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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: If by “literary history” we refer to the traditional—and hence somewhat canonical—form of literary historiography as genre, i.e., the study of literature from an evolutionary, teleological, and ethnocentric standpoint, for which works authored between 1830 and 1945 serve as models (from, let’s say, Georg Gottfried Gervinus to Albert Thibaudet), then this form has undoubtedly been one of the most conservative in the entire history of modern literary criticism, considering the fact that it has almost entirely refused to alter its goals, methodology, and rhetoric for over a century. But I do not consider this to hold true for the literary histories published after the Second World War as well. On the contrary, following a “crisis” lasting for nearly half a century, during which all its theoretical building blocks have been scrutinized and questioned, literary history seems to have made a powerful comeback in the past decades, both as discipline and as genre. Moreover, I tend to believe that it currently represents the most innovative segment in literary studies—, that it is in any case more innovative than individual articles, or monographs, the main source of critical innovation in the second half of the 20th century. And this fact is quite understandable: the very skepticism that had plagued it for decades on end made it so that literary history became one of the most experimental genres within literary studies after the year 2000. Past the threshold of the new millennium, it tested not only its object of study (extending the very definition of “literature” and offering numerous alternatives to the insistent predilection for the “national”) and its methodology beyond every conceivable limit (going through all contemporary theories, frameworks, and analytical procedures, from computational criticism and intermedial studies to feminism and postcolonial studies), but also what

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seemed to be its core determinant: the factor of time (thereby replacing chronology with other ways of arranging its material, such as the geographic/ spatial one). Therefore, in the 21st century, literary history is nothing short of a revolutionary genre—and this seems to be the most convincing retort the old discipline could have made to her detractors.

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: Literary histories have always been “a culture in and of themselves,” and this was the case in all literatures, both in those considered—in lack of better terms—“central” or “major,” and in those regarded as “peripheral” or “minor.” Between the most representative works of Francesco de Sanctis, Gustave Lanson, and George Saintsbury, on the one hand, and those of Boyan Penev, F. O. Matthiessen and G. Călinescu, on the other, only the context is different, whereas the function and overall rhetoric are the same: they all aim to present—if not, in fact, to secretly “create”—the literary Pantheon of their cultures, the organic coherence of their national traditions, the ethnic originality of their own literatures. The specific difference resides in the fact that some cultures felt compelled to renounce, especially following World War II, this nationalist-triumphalist rhetoric, while others still struggle with it. However, the aforementioned turn from this rhetoric did not automatically lead to the dissolution of that “culture in and of themselves.” On the contrary, we could argue that the abandonment of nationalist illusions more clearly revealed the functions of literary history in each cultural system; renouncing its ethnocentric mythology, the discipline was now forced to finally lay bare its premises, methods, and objectives. In fact, I think that this has always been the true role played by literary history within a cultural system: it never “created” canons, traditions, or literatures (despite some critics’ canon-building self-deception) but has always contributed, however inadvertently, to uncovering the ideological practices and premises governing a certain cultural system. Every literary history entails, even without addressing it directly, a debate on the “structure,” “value,” and the “role/ function/ destiny” of a certain literature, and this fact alone is important enough for its “culture.”

