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Distant-Reading Communities: Monolingualisation in Fin-de-Siècle European Literary Historiography

Abstract: A return to earlier forms of distant reading multilingual corpora allows us to reflect on the monolingual authorial position that manages and mediates the language diversity and linguistic specificity (literariness) of multilingual corpora with the objective of fostering supranational (imagined) communities of readers (Anderson, 1983). Revisiting the distant-reading practices of fin-de-siècle Britain can help us identify historiographical focal points and priorities, provide an understanding of the scope and circumference of the corpus, and reveal the conceptions of gain and loss perceived as integral to distant reading. The tension between enrichment and dispossession inherent in the practice of literary historiography is acute when it comes to multilingual corpora, compiled to facilitate a crossing and re-weaving of the boundaries of language, understanding, and community. In the 12-volume series *Periods of European Literature*, edited and, in part, written by the journalist, literary historian, and Chair of Rhetoric and English Literature at Edinburgh University, George Saintsbury (1845–1933), Anglophone comparatists represent the multilingual corpora of exemplar works, gauging the necessity for, or dispensability of, translation, and managing the "great unread", which, in this case, equates the "great unreadable". In their desire to build imagined communities of readers of European literature, Saintsbury and his contributors tend to operate in a monolingual supralinguistic sphere in which languages, authors, and works are named, passages are occasionally quoted, but in which no reading of literature, neither on the side of the comparatist, nor of the reader, takes place. Literary language is thus only tangentially part of literary historiography.

Keywords: literary historiography, community-building, monolingualism, comparative literature, European literature

Benjamin Anderson, through his seminal work *Imagined Communities* of 1983, has established 19th-century print culture as the foundation for the imagined commu-

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nities of readers that underlie the nation. The imagined simultaneity of knowledge and experience that fostered the national community in this abstract fashion was for the most part facilitated through a widely understood standardised national language. Beyond encouraging feelings of national belonging, the immense diversity of news items, reports of scientific advances, and reviews of literary and philosophical texts relating to other nations that circulated in the 19th-century press, be this in daily, weekly, monthly, or quarterly publications, also cultivated imagined supranational and intercultural ties between readers. If periodicals were integral vehicles of promoting conceptualisations of European communities long before the formal political structures we know today, histories of Europe and of European literature are likely to have played a similar part. Unlike literary texts, read 'monolingually' in their original languages or in translation, periodicals and histories, to a large extent, tackled the problem of multilingual sources via the distant-reading mode of monolingualising description, entirely circumventing the experience of both the source text and the source language, which renders the resulting imagined communities inherently abstract.

In the context of the growing eminence of digital literary studies, the notion of 'distant reading' tends to be associated with computational methods and the work of Franco Moretti, who coined the term. Non-digital forms of distant reading have similarly operated by structuring corpora chronologically over time and deriving "grammars of conventions" (Hackler and Kirsten 6) from texts to which ample "attention" (6) is given, but which are not read in their entirety. Literary histories in book-form, aiming at the identification of larger trends in extensive corpora, similarly privilege charting the "great unread" (Cohen) as opposed to offering detailed interpretations of individual texts. Scholar-led distant reading mechanisms have a long tradition and are firmly integrated into cultural and academic history. Since the beginnings of the scholarly study of writing in ancient Alexandria, forms of literary historiography have accompanied the creative production of literature. These forms, then as now, have had a community-building agenda in their endeavour to offer wide-reaching knowledge to an audience that has limited physical and intellectual access to the sources under investigation.

Literary historiography is in itself a mechanism of, and for, community-building that operates through distant reading. It has allowed for the large-scale circulation of knowledge relating to literature, its authors, and relevance based on varying rationales for categorisation. It has, since its inception, been a vehicle for navigating corpora perceived to be of value to communities at a local, national, and international level, often with the objective of strengthening the sense of belonging of groupings of readers to defined territories. When it comes to Anglophone contexts, literary historiography is often associated with the cultivation and canonisation of regional or national literatures, but has, since Henry Hallam's (1777–1859) four-vo-

lume *Introduction to the Literature of Europe in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries* of 1837–1839, also taken significantly wider scopes when it comes to Anglophone scholarship. Histories of European literature surpass the nation as a rationale for corpus design, making the personal identification of the readers with a wider European community possible. This endeavour entails a considerable cognitive, methodological, and editorial challenge, as the literary historian becomes a comparatist faced with a multilingual corpus that exceeds the limits of the readable in terms of quantity and intelligibility.

Literary historiography has been, and remains, a significant motor of community- and identity-building associated with the nation as a model of governance. While many literary histories tend to establish the merits and prestige of the respective nation as superior to those of others, the series of texts chosen for this study seeks to create "something like a new 'Hallam'" (II, vi). The 12-volume series *Periods of European Literature* (hereafter: *Periods*), edited and, in part, written by the journalist, literary historian, and Chair of Rhetoric and English Literature at Edinburgh University, George Saintsbury (1845–1933), tackles a large-scale multilingual corpus. In the conclusion of the last volume, Saintsbury stresses the relative uniqueness of this enterprise: apart from Hallam and the Schlegel brothers, comparative literary criticism had not been attempted (XII, 396). Saintsbury wrote three of the volumes himself (II. *The Flourishing of Romance and the Rise of Allegory*; V. *The Earlier Renaissance*; and XII. *The Later Nineteenth Century*) and commissioned nine experts to cover the remaining periods. With the corpus of *Periods* containing about 5000 pages, starting with the literary history of the 6th century and moving up to that of the latter half of the 19th century, readers face a demanding reading load that is predominantly made up of metaliterature sprinkled with occasional excerpts from literary texts, many of which remain untranslated, uncontextualised, and unexplained.

