

THE NEW BIOGRAPHISM

We know all too well that literature in itself, as well as the way we perceive it (we the readers or we the commentators of literature), changes over time, and that the idea dramatically stated half a century ago by René Wellek, claiming that literary history has failed (“The Fall of Literary History”), only implies that the meanings of this discipline, as well as the literature it covers, have changed. Seen from a distance and farther in time, things come into clearer focus.

Romania too has seen a rather lengthy discussion of the canon. However, it was never loudly emphasized that between literary history and literary scholarship there is a clear difference which is reflected not only by the pragmatic needs generated by each of these separate fields – the list of important topics for the former; the list of possible, approachable and appropriate topics for the latter – but also by the links to other arts and fields of study (psychology, ethics, logic for literary scholarship), criteria of opportunity or political correctness, necessary in order to mould the younger members of society, and a number of other criteria that have a rather indirect connection to the idea of value in itself, which reigns sovereign in the case of literary history. Any confusion between the two fields, which is now the current state of fact, is damaging to both. To give a simple example which is also a generational milestone, Nichita Stănescu’s poetry is, for some people, not very appropriate for school classes, if only because it is extremely difficult to render accessible to a 16-18 year old with an average degree of culture (average for our times, that is). For all its divergent approaches and inherent limitations, literary scholarship and the classroom canon are still the main instruments for the consecration of a Romanian author. Their importance, not to say tyranny, provides the conditions for their perpetration into the future, considering the students’ rather short list of extra-curricular reading. At the same time, it stimulates a competition to squeeze in various writers agreeable to the powers-that-be, helping them onto the list whenever various revisions crack the door into the classroom canon.

The history of Romanian literature occupies a rather precarious position in the public cultural discourse, including here the discourse which promotes a stronger formative and educational role of literature. In this context, any new point of view militating for a “freshening up” of the structure, methods and possibly goals of this discipline should be widely welcomed and thoroughly considered by those specialized in a discipline that has been stagnant and self-complacent for too long. That is why a discussion about the comeback of biographism in literary-historical research, about the re-launching of a comprehensive, elastic biographism, a new

biographism, is an opportunity to widen the frame and the perspectives of this field.

Biographism in literary research is rather old in European culture in general, since it comes from ancient times, and is rather old in Romanian culture as well: after the first literary research studies, which are understandably bibliographical in nature (V. Popp, T. Cipariu, D. Iarcu, etc.), the oldest studies are biographical. This is the criterion behind Vasile Gr. Pop's two volumes of *Conspect asupra literaturii române (A Compendium of Romanian Literature)* of 1875-1876; literary anthologies preceded by biographical notes are the textbooks of the 19th century, such as Pumnul's *Lepturariu [Reader]* of 1862, and this is also the manner of starting books for didactical authors such as Lambrior or Nădejde, though theirs were in fact textbooks of language and literature. It is no wonder then that university lectures of respectable professors such as Bogdan-Duică, Ibrăileanu and even Lovinescu (in the brief period of 1910-1912, working up to the monographs of Asachi and Negruzzi) use heavily the biographical method. The first synthesis on thematic criteria in Romanian literature was published as late as 1929 by a specialist in biographies, the notorious historian N. Iorga, who that year took over a temporary chair of literature that would later on be divided. He understood that the history of literature had to provide a bird's-eye-view on the development of literature in its widest meaning, and intended to show, in brief, "the connection from the oldest books written in Romanian to Eminescu and the literary works of today's generation". All the literary histories that precede or follow his work, including Călinescu's, use the method of monographic fragmentation, with essays on the greater and lesser authors, incorporated into larger chapters worked out along often restrictive and untenable affinities – such as *Promoția ruralilor. Naturalismul (The Rural Generation. Naturalism)*, which included Creangă, Caragiale and Slavici, or *Întâii umoriști (The First Humorists)*, that brings together Negruzzi and Pann. Obviously, these essays comprise a lengthy discussion of the authors' biographies, followed by descriptions of their work that also must, by necessity, include some form of biographical framework.

