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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: In itself, your question seems to call for an unequivocal answer. It is as if literary history, perceived at a local, in other words national or regional level, were systematically marked by conservatism and, thereby, doomed to inexorable obsolescence. This is both absolutely true and eminently debatable. It all depends on the issues and the methods underlying its development. It seems to me that everything that pertains to literary history would benefit from being explicitly and systematically situated in a context, whether geographical or historical—because this context is never self-evident: it is itself the subject of a narrative.

This was valid for romantic historians of literature and continues to be valid for authors of literary histories today. How will they be perceived in fifty years? Or even in twenty years? Even tomorrow, as everything is going so fast? Being contemporary never counts for legitimation. There is no literary history in the singular. There are only literary histories that fit into each other, according to a logic combining stratigraphy (diachronic depth), assembly (methodology), adjustment (reduction of the plural). Literary history is a complex and heterogeneous device, whereas for many it would constitute a homogeneous, irrefutable block. But to speak of it as if the notion had been established forever would be tantamount to a serious mistake. Like any story with a historical scope, literary history is a long-term one, even though the passage of time may be obscured. Moreover, this obliteration is not necessarily deliberate. It's just that, as we are often prisoners of our routine and subject to a kind of cultural inertia, sometimes relayed by institutions, we take things for what they are supposed to be, once and for all.

This is particularly true in the area that interests us here. The origin of literary history has almost always responded to nationalist imperatives that have fueled a conservative, even ultra-conservative discourse. As we know, the rise of literary history is complementary to that of the nation and therefore of

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language. It is useless to return to the close link that literature, the dominant (official) language, the central power and the narrative of its history (that of literature) have and continue to maintain. I will limit myself to giving a single, well-known example. In 1634-1635, in France, if Richelieu promoted the French Academy, it was... well, it is up to you to choose the answer!... 1) in order to protect an assembly of essentially Parisian writers or 2) to better control the booming theater scene. Since then, the august institution has continued to watch over the linguistic doxa² and, more marginally, over the hazards of national literary history. Language, literature, nation... So many questions involving the prestige of a certain community... However, as the late Pascale Casanova reminded us, in *La langue mondiale. Traduction et domination* (2015), prestige and prestidigitation find their common etymon in the Latin *praestigium*. There is a kind of 'power based on illusion'³ in any quest for prestige. This is indeed the problem that literary history must face when it is very closely associated with an objective of valorisation. The quest for national prestige undoubtedly peaked in Europe during the Romantic era, if only, once again, we can reduce Romanticism to a singular... Literary history experienced a veritable boom under the pressure of new nations, Germany in the lead, but not exclusively.

To come back to your question, it is a matter of knowing, first of all, whether literary history today has been able to get rid of the intellectual and political influence so tenacious of the Schlegel brothers, even of Novalis, or just to mention somebody else, of Désiré Nisard. It is then a question of verifying that it has been able to revoke in doubt its "mission" of builder of the cultural pillars of the nation. We remember that this mission had become clearer while writers, revealing themselves to be anthropologists *ante litteram*, endowed their respective countries with an anthology of national/nationalist epic stories. I am thinking in particular of the *Kalevala*, composed by Elias Lönnrot from a selection of scraps collected from the Karelian skalds in northern Finland, using a selective technique analogous to that of romantic literary histories. To the marvelously epic tale which combined the rise of the nation and narration (according to the beautiful formula of Homi Bhabha), there was of course a corresponding hagiographic literary history. Finally, it is a question of wondering if this one knew how to depart from the processes which accompanied its emergence under romanticism. It will be noted that the Goethian *Weltliteratur* did not escape this conservative whirlwind either. Did Goethe really open his thought to India, Persia and China, all three matrices of written epics? Yes, and that's already very good, except that Goethe had concluded his tirade with a eulogy of eternal Greece, of which Hölderlin

² See website of the Académie française, "Aperçu historique": "The members called themselves 'académistes', then 'académiciens' from February 12, 1635. They had to concern themselves with the purity of the language and make it capable of the highest eloquence" (<https://www.academie-francaise.fr/linstitution/apercu-histoire>, consulted on 2022.06.29).