1 'Reading European': Distant-Reading Communities

Periods stands out in its innovative community-building endeavour to shed light on the intercultural networks of collaboration, the recurrence of forms, and the possible contextual factors underlying the development of the literary systems of selected sets of European nations. Rather than presenting literature as the cumulation of the intellectual potential of a national community, in fin-de-siècle Britain, Saintsbury chooses to acknowledge similarities in the quality and nature of literary artefacts from different nations and to value the achievements of authors writing in

disparate literary fields, using different languages. He articulates this goal in vol. II, which tackles the 12th and 13th centuries:

> What is wanted is to secure that the reader, whether he pursues his studies in more detail with regard to any of these literatures or not, shall at any rate have in his head a fair general notion of what they were simultaneously or in succession, of the relation in which they stood to each other, of the division of literary labour between them. (II, 413)

This wish to trace the development of genres as a concatenation of efforts in and by multiple cultures, and to consider the contextual factors in light of which these literary manifestations can be brought into connection with Moretti, anticipates the relational visualisations of comparable elements so prominent in digital literary studies. Saintsbury establishes his methods and aims as innovative, particularly when comparing them to those that Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893) used in *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (XII):

> With Taine this method has been married to a strict and almost fanatical determinism; and the result is that the literature of a country is, according to him, the mathematical product of the circumstances, and that each man's own literature is as rigidly dependent on his race, his time, his milieu. (XII, 144)

The contributors of *Periods* are more interested in tracing 'phenomena' of genre, form, and language than in examining how literature affects identity. Contextual factors play a role, but, again in a fashion that approximates Moretti, foremost in that they are seen to allow for the space in which innovation can occur, not as moulding forces.

Histories of literary systems other than Britain's national literature appeared before Saintsbury's initiative, with, for instance, the series "Literature of the Nineteenth Century" (1834–1838), published in the *Athenaeum* (1828–1921), covering Spain, America, Germany, the Ottoman Empire, Arabic and Persian literature, France, and Poland, following the series "A Biographical and Critical History of the Literature of the last Fifty Years" by Allan Cunningham, published in 1833 in the same journal, focusing on English(-speaking) literature. In my previous work, I have read the close proximity of these series as an indicator that during the early years of the *Athenaeum*, "intellectual life was considered to be inherently intercultural as a matter of course" (Millim 219). Wishing to complement and expand the scope of Hallam's *Introduction*, Saintsbury thinks of *Periods* as a "'text-book', a scholastic or academic manual" (V, xi), to be of service to "students of literature in statu pupillari" (V, xi), performing "for the educated and intelligent reader the same function which a historical atlas of the better kind performs for him in another department – to give a connected, a critical, and a comparative view of the Literature of Europe" (V, xi). This rapprochement between literary history and history is significant because it fuels a process of monolingualis-

ing and perhaps de-lingualising literary language for the sake of the large-scale community-building facilitated by distant reading.

Methodologically, this article draws on recent work conducted by scholars investigating 19th-century multilingual literature, combined with studies on the history of reading and the relationship between genre and reading practices. My reflection targets the space between languages, the forms of overlap, choice, and silence that exist at the interface between the personal and the communal. If Dirk Weissmann, based on the work of the German authors Heinrich Heine, Georg Büchner, Stefan George, and Frank Wedekind, has shown that ostensibly monolingual texts can in fact be multilingual, I want to demonstrate the ways in which multilingualism is monolingualised in the processes of historiographical distant reading. Weissmann draws on the notion of the palimpsest to reveal the "foreign or exophonic matrix" in the writing of said authors (125). Based on Genette, he identifies "a hypertextual translingual relationship: the trace of a seemingly monolingual hypotext written in a language other than the national language", which he also distinguishes as "the presence of other languages underneath the apparently unique language of the text" (129, transl. A.-M. M.). In the case of *Periods*, the situation is reversed: while readers are implicitly invited to appreciate the linguistic diversity of the collection, they experience it through monolingual description. The excerpts offered by the contributors, even when not translated, tend to remain without commentary so that they cannot develop meaning as parts of literary texts.

The absence of close reading is typical for the period and Thomas Seccombe, reviewing vol. IV *The Transition Period* by Gregory Smith for *The Bookman* in August 1900, embraced the style of the manuals entirely: "A book of the kind is addressed primarily to the scholar, whose interest will be better served by a brief communication of the scope of a work, than by any minute critical commentary" (150). Nevertheless, the distance to the texts at hand created by the commentary makes it impossible to access them, or even to sense the literariness of the hypertexts informing the literary historiography. Along the lines of Weissmann's argumentation, the erasure of the palimpsestic source texts and their replacement by the historicising text is total. Ana-Stanca Tabarasi-Hoffmann, in her investigation of the language-switching and -mixing that marks the work of the Danish writer Jens Baggesen (1764–1826), qualifies the latter's wish to "write European" (209) as "an enlightened attempt to transcend national languages and identities" (222). For Baggesen, the refusal to operate within a standardised language system meant the return to a "pre-national multiculturalism" (221), as Tabarasi-Hoffmann notes. While "writing European" can determine the circumvention of ascribing to a monolingual language system, my study investigates the attempts by Saintsbury and his contributors to facilitate "reading European" in the nominally monolingual, albeit cosmopolitan, setting of Britain.

