

European Literature from Romanticism to Postmodernism

A Reader in Aesthetic Practice

Edited by
Martin Travers

CONTINUUM
London and New York

Continuum

The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX

370 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017-6503

First published 2001

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0-8264-4748-1 (hardback)

0-8264-4749-X (paperback)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

European literature from romanticism to postmodernism: a reader in aesthetic practice/
edited by Martin Travers.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8264-4748-1 — ISBN 0-8264-4749-X (pbk.)

1. Literature, Modern—History and criticism. I. Travers, Martin.

PN710 .E88 2000

809'.03.—dc21

00-022684

Typeset by YHT Ltd, London

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

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PREFACE

This book seeks to provide the reader with a collection of documents – essays, letters, prefaces, interviews, manifestos and other theoretical statements – in which some of the major voices of modern European literature have sought to define for themselves, and for others, the nature of their writing and the literary projects upon which they were engaged. This material helps us to understand not only the aesthetic frameworks within which their literature took shape, but also the broader intellectual ambit of that writing, those assumptions and values which may have been consciously or unconsciously held, regarding personal identity, the social and political realms, gender, and those many other attributes of knowledge that constitute the point of contact between literature and the world.

I have grouped these documents around the literary movements and schools with which many of these writers identified (or to which, with greater or lesser justice, they have since been attributed): Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism, Modernism, the Literature of Political Engagement, and Postmodernism. In approaching these writers in this fashion, my intention has not been to reduce them to mere epiphenomena of contemporary cultural trends, or to project them as unambiguous examples of some greater reality of which they were ‘representatives’. The relationship between these writers and the larger cultural formations with which they are often associated was complex, as were the cultural formations themselves. Nevertheless, in spite of their amorphous parameters, these literary movements provide the modern reader with important points of reference, and make possible the identification of the larger conceptual frameworks that linked many of these writers, providing the contexts in which common projects, shared goals and aspirations, and intellectual and artistic convergences were initiated and consolidated.

I have endeavoured, as far as possible, to present these extracts as continuous wholes rather than as purple passages, *obiter dicta*, pregnant formulations and other forms of quotable morsels. I do this for two reasons: first, because my intention is to impart a sense of the developing logic of the arguments from which these extracts come; and second, because, just as, for example, Rousseau’s unique projection of accentuated selfhood is inseparable from a grammar that continually draws the reader back to an almost oppressive first-person assertiveness

and to a narrative line of unflagging self-reflexivity (see Part I, Reading 1), so too with the monolithic dogmatism of the 'On Guard' manifesto (Part IV, Reading 5), and the infinitely more subtle semantic play of Hélène Cixous (Part V, Reading 20), the style of these writings, including the repetitions, longueurs, *non sequiturs* and challenging obscurities that these documents contain, are an essential component of their discursive effect.

The reader, indeed, should look in these documents not only for unambiguous statements and clear avowals of literary intent (although such clearly exist: in the commitments to the cause, in the exhortations to read and to follow, and in the expressions of authorial probity), but also for the subtext of those aims, the stridency that betrays the sense of struggle, the hesitations and prevarications, the oscillations between assertive self-confidence and doubt, and the inner turmoil that emerges between a rejected (but all too solid) past, and a future which draws one into its potentiality, but does not, as yet, exist.

The contradictions are also revealing: Edward Young (Part I, Reading 2), for example, condemning the slavish adherence to the rules of a Classical past in language redolent with erudite allusion, impressive cultural capital (only four from the fifty pages of the standard edition do not contain at least one Classical reference or untranslated quotation from Latin or Greek), and the other essential baggage carried by the eighteenth-century exponent of 'good taste'; or Zola's much vaunted invocation of the scientific methodologies of the behavioural scientists (see Part II, Reading 12) within the arguably highly unscientific context of a novel of domestic melodrama and near Gothic horror; or, at the other end of the spectrum, John Fowles' ungainly advocacy of the cause of metafiction midway through a novel that has, both in narrative and plot, held almost slavishly to the markedly non-metafictional conventions of the nineteenth-century Realist novel (see Part V, Reading 8).

My approach has been to situate the author in question and his or her work within the broader literary movements of which they were a part, with the movements themselves receiving their own introductions at the beginning of each Part. These introductions are offered simply as broad grids intended to steer the reader through a complex area, and the comments on the individual authors viewed, at best, purely as nudges in the direction of understanding. To seek to have anything meaningful to say about Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* (Part I, Reading 12) or Sartre's *What Is Literature?* (Part IV, Reading 21) in the space of a paragraph must leave any author in danger of being caught between the Scylla of *lèse-majesté* and the Charybdis of scholarly suicide. It also needs to be said that the rationale that has governed my choice of extracts departs somewhat from that which informs the familiar 'novelists on the novel' or 'poets on poetry' genres. I have chosen not to go up that road, not because I adhere to some misplaced anti-austerism (we are surely now after three decades of

theory able to see that the grain of the voice can depart from convention and grammar), but simply because the assertive self often misrepresents (does not see) the deeper values that have inspired its work. In order to uncover these values, it is often more useful to understand what the authors in question have written about someone or something else (a political development, a scientific innovation or even an art exhibition), rather than about their own projects, however privately or publicly they may have construed them.

The majority of texts published here have been newly translated into English, many for the first time. Most of these documents have been chosen either because they represent the major theoretical statement of a particular author, or because they were central texts within the literary movement in question (and seen as such), and highlight an essential aspect of the cultural and philosophical goals of that movement. I have not, however, slavishly followed any accepted canon in my choice of texts. On the contrary, I have deliberately included work from previously marginalized writers, such as the Spanish Romantic Mariano José de Larra (Part I, Reading 14), and the inspirational nationalist poet of Poland Adam Mickiewicz (Part I, Reading 17); or, in later chapters, from Realists such as Giovanni Verga (Part II, Reading 13), and Benito Pérez Galdós (Part II, Reading 16). Their writing has been included here not only to broaden the national base of these cultural formations, but to give a fuller picture of the ways in which literature can engage with the most complex desires of nations and individuals alike.

This book pays testimony to the self-aggrandizing, sometimes quarrelsome, frequently quixotic, but nonetheless creative, intellectually vital and essentially humane qualities of the writers represented here. These same qualities have been shared by many of the colleagues, students and mentors with whom I have studied and worked for the past thirty years, most notably at the University of East Anglia (Norwich), Gonville and Caius College (Cambridge) and Griffith University (Brisbane). They include Peter Bayley, Malcolm Bradbury, Pat Buckridge, John Casey, John Gatt-Rutter, Steve Giles, Chris Gooden, Michael Harvey, Chris Holmes, Franz Kuna, Paddy Lyons, Jock Macleod, John Milfull, John and Francie Oppel, David Punter, David Roberts, Elinor Shaffer, Max Sebald, Philip Thomson, Edward Timms and Nicholas Zurbrugg. I dedicate this book to them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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All further translations from the Italian are by Nicholas Everett, and from the French and German by myself, except where otherwise stated.

To Ann, Charlotte, Lucie and Isabel

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