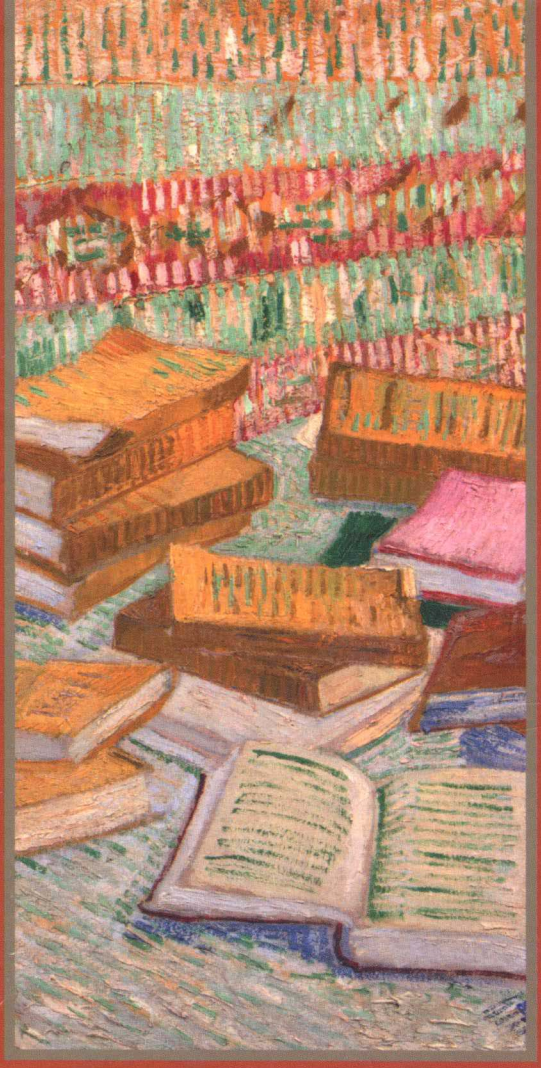
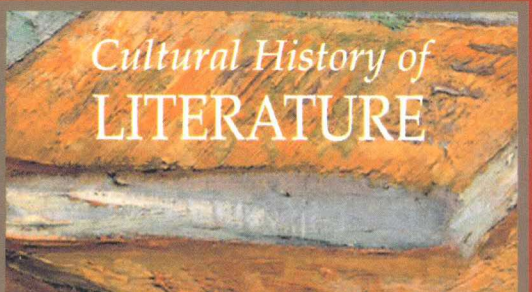


ALISON FINCH

French Literature



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A Cultural History

ALISON FINCH

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In loving memory of my husband Malcolm Bowie, 1943–2007

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Note on References, Bibliography and Translations

Since this book is aimed at a wide audience, I avoid footnotes and give page references only for major quotations, but I have drawn on the work of many specialists and provide as full a bibliography of secondary works as possible. (Page references always refer to the editions cited in the bibliography.) Life-dates are given for most authors discussed, except very minor ones or those mentioned only in passing; some dates are repeated where this might be helpful. Italics, ellipses and translations are mine unless otherwise stated. Published translations are sometimes slightly adjusted.

Contents

Introduction

The body of writing that we call 'French literature' has had a striking impact on the rest of the Western world. Courtly romance spread all across Europe from the mid-twelfth century on, as did French models of chivalric behaviour and love, originating in these romances and the troubadour tradition whose golden age was between about 1160 and 1230. These still shape our ways of thinking, even of feeling. Montaigne's essays (1572–92), translated into English in 1603 and rapidly into other European languages, influenced Shakespeare and have left an indelible impression on European culture. The ideas and even the phrases current in France during the eighteenth century spurred on the American Revolution and contributed to the wording of the American Declaration of Independence (1776); theories of democracy and tolerance either conceived or publicized by the French Enlightenment continue to govern Western liberal political thought. Plays written by French authors have become the libretti of some of Europe's greatest operas: Beaumarchais gave us *The Marriage of Figaro* (the play was first performed in 1784, Mozart's opera in 1786); Hugo gave us the plot of *Rigoletto* (play, *Le Roi s'amuse*, 1832; Verdi's opera, 1851). In the early twentieth century, the Bloomsbury circle turned to French poetry to embolden it in its experimentation; the mid-twentieth-century New York School poets were francophiles (Kenneth Koch sometimes wrote in French and John Ashbery was a Columbia doctoral student in French). Samuel Beckett preferred to write in French rather than English. Post-Second World War French thinkers such as Lévi-Strauss, Foucault and Derrida have taken the humanities by storm in the universities of anglophone and other nations; while Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (1949), translated into English only a few years after publication (1953), led the growth of late twentieth-century feminism in anglophone countries.

