

L'ÉPOQUE DE LA RENAISSANCE: A VENTURE IN COLLECTIVE LITERARY HISTORIOGRAPHY*

The work which is being done in preparation of the Renaissance volumes within the *Comparative Literary History in European Languages* shares many assumptions as well as many problems with other parts of the project; but again, it contains problems and assumptions of its own.

The common ground is first of all, a strong belief in the renewal of literary historiography. There would be no point in pursuing this large undertaking, at such a synthetic and international level, if the "fall of literary history" described by René Wellek in the *Proceedings of the VIth I.C.L.A. Congress (1970)* were a definitive fall from which there was no return. It is assumed that all the movements which have been taking place in many countries towards the intrinsic study of texts do not preclude, but in fact, condition in a favourable manner the renewal of literary history by forcing the literary historian to base any general statement upon a patient, inductive study of many texts; and to beware of genetic fallacies as well as evolutionary determinisms in all their forms.

Secondly, all parts of the project share the hope of attaining a truly international coverage of the phenomena in question; this means an unprecedented effort to overcome the lesser accessibility of certain languages and to do justice to a phenomenon wherever it occurs. It also means a more inquiring glance at periodization, which has customarily been reliant on models drawn from certain "major" literatures.

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Finally, all participating research groups, and implicitly at least, all participants, share the willingness to experiment with collective historiography. This is due to their recognition of the vastness of the task – too vast even for the most hard-working historiographer endowed with the farthest-reaching knowledge. The multiplicity of texts in many languages makes collective writing, if not necessary, at least eminently worthwhile as an experiment. Why the cautious note? Because, many recent encyclopaedic examples notwithstanding, writing history and *especially* literary history implies a unity of vision. Modern theory of general history stresses the activity of the historian's mind as he transforms what had been *res gestae* into *historia rerum gestarum*. When it comes to literary works, individual perception becomes even more important: is it even possible to harmonize several individual perceptions, without reason to any one, sufficiently to draw them into meaningful statements concerning phenomena of literary history? We should begin by raising this question in the most serious manner, without attempting an a priori answer. It may be that a volume consisting of individual contributions will be no more than a series of juxtaposed articles, without the artifice of seams, and showing its diversity in the frankest of manners. Even that will be a significant contribution to Comparative literary history, provided all unexplored territory in terms of relations between relevant national literatures has been covered. It may even be that no dictatorial attempt will be made by the editor to curb individual viewpoints in regard to critical vocabulary, theoretical preferences or even *Weltanschauung*. If so, the resulting book may be a mosaic of treatments, eclectic and broadly humanistic in that each methodology in conjunction with each problem can become an original contribution taken in its own right; in that case the reader is called upon to work out the resultant, as if he were listening to a complex dialogue. Naturally, however, voices will be raised against the lack of unity (which might simply be a lack of homogeneity) of such a book.

Moreover, if single papers united by a common thread (or converging around a single problem; we can all choose our own metaphors!) are the pattern, have we reached the stage of collective historiography, or are we simply speaking of a distribution of more limited tasks to a larger number of collaborators? It is quite obvious that the *Comparative Literary History in European Languages* attempts to go at least one step further by developing a common philosophy of literary historiography, applied to each period, movement or problematics at stake. It is not possible – nor perhaps intended – that the individual writer divest himself of his own vision literary history, and of the phenomenon he studies within it. It is intended however that every unit be convergent in its *questioning* with all other units within the same volume. Thus we can hope to arrive, at least, at homogeneous series which it is legitimate to “compare”. Several of the research centres, including the Renaissance one, have held consultations and/or colloquia, prior to and even during the writing process, to attain, at the very least, this unity of questioning.

Within the history of the series, the Renaissance group was the first to assume responsibility for preparing a group of works resting upon a predominantly chronological basis. At the time, the programme of the Coordinating Committee included primarily volumes dealing with literary movements (Expressionism, Symbolism, etc.) – each movement being characteristic of an age without being equated with the literary or cultural history of that age). In order to supply the series with a study of the entire literary production of a period, the Renaissance group undertook to attempt this task. It would try to encompass, throughout Europe, the literature of the Renaissance, whatever diachronic discrepancies there may have been among countries experiencing a Renaissance, and whatever questions there may be at the outset about the unity of the Renaissance phenomenon. If our task was the exploration of an age, we would not run the risk of imposing an artificial unity on the extraordinarily varied materials at hand and especially, we would not seek turning points

away from medieval ideas and forms unless, *inductively*, a turning-point appeared.

