the fable's ability to depict and promote values of common interest to humanity more broadly, he often tends to undermine his own intentions. Thus, Classen's notion of universality seems to shift between human beings' transcultural attempt to make sense of life and death (155), the indispensability of culture for the organisation of human values and behaviors (155), the general human concerns (usually virtues and vices) addressed by both European and non-European fables (157), and the particular topics with which the discussed fables deal (in one analysis, for instance, Classen speaks, rather curiously, of "the universal theme of the illusion of one individual believing that he is the strongest in the world" (179)). This ever-shifting notion of the global/universal with which Classen operates makes it difficult to pin down those criteria that determine the universality of the fable. If, however, Classen's chief intention is to promote the fable as a globally relevant genre by stressing the widespread tendency to convey moral lessons and general practical advice in an accessible way via short narrative texts, then his undertaking is without a doubt legitimate.

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