

Modern Times. Literary Change

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Preface

This book presents a sample of the research-in-progress conducted within the University of Leuven research program (GOA) “Literature and its Multiple Identities.” Run by the MDRN-group, this program aims to rethink modern literary history by investigating how Western European (French, Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch and English) literature during the period between 1900 and 1950 was defined and legitimized. Five decades of marked cultural and political instability, the first half of the 20th century provides an ideal testing ground for gauging the many histories, functions and mediatizations of modern writing. This book records the program’s first steps in that direction.

The book opens with a manifesto that previously appeared in French in the journal *Fabula LHT* in a slightly different version. In the manifesto, co-authored by all MDRN-researchers, we set out how the dynamic nature of modern writing in general could be conceived and studied. The five chapters that follow the manifesto present a series of contrasting case studies that in various ways set the manifesto to work on writing from the period 1900-1950, foregrounding in particular new work of younger researchers within the MDRN-group. The last section of the book rounds up our argument and discusses a number of further implications of the approach we advocate.

For more information on MDRN’s research,
visit www.mdrn.be.

ABC of Literary History

1 We are all literary historians. The practice of literary history is once again at the heart of literary studies, responding to a genuinely felt need, among both specialists and a wider public, for historical accounts of literature. The multiplication in recent decades of theoretical reflection on literary history (from the New Historicism to evolutionary theory and beyond) bears witness to this. However, despite, or perhaps because of, its centrality today, literary history remains a difficult genre. While there is a consensus on its necessity, there is arguably no agreement on how to write it.

1.1 If traditional, 19th-century models of literary history today appear abandoned, their basic principles continue to haunt the way in which many readers (and certain critics) think about literature and history. The basic principles of those older models are well rehearsed. First, literary history should chart the canon, not the whole of literature and least of all those genres which were once considered to be minor. Second, texts are to be valued on the grounds of their own stylistic, compositional and aesthetic merits. As a result, authors, oeuvres, and texts here form the principal objects of study. Third, literary history is to be conceived as a chronological sequence. Fourth, and paradoxically, literary history should stress the transcendental nature of canonical writing, thereby inadvertently denying literature's full historicity in yet another way: Proust, Joyce or Musil were not only men of their own time; they are above all men of all ages, permanent contemporaries.

1.2

These principles have been criticized from a great many angles and quite a few alternative models have been developed. Sizing down the scale of traditional literary historical models, many recent literary historians have opted for often very detailed close readings of literary texts, their institutional embedding or their relationship to wider cultural forces. Indeed, describing case studies that sum up a historical moment (be it a day, a year, or a decade) has become a new orthodoxy for many recent histories of modern literature and culture, both national as well as transnational. This alternative model is driven by a bottom-up logic rather than by the problematic, panoramic view of older models, but it also remains true to the older principles it seeks to leave behind. For the selection of important events and their reconstruction, however complex, continues to voice a belief in the symptomatic and exemplary character of chosen fragments.

1.3

An opposite approach, favoring the larger scale, has been tried and tested as well in recent years. For literature can of course also be thought of within a *longue durée*, in relation to the entirety of writing on the planet, transcending all (regional, national or linguistic) borders (see, for instance the notion of “deep time” and the many histories advocating the idea of a world or planetary literature). On the surface, this large-scale approach also distinguishes itself from traditional literary history, yet in practice it too takes its cue from the universalist understanding of literature.

2

These and other attempts of recent years to devise new models for literary history are exciting and challenging, but they have not yet led to a broader rethinking of the notions of literature and history.

2.1

All aspects of literature to a great extent depend on pre-existing rules and constraints that surpass the individual and so-called “singular” events or acts of reading and writing. Our conceptions of literature, the way we put literary texts to use as well as the type of judgment (aesthetic or other) that we formulate about texts are all linked to their context, and, as a consequence, more norm-governed and more normative than we usually like to admit. Any reflection on the notions of literature and history, too, inevitably participates in this social dynamic.