2 Writing and Reading Literary Historiography

Literary historians have multiple agendas: by making manageable a diverse, scattered, and often incomprehensible corpus, they wish to educate readers to whom this corpus is not accessible in its entirety and/or complexity, and also make a political statement. There are some similarities in the methods and goals of historians of events and those of literary historians, in that both disciplines are heavily text-focused. However, since literature is made up of encoded texts that are fictional rather than referential in nature, the loss entailed by the omission of displaying and/or close-reading the text that is being described could arguably be greater. Another difference is that readers of historical studies are habitually divorced from many of the sources employed by the historian and accepting of this fact. A substantial part, though by no means all, of the works mentioned in literary historiography circulate in the public sphere and readers can borrow, own, and read them, so the reading act always exists *in potentia*. Hans Harder, in his investigation of literary histories as meta-narratives, notes that while such "secondary" texts are ostensibly about "the primary textual production" that is literature, "they claim to somehow contain, cover, describe or treat the latter" (2). This 'claim to contain' is significant as a mechanism that executes distant reading and simultaneously insists on its integration into the primary direct reading effected by individual readers:

> While on the one hand, as it were, the meta-system of literary history would come on top of literature in that it has literature as its referent, simultaneously it would have to be assigned to some position within the non-literary ("primary") system, genre, or communicational order; simultaneously, the fact that it lacks the quality of artistic creativity would exclude it from the realm of the "literary proper". For it is from a location beyond this "literary proper" that [it] reaches out to deal with artistic utterances; it ties art back to other systems of reference, or views it in terms of a world that is certainly not (or at least not only) art's world. [...] Literary history, then, is a go-between, mediating between a certain literary realm or production and different extra-literary spheres. As such it has multiple binds in both a methodological and a teleological sense: its referent is literature alright, but its telos is the location of literature in other frameworks. (4)

This transposition of framework, from the literary to the historical, means that for Harder, literary artefacts "find themselves projected on a new canvas, or figuring in a new narrative", the latter governed by "the language-nation framework" (11). Texts become part of a "collage", "constituted by a historic contemporaneity or generic similitude formerly unnoticed or uncared for" (11). Indeed, as Michael S. Batts has convincingly shown, many literary historians of the 19th century "persistently" quoted previously published studies and thus were "heavily dependent for the judgments on very old quotations that [had] been passed down from one generation to the next" (118), entirely foregoing first-hand reading. Accordingly, while in line with

the "monolingual paradigm" (7) defined by Yasemin Yildiz in that national language tends to be the criterion for the "inclusion or exclusion" (7) of works, language disappears almost altogether as a vehicle of art in its own right. Instead, literary language becomes an abstract object judged for its expressiveness in a line of argumentation divorced from the experience and experienceability of the realm of the literary. The literary becomes the spectral essence of the new historical framework in which it is signified but never actuated.

When examining the status of literary language in multilingual corpora, attention must be paid to the limited or non-existent actuation of the literary text when historicised. What parts of a literary text can be objectivised? Can literature be understood without access to and through literary language? Can literary historiography be equated to other types of historiography when it comes to the language of the sources? Historically, the connection drawn between language, thought, and insight is very unstable. Jürgen Trabant, in his 2008 reflections on "What is language?" draws the distinction between the historian and the poet, each producing, after Aristotle, two dissimilar types of discourse: *historía* and *poíesis*, respectively. As we shall see, these dimensions tend to overlap in *Periods*. Aristotle fosters what Trabant considers to be the "traditional European view" (256) that cognition occurs through conceptualisation, independently of language and signs. As Trabant explains, for Aristotle words function as vehicles of a-lingual thought. "Vox" (257) is fundamentally unrelated to thought, reducing language to a mere "communicative sound" (257). For Trabant, it is the Italian Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova* of 1744 that alters the status of language in philosophy as the latter insists that the "mental appropriation of the world" (257) occurs through language and is indissolubly tied to "vox": "lógos signifies 'idea' and 'word'" (257, translations of Vico by A.-M. M.). If, for Vico, a certain lexicon is necessary for knowing "the language with which speaks the eternal ideal history" (252, transl. A.-M. M.), this language is not lingual: history, for him, has only one language: "speaking history tells the same story with the same words" everywhere and at any point in history (259, translation of Trabant by A.-M. M.). It is this very belief in a universal mental lexicon underlying the historical imagination, which, I would argue, underlies distant reading. Awareness of language diversity is not irreconcilable with distant-reading practices since languages of composition are easy to name and list, and are convenient for categorisation. Nevertheless, literary texts, as we have seen, can have more than one language, a dimension that cannot be accessed but through the act of reading.

To illustrate a position in which the historiographical imagination and language fully overlap, Trabant refers to Roland Barthes, who, in "Le discours de l'histoire" of 1967, opposes the "illusion of being able to extract [oneself] from language and its semantics held by historians" (Trabant, 269, transl. A.-M. M.). Barthes denounces the belief in the neutrality or objectivity of historiography by insisting that

it represents a reflection in text on other texts with no verifiable connection to a reconstructible reality. The imagined objectivity outside of language that he criticises is often presented as factuality. It occurs in the monolingual framework of distant reading in that the sources and texts under discussion are often not actuated in the act of reading. Nigel Love's examination of Roy Harris's "How to make history with words" similarly reveals the illusion of objectivity: "Historiography is a language-bound enterprise, and facts and events, for the historian, are from the outset *constituted* by the language in which they are formulated" (14). As these thinkers indicate, the historiographical utterance is thus pronounced in a circularity detached from the world and can barely be distinguished from the literary text, entailing a rapprochement between *historía* and *poíesis* that is bound to be destabilising. As Trabant notes, "the linguistic turn" is always concerned with the form of possible "madness", namely the "loss of reality" (275). In the case of literary historiography, the purely linguistic description of the fictional worlds created in literary works that is practised in distant reading can lead to the loss of meaning by the double remove from the actual world.

