



RESEARCH ARTICLE



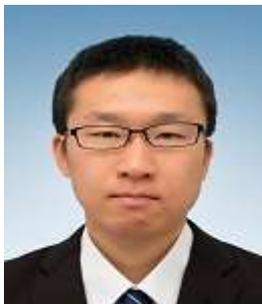
HISTORY AND LITERATURE: INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE OF LITERARY HISTORY

Naruhiko Mikado

(Graduate Student, Department of English and American Literature, Graduate School of Letters, Osaka University, Japan)

doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/joell.62.1>

ABSTRACT



Nowadays, more and more questions are being posed to literary history. However, despite the palpable fact that it has a profound interdisciplinary relevance with the field of literature, few have attempted to theorize on the situation in the sphere of literary studies. Considering the situation, this paper will analyze literary history as an institution to illuminate it from multiple angles. First, history in general and literary history will be compared to bring it into relief. Second, internal properties of literary history will be scrutinized with recourse to the comparison between texts of Milton and Wordsworth. Third, the relationship between literary history and literature as a discipline will be examined. Fourth, the ongoing revamping of American literary history will be explored as a concrete instance. In conclusion, this paper will discuss a possible way that literary history would be like and highlighting the fact that what has been taken for granted is by no means tantamount with an absolute truth. The contribution which this essay will make is to explore

Keywords: *Literary history, Literary theory, Literary criticism.*

Author(s) retain the copyright of this article Copyright © 2019 VEDA Publications

Author(s) agree that this article remains permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License

**CAVEAT**

The phrase 'literary history' is used in this essay fairly frequently. When it is used as a countable noun, it denotes a tangible one such as you may buy at a bookstore. Meanwhile, when it is used as an uncountable, it means an abstract conception, literary history as an institutionalized system.

1. INTRODUCTION

A Literary history, whether it be Japanese, German, or Indian one, is probably one of the most tiring and loathed courses in college (Whittle, 2013). Take English one for example. In the course, students would be showered with names of 'great' personages of letters (e.g. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dickens, etc.) and 'great' works of those figures, and may have repugnance against it after a semester. According to the professor who was in charge of the course in my university, he himself had undergone similar experiences during his college years. The circumstances would have been not so different when my great-grandfather wrote his dissertation. Allowing for this and other similar cases, it could safely be stated that literary history holds an institutional status in tertiary education.

But, its established standing is eroding rapidly these days (Van Dijkhuizen, 2018), and it is becoming more and more difficult to define the authoritative history of any nation's literature. American literature is expanding its scope to the extent that my mother, who also majored in American literature like me, might not pass the current examination. Meanwhile, the English counterpart is disintegrating with ever accelerating velocity. Although some scholars have mentioned the tendency on occasions, yet no meticulous analysis of it has been conducted heretofore.

This paper does not intend to gainsay the tide itself. In life thereof, It will aim to further dissect the nature, idiosyncratic qualities of literary history as an institution. Then the process of the argument would go as follows: first, unique traits of literary history will be examined through a comparison with mainstream historical scholarship. Second, the inner characteristics of literary history will be discusses by investigating into its structural and systemic properties. Third, this paper will explore by

juxtaposing literary history and literature as reciprocal institutions, their correlations which are indeed more complicated that they seem on the surface. Fourth, as a specific instance of the dynamism of literary history, the ongoing revision of American literary history will be inspected. In closing, a possible future for literary history will be discussed. This paper is like a ladder which can be discarded when it has fulfilled its role. If it can provide readers with an opportunity to reflect over the institutional structure of literary history, it can be considered to have done its function.

