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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: Literary historians have grappled with this challenge since at least the early 1960s, a time when revolution was blowing in the wind, as demands for individual rights and freedoms came to the fore in the United States and on European campuses. In a 1963 essay entitled 'Is Literary History Obsolete?' *College English* (Vol. 24, No. 5) Robert E. Spiller addressed this question in the context of what was then an exciting and emerging 'New criticism.' His rebuttal, some six decades later, merits consideration. There is, he contends, a process of cross-breeding between two or more kinds of history. Events in one area of human experience have a habit of growing out of conditions in other areas. He cites, as examples: the French revolution and *A Tale of Two Cities*, and American whaling and *Moby Dick*. Similarly, he argues, significant historical events relate to one or more key personalities whose thoughts and actions precipitated it: battles are always associated with generals (Washington, Wellington or Lee); political events with statesmen (Gladstone, Webster, Bismarck) and changes in the history of thought with thinkers (Locke, Darwin or Marx). Spiller expressed concerns at aesthetic, rhetorical and linguistic analysis dominating basic college textbooks and required courses to the near exclusion of the survey or background course. Such a trend was becoming so prevalent that any suggestion of a historical reference was, he observed, considered 'distracting, superficial, even at times (it would almost seem) immoral.' He would not have fared well in the intervening years.

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Cultural Theory is now so entrenched that history literary courses seem antiquarian if not antediluvian. Yet, his warning that "Research in literature had become what Professor Lowes of Harvard once called, 'Learning more and more about less and less,'" holds some merit. Professors have long despaired of freshman writing skills, but more alarming is the growing disinclination of undergraduates to read large amounts of primary material in the American university system. The norm would now appear to be a short story or two per week rather than a collection per week.

More recently, David Simpson, writing in a special issue of *SubStance* in 1999, identified the challenges literary history must surmount to be relevant. 'Faced with a generation inclined to believe in an end to history, the task of historians of all kinds is first of all one of preservation. Literary historians are especially pressured because of the subsistence of "literature" within an ethos of presence and presentism whose effect is always to dissolve the historical into the immediate. Given the general disposition of literary criticism toward advocacy, prophecy, and testimony, even of chaos itself, literary history enacted under the banner of antiquarianism, skepticism and hesitation may not win many converts.' Whatever else the 21st century has thus far taught us from 9/11 to Brexit, and the Russian war on Ukraine, history is neither dead nor ended. History is as relevant as ever. In a time when what were once considered constitutional rights can be denied, the need for Literary history and the training of students and scholars in the craft and skills of literary history is as essential as ever. Cultural studies, as Simpson argues, appeals partly by the veneer of relevance it provides; 'it allows discussion of the here and now, and about the experience of everyone and not just that of the devotees of a high literacy based in the reading of complex written texts.' This presentism is perhaps the most poisonous chalice on offer to academic scholarship. Without pulling any punches, Simpson all but damns cultural studies. 'Leavened by the familiar postmodern notion of the end of history (in the liberal version) or its redundancy for a new global culture of spatial simultaneity (in the more common leftist-anarchist version), much of cultural studies has no need for history, which tends to appear, if it appears at all, in parodic or reductive form as a history of some uncontested hegemony (orientalism, sexism, homophobia, Eurocentrism, and so on) which it is the critic's task to expunge from the present by the fierce light of radical intelligence." The role of the literary historian in a minoritized language, I believe, is somewhat different. In such cases the literary history is unwritten or only partially written; thus, the literary historian has both the opportunity and obligation to produce a narrative that benefits from the cultural battles fought in the 1970s and 1980s. Such literary histories need to be aware of the role and presence of those uncontested hegemonies which

Simpson named, and produce a literary history that recognizes and addresses them. As scholarship and academic culture expands and evolves, our understanding of the past alters and adapts. Literary History is never done, but must be constantly written and rewritten and challenged and interrogated from what was omitted and elided.

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: Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* rehearses how the fictional construction of a "homogenous national audience" offers to the consolidating multitude of individuals a model of sharing and mutual existence in modern, "homogeneous, and empty time" (37). I think the question here may have different connotations and reverberations if asked of a major, dominant language rather than a minoritized, endangered language. In the case of the former, the literary history is often well documented, well established and stable—in fact it may well be interrogated for what it omitted, diminished or elided. In the case of the latter, however, work of the literary historian is in many cases on-going, in as much as the first narrative is still to be written or edited. The literary historian may be the first to access certain archives, to address certain topics and, in that regard, the canon has yet to be formed. The Irish bardic tradition is a case in point as the incomplete manuscript tradition available to us offers little insight to date on the issue of gender. Thus, the work of Máirín Nic Eoin amongst others is critical not only in addressing the literary history but of addressing the gender issue in the process. Similarly, the work of Philip O'Leary, via his four-volume literary history of modern Irish-language literature, is less an account of who influenced whom, but an intellectual history wherein literature—fictional and non-fictional—serves to illuminate the cultural, political and linguistic debates that dominate the period and recreates that republic of letters. No less so, it is in the work of Regina Uí Chollatáin as regards the history of Irish-language journalism and Pádraig Ó Siadhail in Irish-language theatre that the foundations are laid for future scholars to construct arguments, analyze aesthetics and perform all the many preoccupations that attract current scholars. How much poorer would our understanding of Irish-language literature and journalism be without the essays and letters of Séamus Mac Grianna, edited in various volumes by Nollaig Mac Congail? How much better our understanding of Máirtín Ó Cadhain due to Gearóidín Ní Laighléis's archival work on the state

publisher? The dismissal of literary history—bibliographies, biographies, catalogues—is a luxury that minoritized language can neither afford nor indeed possess. Such work is essential in creating the conditions for further scholarship. Yes, the internet and the digitization of sources has made such work easier and more readily available, but primarily in the major global languages; the concern for digitizing archival materials of minoritized languages remains a minor concern.