3 Reading and Unreading

Historiography has community-building potential because it is a macro-reading enterprise that disseminates knowledge surrounding sources that are often unread by and unreadable for readers, relying on the latter's acceptance of remaining outside of the corpus and depending on the historian as primary access. Literary historiography, when it comes to ancient and rare sources, shares the total reliance of the reader on the literary historian. It differs, however, in that a multitude of literary sources have been mass-reproduced and circulated in the public sphere. Literary history thus pre-empts and replaces the production of mental images essential to reading and actualising literature, a process described by Elaine Scarry in her investigation of the impact of literary writers on developing the imagination of the readers: "By what miracle is a writer able to incite us to bring forth mental images that resemble in their quality not our own daydreaming but our own (much more freely practised) perceptual acts?" (7) The perceptual acts conjured up by the reading of literary texts are, for Cristina Visher Bruns, essential in framing and developing a receptive understanding of a literary object. In her reflections on contemporary academic practices in undergraduate teaching, she highlights the significance of emotional investment in the act of reading: "When literature instruction focuses primarily on the activities of the methodological 'explanation', the other stages of reading that should envelope it and thereby give it meaning can be lost to students." (69) A focus on method, Visher Bruns holds, brings about the situation in which "the

nonmethodical which gives the method its meaning is lost in neglect, and reading becomes little more than a mystifying, empty exercise" (74). Paul B. Armstrong has picked up on the scholarly disregard of the phenomenological aspects of reading by prioritising sociological and contextual factors as hermeneutical avenues. He argues for a return to an understanding of reading as an act of immense variability in terms of depth, thoroughness, quantity, and the imagined worlds created: "Reading is ordinarily a doubled performance of an alien world enacted in my own experience, another way of configuring meaning and relationships that is brought into being by my own acts of comprehension." (92) The comprehension of a literary text cannot be seen to underlie a permanent insight and many of the acts of perception and imagination will be forgotten or distorted by memory. In this sense, some or all of the language vehiculating the reading material habitually disappears from the readers' memory, but nevertheless, it is only through the mental articulation of these literary constructs of language that meaning, sensation, and learning are created.

At least in theory, the aim of the macro-reading enterprise of literary history is to facilitate a level of insight for the reader that could match that of first-hand reading of the individual works discussed, benefitting from the contextualisation and qualification offered by the scholar. This insight relies on the "text's semantic materialisation through reading" by individual readers and does not take place when reading about texts in a literary history. As Janusz Sławiński has noted in his study on the reception of literary histories, in order to productively read a literary text and give meaning to it, first-hand readers "must 'speak' to the work through [their] own reading, which forces [the work] into the boundaries of a semantic system sometimes far removed from the primary code" (523). While literary histories are compiled to be decisively and lastingly established in the worlds of individual readers, the absence of a direct reading experience of the texts under investigation can be seen to compromise that effect. Considering Sławiński's perspective, the macro-reading enterprise endeavoured by the literary historian facilitates an act of un-reading a literary work that is mentioned, described, contextualised, and often quoted from, but that does not tend to undergo a process of close reading that would make possible a level of understanding approximating the product of first-hand experience.

4 Thinking European Communities

If Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744–1803) equation of nation, language, and literature stresses the synchronism of community and territory via a monolingual language system, this alignment is an organisational principle of many histories of na-

tional literatures of the 19th century: the language of the scholar meets the language of the literature under investigation, as well as that of the receiving audience. In multilingual national contexts, as for instance in Britain, additions and subsections can be devoted to literary expression in other languages, such as Scots, Gaelic, or Welsh. Literary histories tackling the output of other nations published by a British scholar also frequently appeared in 19th-century Britain, posing the problem of deciding on the extent of the translation of selected passages from the works under investigation. For *Periods*, the scholarly perspective of the contributors and the editor, the contexts of production and reception, as well as the target audience, are British, but the series does not have the objective of insisting on the superiority of English literature as many literary histories do.

Periods is a large-scale undertaking that seeks to foreground the webs of connectedness that exist between the major European literatures. In most of the studies that make up the series, the nations seen as the agents that produce European literature are Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and sometimes Iceland, Portugal, the Scandinavian countries, and the Netherlands. These nations come to represent a larger polycentric European system even though, for the most part, the respective scholars discuss them separately. The logic of the series is expressed by an epigraphic quote by Matthew Arnold featured on the title page of each volume, drawn from *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* of 1864, which stresses the societal and transcendent agenda underlying the series:

> The criticism which alone can much help us for the future is a criticism which regards Europe as being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working to a common result.

The relativisation of the value of national literatures and criticism encourages the readers perusing *Periods* to view themselves as part of a European community. Criticism is seen as an academic discipline that fundamentally facilitates social thought and political governance via an identification with an imagined supranational realm.

While the contributors do not consider Europe an integrated political entity, there is an underlying call for artistic and scholarly cooperation and cohesion, designed to foster a sense of community in the readers. Nevertheless, if European literature is presented as a fundamentally shared cultural heritage project, this idea is, again and again, thrown into question by the lack of definition of Europe, as well as the tendency of assigning narratives of shared or indistinct origin to the nation most entitled to lay claim to them. Concurrently, a belief in world literature is woven into the fabric of the collection, as David Hannay makes clear in vol. VI *The Later Renaissance*:

> Shakespeare and Cervantes, though the first is very English and the second very Spanish, be-
> long to the whole world. Their countrymen may understand them best, but there is that in
> them which is common to all humanity. [...] They meet in this supreme quality of universality.
> (VI, 251)

Hannay qualifies specific writers as categorically superseding the status of national
possessions despite their association with a nation. He thus demonstrates and en-
courages faith in communities formed beyond language.