2. DIFFERENTIAL PROPERTIES OF LITERARY HISTORY WITHIN HISTORY

Few would dispute that history as an academic discipline intends to reconstruct so-called historical facts from diverse materials, and to clarify causal relationships which link them, though it would be difficult to equate those relations with the historical laws in this postmodern age when confidence in grand narratives is waning rapidly. To borrow the words of a female historian, what the practitioners in the area should do are composed of two principal parts:

The approaches used by most historians fall into two distinct categories. The first is essentially descriptive; that is, it refers to the existence of phenomena or realities without interpreting, explaining, or attributing causality. The second usage is causal; it theorizes about the nature of phenomena or realities, seeking an understanding of how and why these take the form they do. (Scott 1986, p. 1056)

Although there have been animated controversies as to the exact manner of reconstructing historical facts and the proper way to provide an explanation about a cause-and-effect relation (Cauvin, 2016), there would be little resistance when these two items—description of facts and explanation of causality— are taken as a starting point for a discussion about differences between conducting a normal historical study and writing a literary history in order to foreground hallmarks of the latter.

Albeit it is evident that literary history as a scholarly field is a branch of historical study in



general, when compared with the standard model of historical research, what kind of features should characterize literary history? In the beginning, each of the literary texts could be assumed as a counterpart of a historical fact. But, an arduous problem arises when one tries to theorize on causal relationships behind a literary text. Two general types of them could be considered: first, one could observe some causal relationships between the creation of a literary text and social circumstances of the time as well as personal conditions of its author; second, one could notice causations between a text—i.e. a fact—and another text. As for the former category, there seems to be no big difference between it and that of a regular historical investigation. However, the latter is the very thing which makes literary history a truly complicated field. What confronts us is the necessity to expound upon a history of influence between texts.

A simple thought experiment would reveal how such a history of influence between texts is distinctly different from causal correlations with which a typical historical study deals. Please imagine a case in which a contemporary Chinese playwright receives an impact from Shakespeare, or an instance wherein an African poet is influenced by Chaucerian verse. Literary history is fraught with such causal relationships that transcend chronological order, whereas standard historical research usually avoids treating phenomena which are spatiotemporally tangential. In this sense, there is a chasm between the branch and its parent body. Therefore, when a historian contemns literary history as unprovable, that results from a plain inattention to the fundamental difference, while an attempt to write a demonstrable literary history would certainly end in a fiasco.

Let us inspect a well-known example of a relation of influence between literary texts:

They looking back, all th' Eastern side beheld
Of Paradise, so late thir happie seat,
Wav'd over by that flaming Brand, the Gate
With dreadful Faces throng'd and fierie
Armes:

Som natural tears they drop'd, but wip'd them soon;

The World was all before them, where to choose

Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,

Through *Eden* took thir solitarie way.

(Milton 1667/2005, p. 406)

O there is blessing in this gentle breeze,

A visitant that while it fans my cheek

Doth seem half-conscious of the joy it brings

From the green fields, and from yon azure sky.

Whate'er its mission, the soft breeze can come

To none more grateful than to me; escaped

From the vast city, where I long had pined

A discontented sojourner: now free,

Free as a bird to settle where I will.

What dwelling shall receive me? in what vale

Shall be my harbour? Underneath what grove

Shall I take up my home? and what clear stream

Shall with its murmur lull me into rest?

The earth is all before me. With a heart

Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,

I look about; and should the chosen guide

Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,

I cannot miss my way....

(Wordsworth 1824-39/2009, p. 144)

The former passage is the final part of the twelfth book of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in which Adam and Eve leave the Garden of Eden, and the latter is the opening lines of *Prelude* of Wordsworth, a representative poet in the pantheon of English romantic literature. Whether the relationship between these two is described as an allusion, or a



parody, it is manifest that there is a kind of relation of influence—*scilicet*, a causal relationship. The correlation between them has been mentioned so frequently (Harvey, 1966, p. 20; Verbart, 1995, p. 191; Loewenstein, 2004, p. 128; Owen 2007, p. 68), that it is almost impossible to identify the person who located it first.

