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UNIVERSAL PERIODS IN LITERARY HISTORY

The temporal existence of literature as a social institution is inseparable from the life of some human community. The community is usually defined by its geographical and linguistic boundaries and its common social and cultural interests. It may be a 'natural' (ethnographic) community — a tribe, a *polis*, a people, a nation; or an international 'spiritual' community with common linguistic and cultural aspirations, e.g. the community of renaissance humanists. Although the primary medium of literature is linguistic, the inclusion of literature within the sphere of one language is not absolute. Migration of themes, forms and ideas characterize oral 'literatures', and the temporal and geographical boundaries of national literatures are constantly transgressed by translation and the assimilation of foreign traditions and influences. There is even a non-vernacular type of national literature with such varieties as Latin works by some humanists (e.g. the poetry of Janus Pannonius, though in Latin, is an organic part of Hungarian poetry), works in classical Chinese or Arabic, Irish and Scottish poetry in English, or works in French by Algerian, Libyan, Moroccan and Tunisian writers, Filipino literature in Spanish, English and Tagalog, and the non-vernacular literatures of Black Africa. A part of these works also belongs, traditionally, to the literature in whose language they were written, enjoying a sort of dual nationality.

Despite the facts of transgression and exchange, the literatures of individual communities constitute separate entities. In other respects the term 'literature' may apply to all literatures as one, but as a concrete historical phenomenon 'literature' does not exist and function as a single entity with national literatures as its branches or constituent elements: the term refers to them rather as specimens of the same species. This is true even of literatures which have evolved in close interdependence and under the shaping effect of a common tradition, e.g. literatures in Europe.

These considerations appear to run counter to the arguments through which René Wellek arrives at the ideal of 'general literature', the ideal of studying all literatures in their close interdependence. According to Professor Wellek 'literature

is one, as art and humanity are one¹, and we may agree with him that, apart from a typological coherence, in the history of literatures there have always been powerful tendencies to form and maintain a measure of unity and oneness. Still our definition of literature (or a basic mode of the existence and functioning of literature) as a social institution (i.e. literature functioning in the medium which produces it) does to some extent exclude the idea of 'one literature', even though it provides for forces of cohesion and features of identity². To underline this we do not have to go into the details of the powerful motives which cause national literatures to cherish and maintain their specific individuality — their assimilation of foreign influences and traditions may be one of the means through which they achieve it; and it would be foolish to deny the negative consequences of nationalism and provincialism, but yet it remains a fact that the individual literatures are not only a source of great positive values: they are valuable as such, as organic wholes, capable of functioning as relatively autonomous bodies.

One may have doubts concerning the oneness of literature in the past, but the present offers a view of change: the interdependence of national literatures has become greater than ever; all-powerful forces of cohesion are at work, and factors preparing, or perhaps revealing, the structural unity of all national literatures also appear. The reasons are varied: the ever increasing might of economic factors which began functioning with the rise of capitalism; the consequences of the technical and scientific revolution which is taking place in our days; the social and cultural progress which affects, or will soon affect, all mankind. There is already a kind of 'world consciousness' (mostly superficial) created by the advance of telecommunication, and there is also a growing awareness of the totality of all mankind, past and present; an awareness which only the best shared in the past. Although it may be a question of the distant future yet, the forces which prepare the merger of the great cultural traditions of mankind appear to be at work already. This is an irreversible process, none the less real that its prospects seem to be utopistic today. It will affect the status of literature too. The increasing number of polyglot readers and works in translation, the unprecedented opportunities for international contact and co-operation between men of letters, the enormous international exchange of publications and the almost synchronous appearance of certain literary works and influences in many countries regardless of the distance between them, and, last but not least, the advance of 'young' or 'small' national literatures, their international recognition and their coming abreast of the traditionally 'great' literatures may soon create such features of the universal development of literature which far outgrow the 19th century or present day notion of 'world literature'. Thus the universality and oneness of literature,

¹ A. Warren, R. Wellek, *Theory of Literature*, New York 1956, p. 50.