In order that the unity of purpose of the entire project permeate all its phases, much weight is attached to the editorial process: every text is read by all three members of the editorial committee, and rediscussed with the author if any aspect of the text fails to meet the expected format, or coverage, or internationality, or chronological limits. The editorial committee itself receives guidance from an advisory committee entrusted with the quality control of the final version of each volume. Initially, the advisory committee worked with the editorial committee on the outline of the books, on the list of collaborators and on certain introductions and conclusions. In 1977, the Renaissance group lost a great friend and collaborator in the person of Professor Myron Gilmore of Harvard University, an historian of humanism, who wrote the introduction and conclusion of volume I, and criticized most constructively an early version of that volume. A few months ago, we were bereaved of Professor Verdun-L. Saulnier of the Sorbonne.

The Renaissance project is slated to cover literary history from 1400 to 1610 approximately, as follows:

- Volume I: *Avènement de l'esprit nouveau* (1400–80).
Editors: Professors T. Klaniczay, E. Kushner,
A. Stegmann.
- Volume II: *La nouvelle culture* (1480–1520).
Editor: Professor A. Stegmann.
- Volume III: *Maturations et mutations* (1520–60).
Editor: Professor E. Kushner.
- Volume IV: *Crise et essors nouveaux* (1560–1610).
Editor: Professor T. Klaniczay

The language of publication is French; any text written in a language other than French is translated.

The theoretical questions involved in the outline are, obviously, at the outset, those of a definition of the Renaissance and of

the subsequent periodization of the time-span which has been selected. One of the earliest temptations one encounters in this respect is to define and periodize according to the major and bestknown literatures, and according to preconceived notions concerning the Renaissance phenomenon in general. But here was a unique opportunity, here was indeed the obligation, to rethink those bases. A tension arises between the necessities of the "tranche chronologique" and the principle of theoretical soundness which might be expressed as follows: the historical task consists in setting forth a certain number of characteristics and functions which are presupposed to be those of the period in question but also to proceed as quickly as possible to a concrete, inductive inventory of those characteristics and functions in the literature under study. Thus the hypothesis is validated — or invalidated — that the literature which has been examined has undergone a Renaissance.

It is not the purpose of this paper to codify such an inventory characteristics and functions but a few leading examples can be given. Renaissance writings manifest aspirations to resemble, imitate or emulate ancient (Greco-Roman or Byzantine) models, accompanied by a strong impulse to develop the vernacular tongue and its literature; they demand beauty in poetry in addition to truth in poetry, and the harmonization of these two principles stimulates the rise of literary awareness. Underlying — and usually preceding — these endeavours there is a movement to critically examine texts both sacred and profane, which is one of the most fundamental tenets of humanism and which brings in its wake critical and experimental thought with respect to history, politics, philosophy, science, and religion. In a wider sense the Renaissance phenomenon is also linked to the rise of nationhood and to the replacement of feudal by bourgeois societies; and it is all this which constitutes the context and referential framework of a Renaissance literature, which furthermore, in its intrinsic orientation, is humanistic both in the sense of an almost pedagogical awareness of the form and message of the written word, and in the sense of per-

taining to the newly rediscovered dignity and responsibility of man as sung, for example, by Pico della Mirandola.