Indeed, for centuries the French language itself had unparalleled prestige in Europe. Many English works owed their diffusion in other European countries to the fact that they were translated into French and then from French into another language such as German. All over Europe, French

succeeded Latin as the international language: famously, the Academy of Berlin offered a prize in 1782 for the best essay (in French) on this subject: 'What has made French the universal language of Europe?' ('Qu'est-ce qui a fait de la langue française la langue universelle de l'Europe?') Although the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars would reduce this vogue for French, it remained the language of choice in many parts of Europe: as readers of Tolstoy will know, the Russian aristocracy was still speaking it in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

In other areas, too, French culture has shaped our representation of the world. Monet was the begetter of Impressionism; Paris played a spectacular role in nineteenth- and twentieth-century painting, drawing into its ambit many artists of other nationalities such as Picasso. France has bequeathed to the world its cuisine (a French word), its fairy-tales (such stories as those of Sleeping Beauty and Puss-in-Boots were first collected and written down by Perrault in the seventeenth century), and its films. For despite the current commercial domination of Hollywood, it was in France that cinema was invented, and it continues to influence world cinema in more ways than are widely realized. Such key concepts as film noir, cinéaste and 'auteur' cinema are French; Jean Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*, 1939) is still rated among the top ten films ever made, one of the only two non-American films to have had that accolade in every decade for the last fifty years. (The other is Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, almost always, however, lower on the list than the Renoir. *Sight and Sound*, the magazine of the British Film Institute, conducts polls of leading film critics every decade to establish the ranking.) The major international film festival is held in Cannes. And Anglo-American cinema owes some unexpected debts to France: for instance, the plot of Hitchcock's best film *Vertigo* (1958) is based on the French novel *Sueurs froides: d'entre les morts* (1954, by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac).

This is not to deny that other nations have formed Western culture too, among them Arabic and Eastern ones. From the Renaissance on, primary movers have been Italy in art and music; Britain in literature and philosophy; Germany and Austria in music again and in modern theories of politics and the mind. Artists and thinkers from minority European cultures have made a trans-European contribution, those of Jewish origin being particularly prominent. Nor is it to deny that France has turned to and absorbed what these others have offered: during the Renaissance, it eagerly embraced Italian art, the Petrarchan sonnet, and aspects of the Italian language; in the eighteenth century, it declared its debt to British political

structures and thought. Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615) and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–69) suggested the form and scenarios of numerous French novels; France's major nineteenth-century authors looked to Germany and other 'Northern' lands for inspiration – for the new movement of Romanticism, to take only one example. And in a sense, it is somewhat absurd (and outdated) to break down the history of Western culture, which has thrived on interchange as much as it has been damaged by strife, into the history of separate countries. Yet France has 'exported' far more than it has 'imported', and has played a multifaceted role in the world far beyond what might be expected from a relatively small nation. That role has been made possible in part by means of aggressive conquests both in Europe and elsewhere. (While France today has a population of about 64 million, French is spoken as a native language by 90–100 million world-wide and is a second language for some 200 million more in countries that include Vietnam, Senegal and Tunisia.) France's acquisition of overseas territory helped create the wealth that enabled it to foster and subsidize many forms of culture. And such works as Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997) remind us, if we needed reminding, that the modern supremacy of the West arose not from innate genius but from geographical luck and ruthlessness. But within that broad picture, it is revealing to examine the cultural contribution of one nation-state – a nation-state that both regards itself as exceptional and has been so regarded by many outside its borders, even at times when France's military domination has been weak or non-existent.

How has this impact been achieved in the sphere of literature? From very early on in the country that came to be called 'France', good writing and debate were regarded as contributing to social prestige. They became part of the consciousness of a national elite. French culture is much more thoroughly permeated than anglophone by a common literary and intellectual history, one that is viewed with pride. Not only do French journalists frequently allude to the classics, but literature as a distillation of human experience also functions as a valid source of exempla: not so much a 'guide to life' (as for some anglophone critics who suggest: 'Read X [*Middlemarch*, or *Anna Karenina*, or Toni Morrison's *Beloved*] and you will become a better person'), but rather as a shared frame of reference. In the work of the post-war paediatrician Laurence Pernoud, for example, one finds an eloquent, sensitive statement as to how it feels to be pregnant. One expects to see the name of a living woman as the source. No; it is Balzac. But this shared frame of reference, if a cause of pride, does not create complacency. On the contrary,

it has led to constant self-questioning and to a politicization of the relationship between elite and 'low' culture.

