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WRITING LITERARY HISTORY: AN OVERVIEW OF DEBATES

The paper has a very practical intention of providing a certain context for the topic of the conference "Literary history: paradox or paradigm". It deals with literary history as an academic genre and focuses not on theoretical problems, but rather on some practical issues of literary historiography. The aim is to make a short overview of the main aspects that have been considered as problematic in various debates during the last several years, to highlight the most debated and criticized issues, and suggest some adjustments or alternatives. This outline devoted to the core of the debates on practical problems of writing literary history is framed by making use of the analysis of the material of several international conferences, seminars, "round table discussions" and other academic meetings organised in the last decade, as well as some recent research projects and articles dealing with the theoretical and practical issues of literary history.

It is usually said that literary history is "a child of romanticism", born in the early nineteenth century out of the ideas of Friedrich Schlegel, August Wilhelm and others (though concepts of literary history can be found in the works of critics from Aristotle times). Since then, as David Perkins states in his book *Is Literary History Possible?*, major modes of literary history have been Hegelian, naturalist, positivist, *geistesgeschichtlich*, Marxist, formalist, sociological and postmodernist?; in variants, the theories of Darwin, Spengler, Wölfflin, Weber, Adorno, Foucault, Bloom, Geertz, and many others have been pressed into service. For approximately the first seventy-five years of the nineteenth century, literary history enjoyed popularity and unquestioned prestige; at that time it was characterized by three fundamental assumptions: that literary works are formed by their historical context, that change in literature takes place developmentally, and that this change is the unfolding of an idea, principle, or suprapersonal entity.¹

¹David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, p. 1.

In the twentieth century, however, literary historians confronted new fundamental questions about the definition and scope of literature (and national literary histories, the dominant model of literary scholarship in the nineteenth century, have come under attack). The question whether literary history can be considered to be a genre has been the subject of numerous debates for the last thirty years. In 1980's, that traditional model was brought up for discussion and a decade later, the general doubts regarding the necessity of writing literary histories were raised. At present (at the beginning of the 21st century), argumentation seems to be more moderate and notably much more constructive. The popular titles (to mention just a few: "Rethinking Literary History"², "How to Write Literary History Today?"³, "The Future of Literary History: Three Challenges of the Twentieth Century"⁴, "Theoretical Issues in Literary History"⁵) mark persistent efforts to establish new concepts, construct up-to-date theoretical basis, intensify dialogue with other subjects, and to form alternative ways of writing literary history. The greatest problems, which have to be addressed, are those of sources, methods, and modelling. Irrespective of the sceptics, who speak about the crisis and anachronistic character of literary history, some optimists claim that in the last years this genre has been enjoying a remarkable revival⁶: large studies have been published and a number of multivolume projects have been undertaken (for instance, work in progress "History of the Literary Cultures in Eastern and Central Europe", the Cambridge and Columbia histories of American literature" etc.). Since the early 1990's, Lithuanian criticism has also had several extensive debates related to literary history, for example, a heated polemic which ensued after the publication of Vytautas Kubilius' book *Twentieth Century Literature* in 1995 and several problematic papers as well as a special discussion on the possibilities of literary history at the conference in 1996⁷.

² *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

³ The title of the international Conference in Liubliana, 2002.

⁴ Галин Тиханов, "Будущее истории литературы: Три вызова XXI века", *Новое литературное обозрение*, 2003, N.59, <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2003/59/tih.html>

⁵ *Theoretical Issues in Literary History*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

⁶ Marshal Brown, *Rethinking the Scale of Literary History, Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p.116.

⁷ *Lituanistikos tyrinėjimo būdai: naujos temos ir metodai. II diskusijų stalas, Lituanistika XXI amžiaus išvakarėse*, Vilnius: Pasaulio lituanistų bendrija, 1997, p. 131-143.

The starting point of many discussions is the introductory (but also essential) stage of writing literary histories, i.e., the choice of the main parameters to construct a particular model of literary history. First, they include the concepts of *literary* and *literature* (over time, *literary* means different things, for instance, for eighteenth-century literary historians it would have included any piece of writing - from poetry to philosophy; the German romantics would have accepted only "imaginative" writing. Today again a more inclusive definition, which covers non-fictional, factual, or popular discourse can be found⁸. This enlargement and variety of the subject should be reflected in literary histories, too.). The second basic parameter is what understanding of history should be accepted as the basis: linear, integral, continuous, or the one formed from synchronized parallels. The third key issue is *theoretical* and *methodological approach*, because shifting theoretical trends challenge the practice of writing literary histories. The fourth, when a model is constructed audience should be taken into account. Scholars reflect on the contradiction that emerges between the expectations of the broader addressee (including pupils and students) and the so-called literary "experts" (researchers, critics, translators, publishers etc.). Paradoxically, the expectations of the broader audience are precisely the issues that are questioned from theoretical and critical standpoints⁹. Finally, *literary texts* themselves (features of their content, stylistics, ideology etc.) may adjust the structure of a specific literary history.