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: I think that, despite their evident issues, periods and periodization cannot be eliminated from literary history altogether. There are two reasons for this. First, the very nature of “periods” implies the existence of historical “thresholds,” namely that certain moments and events distinguish themselves from others from a qualitative standpoint, therefore enclosing “periods” and “epochs.” Naturally, the process of drawing the “thresholds” and “epochs” is oftentimes done according to the ideological agenda of the broader group to which the literary historian belongs or, worse yet, according to his own idiosyncratic agenda. Yet, identifying such practices should only stimulate us further in discovering and suggesting “thresholds” and “epochs” that are more scientifically substantiated. Conversely, the abolition of all such “thresholds” and “epochs” would imply accepting the thesis that all moments and events are equally relevant (or irrelevant) from a historiographic point of view, and that it is impossible to establish a hierarchy among historical events. Furthermore, this would mean that any historical selection of events is equally (il)legitimate as any other, which would equate to the dissolution of history—and implicitly also of literary history—as discipline. Second, literary periods are necessary also because they, as “worlds of history,” legitimize and facilitate correlations and comparisons among certain authors, works, events, or literary processes. For instance, defining and enclosing “The Interwar Era” or “The Modernist Era” reveals why we are somehow obliged to correlate—and perhaps even to compare—Joyce with Kafka, but not necessarily Kafka with Shakespeare or Joyce with Dostoevsky. On the other hand, literary periods are a stark reminder that time does not pass in a homogeneous flow across the globe and therefore impel us to draw out new connections which contributes to the deepening of our historical knowledge. For example, is the “world” in which the Romanian chronicler Ion Neculce (1672–1745) lived the same as that of Montesquieu (1689–1755), or rather similar to that of Geoffroi de Villehardouin (1150–1212/ 1218) or Jean Froissart (1337–1410)? I will not attempt to provide here an answer to this question, but it seems clear to me that it should preoccupy every historian of Romanian literature.

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

A: If a period is, as I stated before, a “historical world,” then in order to trace the outlines of contemporaneity, I think we should ask ourselves as to when, in fact, “our world,” i.e., the one we currently live in, begins. Obviously, the answer can be nothing but subjective, given the likelihood that older generations of critics will argue that 1945 or 1968 were moments that fundamentally altered the face of the world. No doubt they were, yet contemporaneity should be defined by the *last* (i.e., most recent) event that ushered in a fundamental change in the world. However, things are debatable even in this case, because “our world” is not

transformed all at once, through a happy convergence of all contributing factors, but rather unevenly, through unexpected and uncorrelated mutations taking place in politics, technology, economy, culture, etc. For example, from a technological point of view, I think we could safely argue that “our era” is primarily characterized by the expansion of the Internet and virtual medium generally. This means going back to 1989, when Tim Berners-Lee, then employed at CERN, invented the World Wide Web. This milestone is, indeed, extremely convenient from the standpoint of geopolitics, as it corresponds to the end of the Cold War, and it is likely that it will be employed for a long time to signal the beginning of “contemporaneity.” However, I can’t help but wonder whether our world is still the post-Cold War, unipolar, open world set on a seemingly inevitable path towards liberal democracy, as it appeared to us in the 1990s or even the early 2000s. To me, it seems obvious that it is not the case. Because, even if it does not necessarily herald a new Cold War, the Russo-Ukrainian War, combined with the undermining of international law under the pressure of various authoritarian regimes and new isolationist policies, shows us that “our world” is no longer the one we grew familiar with after 1990. Therefore, I argue that our contemporaneity began on February 24, 2022, whether we like it or not and regardless of what it will ultimately bring forth.

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: For nearly two centuries, most literary histories were written by single authors, hence their legitimacy no longer requires any further demonstration. The issue at hand in the contemporary period, however, concerns the competence of these authors, more precisely the odds that a single scholar can successfully cover objects of study involving eras, genres, and styles that are sometimes extremely varied and whose understanding requires specialized knowledge. Under these conditions, the success of a literary history written by a single author is often inversely proportional to the extent of its subject. In order to illustrate this point, it is enough to compare the almost flawless compactness of Mihai Iovănel’s *Istoria literaturii române contemporane 1990–2020* (History of Contemporary Romanian Literature 1990–2020, 2021) with the superficiality underlying numerous chapters of Nicolae Manolescu’s *Istoria critică a literaturii române* (Critical History of Romanian Literature, 2008/ 2019). Therefore, the risk of dilettantism lurks in any ambitious literary history project conceived by a single author. But this does not mean that collective histories are exempt from dangers of this sort. The most serious of all, of course, concerns the risk of internal collapse faced by projects articulated on voices and perspectives that are too different from each other. In conclusion, shallowness and incoherence are the Scylla and Charybdis that contemporary literary histories must choose between. And I could not say I prefer one over the other.