In short, France perceives itself as both a 'literary' and a 'political' nation, and this has endowed it, over the course of a millennium, with hundreds of plays, poems, narratives and discursive texts that are especially linguistically aware; especially engaged with social issues; and especially inclined to weave that awareness and that engagement together. My book traces the history of this interweaving, going further back than most 'cultural histories of literature' do. Cultural studies are often confined to the mass-media era, but a longer time-span can open up revealing perspectives. So, although I devote more space to the post-1789 period than to previous ones, I bring out continuities that have their origins in the earliest French literature. There are ruptures and discontinuities too; but overarching preoccupations still emerge, sometimes in surprising places.

As an example of the approach the 'cultural critic' can take, let us look at Van Gogh's *Parisian Novels* of 1887–8, shown on the cover of this book. Van Gogh's painting has international dimensions. Its title, telling us that the provenance of the novels is Paris, announces therefore that it is by a non-French national drawn to Parisian culture. (Indeed, Van Gogh painted it during his two-year stay in Paris.) The 'yellow novels' were the popular fiction produced for a newly literate readership in nineteenth-century France; regarded as scandalous outside France, they would be taken up by anglophone writers who wanted to trail-blaze on both social and literary fronts. (Oscar Wilde's circle founded a magazine called *The Yellow Book*, illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley, and the British 1890s would be referred to as 'the yellow nineties'.) Thus the painting may remind the viewer 'in the know' that France had been, and would continue to be, a beacon for experimental work abroad.

There are more internal meanings too. Literacy was spreading only because of post-Revolutionary political reforms; the large-scale marketing of novels occurred only because inventors and businessmen realized it was in their commercial interests to make and use the cheap paper that could bring prices down. This knowledge is in the hinterland of the painting, which is saying a number of different and perhaps incompatible things about art. Far from disdaining popular culture, the artist makes it an aesthetic subject, as if to say that any artefact can be beautiful and that 'elite' and 'popular' can enrich each other. Yet at the same time the artist needs to preserve his social distinctiveness: after all, he has to make a living from

being 'different' – he has to suggest that the (eventual) sale of this painting is *not* the same as the sale of novels, not essentially a matter of mass-produced commodities. So the artist challenges the spectator to set the cheap novels both with and against the work of art that makes them lovely. In other words, there is a double self-positioning here that we shall encounter again. The artist expresses solidarity with the novels and at the same time lays claim to cultural prestige by appealing to a viewer more sophisticated than their average reader.

1

From the Beginnings to the Renaissance

The medieval period originated in the break-up of the Roman Empire, shifting the global cultural struggle from 'Europe' (Greece, and later Rome) versus 'Asia' (Persia) to Christian Europe versus Islam; a recognizable 'French' monarchy started in 987 with the election of Hugues Capet as king of France. The Capetians survived in a direct line until 1328, and branches of the family continued to rule thereafter. This continuity, with relatively few dynastic struggles, already gave France an advantage; but, as yet, the early French monarchy was centred in the tiny territory of the Ile-de-France, and the king ruled precariously over unreliable vassals. Nevertheless, capable of rebellion though they might be, they recognized the king as a figure to whom loyalty was owed, and it was less through violent annexations, more through diplomacy and the building of ties by marriage, that the Capetian kings slowly strengthened and extended the royal sphere until the French crown became the foremost one in Europe, and the one with which the Popes had the closest alliances. (This is one reason why the Papacy moved temporarily to Avignon from 1309 to 1377.) But 'Gallicanism' was also developing in the French Church, limiting the Pope's authority, tilting the balance of influence to the bishops or the monarch, and ensuring a degree of Church autonomy that would continue right through to Napoleon.

From early on, therefore, there existed an independent land called 'France', one whose nationhood was still weak and whose powerful princes and local lords had to be won round to any sense of 'the centre', yet one in which the monarchy's gradual consolidation normally proceeded without all-out collisions like those which in England led to the assassination of the Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Becket in 1170, or to the signing of Magna Carta forced on King John in 1215.

