Writing a Literary History Now: Brief Theoretical Considerations

CĂTĂLIN GHIȚĂ

Résumé: *Ce document modeste ne vise pas à apporter des réponses définitives aux problèmes complexes posés par l'élaboration d'une histoire littéraire dans le siècle présent, mais, plutôt, à répondre à un certain nombre de questions théoriques et pratiques, destinées à favoriser le dialogue entre les philologues de différentes écoles de la pensée. Par conséquent, mon intention est de ne pas engager une polémique (en fait, je souligne que je trouve l'utilité de ces pratiques douteuse au mieux dans un domaine d'études – la littérature – toujours sous la menace du relativisme), mais de proposer quelques lignes d'argumentation que je trouve personnellement très difficile à éviter.*

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This modest paper does not aim to offer definitive answers to the complex problems raised by the elaboration of a literary history in the present age, but rather to address a number of theoretical and practical issues, meant to favour dialogue between philologists of various schools of thought. Therefore, my intention is not to initiate a polemic (indeed, I emphasize that I find the usefulness of such practices dubious at best within a field of study – literature – forever menaced by relativism), but to suggest a few lines of argument which I personally find quite hard to avoid.

The starting point of my argument lies in the enumeration of the difficulties which beset the "classical" (i.e. pre-Internet, therefore "unreformed") status of literary history[1], as listed by René Wellek and Austin Warren. The last chapter of their influential *Theory of Literature* (1949) is devoted to various problems related to literary history: "Is it *possible*" (authors' emphasis), the researchers ask themselves in a rhetorical manner, "to write literary history, that is, to write that which will be both literary and a history?" (252). The answer they hasten to put forward, though formulated in a disjunction which, defying grammar, branches into three components, manages to dispel and clarify the haziness of the original question: "Most histories of literature, it must be admitted, are either social histories, or histories of thought as illustrated in literature, or impressions and judgments on specific works arranged in more or less chronological order" (252).

Could literary histories ever aspire to be anything more than that? And how exactly could they manage to elevate their status?

This merely constitutes the start of the discussion initiated and conducted with theoretical gusto by Wellek and Warren. Because of obvious space constraints, I cannot go into the details of their argument (which addresses major issues, such as literary evolution, the question of originality, the history of literary genres, as well as that of a period or movement)[1], I shall only dwell upon its final detail, concerning the possibility of establishing a history of a national literature *in integrum* or – an even riskier venture – a history of a group of literatures: "Needless to say", emphasize Wellek and Warren, "histories of groups of literatures are even more distant ideals" (268). (Obviously, the two authors compare this to the ideal of writing a history of a national literature.) Strange as it may seem, this ideal has not proved such a distant one as Wellek and Warren, together with other notable scholars, predicted immediately after the Second World War. Two researchers, Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, have recently coordinated the elaboration of a massive *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (4 volumes, 2004-2010). Its editors point out that history should be seen "(1) as an experiment in writing new kinds of literary histories, (2) as a pioneering effort to conceptualize the possibilities and problems of regional literary histories, and (3) as the first transnational literary history of East-Central Europe" (IV, 3). Although limiting its scope to the history of literary cultures of the last 200 years, i.e. from the beginning of the 19th century onwards, the monumental work edited by Cornis-Pope and Neubauer succeeds in harmonizing on several levels various Central and Eastern European literatures. Insofar as the strategies of elaboration are concerned, the favoured critical perspectives refer to "(1) key political events, (2) literary periods and genres, (3) cities and regions, (4) literary institutions, and (5) figures" (IV, 5)[2]. Their main themes cover, therefore, a broad spectrum of analysis from overlapping fields of study: history, the history of ideas, political studies, geography, etc.

Nowadays, it has become quite clear that literary history as it had been imagined until the late '40s by theorists like Wellek and Warren is no longer feasible or even desirable[3]. Most "classic" literary histories – and by this I mean Francesco de Sanctis's *Storia della letteratura italiana* or G. Călinescu's *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* (to quote but two of the most illustrious examples – are "personal" histories, bearing the stylistic mark of their authors and placing themselves at a crossroads between literary research and artistic virtuosity. In these "personal" histories, rhetoric and style are important issues, and tropes are scrupulously employed for an increase in expressiveness. These, however, often obscure the meaning and add little in the way of cold fact. Today, a "reliable" literary history, i.e. one which would faithfully mirror cultural reality, can no longer be imagined in other terms than the fruit of a collective effort. I have already mentioned the four-volume work coordinated by Cornis-Pope and Neubauer; one may also add the research project of the team led by Emory Elliott, which represents one of the most convincing examples of recent literary histories: the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988). The

lucidity of the collective effort, with its appropriate distribution of tasks, as opposed to the titanic character of individual initiatives is but a preliminary issue, which concerns the organization of the research team, whose respective members should be selected according to their ability to cover designated areas of cultural information. Once this problem has been solved, however, other issues loom large.

