STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXVII, 3, 2022, p. 47 - 52
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2022.3.08

EVE PATTEN[1]

Q: Literary history, be it national, local, or regional, is perhaps the most conservative form of literary study, with many claiming that the method is outmoded. What can literary histories do to overcome both the risk of obsolescence and their inherent conservatism?

A: At the high point of its evolution, say at the end of the nineteenth century when George Saintsbury published *A Short History of English Literature* (which of course, was anything *but* short), the genre of the literary history was unashamedly conservative, dedicated to the bolstering of national identity, political outlook, culture and tradition, in a mode that defined the thinking of most European nations. Literary history was 'monumental', in Nietzsche's sense of that term: it was dedicated to the solidification of the past and its enshrinement in the narratives of the present. And rightly, this kind of monumentalism has been challenged, not just in our own time but throughout the twentieth century. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren were writing about 'the fall of literary history' back in the early 1940s (*Theory of Literature*, 1942), as the devastation of the Second World War undermined any sense of a collective or shared European narrative of cultural progress. At that time, many critics would have agreed, I expect, that this critical method would not survive the aesthetic and geo-political reorientations of the post-war decades.

But nation-based literary history, we have to acknowledge, *has* survived, with some commentators struggling to identify the reasons for this resilience. 'In the C21st globalized, multinational, and diasporic world, how can we explain the continuing appeal, not only of the single-nation/single-ethnicity focus of literary histories, but also, of its familiar teleogical model, deployed even by those writing the new literary histories based on race, gender, sexual choice', Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdez ask in the introduction to their thoughtful edited volume, *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory* (2002). And literary history has survived not only the reformations of society that followed the Second World War, but also the academic and pedagogical bombardments

[1] **Eve PATTEN** is Professor of English at Trinity College, Dublin, and Director of the Trinity Long Room Hub Arts and Humanities Research Institute. Her recent books include, as editor, *Irish Literature in Transition, 1940-1980* (Cambridge UP, 2020), and as author, *Ireland, Revolution, and the English Modernist Imagination* (Oxford UP, 2022). She worked for the British Council in Romania from 1993 to 1996. Email: epatten@tcd.ie.

which have followed since: the backlash against the Leavisite 'canon', the backlash against modernism, the assaults of deconstruction, the barring of the Dead White Males, and the continuing decolonization of the university curriculum.

Literary histories continue to give shape to our comprehension of the literary field, and continue to do this—despite globalization—in predominantly national terms. *The Oxford English Literary History*, for example, ably steered by general editor Jonathan Bate, keeps producing new individual volumes and remains perhaps the defining series of its type. I use it regularly and benefit from the sense of a traditional framework as a reliable hinterland to the random shifts in taste of the literary foreground. And for those who attempt to take on the global remit, there has been great success too—I'm so impressed by Debjani Ganguly's management of what seemed impossible, in her superb editing of *The Cambridge History of World Literature*, published recently in 2021.

What Ganguly's work also shows is that literary history, as a genre, has not remained static. Over the last few years I have witnessed its development through my own engagement with the form, as a volume editor for the *Irish Literature in Transition* series, published by Cambridge under the general editorship of Claire Connolly and Marjorie Howes. The mode and ideology of Irish literary history is obviously different to an English canonical counterpart, but may have useful things in common with Romanian narratives. In this case, the idea of 'transition' in the title for the six volume series, ambitiously surveying the period from 1700 to 2020, signals the intention to move beyond a linear, top-down narrative of continuity and influence—something which has never been straightforward in Irish writing anyway—and to emphasise instead, the discontinuities, fractures, and fault-lines which have shaped an Irish literary experience over four centuries. This was a literary history that aimed to swap monumentalism for misinheritances, and teleology for unpredictability. A literary history that enfolded 'histories' (and 'herstories' and increasingly 'theirstories') within itself.