At any rate, when the romantic poet eulogized the emancipation of the self, it was vocalized literally as an escape from a “vast city”; nevertheless, it simultaneously meant the emancipation from the Miltonic, Biblical framework of thought. Bearing in mind Adam and Eve who, dispelled from the Paradise and now having only Providence as their guide, depart “with wandering steps and slow”, Wordsworth sang: “should the chosen guide / Be nothing better than a wandering cloud, / I cannot miss my way.” This is a precisely dramatic incident. Across a gap of about 150 years, the tradition of English poetry—i.e. the history of it—evinces both intense continuity and critical disruption. In a text where a romantic sense of freedom can be facily detected and natural representations abound, a powerful gesture of refusal and a flight of passion materialize themselves at the same time. Here one could recognize not a lyrical poet who gently narrates bonds between nature and various existences, but a lively figure of a fighting bard. The leap may even be portrayed as a paradigm shift, one from a biblical outlook to the romantic worldview. What is also significant is that an old, obsolete paradigm can revive in literary history. The ‘living past’ is not only the title of a decadent novel, but can be an expression which marks out distinctive workings and properties of the past in literary history.

In this sense, literary history is the history of the living past. Considering that literary history must be at once diachronic and synchronic, one would easily find out that such a causal relationship is utterly outside the province of the standard historical study. Still, it is hardly possible to conceive a literary history which does not treat those relations. Moreover, another huge problematic trait could be found here. Where history consists of individual events and illustration of their causations which confers a sense of continuity, how can we apprehend

continuity in literary history? Does it mean a continuous flow of literary texts, as if a historical occurrence comes about after another? Or does it mean something which has been preserved and is recognizably distinct in a genre? In other words, can a literary history be compiled within a broad framework like England or the US? Or can it be written only within a genre such as a literary history of English poetry or that of Japanese haiku?

In addition, in writing a literary history, one must inevitably and actively make a series of subjective evaluations upon the value of each literary text, whereas a typical practitioner of history would endeavor to minimize such subjectivity when he describes a fact, pursuing what could be called scholarly objectivity. Of course, it is unavoidable for any historian to be subjective to a degree; yet, that feature is often foregrounded in writing a literary history. David Perkins, one of the few academics who recently attempted to analyze the nature of literary history asserted as follows:

Literary history differs from history because the works it considers are felt to have a value quite different from and often far transcending their significance as a part of history. In other words, literary history is also literary criticism. Its aim is not merely to reconstruct and understand the past, for it has a further end, which is to illuminate literary works. It seeks to explain how and why a work acquired its form and themes and, thus, to help readers orient themselves. It subserves the appreciation of literature. The function of literary history lies partly in its impact on reading. We write literary history because we want to explain, understand, and enjoy literary works. (Perkins, 1992, pp. 177-178)

The reason why literary histories would strike historians as a loose, unmethodical branch is that they positively demand of their writers to pronounce critical assessments and value judgments in them. These evaluative verdicts and the trans-chronological feature are those precise factors which discriminate literary history decidedly from other fields of history such as political history and economic history.



The fact that literary history must involve valuation and criticism as part of its *raison d'être*, in fact, entails that any literary history is a history of an ideology. That is to say, every single literary history is more or less defined by the class, gender, sexuality, etc. of both readers and writers. One could effortlessly comprehend the problematic characteristics simply by pondering over whether an extraordinarily singular text like *Moby Dick* can be unconditionally a masterpiece for a young student intent on reading fantasies featuring, say, faeries.

It has been repeatedly attested that many countries exploited constructing their literary histories as one means to consolidate their national unity (Hollier, 1995, p. 236; Whittle, 2013, p. 45). For instance, the United Kingdom, a country composed of four constituent nations, has long handled the literary history invented from the standpoint of England as the standard and authoritative one. Nevertheless, we usually do not deem it a problem that literary histories which are arrayed on the shelves of bookstores are still predominantly written under the framework of nation-states. When taking this situation into consideration, one would not, but recognize some ideological devices working furtively. Considering these elements, it is natural that literary histories should be, at least on some points, rewritten and altered. It is just a manifestation of the potentiality of literary history that the one which is written from an ideological perspective should be criticized by another composed from a different angle, and that there should be multiple literary histories according to the diversity of race, class, and gender. Rather it is indeed a weird naivety to believe in the presence of the definitive literary history. Those radical shakedowns which are occurring in the canon of many countries' literature are only inescapable results, which perhaps should have taken place earlier.

