

Literary History

ABSTRACT: Recent changes in the theoretical and practical approaches to literary history: new interest in the relationship among literature, culture, and history, new attention to the narrative quality of this particular genre of history, new interpretations of the traditional problems: distinction between document and monument, distinction between the general and the individual. Some of the old approaches to writing literary history, such as the nineteenth-century examples of *Geistesgeschichte* or *Stilgeschichte*, have gone out of fashion. Newer suggestions have come from the French historians gathered around the journal *Annales*, the German school of *Rezeptionskritik*, and the American discussions on the canon. Among the types of literary history that are widely practiced today are those focused on the evolution of literary institutions, the development of a language, the history of ideas and ideologies, and the reconstruction of the biographical and sociological conditions underlying the production of a literary work. Two types of approaches seem to stand out: those that center on the development of literary forms and those that trace the changes in literary themes over time. The real achievement would be to provide, at the same time, a history of literary forms and a history of literary themes.

KEYWORDS: literature, culture, history.

The last three decades have seen a sharp change in the cultural and philosophical attitudes of many scholars, across many disciplines. For some time at the beginning of this period, structuralist linguistics held sway, penetrating many other disciplines with its influence and generating distinctive approaches in sociology, psychology, anthropology, and even in literary criticism, where texts tended to be treated as linguistic structures separate from their historical contexts. Now we have entered a new phase, in which structuralist linguistics has been replaced by psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. In many disciplines, dialogical and hermeneutical approaches have dominated, while in literary studies, previously abandoned critical approaches and key words have returned in force: the study of themes, the analysis of narrative techniques in their histor-

ical development, the relationship between texts and contexts, the combination of specifically literary analysis and the broader study of cultures. The change has even reached the subdiscipline of literary history, whether in reopening the discussion about the relationship between literature and history or in giving encouragement to more analytic studies of the particular genre of narrative work constituted by literary histories, which had their greatest moment in the nineteenth century, an era of historiography and of novelistic narrative. Lending force to this change has been a widespread interest in narrativity, as attested by the interventions of a wide variety of thinkers and scholars, including the American biologist Stephen Jay Gould. According to Gould, "We are storytelling creatures, and should have been named *Homo narrator* (or perhaps *Homo mendax*) to acknowledge the misleading side of storytelling, rather than the often inappropriate *Homo sapiens*. The narrative mode comes naturally to us as a style for organizing thoughts and ideas."¹

But what is the current state of the theoretical discussion about literary history? Here too the signs of change are easy to discern. One question raised on several occasions in the twentieth century made a renewed appearance in the title of a book published in 1992: *Is Literary History Possible?*² The question itself is evidence of a certain skepticism, a skepticism that has found many different forms of expression and a wide variety of theoretical and philosophical justifications on the many occasions throughout the twentieth century when the underlying principles of literary history have been subjected to critical scrutiny. It is nonetheless true that the very act of asking the question about the possibility of literary history invites and encourages us to search for a positive answer.

Critical debate on this topic has revolved around two distinctions of a conceptual nature. The first is the distinction between *documents* and *monuments*, an ancient distinction that has recently regained currency in an ongoing debate among historians. Imported into the field of aesthetics (especially the phenomenological schools), it has provided the basis for a division between those works that present themselves as *documents*, that is, as testimonies for a certain historical reality, individual or social, and those works that present themselves as valuable in themselves. These latter examples may of course, with the necessary caution, be employed as historical documents, but they have their real *raison d'être* in themselves, in the richness and density of their significations, in the brilliance of their formal achievement, and in their own aesthetic qualities.

Hippolyte Taine, at the high-water mark of the exaltation of the document,

and inspired by a conception of literature that was drawn from the great romantic and Hegelian tradition, felt able to write that "if literary works provide documents, that's because they are monuments."³ René Wellek, years later, and in a decidedly antipositivist climate, was far more drastic: "Works of art, I would argue, are monuments not documents (though they can of course be used and studied as documents)."⁴ They are, according to Wellek, immediately present, whether Homer or Proust, the Parthenon or Picasso, Monteverdi or Janacek.⁵ He also wrote that:

A work of art is not simply a member of a series, a link in a chain. It may stand in relation to anything in the past. It is not only a structure that may be analyzed descriptively. It is a totality of values that do not adhere to the structure but constitute its very nature. The values can be grasped only in an act of contemplation. These values are created in a free act of the imagination irreducible to limiting conditions in sources, traditions, biographical and social circumstances.⁶

The other conceptual distinction is between *individual* and *general* (or *generic*, or *exemplary*). This is taken from classical logic and distinguishes between the interpretation and aesthetic judgment of individual works of literature, in which each text is often best treated in and of itself, and the formulation of generic and classificatory principles, an activity most familiarly associated with natural scientists but also required of historians, often guided by the principle that "a single swallow does not a summer make." This distinction, in reference to the problems of literary history, has been set out with great clarity by the German critic Peter Szondi precisely to establish a difference between science and literary history:

Literary history, like the study of all art, is separated from history by the same gulf that divides it from the natural sciences. Literary history also tends to see the particular only as a specimen, not as an individual entity; uniqueness falls outside its purview too. Friedrich Schlegel had some harsh words to say on this score. He complained that one of the "basic principles of the so-called historical criticism [is] the postulate of commonness: Everything truly great, good, and beautiful is improbable, for it is extraordinary, and, at the very least, suspect." Such criticism of literary history by no means implies acceptance of the thesis that the individual, the particular work, is unhistorical.

