# The Future of Literary History: Three Challenges in the 21st Century

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*How literary history evolves will largely depend on the modifications of the wider framework in which its evolution takes place. Understanding these modifications seems to be an essential first step. In this paper I concentrate on three factors (the nation state; the media; the evolution of society under the pressures of changing demographics), and seek to elucidate and weigh their importance for literary history.*

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The future of literary history appears precarious but perhaps not as gloomy as some may wish to think. Even though the appeals to abandon literary history have, ironically, a century-long history,[1] the sense of crisis and methodological predicament did not begin to be acutely felt until the 1980s when attempts at reforming the craft of literary historiography culminated – provisionally – in the by now well-known *A New History of French Literature* (Hollier). Many saw this project as an assault on traditional literary history, while having to admit that its editor, Denis Hollier, had recognized the difficulties besetting the discipline upon the arrival of post-modernism and post-structuralism and had responded in an innovative, if inconclusive, fashion.[2] In the next decade, the question of the very possibility of literary history was posed with some urgency (cf. e.g. Perkins), but early 21st century responses to it seem to have been marked by moderation and constructive skepticism rather than radical denial. A recent international conference organized by Marko Juvan and Darko Dolinar at the Institute for Slovene literature and literary studies in Ljubljana, where a number of very interesting papers were presented (see Dolinar and Juvan), offers a good example of this attitude.

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## The Nation State

The origins of literary history as an institutionalized discourse are closely interwoven with the fortunes of nationalism and the nation state after the French Revolution. Although the first chairs of literature were conceived to teach and profess the letters without particular national restrictions, the post-Napoleonic period marked by the rise of nationalism in Europe saw a gradual transition towards a nationally focused research and teaching agenda. Literature itself was seen as an instrument of preserving and glorifying "those great national memories that are in the dim past of a national history" (Schlegel VI, 15) – and so was literary history. As Cornis-Pope and Neubauer have recently argued (12), the study of literature and its history was first institutionalized in societies that were concerned to cultivate a clear national identity and gain state sovereignty (Germany, Italy, Central and Eastern Europe), although it would be true to say that in England, where statehood and national identity had been established very early on, literary historiography took off ahead of any such attempts in the countries mentioned above (Thomas Warton published between 1774 and 1781 three volumes of his unfinished literary history, only making it to the time of the Reformation). In Germany, the first literary history appeared long before the unification of the country under Bismarck in 1871: between 1835 and 1842, Georg Gervinus (1805–1871) published a five-volume *Geschichte der poetischen Nationalliteratur der Deutschen* (the title was later changed to *Geschichte der deutschen Dichtung*); this was half a century earlier than the first great history of French literature published by Gustave Lanson in 1895. In Italy, De Sanctis published a two-volume history of Italian literature in 1870–71, after the unification of the country, but still twenty years ahead of Lanson. Even though Gervinus did not agree with the politics by which Bismarck sought to achieve the unification of Germany, his history was a powerful instrument in constructing an awareness of German cultural homogeneity.

The future of this pattern that has enjoyed unquestioned domination for over a century is now highly uncertain. There are several reasons for this. To start with, Eurocentrism itself has been losing ground ever since World War I, and with it also the European model of nation-centred literary history. This process was exacerbated by the arrival of globalisation

on the crest of revolutionary discoveries in information technology in the 1950s, which coincided with the swift dismantling of the colonial system. The ensuing growth of diasporic cultures, on the one hand, and the process of European integration in the context of a globalised economy, on the other, gave rise to occurrences best described as the gradual 'hollowing-out' of the nation state in the West. A single unified canon, on which to base literary history, became increasingly untenable. Within the nationstate, there emerged a string of parallel canons called upon to rectify the social injustices of the past. For those who want to see it, there is a very strong signal heralding the move away from national literary histories: the talk now, especially in Germany, where Goethe had dreamt of a 'world literature', is of how to construct a representative European canon, which would stimulate the writing of regional histories or, ideally, of a history of European literature at large. Nor is this the pastime of the rich alone. Concerned with security and determined to see an ever-expanding market, the European Union and various NGOs compete in the Balkans in sponsoring textbooks that are meant to teach the younger generations that they all have a shared political and cultural history. Thus we face two developments, none of which is hospitable to the traditional literary history commissioned by the nation state: either regional, and even 'pan-European' histories, serving a different set of political goals from those so familiar from the recent past, or trans-national, often also trans-continental, narratives heeding not the monolithic projects of the nation state but rather, as Stephen Greenblatt demands, the postcolonial processes of "exile, emigration, wandering, contamination, and unexpected consequences, along with the fierce compulsions of greed, longing, and restlessness, for /…/ it is these disruptive forces that principally shape the history and diffusion of languages, and not a rooted sense of cultural legitimacy" (Greenblatt 61). If the traditional national literary history is to survive, it has to muster all its flexibility and suppleness to accommodate these new developments. A fresh example provides the new *Oxford English Literary History* in 13 volumes, which will dedicate two volumes to the post-World War II period, both designed to compete with, and qualify, each other in the way they interpret Englishness: the volume *1960–2000: The Last of England*, written by Randall Stevenson, described as a "Scotsman who believes that the idea of 'English literature' is no longer a possibility" (see Bate 17), and another volume, *1948–2000: The Internationalisation of English Literature*, written by the Canadian Bruce King who celebrates multiculturalism not as the end but as a revival of this idea. (Note also that these two volumes interpret differently the lower chronological boundary of the period they explore.) The new Oxford history is thus seeking to transpose – without canceling