2.2

Common sense dictates that texts always change (we do not read the same Don Quixote, for despite Pierre Ménard a text’s material form does change). Furthermore, very few would oppose the claim that our contact with and experience of literature is also subject to change (the protocols of contemporary reading do not coincide with those of half a century ago). Finally, we all agree that our views and ideas about literature change as well (the fuzzy boundaries between literature, paraliterature and non-literature need but be recalled). Hence, *literature does not exist; it becomes*.

3

These observations are of no small consequence, because they invite us not to ask what literature is (good, true literature of course), but to examine how literature *functions* in one particular context or the other,

not for the sake of generalizing what the specific case reveals, but in order to obtain a clearer view of what appears to be unique and incomparable. Not only in terms of texts' contexts or space-times, but also in terms of their material presentation and the uses to which they are and have been put.

3.1 Such a *functionalist* approach leads to an expansion of what we traditionally consider to be part of "literature." In so doing, this approach further challenges traditional literary history to venture into alternative directions. For, if the most conspicuous feature of literature is not its being but its becoming, then literary history should first and foremost come to terms with the ways in which literature changes.

3.2 In "What is an Author?" (1969) Michel Foucault famously introduced the notion of the "author function." For Foucault the name of an author not only refers to the subject outside the text, but also to the special status of the discourse to which that subject's name is attached: a text or discourse provided with an author *functions* differently than other discourses (from the identification of genres to the positioning within the larger field of textual production).

3.3 In the wake of Foucault's displacement, we introduce the notion of the "literature function." This notion does not refer to the fact that literature is defined by internal or external functions (say, to please, to instruct or to inform), but to the fact that it is itself a function, that is, a feature tied to a certain type of texts with the aim of attributing them a role or a function designated

as "literary." When studying how literature changes, it seems obvious to give pride of place to this function and its many permutations.

4 Modern literature is a cultural form in permanent evolution. While there are numerous ways to describe the basic building blocks involved in the process of literary change, we propose to view literature as constituted of *objects*, *discourses*, *practices* and *media*.

4.1 Literary objects are principally texts (understood in the widest possible sense). These objects themselves change continuously. Even different editions of the same text should be considered as new objects, because even if the typeface and lay-out remain the same, their context, and therefore their meaning and their function might vary.

4.2 Literary objects cannot be separated from all sorts of discourses that evaluate and judge them. Naming, classifying, and regrouping individual texts are types of judgment, and the same is true of discourses that evaluate a text in light of general ideas, as for instance propriety or beauty. Many discourses thus bear the trace of a *doxa*, which is often revealed by the appeal to a certain aesthetic of writing or recourse to certain metaphors (such as those presenting literature as a library, a body or a spirit). Discourses on literature invariably define the boundary between what is considered to be (more) literary and what is not (or less). Furthermore, they propose (that is, try to impose) ideas about the best way to create and read literature. In short, saying what literature *ought to be*, they always entail a normative dimension,

which they nonetheless often try to conceal, for example by emphasizing the “natural” character of their viewpoints.

4.3

Furthermore, literature is made up of practices, of certain acts and experiences, individual as well as collective, that accompany the dialogue between objects and discourses. These practices often have a ritual dimension: public lectures, book-signing sessions, interviews, state funerals or the publication of anthologies. Such practices do not only reflect the temporal and the historical, but also the geographical and the cultural situatedness of literature. They further constitute literature’s institutional context, and for all these reasons it is important to include them in every discussion of literary change.

4.4

Irreducible to the above constituents of literature is medium. Objects, discourses and practices always come with a medial aspect, in that they cannot be conceived without taking into account their material support: paper for those who write, radio for those who comment on these writings, the theatre where the author receives her or his prize. However, the concept of medium cannot be restricted to the material support of each separate object, discourse or practice. The material conditions of modern, and especially late modern, writing are such that we above all need to canvass the productive relationships between all these separate elements. We write in a different way depending on the supporting medium, we comment differently depending on whether radio or television is the intended medium, and we present different prizes, and according to different criteria, depending on the institutional context of each practice.

