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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: I'm not sure it is the most conservative form of literary study: I think all forms of literary study might have more progressive or more conservative modes. However, I see where this question is coming from.

Nobody and nothing can stop obsolescence: that's just time passing.

But conservatism? Some thoughts. Learn from works of literature: they are always cross-fertilizing, drawing on other things, looking outside their own patch. Learn too from more experimental and challenging historians: what if you look at it this way, or that way? Keep an eye out for powerful contemporary movements (e.g. Decolonise the discipline) and pay attention to minorities. Be aware that geographies and times crisscross each other. The best recent literary history I have read, the *Cambridge History of Welsh Literature*, edited by Geraint Evans and Helen Fulton, does some of these really well, perhaps because it is a history of a literature in two languages, it's already aware of diversity.

A part of me thinks: a literary history is a kind of gathering. Gatherings may have a range of different principles—I think one should be free to experiment with those principles.

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?

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A: Yes, like all aspects of intellectual culture, literary history can become a 'glass bead game' of its own, with its own rules and preoccupations. I think this can be avoided to some extent. First, literary history has to be aware of wider currents in literary studies, intellectual work and culture as a whole. These will shape that history quite as much as that history shapes them (by, say, recovering a writer). Second, literary history needs to be self-reflective both as a practice and in its representation to others: why I am writing *this* history rather than *that* one? Why *this* writer? Why this writer *now*? This means making cases in public, and for the public, as well as for scholars. A good example of this in the UK context is Corinne Fowler's book *Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England's Colonial Connections* (2020 Peepal Tree Press). Not only is it written in a clear idiom, but it reshapes (roughly) the pastoral mode in light of imperial and slave-owning history. Further, each writer makes their own literary genealogy.

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 deceptively simple question gets at the heart of a key, unanswered and perhaps unanswerable question in literary studies: the question that opposes historicism to formalism or context to aesthetics. So, periodization matters in one way because that is the language of the academy (and increasingly so: literary studies and the humanities are in a very historicist moment). Periods create a way for different disciplines to share ideas and arguments; they are easily recognizable more widely. In this way they matter. However, of course, they also obscure longer and shorter processes, less recognized areas and so on. And they might, too, work against the aesthetic (through the claim that 'you cannot understand this without the context' when of course you can, but just not as a historian). And periods also abstract particular texts into a longer historical story. So do they still matter? Yes. Should they? Perhaps a bit less than they do.

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

A: Again, a really hard question. There are lots of accounts of this (like Agamben's) and no one is really able to agree. Of course 'now' is shaped by 'then' and 'here' is shaped by 'elsewhere'. My answer is, sadly, a teaching one rather than a theoretical one. One game I play is to ask the year, the students look at me as if I am an idiot,

but once I point out that dates are different (say, 1444 in the Muslim calendar is also 2022), things look different. And then, on my 'Ideas in contemporary fiction' course, no novel is more than 10 years old. Think of yourself at 19. Does a book or album or game that came out when you were 9 feel contemporary? Of course, my contemporary is not yours, my 'key dates' both personally and communally are not shared by you. So we have to constantly negotiate this.

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: I don't have a view on this. If an individual wants to write a literary history, why should we stop them? If a research group does, that's fine too. Would the latter be more diverse than the former?