The central position of the recurring epigraph by Arnold in every volume of
Periods, as well as the editorial strategy of comparing and contrasting the evolution
of different genres in different national contexts over time, show that, without ques-
tion, Saintsbury intended to expand the reading horizon of his audience. Beyond the
enrichment in terms of cultural capital, Saintsbury also envisaged to widen the web
of identity of his readers.

5 The Limitations of Multilingual Scholarship: Editorial Concessions

Communicating knowledge about literary works composed in a language other than
English is seen as an immensely rewarding and desirable act of cultural mediation,
but also as a fundamentally utopian endeavour. For this reason, the contributors to
Periods tend to openly examine their own competence as comparatists and literary
scholars in their respective volumes, revealing and mitigating shortcomings in
terms of linguistic and academic expertise. They all grapple with Herderian notions
of quality based on nativity when they question the quality of observation, under-
standing, and evaluation that non-native scholars are capable of producing. Oliver
Elton, in vol. VIII *The Augustan Ages*, reflects the Herderian nativist-monolingual
belief in the creative and expressive authority of native speakers and writers within
the dimension of literary criticism: "Let us concede that no foreign critic can ever
thoroughly appreciate a poet, that much Greek comment on Aeschylus and Euri-
pides is unintelligible to moderns, that even German study of Shakespeare seems to
ourselves often strained and beside the mark." (VIII, 317) Elton frankly acknowl-
edges possible limits of understanding entailed by the linguistic and historical dis-
tance to a literary product. Nevertheless, he insists in his preface manifesto, the
importance of the cultural mediation facilitated by the comparatist scholar must
outweigh any claims to a totality of insight:

> Everyone who would labour honestly over such a span of history must compromise in some
> clear way with his own ignorance. [...] Much of the work cannot be done minutely, and many a

position has been summed already. But the errors of an Englishman judging Racine or Bossuet, like the felicities of a Frenchman judging Milton or Wordsworth, are instructive, and in any case will not show mere submission to the native estimates, however brilliant. (VIII, vi)

Elton's statement renders the editorial line of the series: the analysis and assessment of European literatures by non-native scholars is necessarily burdened by insecurities and linguistic gaps, but is nevertheless a valid contribution to Anglophone education and international scholarship. The relative confidence displayed by Elton regards the literatures that the scholar can access without recourse to translation.

Translation, the principal means of accessing many of the multilingual corpora under investigation, is suspicious to some of the contributors. Hannay, for instance, holds that "all translation is as the back of the tapestry" (VI, 374), again indicating a wish to experience and render the vivacity of the direct reading process. Saintsbury, too, in his reflection on his earlier volumes in the series, conducted in the preface of vol. XII, addresses his dissatisfaction with feeling barred from his scholarly work by his linguistic repertoire and contextual knowledge, settling for approximation:

I have sedulously eschewed translations. Here, in the case of Russian, of Norwegian, and of some other divisions, I have not hesitated to use them as the foundation – with thus due warning – of even a critical judgement. And I do this with the less hesitation, inasmuch as it is perfectly notorious that the extremest Ibsenomania or Tolstoyolatry is compatible with an inability, at least as complete as mine, to read a single sentence in Russian, or to do more than spell out Norse. What I have said of translation I may also say of second-hand knowledge, not derived even from translation itself. There is not very much of it in this book, but there is necessarily some. (XII, xi)

The guilt of distant reading is connected to not being able to capture the type of detail perceptible to the native reader. Saintsbury resists a demand for a monolingual alignment of the language of the text, scholar, and reader.

Throughout *Periods*, contributing scholars verbalise their guilt relating to the limits of their reading which they view as compromising their expertise. Hannay, in vol. VI *The Later Renaissance* reveals, "I have to confess that I do not speak with any personal knowledge of the *Carolea* of Hierónimo Sempere, published in 1560, or many others, and with only a slight acquaintance with the *Carlo Famoso* of Don Luis de Zapata" (VI, 52). In a later chapter, Hannay wishes to disempower the shame that comes with the practice of distant reading:

If it is a rule admitting of no exception that the critic or historian of literature should have read all his author, then I at least must confess my incapacity to speak to this famous writer [Lope Felix de Vega]. Yet, encouraged by a firm conviction that there never lived or does live, anybody who has achieved or will achieve this feat, – being, moreover, persuaded, for reasons to be given, that it is not necessary to be achieved, I venture to go on. (VI, 72)

This guilt can partly stem from the rationale for the selection of the works of literature that should be part of the literary history. Hannay, when qualifying the memoir, history, and satire of later Renaissance France as "interesting" (VI, 334), dismisses it for inclusion because "no part of it belongs to the literature which every thinking man in every country has read, or knows that it would be good to read. They may all be left aside, not without loss indeed, yet without irreparable loss" (VI, 344). While, as I have explained, literary history builds on and perpetuates practices of distant reading in its circumvention of quotation, close reading, and translation via descriptive language, according to Hannay, it should tackle works that dominate the readers' consciousness and are already part of actual and potential reading repertoires.