The central issue of the debates is that of "the most appropriate" model of historical writing in literary studies. Traditional model, whereby "traditional" usually means history of one nation or one language, split by authors and periods in chronological order, is subjected to harshest criticism. Western academy, which has an extremely rich literary historiography, is especially prone to reforms. The most often criticised aspects are the following: a) a teleological narrative of continual and organic evolution; b) a mechanistic cause-and-effect mode of explanation; c) taking one nation as the basis (this approach in particular

⁸ Linda Hutcheon, Mario Valdés, *Theorizing Literary History in Dialogue, Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. ix.

⁹ Darko Dolinar, *Literarna zgodovina in njeni bralci / Literary History and Its Readership, Kako pisati literarno zgodovino danes? Mednarodni simpozij. Povzetki referatov / How to Write Literary History Today? International Conference. Summaries*. Ljubljana: Scientific Research Centre of the SAZU, 2002, <http://www.zrc-sazu.si/sdpk/LZGsimpozij.htm>

fails to meet contemporary conditions of multinational societies or cultures with vast diaspora communities); d) periodisation (the traditional set of periods and trends, like “the Old literature”, “the nineteenth century literature”, or realism, modernism, postmodernism, or classicism, Enlightenment, etc.) has been questioned, especially their traditional borders. Some critics conceive such terms as generalizations which are losing meanings, while some others suggest to abandon classifying thinking at all¹⁰ or to treat the features of periods currently considered to be separate as simultaneously coexisting paradigms¹¹); e) merely cataloguing empirical data and lack of their interpretation; f) a limited “canonical” subject. As Peter Burke points out, traditional concept of history mostly concerns with consequent series of events and authors’ “dynasties”, analyzes “great men” ignoring others and stands on “objective” concept of history¹². Comparing “old” and “new” models of history, he adds that traditional historians think of history as essentially a narrative of events, while the new history is more concerned with the analysis of structures.

Mentioned aspects are highly relevant to the conceptualisation of Lithuanian literary history. The criticism of the positivistic teleological narrative is well founded: history is not necessarily a consistently continuous process (there are also ruptures or returns), neither does it submit to evolutionary logic. In practice, writers do not walk in a crowd in the manner they are organized in literary histories under different chapters and categories, therefore researchers of literary process must carefully use the traditional classification schemes. Although at the same time, in the case of Lithuanian culture some of the aspects, underlined in the contemporary foreign debates, raise additional problems, called forth by the local features of social and cultural history. For instance, the national model of literary history should not without deeper analysis be rejected as an “old-fashioned” because the idea of a close relationship between literature and formation of the nation is still embedded in our culture. Besides, the fact that the national model

¹⁰ Robert Rehder, “Periodization and the Theory of Literary History”, http://www.unifr.ch/das/Robert_Rehder/Essays/Periodization_1.html

¹¹ Brian Richardson, “Remapping The Present: The Master Narrative Of Modern Literary History And The Lost Forms Of Twentieth-Century Fiction”, *Twentieth Century Literature*, Fall97, Vol. 43, Issue 3, <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5000589781>

¹² Peter Burke, “Overture: the New History, its Past and its Future”, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR/burkenh.html>

is still strong might be justified by the fact that Lithuanian literary historiography until recently did not have such comprehensive literary histories of any longer period as did, in comparison, the studies of the largest Western cultures. Yet, even accepting the general national type of the literary history, the question, however, of what kind of constructing sub-patterns should be employed, remains.

One of the alternatives to the traditional model suggested by literary historians insists on the replacement of descriptive chronology by various specific analyses, based on different, quite narrow, literary aspects. This approach splits literary History (capitalized mostly by the cultural ideology of romanticism) into many smaller competitive versions of literary history, which are written by making various presumptions and using different attitudes. In Lithuania, an example of such literary history focused on certain aspects can be Viktorija Daujotytė's book *Parašyta moterų* (*Written by women*, 2001). Similar decision is to write histories of separate genres, topics and the like instead of making efforts to create a frame for overall history.

Two other popular alternatives discussed in the contemporary debates are to develop *formalistic* literary histories or, on the contrary, put literary processes into broader *contexts*, as is suggested by the theoretical and practical project of New historicism, comparative literature, or intertextuality studies. For instance, comparative intertextual approach permits constructing regional literary history (for example, cultural history of Eastern Europe, or that of post-Soviet countries, or of the Baltic Sea region and so on). Such perspective would reveal the coexistence of different literary conventions within one nation or region, and would draw historians' attention to relations between different cultures¹³.

