

# Historiography of Literary History

John Neubauer

University of Amsterdam

J.Neubauer@uva.nl

*Literary histories constitute a species of modern discourse that emerged in Early Romanticism at the end of the eighteenth century as an indispensable element of professionalizing literary studies. Although the rise of organic theories of literature and culture is often associated with Romanticism and Samuel Coleridge in particular, it has not been sufficiently understood how, specifically, romantic historiography has profited from the clash of biological theories in the second half of the eighteenth century. In response to concentrated and prolonged twentieth-century attacks on the organicist assumptions of literary histories, some recent publications have attempted to abandon the traditional principles.*

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History of literature nestled itself between history writing and historical fiction. Though it could not compete with their popularity and scholarly stature, it powerfully shaped the identity of nineteenth-century national groups by canonizing national writers and their works and by authenticating ancient legends and myths as reflections of a past national glory. Literary histories, widely used in schools and at universities, became an important factor in shaping national self-images.

The overarching tropes and narrative forms of literary history were eclectically adopted in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries from two different fields: 1) the epic or dramatic narratives that were actually a subject matter of literary history, and 2) the history of living organisms that the new science of biology developed in the second half of the eighteenth century. My paper is primarily a study of the biological metaphor, which has been relatively neglected compared to the former category, which is usually treated today under the heading “grand narrative” (grand récit).

## I

If, as Hayden White and others have argued, all historical writing employs tropes and narrative forms, then literary histories, especially in

Eastern Europe, have borrowed these primarily from the history of living organisms. The organicist ideology that underlies such literary and other histories has rightly but often indiscriminately been attacked. Organicism, as I call it, has many faces. More concretely, biological metaphors had a double role in literary histories, a positive and emancipatory one that allowed for genuine historical change, and a negative one that counteracted this by setting up organic form and organic growth as quasi-natural laws of literature, the arts, culture, and human history. Precisely this reading of culture as nature has been the target of contemporary criticism.

Before turning to literary history proper, I briefly note that “organicism” has been applied to many aspects of the arts. Literary (as well as musicological and art historical) studies have imposed biological cycles of birth, growth, decline, and death on the life of artists, on literary periods and movements, and many other temporal processes in the arts. Furthermore, organicism has, next to this diachronic dimension, also a structural meaning: it implies that the parts of a totality are “organically” interrelated, that all of them manifest, though in various forms, the core or essence of that totality. We are all familiar with the “organic cohesion” that literary historians have attributed until recently to each successful work of art, to the life and the oeuvre of an artist, and to such period concepts of literary history as Baroque, Romanticism, or Realism. Holistic approaches have been severely criticized by deconstructionist thinkers, as well as by Michel Foucault, who wanted to replace the organicism of *Geistesgeschichte* with his own notion of *epistèmes*. I have argued elsewhere that Foucault’s philosophy of history, and other radical attacks on organicism, could not rid itself from vestiges of an organicist ideology.

Biology’s more technical contribution to the emerging genre of literary history emerged from the switch from a mechanistic *preformation* model to an *epigenetic* one that attributed to each organism an inner life force of its own. In the theory of *preformation* (*Einschachtelung* or *emboitment*) all descendants were considered to be present as miniatures in the oldest ancestor or originator. At the end of the eighteenth century, preformation was replaced by the theory of *epigenesis*, which claimed that the developmental force was not predetermined but rather innate to each organic being. Although important physiologists like Lazzaro Spallanzani and Albrecht von Haller opposed the new theory on account of its materialist potential, physiologists and philosophers of the next generation continued to elaborate on the notion that organic beings possessed some innate force. Charles Bonnet, for instance, distinguished between two versions, labeling them with terms that have recently been recuperated in the humanities: seeds were either everywhere (*dissémination*) or they descended from Adam

and Eve (*mise-en-abîme*). Caspar Friedrich Wolff, the key figure in epigenetic theory, claimed that all beings possessed a *vis essentialis*; Friedrich Blumenbach rebaptized this force as *Bildungstrieb*, whereas Herder, building on Blumenbach, claimed that more than one innate force shaped the life of all living beings (see Müller-Sievers).