Quite to the contrary, historicity is in fact a part of its particularity, so that the only approach that does full justice to the work of art is the one that allows us to see history in the work of art, not the one that shows us the work of art in history. The latter point of view also has its justification: of that there should be no doubt. One of the tasks of literary study is to abstract from the individual work in order to arrive at an overview of a more or less unified period of historical development. Moreover, it cannot be denied that a deeper understanding of an individual passage or an individual work is sometimes facilitated by this general knowledge, however problematic it may be.

Yet we must not overlook the fact that every work of art possesses a certain monarchical strain, that—as Valéry put the matter—simply by its very existence it would like to destroy all other works of art.⁷

Around the key concepts that I have laid out here there raged, through the course of the twentieth century, a long and intense debate, which eventually resulted in the calling into question of the very legitimacy of literary history. In my book *Raccontare la letteratura*,⁸ I reconstructed this debate and told how, after years in which formalist and structuralist styles of criticism were greatly in vogue and the legitimacy of any attempt to historicize or contextualize literary texts was put in doubt, there was a sudden return of interest in those approaches to literature, and hypotheses and theories were advanced on the historical richness of literary texts and on the various ways in which they could be contextualized historically. I recall here as one of the most significant episodes in this resurgence—along with the book by David Perkins and the reader he edited on the subject⁹—a special edition of *Annales*,¹⁰ which added to an already healthy number of previous initiatives of a similar type (such as those mounted by two journals, the American *New Literary History* and the European *Poetics*, which published together in 1985, in a sort of organized dialogue, two issues on the theme of *Writing Histories of Literature*¹¹). That the main organ of the prestigious French school of social history judged it necessary to dedicate an entire issue to this question was naturally of some importance. But it is also worth remembering that *Annales* itself printed an essay by Roland Barthes on the same subject as long ago as 1960, the somewhat conflicted quality of which is apparent even in its title, “History or Literature?”¹² And it is also worth remembering that literary history was for some time of considerable interest to the greatest of all the practitioners of the French school of social history, Lucien Febvre, even to the

point of motivating him to call for a “genuinely historical literary history.”¹³ Furthermore, in his review of Daniel Mornet’s *Histoire de la littérature classique*, and in reaction to the failure of Gustave Lanson’s attempt to bring history and literary history closer together, Febvre had written that a genuinely historical literary history would represent the history of the literature of a particular era in its relations with the social life of that era. It would reconstruct the atmosphere of the era, investigate who was writing, and for what audience, as well as who was reading, and for what reason. It would have to examine what education writers received (either in colleges or elsewhere) and at the same time what education their readers received.¹⁴

In the introduction of the special issue of *Annales*, Christian Jouhaud surveys current critical attitudes to the problem of literary history, both on the part of historians and on the part of literary scholars, and speaks of a “vast movement to rehistoricize the literary,”¹⁵ endorsing a view that has become quite widespread. I myself have spoken of the “reversal of a trend” in recent theoretical attitudes,¹⁶ and David Perkins has spoken of a “revival of literary history.”¹⁷

The two trends in literary criticism and theory that attract most of the attention of the contributors to the *Annales* special issue are the German tradition of *Rezeptionskritik* or “reader-response criticism” led by Hans Robert Jauss, the principal representative of the School of Konstanz, and the American tradition of New Historicism spearheaded by Stephen Greenblatt. And the choice is unsurprising, since these are the two schools of thought that are for various reasons closest to the method and theoretical presuppositions of French social historiography.¹⁸ As emerges, indeed, from the essays collected in this issue of *Annales*, all dedicated—and this was deliberate—to aspects of French literature of the seventeenth century, the main themes of research are: the publishing and circulation of literary works, with an obvious reference point in the French tradition of the history of the book (Lucien Febvre, Henri-Jean Martin, François Furet, Jacques Ozouf¹⁹); the reception of literary work and profiles of the audience these works were addressed to; the self-fashioning of writers and of their own social role as projected in their works.

Of course the full variety of critical and theoretical proposals that have been advanced inside this vast movement to rehistoricize literature is much broader than this. And one of the central approaches in the field, the School of Konstanz’s attempt to do literary history as a history of literary reception, is now in crisis even in its German homeland (though it has undoubtedly stimulated dis-

cussions of some importance, such as that surrounding the “canon”). Undeniably, now that three or four decades have passed since the original formulation of the theory, and in view of the practical results that have been achieved and the various intellectual paths that some of the movement’s leaders have taken (H. R. Jauss toward aesthetics, Wolfgang Iser toward problems of the imaginary²⁰), a certain sentiment of discontent and frustration has grown among adherents of the school. After so many years of theorizing, not one actual literary history has been written along the lines set out by reception theory. As a consequence, the journal *Cahiers d’Histoire des Littératures Romanes*—*Romanistische Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte* has taken on a certain stature as an organ for alternative views. The journal was founded in the 1960s by Erich Köhler (shortly before his early death), a scholar of Romance literature and a colleague of Jauss who collaborated with him on the grand literary historical project *Grundriss der romanischen Literaturen des Mittelalters*.²¹ Köhler’s work on the troubadours, on Arthurian romances, and on many other aspects of medieval and modern literature²² was often highly original, and his proposals to recontextualize the literary text seem to me to be still of great interest today, appealing as they do to a conception of a historical sociology of literature and of the imaginary more generally, an approach that is strikingly modern and sophisticated. Besides this, he had a fair number of students and followers, both in Germany among the contributors to the *Zeitschrift* he founded and in Italy among Romance studies scholars such as Mario Mancini and Nicolò Pasero, who edits a journal whose debt to Köhler’s work is apparent in its name, *The Reflected Image*.