The conviction that the "thoroughness" (VIII, 317) of understanding mentioned by Elton is not an unshakeable requirement for instilling knowledge into readers is shared by all contributors in their respective prefaces. A perceived lack in the thoroughness of both comprehension and comprehensiveness is the major insecurity addressed by the authors of *Periods* and is still acutely present in discussions surrounding distant reading today. Saintsbury, in vol. XII *The Later Nineteenth Century* of 1907, admits, "It is difficult to do everything; and we have done what we could. If we have not dealt (as some would have had us deal) with everything that literature is about, as well as with literature, I do not think we are much the worse for it." (ix) The necessary omissions that come with the establishment and necessarily cursory discussion of expansive corpora seem contestable to the contributors. The justifications that frame the series indicate the latter's sense that literary historiography tackling multilingual corpora is constantly at risk of misrepresenting corpus and context.

6 From Monolingual to Multilingual Corpora: Degrees and Types of Distance

The primary distant reading techniques encouraged by *Periods* entail a focus on seminal literary works, narrativised lists, lengthy or abstract description depending on the perceived quality of the work at hand, and the foregrounding of form and context. Rarely do Saintsbury or his contributors offer passages from the text, and instead consistently forego close reading for distant reading, with the result that no reading of the texts under investigation takes place. The works are mentioned and discussed without allowing autonomy to the readers of *Periods*, who are resolutely kept at a distance from the literature presented, being taught, rather than invited to learn for themselves. When it comes to the perception, address, and navigation of the readers in the late-19th century, literary historiography differs significantly

from contemporary literary criticism. Criticism, as Nicolas Dames has shown in his compelling study on the protocols of reader approach held by Victorian periodicals, strove to involve the reader in a reading process that was designed to be communal. Reviewers tended to include lengthy excerpts from the texts under review into their contributions, often without contextualising or discussing them. While the insertion of long copied passages could be seen as filler material, Dames argues that giving the reader the opportunity to discover the text conveys a belief in the latter's agency and an invitation to independent discovery: "not Look what I can see, but Look what we both see and feel; it describes agreement rather than ingenuity" (18). If neither of these quality-assessing genres are known for reliance on close reading during the 19th century, Victorian reviewing practices, more so than literary historiography, tended to allow the texts under examination to exist as texts in language.

The focus on documenting the linguistic particularity of European literature is necessarily compromised through a circumvention of the rendering and experience of the respective literary languages. *Periods* traces a time frame that witnesses the transition from the creative use of the classical languages towards the development of literature in the vernaculars. Vol. V *The Earlier Renaissance* (1901) by George Saintsbury documents a period that is presented as the hinging point in literary history. The book gives us an indication of the ideological impact of the gradual switch from a universally understood monolingual literary language system to a set of often mutually unintelligible ones, as perceived by fin-de-siècle British scholars. It is with this volume that the series, which hitherto to a large extent presented works written in Latin, along with some composed in vernacular literary languages, moves from being a large-scale study that foremost discusses a monolingual corpus to one that discusses multilingual literary contexts. The comparative work conducted in *Periods* thus becomes more challenging to the experts commissioned to cover the different periods and their own linguistic competence becomes a stronger factor in the distant reading facilitated by the series. Commentary comes to relate to primary materials that are, in part, unreadable for the scholars, thus remain unread, and will not be read by the audience. The distant-reading chain thus relies on the consultation and reproduction of information that cannot be checked or updated, and thus on practices of unreading.

The switch to vernacular literary languages as described by Saintsbury in vol. V is not programmatically represented as the result of politically engineered language planning, but as a logical development towards frankness and immediacy in terms of expression, omitting the proxy or surrogate language of Latin. The conclusion of vol. V describes this turning-point:

> Above all, people are beginning to take a national interest in their own language and their own literature – to determine to write "English matters in the English tongue for English men",

mutatis mutandis; to think of adorning the Sparta that has fallen to their lot. No doubt there are dangers in this as there are in everything; no doubt it leads in time to a most undesirable cutting of literary communications between nation and nation, which becomes worse as the cultivation of the common tongue of Latin for literary purposes becomes more and more unusual. But its advantages far outweigh its defects, and the vernaculars are, in consequence of it, put in a fair way to develop, after a fashion which would have been simply impossible if the mediaeval solidarity had continued, and which, in the case of some languages, though probably not English, is likely to be rather hampered than helped by any restoration of general literary comity. In other words, the great languages are now fairly launched, or on the point of having the dog-shores knocked away, that they must sail the ocean – irremeable certainly, perhaps illimitable – *qua cursum ventus*. (V, 416).

The distance adopted here does not just regard literary phenomena, such as the choice of genre and the type of rhyme prominent during a certain era, but produces a macro-societal commentary on post-Renaissance literary, cultural, and political relations. By using the historical present tense, Saintsbury enacts a moment in the history of language and literature in which, long before the age of nationalism, the benefits of monolingual channelling become compelling and impossible to ignore. By employing a set of nautical metaphors, Saintsbury now presents the monolingualised literary system as purposefully assembled by concerted national effort. The literatures that have been launched to sea are the ones presenting a literary field in the Bourdieuan sense, which connects writers and readers via instituted editorial, productional, and retailing infrastructures of a magnitude that the mediaeval bonds of solidarity would not have allowed for. The nautical metaphor is also significant in that it describes parameters of reception that are not characterised by unmanaged and unmanageable diffusion, but are based on targeted decisions: just as a ship goes to one location at a time, the new literatures have one audience, namely the monolingual speakers of the literary language in question. The route of the monolingual vernacular literature ensures that the literary potential of a nation benefits and adorns that nation – an image that manifests an economy of national interiority. Given the cosmopolitan agenda of *Periods*, we must stress that Saintsbury does advocate for a Europe-wide community of literary scholars and readers. However, the web of mutual interest that he envisages and hopes to create via his project must operate based on juxtaposed monolingual language systems, national or regional. The loss of meaning, intelligibility, and community is an acceptable function of the dynamism fuelling a monolingual literature.