Though both formalization and contextualization are the most conceptual alternatives to the traditional historiography, the first one is much less popular. It focuses not on literary events and authors, but on formalistic elements, such as rhetorical codes, narrative techniques, poetic forms, structures etc., and – it must be emphasized – shows their historical development, or in other words, gives its historicity to formalization. Thus, it differs from the conventional structuralistic approach that deals with the immanent level of literary forms and interprets it

¹³ Jan Walsh Hokenson, "Comparative Literature and the Culture of the Context", *Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWeb Journal* 2.4 (2000), <http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb00-4/hokenson00.html>

mostly from the aesthetical point of view. According to a supporter of the historical formalistic approach, Nihad Agić, “metaphorically speaking, the theory of literary forms of poetics must encounter history in order to become literary history”¹⁴. This approach runs counter the concept of literature as cultural document of the consciousness of the given society or nation’s identity, depurates literary features from social context, the literary taste and aesthetic beliefs of authors.

The most fashionable tendency can be titled as “towards cultural studies”, that is directing literary history towards the general history of culture and society, (“returning of literary history to history”¹⁵) and analysing various contexts of literary culture. It is believed that neither literary history, nor an individual author or a text can be understood apart from the effort to interpret them within their historical, political, economic, social, and intellectual contexts¹⁶. The history of literature is defined not only as an experimental laboratory of literary ideas and forms, but rather as the multiple histories of its production and reception. It includes every element of what has come to be called “the literary field”. According to this approach, printing technologies, for instance, are as much a part of literary history today as is the development of genres or thematic motifs. Literary studies give attention to the manners and customs of the society, try to catch “the spirit of the age”. As Linda Hutcheon and Mario Valdés state, social status of a writer, living conditions and cultural reputation, literary environment with its salons and periodicals, the system of publishing, distribution and reading, etc. have always been the subject of researchers’ interest, yet somehow have not become a part of traditional literary histories¹⁷. Additionally, renewed literary histories of a specific area or a period tend to consider not only newly created texts, but also the functioning of translations and republications¹⁸, because, for example, looked at from the perspective of 1910’s, 1950’s or 2000’s literature of the ninetieth

¹⁴ Nihad Agić, “Towards a History of Literary Forms”, *Forum Bosnae*, 2001, nr. 11, <http://www.ifbosna.org.ba/engleski/publikacije/bosnae/11-01/15.htm>

¹⁵ Mario J. Valdés, *Rethinking the History of Literary History, Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 86.

¹⁶ Cary Nelson, “Facts Have No Meaning: Writing Literary History In The Shadow Of Poststructuralism”, *College Literature*, Jun93, Vol. 20, Issue 2, p. 1-12.

¹⁷ Linda Hutcheon, Mario Valdés, *Theorizing Literary History in Dialogue, Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. x.

¹⁸ М.Л. Гаспаров, “Как писать историю литературы”, *Новое литературное обозрение*, 2003, N.59, <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2003/59/gasp.html>

century contains different names and values. Furthermore, according to the new theoretical attitudes, links with other arts (visual, theatrical, musical, cinematographic) must also be analysed by literary historians.

“Conventional” literary histories have been considered as “objective” collections of facts and aesthetic valuation, but contemporary theories of literary history have questioned the very concept of fact. When traditional histories collect and describe facts without deeper reflection, poststructuralism doubts not the existence of the fact but its meaning. It maintains that there are no “innocent” facts; they are icons for cultural investment, an index for what we consider important and worth remembering, a guide to how we organize and categorize the past, and an uninterpreted fact would have no meaning at all. It is suggested that facts have no inherent meaning, therefore cannot be interpreted separately from the whole system of meanings in a given culture¹⁹. The intention to emphasize various contexts has made an impact even on the key notions: *literary history* tends to be replaced by *literary culture*. The theorist of literary history, Mario Valdés, is convinced that the kind of literary history that is separated from the general history and simply collects books and authors in chronological order, is no longer literary history but only an inventory for literary studies. Rather, writing about the development of a specific literature, literary historians should search for structures of meanings or symbolic goods.²⁰

Thus, summing up it may be said that nowadays the concept of literature as a social institute dominates over the notion of literature as an aesthetic phenomenon. A wide understanding of culture is central to the new history, and in this attitude, literary text has no self-sufficient or special status. A completely opposing point of view is to construct literary histories only of literary “tops”, that is, from individual authors and works, which are considered to be the most aesthetically valuable. As Lithuanian literary researcher Albertas Zalatorius once passionately asserted: “it is so difficult, though, to get rid of traditional models! [...] If one writes a literary history, then it certainly must include overviews and galleries of individual portraits, where both

¹⁹ Cary Nelson, “Facts Have No Meaning: Writing Literary History In The Shadow Of Poststructuralism”, *College Literature*, Jun93, Vol. 20, Issue 2, p. 1-12.