³ Pascale Casanova, *La langue mondiale. Traduction et domination*, Paris, Seuil, 2015, p. 10.

had hinted shortly before that it would have found its true heir in Germany. Much later, Aamir Mufti points out that this beginning of planetary openness, which soon found a strong relay in European colonialism, also resulted... in a fence. The constitution of the local canon, in India, for example, had been totally governed by the colonizer, promoter of a literary history that did not belong to him, with the help of local notables won over to his cause.⁴

A literary history perpetuating this tradition would indeed be obsolete and conservative, not to say nationalist and/or neo-colonial. It would be insular in a way. It would present itself as an island completely lost in the midst of our planetary and diasporic history and geography. So what to do, especially since this somewhat archaic approach finally seems quite outdated today? Why not think more in terms of scale? Why not leave the island and make literary history tend towards the archipelagic, so dear to Edouard Glissant? Because, as we know, the archipelago is both a rather homogeneous whole in its relationship to the mainland, with which it always interacts, and heterogeneous in its internal articulations. Archipelagic, literary history ceases to be singular to become a singular plural, an oxymoron that I appreciate and which suits it rather well, it seems to me. In short, the problem lies less in literary history per se than in our approach to it.

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: It all depends on what level you are at. Are we talking about literary history perceived as the expression of an international, national or regional doxa or of a specific volume examining the literary history of a given entity? In the latter case, we can estimate that the study can influence the perception of the literary history of this entity, even call it into question, but it seems difficult to me to think that it will be able to modify it completely, revolutionize it. At the very least, its critical reception will have to allow its integration into the mental landscape of its recipients. That takes time. To stick to the example of the canon, the establishment of which is one of the induced corollaries of the historiographical enterprise, we note that its evolution is progressive. To tell the truth, it turns out to be rather cautious, even conservative. We come back to what we were saying earlier.

Today, things certainly tend to accelerate. Do you remember the protesters on the Stanford campus who, in the second half of the 1980s, demanded that the reading lists imposed on them be changed? They won their case: the literary

⁴ See Aamir Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2016.

history they would be taught would henceforth include the expression of minority discourses. Well, it could look like a revolution. In reality, it reflected above all, with a delay, the evolution of all a society. The literary canon, as it had been conceived within the American education system, was quite simply out of step by about twenty years with the achievements obtained from the 1960s (Civil Rights Act, and all the subsequent conquests). A new acceleration has been occurring for some years, now. It particularly concerns continental Europe, which often lags behind the English-speaking world, and consists of bringing the canon and the representation of literary history into line with the expectations of society. I am thinking in particular of the inclusion of female corpora in literary anthologies. Does this action produce culture for all that? Rather, it seems to me that it gradually—and finally—integrates cultural data that have become indisputable at a society scale.

Literary history is supposed to stem, as I recalled earlier, from the credo of a community. As soon as it covers a collective scope, it does not, strictly speaking, create culture, but rather reflects a culture that achieves consensus. And, as we have just seen, it often reacts with a delay that could be qualified as culpable to the new social imperatives. This is quite paradoxical—or perhaps not, because after all, literary history sometimes adopts an institutional, eminently official character. Insofar as it reflects the vision of a community, it tends to remain in tune with it. However, staying in phase means testing the waters with a certain caution, reacting with a delay. Consider the conditions that govern the writing of school textbooks. In general, their authors and authors all feel the same burning desire: to introduce novelty, to refocus discourses that have been marginalized for too long, in short, to contribute to energizing literary history... Can they? Not always, and even quite rarely, because there is a good chance that the institution supervising their work (publishers, educational bodies, etc.) is lagging behind them and holding them back.

All this is hardly exciting, but the fact remains that, even if the forces present are disproportionate, the effort must be continued. We are still witnessing a form of interaction that will move the barrel and enrich the identity palette of the community concerned. Moreover, studying how literary history evolves also gives us an instructive lesson in what is meant by literature as time goes by. Failing to create a culture, literary history legitimizes new variations of the creative process and reinterprets the concept of (official) culture. What about cultural studies? Take for example the case of manga. Personally, I have never considered them. You will want to be careful not to call me a snob, because I am particularly open to Italian trash films from the years 1960-1975, in particular, with regard to which manga would almost pass for Shakespearean sonnets! It is rather for lack of taste that I abandon the eats. That's it, for me, but that's not the case for the majority of students who work with me, especially since manga are particularly

popular in France. Am I then going to ignore manga? Of course not, because in doing so I would be avoiding what most students read when they really have a choice of what to read. No offense to some, *Ghost in the Shell* by Masamune Shirow and its various animated avatars are very often better known and appreciated by French students than *Les Chants de Maldoror* or *Finnegan's Wake*. I will therefore strive to integrate it into my personal culture while waiting for it to be integrated into literary history. When, sooner or later, this has happened, we will admit that the definition of literature will have changed and that this evolution in itself reflects new cultural modalities shared by the whole of society.