Theories of innate life forces obviously had an immense appeal to the romantics and the idealist philosophers. Some critics have recently argued that epigenesis forms the basis, or point of departure, for theories of self-generation, and even that it had a vital role in the emergence of Idealism and Romanticism. For now, I want to show with a concrete example how the new epigenetic model functioned in one of the first literary histories, August Wilhelm Schlegel's 1811 lectures on European drama. In a famous passage, August Wilhelm turns against Johann Joachim Winckelmann's doctrine that the modern arts must imitate the classical ones. In August Wilhelm's view Shakespeare and Calderón are a match to the ancients, even if they do not follow theatrical rules derived from them. Instead of mechanically imposing ancient forms on their material (which would be the equivalent of biological preformation) these post-classical and post-medieval writers adopted forms that developed from their own material and age. It is this "inner-determined" form that Schlegel regards as organic. Seen this way, organic form manifests autonomy and self-organization. Translating the epigenetic biological principle into a principle of theater history means that each age must develop, "from inside" so to speak, its proper theatrical forms:

the spirit of poetry is eternal but it passes through different bodies, as it were, and each time it becomes incarnate in humanity it has to bring about a new body, must build for itself a differently constructed body from the nourishments of a changed epoch. Forms change with the direction of poetic sensibility; to label new poetic forms as old genres and to judge them in terms of them is to make an utterly inadmissible use of the reputation that classical antiquity enjoys. Nobody should be judged by a court that has no jurisdiction over him. We gladly admit that most dramatic works of the English and Spanish poets are neither tragedies nor comedies in the ancient sense; they are romantic theater. (*Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* 2 112)<sup>1</sup>

The passage does not refer to epigenesis explicitly, but its biological simile hinges on the epigenetic view that each organism develops from an inner principle, and not from a pre-existent one inherited from the ancestors, as the preformationists held until the last decades of the eighteenth century. As Schlegel argues, it is unfair to judge English and Spanish theater in terms of criteria derived from ancient tragedies and comedies; the spirit of poetry impregnates each epoch differently, so that new art forms come about. The imagery may seem romantic and fanciful, but it relies

on biological discourse: literature perpetuates itself by means of epigeneses (repeated new generations) rather than mechanical preformation. By implication, both genres and national literary cultures can develop freely, unfettered by the canonized forms of tradition. The biological metaphor is not restrictive but liberating, allowing a free movement throughout the centuries and across national boundaries.

## II

This liberal and anti-dogmatic approach to literary history very quickly changed in the early years of the nineteenth century, as Friedrich Schlegel's 1812 Vienna lectures, *Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur*, clearly show. The decisive historical event shaping Friedrich Schlegel's lecture was the war against Napoleon, which reached its turning point in 1812. By that time, as Hans Eichner writes, "the follower of Fichte became a Catholic, the partisan of the French Revolution became its determined opponent, and the European Cosmopolitan became a German patriot and an admirer of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation." Ironically, just these lectures, which supported so firmly the state and the status quo, were almost suppressed. The university was of the opinion that such extra-mural lectures were unnecessary, the police rejected the application, and only the Emperor's direct intervention secured for Friedrich the needed permit – on the condition that a police observant be present at the lectures. In the end, the lectures that were held between February 27 and April 30, 1812 became a great success.

Schlegel's newly won Catholic, conservative, and nationalist position is reflected in his dedication to Metternich, which explains that he wants to bridge the deep gulf between the literary and intellectual world on the one hand and "practical reality" on the other. Schlegel's goal was to show, "how decisively a nation's spiritual culture (*Geistesbildung*) may often intervene, even in great global events and the fate of nations." For Schlegel, literature was not merely entertainment or a copy of the "real world" but also a political force.