²⁰ Mario J. Valdés, *Rethinking the History of Literary History, Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 64.

the most talented writers and second-rated ones or even scribblers are set together of equal value. Why could not one concern only the highest tops of literature, since only they will survive in the history”²¹ (This thought leads to the more profound problem of whether literature is only the “best” writings, or it also includes popular works that are considered to be qualitatively inferior? Should literary histories focus only on the moments of innovation and high achievement, or should they distribute their space as time was spread out in the past, when “whole centuries” were devoted to “imitation and mere development”?)²² Yet, who and on what ground is authorized to identify “the tops”?). However, at present this approach is overshadowed by the attention to everyday culture and structures that are more general. A study of an American researcher, who managed to analyse discursive patterns of 1910–1945 poetry without any individual author’s name could serve as an unmistakable example of this tendency. In the context of Lithuanian academic criticism, radical contextualisation of literary texts or such anonymity of culture would seem controversial, since aesthetical criteria have a very strong tradition in our literary studies.

Participants of the debates on writing literary history often refer to a book *A New History of French Literature*, edited by Denis Holler²³, as an example of bringing into being of a new refreshing theoretical approach to literary history, mostly due to an original and multi-perspective analysis of the cultural process. (On the other hand, some reviewers refer to this literary history as a negative example due to the lack of one integral aspect and narrative.) Written by 164 American and European specialists, this book introduces French literary tradition from 842 A.D. until our days. It is not a customary inventory of authors and titles but a collection of wide-angled views of historical and cultural phenomena. It comprises writers, public figures, criminals, social revolutions etc., even public monuments and TV shows. Essays are introduced by date and arranged in chronological order, but are concerned with totally different issues: articles devoted to a genre exist alongside with essays analysing only one book, or institutions are presented side by side with literary movements. In the given literary

²¹ „Darbštumas ir skubėjimo kaina. Keturius nuomonės apie Vytauto Kubiliaus XX amžiaus literatūra“, in: *Metai*, 1996, nr. 1, p. 83.

²² David Perkins, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

²³ *A New History of French Literature*, London: Harward University Press, 1989.

history, such titles as “The Origin of French Tragedy” with “From Exoticism to Homosexuality” or “Literature in the Classroom” with “Prostitution in the Novel” coexist. Essays are confined to no specific format, alongside with the literary works they analyse political, scientific, philosophical, and religious texts. The variety does not include, however, any article limited to the “life and works” of a single author.

At the conclusion of this overview, it can be said that the contemporary genre of literary history is more than ever diverse. It includes works on the literature of nations, periods, traditions, schools, regions, social classes, political movements, ethnic groups, women, and gays, and these studies may foreground the genesis or production of texts, their effect on society or on subsequent literature, their reception, or all these moments synthetically²⁴. The main issue of some recent debates on writing this genre is the establishment of concepts and the construction of possible models for literary process. Positivistic teleological narrative and the traditional design under the scheme “separate political/social events – author’s life – literary works” are treated as no longer appropriate for writing literary histories and several new approaches are gradually replacing such biographism. (In Lithuania, however, this model still prevails; there are many volumes dealing with the collection and description of literary facts).

On the other hand, the search for some universal standards and efforts to create a universal model appropriate for every sort of literature is treated as an illusion. On the contrary, in order to write an effective literary history, one must abandon all pretension of an *a priori* rational model or structure²⁵. A successful construction (preferably “open-ended” one) can emerge only after combining a chosen theoretical approach with precise account of multiple branches and coexisting cultural codes of the given period. Thus, writing a concrete literary history, it is essential to be conscious of new theories and methodologies; but it is even more essential to consider the peculiarity of the local literary and social situation, both the logic of the development and the main needs of literary research.

The dominant tendency is to overcome the traditional opposition between events and structures and replace it by a concern for their *relationship*. It is believed that new literary histories should be written

²⁴ David Perkins, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

²⁵ Mario J. Valdés, *op. cit.*, 2002, p. 69.

by combining the so-called fundamental material (or a descriptive outline) with problematic aspects. One potential mode suggested as an effective alternative can be a combination of diachronic and synchronic dimensions, still sustaining some chronological frame. The same historiographic study might cover problematic nodes of different levels of literary culture, for example, literary conventions of a given period, institutions, some époque-making years and events etc.

However, whatever the directions of constructing new models might be, it would be unwise and too great luxury to deconstruct the already established and articulated modes of writing literary histories. Radical experiments, which search for novelty but ignore any systemization, become literary histories, which are read only subject to the dominant cultural fashion of the given period.

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