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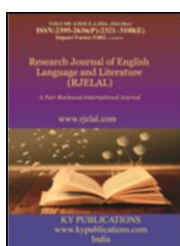
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RESTORING LITERARY HISTORIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

Literary Historiography has often claimed to be the critical center around which the discipline should rally and systematize itself. However, a critical glance at the history of methods reveals that positivist literary historiography has suffered death blows at the hands of post-modernism and its revelations about the impossibility of whole truths. The traditional mode of pursuing literary historiography needs to find solutions to multiple problems: periodization, canonization, the relevance of binaries such as popular/artistic, linear development and so on. It is not enough to document these problems but to also simultaneously consider the theorized alternatives for the progress of literary historiography into the 21st century. Franco Moretti's model is one of great relevance in this context as it attempts to answer the big questions posed by post-modernism while still maintaining a precariously delicate balance in his approach to literature within history. As a Marxist critic, he attempts to locate literature in itself as well as within a larger social, historical space.

Keywords: Literary history, Marxism, Canon, Popular Literature, Comparative Literature

The twentieth century constantly grappled with the idea of literary history, and the ambition it entailed, as an attempt to explain the laws governing the evolution of literature, the coherence of literary periodization, the inter-linkages and exchanges between genres with reference to either the movement of history as an ever-present backdrop or in reference to formal aspects of the literary system itself. The last decades of the century threw this ambition into disarray. Positivist literary historiography claimed a certain degree of objectivity, valorized a group of writers and texts, created problematic distinctions such as popular and mass literature and foregrounded the dominance of certain genres in certain periods among other questionable aspects. In other words, the fact that literary history is a constructed narrative with a point of view, attempting to naturalize itself, either for the consolidation of literary studies as a coherent academic discipline or for the

consolidation of a certain power structure was revealed. This raised serious questions about the legitimacy of literary history as a worthwhile practice and regarding the possibility of a new kind of literary history which could create its own path maneuvering its way through these pitfalls. Such questions have been addressed by Franco Moretti and David Perkins among many others. This paper will, firstly, survey the slew of attacks upon the positivist understanding of literary history as a profitable practice capable of enlightening our present through the creation of a legitimate body of knowledge about the past. The second half of the paper will document and analyze alternative possibilities of writing literary history such as the one offered by Franco Moretti.

Prior to a critical survey of the challenges faced by literary historiography, it is essential to understand the stakes involved in such a discussion. The production of any kind of knowledge entails,

literary historiography is no different, either a complicity in the maintenance, perpetuation of the socio-political status quo or an active intervention against it. The project of literary historiography in the eighteenth century and for a good part of the nineteenth century, when the discipline naturalized itself, was a period when the nation was in the process of being imagined. The creation of literary canons as embodiments of the cultural values of a specific group, community or nation was critical to this enterprise of nation building. However, the fracture of the meta-narrative brought about by the revolutionary ideas of post-structuralism that have exposed the textuality of history has made us question the possibility of complete knowledge. The discipline of literary historiography too has had to redefine itself, its aims and its methodology in this context.

In spite of the demise of nationalism as a shaping force in the writing of literary history, identity politics and canons still continue to dominate the practice in academic circles. The so called "third-world" is keen to write its own narrative, and marginalized perspectives such as those of women and lesbian and gay voices have attempted to write their own versions of literary history. However, the post-modern scenario dictates that these narratives are conscious of their partial nature, of being far from the 'whole truth', and that raises more questions than answers. The question remains whether these literary histories add up to any degree of legitimacy or verifiability and whether they faithfully represent the totality of the literary production of our age. These questions, among others, are taken up by Moretti whose essay provides a focused attempt at disciplining literary historiography out of its lazy and superficial entrapments.

The nineteenth century prestige of literary historiography as a discipline was based on the stability and reliability of history as a concept in itself and on the belief that literature mirrored the movement of history. This conception of history as a set of unrepeatable, closed events that could be transparently recorded has come under duress in the 20th century. The alternative approach to literary historiography, as pursued by the formalists, bent

the stick in the absolute other direction by attempting to explain the evolution of literature not through historical context but by the consideration of the literary system as a relatively autonomous sphere governed by its own set of rules. The formalist experiment attempted to dehistoricize, while simultaneously, attempting to restore coherence and order to the literary system. The concept of defamiliarization attempted to explain literary evolution as a constant series of renewals based on the rejection of past forms that are displaced by new forms. Such a method, while having its own merits in certain contexts, doesn't explain the full spectrum of questions such as the strong persistence of certain genres across time and the co-existence of diverse genres in the same historical moment. It further disturbs our notions of periodization usually based on historical events such as the beginning or the end of a monarch's reign.

Another aspect that has troubled the conscience of literary historians is the developmental, linear model it usually assumes. This model reduces the complexity of cross-cultural, cross-temporal exchange and portrays artistic evolution in a strict chain of cause-effect relationships. The problem with such a model is that it continuously relegates the past onto a dead heap while not acknowledging its ability to constantly renew itself. This problem is framed in a similar vein by David Perkins:

"The premise of developmental history is that an event goes "through a series of changes," as Dilthey puts it, "of which each is possible only on the basis of the previous one." Transition of this kind has continuity. The next phase preserves much of the former. There are no jumps, reversals, returns, clean slates or beginnings. Developmental history explains a work by what it immediately evolves from. The contexts in which it places a work exist simultaneously with or just prior to the work. The view of developmental history is limited in this respect, since literary works may be directly modeled on ones produced centuries earlier in alien societies." (2)

The keyword here is "continuity". Perkins' argument is driving against this tendency of unbroken organic

narratives and what is suggested here is further qualified by Franco Moretti.