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: In itself, your question advances a form of answer that I share, in many respects. It questions the methodological validity of a literary history whose arrangement would be based on institutionalized chronological divisions. This leads to a double questioning related to the epistemological foundations of an established—not to say sanctuarized—period and, more generally, to the principle governing a periodic approach. I believe that, to try to provide an answer, it is necessary to add a geographical parameter to the reflection, because, once again, it is difficult to separate the temporal framework from the spatial framework. There is no temporal absolute, locally isolable, as the periodizations relayed by traditional school textbooks, even traditionalist, and a certain number of academic essays suggest.

To be convinced of this, it suffices to compare the periodizations that circulate at the international level. At the end of a confrontation of this kind, one can only take note of the heterogeneity of literary history. Take the case of Spain, where the periodizations correspond to very precisely dated generations: thus those of 98 (Unamuno, Valle-Inclán, ...) and 27 (García Lorca, Cernuda, ...). 1898 referred to the crisis that had erupted following the defeat suffered by Spain against the United States in the context of the colonial wars of the time, while 1927 sanctioned the recent emergence of the Spanish artistic avant-gardes. Do these periods have a real impact outside the country? To a small extent, because they reproduce an idiosyncrasy whose geographical scope is restricted. Ultimately, they even have an unfortunate side effect, because they contribute to isolating, or even insularizing, Spanish literary history from the European or Latin American literatures of the time. This kind of example is likely to be identified in almost all national versions of literary history.

Moreover, as long as periodizations are perceived in an international dimension, we quickly realize that they yield to changes of scale. If I asked my students to locate the beginnings of romanticism, they would probably mention the name of Chateaubriand. It is of him that French literary history has made the “first romantic,” even though sometimes there is a reference to the “precursor” André Chénier, guillotined in 1794—for having condemned revolutionary Jacobinism, while also condemning royalism... what textbooks generally forget to specify! Of course, if a colleague asked the same question in Germany or the United Kingdom, the answer would change completely, as would the dating of the period, which would thereby lose its value as a local absolute. What would be the response in the Czech Republic or Bulgaria? Was Karel Hynek Mácha a Czech romantic, he who succumbed to a disease at a very young age after having published *Máj* in 1836? Was Khristo Botev another romantic, he who died in battle during the Bulgarian uprising against the Ottomans in 1876? Perhaps both of them were romantics, after all and after so many so-called “official” romantics. So what is romanticism? Ultimately? Difficult to answer, it seems to me. Would it be at best the crystallization of a Hegelian *Zeitgeist* or *Weltgeist*? When did it take place? There, the answer is simpler: it took *place*! Each place indeed cultivates its own version, its own periodization, without realizing that, in doing so, it relativizes the scope of what it wishes to establish and, in the best of cases, fetishizes the local culture. It’s a bit like the story of this man “who thought he’d find his sword by marking the place where it had fallen on the hull of the boat,”⁵ except that the boat moves, like the water that supports it, and that of boats, there are many.

In order for a periodization to retain a value other than that which consists in defending, as you have underlined, its own authority, it is appropriate that we meditate on the spatio-temporal articulation that it proposes, according to a dynamic of which I already noticed it had to be archipelagic. It does not simply “periodize”; in a way, it “spatio-periodizes.” It is never self-evident, but is relative to a geo-cultural environment and applicable on a certain scale which can be local, national, international, continental or planetary. What would we say, on a planetary scale, of romanticism? In the same logic, we will start by asking whether the very concept of periodization is extendable to the entire planet. In other words, do all the cultures in the world rely on periodizations? Is it a universal concept? Nothing is less sure. It seems to me that in China, while canonical works are perfectly identified and defined, literature is periodized according to the same

⁵ In English: Chu Tien-Hsin, *The Old Capital: A Novel from Taipeh* [1997], translated from the Chinese (Taiwan) by Howard Goldblatt, New York, Columbia UP, 2007. Yet, the excerpt, above, has been translated in English by Bertrand Westphal from the French translation: *Ancienne Capitale*, transl. Angel Pino and Isabelle Rabut, Arles, Actes Sud, 2022, p. 93.

dynastic criteria that apply to its political history. A question specific to chronological perception also arises. Periods of time are not apprehended in a uniform way everywhere. In the West, the “periods” now flow at the rate of a frenetic acceleration that Paul Virilio described as a dromological drift.⁶ Postmodernism was definitely very brief. It led, it is said, to post-postmodernism, before switching to the posthuman. Half a century at most will have sufficed to pile up such a periodic strata. In China again, the periods seem more stabilized because the socio-cultural time is conceived in a different way. It is permissible to quote a text which would be considered ancient in Europe without being considered misinformed, quite simply because the authority of the source persists for a longer time stretch. All of this is part of what we will call *polychrony*. At an instant T in history, in heterogeneous spaces, the vision of time and its passage are also heterogeneous. Consequently, yes, literary periods should be handled with the greatest caution, except to end up with approximations that are more a matter of stereotype than of literary theory.

