

*A panorama of literature in its cultural context—
music, painting, politics, and monuments public and private*

A NEW

HISTORY

of FRENCH

LITERATURE

Edited by Denis Hollier

❧ A NEW
HISTORY *of*
FRENCH
LITERATURE

EDITED BY
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Introduction

Conceived for the general reader, this volume presents French literature not as a simple inventory of authors or titles, but rather as a historical and cultural field viewed from a wide array of contemporary critical perspectives. Neither of the traditional modes of encyclopedic presentation—continuous historical narrative or alphabetical “dictionary”—seemed adequate for such an undertaking. The former, while attempting complete coverage, introduces masses of often irrelevant information, and the latter artificially homogenizes literature into linear genealogies.

Insofar as the essays that follow are each introduced by a date and are arranged in chronological order, they observe the general presentation of a history of literature. But both individually and cumulatively they question our conventional perception of the historical continuum. Each date is followed by a “headline,” evoking an event, which specifies not so much the essay’s content as its chronological point of departure. Usually the event is literary—typically the publication of an original work, of a journal, or of a translation; the first performance of a play; the death of an author. But some events are literary only in terms of their repercussions, and some of those repercussions are far removed from their origins in time or place. The juxtaposition of these events is designed to produce an effect of heterogeneity and to disrupt the traditional orderliness of most histories of literature: essays devoted to a genre coexist with essays devoted to one book, institutions are presented alongside literary movements, large surveys next to detailed analysis of specific landmarks.

No article is conceived as a comprehensive presentation of a single author. There are, for example, several Rousseaus: the Rousseau of the *Essai sur l'origine des langues* (1754? *Essay on the Origin of Languages*), the Rousseau of the *Lettre à M. d'Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758; *Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theater*), the Rousseau of *Du contrat social* (1762; *On the Social Contract*), and the Rousseau of *Les confessions* (1782–1789). Proust also appears through various lenses: fleetingly, in connection with Antoine Galland’s translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* (1704; *Les mille et une nuits*); in 1898, in connection with the Dreyfus

Affair; in 1905, on the occasion of the law on the separation of church and state; in 1911, in relation to Gide and their different treatments of homosexuality; and in 1922 on the occasion of his death. The concept of *period* has undergone a fragmentation analogous to that of author. Rather than following the usual periodization schemes by centuries, as often as possible we have favored much briefer time spans and focused on nodal points, coincidences, returns, resurgences.

Without pretending to cover every author, work, and cultural development since the Serments de Strasbourg in 842, this history attempts to be both informative and critical. It presents the classical canon next to both its rivals and its opponents. In setting forth not only their knowledge but also their points of view and their choices, the contributors offer encounters with the major methodological and ideological positions in today's literary studies.

Although each essay is conceived as an independent entity, connections to discussions of related interest in the volume are flagged by a *See also* at the conclusion of many essays. Titles of French works are followed at their first occurrence by their date of publication and a translation of the title in parentheses. Old spellings of proper names and titles have been modernized. All quotations are given in English and are followed by a brief reference to a source listed in the bibliography following each article.

The Editors

On Writing Literary History

One of the most selfless of today's international humanitarian institutions is called Médecins sans Frontières, Doctors without Borders. Literature, however, selfless or not, never comes without borders. Not only, as Rousseau said, does language distinguish humans from animals, but also, as he added, languages distinguish nations from one another.

National borders are not the only ones dividing literature. Borders also exist between genders, classes, and generations, between the oral and the written, between writing and reading; and all these are significant. It is also true that the linguistic map of the world is not identical with the political one, and that the nationalistic celebration of borders is not the only way of accounting for their existence. Works of literature are not as tightly bound to place as are architectural ones, or to time as are political acts. The most significant aspects of the Western idea of literature are embodied in the book, a physical object that circulates more easily through the world than any oral utterance; able to overstep the borders enclosing vernacular languages, it is less tightly anchored to local history and geography. But despite this kind of freedom, literature's production and consumption remain for the most part shaped by the nonuniversality of languages, framed by the experience of frontiers. The necessity of translation (as well as its many impossibilities) is part of its definition: literature is both lost and found in translation. Esperanto might be a linguistic utopia; but it will remain a language with no literature.

This linguistic anchorage is responsible for the commonly held idea that literary historians ought to belong to the same linguistic background as their object: literary history has to be written by natives, from within; one is entitled to write only the history of one's own literature. This almost autobiographical dimension was underlined by Chateaubriand when he remarked in his *Essai sur la littérature anglaise* (1836; *Essay on English Literature*): "It's hilarious to find out who our great writers are in London, Vienna, Berlin, Petersburg, Munich, Leipzig, Göttingen, Cologne" (*Essai*, 2:235). And, having written his survey of English literature in Paris, he must admit the inevitable corollary for his own effort: "I have just expressed my opinion on a whole crowd of English authors:

it is very possible . . . that my judgments will seem impertinent and grotesque on the other side of the Channel" (p. 236).