– the largely exhausted national narrative into the (questionable) tonality of multicultural globalism.

## The Media

Marshall McLuhan's assertion according to which the medium is the message (23–36) regains resonance today as we try to chart the fortunes of literary history. The business of literary history has changed dramatically over the last 60 years in large measure due to the changing media environment.

There are several aspects to this change. First of all, the pattern of the consumption of literature underwent a significant alteration. Film adaptations of the national canons abound, making it easy to delude oneself into believing that watching *Sense and Sensibility* exempts one from reading Jane Austin. The accessibility of the classics through low-budget television versions gradually came to bridge the gap between high and popular literature that the discipline of literary history has depended on all along. To be sure, it was literary history in the first place that instituted the division between 'high' and 'low', and conjured works initially serialized in newspapers for the entertainment (also for the edification, needless to say) of the wider reading public into masterpieces of high culture. Many of the 19th century novels, including those of Dostoevsky and Balzac, were subject to such metamorphic refashioning at the hands of academic literary historians in the decades following their first publication. Now the table has been turned on the literary historian: the plethora of films, radio adaptations, comics etc. has plunged the profession into a world where the previous security furnished by the canon has all but vanished. The supposedly unique act of silent reading has been brutally ousted by the mass consumption of visual surrogates perceived to be better at emphasizing the plot and the costumes rather than the supposedly great philosophical message of the literary work of art. Thus literary historians have been left wandering without a compass in the thicket of a culture that is neither high nor low but subsists instead on the reproducibility of the sacred in a myriad of everyday instances of overlapping epiphany and performance.

The second aspect is induced by the all-too-powerful presence of the new electronic media. Ever since Baudrillard,[3] we have learned to question the boundary between fact and fiction in the workings of the electronic press. Moreover, modern media, in particular the interactive technologies, have brought about an unprecedented openness of the text to simultaneous modification by the recipient. Thus the status of the text has changed

beyond the comfortable manageability on which traditional literary history rests. The disobedient text that emerges from the process of electronic interaction is open-ended, mobile as never before, and truly boundless; not even the conceptual armament of intertextuality is any longer capable of domesticating it. An ever-fluid hypertext renders the customary articulation of semantic entities obsolete and unreliable. The result is an archive of semantically dynamic deposits, which can be added to or subtracted from at liberty at any time. The author/reader boundary is totally erased, and so are the foundations of reception theory and traditional literary history.

Finally, the global network creates a vast electronic library, where national traditions and loyalties are quickly destabilized. Fragmentary in its foundations, the experience of the internet-driven reader contributes to a new paradigm of interpretation where reference and comparison no longer originate with compelling logic from a historically verifiable pool of national writing. To make sense of a story or a poem, both teachers and students of literature now often depend on support from the global bank of plots and images that feeds the mind without asking questions about the historical or national appropriateness of the material supplied. The electronic media and the Internet thus confront literary history with the challenges of simultaneity and deracination.

## Demographics

Habermas, among others, has recently asked the incommodious (to put it mildly) question of 'the future of human nature'. He placed this question in the bedrock of modern genetics and the inevitable – and as yet unforeseeable – changes that are to follow from the imminent arrival of cloning and the genetic modification of human material. From my standpoint, there are two interconnected issues at stake here: longevity and memory. Both plunge the commentator into previously unexplored depths. With an ever growing life expectancy and the corresponding attempts at managing it through various economic and administrative techniques, how is memory to be distributed socially? In the wake of the alterations dormant in the management of longevity, how will the perception change of what constitutes the formative experiences and segments of human life, childhood and adolescence? Three of the essential cornerstones of literary history – indeed of any history – will be heading for dramatic transformation. One is the concept of generation; the other one is the notion of period; and the last one – the notion of novelness (what constitutes novelty in