The problem of the literary canon, on the other hand, after having been of some interest to Jauss and his German colleagues, stimulating them to a series of discussions on the topic of the classics (both canonical works in general and, in particular, possible canonical works of the Middle Ages²³), has gone through a remarkable development in the United States, where it has provoked unusually sharp debate and has come to touch on the very delicate question of the role of literature in schools and in the nation’s common cultural foundations. The issue of the canon, in fact, has laid bare all of a sudden a very important aspect of any literary history—that is, the hierarchy of individual literary works (which determines how much space each individual work deserves in a literary history). At the same time, it has brought us face-to-face with the constant change, from one generation to the next, in our hierarchy of values and, with it, the possibility that each new generation will have to construct a literary history of its own. It is

no accident that *New Literary History*, in celebrating its twenty-fifth year, opened the first of four projected special issues, all dedicated to the rehistoricization of literature, with an essay devoted to the question of the canon, and bearing the ironic title "Canonade."²⁴

So much for the long series of theoretical proposals to which scholars have had recourse over the last few decades in their attempt to provide new and original answers to the question of whether it is possible to write literary history. I turn now to two different questions. First, *what exactly is literary history about*, or *what exactly is it writing the history of*? What choices are literary historians making, and what purposes do they have in mind, when they decide to tell us about a particular series of events in which, according to them, literary history consists? And second, *how does one do literary history*? What narrative techniques do literary historians have recourse to, or have at their disposal?

There are two types of literary history that stand no chance of being rehabilitated in our time. Though they both belonged to the genre's most glorious phase, writing in either mode no longer seems possible; no scholar today would feel comfortable in using them as a basis for his or her own work. The first type is literary history as the history of a national consciousness or of the identifying traits (whether cultural, linguistic, or even racial) of a particular national community. This is the model that inspired the great literary historians of the nineteenth century. Besides Francesco de Sanctis²⁵—who probably wrote the single greatest work of this type in all of Europe—we should recall here the already mentioned Taine, along with Georg Gottfried Gervinus, Leslie Stephen, George Brandes, Émile Legouis, Louis Cazamian,²⁶ and many others. This type of literary history rests on particular philosophical foundations. Particularly fundamental is the idea that the nation should be conceived not only as an assemblage of political institutions but also as a set of common cultural norms; the idea that each nation has a particular Hegelian spirit or *Geist*, a particular national identity that can be isolated and reconstructed in telling the story of its past, and which found expression in all the various ways the nation had of representing itself, and especially through the representative modes of literature. Underneath this particular tendency in literary history was an even broader conception, widespread in the nineteenth century, of a history of the spirit, *Geistesgeschichte*, which should be involved in recovering the successive stages of the development of civilization in the various European nation-states. (And this is leaving aside the contemporaneous debate on the difference between civilization and culture.²⁷)

This nationalistic tendency depended upon the enabling condition of the birth, at the beginning of the modern age, of a very strong sense not only of the individuality of the bourgeois subject but also of the individuality of those collective subjects that constitute modern nation-states. It is therefore hardly surprising that, beside the development of a striking new narrative form, the *Bildungsroman*, involved in recounting the episodes that went toward the construction of an individual subject (his "self-education" or, to use Hans Blumenberg's²⁸ terms, his "self-affirmation" and "self-determination"), there arose the genre of literary history, whose task was to recount the episodes that went toward the construction of a collective subject, the nation-state, and to mirror its self-education and self-fashionings through time.²⁹

Another type of literary history, also very popular in the past but now out of fashion and surrounded by doubts and criticisms whenever it makes an appearance, is literary history as the history of styles: not *Geistesgeschichte*, then, but *Stilgeschichte*. Examples include the periodic attempts to write histories of the neogothic, baroque, or neoclassical styles. In such cases the element in common that allows one to generalize, which provides a solid foundation for the reconstruction of a period of history, is some stylistic trait, some recognizable formal characteristic (such as openness and closure, horizontality and verticality, torsion, spirals, and so on), often chosen by analogy with the practice of art historians. This approach certainly has a notable past, and can be traced back to the example of Heinrich Wölfflin and other great art historians. It is motivated by the idea that a literary form has life and a development in time.³⁰ All the same, there are cogent reasons to doubt the theoretical coherence of this type of literary history, which hypothesizes a separate and autonomous life for literary forms,³¹ and after projects like that of Arnold Hauser, who constructed his own model that combined the history of styles with the history of societies,³² this type of literary history has rarely been attempted. When one comes across a book with a title like Jean Rousset's *La littérature de l'âge baroque en France*,³³ one should be on one's guard: Rousset's critique of the traditional idea that the Baroque was foreign to the spirit of the French people, and his attempt to show that there was such a thing as the French baroque, is based almost entirely on the demonstration of recurring *themes* (not stylistic *tropes*) in the literary texts of the *grand siècle*.

But there are other types of literary history that are more theoretically acceptable, more widespread, and more commonly practiced today, and today's liter-

ary histories tend to model themselves at times on one of them, and at times on another; sometimes they are even modeled on a combination of approaches. I will try to make a rapid survey of these types.