Schlegel's introduction and his first lecture specified the task further. He wanted to convince the political leaders that literature was the essence [*Inbegriff*] of a nation's intellectual life, though he acknowledged that scholars and writers had traditionally been isolated from the higher classes as well as from the rest of the nation. Divisions within the artistic-intellectual culture itself, and its separation from the people were the greatest obstacles in developing a general national culture, but, Schlegel claimed, the eight-

eenth century generated in Germany and the other European nations a revival of the “national spirit.” In practice this meant for him that literature ought to serve the state, and, more specifically, to glorify the national past:

From a historical perspective that compares people according to their value it is most important for a nation’s further development, even its whole spiritual existence that a folk should retain those great national memories of its distant origins that usually vanish. Poetry’s prime business is to preserve and to glorify these. Such national memories, which constitute the most splendid part of the heritage a folk can have, represent an advantage that nothing else can replace. And if a folk finds itself “ennobled,” elevated in its self-esteem due to its great past and its memories of primeval time – if it has, in a word, poetry--then it will also be raised to a higher level in our eyes and judgment. (*Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* 6 15 f)

### III

In other contexts I have shown how Friedrich Schlegel’s conservative and nationalist conception of literary history became dominant in the nineteenth century. For my present purpose I can merely indicate, with a couple of examples, that organicist nationalist literary histories lived on in the twentieth century. I take the great Romanian polyhistor and politician Nicolae Iorga, his younger colleague Nae Ionescu, and the Croatian literary historian Branko Vodnik as my examples.

Iorga maintained in his *History of Romanian Literature in the Eighteenth Century* (1901) and thereafter that Romanian literature grew *organically* and *spontaneously* from the soil of local traditions and folklore, but also from Dacian, Roman, and Byzantine sources. In *Byzantium after Byzantium* (1935) he tried to show that Dacian culture and Roman customs were preserved by the Romanian peasantry. Indeed, he thought that the peasants he found in Hunedoara county were still Dacians:

here are the true Dacians, the new Dacians of 2,000 years past, who carry with them as a sign of their triumph the language of a Rome long consigned to dust. The peasants here are indeed Dacians, with their tough and reserved features, their tight-lipped and ancient custom of paying everyone their due with a sense of justice. (*Válogatott írások* 167-69)

If Iorga’s organicist nationalism is inclusionary and expansionist (because it appropriates a whole non-Romanian tradition), that of his younger countryman, Nae Ionescu, was exclusionary. Ionescu, like many populists in various countries, deplored the cosmopolitan spirit of cities, especially of Bucharest. For him, Romania’s capital city distinguished itself by “lack

of national roots” (note the biological metaphor!) and a “loss of contact” with everything native, including the Eastern Orthodox Church and the folk tradition in the countryside (Ionescu 146–48). He even recommended closing the Romanian borders and decoupling Romania from world politics and foreign borrowings (287).

It would seem from these examples that organicism had always glorified the peasants and the traditional values of the countryside. While this is, indeed, mostly the case, my final example shows that organicism could serve several different ideologies. At the center of Branko Vodnik’s Croatian literary history was not the countryside but the city, more concretely the Dalmatian city state. Vodnik’s organicism was as exclusionary as that of Ionescu’s, but it excluded just what was, for the latter, the heart of the organism. As Nenad Ivić writes, Vodnik wanted to show in *Povijest hrvatske književnosti* (1913) “the organic development of our old literature” (4). He meant by “organic development” the exclusion of whatever seemed to him heterogeneous, not organically fitting, for instance Glagolitic literature, because it was not specifically Croat. Proper Croatian literary history began, according to Vodnik, with the flourishing of Humanism and Renaissance in free Dalmatian city-states. The Croatian national space was organically cohesive and permanently coextensive with that of his own time: Vodnik suppressed, according to Ivić, potential disruptions, differences between cities and their environments, between Dalmatia, Croatia proper, and Slavonia, between Dubrovnik and other Dalmatian cities, between languages and dialects, or types of literacy and literature. The hero of Vodnik’s historical narrative was an unchanging subject without internal fissures or contradictions: a Croatian nation, reduced to its primeval form of a city-state.<sup>2</sup>

