PROBLEMS OF WRITING LITERARY HISTORIES

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Abstract: The present paper deals with the problems that occur in writing literary histories, in Romanian literary histories published after 1990. The identified problems are problem of construction, of selection, of classification, of interpretation, of writing style, of objectivity, of point of view as well as the problem of proving the evolution of literature and giving plausible explanations of the past.

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There are several problems to be identified in the writing of a literary history: problem of construction, of selection and of writing style. In our analysis we will discuss these identified matters and we will apply them on Romanian literary histories appeared after 1990. We have chosen to treat this histories, appeared after 1990, because during the last twenty years there was more interest in writing these histories as compared to the period of communist regime. The tradition of Romanian literary histories is based on the fact that they comprise into their pages the Romanian literature from the beginning to contemporary times as compared to other literatures where this kind of work is made by collectives of researchers. There are also, probably, other problems, bigger or smaller, but they do not make the object of this paper.

First problem, the one of construction takes into consideration the fact that for historians this is one of the most common problems. They have to decide which structure is easier for their history in order to make it more accessible for their readers. Afterwards they have to decide whether their history will be structured on the literary movements, genres or time frames and which authors should be included. And after that they have to write in a style that is attractive to readers because otherwise they assume the risk their histories won’t be read.

Literary tradition has imposed some guidelines for organizing the literary works which are generally accepted. The work of the authors can be divided in genres. There is useful to have some criteria inside the genre because the interior order, which groups the literary productions based on style and themes, can give a good summary of the directions and trends of that literature. Also there should be a criterion of representative selection and hierarchy making but trying to catch the inner movement of literature.

Having these guidelines the historians start with the beginning of literature, with the first literary productions and first authors, and they continue, diachronically, with the evolution of literature, in fields like poetry, drama, novel and some recent histories include also criticism. It is somehow easy to respect this pattern because the historians will have to prove their personal contribution in treating the contemporary literature and for the literary work from the beginning they can take for granted the canonized writers.

We have identified 3 patterns of literary histories construction. The first one has a model in George Călinescu’s history, which deals with the entire literature, from the beginning to the time of the historian. The structure is based on literary movements, diachronically presented, and
few authors are left outside. He is dealing with all the writers even if they were minor writers; he included them in his history even if he mentioned them as minor writer. This was an easy thing to do in 1940 as there weren't too many literary productions. A lot of histories appeared after 1990 respect this model but they loose from their sight the fact that nowadays the number of literary productions has exponentially increased and that there are a lot of things to write about a huge number of authors.

The second model is based on literary histories who are trying to confirm a modernist approach to the literary phenomena. The literary histories that belong to this category have an aesthetic value added to their writing in the sense that they also make some interpretation of the included authors. There have been a lot of debates on the subject of if there is an aesthetic value in the literary histories written by critics. Traditional writing of criticism and literary histories sustained the fact that there isn’t or shouldn’t be value on this kind of writings. But then there cannot be a literary history without this value because its author has proven an interpretative technique in analyzing the literary productions.

The third model of literary histories are the so called niche literary histories and they comprise into their pages only a single literary movement or a single criteria that has to be respected or they announce you from the beginning that they have chosen the authors after their personal taste. There are several literary histories built under this model which have proven very valuable because they have analyzed the literary phenomenon more detailed.

Rien T. Segers, in his article about the principles of writing literary histories, considers that old literary histories are written based on the diachronic principle, while the new ones are oriented also towards synchronism: “a system-oriented approach towards literary history implies the realization of an old principle with new research strategies: the description and combination of the synchronic and diachronic historical axes” (Segers, 1986, p. 247)

The problem of selection is something that all the historians have faced. And a big number of them failed. They have a number of valuable authors which they didn’t include in their history and a big number of small authors who are included based on personal relations. This matter of selection is also something that it should be taken into consideration when writing a history because the same readers might lose their interest and the historian might lose his credibility and objectivity. Laurențiu Ulici (1995) says that a history of literature that is selective and chronological or selective and thematic or selective and stylistic will never have an objective base because it is selective.