5

Viewing literature as a function emerging from a constellation of objects, discourses, practices and media requires that we also consider the ways in which literature represents and legitimizes itself and/or how it is assigned legitimization by non-literary objects, discourses and practices. Put differently, it is necessary that we assess how literature, as a function, is represented and legitimized, both within and outside the literary realm.

5.1

Traditionally, in European literary studies, modern literature from Romanticism onward is said to be subjected to a process of growing autonomization. While this teleological and panoramic account of modern literature’s history effaces the complexity of literary change, it poignantly illustrates how modern literature always constitutes and marks itself as a distinct set of discourses.

5.2

The ways in which these discourses define and legitimize modern literature are considered to be varied and diverse. Yet in general terms they fall within a spectrum of possibilities that oscillate between a stress on autonomy on one hand (here, literature obeys its own rules and serves exclusively literary purposes) and an emphasis on heteronomy on the other (here literature presents itself as driven by extra-literary goals; literature is a means to another, non-literary end). This implies that we also need to take into consideration literature’s dialogue with other discourses such as those of philosophy, history, politics, religion, science or law, as well as literature’s ongoing conversation with other forms of artistic production, such as painting, music, photography and cinema.

5.3

In these dialogues, literature often takes its others as its object, as motifs in its own discourse, so as to grant itself legitimacy and specificity. As literary elements are integrated into the literary discourse they always are reinterpreted, transformed, restructured and hierarchically arranged, that is, finally, “literarized.” The way in which Karl Krauss made journalistic patches subject to “détournement” is an apt illustration. A similar logic is at work when direct political force and power are involved. Political systems can define literature’s role and impose literary forms upon literature, but even the most orthodox idea when formulated in a *roman à thèse* functions differently than when it is expounded in an ideological tract.

5.4

The fact that literature’s legitimacy is in part determined by non-literary discourses, objects and practices further widens the phenomena we traditionally consider to be part of “literature.” When a literary text stages a trial or scaffolds lawyers and judges, ever-changing legal objects, discourses and practices become part of the literary as well. Similarly, the dialogue between literature and other discourses makes us aware of the need to look at literary objects, discourses and practices outside the canon and beyond “high” literature. So-called “middlebrow” literature is a case in point. Assigning itself different roles (aesthetic, didactic, entertaining), middlebrow writing ultimately grounds its legitimacy on the claim to make “high” cultural forms accessible to a wider readership. Logically, “lowbrow” writing or paraliterature as well enter the scope of any assessment of literature’s constantly evolving nature. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, viewing literature in its dialogue with other dis-

courses also invites us to reconsider canonical writing itself, for example, by unearthing the social dimension of the most self-proclaimed autonomist, and seemingly intransitive, canonical texts.

5.5

Paying attention to literature’s intimate ties to non-literary discourses, and the resultant expansion of “literature,” further requires that we cross traditional disciplinary divides. When law becomes literature, as in the above example, we can no longer content ourselves with restricting ourselves to the boundaries of literary studies. When works of literature are introduced in non-literary constellations, literature’s role and function in turn are often redefined. When, for instance, a literary text is turned into a film, it too becomes literature; if an adaptation is a genuine “reading” of a work, one has to face the consequence: the film adaptation is then part of literary history. What is more, cinema can also portray authors, both fictional and real, in specific fashions. In so doing, cinema not only incites the necessity of incorporating film studies in literary history. It also exemplifies that the “uses” of literature, the legitimacy of literature, are always multiple and complex.

6

Any historical approach to modern literature inevitably stumbles upon the way in which writing’s ever-changing objects, media, discourses and practices constantly affect one another. The materiality of writing’s supporting media requires special attention to grasp the changing nature of literature.