First and foremost, there is the history of literary institutions, which focuses on all the various sorts of institutions that have assisted in the production and distribution of literary texts in different historical periods. This type of literary history—not too far from that called for by Lucien Febvre—deals with the material supports for literary communication, from orality to literacy and from the manuscript to the book. It also deals with the contexts and circumstances of literary production, from the copyist's workshop to modern editing to electronic means for the conservation and distribution of texts. (It is, then, a field of inquiry closely related to the history of the book.) It further deals with places of encounter between writers and readers (the medieval university, the chancellery of a medieval city-state or *signoria*, courts, academies, literary cafés, editorial boards for encyclopedias, publishing houses, journals). Finally, it deals with the coming together of groups, schools, and movements, traditional and avant-garde, and with the formulation of programs and the writing of manifestos. This is a perfectly respectable way of constructing a literary history, and one that is readily connected to other aspects of social and cultural history. But its real subject matter is cultural institutions, which provided the backdrop and rendered possible the production, distribution, and consumption of literary works.

Related to the history of cultural institutions is another type of history, which is similarly concerned with the very conditions of literary production and which is particularly vital to it: the history of languages themselves. Carlo Dionisotti, for one, has argued (picking up some important insights of Antonio Gramsci³⁴) that it is impossible to do Italian history—not only literary history but cultural and social history as well—without grappling with the question of the Italian language. The Italian language, in this view, is a fundamental aspect not only of the construction of the Italian national identity but also of the construction of Italy's civic, social, and political institutions.³⁵ The same can be said of many other nations.

Another type of literary history takes the circulation of literary works as its subject. This is a broad field and has generated a distinctive brand of literary sociology, which has occupied itself with publishing markets, the distribution of books, the reactions of readers, in sum with literature as practice and its various fortunes through history. To this field belong outstanding studies such as the

history of the circulation of Boccaccio's *Decameron* by Vittore Branca, who was able to establish, by a careful study of the manuscripts, that it was Florentine merchants, more than the members of any other social class, who bought, read, and circulated the *Decameron* in the fourteenth century.³⁶ A quantitative sociology of reading has been elaborated by the German scholar Rolf Engelsing and the French scholar Robert Escarpit. The American Robert Darnton has complemented these elementary statistical studies with more intimate investigations, examining the internal effects on the mind and imagination of readers of the often exciting and emotional experience of reading a novel, from the eighteenth century to today.³⁷ And a good number of scholars have studied the market for books in the modern era, reconstructing the consequences that the internal differentiation of the reading public has had on the production of volumes of various sorts (e.g., highbrow and lowbrow literature) and on the formation of strongly defined and conventionalized genres built around the effects produced in readers (e.g., mystery, suspense, horror). (And from here a whole series of other histories can be written of the subgenres of serial literature, such as detective fiction, spy stories, and sci-fi.) The methodologies of German *Rezeptionskritik* and American reader-response criticism, although they are oriented toward the actual reading of texts, are not in their essence sociological approaches. And yet they do have in some sense a linguistic, semiotic, and hermeneutic quality, since they focus their attention not so much on the audience and its social composition as on the relationship between the text and the audience and on those features of the text that allow them to evoke certain reactions in readers (whence the concepts of the "implicit reader" and the "horizon of expectation"). Here the sociological methodology and language of Pierre Bourdieu have had great influence, both in France and outside of it. Bourdieu proposed a sociology of cultural processes and a concept of "cultural capital," and distinguished between various fields of cultural activity, substituting for the concept of "cultural hegemony" that of "symbolic violence."³⁸ Several scholars—Pascale Casanova providing perhaps the most authoritative voice among them—have applied the ideas of Bourdieu to literary studies, with fascinating results.³⁹

The problem with these various schools of literary sociology is that they have concentrated on individual aspects of literary communication (e.g., the canon, genre, imitation, irony, allegory, the market, center and periphery). Though many of these different dimensions are of some importance, in focusing on

them, these approaches have all so far failed to construct actual literal histories of any completeness.

There is another type of history, and that is the history of ideas or of ideologies. This has often been approximated, especially in France and Italy, and particularly by Gramscians, to the history of intellectuals and their role in society. The history of ideas, it must be admitted, no doubt has a role to play in any more general social or cultural history. Its main interest is in movements within society, in the hegemonic or contested ideas within them, in the rise and fall of new ideas and projects, and in the role intellectuals and writers play in different societies in the formation and diffusion of these ideas. The problem of what role to attribute to intellectuals has arisen in various periods of history in many nation-states. Was their role granted to them or seized by them? At various points their position has been seen to be organic, critical, or challenging (to use Gramsci's terms). It is a key aspect of Italian history, and may be similarly central in all those countries in which national unification came late and by unusual means, since in such places, in the absence of well-defined interests and in the presence of excessively weak political structures, a particularly central role was given to intellectuals in propping up those in power, intervening on behalf of the people, or simply in radical contestation.⁴⁰ And yet the identification of intellectuals and literary figures, though it is not unjustified in the history of many nations, has ended too often in eliding the uniqueness of literature and in reducing literary history to the history of ideologies. Literary history has become the history of intellectuals and their role, of their explicit and implicit connections with the world of ideas, of movements, of the great trends.