Moretti's new model for literary historiography doesn't emerge out of thin-air. It emerges out of his deep commitment to Marxism and hence his desire to look at literature-in-history without reducing one to the other. The attempt, therefore, has been to delineate alternative modes of writing literary history in a manner that can justify both ends of the spectrum: the literary system in itself as a relatively autonomous entity and history as a shaping force that conditions, nurtures and influences this system in complex but verifiable ways. Moreover, Moretti is conscious of the precarious position of literary history within the academia conceding the fact that in its present state of affairs it is unable to contribute anything to social sciences and to the writing of a "total" history of culture and society. It is in this light that he sets out to re-organize the discipline by confining it within rhetorical studies, for literary discourse is rhetorical discourse, and by restoring to it systematicity, "theoretical precision and historical fidelity." (Moretti 16)

Moretti seems to be in agreement with Perkins on the problematic nature of the developmental model but he qualifies what he means by the 'developmental model'. Moretti argues that literary history is often presented as marking the ruptures, the moments of radical divergence, possibly with the concealed aim of projecting literature's anti-conformist, revolutionary function, so that literary history seems like a succession of masterpieces that break from "convention". Moretti calls for a new way of imagining the movement of literary history. It is no more a series of continual eruptions of innovative activity, of radical divergence, but a complex, layered movement in which older literary forms, devices betray an extraordinary resistance against the deathly sweep of time.

Moretti argues while borrowing from the *Annales* school, the element of 'inertia' within the literary system and its historical movement has been ignored (Moretti 6). This element of inertia is the resistance of "mentality", or the resistance of expressive resources, that continue to appear within

literature across the created boundaries of period and theme. Moretti is demanding here a new focus on "convention" and the "commonplace" which will allow us to piece together a more holistic literary history while simultaneously allowing us to arrive at a more precise relationship between the literary system and socio-political historical movement and in turn of a new relationship between literary studies, situated for Moretti within rhetorical studies, and the social sciences.

"If one wants to keep the couple convention-innovation and give the latter term the full term the full historical and formal weight it deserves, it is all the more important to realize that the first term of the pair has not yet become an 'object of knowledge' in a true sense for literary criticism." (Moretti 15)

In order to understand a masterpiece, a so called path-breaking work of art, the necessary evil is that one must understand what that work breaks from – the mass of writing that is understood to be conventional and not worthy to deserve the name of "literature". Moretti is conscious of the conspicuous presence and persistence of 'taste' in this aspect even after the liberal humanist critical practice in the evaluation of the literary have been thrown by the new-historicist, materialist approaches. Our syllabi, our universities continue to persist with the masterpiece/hack-work binary. Therefore, a critical part of Moretti's solution is to give greater respect and scholarly effort to mass literature which is at the moment considered to be an "undifferentiated and meaningless expanse" (Moretti 15). This is essential in order for us to arrive at that slower, discontinuous mode of doing literary historiography which will enable us to dissect the canon through a closer inspection of this convention/rupture movement that literary histories often evoke.

The concept of inertia as outlined by Moretti doesn't undermine innovation in the articulation of this new metaphor but urges the literary historian to take on the laborious but critical task of understanding the slow, discontinuous unfolding of literature that is constituted by centuries of 'popular' literature and not just by a handful of masterpieces. These works will form the

connecting lines between different literary epochs, styles.

Moretti's demand is in no way novel but it is much more sensitive to the artistic consciousness as is evidenced by the resonance it finds in the words of Bertolt Brecht who passionately demanded similar rigour from historians for the so called "failed" works of art. (Brecht)

"Literature, to be understood, must be considered in its development, by which I do not mean self-development. Then experimental phases can be seen, in which often an almost unbelievable narrowing of perspective occurs, one sided or rather few sided products emerge...there are experiments that come to nothing...The world has reason to be impatient with these people and it makes abundant use of this right. But it also has reason to be patient towards them." (Brecht 74)

Brecht, in the above passage, is evidently talking in an entirely different context and engaging in a debate with Lukacs on the usefulness of such transitional literary experiments such as expressionism, and of the true meaning of realism, but the resonance with Moretti is critical. Like Moretti who insists on a rigorous study of mass literature, imitative and experimental writing, Brecht too doesn't allow Lukacs to define realism as only the realism of Balzac and Tolstoy. Brecht condemns Lukacs' complete rejection of expressionism to ensure that understanding of literature cannot be complete without the understanding of its failed experiments. It is well known to us now, of course, that Modernism's force didn't dissipate due to attacks such as that of Lukacs and continues to be a hotbed of expressive resources that are rekindled often in contemporary art.

As a Marxist critic, Moretti is quick to underline the usefulness of re-orienting literary history, and the concept of convention/innovation in the aforementioned manner. The simple assumption that what is innovative is necessarily oppositional, radical and anti-conformist is dismissed. Moretti says, "...in particular social contexts even 'open', non-organic, or 'obscure' aesthetic forms can function as instruments of consent." (8) However, at

times literary innovation can be read as signs of cultural resistance, a kind of "rhetorical daring", but correspondingly conventions can be -"instruments of consent" and by being commonplaces, like dead metaphors, are the most embedded in the political and social unconscious preserving and perpetuating the status quo.

In conclusion, it is critical to highlight the thrust of the argument which is to restore to literary historiography a degree of verifiability, and precision which can only happen if it is reorganized such that it is faithful to its obligations to literature, history and the humanities at large. Furthermore, the demand to demystify the element of 'taste' that still lingers behind our continuous pursuit of the canon so that centuries of unacknowledged work can be taken up for analysis to enrich our understanding of literature must be kept in mind. The political implications of writing literary history, in analyzing conventions and innovations within literary history, and in the creation and circulation of any kind of knowledge at large are consciously sustained in the work of Moretti and his approach to literary historiography is no different.

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