This approach, from a perspective that follows the author's work chronologically, along the course of the author's biography, an approach that usually comes with a rather impressionistic manner of text analysis, was challenged and abandoned once the Anglo-American school of New Criticism successfully brought forth the analytical type of research – and was then pushed in a different direction by Russian formalism, and by structuralism in its various forms, from Mukarovsky's early stance to Barthes' semiotics. Almost a century of spectacular progress and evolution in this field have shown, however, the limits and excesses of what was rightly seen as a revolution in literary research, linguistics, semiotics, etc.

In the wider field of literary research, there is already a sort of fertile dissatisfaction with the instruments we traditionally use, these instruments which

stimulate neither emulation, nor discussion or personal initiative. It has become clearer that we need to freshen up our concepts, perspectives and our tacit acceptance of notions in need of revision. An American comparatist who comes from a background slightly different from the regular field of specialization, Eric Hayot (author of a dissertation on Chinese culture, its representations and symbolic implications in European cultures), rightly points out that we do not give enough consideration to the impact of the notions used in areas such as the history of literature, the school and academic curricula in general, the book market, distinctions granted and predilections for a particular medium, on the way we perceive the three or four centuries of modern literature to which we usually refer. European literary history attempts to answer this challenge starting from specific cases of authors or literatures that require different, more complicated approaches than those we are used to. No wonder that one of those pushing for this conversation is a Swiss critic who, among the rather many others involved in this process, suggests a reformation and reassessment of the notion of personality, in fact an assumed, constructed persona more appropriately named “posture”.

The new biographism put forth by the past years’ research is rather different from what might at first be read into its label. At the very least, it allows a certain variety of opinion that gives us laymen wider berth in a space merely configured by its basic concept. This is, as stated by one of the top authors, the Swiss Jérôme Meizoz, the “posture” chosen by the author of literature, the posture in which the author places himself/ herself with every option made at every turn: topics chosen, style of writing, the public position taken in issues of literature or any other field, statements, etc. In other words, it is what the author chooses to be and what the author allows to be seen, the way the author stages himself/herself, including the assumption of a literary identity that is constructed, manipulated or downright fabricated, in itself a “posture” (Jérôme Meizoz, *Postures littéraires*, 2007). In reply to Barthes’s illusions about “the death of the author”, Meizoz actually announces a return of the author; the desired unified historic perspective concerns not the reading of the work, but the reading of the author.

In a way, placing literature in large chapters of families related through their members’ assumed “posture” can better reflect the relation between the writer (and his/ her literature) and a society which is the intended receptacle not only of literature, but also of the writer’s posturing, of his/her assumed identity; it includes the writer’s position in what concerns the great literary issues of the moment, the political issues of the day, cultural issues, etc. It is, obviously, not far from a sociological view of literature; however, this new type of biographism promises a larger share to the individual, to the writers themselves, with their hesitations and doctrinal oscillations. These can be synthesized in the evolution of their posture, and the posture itself can be placed in relation to the evolution of other important authors or just to the postures assumed by minor authors, whose work can be investigated in relation to one or several of the great axes of global investigation in

a given time. The attempt to determine the author's posture and situate it in the public sphere also comes to support Eric Hayot's thesis, denouncing the falsification of literary research from the moment of choosing a topic that is circumscribed to an artificial system of conventions and "important methodological options". One major example is periodization, which breaks the cursive chain of historical evolution and inevitably separates authors and actions that are in reality closely connected (see the chapter "Against Periodization" in *On Literary Worlds*, 2012). Elements of this criticism have come up as early as a decade before, with historians such as Jason Smith in his 1998 *The strange history of the decade: Modernity, nostalgia, and the perils of periodization*, and others. If we decide to call this fragmentation procedure by its proper name, that of methodological expedient, and to bypass it when it is not imposed by pedagogical reasons, we might more freely conceive of one of the characteristics essential to literature, to culture overall and history in general: continuity in rupture.

We might then finally leave it to highschools to operate with the dictionary type of literary history, with monographic chapters on each author. As it appears at least in a comprehensive history of literature that analyzes long periods of time, one could emphasize the continuity or discontinuity of a posture, that is of an existential, vital option (and an artistic option first and foremost) in the evolution of that literature, rather than discussing continuities in topic, stylistics, fundamental motifs favored by a periodization unchanged for decades because of a narrow, inexplicable subordination to an often misconceived historical periodization and chronology.

