

# ACADEMIA | Letters

## *Big Literary History*

Luis Beltrán Almería

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This project aims to expand on the line of work pursued by Genus, an international group composed of researchers from Spain, France, Italy, Switzerland, the USA, Mexico, Costa Rica and Colombia and directed by myself. The group has been working on aesthetics, theory of the novel, and theory of discourse since 2011. The project is sponsored by the Spanish Government and the University of Zaragoza. The objective is to investigate a topic I have been addressing for many years, Big History.

Research into the theory of literary history is currently at an impasse. Yet there is a great opportunity on the horizon. Today there are two opposed currents in the conception of literary history: the *old literary history* and the *new literary history*. This is how they are conventionally known, although the new literary history is rather less new than it claims to be. *Old literary history* denotes the continuity that persists in the historical-critical method of literary studies dating back to the 19th century, especially in Biblical studies, although it was soon transferred to classic and modern philologies. In the Hispanic context, the term should be associated with the school of Spanish philology, providing we dispense with nuances that may seem secondary in this respect. *New literary history* – or *new historicism* – refers to the movement of so-called cultural studies, which came into being in the 1970s in the Anglo-Saxon realm. The ‘old-new’ opposition is unfair given that new historicism fails to offer a method comparable in rigour and significance to the historical-critical method. Its current success is due to the fact that the historical-critical method has become obsolete, and is a clear call to go beyond this state of affairs. But novelty is not a sufficient criterion. New historicism is a minor episode. It is based on spotlighting the ideological dimension of the literary event. To this end, it takes the hermeneutical liberty of reading classical works in the light of the contemporary agenda – that is to say, in the light of the triptych of genderclass and ethnicity or nation. It also downplays the artistic character of literature, which it tends to

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regard as a document – of barbarism, according to the expression attributed to W. Benjamin. The aesthetic dimension is reduced to the taste of the dominant class and the justification that conceals their interests.

In spite of these major differences, the two historicist currents share the same scientific paradigm. This paradigm can be defined in terms of three features:

- the conception of the work as a unity of form and content;
- the primacy of the principle of beauty;
- the criterion of the *Zeitgeist* or the spirit of the time.

These three principles are treated distinctly by the two currents, but in both of them they are fundamental.

The last three decades have seen a new event in the panorama of the humanities: Big History. Bill Gates and David Christian founded the *Big History Project* with a view to spreading the worldwide teaching of Big History. Cultural phenomena must be understood within the framework of the unity of culture. That framework is the great evolution of homo sapiens: from animal to god. In partial and particular conceptions, interpretations necessarily appear biased and incomplete, devoid of their civilisational meaning. Big History is an opportunity for this purpose.

The success of the essays by Yuval Noah Harari (*Sapiens*, *Homo Deus*, etc.) has helped draw attention to this emerging discipline, even though Harari himself is above all a public communicator, making use of the research work of thinkers such as Fred Spier and Jeremy Rifkin (*The Empathic Civilization*). The new understandings of human nature open the door to a never-before-told journey.

A literary history as an essential part of a history of the imagination is essential today. This history of the literary imagination can be articulated from certain key categories:

1. Imagination. Its evolutionary laws. Aesthetics as imagination.
2. Identity. The conformation of cultural identity.
3. Time. The categories that the experience of time has been inserting in the imagination.
4. Space. Also the space has given rise to different cultural conceptions (vertical spaces and horizontal spaces).
5. Speech. The genres of discourse have evolved in step with the previous categories. A historical theory of the genres of discourse is necessary.

6. Tradition. Popular culture. Custom. Stages of the tradition: heroic, epic-lyrical, dramatic, humorous-serious, modern.
7. Grotesque.
8. Castes. Orature is the product of a caste - the bards. Literary history is linked to the transformation of this caste into artists and authors.
9. Imagination. Dimensions: technical - ideological - aesthetic. Literature is a part of the aesthetic imagination. The study of the evolution of the laws of the imagination is fundamental for the study of literary history
10. Emotions and values: literature -like the other arts- transmits emotions and values.

In addition to these categories, it is necessary to display several of the construction of literary history as cultural history.

1. History of popular literature differentiated from wise literary history.
2. History of literary genres.
3. Continental Literary History (ie Western, Eastern), leaving regional or national divisions behind.
4. History of literary and cultural categories.

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