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

A: Considering what has just been said, I am tempted to answer you that in the singular the contemporary declension of the global does not exist. On the surface of the planet, we share neither the same temporal modalities (polychrony) nor the same rhythms (polyrhythm). In a way, the concept of contemporary is an oversimplification. It corresponds to a desperate effort of simultaneous global representation of planetary cultures, according to a privileged point of view (the observer’s). It is maintained as before we maintained the fire of the hearth around which we gathered to tell stories. We are not necessarily contemporary with others, because, after all, who sets the temporal benchmark? Who is contemporary with whom? At most, one is *concomitant* with others. We co-exist within the same abstract temporal matrix which is part of a heterogeneous duration where the markers are innumerable. The question is also to know if, at the very least, we are contemporary with ourselves! As you will rightly tax me as a sophist, I hasten to quote someone who, for me, has long embodied the figure of a master thinker. In this era torn between a thirst for certainty and an increased awareness of the scope of uncertainty, there are still a few: I believe that Giorgio Agamben is one of them. He writes: “Contemporaneo non è colui che cerca di coincidere e adeguarsi al suo tempo, ma chi aderisce a esso attraverso una sfasatura e un anacronismo,”⁷ in other words: “A contemporary is not someone

⁶ See Paul Virilio, *L’Horizon négatif : essai de dromoscopie*, Paris, Galilée, 1984 (in English: *Negative Horizon: An Essay in Dromoscopy*, transl. Michael Degener, London, Continuum, 2005).

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Che cos’è il contemporaneo?*, Rome, Nottempo, 2008, back cover.

who seeks to coincide and conform to his time, but the one who adheres to it through a phase shift and an anachronism.” It seems to me that Agamben’s proposal suits our purpose very well and allows us to get back on our feet. By its nature, as we have seen several times during this interview, literary history is out of step with the moment in which it unfolds. It is written after the fact—like any story, you might say. However, it has a particularity: it draws up an inventory of an aesthetic production which is essentially based on representation, but what is representation if not a re-presentation, a presentification? Let us not forget that the epic founding texts of Mediterranean literature did not even tolerate contemporaneity between the content of the story and the topicality of its recipients, as Mikhail Bakhtin has shown very well. One has the impression that a double shift characterizes the genealogy of literary history. It is therefore in its phase shift and its inevitable anachronism that it manifests its contemporaneity.

Well, let’s break there with the sophisms, although they are very useful: they prove to us that we have to remain cautious in the handling of the tools of interpretation of the world. It is that we are constantly watched by ethnocentric reflexes likely to blind us. This is why it is necessary to imagine a flexible articulation between what we commonly call the contemporary and, even more questionably, the global. Rather than the global, I believe moreover that it would be a question of speaking of planetary, a term which points to cultural diversity and relationality, at a respectable distance from the homogenizing drifts of the global. Once again, let us invoke an archipelagic view of literary history. Instead of homologating a forced amalgam of island type, it inspires a relationship in diversity. It will combine respect for the local with the potential residing in arrangements on a larger scale, possibly on a global scale. Ideally, the planet is a vast archipelago where no island is called upon to exercise hegemonic power and where no declination of the contemporary overhangs another *a priori*. In politics, this equitable approach is unfortunately utopian, which does not mean that it cannot serve as a model for a possible future, because it is not a question of sinking into radical skepticism. On the other hand, whether in a literary history essay or in a textbook, such an approach is conceivable and even highly desirable, even when the literary universe, perceived in its entirety and in all its materiality, is never independent of economics and politics, as evidenced by the asymmetrical density and patronage of libraries and bookstores, sometimes dissuasive manufacturing costs, access to the publishing market that is profoundly heterogeneous and unfair, among other issues.

On a national level, all this could result in the articulation between a traditional corpus and a corpus located at the extremities of the “plateau,” in the Deleuzian sense of the term, whether in the direction of the microscopic (the regional level, with its linguistic variability) or the macroscopic (the international, even planetary level, included in a diasporic and nomadic dynamic, in a Deleuzian

sense once again). This also manifests itself in the combination and reconciliation of non-homogeneous temporal perceptions, in other words by taking into account the disparity of the contemporary.