² Cf. H. Levin, *Literature as an Institution*, [in:] *Criticism: The Foundation of Modern Literary Judgement*, ed. M. Schorer, J. Miles, G. McKenzie, New York 1948, p. 552; J. Mukařovský, *K pojmosloví československé teorie umění*, [in:] *Studie z estetiky*, Praha 1966, pp. 117—124.

inherent in its nature and character from its beginnings and through its vicissitudes in human history, will manifest in its immediate functioning apparatus.

The problematic status of the 'oneness' of literature explains the special difficulty of a universal system of literary periods. There are numerous theories of literary evolution, and they always imply some sort of periodization: a way to solve the problem is to transfer it to the competency of one of those hypotheses. Even so, the distance between a grandiose theory of literary evolution and the flux of heterogeneous facts is usually too great to base concrete periods on it, and even systems that also systematize 'deviations' are, as a rule, too vague on subperiods and sub-subperiods. Dialectically conceived theories of evolution encourage induction in such cases. But periods established through induction also gravitate toward some concept of evolution; in this regard even the neutrality of periods based on a simple mathematical division of time is questionable: in many cases they are, or tend to be, synonyms for aesthetical and historical period terms, such as *Cinquecento* for the brightest period of Italian Renaissance art, or *le XVIII^e siècle* for 'le siècle des Lumières', or 'la fin de siècle' for specific tendencies in 19th century French literature, or 'The Thirties' for a trend of progressive social aspirations in 20th century English literature.

Our definition of the temporal existence of literature as the mode of existence of a social institution and our remarks concerning the 'oneness' of literature also have evolutionary implications: they imply an evolution from divergence to integration. This gives us a chance to ascertain a few, though vague, universal periods: a preliminary phase of synchronous evolution characterized by the emergence and diverse development of individual literatures; a synchronous phase of transition to 'world literature', and then to 'one literature'; and a utopistic phase of total integration. Beyond those it is hard to find synchronous phases of universal evolution. (We may of course speak of an era of the pre-historical, or pre-literary stage, the era of oral 'literatures'.)

If we wish to go further than that in the establishment of universal periods, unless we retreat to a mechanical system of periodization, we shall have to surrender the claim to close synchronism, which means surrendering a genuine sense of 'period' as a 'unit of time or contemporaneity'³. Or we may reduce that claim to a given area, e.g. to European literature, to a single country or nation, or to other such community, but then our claim to universality will suffer. We may of course retain it, or a semblance of it, with certain modifications in its appeal, e.g. with a shift of sense to 'typicalness', with reference to typical phases or 'stages' of evolution detectable in all literatures, or in some exemplary literatures which serve as models. These phases or 'stages', which may be chronologically circumscribed periods in

³ Cf. G. Kubler, *Period, Style and Meaning in Ancient American Art*, "New Literary History", Winter 1970 (vol. 1, No 2), p. 127.

individual literatures, are universal in the sense that they are, or they are claimed to be, typical of the species.

Recently a Soviet scholar, N.I. Konrad, suggested a system of general periods based on the evolution of world literature⁴. He spoke of three main periods: Antiquity, the Medieval period, and the Modern era, representing three major stages — slavery, feudalism, and capitalism — of social evolution. He demonstrated the analogous character of Eastern and Western literary evolution through comparable types of literary products present in both cultural spheres — histories by Polybius and Plutarch and histories by Ssu-ma Ch'ien in Antiquity; mysteries, miracle plays and farces in medieval Europe and *nō*-plays and 'kyogen' interludes in medieval Japan; court lyrics in medieval France and China. He pointed out that cultural periods corresponding to the phases of transition from one stage of social evolution to another, e.g. the period of Hellenism and the Renaissance period, are also detectable in the East, i.e. a Renaissance period began in China in the 8th century, in Central Asia, Iran and North-West India in the 9th century, in Italy in the 13th century, and in England and Japan in the 17th century.