Yet another sort of literary history of considerable interest is that which focuses on writers and their lives. This is a type of history that has its own particular problems, problems of legitimacy and of methodology. For example, is it really possible to reconstruct and interpret the course of a life, assembling its details into an orderly and meaningful narrative? What are the interpretive tools to which one can legitimately have recourse in doing so? What narrative choices should one make among the many that have been tried in this particular literary genre? And does a writer's life have its own particular characteristics that make it different from the lives of other people? Moreover, this sort of history raises delicate questions about the relationship between literature and biography, between social history and the history of individuals. The relation-

ship between a writer's life and work is, as is well recognized, very complex and problematic, and the tendency to interpret, or even psychoanalyze, a writer on the basis of hidden themes or recurring metaphors in his work was quite widespread among twentieth-century biographers. On the other hand, nobody is inclined to deny absolutely either the inherent interest or the theoretical legitimacy of the biography as history and narrative. Indeed, it is a curious fact that not a few of the leading lights of the Russian formalist movement (Šklovskij, Eichenbaum, Tynianov), after falling victim to political repression, turned to writing literary biographies, thus making a prudent retreat from the world of expressive text to the past world of single authors' lives. A further problem that should not go unnoticed is that the organic development of a writer's life cannot always be schematized and inserted into the broader historical development of a society. An individual life may trace an arc that departs significantly from the arc traced by social structures, with their internal dynamics of organization, transformation, and stabilization. There are writers who found themselves in a reasonably harmonious relationship with their time and others whose lives had a developmental rhythm that contrasted greatly with the surrounding rate of social development, either because their lives anticipated society's future course too soon or because they remained attached to old ways and old values. There are writers whose lives have straddled some great social transformation, and who lived half in one historical period and half in another. Here again arises the problem, to which I made reference at the beginning of this essay, of the relationship between the individual and the general. The material and existential circumstances of a writer's life stand in a relationship to his work that is complex and problematic, yet at the same time concrete and particular; but the relationship that such circumstances have with the historical context of the writer's lived experience is instead abstract and generalized. To emphasize the particular circumstances of individual lives and works can confer a certain thickness and authenticity to a literary history, but it risks shattering any more general design, thus reducing history to a series of portraits or busts of individual writers.

The types of literary history that I have discussed so far tend to consider the literary work as a document, not a monument, interest themselves more in contexts than in texts themselves, and take their points of departure from individual elements of the historical context: institutions, language, ideas, intellectuals, and so on.

But what of types of literary history that concentrate more directly on texts

themselves and tend to treat them as monuments instead of documents? As representative examples of this category, we will consider now two other approaches, both of which have been tried many times and ended in failure; because of this, their viability remains open to question. I am talking about the history of literary forms and that of literary themes.

The idea of doing literary history as a history of literary forms was the great dream of the Russian formalists, and later of the Prague structuralists. It is an idea that has been taken up several times, perhaps never so bravely as in the 1960s and '70s, when a school of thought that had emerged in the first decades of the century was relaunched in a quite different intellectual atmosphere. At the roots of this project (initiated by Tynianov and taken up later in Prague by Mukařovský⁴¹) is the idea that literary forms have their own existence and agency. Conjoined with this is the notion that there is an evolution of forms through time (in language, genres, meters, structures) along their own particular line of development (the "series"), which runs parallel to—if sometimes slightly out of sync with—other series following their own evolving paths (e.g., ways of living, *mentalités*, cultural representations, imaginaries, ideologies).

I believe there is a subtle point here calling for deeper exploration. Literary forms can certainly be said to have their own histories. One could imagine, for example, a history of the octave, or a history of *terza rima* from Dante through Machiavelli to the modern era, or a history of *poesia barbara* (modern accented poetry that imitates classical quantitative meters), of prose poetry, of free verse. Each of these literary forms appeared at a certain moment in the development of literature and not before or after; each had an originator and went through transformations and innovations. And yet, after all the great work done on one aspect of the history of literary forms or another, the realization has been that it is not possible to construct a proper literary history on this basis, since a literary history that takes forms as its point of departure will never escape those forms into the broader landscape of literary production. And the precise reason for this impasse is that literary forms have in themselves no meaning: the individual formal characteristics of a work (rhetorical, metrical, or linguistic) only have a role in the structure of a work if they are placed in some relationship with elements of that work's thematic content.

Less frequent have been attempts to write literary histories focusing on literary themes. There is the recent and ambitious essay by Francesco Orlando, who dedicates a whole book to certain images that recur in Western literature

through all the many centuries of its evolution, images of what he calls “obsolescent objects”: the landscape with ruins, the deconsecrated church, the desiccated flower, the necromantic relic, the buried treasure, the antiquarian’s paraphernalia, the fraying habit, the dilapidated house, the haunted castle, the city swallowed up by the desert, the tacky souvenir.⁴² We are dealing with recurring or widely employed images or thematic elements, very often organized in “chaotic enumeration” as studied by Leo Spitzer, which are for the first time in Orlando’s book put systematically at the center of our attention, defined and scrutinized in all their specificity and difference. Moreover, the images are placed in connection with a larger and more meaningful system, with the broader cultural or literary imaginary, and even with a generalizing history of the relationship between humankind and things, culture and nature.