Chateaubriand's worries, of course, are more those of a writer than of a scholar, as much about being known as about knowing. And after expressing his concerns for "our great writers" he joins their ranks and speaks in his own name—"we great men"—bitterly depicting the aspect of the Romantic departmentalization of literature to which his desire for fame made him most sensitive, the end of universal literary glory: "In Vienna, Petersburg, Berlin, London, Lisbon, Madrid, Rome, Paris, no one will ever have the same and identical view of a German, English, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, French poet, as we do with Virgil and Homer . . . We great men count on filling the world with our fame, but, whatever we do, it will scarcely cross the borders at which our language expires" (*Essai*, 2:237–238). Modernity has brought the loss of universal standards. With the European republic of letters now divided into national literatures, no nation willingly ratifies the local fame of its competitors. Fame, now tied to languages, ends just where languages do.

The nationalization of literary fame is coeval with the Romantic vision of literature inaugurated in France by Germaine de Staël's *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (1801; *The Influence of Literature upon Society*). Staël's work is rightly considered to be the charter of the twin decanonizing disciplines, literary history and comparative literature. From this date on, literary studies sought to contextualize the productions of the mind, to present them as conforming to a cultural ecology, to reconstruct, as biology does for living organisms, the milieu that allowed them to appear and to grow. Tastes, which are a function of context, took the place of rules, which are not: each era, each nation, came to be viewed in terms of its own values, its own style. Despite the singular *littérature* in its title, Staël's book has a pluralizing message: *Des littératures*.

Such contextualization also rooted literary works in their geographic soil: the *genius loci*, like Sartre's legendary bananas, could be tasted only on the spot. Whether oral or written, they traveled no longer. *Scripta restant*. Instead, readers started traveling specifically as readers. Reflecting the Romantics' taste for *couleur locale*, most early French literary historians drew their inspiration from what we would call today anthropology (or cultural tourism), concerning themselves with non-French as well as with proto and early French literatures. Staël's career as a historian of literature, for example, was a consequence of exile: she wrote *De l'Allemagne* (1813; *On Germany*) because Napoleon, instead of asking the most brilliant *femme de lettres* of his time to influence society, banished her from Paris. Similarly, Chateaubriand's *Essai* owes everything to his sojourns in England, first as an exile, later as an ambassador. Jean-Jacques Ampère, who introduced the term *littérature comparée* in French, described his speciality as "traveling criticism" (*critique en voyage*); an active globetrotter, he visited Germany and Sweden before writing about "Northern Literatures," and Greece before writing about Homer. The challenge was to bridge the historical or geographic gap separating the contexts of the work and of its Romantic revival.

For the French, who, throughout the Enlightenment, considered their language to be the voice of the universal, this nationalization almost came to mean their own cultural death. As late as 1784, for example, Antoine de Rivarol had read in Berlin a somewhat immodest discourse, *De l'universalité de la langue française* (*On the Universality of the French Language*), in which he declared bluntly: "The time has come to call the world French" (p. 2); and the arrogance of such a statement did not prevent Prussia's Frederick the Great from acclaiming it. Yet even then the time had in fact passed for calling a sizable part of the world French: in the 1763 Treaty of Paris, France had given up Canada to England and Louisiana to Spain, a geopolitical reapportionment that resulted in France's "exclusion from the world where the human race begins anew" (Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* [1849; *Memoirs from beyond the Grave*], 1:317). The Romantic view of literature also was at odds with the neoclassical agenda that ruled most French cultural institutions after the Revolution, typified by the very name—*lycée* (lyceum)—given by Bonaparte in 1802 to secondary schools. Accordingly, the first histories of French literature, which sought above all else to defend classical stability against Romantic relativism, were resolutely antihistorical. Désiré Nisard's *Histoire de la littérature française* (1841–1861) praised "what is constant, essential, immutable in *l'esprit français*" (1:9); it presented this French mind as untouched by evolution, as "always identical with itself" (4:540). In his 1810 letter censoring *De l'Allemagne*, Napoleon's police minister had told Staël: "We are not yet reduced to looking for models among the nations you admire" (*De l'Allemagne*, 1:39). Nisard, thirty years later, still wanted to spare French literature the vicissitudes of change, the trials of otherness: looking beyond the borders of France for inspiration could only be fatal for it. French literature was different from all others precisely because in it there was nothing "merely local" (1:18). The same "chauvinisme transcendantal," as Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve (*Causeries du lundi* [1859; *Monday Chats*], 11:465) characterized Nisard's position, was expressed even more graphically, around the same time, in the concept of *nationalité*, still a neologism when Emile Littré included an article on it in his 1866 *Dictionnaire de la langue française*. His dissymmetrical definition contrasted a statement about the phenomenon elsewhere ("the principle of nationalities is in the process of transforming Germany") with a disclaimer about its operative-ness in France, allegedly derived from Napoleon Bonaparte: "Les Français n'ont point de nationalité" ("French people have no nationality at all"). This blindness to one's own nationalism survived the 19th century. Ingrained against the most obvious goodwill, it would lead Sartre himself, in the same year that he wrote his diatribe against "La nationalisation de la littérature" (1947; "The Nationalization of Literature"), to publish *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (*What Is Literature?*), a dazzling short history of French literature whose title seems to imply that for him there simply was no literature outside France.