The authors who take part in the preparation of the four volumes are, essentially, entrusted with seeking out Renaissance characteristics with respect to a given corpus, theme or set of themes in the four chronological sections. Inevitably the authors encounter the tension between chronology and content referred to earlier. When thinking of Renaissance historiography, for example, one immediately remembers the learned, humanistic procedures brought in by Bruni, Aeneas Sylvius etc . . . even before Machiavelli and Guicciardini. That is indeed the subject-matter covered by Professor Kelley in a sub-chapter entitled "La nouvelle historiographie savante" in the framework of a chapter on the new learned, humanistic literature which also includes P. Chavy's text on humanistic translation, J. Ijsewijn's text on humanistic poetry, T. Klaniczay's text on humanistic biography with its characteristic personality cult, and A. Stäuble's text on humanistic drama. In this wider context the new, scholarly historiography finds its natural place. In another section however, devoted to the spread and popularization of knowledge among non-learned readers, there is a sub-chapter dealing with "Historiographie propagandiste et apologétique" written by Professor Kulcsár and showing how in several countries, especially, but not solely those of Eastern Europe, the humanistic influence in historiography met severe limitations so that history continued, as in the Middle Ages, to be a medium for glorification and naive explanation of world history, but in the new conjuncture created by the rise of nationalisms and the centralization of power. In Poland, Hungary, Germany histories are written picturing each country within the framework of a universal historical becoming and perpetuating the tradition of a Biblical basis, of the *translatio imperii* and of the directing role of divine providence. Also, notably in Russia, such propagandistic historiography serves to bolster national unity against invasions and to maintain morale by showing that the enemy is a scourge sent by God to force His people not only to self-defence

but also to self-purification. The distance between these two conceptions of historiography within the same period illustrates some of the problems and challenges which the project faces. There is no abrupt geographical break between one type of historiography and the other. Even if Italy comes first, most countries will gradually harbour learned historiographers; but many will continue to have propagandistic historiographers; also, the two kinds of historiography will interact.

From the divergences between initial hypotheses and chronological realities several directing principles may be drawn:

1. Within the same chronological section divergences among countries and/or zones must be inventoried and made explicit. This will preclude hasty generalizations concerning turning-points, where perhaps there are none.

2. It is necessary to articulate the outline of each book in such a manner that all active genres, tendencies, traditions and innovations, as well as survivals, are represented. This again compels the literary historian to question formerly accepted categories.

3. To periodize is to articulate. It is nothing to have set chronological limits if you cannot within these shape your data into recognizable macro-units.

4. Geographical realities must be respected for what they are. The inventory ensures that no country where a given phenomenon has occurred – e.g. a significant development of the short narrative – is left out; but the author must himself articulate the materials through formal and thematic analyses which will lead him to conclude when, where and how the Renaissance sets in, both in terms of the national origins of the texts and in terms of the corpus itself which in one country may, and in another may not or may partly manifest major Renaissance characteristics.

If these principles are respected within each section of each volume and in the relations between the sections within each volume; and if they are also respected from one volume to another, then the periodization and articulation effort will be successful, inasmuch as various aspects and functions of the Renaissance will be covered as they occur, even if there are

diachronic spreads among various aspects and functions within one country; or in one given aspect among various countries: say in the glorification of the literary use of the vernacular, of which examples can be found between the 13th and the 19th centuries.

Furthermore, the internationality of comparative literary studies will also have been served by the observance of the principles we have mentioned: the all too frequent imposition of the Italian or the French model on a variety of countries will be avoided. Even the English Renaissance fares better when viewed less in terms of Italianate tastes and influences in the first half of the sixteenth century, and more in its own flowering of the Elizabethan period. The more the historian accepts to take into account the specificities of national literatures, the more dynamic the process of articulation becomes and the more respectful of the complexities of the real. The unfolding of the Renaissance in a given country is seen to occur in all its functions and characteristics, whatever duration this may imply.

The kind of overview which is sought by the Renaissance group requires that no chapter or sub-chapter be structured in terms of one author, genre or even national literature, but in terms of broadly, internationally ascertained themes. As a consequence major names such as Erasmus, Luther, Montaigne, Shakespeare do not appear in units devoted to themselves but in a variety of units. Thus Erasmus is discussed under "Triomphe sur les hommes obscurs" and more particularly "Querelles humanistes" but also "Renouveau scripturaire" and "Mythes d'une parfaite harmonie", as well as in terms of Erasmian sequels in volume III such as "La Réforme, les évangélismes" and "Évangéliques et libertins spirituels".

It will, by now, be obvious to the reader that the inductive method which is being used also precludes rigid definitions of literariness; not — far to the contrary — because of any lack of attention to aesthetic values; but because of the intellectual renewal which comes from watching literary consciousness arise from and within the totality of social discourse.