A key addition in this series was the focus beyond national boundaries to the 'elsewheres' of Irish writing, in the US, Europe, and even Asia, with a responsible shift of focus to the diasporic and extra-territorial contexts of Irish literary culture and history—an experience that Romanian literary culture undoubtedly shares. In fact I note a similar welcome emphasis in new Romanian histories, specifically the focus on the 'transnational geolocations' of the modernist era, in Martin, Moraru and Terian (eds.), *Romanian Literature as World Literature* (2018). This expansion beyond fossilised national definitions has been instructive, even paradigmatic here, giving us a means of moving on from a literary history that defines our culture in terms of the 'minor' and 'peripheral', by restoring the broader European, transatlantic and indeed, global conversations in which Irish writing has shared.

It has also relaxed—to some degree—the grip of what can be very compromising political outlines (by which I mean rigid postcolonial and nationalist outlines) that blind us to the full picture of our own literary inheritance. This accommodating spatial expansionism is evident in recent books such as Joe Cleary's *The Irish Expatriate Novel in Late Capitalist Globalization* (2021), and is being taken up in rigorous literary and cultural history by Irish academics based in central and Eastern Europe, including Aidan O'Malley at the University of Rijeka, Croatia, for example, whose forthcoming study of Irish literary debates in the context of mid C20th Europe will further undermine the prevailing insularity of Irish literary history.

I would add that this spatial redefinition is not critical opportunism but a response to major changes in literary history methodology over the past few years. Irish writing has benefited from substantial realignments thanks to the results of digitization and newly available archives. While the Irish national canon is still heralded by the giants, Joyce, Yeats, and Beckett, fresh generations of students and critics have turned to lesser-known figures, including many brilliant but neglected women writers, and to alternative genres, including middlebrow and popular formats. There has been an enriching attention paid to material culture in the form of print and publishing history, which has also helped to adjust the boundaries of a national narrative. And crucially, the sense of the nation itself, the bedrock for literary history, has collapsed under pressure from new and exciting transnational models, following influential thinkers such as Pascale Casanova in *The World Republic of Letters* (originally published 1999), or from the game-changing readings of archipelagic and regional studies critics. Nicholas Allen's *Ireland, Literature, and the Coast* (2021) is a notably productive reading of modern Irish writing through modes of fluidity, porosity, oceanic network and extra-territorial connection.

Crucially then, a postcolonial Irish literary history conventionally mobilized by rigid oppositionality to a British tradition has given way to a mobile and provisional set of identities, and to the recognition that an Irish writing has emerged in the wider context of European, global, transatlantic or transnational alliances and hybridities, including the close-at-hand context of British hybridity, which I explore in my own work. So a transitional literary history, in this case, has evolved in tandem with a global confidence and a recognition of spatial or diasporic landscapes.

Q: Literary histories are known for their preoccupation with identity. Canons are made or broken by them, ideologies are affirmed or restored, and writers are recovered or left out. As intellectual enterprises that hold a certain authority over a segment of culture, can they become a culture in and of themselves?

A: There is no doubt that literary histories do, and should, become subject to critical review and deconstruction. Their alliance with the project of national identity formation calls them into immediate question, while their necessary patterns of exclusion and canonization have to be interrogated. The Irish example is salutory here. In early 1990s, against the volatile backdrop of the continuing Troubles in Northern Ireland, the publication of the initial three-volume *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, compiled under general editor Seamus Deane, provided a version of Irish literary history that many saw as being yoked to a singular Irish male nationalist identity, and that excluded both female and Protestant unionist voices, in particular. But the controversy that ensued captured the public imagination, well beyond the normal remit of a literary publication, and perhaps sensitized a younger generation of critics to the dangers of literary monumentalism. No-one wants to repeat that exercise. There is no doubt that the *Field Day* volumes anthologized a lot of good and sometimes obscure material, and provided expert critical contexts, alignments, and historical narratives, but overall the enterprise was swamped by the weight of its own ideological agenda. And yes, doctoral theses and books have been written on the project and what the whole saga meant for Irish culture and politics, so it did become a culture in and of itself, in that respect.