If *Periods* traces the movement towards the monolingualisation of literatures in Europe, the enthusiasm of the contributors is not caused by a prospect of national possession or linguistic purity, but by an embrace of the vigour and authenticity of vernacular literatures. While all contributors admit that a universal literary language, like Latin had been up to the Renaissance, is conducive to pertinent scholarship, comfortable exchange, and formal stability, they also tend to agree that litera-

ture produced in Latin lacks the vivacity of vernacular literature. Due to the *longue durée* orientation of the series, the dynamics between Latin and the respective vernacular languages is a fundamental topic, drawn out extensively in the first half of the volumes. The long process during which Latin lost its prominent position as a literary language all over Europe is rendered in and through a lexicon of metaphors relating to maturity and sin to illustrate the transition of literary languages. The attention paid to juxtaposed literary systems based on language, as in the cases of concurrent use of Latin and vernaculars, indicates that the language of composition is fundamental to its meaning and understanding within and outside of the territory of reception. Saintsbury's *The Earlier Renaissance* is a particularly salient volume of *Periods* as the author considers the 15th century a hinge moment in literary history because "a much greater contingent of positive literary genius turned itself into the channel of Latin writing [...] simply because the vernaculars were not ready to receive it fully" (V, 3). Despite the choice of the spectrum of immaturity to maturity that underlies the series when it comes to rendering the appearance of vernacular literatures, Saintsbury and his contributors write in opposition to the "contempt of [the] vernaculars" (3) that they observe throughout history and which they sometimes deem "excusable" (3), and sometimes view as "the folly of despising the mother tongue" (6).

7 Abstraction as Method of Distant Reading

The community-building meta-literary commentary through which Saintsbury – much like the other contributors – tends to describe his appreciation of the effects of some of the texts at hand, creates a situation in which insight on literature becomes delingualised and resuscitates a view of language and knowledge as disconnected. Such delingualisation is intended to address and include all European readers. It operates, for one, through the abstract description of phenomena that can only be meaningfully experienced directly. In the chapter "The Harvest-Time of Humanism", for instance, Saintsbury tackles the work of the Scottish writer George Buchanan (1506–1582), whom he presents as the "best Latinist living in Europe" at the time (V, 49), writing both in Latin and the vernacular. In relation to the *Psalms*, he notes, in a rare call for first-hand reading,

> That they are sufficiently elegant Latin is quite true; but then elegant Latin is about the last kind of medium suitable for Hebrew Poetry. It is almost impossible to describe, but it is worthwhile to recommend actual experience of, the curious shock of the contrast which strikes one between the fragments of the Vulgate which, as usual, head the versions, and the first lines in the same, or nominally the same, language which follow. (V, 53)

The communication of a characteristic so subjectively determined as the impression of the elegance of linguistic/literary expression, delivered without exemplification, cannot produce insight in the reader. Saintsbury criticises the lack of appeal of the psalms, which he finds heightened by their translation into a language system that cannot make them resonate in a meaningful way due to the ways in which themes and images correlate to sound and syntax. In this instance, we see Saintsbury admit to the limitations of his abstractification of one language being an ill-fitting receptacle for another, assessing indeed that first-hand reading only can generate understanding.

W. P. Ker's vol. 1 *The Dark Ages* (1904), in a discussion of the *Romaunt of the Rose*, institutes a complete, though impossible, first-hand reading of the text as the only way of learning about it. The agenda pronounced by Ker may underlie the general scarcity of quotation in the series: "No quotation can give any proper idea of the amount and the intricacy of allegorical conceits in the Moralia, nor of their influence upon later students. It cannot be described" (I, 134). Ker again questions the very rationale informing the series when dealing with the biographical work of Ekkehard V: "Ekkehard is so good that it is scarcely possible for any modern rendering to take his place. [...] There is no room here for the variety of the book [Ekkehard's Memoirs] and no summary can represent it." (I, 196) The limitations in terms of space are evident, but the deliberate by-passing of engagement with the text as an indicator of its outstanding quality is significant in terms of reader excision.

Saintsbury's presentation of the Icelandic sagas of the 12th to the 14th centuries in vol. II clearly illustrates the abstractifying of parts of multilingual corpora in a monolingual rendering. The subsection "Great Passages of the Sagas" indicates Saintsbury's endeavor to communicate the vividness of literary language as well as his opinion that an understanding of "the wild interest of the story and the vivid individuality of the characters" (II, 360) will be enriching to the readers. He is eager to mimic the readers' imagined reading experience when he quotes isolated translated sentences in his discussion of the Njala saga, as for instance "Eager to find my lady, I have scoured the whole house with the glances of my eyes – in vain" (361), impersonating the readers' reaction by insisting that this "unconscious translation of Aeschylus [...] dwell[s] in the memory as [a] softer [touch]" (II, 360–361). He offers no contextualisation and no literary analysis of the effect he deems the themes and prosody to have on the potential readers. The cultural and literary mediation that he undertakes is primarily executed through the abstractification that provides a synthesis of the elements that make a literary narrative lively:

> The saga prose is straightforward and business-like, the dialogue short and pithy, with considerable interspersion of proverbial phrase, but with, except in the case of bad texts, very little

> obscurity. It is, however, much interspersed also with verses which, like Icelandic verse in general, are alliterative in prosody, and often of the extremest euphuism and extravagance in phrase. All who have even a slight acquaintance with sagas know the extraordinary peri-phrases for common objects, for men and maidens, for ships and swords, that bestrew them. (II, 361)

