

Literary history as a challenge to literary theory

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In our time literary history has increasingly fallen into disrepute, and not at all without reason. The history of this worthy discipline in the last one hundred and fifty years unmistakably describes the path of a steady decline. Its greatest achievements all belong to the nineteenth century. To write the history of a national literature counted, in the times of Gervinus and Scherer, De Sanctis and Lanson, as the crowning life's work of the philologist. The patriarchs of the discipline saw their highest goal therein, to represent in the history of literary works [*Dichtwerke*] the idea of national individuality on its way to itself. This high point is already a distant memory. The received form of literary history scarcely scratches out a living for itself in the intellectual life of our time. It has maintained itself in requirements for examinations by the state system of examinations that are themselves ready for dismantling. As a compulsory subject in the high school curriculum, it has almost disappeared in Germany. Beyond that, literary histories are still to be found only, if at all, on the bookshelves of the educated bourgeoisie who for the most part opens them, lacking a more appropriate literary dictionary, to answer literary quiz questions.

In university course catalogs literary history is clearly disappearing. It has long been no secret that the philologists of my generation even rather pride themselves in having replaced the traditional presentation of their national literature by periods and as a whole with lectures on the history of a problem or with other systematic approaches. Scholarly production offers a corresponding picture: collective projects in the form of handbooks, encyclopedias, and (as the latest offshoot of the so-called "publisher's synthesis") series of collected interpretations have driven out literary histories as unserious and presumptuous. Significantly, such pseudohistorical collections seldom derive from the initiative of scholars, rather most often from the whim of some restless publisher. Serious scholarship on the other hand precipitates into monographs in scholarly journals and presupposes the stricter standard of the literary critical methods of stylistics, rhetoric, textual philology, semantics, poetics, morphology, historical philology, and the history of motifs and genres. Philological scholarly journals today are admittedly in good part still filled with articles that content themselves with a literary historical approach. But their authors find themselves facing a twofold critique. Their formulations of the question are, from the perspective of neighboring disciplines, qualified publicly or privately as pseudo-

problems, and their results put aside as mere antiquarian knowledge. The critique of literary theory scarcely sees the problem any more clearly. It finds fault with classical literary history in that the latter pretends to be only one form of history writing, but in truth operates outside the historical dimension and thereby lacks the foundation of aesthetic judgment demanded by its object—literature as one of the arts.

This critique should first be made clear. Literary history of the most convenient forms tries to escape from the dilemma of a mere annal-like lining-up of the facts by arranging its material according to general tendencies, genres, and what-have-you, in order then to treat within these rubrics the individual works in chronological series. In the form of an excursus, the author's biography and the evaluation of their oeuvre pop up in some accidental spot here, in the manner of an occasional aside. Or this literary history arranges its material unilinearly, according to the chronology of great authors, and evaluates them in accordance with the schema of "life and works;" the lesser authors are here overlooked (they are settled in the interstices), and the development of genres must thereby also unavoidably be dismembered. The second form is more appropriate to the canon of authors of the classics; the first is found more often in the modern literatures that have to struggle with the difficulty—growing up to and in the present—of making a selection from a scarcely surveyable list of authors and works.

But a description of literature that follows an already sanctioned canon and simply sets the life and work of the writers one after another in a chronological series is, as Gervinus already remarked, "no history; it is scarcely the skeleton of a history." By the same token, no historian would consider historical a presentation of literature by genres that, registering changes from work to work, followed the unique laws of the forms of development of the lyric, drama, and novel and merely framed the unclarified character of the literary development with a general observation (for the most part borrowed from historical studies) concerning the *Zeitgeist* and the political tendencies of the age. On the other hand it is not only rare but almost forbidden that a literary historian should hold judgments of quality concerning the works of past ages. Rather, he prefers to appeal to the ideal of objectivity of historiography, which only has to describe "how it really was." His aesthetic abstinence has good grounds. For the quality and rank of a literary work result neither from the biographical or historical conditions of its origin [*Entstehung*], nor from its place in the sequence of the development of a genre alone, but rather from the criteria of influence, reception, and posthumous fame, criteria that are more difficult to grasp. And if a literary historian, bound by the ideal of objectivity, limits himself to the presentation of a closed past, leaving the judgment of the literature of his own, still-unfinished age to the responsible critics and limiting himself to the secure canon of "masterpieces," he remains in his historical distance most often one to two generations behind the latest development in literature. At best he partakes of the contemporary engagement with literary phenomena of the present as a passive reader, and thereby becomes in the formation of his judgment a parasite of a

criticism that he silently despises as “unscholarly.” What then should a historical study of literature still be today, a study that—taking up a classical definition of the interest in history, that of Friedrich Schiller—can promise so little instruction to the “thoughtful observer,” no imitative model at all to the “active man of the world,” no important information to the “philosopher,” and everything else but a “source of the noblest pleasure” to the reader?

Thesis 1. A renewal of literary history demands the removal of the prejudices of historical objectivism and the grounding of the traditional aesthetics of production and representation in an aesthetics of reception and influence. The historicity of literature rests not on an organization of “literary facts” that is established *post festum*, but rather on the preceding experience of the literary work by its readers.

R.G. Collingwood’s postulate, posed in his critique of the prevailing ideology of objectivity in history—“History is nothing but the re-enactment of past thought in the historian’s mind”—is even more valid for literary history. For the positivistic view of history as the “objective” description of a series of events in an isolated past neglects the artistic character as well as the specific historicity of literature. A literary work is not an object that stands by itself and that offers the same view to each reader in each period. It is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless essence. It is much more like an orchestration that strikes ever new resonances among its readers and that frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to a contemporary existence: “words that must, at the same time that they speak to him, create an interlocutor capable of understanding them.” This dialogical character of the literary work also establishes why philological understanding can exist only in a perpetual confrontation with the text, and cannot be allowed to be reduced to a knowledge of facts. Philological understanding always remains related to interpretation that must set as its goal, along with learning about the object, the reflection on and description of the completion of this knowledge as a moment of new understanding.

History of literature is a process of aesthetic reception and production that takes place in the realization of literary texts on the part of the receptive reader, the reflective critic, and the author in his continuing productivity. The endlessly growing sum of literary “facts” that winds up in the conventional literary histories is merely left over from this process; it is only the collected and classified past and therefore not history at all, but pseudo-history. Anyone who considers a series of such literary facts as a piece of the history of literature confuses the eventful character of a work of art with that of historical matter-of-factness. The *Perceval* of Chrétien de Troyes, as a literary event, is not “historical” in the same sense as, for example, the Third Crusade, which was occurring at about the same time. It is not a “fact” that could be explained as caused by a series of situational preconditions and motives, by the intent of a historical action as it can be reconstructed, and by the necessary and secondary consequences of this deed. The historical context in which a literary work appears is not a factual, independent series of events that exists apart from an observer. *Perceval* becomes a literary event only for its reader, who reads this

last work of Chrétien with a memory of his earlier works and who recognizes its individuality in comparison with these and other works that he already knows, so that he gains a new criterion for evaluating future works. In contrast to a political event, a literary event has no unavoidable consequences subsisting on their own that no succeeding generation can ever escape. A literary event can continue to have an effect only if those who come after it still or once again respond to it—if there are readers who again appropriate the past work or authors who want to imitate, outdo, or refute it. The coherence of literature as an event is primarily mediated in the horizon of expectations of the literary experience of contemporary and later readers, critics, and authors. Whether it is possible to comprehend and represent the history of literature in its unique historicity depends on whether this horizon of expectations can be objectified.