Certain weaknesses or hangovers have beset an Irish literary history as a legacy of national 'identity parades' in the past. For me, some of these are bound up with issues of genre. In its post-Revival, post-Yeats evolution, concepts of an Irish canon remained heavily invested in poetry, theatre, and the short story as supposedly 'national' art forms, with a companion critical downgrading of the novel (with the obvious and erratic exception of *Ulysses*). According to the set narrative, the realist novel was seen as the 'poor relation' of the Irish literary family, a genre that didn't fit a non-bourgeois, non-industrial population. Irish society, plundered and damaged by the colonial experience, was too 'thin', it was argued, to sustain a Charles Dickens or George Eliot. Ireland's literary history was skewed as a result of several influential readings in this vein, and it is only recently that the novel genre has been allowed to tell the 'national story' and to illuminate the plurality and polyphony of Irish society, with the recent publication of the multi-authored *Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Fiction* (2021), edited by Liam Harte, an example of substantial and purposeful generic recovery. The Irish novel is now, arguably, the grounding genre for a solid Irish literary history, and the strength of contemporary Irish fiction, in the work of writers such as Kevin Power, Sara Baume, Caitriona Lally and Sally Rooney, endorses that evolution.

Q: For literary histories, literary periods are, first and foremost, instruments of contrast and vehicles of legitimization. Oftentimes, periodization speaks more of literary historiography's status anxiety and disciplinary autonomy than of their function in describing and investigating literary histories. Does periodization still matter beyond preserving the authority of periodization itself?

A: This is such a good question. The short answer is yes, periodization helps to frame our thinking. Again, to turn to Ireland as an example, our current focus on the 'decade of centenaries', the past ten years of reflection on the troubled founding of the new independent state a hundred years ago, has prompted critical interest in themes of memory, post-traumatic experience, and national recovery. There are periods of our modern history when literature appears to speak clearly to social experience: the mass emigrations from Ireland in the 1950s, for example, provided a cradle for a literature of diaspora and exile, while the Northern Irish Civil Rights protest era and then the Troubles, after 1970 and up to the IRA ceasefires of the mid 1990s, are categorically a defining context of a new vein of highly politicised and responsive creativity. In the same way, Irish literary history looks usefully to the Celtic Tiger era of economic expansion as marking a sea-change in cultural sensibility. For Mihai Iovanel, in the new *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature*, there is a clear rationale in working from 1990 to the present to indicate a paradigm shift—even if it was a slow and sometimes faltering shift—in Romanian literary and social life after the fall of Ceaucescu in 1989. In British writing, the catastrophe of the Brexit vote in 2016 may prove to be similar temporal marker for writers and critics.

But inevitably such alignments produce artificial literary landscapes, and skewed perspectives. They will always exclude meaningful continuities and inheritances. I think back to W.B. Yeats, and how he downgraded the entire nineteenth century in his influential introduction to the *Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1936), or of how the deaths of Yeats, Joyce and Woolf, so close together, give a convenient but flawed sense of the end of modernism happening neatly in 1940. We all know that the impulse to parcel up workable segments of literary history is driven by teleology and hindsight, but we continue to practice this, all the same. It makes the unwieldiness of the cultural and political past manageable.

Q: How do you comment on the legitimacy of literary histories written by a single author? Should literary histories become the domain of research collectives?

A: There has to be room for both approaches. The collaborative, multi-authored approach allows for a variety of expertise and a wide coverage. The experience of working with the large team that created the Cambridge *Irish Literature in Transition* series showed me that literary history benefits from critical multi-focalism, even at the risk of repetitions and overlaps. But if I reflect on works that have stayed with me throughout my academic career, they are very often single-author studies. Valentine Cunningham's *British Writers of the Thirties*, first published in 1988, answers both this question and the previous one: I doubt it can ever be bettered as a literary account of a decade. Malcolm Bradbury's *The Modern British Novel* (1993) offers the same level of individual authority, and thematic continuity, across a vast sweep of post-war fiction. For those interested in writing in Ireland, Seamus Deane's *A Short History of Irish Literature* (1986) is a further example of an individual author with complete command over the pertinent cultural and ideological narratives of an era, and of a literary history that establishes trust with the reader in a way that multi-authored studies often fail to achieve. Even when there are quirks and preferences, the right author will still carry the reader along with the tide of a historical evolution: Randall Stevenson's *The Last of England*, which is the 12th volume of the *Oxford English Literary History*, covering the period from 1960 to 2000, is full of unexpected turns, provocations, and idiosyncracies, but it is exactly that individuality of approach that gives the study its energy and character. A research collective may give a fuller, more detailed profile, but a single author can tell a story.