STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXVII, 3, 2022, p. 23 - 25
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2022.3.03

MIHAI IOVĂNEL[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: I do not believe conservatism is intrinsic to literary historiography. Eugen Lovinescu's literary histories (1926-1929)—to invoke the most important Romanian contributions—are far from conservative. Directed against the fetishization of tradition, their theoretical starting points are still hard to assimilate by some Romanian cultural institutions to this day. The Romanian Academy is one such institution despite its eagerness to appoint Lovinescu as Member of Honor within its ranks after the 1989 regime change. Nonetheless, it is true that literary history oftentimes ends up playing a conservative role on account of its own history, which is longer and more indebted to the past than that of other forms of literary research. After all, as is well known, what is initially fresh and innovative becomes the object of consecration once it has been ratified and canonized by cultural structures and institutions.

What can be done to counteract this mainly unintentional effect? What I personally did in my *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature* was to supplement the historiographic component throughout with a reflection on *historiography* itself, that is, with an overarching theory that points to and discusses the limitations and risks of such an undertaking.

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?

---

[1] **Mihai IOVĂNEL** (b. 1979) earned his PhD from the University of Bucharest and is currently Senior Researcher at the "G. Călinescu" Institute of Literary History and Theory of the Romanian Academy. He wrote 70 articles for the *General Dictionary of the Romanian Literature* (7 vols., 2004-2009) and was one of the editors of the "Dictionary of Romanian Literature" (2 vols., 2012). He also co-authored the *Chronology of Romanian Literary Life: 1944-1964* (10 vols., 2010-2013). He co-edited the *General Dictionary of the Romanian Literature*, 2nd edition (8 vols. 2016-2021). Books: *Evreul improbabil. Mihai Sebastian: o monografie ideologică* (The Improbable Jew. Mihail Sebastian: An Ideological Monograph) (2012); *Roman polițist* (Detective Novel) (2015); *Ideologiile literaturii în postcomunismul românesc* (The Ideologies of the Romanian Post-Communist Literature) (2017), *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990-2020* (The History of the Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990-2020 (2021). Email: mihai.iovanel@gmail.com.

A: Indeed, literary histories can become a culture in and of themselves. They undergo a process resembling that of novels. Because the initial context of their emergence is difficult to preserve in cultural memory, novels and literary histories are eventually approached with nearly no regard for their original ideological, social, and political backdrops. They end up becoming false friends, as it were. This inevitably leads to distortions in the way they are understood and employed, hence the importance of historical readings that attempt to retrieve otherwise lost historical contexts.

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: Given that my *History* is one of *contemporary* literature, periodization plays a lesser role in it than in histories covering a broader time span. However, this does not mean that I do not periodize at all. For instance, I felt compelled to address the apparent paradox that the roots of "the contemporary" in Romania are to be found both in the early 1980s—when communism was still alive and kicking—and during the late 1980s, more exactly in December of 1989, when the communist regime was overthrown by a popular revolution.

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

A: Contemporary Romanian literature has long ceased to be a national literature exclusively. It most likely never was, during the past two centuries, *only* a national literature. But today's literature is less local than ever. We are living in a period when the English language and Anglophone literature exert a powerful influence on all the other literatures in the world, so powerful, indeed, that the Anglo-American cultural space has become the locus where they meet and mutually influence each other. For example, a Romanian reader will read a Bulgarian author rather through an English-language intermediary than in the original Bulgarian or in a Romanian translation. Admittedly, the temporalities making up contemporaneity across the globe are not yet perfectly synchronized or unified. Neither are they in the United States for that matter. What someone interested in the academic debates in North America discovers is a very rich and diverse cultural scene, with numerous conversations taking place simultaneously. On the other hand, the ever-more pervasive role of platforms such as Amazon—

which, as Mark McGurl shows in *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon* (2021), already redraws the rules of literature more efficiently than any academic institution—will probably contribute to a worldwide increase in uniformity.

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: In principle, I have nothing against literary histories written by a single author—it would be hypocritical of me, as I have just published my *History*. But I believe that the increasingly more complex available datasets, both from a quantitative and a qualitative point of view, will gradually become too difficult to analyze just by one critic. Without casting doubt on the *legitimacy* of such solo enterprises, I tend to believe that their *feasibility* will become—if it has not already—a real challenge.