Professor Konrad started out of the thesis that world literature is one, and it functions as a single unified system. He built this view upon the following evidence: (a) interrelation and interaction between literatures; (b) identical or near-identical phenomena (*genres*, etc.); (c) similarity of major periods and trends; (d) literature appears as one and the same phenomenon everywhere, and undergoes the same type of evolution; (e) the communal preconditions for the continuous existence of great literatures are the same everywhere; (f) literatures do not simply take, individually, a similar course of evolution: they undergo the same evolutionary process in common; a proof of this is to be seen in the lack of simultaneous evolution, on the understanding that 'unequal development' is one of the moving forces of historical evolution.

How far do these arguments support the idea of the common evolution of literatures?

A part of them (b), (d), (e) proves that literature is 'one' only in the sense that it is substantially the same phenomenon whenever and wherever it occurs. Its similar or 'identical' features in various social formations may be due to its general characteristics and to similar or 'identical' features in the social structure. This is also true of the similarity of major periods and trends (c), and especially so if they belong to world zones or historical eras of literatures with no actual continuity and interdependence. In our opinion the time gap between 'identical' periods is ample proof that the evolution of literatures did not take place in a unified system. The crux of the matter is what kind of interaction and interrelationship existed between the world zones of literatures, and how efficient they were (a). Excepting the most

⁴ N.I. Konrad, *O nekotorykh voprosakh istorii mirovoy literatury* (1965), [in:] *Zapad y Vostok*, Moskva 1966, pp. 446—465.

recent period, it is doubtful that in the past there was an effectual interaction between Western and Eastern literatures; there are some isolated facts of interrelationship, but the facts of isolation are far more conspicuous. Without a structured form of relations it is difficult to see the evolution of world literature as a result of the workings of 'one system'. Nor is the problem settled by the assumption (f) that 'unequal development' (meaning a time gap between literatures on the same stage of evolution) is a symptom or a motive force of common evolution. The existence of typologically identical processes, with no contact or continuity between them, does not prove that they are functioning within the framework of one system. Nor does the acceleration of a delayed zone through contact with a more advanced one prove that the two zones functioned as components of a single system, the system of 'world literature', before they entered into communication. Apart from the most recent period there is no evidence that contacts and relationships between the various world zones took a structured form in the past, or that the world zones were functioning in a single, world-wide dynamic system. In our opinion 'world literature' did not exist as a unified whole or had an independent common evolution before historical (economic and social) development made it possible. Even if we ignored Engels's remark that the spheres of ideology which play a part in history have no independent evolution, facts quoted by Professor Konrad would make us think that typological identities in literary evolution are due to typological identities in the progress of society. A world system of markets did not exist before capitalism created it; nor did a system of world literature exist before its economic, social and cultural preconditions were created by the advance of capitalism, as it was described by the authors of the *Communist Manifesto*. It is true that 'the existence of various national histories does not exclude a history of humanity itself as a *sui generis* phenomenon'⁵, but this does not disprove that the history of 'literature' as such is a history of tribal, national, zonal, etc. literatures, their eventual contacts, interaction, typological identities, and their tendencies of integration. Theoretical abstraction may of course draft a universal scheme of literary evolution, just as one may discuss, theoretically, the evolution of 'nation' as such. And in the sense that all literary phenomena did somehow partake in such a general evolution, all literary phenomena — among them all individual literatures — are one.

This criticism does not diminish the practical value of the periodization suggested by Professor Konrad; what we cannot accept is the assumption that world literature was functioning as a unified system from an early stage of history, and that it had a common evolution, and, consequently, synchronous periods. Our position is much closer to what Professor Konrad offers as a parallel scheme of evolution based on changes in the communal preconditions of great and long standing literatures. This scheme includes a tribal phase, a period of peoples, and a period of nations, i.e. the subsequent phases of the evolution of individual literatures.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 460.

The thesis on the common evolution of literatures was absent from an earlier study of his, in which we find a periodization of the modern era according to the evolution of individual literatures toward integration in a world system of literatures⁶. In that study the beginning of the modern era coincided with the emergence of national literatures; from the 17th century that early period gave place to a period of national literatures and the appearance of common traits in them; the 19th century represented the period of the full accomplishment of national literatures, an immense growth of contacts between them and, due to a further extension of the capitalist world system, the development of contacts between Western and Eastern (European and Asian) literatures; the present era appeared as a period of the revitalization of ancient national literatures (e.g. in India and in the Arab countries), the emergence of socialist national literatures, and, in consequence of the disintegration of the colonial system, the emergence of new national literatures.