Fault-lines, naturally, existed. In *The Identity of France* (1986), the historian Fernand Braudel has declared: 'Yes, France is certainly diverse, and that diversity is visible, lasting, and *structural*' (his italics: II 669); and he suggests that France is 'too good' at internecine strife, wars of religion,

even civil war. 'Every nation is divided, and thrives on division. But France illustrates the rule rather too well: Protestants and Catholics, Jansenists and Jesuits, blues and reds, republicans and royalists, right and left, Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards, collaborators and resisters – division is within the house and unity is no more than a façade, a superstructure, a shout in the wind' (I 119). Here then are some of these divisions, already declaring themselves in the Middle Ages: between centre and regions; between the two great medieval civilizations of North and South (with their different languages, *langue d'oïl* and *langue d'oc*); between the assertion of authority and the rejection of it; between different belief-systems and ideologies. But if there was 'division within the house', there was still a 'house', providing room for the arts to develop locally and centrally, particularly during what has been described as 'the twelfth-century Renaissance' – and room for Paris to become established as a European focus for intellectuals. For the Middle Ages gave us universities, and in the twelfth century that of Paris became pre-eminent, attracting students from all over Europe to learn from its great thinkers, the most renowned being Pierre Abélard (1079–1142/4). By the time the famous Louis IX was reigning (1226–70), it was taken for granted that national and international prestige could be demonstrated through centres of learning and through religious architecture and art. Through other means too: Louis IX, like his predecessors, led a Crusade, albeit one during which he was captured and had to be ransomed; and he sanctioned the Papal Inquisition in Languedoc. But along with these acts of violence (for which he would be canonized), he encouraged artistic production, for example building the exquisite Sainte-Chapelle in Paris.

Partly, then, because the initially weak Capetian kings kept power internally through negotiation not battle, 'France' was able to develop art and writing, the latter at first in the monasteries but soon spreading to secular communities. While the commissioning of music and expensive artefacts fulfilled a social function as affirmations of luxury, hence status, regional seigneurs often favoured writing as a means of enhancing their position. Thus ducal patrons might commission chronicles designed to highlight their achievements or genealogy – to demonstrate, say, their descent from Charlemagne, which affirmed their legitimacy vis-à-vis the present king; these histories could shade off into fictional narrative. But it was not only commissioned chronicles that contributed to prestige. It is often supposed that in 'undeveloped' societies antagonism was and is settled purely by might and main; the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld has however noted that fine verbal performance can sometimes more successfully contain an opponent than physical violence. If, in an angry dialogue, one interlocutor

makes a clever riposte, 'to respond with knife or fist would demean the assailant by suggesting that he was incapable of responding with some witty line of his own' (*The Poetics of Manhood*, 1985, 143). Herzfeld's comments indicate that in certain contexts skilful language is a particularly effectual non-physical demonstration of status. It can hold conflict in equipoise. France's elite would appear to have learned this lesson early on – to have placed high valuation on a linguistic dexterity that can both express tension and be used to deflect its bodily enactment.

Of course the application of the lesson would be uneven; nor should we suppose that all medieval French literature expresses tension: the saints' lives (hagiographies), among the earliest of chronicles, voice duty to God in pure form and thus generally lack the mental *agon*, the contest, of self against self to be found in almost all the literature the West now values, going back to Homer. But much of this early literature does depict both outer and inner strife. For instance, in the medieval French epic, loyalty was owed first to the Lord God, then to one's liege, and, later, to one's Lady: these loyalties could however clash. The first masterpiece of French literature, *La Chanson de Roland*, shows how works can both describe struggles and paradoxically be 'used' to consolidate political aims. Composed in Northern France in the late eleventh century, the *Roland* narrates the end of the Frankish Emperor Charlemagne's campaign against the Saracens of Spain. The Christians accept the Saracens' deceitful offer of peace, an offer opposed only by Charlemagne's nephew Roland. Roland's treacherous stepfather Ganelon conspires with the Saracens, who ambush Charlemagne's army; Roland, commanding the rearguard, at first refuses the advice of his friend Olivier to blow his oliphant (ivory horn) and summon help from the rest of Charlemagne's retreating army. Roland dies, Charlemagne takes vengeance on the Saracens, and the traitor Ganelon is executed.

This epic enjoyed great popularity in the Middle Ages and was translated and adapted into Latin, Norse, Middle High German, Dutch, Welsh and Middle English. Arguably, at the time of its dissemination it reflected, and even contributed to, some sense of quasi-national community: it refers to 'dulce France', 'sweet France' (line 109 and elsewhere), and to the bitter tears, the swooning in dismay, of '100,000 French' ('Cent milie Franc en unt si grant dulur, / N'en i ad cel ki durement ne plurt'; 'Cent milie Francs s'en pasment cuntre tere', lines 2907–08, 2932). It illustrates, too, the literary representation of history for purposes of propaganda: the original battle, in 778, was against the Basques not the Saracens. But the Crusades were now on the horizon: the *Roland* was composed soon after 1086, and