the literary and ideological life of society). Traditional literary history has been reliant on these three concepts to provide a meaningful centre of interpretation. It will not be enough to realize that periods in literary and intellectual history are discursive ideological constructs; so much is known even now. The real issue at stake is the changing lifespan of generations, and with this the changing rhythms of the production of meaning. Public consent over key events underlying the narrative of the historian is likely to be reached in an ever more complicated and mediated fashion, because the constitutive voices of the generational ensemble will each have a temporality, duration, and therefore force, different from those informing the practice of (literary) historiography at present. Whether microhistory or any other tools favoured by modern historiography will be able to respond to these challenges is far from certain. I do not wish to sound as the author of mediocre science fiction: it is the realities of progress in genetics and the impending growth in longevity on a previously unprecedented scale that urge us to rethink the foundations of (literary) history in the future. It is apposite here to stress that literary history has always been largely sustained by the secure market of university and school education; without this market, it is difficult to assume that it would be a viable enterprise in any modern society. But what we see today, precisely as part of the economic and social techniques of demographic control, is the introduction of a totally new concept of education. The so-called 'continuing education', or 'life-long education', which is now part of the educational landscape throughout Europe and America, slowly but securely redefines the philosophy of education, leaving behind the dogma of clear-cut disciplinarity. The pick-and-mix approach of the Western-style educational supermarket is here to stay and to be employed in regular sequences throughout the life of the individual. Having to serve this ever growing market, as well as the modular system of undergraduate education, is already impacting on the scope of research undertaken in the modern university. Thus we are witnessing a new cycle of education and employment, which no longer separates the two, and a new social task for education to live up to. All this contributes to a new climate of learning and scholarship, in which authoritative knowledge and the guarding of any particular subject – literary history not excluded – look increasingly inadequate.

Yet one needn't finish on a pessimistic note. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger has warned that "as a determination historicity is prior to what is called history" (17). He meant by this, as he states in the same section (No. 6), that the elemental historicity of *Dasein* may remain hidden from *Dasein* itself, i.e. hidden from our existence here and now. But with this statement he also alerts us to the fact that the awareness of history and the

writing of history, whenever they take place, come as a response (as a gift by Being) to an ever-present historicity (temporality) that conditions our lives as humans. There is, in other words, no escape from historicity, even in the recesses – long or short – when the practice of literary history seems forever stalled. There is only a return to be accomplished by a transformed literary history in a transformed world. If this takes the dissolution of literary history into a cultural history that will of necessity differ from both the 19th century positivistic amassment of facts and from the lofty ideological parallels of 20th century *Geistesgeschichte*, so be it.

## NOTES

[1] The various objections to literary history from the late 19th century through to the 1960s are helpfully summarized in Wellek.

[2] The extent to which Hollier's project was departing from traditional practices of literary historiography could be gathered from the fact that in the – later – French version of the book 'history' was omitted from the title (cf. Hollier *De la litt.*).

[3] See above all Baudrillard's notorious pamphlet *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*.

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# Prihodnost literarne zgodovine: trije izzivi 21. stoletja

Ključne besede: literarna zgodovina / literatura in družba / nacionalne literarne zgodovine / demografski razvoj / novi mediji

Prihodnost literarne zgodovine je videti negotova, a morda ne tako mračna, kot bi nekateri radi mislili. Četudi imajo – ironično – pozivi k opuščanju literarne zgodovine že stoletno zgodovino, se je začelo občutje krize in metodološke zagate izrazito čutiti šele v osemdesetih letih 20. stoletja, ko so poskusi reformiranja veščine literarnega zgodovinopisja dosegli vrhunec v danes dobro znani Novi zgodovini francoske književnosti (Hollier 1989). Marsikdo je videl v tem projektu napad na tradicionalno literarno zgodovino, obenem pa je moral priznati, da je urednik Denis Hollier jasno uvidel težave, ki so pestile stroko po nastopu postmodernizma in poststrukturalizma, in se odzval nanje na inovativen, četudi nezadosten način. V naslednjem desetletju se je vprašanje o sami možnosti literarne zgodovine zastavljalo z dokajšnjo ostrino, a odgovori, ki jih daje nanj zgodnje 21. stoletje, so po vsem sodeč v znamenju zmernosti in konstruktivnega skepticizma, ne pa radikalnega zavračanja. Mednarodna konferenca, ki sta jo organizirala Marko Juvan in Darko Dolinar na Inštitutu za slovensko literaturo in literarne vede Znanstvenoraziskovalnega centra SAZU v Ljubljani, kjer je bilo slišati veliko zelo zanimivih referatov (glej Dolinar in Juvan 2006), ponuja dober primer tega razpoloženja.

Kako se razvija literarna zgodovina, je v marsičem odvisno od sprememb širšega okvira, v katerem poteka njen razvoj. Razumevanje teh sprememb se mi zdi bistven prvi korak. V tem prispevku se osredotočam na tri dejavnike (nacionalna država, mediji, razvoj družbe pod pritiskom demografskih sprememb) ter skušam pojasniti in pretehtati njihov pomen za literarno zgodovino.

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