This is a graphic outline of the phases of the growth and development of 'world literature' as an ensemble of national literatures, though perhaps it fails to do justice to the individual development of 'old' national literatures in the more recent period, while the earliest periods refer exclusively to European development (unless the term 'nation' occurs in a more extended sense than what is usual in Marxist historical theory).

The basic stages of social evolution serve as a framework to literary periods in the conception of *The History of World Literature*, a work in progress in the Maxim Gorky Institute for World Literature in Moscow. As I. G. Neupokoyeva explained in a lecture at the 5th Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association in Belgrade, periods in *The History of World Literature* are based on a historical chronological principle⁷. This means that the synchronism of major cultural periods provides a framework for the discussion of individual literatures, and the work will be divided into individual volumes according to chronologically definable periods; in the volumes, apart from a description of the development of individual literatures, attention will be paid to synchronous and typologically identical features, to contacts of literatures in various regions and world zones, to 'inter-regional processes', such as traits of typological identity in certain genres, or similarities in the lyrical poetry of the feudal period in various countries, or similarities in the genres and style of early urban literatures. This approach appears to prepare a transition from a relatively pure synchronism of universal periods to a geographical principle of division. I. G. Neupokoyeva emphasized the importance of synchronous interregional comparison in the study of contemporary literature, and drew attention to an increase of synchrony in the recent development of world literature. It is however

⁶ *Problemy sovremennogo sravnitel'nogo literaturovedeniya* (1959), *ibidem*, pp. 304—331.

⁷ I.G. Neupokoyeva, *The Comparative Aspect of Literature in "The History of World Literature"*, [in:] *Proceedings of the Vth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*, Belgrade — Amsterdam 1969, pp. 37—43.

an important feature of the work that it does not strive to overstate the case of synchronism and of synchronous periodization: its 'principle of diachronism' provides for the facts of the historical relationship of subsequent periods and for typological identities (or near-identities) occurring in diverse periods and on diverse stages of literary evolution. The work is claimed to be based on the recognition of issues wider than the sphere of literature or the retrospective extension of the concept of 'world literature': 'The methodological basis for the confrontation of inter-regional literary development is the concept of unity of the historical development of mankind and the assumption of existence of some general laws in it'⁸. So far as principles go this appears to be a happy coincidence of typology and universal periodization.

World periods based on the evolutionary stages of human society may provide us with a broad framework for the periodization of the history of world literature, but they do not spare us the trouble of taking a closer view of the evolution of literature to discern its stages, and, if chronologically acceptable, use them as 'periods'. If we dispense with taking this step, the periods based on social history may easily become a neutral means of division. This may be the case with many histories of literature in which political events, the reign of kings, wars, revolutions, etc. signal the beginning, the culmination, or the end of literary periods, unless such facts are introduced on the understanding that they had, in one way or other, a relevant part in the progress of literature. If so, we have to ask the question, 'What is it exactly what those extra-literary facts and events determine?' Or: 'What are they parallel with within the sphere of literature?' 'In what facts and events does literary evolution manifest itself?' 'In what spheres, or strata, or means, and by what type of facts and events is its evolution, progress, development, or fate apprehensible?' And: 'Are the phases of its progress revealed always on the same plane of facts and events, or in the same class of functions and effect?'

Obviously facts which are perhaps external, technical or preparatory with respect to literary evolution may be of great help in periodizing literature. Such facts as e.g. the transition from oral to manuscript form, the advent of the 'Gutenberg Galaxy' and whatever comes after might be epoch-making landmarks in the history of culture, or that of literature. Changes in the social status of writers and the social composition of audiences may also contribute to a practicable scheme of periods. Still these are preliminary or secondary to facts exhibited in the works themselves — techniques, styles, modes, methods, themes, motives, attitudes, sentiments, ideas and ideals. 'Style' is perhaps the most widely used term in schemes of evolution, including some or all of the other elements. Periods are often defined according to the prevalence of ideas and ideals. 'Mode' and 'method' also occur as leading terms in evolutionary period concepts. Dealing with fiction in Western literature Northrop Frye suggested that there were five 'modes' — myth, romance, the high mimetic

