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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: It seems to me imperative to come to terms with the fact that literary histories are a product of modernity; they typically begin as national accounts of cultural uniqueness, more often presumed than real. Early in the 19th century there appear the first macroregional literary histories, e.g. that by Sismondi, who is today best remembered as an economist and a social thinker; he wrote a history in several volumes of what he called “the South of Europe,” essentially a panoramic (and mosaic) history of the literatures in the Romance languages (but not of Romanian literature). How do we move onwards from the strictures imposed by the birthmarks of modernity with its teleological rationale? I have written briefly on this in an article on the challenges literary history faces in the 21st century.² Today, I would add the following: literary history has to navigate the new concerns of anthropocentrism and, more widely, of a post-humanist world; without this, it would struggle to perform a meaningful role beyond a cultural space confined and fuelled by national(ist) agendas.

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² “The Future of Literary History: Three Challenges in the 21st Century,” *Primerjalna književnost*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2008): 65-72 [Romanian translation: “Viitorul istoriei literare: trei provocari pentru secolul XXI,” *Analele Universitatii Bucuresti*, Vol. 57 (2008): 89-96; Slovene translation: “Prihodnost literarne zgodovine: trije izzivi 21. stoletja,” in *Primerjalna književnost v 20. stoletju in Anton Ocvirk*, edited by D. Dolinar and M. Juvan, Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, ZRC SAZU (2008): 325-32; Hungarian translation: “Az irodalomtörténet jövője: Három kihívás a 21. században,” *Korunk*, Vol. 23, No. 2, (2012): 49-54, translated by T. Scheibner; Spanish translation: “El futuro de la historia literaria: tres desafíos en el siglo XXI,” *Criterios*, Vol. 48 (2013): 811-19, translated by D. Navarro].

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: Culture is a habitus of organizing the world that surrounds us by (re)producing conventions of knowledge and communication. If the question concerns literary histories more specifically, this is perhaps a question of whether the writing of literary history is a specific form of introducing and sustaining such a habitus. I am not sure it still is; for it to be such a form, it has to have an impact beyond a narrower circle of specialists, which is very difficult, nay impossible, in the present intellectual climate. If literary history as a practice does not attain an impact beyond the guild, it could at best claim to be a form of subculture, of which there are so many today, and so few that engage in dialogue with one another. Furthermore, I am not convinced that literary histories still command the power to build and protect canons; even within the national space, there is no longer a single canon, as various social groups rightfully demand that they be given a place in the curriculum and in the wider public sphere.

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: There have been some good arguments, formulated recently by others, in favour of periodization, its pragmatic use value, and its ineluctability. But I hasten to add that periodization is a cultural product, and as such it has only very limited validity beyond the culture whose perceptions of time and the ways time flows it reflects. Suffice it to point to the never-ending conversation amongst mediaevalists about the absence of this appellation (and the period it refers to) in non-European cultures (and the profound differences that result from this in how one defines novelty and continuity); or to the polemics—at least since the 1920s, particularly active since the 1960s and now, on whether or not the Renaissance is a universally applicable designation. There were those who thought that the Renaissance is a label that captures both a period and a wider type of a cultural situation of renewal of the present by turning to the resources of the past; Konrad would thus chart a rather peculiar trajectory for

the Renaissance, beginning in China in the 8th century AD, then travelling to the Middle East, and only much later arriving in Europe (Italy and the European North). The same is true, to a lesser degree, of the conversations about Romanticism as a dual category that harnesses a particular sense of time break but also an enduring (rather acute in its Romantic articulation) dichotomy between two different regimes of relevance literature and the arts experience, those of autonomy and heteronomy; this dichotomy (sometimes rethought as a dialectic) recurs beyond the decades (in total, if we also count the experience of Eastern Europe and other parts of the world, perhaps the century) occupied by Romanticism proper. But we don't need to go beyond Europe to realize that periodizations cannot hold universal validity. Spanish literature would be dogged by tribulation over the absence of a proper Enlightenment phase; Russian literature by a similar anxiety over the absence of a Renaissance. In other words, periodizations are instruments of capturing and making sense of the ways time flows by constructing scenarios about change and identity that are exemplified by (usually canonical) products of creative writing across larger chronological segments; and these instruments are always conditioned by various cultural (less so economic) factors that are much more local than literary history is prepared to concede.

Q: How is contemporaneity, as a historiographic milestone, negotiated in a global context?

A: As evidence of non-negotiable diversity. Whether a history of contemporary literature is at all possible is a question of how we understand 'history' in 'literary history'. We still operate on the premise that history is about taking stock by creating temporal distance from the objects we analyse (this is the Hegelian approach to history, which remains resilient despite the many forceful objections levelled at it). In that sense, history and theory (through the canon) are intimately linked. It is the crisis of theory that was then legible in the crisis of the canon, which in turn has affected the way in which we think of literary history. All this means that we should be bolder in embracing contemporary writing as a legitimate subject for literary historians; globally, but also within the national cultural space, there is hardly a better way to come to terms with the diversity and incommensurability that mark not just the production, but also the consumption (and that also means the interpretation) of literature today.

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 is a deeper paradox to the fact that national literary histories, ever since the 18th century, would be written by single authors (Warton; Gervinus, De Sanctis, etc.); this is perhaps the ultimate discrepancy at the heart of this project: a scholar who ends up speaking about, and in favour of, the nation (or being even misheard by his contemporaries as speaking on its behalf). But this is not to say that a collective history would do much better. Collective enterprises in the humanities are usually the result of a compromise, methodologically speaking. If a history is to be coherent as a collective endeavour, it would have to reflect in the end the views of its lead editors (thus overwriting individual points of view); this is at least my experience with working on the prize-winning and oft-cited *History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism: The Soviet Age and Beyond* (2011) that Evgeny Dobrenko and I steered to completion.