6.1 Literature's medial composition is inevitably plural. First, although the book or codex is most often put center-stage in the history of the book and related reception, it is important to realize that it is inherently heterogeneous, as its signs stem from different media. A text to be read is also a thing to be seen, heard, and sensed in a variety of still other ways. Second, literature cannot be confined to the inherently plural medium of the "book." A different form of plurality emerges when we bring into scope literature's media mobility: texts can change from one supporting medium to another (when digitized, for instance), oral discourse can become printed or vice versa, one institutional practice can be replaced by another (for example, when a writer's speech in a lecture hall is transmitted on television).

6.2 Media changes in literary objects, discourses and practices can occur internally as well as externally.

6.2.1 Internal changes involve modifications within one medium. A different kind of paper (we need only look at the way paper ages) changes the way we read. Turning a hardback into a pocket edition modifies its status (and subsequently its reading). Adding a new cover illustration may alter the interpretation of a text. Introducing a text for the first time in a classroom may impact its status in the literary field. It is important to understand that such and other internal changes constantly occur, and that they often in turn affect events elsewhere.

6.2.2 External changes are ubiquitous as well. They arise when, for instance, a literary object passes from one composite medium to another. Simplifying, we could say that these changes fall into three big categories. First, there is adaptation, a well-known phenomenon and doubtlessly as old as "literature" itself (the written record of ancient epics is an example of an adaptation dating back to antiquity). Next, there is the competition between different media, driven by the idea that each new medium, considered stronger and more efficient than its predecessors, replaces the others in a process of endless re-mediatization, a topic of hefty debate since the work of McLuhan. Finally, there are the hybrid mediatizations where literary language is completed by a non-verbal medial element (graphic novels, photo-novellas, visual poetry, etc.).

6.3 Media historians often describe, if not a certain teleology, then at least a sort of progressive logic in the mutations within the media sphere. Thanks to the development of new (infra)structures, information gradually comes to circulate better, faster, easier and with ever more freedom. Such teleology is less conspicuous in literary history. Here, the weight (if not the inspiration) of tradition remains strong. Here, the bond between old and new may actually be more intense and more productive than in other cultural practices, to such an extent that anachronisms are perfectly legitimate. At the same time, literary changes associated with media mutations can also prove very sudden. Hence, the constitutive role of literature's material and medial manifestation should at all times be scrutinized in order to grasp literature's dynamic character.

7 No-one single-handedly determines the course of literary history. As a result, the discourses and practices of professional readers (critics, teachers, librarians, theorists, historians, among others) do not have a monopoly on literary history. Writers themselves too, of course, are very often literary historians. And what to say about the many other readers (minorities, but especially majorities) so frequently ignored by (traditional) literary histories? The often rebellious, popular, at times somewhat “naïve” contributions of certain non-professionals, whether they are “lambda” readers or members of other institutions (legal, political, scientific, etc.) cannot be neglected, even though they are unfamiliar with the uses and customs (and, consequently, the shared values) of the literary enterprise. All and everyone’s ideas of what literature is or should be contribute to its change and to the complex procedure of its legitimization.

8 If modern literature becomes (and never is), it should accordingly be thought of in dynamic terms. Those terms inevitably abandon traditional, teleological models and principles of literary history. For the forces and processes involved in literary change are complex, multidirectional and often diametrically opposed. The models and methods of periodization we evoked above seem unfit to grasp such dynamic constellations. Both the traditional models (advocating internal homogeneity and evoking a linear chain of periods, styles, schools and movements) as well as more recent larger and smaller-scale models pay insufficient attention to what is perhaps the one element characterizing all of modern literature at every point and instance: change.