All the literary historians seek to prove objectivity in the selections they make, in the number of pages they give to an author, the treatment given to authors, etc. There will always be a certain caution from the historian in making the selection for their histories because they will be haunted by the partial reading. They have to take into consideration, beyond their personal taste, the way in which the critics have written about that author’s work.

It has a vital importance for a historian to notice the value of an author and the relation of a literary production with the changing taste of the reader. Historians have to prove their talent in dealing with their generation, and with the authors, colleagues, friends or enemies, which will be included or not in their histories.

There are a lot of controversies around the selections made by the recent literary histories and if you listen either of the parts you tend to agree with both of them. Usually the authors make introductory chapters of their histories where they explain the criteria of selection, the methods used in analyzing the writers’ work, their intention regarding the use of the history, their intended scope and the final result, the reasons why they write in a certain style, etc.

When writing a history, its author should think of its target audience and usually this audience should be very large. Therefore the history should be written in a coherent, logically, simple style, with clear and concise explanations and with pertinent interpretations, the judgments should be based on proofs and the sources should be cited.
Recent literary histories have enjoyed a good reception from the readers and this might be also due to the writing style. These histories are written in the usual style of the contemporary time and they are easy to understand and follow.

Trying to answer his question, whether is literary history possible, David Perkins names the aims of literary histories: “to recall the literature of the past, including much that is now seldom read; to organize the past by selecting which authors and texts are to be discussed and by arranging them into interconnected groups and narrative sequences; to interpret literary works and account for their character and development by relating them to their historical contexts; to describe the styles and Weltanschauungen of texts, authors, ages, and so on; to express the contents of works and quote passages from them, since many readers will have no other experience of these works; to bring, through selection, interpretation, and evaluation, the literary past to bear on the present, with consequences for both the literature and the society of the future.” (Perkins, 1992, p.12) Some of the stated aims of the literary histories are possible but some of them might not be.

It is a utopian goal the possibility of writing a complete literary history of the contemporary literature. This is utopian because there is a huge number of literary works which cannot be read by a single person. What should be very clear for the historians is the fact that the history it is not or at least it shouldn’t be a complex and complete map of the national literature (Ulici, 1995).

Every literary history tries to explain the way the literature he describes has developed and evolved during time and also attempts to explain the past. Literary theory and literary history are inextricably connected to each other in terms of the fundamental problems raised by writing literary histories. Literary history is inevitably confronted with the problem of delimiting the analyzed object, the selection problem and the canon of literary texts, problems of interpretation of literary texts and other information, the problem of point or points of view and objectivity, the problem of periodization and establishing new era thresholds, problem of synthesizing literary productions, based on concepts such as genre classification, movement or literary traditions, issues relating to the organization and structuring of material, literature networking problem with cultural tradition and its contextualization.

Any literary history is a great project even when the end result is not the one expected and generally accepted. Both traditional literary histories of considerable length, comprehensive and monumental, and modernist type, smaller in size, and to some extent niche are the risks that literary historians have assumed and the courage to propose an overview of the literature, genders, ages and literary trends. Comparing old and new models of literary history we can see that traditional historians see history as a narrative of events while new historians are concerned with the analysis of structures.

Nowadays can be seen an increasingly reflected tendency to promote great projects only in theory which either fail to reach to the present or are practically fled to the level synthesis. The authors also seem to show a preference for using the term history as an umbrella to cover collections of critical essays or exegetical medallions dictated by the personal taste of the person who writes them. Romanian literary histories published after 1990 do not comply with dictionary definition of the word, but are selective literary history, with various sizes, with questionable presence and absence, more subjective or objective, illustrating the colorful panel of Romanian literature.

Our literary historiography has never had a theoretical stable base and this is reflected in the current state of the discipline. Broad concept of literary history tries a real synchronization with international literary history, although the existing theoretical deficit cannot be completely ignored. We are facing rather a crisis of a certain conception about literary history, leading to a paradigm shift, but not to the disappearance of genre.
REFERENCES
