ARTS & LETTERS

Rewriting Literary History

"Racial Memory and Literary History" by Stephen Greenblatt, in *PMLA* (Jan. 2001), Modern Language Assn. of America, 26 Broadway, 3rd fl., New York, N.Y. 10004–1789.

The idea that nations have their own distinctive literary histories has come under strong scholarly assault in recent decades. Feminists, deconstructionists, and New Historicists have charged that traditional national literary histories, with their narratives of collective progress, give a false unity to what was a multicultural reality. But now, as feminist, black, Hispanic, and gay and lesbian scholars write their own literary histories, many are adopting the same traditional historical narrative of unfolding progress, even if not on the national level. In doing this, contends Greenblatt, a professor of humanities at Harvard University and a leading New Historicist, they are making "a serious mistake."

"It is one thing," he says, "to celebrate powerful literary achievements and to understand how new work can build on the work of the past; it is quite another thing to endorse a theory of evolutionary progress or steady, organic development that one knows is bankrupt." In *The Cambridge History of Latin American Literature* (1996), for instance, editors Roberto González Echevarría and Enrique Pupo-Walker "genially acknowledge that [their] sense of continuity is a fiction," Greenblatt says, yet they insist "'it does not matter.'" But truth, he objects, does matter in writing literary history, as in any other form of history.

"If the assumptions of an originary or primordial culture or of a stable linguistic identity progressively unfolding through time or of an ethnic, racial, or sexual essence are misguided," he declares, "then they must not be embraced, even with a sly wink and a whispered assurance that the embrace is only ironic and performative." That way, he warns, lies "the most corrosive and ultimately self-defeating cynicism."

Today's literary historians, says Greenblatt, offer "no coherent arguments" to justify setting aside the "withering critiques" of the national literary narratives in order to use similar narratives in the service of "identity politics." They have not explained "why claims of racial memory or ethnic solidarity that are anything but progressive in the real-world politics of, say, Serbia, Rwanda, or Sri Lanka . . . should somehow be transformed when they are . . . canonized in literary history."

What is the right course now for literary studies? In Greenblatt's view, it is toward world history, written with "a sharp awareness" of the historical roles of mistakes, accidents, and tragedies. "We need to understand colonization, exile, emigration, wandering, contamination, and unexpected consequences, along with the fierce compulsions of greed, longing, and restlessness." Instead of merely putting "the hitherto marginalized groups" on the map, he says, the new literary histories "should transform the act of mapmaking."

EXCERPT

Painting Hits the Jackpot

The big event in the modern history of visual art was the invention of photography. A paradox: Photography (which competes with painting) was the loveliest gift painting ever got. The invention of photography meant that painting hit the jackpot—won a billion dollars in the lottery, quit its job, and was free to do whatever it felt like for the rest of history.

—David Gelernter, a professor of computer science at Yale University, in *Commentary* (Apr. 2001)