#### IV

Vodnik published his Croatian literary history in 1913, on the eve of World War I. The war inaugurated a long period, in which organicist literary histories—and literary histories in general—were regarded with great suspicion. Let us remember the rise of Russian Formalism during and after the war, the dominance of New Criticism during the interbellum and beyond in the West, the coming of Structuralism and Poststructuralism in the decades starting with the 1950s. Of this well-known story, which need not be rehearsed here, I single out as exemplary Roland Barthes’s “Histoire ou littérature?,” written in the 1950 and included then in his book on Racine (1963), and Michel Foucault’s *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972), the polemical companion piece to his own historical construction in *The Order of Things* (1966) and the most concerted attack on organicist historiographic assumptions.<sup>3</sup>

Poststructuralist, Foucauldian, and deconstructivist attacks on the presuppositions of the organicist traditions have recently led to new and experimental literary histories, which transgress narrative, disciplinary, and national/cultural borders and thereby destroy, explicitly or implicitly, the principles of organic unity. Of this growing body of new histories I can mention here only a few. Thus, narrative conventions are radically discarded in the French literary histories that Denis Hollier put together with a team of scholars. The overarching narrative of the “grand récit” is replaced here by a large number of essays, each attached to a particular date that marks a literary or political event. Disciplinary borders are most evidently transgressed in studies inspired by New Historicism, while national and cultural borders are crossed in regional studies, such as the *History of the Literary Cultures in East-Central Europe*, edited by Marcel Cornis-Pope and myself, and the new attempts to write transcultural and global literary histories, published by under the editorship of Gunilla Lindberg-Wada. How they succeed in overcoming the organicist tradition, how they absorb elements from it, and how they succeed in creating radically new ways of writing literary history, time will tell. Their thorough discussion will have to wait, in any case, for another occasion.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> /Hieraus leuchtet ein, daß/ der unvergängliche, aber gleichsam durch verschiedene Körper wandernde Geist der Poesie, so oft er sich im Menschengeschlechte neu gebiert, aus den Nahrungsstoffen eines veränderten Zeitalters sich auch einen anders gestalteten Leib zubilden muß. Mit der Richtung des dichterischen Sinnes wechseln die Formen, und wenn man die neuen Dichtarten mit den alten Gattungsnamen belegt, und sie nach deren Begriffe beurtheilt, so ist dieß eine ganz unbefugte Anwendung von dem Ansehen des classischen Alterthums. Niemand soll vor einer Gerichtsbarkeit belangt werden, unter die er nicht gehört. Wir können gern zugeben, die meisten dramatischen Werke der englischen und spanischen Dichter seyen im Sinne der Alten weder Tragödien noch Komödien: es sind eben romantische Schauspiele.

<sup>2</sup> Of the many more, and different examples I mention here only the postwar Ukrainian debates about the question what would constitute a great national literature, a literature “of and for the people.” Iurii Sherekh, for instance, postulated a “national” or “national-organic” style that expressed the uniquely Ukrainian experience and spirit (see Grabowicz).

<sup>3</sup> On Foucault and literary history, see Simon During’s *Foucault and Literature*, and my own two articles, “Foucault’s Voices” and “Can Foucault save Literary History?” In the latter I list his contributions under three rubrics: 1) his close readings of specific literary texts, 2) the place and function of literary texts in Foucault’s historical narratives, and 3)

Foucault’s (meta)critique of historiography. It is ironical, of course, that Foucault’s own epistemic historical structure in *The Order of Things* should bear some resemblance to organicist histories, even if it should postulate breaks instead of continuous “growth” between the epistemes.

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