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 41.

mode, the low mimetic mode, and the ironic mode⁹. In Marxist literary scholarship 'method' and 'style' seem to be clue terms. According to an influential theory put forward by M. A. Lifschitz, Georg Lukács, G. A. Nedoshivin and others, period styles were only manifestations of the basic method of realism and its antagonist, 'anti-realism'. 'Method' in the sense of 'metastyle' is also an important category of Marxist theoreticians who reject the doctrine of artistic evolution through alternating phases of realism and antirealism. The present work of Marxist literary historians is characterized by the subordination of periodization to the socio-historical interpretation of cultural periods, period styles, artistic and literary movements, with great emphasis on empirical research, and by a conscious effort to observe the quasi-autonomous nature of literary phenomena and avoid a rigid division of the literary process into separate, self-contained, monolithic 'periods'. There is perhaps less interest than earlier in all-embracing hypotheses on the universal evolution of literature, or art in general, though there is at least one major exception: a coherent scheme of artistic evolution outlined by Georg Lukács in his *Aesthetics*¹⁰. He describes the evolution of arts in terms of 'thisworldliness', i.e. the struggle of art to increase its independence from magical and religious bonds. Based on the phases of that historical process he outlines some inclusive stages or 'periods' of artistic evolution, but so far no attempt has been made to adapt the periods thus conceived to a history of world literature, or to define them as distinct historical periods.

Returning to the problem of period styles and their use in constituting a system of universal periods we cannot disregard the fact that period styles have been established, as a rule, on a regional basis, i.e. European literature has served as a model for general conclusions. This procedure may perhaps be justified by historical and aesthetic reasons, but the establishment of synchronous periods involves serious difficulties even in this limited area, owing to differences in the development of national literatures. The main difficulty lies in the lack of clearcut characteristics, the abundance of local shades and varieties, the coexistence of styles representing subsequent phases of development, and considerable phase delays. One way to solve the problem is to assign the major period styles to national literatures in which they are supposed to have appeared in a clearcut form. Thus W. P. Friedrich and D. H. Malone, authors of the *Outline of Comparative Literature*, give prominence to Italian literature in the Renaissance period, to Spanish literature in the Baroque period, to German literature in the Age of Romanticism, etc., etc.¹¹ This procedure creates obvious contradictions, and the authors of the *Outline* put up with them with rare consistency. Still their approach is far from being a unique attempt: the

⁹ N. Frye, *Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes*, [in:] *Anatomy of Criticism*, New York 1957, 1966, pp. 33—67.

¹⁰ G. Lukács, *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen*, Berlin—Spandau 1963.

¹¹ W.P. Friedrich, D.H. Malone, *Outline of Comparative Literature from Dante Alighieri to Eugene O'Neill*, Chapel Hill 1954.

opinion that, due to the unequal development of nations and national literatures, the geographical centre of literary evolution has shifted from one area to another has many supporters among students of literature. Some Marxist scholars, e.g. V. M. Zhirmunsky, argue that the radiating centre of cultural and ideological influence was always in countries which were at the moment in the van of social development (Italian Renaissance in the 15th and 16th centuries, French and British Enlightenment in the 18th century, Soviet Socialist Realism in the 20th century)¹². Professor Zhirmunsky admits however that the picture is blurred as regressive influences (the origins of the Baroque style in Spain and of Modern Decadence in France are mentioned as examples), also had national centres, and certain positive trends originated, or took a representative form, in relatively backward countries (e.g. German Classical poetry, and the great trend of Realism in 19th century Russian literature). A Hungarian scholar, Tibor Klaniczay, stresses that period styles represent phases of development but they are not units of a 'chronological mechanism'. He rejects their classification as positive or negative (progressive or reactionary) phenomena and their assignment to various national literatures. In his opinion at the beginning they still bear the imprint of class interests and nationality, but as soon as they are established as instruments of general appeal, their class bias and their national limitation disappear, they become international and begin functioning as a common medium of expression and effect for friend and foe alike (e.g. Baroque as the representative style of Catholic counter-reformation, as Milton's style, and as a common form of expression for Catholic and Protestant writers in Hungary, etc.)¹³.