To be more specific, 60 years ago, Wellek and Warren could hardly anticipate the advent of a technological innovation which was to shatter all expectations nourished by authors who had been accustomed to working with printed materials in 19th-century libraries. Once the technology of the Internet set in in the late '90s, the scientific community made a giant evolutionary leap, seemingly overnight. We now know that the sheer amount of data increases geometrically, not merely arithmetically. The bright side of this phenomenon is that never in the history of culture has access to information been quicker and freer. The dark side of it is that, suffocated by the deluge of data, the researcher trained in accordance with old-fashioned means of study undergoes major adjustment problems and, in order to cope with today's fierce competition, he must redefine his position from an entirely new set of perspectives. When it comes to writing literary history, these perspectives require changes in the authors' structural and functional behaviour.

I have already emphasized the fact that, in the context of writing a literary history, it is the collective effort, not the individual initiative, which gains the upper hand. The first logical consequence of forming a research team concerns the intricate problem of authority. This depends, automatically, both on the general competence of the respective team (which translates a Gestalt principle, according to which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts), and on the intellectual and organizational abilities of the project leader, who ought to be a highly respected critical voice within the scientific community, and therefore able to lend prestige to the whole group. In the absence of this complex principle of influence, the resulting literary history inevitably becomes, as soon as it has been published, a soon-to-be-forgotten cultural curiosity.

The imperative of team work and its direct consequence, regarding the authority of the respective team and of its leader, are significant issues, but they are restricted to the sphere of general organization. It is only after they are taken care of that more important problems, such as those concerning scientific methodology, may be raised. The first issue which looms large at this point refers to classification. A literary history cannot record, in the manner of a comprehensive Baedeker, absolutely everything worth mentioning within the field of a national literature or a group of literatures. Spatial constraints and narrative coherence call for selectivity: literary movements and their corresponding authors must be carefully chosen, so that the resulting selection should not betray the veracity of the panorama or the truth of its detail.

The second scientifically relevant problem involves aesthetic distance. This concerns dealing with works penned by contemporary authors, whose recent date of elaboration renders any objective judgment futile. (Reviewers actually run the highest evaluation risks, and, far from compromising their position, they should at least acknowledge it.) To this one may add purely practical obstacles which arise naturally in the case of a

living author, whose later works may change or even upset preliminary critical verdicts. That is why several prestigious universities in Europe, America and Japan have tended to discourage PhD candidates' options for studying living authors, although, of late, academic constraints seem to have become more relaxed in this respect.

The third scientifically important issue regards the principle of apposite mixture, according to which a convincing literary history may accommodate, in addition to purely aesthetic criteria, various other factors of anthropological, ideological, psychological or sociological nature[4]. This intellectual dosage ensures, I believe, the success of a literary history. If one of the components is poorly represented within the system, the narrative becomes faulty and the whole enterprise, fraught with the danger of subjectivity from the very beginning, inevitably crumbles. All too often I find myself reading histories of mentalities or mere physiologies of a cultural movement disguised as literary histories. Similarly, if the authors decide to favour the historical over the aesthetic perspective, they run the risk of writing just a history. This is particularly relevant in the case of several British new historicists, who have enthusiastically and uncritically followed in Professor Stephen Greenblatt's footsteps. Prudently enough, I should add, Greenblatt has only sought to point out that the literary and historical dimensions are mutually permeable.

The fourth scientifically relevant question regards the ability of the respective history to initiate and entertain a fertile critical dialogue with previously elaborated literary histories, be they focused on national literatures or on groups of literatures. That is to say, it is necessary that a team should pen a critical history, in the truest sense of the word. I have often been confronted with literary histories which present their object of investigation in a sort of bibliographical vacuum. By reducing precedent peer contributions to mere *tabula rasa*, the authors of the literary histories in question establish a monologue, not a dialogue, giving the impression of a decontextualization. Their lack of critical situatedness subverts their very credibility.

"To cut a long story short", you may ask me, an imprudent philologist who has just committed the error of giving advice as to how one should write a literary history before taking part himself in the elaboration of one, "what would the ideal literary history look like?" My honest answer is I do not know, for had I known, I should have already started writing it (or rather joined in the effort of writing it). All I can safely assert is that, in the absence of firm criteria which pertain both to the organization of work and to scientific methodology, such a project cannot even be initiated, let alone accomplished. I may have touched upon a few important issues, but I may equally have left aside other relevant problems. Questions, as well as answers, are open to an ever fruitful dialogue.

NOTES

[1] For reasons of concision, I shall not dwell on Wellek's distinctions between theory, criticism and literary history. The best account is to be found in the first chapter of *Concepts of Criticism*, titled "Literary Theory, Criticism, and History" (Wellek 1-20).

[2] For a complete demonstration, see Wellek and Warren, pages 252-269.

[3] For additional details, see Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, vol. IV, pages 1-9.

[4] It is, perhaps, significant that Wellek and Warren went far beyond the reductionist views which, unfortunately, were prevalent at the time. A case in point is that of the American author and professor Edwin Almiron Greenlaw, who still thought, in the early '30s, that literary history should focus on "the record of the lives of men of letters, the influence upon them of the life about them and of their life in books, and the writings themselves" (36).

[5] See *supra* the paragraph concerning the literary history coordinated by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer.

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University of Craiova