3. THE STRUCTURE OF LITERARY HISTORY

Literary histories which I have long presumed to be stable are now transforming themselves before my very eyes—it awakes both a refreshing and perturbing sensation in my mind. Above I bumptiously talked of literary history and its attributes; but, they are only afterthoughts, and I

actually have not noticed the patent fact that any literary history is destined to crumble and inflate incessantly in that it is essentially borderless, open, and by no means closed, expanding with incessant addition of new texts. Jacques Derrida's comment upon the 'center' offers an enlightening insight into the volatile structure of literary histories.

There was no center...the center could not be thought in the form of a being-present...the center had no natural locus...it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This moment was that in which language invade the universal problematic; that in which, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse...that is to say, when everything became a system where the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. (Derrida, 1987, p. 37)

It is undeniably impossible to identify the totality or completeness of a system with no center. "This movement of freeplay, permitted by the lack, the absence of a center or origin, is the movement of supplementarity" (Derrida, 1987, p. 47). When a sign is added to a system which has intrinsically no center, the particular addition engenders an alteration to the existing system; even when there was something which could be regarded as the center, it also must move. For all that, if one tried to speak of the center, it would be something like a functional center, or a central effect. At a glance, this Derrida's argument would be interpreted as a nonsensical causerie; yet, it would enable one to descry another facet of the structure of literary history—literary history is a discursive system of differences.

However, Derrida is never alone in providing a beneficial tool to theorize upon literary history. In actuality, several decades previously in the sphere of literature, T.S. Eliot propounded a similarly penetrative view in "Tradition and Individual Talent". That the quality has not heeded heretofore may have its cause in the fact that people have read the essay only within the framework of modernism poetry:



No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.... What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered. (Eliot, 1919, p. 55)

Although one may think of the combination of T.S. Eliot and Derrida as bizarre, we should not overlook the striking similarities between their thoughts. What Eliot called 'tradition' is the very problem of literary history.

What should be especially noticed is that both two foregrounded the mechanism wherewith an existing system or an established order was given a new sigh or a new piece. They would have perceived that a system discloses its nature when it has contact with another and is compelled to decide whether it forms a link with the alien element or not. Current disintegration of canons and revisions in literary histories are laying bare the conservative principles which have substantiated them - continuity and discontinuity which had been entrenched in people's beliefs are on trial. We should not bury our head in the sand before this situation.

4. LITERATURE AND LITERARY HISTORY AS INSTITUTIONS

As an established institution often operates hand in hand with another which is close to it, literature and literary history have inseparable associations with each other, which one would reasonably regard as a matter of fact. It would also elicit few objections to consider a literary history to be composed of literary texts; in other words, a literary history is born only after literary texts. Yet, as

it is shown below, that artless opinion would be proven untenable when one pays attention to the moment when a text is judged to be literary one.

Take the following poem for an example:

When Adan day by day
Woke up in Paradise,
He always used to say
"Oh, this is very nice."
But Eve from scenes of bliss
Transported him for life.
The more I think of this
The more I beat my wife. (Houseman,
1898/2007, p. 108)

As Kingsley Amis evaluated (p. 179), one would reckon this as belonging to the genre of light verse, not to that of epic as Milton's *Paradise Lost*. When one is meta-cognizant of the process itself, she/he will recognize that such a construal contains several presuppositions. When I identified the text made of many letters as a 'poem', I unconsciously set myself in the organization of literary history. I judged the text to be classifiable as a literary text, neither political nor religious one. Whether my assessment was prompted by its form or the content, the thing which had me deem it to be a literary piece was an amalgam of literature and literary history as institutions. True it is that literary histories include many literary works; nonetheless, it is not the works which create the literary histories. On the contrary, the literary histories themselves incorporate the works into the structure, labelling them as 'literary'. Literature as an institution cannot be discussed only upon a synchronic level; one must see it from a diachronic angle, namely, literature and literary history as institutions are like two sides of the same coin. In this meaning, whether one can read literary works without the knowledge of literary history or cannot is an utterly nonsensical inquiry. Outside the synchronic and diachronic system of literary history, literary works can by no means exist. Radical as it may seem, the conception of intertextuality is confronted with an onerous difficulty when it takes effects and functions of literary history.

