TOWARDS A NEW EUROPE?
ON EMERGENT AND TRANSCULTURAL LITERARY HISTORIES

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This essay raises two questions: what are the challenges for an understanding of Europe and European future? How can we rethink literary history so that it reflects the present historical and political moment of Europe? The aim of bringing these two concerns together is to argue that European literary history has the potential of being an agent in the forming a new understanding of Europe. The essay takes its point of departure in Etienne Balibar’s suggestion that Europe should base its future identity in palimpsestic collaboration and anti-essential agency instead of basing it in a common culture. It argues that if we want the genre of literary history to adapt to a new and dynamic world, we have to rethink the term of “historicity” and the function of history within literary history. The article suggests that literary histories could be developed through a strategic use of the concepts of emergence (Wlad Godzich) and transculturation (Fernando Ortiz).

If Europe is to live up to its reputation as the world's most successful failing political organization, then it must achieve a new selfunderstanding.1

European literary history?
The genre of literary history is in its origin closely connected with the historical task of nation-building during the nineteenth century. Since the nation state is now in a state of decline as the all-determining frame for political and social identity, the question is whether literary history can be associated with a new integrative political project, that of a unified Europe. The question is also whether we want it to, and if we do, in what way. The genre of literary history is burdened with a lot of inherited assumptions about national coherence, periodization, geographical fencing of different literatures and specific logics of influence and development. However, in the last couple of decades we have seen some radical experiments with the genre that almost dissolve the genre itself. I am

thinking here of Denis Hollier’s *New French Literary History*\(^2\) and some of the volumes included in the ICLA’s impressive series of Comparative Literary History, some of which are directly based on the idea of discontinuity.

Literary history as a genre seems to be caught between an inherent conservatism and quite radical experimentalism. My question in this article is whether it is possible to rethink the genre so that it can meet the purpose of conceptualizing or building a New Europe. This also means re-establishing a close relationship between literary history and history – a relationship often only superficially admitted in the overall framing of literary histories, and between literary history and politics – a relationship many literary scholars would resist.\(^3\)

At the present historical moment, Europe seems to be in a transitional period, still trying to find its feet in a post-cold war and post-9/11 world. Even if it is not the end of history, the progressive goals of European development seem to be debatable, and so is the identity of Europe. Yet this was also exactly the situation of the nation when the first national literary histories were made in the beginning of the nineteenth century in Europe. When Georg Gottfried Gervinus wrote his *Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Deutschen* in 1835, Germany existed only as an idea and a political project in the making, and the specific aim of his literary history was to engender the spiritual coherence necessary to later form the political national state.

Europe is both at a more advanced and a more underdeveloped stage than Germany in the 1830s. Direct political, legal, economic and cultural collaboration is extensive and multifaceted but a unified identity may seem even more remote than it seemed for the Germans before the building of the German national state. In order to discuss the mode of a European literary history, we should first face the problem that Europe does not exist as a unity and that the very term is contested. The problem is not only that Europe consists internally of a multitude of cultural and national differences, it is also the fact that global developments question the role of Europe and its traditional avant-garde-position. A literary history of the new Europe should respond to the political challenges of


\(^3\) I stress that I take the word “politics” as referring to the understanding of human interrelations in a specific society and not in its more narrow sense of “techne of the state”.