Although the use of European literature as a model of literary evolution implies the question whether all literatures take the same course, this question is rarely asked. N. I. Konrad remarked that from 1870 to 1920 Japanese literature passed through all the major phases of the development of Western bourgeois literature — Classicism, Romanticism, Realism, and Symbolism. Our impression is that contemporary trends — Romanticism and Naturalism — prevailed in Japanese literature at the end of the 19th century, and there is no sign of a close sequence of styles in the above order. Nor did other new national literatures duplicate the former phases of European development on entering world literature: they adopted and assimilated contemporary styles, or styles of the immediate past. The same is true of the literatures of the developing countries, or — as N. I. Konrad, V. M. Zhirmunsky and other Soviet scholars point out — of the new national literatures in the Soviet Union. This must be so partly because contemporary or quasi-contemporary literary in-

¹² V.M. Zhirmunsky, *Problemy sravnitel'nogo-istoricheskogo izucheniya literatur*, [in:] *Izvestiya Akademii Nauk SSSR, Otdel. Liter. y yazika*, 1960, vol. 19, fasc. 3, pp. 177—186.

¹³ T. Klaniczay, *Styles et histoire du style*, [in:] *Littérature hongroise, littérature européenne*, Budapest 1964, pp. 26—43.

fluences are immediately available and of direct use for social and literary progress, and partly because the economic and social advance of backward countries is so fast that it dispenses with the intermediate stages of development.

The periodization of books on literary history is often criticized for lack of consistency, while schemes which are all of a piece frequently expose themselves to criticism on account of an arbitrary arrangement of facts and events. Critics who deal with periodization are inclined to overlook the fact that a history of literature may be consistent without a homogeneous scheme of periods. Some complexity is inevitable. If 'stages' of development on one plane define 'epochs' or 'periods', it will be necessary to use phases of development on another plane for subdivision. One may find that events occurring on a third plane give prominence to important phases which remain otherwise undistinguishable. A relevant system of periods ought to give prominence to phases that are prominent in the process itself, and in a complex process they appear on diverse planes; e.g. in 19th century Hungarian literature ideological and political influences functioned as an intrinsic motive, and so much so that it would be irrelevant to exclude them for the sake of period styles and stylistic trends — a workable system up to that phase.

Actual schemes of literary periods are always built upon a compromise between chronology and the phases or 'periodicity' of the literary process. It is therefore needless to avoid at any price the terms of a broader framework (e.g. the stages of social or cultural evolution) for the sake of 'intrinsic' boundaries, especially if the former also grant some of the advantages of 'universal periods', or the advantages of a meaningful chronological division. Periodizing is at its best when it points to significant coincidences of 'extrinsic' and 'intrinsic' developments. Periods based on coincidences of a functional nature represent far more than a compromise: they reveal the dialectics of literary evolution.

OKRESY UNIWERSALNE W HISTORII LITERATURY

STRESZCZENIE

Istnienia w czasie literatury jako instytucji społecznej (tzn. jej funkcjonowania w środowisku, które ją tworzy) nie można oddzielić od istnienia pewnej społeczności ludzkiej określonej granicami geograficznymi lub językowymi i (albo) wspólnymi społecznymi dążeniami. Jakkolwiek granice te są stale przekraczane, a w niektórych przypadkach liczne społeczności uczestniczą w literaturach nierodzimych — „literatura” jako konkretne wyizolowane zjawisko historyczne nie istnieje, lecz funkcjonuje jako szczególna całość łącznie z literaturami narodowymi jako jej odgałęzieniami lub konstytutywnymi elementami: termin ten odnosi się do nich raczej jako do pewnych odmian tego samego gatunku. Taka definicja historycznego istnienia literatury, choć wzmacnia spójność oraz wydobywa cechy identyczności, wyklucza *de facto*, przynajmniej w tym względzie, ideę „jednej literatury” lub „literatury uniwersalnej” (René Wellek). Niemniej pewne oznaki wskazują, że w naszej epoce współzależność literatur narodowych jest większa, niż była dawniej. Poza tym pojawiają