Then where can one find the discursive institution named literary history? Of course, it does not exist as a tangible substance. As once Russian formalists failed to detect the idiosyncratic quality of



literature in its literariness, an attempt to discover the true nature of literary history would never succeed. In a similar way that a literary work is born through the mediation of the institution of literary history, what would be a literary history is defined as such through a chain of comparisons with other discursive systems—i.e. it is generated through differences. By this fashion, literary history is differentiated amongst general discourses of culture. The text which was quoted above would be categorized into light verse through the process of segmentation and differentiation in the differentiated discursive system. Basically that process always happens when one meets a group of letters printed (normally) on pages. We read literary works within the boundaries of literary history. That mechanism is increasingly becoming palpable thanks to the revamps which assail on many established literary histories.

5. LITERARY HISTORY UNBOUND

The most conspicuous manifestation of such a transformative movement is occurring in American literary history. Ahead of delving into the subject, please suppose that a literary history could be fixed by several authoritative texts and absolutely stable. In that case, by suppressing all chances of a change, that literary history would succeed in being the standard type. That is probably the form of literary history which would have, if unconsciously, occurred to most people's mind for a long time when they heard the word. But, as evidenced by the succession of reorganizations, literary history is a system which signals itself both through relationships with literary works inside and through various impacts from outside.

One of the main driving forces which are promoting the revamping of the configuration of American literary history is one such external pressure. Mark Poster (1992), one of few scholars trying to formulate a theory about the way that literature should be in this globalized age, summarized the ongoing situation as follows:

The term multiculturalism generally refers to curricula reform at institutions of higher learning. As more and more minorities attend these institutions, the easy

assumption of the universality of Western culture and the Eurocentrism of many basic courses in the humanities and social sciences increasingly appears incongruous. In campus after campus, controversial curricula reforms have been initiated by faculty and more often by administrators to include non-Western or minority components in course on literature and history. [...].

The argument in this case is that the inclusion of non-European cultures in the curriculum introduces a multiplicity of viewpoints that corresponds to the postmodernist celebration of difference. (Poster, pp. 576-577)

Pluralization and relativization of values which the postmodern era has fostered have in turn instilled people with respect for differences which make one person more or less alien to other individuals; it is manifest that the tide would facilitate a mutual appreciation for differences amongst cultures. It might be right that a philosophy would be diluted and rendered into something practical and useful when imported into the US; yet, it is of more noticeable moment that the tempered thought should often trigger a sound and fresh influence in another sphere. It is the province of higher education in this case of the restructuring of American literary history. The run of innovations in the curriculum across the universities in the country should not be ascribed to just a ramification of globalization. It results partly from a schematic transformation in the people's mind.

In the tendency, American literary history is being rewritten, works in its canon are being replaced, and the 'standard' cannot maintain the legitimacy unconditionally. According to Leslie Fiedler, the course of American literary history taught in the high school where his wife works does not include Hawthorn, Melville, Twain, Hemingway, or Faulkner. Instead, "of course, women and African-American writers—most of lesser distinction—were dutifully included" (Fiedler, 1993, p. 34). The aim of Fiedler is evidently to impugn the way and the young teacher in charge of it, which he and other conservative critics suppose may cause a breakup of



the rightful history. In order to make their point, those traditionalists normally point to the slipshodness of an interpretation and castigate a supposed weakening of literary receptivity. If they really believe that such censures are sufficient to confute the current tide, they should be considered vastly inattentive to the actual state of affairs. An attempt to rewrite a literary history like the one in the US ought to be regarded as a practice of anti-Eurocentrism, anti-middle-class, male centrism, anti-white centrism, and perhaps anti-Phallogocentrism. In order to attest that the young school teacher is not an isolated figure, let me introduce a statement of one of those academics who was indeed involved in a rewriting project. The person, Jonathan Arac (1993), was in charge of the section dealing with the middle part of the nineteenth century, the time generally called 'American Renaissance':