But even with such an enthralling instance of this type of work, the question nevertheless arises of whether it is really possible to write satisfying literary history by beginning from a single theme or even an entire network of themes. The question remains even in cases where a scholar departs from a single element or network and connects it to a more general and comprehensive thematic structure that constituted—so he may claim—the imaginary of an entire historical era. A work like that of Ernst Robert Curtius, on a quite broad series of themes that recur in classical and medieval literature,⁴³ though having some of the features I am talking about, is in the final analysis rather partial. The themes (or *topoi*) that it takes as its purview are appealed to in order to support or collaborate a historical thesis that is quite subjective and clearly ideologically motivated: that of the continuity of the classical Christian tradition and medieval literature.⁴⁴ Thematic reconstruction can too often degenerate into a kind of historical taking of sides, an almost obsessive reference back to past traditions, all within a generalizing and universalizing drift that more often than not ends up occluding the particular characteristics of individual periods or works. Examples of successful thematic research do exist, made possible by a certain compactness of the themes in question in particular historical periods, or by the particular density of certain thematic strands,⁴⁵ which thus collected around themselves whole sections of the imaginary in a consistent way through various periods of history.⁴⁶ And yet even when we move on to works dedicated to single genres or styles (Bakhtin’s epics and novels,⁴⁷ for example, or Moretti’s *Bildungsroman*,⁴⁸ Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, Frye’s romances and comedies, or Leo Marx’s pastoral⁴⁹), this approach, which at different times privileges an entire

tradition in its thematic consistency, or its incarnation in particular works of art, tends to partiality. And departing from partial reconstructions, it is difficult to attain the ideal of a generalized and comprehensive literary history. Whenever one finishes reading a work of this nature, the same question always arises: are these literary genres and styles best defined and described in terms of the thematic structures that characterize them or in terms of their formal and rhetorical features?

The real achievement would be to provide at the same time a history of literary themes and literary forms, with the two aspects linked closely together. But I am not sure whether even this, once it was attained, would be enough. Indeed, I have the impression that to the question "What is literary history a history of?" it is possible to give, at present, only a provisional and unsatisfactory answer. One thing, in any case, is certain: whoever takes it upon himself to write a literary history should be aware that he has in front of him a choice, a necessity to take an explicit stand in terms of his point of view and his aims. This is what David Perkins means when he writes that a literary history must be written from a specific point of view.⁵⁰ The same idea, expressed in a bolder and more imaginative way, appears in a dense passage by Walter Benjamin: "Just as flowers turn their heads towards the sun, so, in the power of a secret heliotropism, does all that has been tend to turn itself towards the sun which is rising in the sky of history."⁵¹ According to this idea the past, even the past of literary imagination, presents itself to us as we watch the sky of history in a certain perspective, and we who contemplate and try to understand it have inevitably our own viewing-place, our own perspective.

Bearing this principle in mind, we can add that the most useful and convincing literary histories are those that combine more than one of the approaches I have surveyed, thus avoiding the limitations of any single approach. Avoiding a simple identification of literary history as a whole with one type of literary history is particularly important for those who focus on context and risk thereby making a history of literary works into a history of documents. If we are really serious about constructing an image of the flower that turns to us from the past and lifts itself into the sky of history, we have to embrace multiple perspectives, triangulating contrasting approaches and insisting on maintaining and exploring the relationship between texts and contexts.

We come now to the second question I wanted to ask: how does one do literary history? Well, how are literary histories done? If one looks at the formal

structures of literary history, one can observe that two approaches are preeminent, two approaches that alternate and contrast with each other within the single peculiar genre of literary history, a peculiarly narrative genre. These approaches are narrating and describing. There is a continual oscillation between these two modes of writing in the works that we call literary histories. Often an author halts his or her narrative to begin a description of individual works of art; he contemplates and analyzes them, describing them in all their specificity, letting us understand how they are constructed. Then, knowing well, like any good storyteller, that audiences do not like excessively long descriptions, he or she returns to the dominant mode, to the rhetorical and structural principle at the foundation of all literary histories, that is, to narrative.

The circumstances of the production of texts, the events of authors' lives, the main features of their works, their reception by the public, the place their formal and thematic choices earn them within a tradition and a system of genres, the place they occupy in some aesthetically defined canon . . . In literary histories, all these elements are integrated and organized into a narrative that conforms to the conventions of logical and linear development, makes use of effects such as complication as denouement, and pays attention to the devices of suspense and surprise.⁵²

Of course, there is more than one way of organizing a narrative. There is the classic model of the *Bildungsroman*. There is the foregrounding and placing in relief of a few exemplary characters of literary history in a manner reminiscent of the historical novel. There is the exciting journey between texts encountered almost by chance in a narrative that is like nothing so much as an adventure novel. There is the dense cataloging of dates, lives, genres, and texts in a literary history that approaches the nineteenth-century novel in its overfed vastness. There is the imitation of the experimental novel, aiming to provide a deliberately fragmented account of the literature of the past. And finally there is the ambitious attempt at creating a literary history that is consonant with the modern or postmodern sensibility, with multiple plotlines and perspectives, intersections and superimpositions, and a few pregnant moments in which the *longue durée* breaks into the present, revealing the existential timelessness of the human condition. Perhaps the greatest example of this kind of narrative is Erich Auerbach's masterpiece, *Mimesis*,⁵³ which closes—and this is no accident—with discussions of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