By adding poetic qualities to the language of his assessment of the sagas' verbosity and variety of style, as in the alliteration of men/maidens and ships/swords, Saintsbury creates an emotive spectacle for the reader without delivering illustration for said qualities of Icelandic verse. He thus informs the readers of the type of verse he has read for them via proxy without allowing for a sense of the rhythm, tone, or meaning of the text as an experience. It becomes clear from the quoted passage that for Saintsbury, genre has categorical and descriptive dimensions capable of rendering experience. Dallas Liddle's Bakhtinian reading of genre can help us mitigate the effects of the omission of quotation. According to Liddle, mid-Victorian readers would have been able to rely on the fixity of genre to approach literary corpora and literary history:

> Not all or even most instances of text in a genre need to be read closely, because most uses of genre – especially journalistic ones – only reproduce ready-made meanings already contained in the genre itself. This is how, and why, genres work so well to enable and mediate communication. To decode most instances of most genres, readers need to understand only their genre-level meaning – what Bakhtin called their worldview. (154)

Given that the manuals that are part of Saintsbury's series are organised in terms of nation and genre, rather than themes and topics, for the authors the recognisability of generic form functioned as an aesthetic and experiential language that all readers understood and appreciated. Reference to genre is an abstraction that can communicate an anticipated, imagined, and maybe internalised response, but it cannot render the expressive particularity that comes with a multilingual corpus. The abstractification is thus designed to render the effect of the language without resorting to quotation or translation. The monolingual descriptions of the experience of literary effect devoid of the particularities of the text in its source language or in translation evoke the possibility of imagined reading.

As indicated in the preface to vol. VII, Saintsbury refrains from using translations whenever he can. As an expert in Romance Studies, he does not, for instance, offer translations for quotations in Provençal. In his chapter on Provençal poetry, his aim is to communicate the essence of this genre. He does so in a manner quite characteristic for the series as a whole, namely by quoting in the source language, structuring an abstract argument around the quote, but not explaining the quote in any way:

> The spirit of this poetry is nowhere better shown than in the refrain of an anonymous *alba*, which begins –
>> "En un verger sotz folha d' albespi,"
>> and which has for burden –
>> "Oi deus! Oi deus, de l'alba, tant tost ve !"
> Of which an adaptation by Mr Swinburne is well known. "In the Orchard," however, is not only a much longer poem than the alba from which it borrows its burden, but is couched in a form much more elaborate, and had a spirit rather early Italian than Provençal. It is, indeed, not very easy to define the Provençal spirit itself, which has sometimes been mistaken, and oftener exaggerated. (II, 367)

Setting out to define the "spirit" (367) of Provençal poetry in the 12th–14th centuries, Saintsbury establishes an abstraction as an explanatory model of the particularities of a poetic manifestation. He wishes to render the spirit of a vast corpus of lament poetry via a single verse that few readers would have understood and does not indicate what he wishes them to look out for.

The absence of authorial mediation can be seen as a symptom of the wish to instantiate understanding of European literatures and languages without the experience of the source texts themselves. The chapter on Provençal troubadour poetry illustrates the juxtaposition of monolingual fragments in different languages, rather than the interpretation or discussion of non-Anglophone texts in English:

> In succession to [the two most famous pieces of Troubadour anecdotic history], Count Rambaut of Orange and Countess Beatrice of Die keep up the reputation of the *gai saber* as an aristocratic employment, and the former's poem –
>> "Escoutaz mas no sai que s'es"
> (in six-lined stanzas, rhymed *ababab*, with prose "tags" to each, something in the manner of the modern comic song), is at least a curiosity.

The rendering of the multilingual nature of the corpus tends to be superficial and works based on the mention, not the reading or analysis, of passages of the selected texts. The descriptive detailing of formal elements, without the illustration through quotation and in no relation to the verse quoted just before, is designed to replace the prosodic experience of the source poem. The consequent encryption of meaning functions via the framing of the quote in English and the citing of the text in Provençal. Saintsbury wishes the readers to arrive at the level of insight they would have acquired after reading numerous albas without extensive quotation, translation, and close reading. This circumvention of literary language and necessary scholarly guidance, however, is likely to have failed its aim. The immediate comparison of an unknown and undescribed Provençal poem to a better-known one in English, as well as the complaint that the "Provençal spirit" is indeed difficult to define, further increases the distance between the literary historiography and the lament

at hand. Distant reading, in this instance, is no longer productive or scholarly, as understanding becomes esoteric.

7 Conclusion

By revealing formal and thematic correspondences between literatures and literary works, as well as showing priorities and absences, Saintsbury and his contributors certainly affected the perceptions of literature and culture held by their readers. They offered new avenues for identification by presenting new or alternative spectra of ideas manifest in the vast corpora at hand. It is conceivable that the make-up and content of the series also implicitly encouraged a sense of belonging to a European community, composed of the nations the respective contributors consecrated as significant producers of literature. The foremost objective of *Periods* is to build a community of readers marked by the awareness of and respect for European literatures beyond their respective national ones. The achievement of the series does not lie in the actuation of the potential meaning inherent in the deciphering of literary narratives, but in the wish to include them into a consultable archive structured around the recognisable features of nation, language, and genre. The removal of distance in terms of language is overcome via monolingual description and contextualisation so large-scale it can appear to have disappeared since it is not applied to single works and their thematic and aesthetic dimensions. The task of large-scale text-management has led to an amalgamation of multilingual literature and scholarship into a monolingual commentary, which, in the end, does not comment as much as it seeks to stand in for the act of actualised reading.

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