Schematically, I employ four means. I avoid the first-person plural; I make of the nation a problem rather than both a presupposition and a goal; I choose as the fundamental unit of intelligibility not the author but the generic system; and I chart the emergence of the "literary" as an event within the generic system that responds to specific problems of nationality. (Arac, p. 107)

The era in which Hawthorn, Melville, and Poe produced their works saw the effort on the parts of white men to extinguish Native Americans, along with 'democratic' developments in the regime of the new nation. He refuses to name the era American Renaissance. Then, thereby, he tosses out the maybe most famous notion in American literary history. Here 'a' literary history comes apart, refreshingly.

6. CONCLUSION

One may presume that the researcher wants to exclude the possibility to write a literary history. In actuality, the researcher partly believes literary histories cannot be written in the way that they had been; namely, it would be impossible to write a fixed, definitive literary history. Still, it does not necessarily mean that chaos should reign. In lieu, it is more appropriate to reckon the present tendency as a chance to see literary histories from a novel outlook; they themselves now can be objects for literary

criticism. The resultant discourses to come will provide those in the field with another perspective to observe both literature and literary history. Innocently optimistic as this conclusion might sound, in this sense, literary histories would and should continue to be written henceforth.

REFERENCES

- Amis, K. (1978). *The new Oxford book of light verse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Arac, J. (1993). What is the history of literature? *Modern Language Quarterly*, 54(1), 105-110.
- Cauvin, T. (2016). *Public history: A textbook of practice*. Public History: Routledge.
- Derrida, J. (1987). Structure, sign and play in the discourse of human sciences. In Vassilis Lambropoulos and David Neal Miller (Eds.), *Twentieth century literary theory* (pp. 35-60). New York: SUNY Press.
- Eliot, T.S. (1919). Tradition and the individual talent [I]. *The Egoist* 6(4), 54-55.
- Fiedler, L. (1993). The canon and the classroom: A caveat. In Susan Gubar and Jonathan Kamholz (Eds.), *English inside and out: The places of literary criticism* (pp. 29-36). London: Routledge.
- Harvey, J.W. (1966). *Poetic vision in the world of prose*. Belfast: Queen's University.
- Hollier, D. (1995). On literature considered as a dead language. In Marshall Brown (Ed.), *The uses of literary history* (pp. 233-241). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Houseman, A.E. (2007). *The letters of A.E. Houseman*. Archie Burnett (Ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Loewenstein, D. (2004). *Milton: Paradise Lost*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Milton, J. (2005). *Paradise Lost*. David Scott Kastan and Merritt Yerkes Hughes (Eds.). Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Owen, W.J.B. (2007). *Understanding The Prelude*. Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks.
- Perkins, D. (1992). *Is literary history possible?* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.



- Poster, M. (1992). Postmodernity and the politics of multiculturalism: The Lyotard—Habermas debate over social theory. *Modern Fiction Studies*, (38)3, 567-580.
- Scott, J.W. (1986). Gender: A useful category of historical analysis. *American Historical Review*, (91)5, 1053-1075.
- Van Dijkhuizen, J. (2018). *A literary history of reconciliation: Power, remorse and the limits of forgiveness*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.
- Verbart, A. (1995). *Fellowship in Paradise Lost: Vergil, Milton, Wordsworth*. Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam.
- Whittle, R. (2013). *Gender, canon and literary history: The changing place of nineteenth-century German women writers*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Wordsworth, W. (2009). *The poems of William Wordsworth, Volume 1: Collected reading texts from the Cornell Wordsworth*. Jared R. Curtis (Ed.). Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks.
-