NOTES

1. Stephen Jay Gould, "So Near and yet So Far," *New York Review of Books* XLI, 17 (October 20, 1994): 26.
2. D. Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
3. H. Taine, *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*, 2nd ed. (Paris: 1866), I: xlvii: "si elles fournissent des documents, c'est qu'elle sont des monuments."
4. The interpretation of the two concepts of documents and monuments among historians has varied substantially. See the very clear survey in the entry "Documento/Monumento" contributed by Jacques LeGoff to *Enciclopedia* (Turin: Einaudi, 1978), V: 38–48. LeGoff recalls the antipositivist criticisms leveled by the *Annales* school against the very concept of documents, and appeals to the reflections of literary historians such as Paul Zumthor and philosophers such as Michel Foucault to support his argument that modern historiography, or "total history," is leading to the overcoming of any distinction between documents and monuments, to the broadening of the concept of document (to include literary, iconographic, and archaeological types of evidence among others), and to the wholesale attribution of the status of monument to virtually any significant document of the past.
5. R. Wellek, review of C. Guillen, *Literature as System: Essays towards a Theory of Literary History*, in *Yale Review* LXI (Winter 1972), 258.
6. R. Wellek, "The Fall of Literary History," in *The Attack on Literature and Other Essays* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 75.
7. P. Szondi, "On Textual Understanding" [1962], in *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, ed. H. Mendelsohn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 13–14.
8. R. Ceserani, *Raccontare la letteratura* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1990).
9. D. Perkins, ed. *Theoretical Issues in Literary History*, *Harvard English Studies* XVI (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).
10. "Littérature et histoire," ed. C. Jouhaud, special issue, *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* XLIX (March–April 1994).
11. "On Writing Histories of Literature," ed. R. Cohen, special issue, *New Literary History* XVI (Spring 1985); "On Writing Histories of Literature," ed. J. Schmidt, special issue, *Poetics* XIV (Spring 1985).
12. R. Barthes, "Histoire ou littérature?" in *Annales* (1960), later collected in *Sur Racine* (1964) and in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. E. Marti (Paris: Seuil, 1993), I: 1087–1103.
13. L. Febvre, "Littérature et vie sociale: De Lanson à Daniel Mornet un renoncement?" *Combat pour l'histoire* (Paris: A. Colin, 1953), 264: "une histoire historienne de la littérature."
14. Ibid.

15. Jouhaud, "Présentation," in *Annales* (1994), 271.
16. Ceserani, *Raccontare la letteratura*, 33–63.
17. Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?*, 9.
18. For an introduction to reception theory, see H. R. Jauss, *Literatur als Provokation* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970); H. Weinrich, *Literatur für Leser* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971); J. P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); H. R. Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981); R. C. Holub, ed., *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1984); U. Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); R. Warning, ed., *Rezeptionsästhetik* (Munich: Fink, 1994). For an introduction to the New Historicism, see S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); H. A. Veeser, ed., *The New Historicism* (New York: Routledge, 1989); R. Wilson and R. Dutton, eds., *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama* (London: Longman, 1992); Jurgen Pieters, ed., *Critical Self-Fashioning: S. Greenblatt and the New Historicism* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1999); C. Colebrook, *New Literary Histories: New Historicism and Contemporary Criticism* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997); C. Callagher, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); M. Payne, ed., *The Greenblatt Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).
19. L. Febvre and H.-J. Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450–1800* [1971] (London: Verso, 2010); H.-J. Martin, *The History and Power of Writing* [1988] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); F. Furet and J. Ozouf, *Reading and Writing: Literacy in France from Calvin to Jules Ferry* [1977] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
20. H. R. Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* [1982] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); W. Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* [1991] (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
21. Published by Winter (Heidelberg) beginning in 1962.
22. E. Köhler, *Ideal und Wirklichkeit in der höfischen Epik: Studien zur Form der frühen Artus- und Graldichtung* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1970); *Der literarische Zufall* (Munich: Fink), 1973; *Literatursoziologische Perspektiven* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1982).
23. H. R. Jauss, *Alterität und Modernität der mittelalterlichen Literatur* (Munich: Fink, 1977).
24. J. McGann, "Canonade," *New Literary History* XXV (Summer 1994): 487–504; see J. Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
25. F. de Sanctis, *History of Italian Literature* [1870–71] (New York: Basic Books, 1959).
26. G. G. Gervinus, *Geschichte der poetischen Nationalliteratur der Deutschen* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1835–42); L. Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* [1876] (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1962); G. Brandes, *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature*

[1872–90] (London: Heinemann, 1906); É. Legouis and L. Cazamian, *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* [1924] (Paris: Hachette, 1933).

27. The distinction between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* is very neat in German: by *Kultur* is understood the original, hereditary patrimony of a people, the totality of its traditions, customs, and characteristics; by *Zivilisation* is meant a process of cultural, intellectual, and spiritual refinement. See R. Eckhart, *Kultur, Zivilisation und Gesellschaft: Die Geschichtstheorie Alfred Webers* (Basel: Kyklos, 1970).

28. H. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* [1972] (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).

29. Of interest in this regard (even in the title) is H. K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990).

30. For Wölfflin's central ideas, see *Principles of Art History* [1915] (New York: Dover, 1950); and *Gedanken zur Kunstgeschichte* (Basel: Schwabe, 1940); for those of Focillon, see *The Life of Forms in Art* [1934] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942).

31. It is a curious fact that Wellek, for all his doubts about the legitimacy of literary history, dedicated some of his most important studies to stylistic periodization: for example, his essays on the concepts of the baroque, classicism, romanticism, realism, naturalism, and symbolism collected in *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963) and *Discriminations: Further Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

32. A. Hauser, *The Social History of Art* [1951] (New York: Routledge, 1999); *Mannerism: The Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art* [1965] (New York: Knopf, 1965). Along the same lines, with particular attention to literature: G. R. Hocke, *Die Welt als Labyrinth: Manierismus in der europäischen Kunst und Literatur* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1987). Italian scholars working in the same tradition include Mario Praz, Walter Binni, and Riccardo Scrivano.