Nisard, as director of the Ecole Normale Supérieure from 1857 until the fall of the Second Empire in 1870, practically controlled the teaching of literature in French secondary schools. In institutionalizing the rhetorical resistance

against the progress of history, he delayed in France the defeat of rhetoric by science. Elsewhere in Europe, the mid-19th century witnessed the development of a growing gap between history and literature. History, seeking legitimation as a scientific discipline, entered the university by withdrawing from the republic of letters. Modern historians wanted to be admired not for the way they wrote, but for what they wrote. This change in focus from eloquence to research transformed the teaching of literature in high schools: students were required no longer to admire and imitate, to compete with the eloquence of classical models, but to analyze, describe, and judge. Gérard Genette summarizes this pedagogical shift in his essay "Rhétorique et enseignement" (1969; "Rhetoric and Teaching"): "From a model, literature turned into an object; scholarly discourse was no longer a literary discourse but a discourse about literature" (*Figures II*, p. 30). Gustave Lanson's 1895 *Histoire de la littérature française* is, in that sense, the first work to deserve (and to claim fully) the status of history. As director of the same Ecole Normale Supérieure in the 1920s, Lanson thus exerted the same influence that Nisard had on the teaching of literature, but to an opposite end. For him, literary history had a political function as a tool of national reconciliation; in its space, former enemies—Catholics and Protestants, the Ancients and the Moderns, the classics and the Romantics—were able to coexist. The emergence of the discipline of comparative literature fulfilled an identical function, but at the international level. Comparative literature is the 20th-century version of the 18th-century republic of letters.

For the Romantics, the chief border affecting literary history was the linguistic one separating nations; for the positivist historians it was the epistemological border separating a scientific discourse from its object. For the comparativists there is yet a third, implicit border: the one separating the literary and the nonliterary. "Like humanity, Literature is one," René Wellek and Austin Warren proclaim in their *Theory of Literature* (p. 50). But in overcoming the conflicts of nationalities, comparative literature also obliterates the singularity of idioms. Thus, although Wellek and Warren analyze what the status of a poem owes to its being oral or written, to being read aloud or read silently, to what extent it is dependent on its typographical presentation, and even whether it can be affected by the occurrence of typographical errors, they never address the fact that the signs of a literary work of art also belong—for reasons that are essential to its definition—to a given idiom. The question of translation is totally ignored. Literature's independence of languages is a prerequisite for enclosing the literary work of art within its own border.

Such an essentialism does not preclude per se a historical approach to literature. Wellek claims on the contrary that it provides the ground for a true literary history. Replacing both a theory of literature unable to account for its evolution and a view of history unable to account for the literary, a formalist literary history will finally grasp literature's own historicity, literature changing as literature and for literary reasons. Methodological debates concerning literary history traditionally focus on the relations between what is inside and what is

outside a literary work, between its content and its context. Whether they intend to demonstrate literature's independence of any contextual influence, its enforced responsiveness to what occurs in its surroundings, or its evolution according to its own laws, all these versions of literary history require that it always be clear what is inside and what outside, where literature starts and where it ends, where one enters and where one leaves literature.

Today it is increasingly difficult to draw one solid line of demarcation between the inside and the outside of a work of art; sometimes it is even impossible to distinguish between form and background. Context itself has been "textualized": Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot define modern art as being "out of work"; Hans Robert Jauss moves it outward toward its reception; Gérard Genette is concerned with the editorial procedures by which a text is severed from its author—the "paratextual," external presentation that makes a book out of it; Jacques Derrida insists on margins, on frames, on the parergon, the "hors-livre" that his translator renders as the "outwork." One enters literature by leaving it. There is no reliable checkpoint; it is impossible to say where it starts and where it ends. Literature is engrossed by what takes its place. The possibility of a history of literature is thus dependent on both literature's resistance to history and literature's resistance to literature. Literature wants to be everything—but beside itself. As a result, the question today is no longer, as it still was for Sartre, "What is literature?" but rather, "What is not?"

For us, the space of literature is mapped according to more complex and more delicate strategies, which, though not denying the inescapable partisanisms that go with the politics of language, are no longer contained by national politics. Its focus has shifted from the assertion of borders through literature and the presentation of a literature within borders, to a questioning that results in the proliferation of those borders. Such a questioning, occurring both within and outside literature, both constitutes and undoes literature.

What French person, asked Chateaubriand, would not smile at the idea of a history of French literature composed outside France's own frontiers? This *New History of French Literature* has been written from both sides of as many borders as possible.

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