sie czynniki przygotowujące strukturalną jedność wszystkich literatur. Proces tej integracji można podzielić na fazy, które dają kilka mało wyraźnych uniwersalnych okresów: 1) pojawienie się i fakt różnokierunkowego rozwoju poszczególnych literatur, 2) równoczesność kształtowania „literatury światowej”, a następnie „jednej literatury, 3) hipotetyczna faza totalnego scalenia. Poza tym trudno jest rozróżnić „okresy uniwersalne” bez pominięcia czasowych kryteriów zawartych w słowie „okres”. Luka pomiędzy identycznymi stadiami ewolucji w literaturze światowej (czy chodzi o literatury indywidualne, czy też strefy wspólnej tradycji literackiej) jest zbyt duża, by dopuścić możliwość istnienia okresów uniwersalnych. W tym znaczeniu wydają się niezadowolające wysuwane przez N. I. Konrada argumenty za układem okresów uniwersalnych opartych na jedności struktury i na identycznym rozwoju literatury światowej. Istnienie typologicznie tożsamyh cech w rozwoju literatur, między którymi nie było żadnej łączności ani współdziałania — mogłoby jedynie świadczyć o tym, że literatura jest w zasadzie, gdziekolwiek się pojawi, jednym i tym samym zjawiskiem oraz że historyczne stadia społecznego rozwoju mają swoje odbicie w typologicznie identycznych cechach rozwoju poszczególnych literatur. Etapy ewolucji społecznej (lub ściślej: ewolucji kulturalnej) oraz równoległe do nich przebiegające zmiany prymarnych warunków rozwoju poszczególnych literatur (jak to opisał N. I. Konrad w swej wcześniejszej pracy) — mogą służyć za niezawodną podstawę do względnie ogólnej periodyzacji w literaturze światowej. Schemat taki został nakreślony przez I. G. Nieupokojewą, która zamiast zakładać retrospektywną jedność struktury dla literatury światowej — wyjaśniła dialektyczność międzyregionalnego rozwoju literatury na zasadzie „jedności historycznego rozwoju ludzkości”. Nawet jeśli w ustaleniu okresów literatury oprzemy się na etapach rozwoju społeczeństwa, to i tak będziemy musieli określić powiązania między ustalonymi w ten sposób granicami a rozłożonymi w czasie fazami rozwoju literatury. Schematy rozwoju, zbudowane na faktach przedstawionych w samych utworach, z reguły wyraża się terminami „styl”, „rodzaj” lub „metoda”, bądź też ich równoważnikami, z odniesieniem do tego, co stanowi najbardziej decydujący element czy aspekt w procesie typowo literackim. Jednakowoż trudno jest opierać na nich „okresy uniwersalne”, nawet w strefie ograniczonej (np. w dziedzinie literatur europejskich), a praktyczne rozwiązanie tego problemu (przez wyszczególnienie np. krajów „wiodących” albo centrów promieniujących) nie przekreśla faktu istnienia luki między fazami rozwoju a synchronią. Dopatrywanie się pełnej analogii między etapami rozwojowymi literatury europejskiej i literatury nieeuropejskich nie dysponuje chyba dostateczną argumentacją. Aktualne schematy okresów literatury opierają się z konieczności na pewnym kompromisie pomiędzy chronologią a fazami (lub periodycznością) procesu literackiego. Ponieważ ten ostatni widoczny jest na różnych planach odnoszących się do skomplikowanej struktury procesu — historia literatury może być całkowicie zwarta bez ujawniania homogenicznego schematu powyższych okresów. Posługiwanie się pojęciem (społecznych czy kulturalnych) faz dla zakresów czasowych mogłoby być korzystne w wypadku tzw. „okresów uniwersalnych”, tymczasem zaś okresy oparte na ważniejszych zbieżnościach rozwoju „zewnętrznego” i „wewnętrznego” miałyby tę dobrą stronę, że ukazywałyby dialektykę rozwoju literatury.

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