8.1 It goes without saying that change in literature is multiple and reveals the coexistence of forces both distinct and potentially opposed. The density and complexity of change in literature is constituted, for instance, by a whole series of frictions between models of stability and transformation, of tradition and innovation, of repetition and invention. Think of the many authors who, thought of as progressive, nevertheless make use of literary techniques considered conventional or fossilized (for example, the many classicist and folklorist elements in the work of the Generation of ’27 in Spain). Alternatively, writers who are considered to be traditionalists often showcase innovative techniques and surprising stylistic feats (Céline introducing slang as literary language, for instance). More generally, well-known phenomena such as the tradition of innovation or the innovation of tradition equally testify to this complexity. Logically, literature is co-determined by both tendencies. This requires that we study notions like evolution, revolution, innovation, crisis and avant-garde. But at the same time (literally!), it also demands that we pay attention to less popular, but equally important concepts such as the classic, the anti-modern, cessation, return and *arrière-garde*.

8.2 Apart from the direction of literary history, we should also look at its rhythm and tempo. Literary change is not only characterized by a series of conflicting moves on different levels in divergent directions. It also operates at different speeds on a variety of levels. Not only is there the ever-present tension between change and immobility, between progress and reaction, between revolution and a return to order, as voiced for instance in the “modern classicism” of the magazine *La*

Ronda. Throughout history, acceleration (sometimes to the point of vertigo) and deceleration (often until stasis is reached) are inseparable. As such, the temporality of modern literature is at all times multiple as well.

8.3

Modern literature's objects, discourses, and practices are always evidence of a conflict between three – or, perhaps more accurately, four – possible positions: the dominant, the residual, the emergent, but also the *potential* (that which could exist, without necessarily realizing itself).

8.3.1

At any moment in history these historical conflicts are visible; any slice of literary history (be it large or small scale) reveals the interplay between these various positions, which are equally likely to resist as to ignore one another. We can say that literary objects, discourses, and practices are always perceived in light of what, at any given moment within a given context, appears to be dominant, what appears to be associated with the past, and what appears to be new. In this respect, any text, discourse or practice is less a symptom of broader social processes than an index of the mechanics of literary history.

8.3.2

While it is a truism to argue that the past as well as the new form part of the present, it seems counterintuitive to claim that non-events constitute that same moment. For that reason the potential is of particular interest. It ranges from the idea of a literary absolute in Romanticism, over the utopian notion, since Lautréamont, of a literature “made by all,” to the desire to abolish the boundary between literary and ordi-

nary language. The potential thus signals not so much the things excluded, dismissed, or censored, but the thwarted ambitions, failures, never realized possibilities or dead-ends of literature. Literary history should treat them not simply as (failed) facts, but as an inherent part of the objects, discourses, and practices at any particular moment.

8.3.3

Since every event in literature, be it viewed synchronically or diachronically, is marked by change, we should also recognize that there is a multiplicity of presents, that is, multiple ways in which certain objects, discourses and practices position themselves in (and against) time and history. Hence the traditional idea that different literary traditions (French, German, Spanish, etc.) do not transform or sustain themselves in the same way, often being marked by quite different rhythms. Hence, also, the oft-encountered sense that literature is trailing (or ahead of) the changes discernible in other artistic or social domains. On a different plane, the temporalities of traditional literary historiography and literature are manifold. In traditional literary history, it is not uncommon to recuperate an innovation by a single writer in tested ways, for instance by situating and domesticating it within a writer's developing oeuvre. In literature, by contrast, older forms are often seized upon to create advances (the rediscovery of then recently published poetic fragments of Sappho, Japanese and Chinese poetry in Anglophone modernism, for example).

9

By consequence, a dynamic approach to literature thinks less in terms of literature's “properties” than in terms of literary strategy. In the first case, the dynamic and ever-shifting nature of writing seems but one of its

many characteristics. In the second, however, change constitutes the framework in which any literary event (be it an object, discourse, practice, medium or a combination thereof) becomes legible and acquires meaning. Any model for critical reading or literary history thus should not only recognize that change encompasses the whole of literature, including those things we feel are most resistant to it. It should also tell and show that the same process of change affects the practice of critical reading and history.

10 Looking at literature as something that becomes rather than is, generates a whole series of questions without immediately providing answers. The pleasure of the text does no longer require a manifesto. The pleasure of studying literary change does. We need new modes and models for writing literary history. There might be many.