33. J. Rousset, *La littérature de l'âge baroque en France* (Paris: Corti, 1954).

34. A. Gramsci: "Every time the question of the language surfaces [in Italian history], in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore: the formation and enlargement of the governing class, the need to establish a more intimate and secure relationship between the governing groups and the national-popular mass, in other words to reorganize the cultural hegemony": from *An Antonio Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916–1935*, ed. D. Forgacs (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 357 (from the Italian original: *Quaderni dal carcere*, ed. V. Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), 2346). See C. Dionisotti, *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967).

35. In Italy, there has been a huge surge in linguistic history, often involving sophisticated methodologies and always diverging from simple linguistic analysis to larger historical structures and events. Recently several new histories of the Italian language, arranged by theme or by region of Italy, have been published, and they often employ novel

interpretive approaches and present us with syntheses of some originality and interest. See, in particular, F. Bruni, ed., *L'italiano nelle regioni: Lingua nazionale e identità regionali* (Turin: Utet, 1992–97); *Storia della lingua italiana*, with volumes addressed to each successive century and written by a team of scholars under the direction of F. Bruni (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1989–2006); and A. Asor Rosa, ed., *Storia della lingua italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993–94).

36. V. Branca, *Tradizione delle opere di G. Boccaccio* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1958); *Boccaccio medievale* (Florence: Sansoni, 1970).

37. I discuss these issues at some length in my *Raccontare la letteratura*, pp. 102–6. Fuller references: R. Engelsing, *Der Bürger als Leser: Lesergeschichte in Deutschland, 1500–1800* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1974); R. Escarpit et al., *Atlas de la lecture à Bordeaux* (Bordeaux: Faculté de Lettres, 1963); R. Escarpit, ed., *La lecture populaire en France du Moyen Âge à nos jours* (Bordeaux: Faculté de Lettres, 1965); R. Darnton, “Readers Respond to Rousseau: The Fabrication of Romantic Sensitivity,” *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 115–63.

38. P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), and *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* [1992] (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

39. P. Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* [1999] (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004). See, for applications, A. Boschetti, ed., *L'Espace culturel transnational* (Paris: Nouveau Monde Editions, 2010), and for critical objections, C. Prendergast, ed., *Debating World Literature* (London: Verso, 2004).

40. To this strand of inquiry belong the studies in Florentine humanism of Hans Baron (*In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism: Essays on the Transition from Medieval to Modern Thought*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988) and of Eugenio Garin (*Italian Humanism: Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance*, New York: Harper & Row, 1965), many studies on Machiavelli, Bruno, Campanella, those of Franco Venturi on the Italian illuminati, and so on. An exemplary collection of such material can be found in *Intelletuali e potere*, edited by C. Vivanti, vol. 4 of *Storia d'Italia: Annali* (Turin: Einaudi, 1981).

41. J. Tynianov, *Archaisty i novatory* (Leningrad, 1929); Italian translation: *Avanguardia e tradizione* (Bari: Dedalo, 1968); J. Tynianov, *Poetika / Istorija literatuŕy / Kino* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977); J. Mukařovský, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979).

42. F. Orlando, *Obsolete Objects in the Literary Imagination: Ruins, Relics, Rarities, Rubbish, Uninhabited Places, and Hidden Treasures* [1993] (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

43. L. Spitzer, *La enumeración caótica de la poesía moderna* (Buenos Aires: Instituto de Filología, 1945).

44. E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* [1948] (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953).

45. Exemplary in this connection are J. Rousset's studies of seventeenth-century France, among which is the already cited *La littérature de l'âge baroque en France*.
46. This is the case, for example, for a theme like shipwreck, present in literature from Homer to the postmodernists: see L. Sannia Nowé and M. Virdis, eds., *Naufragi: Atti del Convegno di Studi Cagliari 8-9-10 aprile 1992* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1993); M. di Maio, ed., *Naufragi: Storia di un'avventurosa metafora* (Milan: Guerini e Associati, 1994). On thematic criticism in general, see W. Sollors, ed., *The Return of Thematic Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
47. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).
48. F. Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* [1986] (London: Verso, 1987).
49. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* [1929] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), and *Rabelais and His World* [1941, 1965] (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959); L. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).
50. Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?*, 13.
51. W. Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses_on_History.html.
52. All these aspects receive a thorough analysis in the chapter "La storia letteraria come genere narrativo," in my *Raccontare la letteratura*, 17-32 (cited earlier).
53. E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* [1946] (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

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REMO CESERANI was a professor of comparative literature at the University of Bologna until November 2006. Since then, he has taught courses as a visiting professor at ETH Zurich, the University of São Paulo, and Stanford. Among his recent books are *Convergenze* (2010), on the relationship between literature and the other disciplines (2010); *L'occhio della Medusa*, on photography and literature (2011); *Letteratura nell'età globale* (2012; with Giuliana Benvenuti); and *Gli uomini, i libri e gli altri animali* (2013; with Danilo Mainardi). He was a coeditor of the *Dizionario dei temi letterari* (2007) and, with Umberto Eco, of an anthology of texts on fog, *Nebbia* (2010). In 2012, he received the Feltrinelli Prize for European Literature from the Accademia dei Lincei, Rome. His website is www.ceserani.com, and he may be reached at puckee123@gmail.com.