In fact, the principal gain of this shift might be the opportunity to go beyond the current type of literary history which, for the past two hundred years, has been content to keep count and keep track of the relations between literary texts – which is also why models of formal text analysis were developed. Because of the infusions of politically-driven ideology, the study of the idea of literature was neglected, or better said the study of the literary space, the place where other components of specialized research are at work. That is, of course, if we accept that literature is one of the manners of expressing the intellectual life of society, a special-characteristics field of cultural anthropology. What would be of interest here is not just the accomplished component of literature, i.e. the literary texts and especially the landmark texts of the greatest authors, but also the unaccomplished component, those works that did not turn out to be landmarks but helped map out the land, determined the establishment of currents, trends, journals that underlie those para-literary phenomena such as fads, imitations, plagiarism, fakes (Meizoz also brings into discussion pseudonyms, which structure the author's relation to the literary field differently). All these should aim to define the context which gives birth and shape to literary landmark works, a place where they interact not just among themselves, as in a closed-circuit club, but where they interact with the

complex environments that generate them, validate them and which they represent one way or another.

Naturally, proposals and even theoretical works are irrelevant until the moment when several texts, several books will have verified the validity and the elasticity of the concept. There are already, out there, several books that attempt, deliberately or empirically, to come out of the cul-de-sac that is sometimes called the “crisis” of literary history. We too, when discussing them, should attempt to place them in the perspective of this – I believe – necessary change.

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THE NEW BIOGRAPHISM

(Abstract)

Literary history as a field is periodically shaken by challenges directed at its orientation, purposefulness or its very constitutive legitimacy. The object of literary history, it is claimed, is contradictory: it attempts to be simultaneously both material – the description and analysis of literature, of texts and their construction – and ideological, i.e. the history of the literature described. Not only is this history a construct, made possible only through an act of selection and interpretation, but it also has to first “create” the entities whose evolution it discusses: authors, trends, literary kinships, cultural environments with both political and artistic components, the emblematic reader of the time (embodying public opinion and various types of success), the part played by translations and foreign literature in this process, etc. It all becomes possible, at least theoretically, if literary history surrenders its traditional presumptuous ambition of “totality” (or, in Wellek’s words, its attempt “to write that which will be both literary and a history”) and accepts its position as “imaginary space”, a creation and proposition put forth by the literary historian, who can then construct it based on a return to the persona of the author – therefore a sort of new biographism.

Keywords: literary history, new biographism, renouncing the ambition of totality, literary history as imaginary space.

NOUL BIOGRAFISM

(Rezumat)

Istoria literaturii este o disciplină zguduită periodic de contestări, fie ale orientărilor sau finalităților, fie chiar ale legitimității sale constitutive. Această legitimitate este contestată pentru că istoria literaturii ar avea un obiect contradictoriu, imposibil: obiectul său este în același timp de natură materială, respectiv descrierea și analiza literaturii, a textelor și construcția lor, și de natură ideologică totodată, adică istoria literaturii descrise. Nu numai că istoria este un construct, posibil doar printr-un act de alegere și interpretare, dar ea trebuie să „creeze” în prealabil entitățile a căror evoluție o propune: autori, curente și grupuri literare, medii culturale cu componente în același timp politice și artistice, cititorul emblematic (sau canonic) al momentului, care încarnează opinia publică și deci succesul, participarea traducerilor și a lecturilor de carte străină la acest proces etc. Toate devin posibile, cel puțin teoretic, dacă istoria literară renunță la ambiția „totalității” (sau, cum spune Wellek, “to write that which will be both literary and a history”) și acceptă statutul de spațiu imaginar, creație și propunere a istoricului literar, care îl poate construi pe temeiul unei reveniri la *persona* autorului, deci un fel de biografism nou.

Cuvinte-cheie: noul biografism, renunțarea la ambiția totalității, istoria literară ca spațiu imaginar.