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 would gladly answer you that the question of legitimacy is relative to the intimate history of each and every one of us. Let's completely change the domain... but not the topic! There's a lot of talk about tennis these days, as the Wimbledon finals are coming up. And journalists wonder who was the best player of all time (the question should also be asked for women, but, in fact, the sports press does not really support gender parity). Federer? Djokovic? Nadal? Who knows? What if it was another one? Because our propensity for chronocentrism pushes us to forget older exploits, or to underestimate them. Here is what Sari, an anonymous commentator, wrote in the forum of *L'Equipe*, the French sports daily: "Well... A piece in the jukebox! History is told by human beings. Everyone will have their feelings about who marked tennis for them. For example, I was more marked by Connors and McEnroe than by Federer/Nadal/Djokovic. The digital era only sees through figures, statistics. Tennis is not lines of code. Life is not an algorithm."⁸ Wise answer, I think. Wise also because it insists on the relativity of the canon seen as a jukebox. How to define it, calculate it? Who can decline it? Want my opinion? Well, here it is: for me, the greatest contemporary writer, whose life was too short, is David Foster Wallace. Why? Because, precisely, he knew how to combine literature and tennis, bordering on the sublime. You have to read Wallace when he talks about Federer, his own windy competitions in the Midwest or an epic match of the obscure but endearing Michael Joyce against Andre Agassi! Should it have been an author or a collective of authors who pointed out to me the importance of Wallace? What does it matter, after all! What matters is that Wallace matters to me. And this "me," in different ways, is to be multiplied *ad infinitum*, by as many people as there are readers. In literature, as in tennis, there is an inseparable relationship between official history and personal canon. By the way, I forgot to tell you that for me the greatest male tennis player was and remains Björn Borg and the greatest female player Serena Williams. And you, what is your opinion? In sports, the personal canon is often built during adolescence. In literature, a little later, but not always... School readings

⁸ *L'Equipe Numérique*, "Stefan Edberg: 'The history books will remember the one who has the most Grand Slams'", 2022.07.08, commentary by Sari, at 12:08 p.m. (<https://www.lequipe.fr/Tennis/Actualites/Stefan-edberg-les-livres-d-histoire-retiendront-celui-qui-aura-le-plus-de-grands-chelems/1342415>, consulted on 2022.07.08)

are fundamental and, therefore, so are textbooks, as well as the literary stories that feed them.

Can one write a literary history alone? Should it be written as a team? I do not believe that there is a rule, because in both cases we will find solutions while being confronted with insurmountable obstacles. Could literary history be written objectively? I do not believe it one second. I even wonder if it is not by recognizing the part of subjectivity in any enterprise of this kind that we will achieve the most significant degree of objectivity. Let's take the case of a team... How is it formed? According to what founding principles? We are well aware that in the literary field the functioning of collectives has nothing to do with that of teams of hard scientists, where the distribution of tasks is carried out according to much more specific skills and for a result that is easier to target, even if it may prove impossible to achieve. Furthermore, there is the problem of financing such structures. Literature researchers, who are generally professionals, are accustomed to working on a fictitious voluntary basis; they are indeed paid to do so even if no one really forces them to do so. On the other hand, as soon as they call on skills outside the academia, they come up against the question of remuneration, which is always tricky to deal with, even on a strictly accounting level. At Columbia, then at Stanford, Franco Moretti had managed to build large teams to feed the statistics of Distant Reading, but he had budgets almost inaccessible in Europe. Moreover, all this collective work ended up being put through the mill with a single standardizing gaze, his own. Is this a hindrance? Yes, in a sense. Not in the other, because, subjectivity for subjectivity, this work was underpinned by a methodological homogeneity that was easy to decipher and therefore honest in itself. In short, a team makes it possible to articulate more varied skills, but not absolute ones, especially when one deploys on the perimeter of World Literature. Yet, this same team will depend on a directing authority as well on the scientific level as on the economic plan. As for the individual, if he is necessarily less competent, he will apply a methodology that is easier to identify. Paradoxically, it is in its undeniable subjectivity that his work will lend itself to a more objective reading. Basically, the reader then knows who and what they are dealing with!

To conclude, let me tell you that there is one point, in this case, that is almost never mentioned, especially on a transnational and interlinguistic level: it is that of translation. How many literary history essays are translated? and even, more generally, how many literary theory essays? It would be so instructive to be able to compare linguistically diverse productions through translations. They would enrich our point of view—and it is indeed this immeasurable variability that we need in a world that wants to be transnational but where so many entities turn in on themselves.