And perhaps this feature may be one of the great strengths of literary history as part of the broader humanities, the very act of challenging, repositioning and remaking the literary canon—if you accept such canons—artificial but convenient constructions that they are. It is through the act of retrieval and discovery—the skill the literary historian performs—that forgotten and discarded voices and texts can be resurrected and placed in the conversation. The literary historian may be the guardian of the canon, but he/she is also the makeover guru.

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: Chronological boundaries, no more than class times are a necessary evil: necessary for administrative and pedagogic purposes, but problematic when applied over-zealously or over-rigorously. Authors, unfortunately, live on past centuries' ends, and are often inconveniently born before or after famous battles that define geopolitics. They live, learn and evolve. As political, cultural, linguistic, and environmental events occur, they respond and react. A text may be linked to a date of composition, but its author had a life before and afterwards in which she wrote other texts. The problem arises when we forget the randomness and artificial nature of such boundaries; they are artificial constructions, often based on historically contingent assumptions. The Irish Famine of 1845 is the typical start point for modern Ireland and as seen as the point when the Irish-language is no longer relevant for discussion, but Irish-speakers lived and spoke, sang and danced, composed and critiqued long after the famine of 1845-47. The 1st January 1801 Act of Union serves as a convenient period boundary, but bears much less literary or cultural freight. Periodization certainly matters. It matters in that it sets the narrative and allows for the inclusion and/or exclusion of certain events. It allows for a different set of lenses throughout which to study and understand the topic at hand. In

minoritized languages, the periodization of the dominant or colonial culture often serves to distort or disguise key features of cultural energy or political thought. In terms of modern Irish literature, the establishment of An tOireachtas literary festival in 1898 is of greater significance than the foundation of the Society of the Preservation of the Irish Language, the Gaelic Union or the Gaelic League, but it is the dates associated with those organizations that marks the beginning of the Revival period.

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

A: Poorly. Should scholars concern themselves with it? Should they bow to the pressure of 'contemporaneity'? In many ways this is a pressure not only to be relevant but to be relevant to the present moment and the latest news cycle, to produce work which suits the latest podcast, topical affairs radio/TV program, etc. in which the academic exists to facilitate the radio/TV researcher and publicize the university brand. Should a two-minute appearance as a talking head on a major news channel outweigh publications and traditional scholarship? What is contemporaneous in the first world/global north may be very different to Bangladesh. The issues animating the United States in the post-Trump insurrection moment are very different from those in Ukraine, Belarus and post-Brexit Britain. To attempt to connect one's work to the immediate, to be trendy and turned-on, contemporary and controversial is a temptation, but the best literary criticism, and scholarship, is dispassionate, achieved slowly and carefully, and does not respond to the changing fortunes of politics and popular culture. Such writing is the proven province of journalism. The biographies of Volodymyr Zelenskyy and histories of Ukraine that popular publishers race to issue serve the current need and market appetite for immediate knowledge while the craft of literary history requires access to archives, notes, interviews, letters and so forth, not to mention proficiency in Ukranian and Russian.

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: Writing the day after the US Supreme Court overturned Roe v Wade, the topic of legitimacy is timely and troubling. By whom is legitimacy granted and how is it gambled away? As long as the single-author monograph is the coin of the academic realm, as it is in the North American corporate university sector, it is not only legitimate but the lone and single recognized form of legitimacy.

Scientists are better disposed, indeed trained and acculturated, to cooperation, team work and collaboration. Humanists are not. As long as the model for doctorate training consists of an apprentice in a hierarchical relationship with his/her supervisor and embedded in an adversarial combative relationship with his/her peers, the model is unlikely to change. With doctoral candidates required to identify a new, original thesis question or topic and to work as an individual for three to six years establishing the 'correctness' of their thesis over all pre-existing and current ideas, the situation will not change. Indeed, such a culture breeds competition and increases rancor in departments. Of course, collaboration makes sense: it offers so much, and it addresses so many weaknesses. In a North American academy where multilingualism is in retreat, collective research teams are better equipped to deal with multilingual archives and texts. Collectives offer opportunities to address gender and racial issues and stereotypes. As the co-editor of a recent project involving some 25 contributors, I worked intentionally to match historians with literary critics, males with females, and scholars from different backgrounds and origins to create situations wherein scholars were forced into dialogue with one and other, where the assumptions of one discipline were challenged by another. The payoff in such projects is often not in the publication at hand, but in subsequent publications, where the results of thought and reflection bear fruit. The downside of such large-scale research collectives is the challenge in project management: keeping a diverse cohort of scholars on track and on time and ensuring continuity and standardization across the project as well as playing the role or peacemaker.