

French Literature in the Perspective of Literary Historiography

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Literary History has changed its objectives during the last few decades. In theory as well as in literary analysis strictly demarcated approaches have given way to a worldwide perspective. The openness to the world and the ongoing dialogue with the ‘other’ resonates in recent French Literature. Academic critique can accompany and guide these evolutions. This article focuses on three central concepts: *transculturalité*, *colinguisme* and *transmédiabilité*. Special attention will be given to the 18th century French-English author William Beckford and the final word is spoken by Edouard Glissant.

Any historiographer at some moment meets the double bind situation, where exhaustiveness on the one hand and the necessity of a good narrative on the other enter into competition. Completeness being an utopian wish, the encyclopaedic formula at least tries to give as much information as possible without having as its aim a coherent ‘story’.¹ In France all sorts of ‘dictionnaires’ have been published quite recently that show a clear demand for this category of books. A well organized system of links between the different entries can guide the reader, as I experienced while collaborating in the writing of the *French Beckett Dictionary* directed by Marie-Claude Hubert (Champion, 2011²). The evolution of Beckett’s writing during the 1970s and 1980s could be outlined in this context. The *Dictionnaire des littératures de langue française* directed by Jean-Pierre de Beaumarchais is one of the most popular publications of this kind, wherein above all the entries on genres, literary movements and periods are most useful. These dictionaries intend to give a more objective overview than traditional histories, but the necessity to make choices and to organize the materials always persists as a limitation.

Another attempt to escape from pre-established, ideologically motivated frames can be discovered in *A New History of French Literature* by Denis Hollier. It was first published in English by Harvard University Press (1989),³ and a French translation (Bordas, 1995) curiously changed this title in *De la littérature française*. Explicitly; the work addresses itself to a public that is not only composed of students but of ‘all those that read with passion and for their pleasure and who want to go beyond the literary works themselves to discover the conditions of literary creation’ (cover text).

Although there is a chronological order the relationship with other cultural, historical or political references has been privileged. 'Without wanting to be exhaustive, this history pretends to be dynamic, informative and modern'. 'Modern' (like 'New' one may presume) is meant as a synonym for the combination of the following three major characteristics: the fragmentary, mosaic composition giving a more objective image of historical reality; the network of references embedding literature in a varied social and artistic context; and the freedom to browse given to the 'passionate' reader.

If the first group (the Dictionaries) shows a profound nostalgia for completeness, the second category, of which Hollier is the most prominent representative, figures as a witness of the post 1968 sense of freedom and liberation for the errant spectator of the cultural parade.

As for many other social aspects, in the beginning of the 21st century we observe a return to firm criteria and reassuring order. The post-zappers crave for lullabies and fairy tales. More seriously, literary history once more embraces the narrative formula, but this cannot be done any more without taking into account the diverse critical contributions of the preceding decades.

In France, the principles of the two large Literary Histories of the 1970s are reinterpreted and reformulated in line with this evolution. *La Littérature française*, published by Arthaud in the 1970s as a collection of 16 big volumes and directed by the most famous French academics of that moment, has a tripartite organization: starting with an exposé of the historical and cultural context, it proceeds by giving the chronological history of literature followed by a section devoted to 'major authors' and a sort of dictionary for all minor writers. The other major History, published from 1974 on, in ten volumes, by the Editions Sociales (direction René Desné and Pierre Abraham) concentrates on the cohesion between a Marxist vision of history and literary 'production'. This last option re-emerges in the recent two-volume edition *La littérature française du 20e siècle* (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009) by Michèle Touret. Nowadays, the socio-political background is much more varied and open to discussion while the interaction between social life and artistic creations is seen as a dynamic and mutual interference.

In Dominique Viart's *La littérature française au présent*, the evolution of genres and the impact of intertextuality are major starting points as well as the practical aspects of writing and publishing. Mireille Calle-Gruber stresses in the presentation of her *Histoire de la littérature française du XXe Siècle* that literature cannot be conceived today as depending on pre-established rules, but shows that literary work is a constant 'becoming' and that it accepts the infinite possibilities of language.

So we can see that various kinds of narratives may occur, always conscious of historical developments and of critical contributions of the past and present. As a more general horizon of these diverse openings and reorientations, nowadays historians more and more feel the necessity – within an ever growing experience of worldwide cultural influences – to abandon the narcissistic view of autochthonous national perspectives only and the need to focus on the notion of the Other – the other as societal or political reality; the other as cultural comparison and confrontation; the other as a component of the global mixing up of identities and individualities where the major gain of the Western Enlightenment, subjectivity, enters into a most fascinating encounter with the 'world'.

This enlarged perspective naturally expands on the historical scene and leads to a reinterpretation of cultural positions in the past.

The presence – or the absence – of others (of the other) in literature (and in literary studies as well as in the history – histories of literature) seems to me a valuable approach, the more so as this appears to be the key-notion of a psychoanalytical view of literature as well as of a literary insight in psychoanalysis. Sociological, psychological, ideological and even epistemological evaluations of (literary) history meet in this context.

My intention is not to develop in detail how this relation (between literature and psychoanalysis) could or should be envisaged today. Let us just argue that it might be present in our practice, reflecting on literary history in one way or another, leaving aside sociological, epistemological, historical, and so on, arguments. To illustrate this position we might refer to the key distinction Jacques Lacan in his *Ecrits* made between the other (small o) and the Other (with a capital): the first notion refers to the imaginary stage of the psyche when illusions and fascination build up an image of the other as an object of desire; the second concept takes place in the symbolic order in which the others participate and where the subject depends on a field of communication, of language, of taking distance. The rupture as well as the link between the two realms is a tragic moment of abandoning and of abandonment (of castration if we prefer).

My suggestion would be that in the dynamic reality of literary history a constant to and fro is active going from fascination and appropriation on the one side to cohabitation with the other and its assimilation. To cite one more name in this context: I think it can be fruitful to take into account the theory of Donald Winnicott, where the transitional object is a central notion that permits us to leave the other (be it temporarily) and to enter into the universe of the others. Literature in one way or another can be, and has been, a sublime transitional object.

We can add to this that in French literary history psychoanalysis (alongside philosophy) has played an important role during the 20th century, from Marie Bonaparte, over Charles Mauron, to Jean Bellemin-Noël and Pierre Bayard. To put it differently, and from a parallel perspective: the major reference (and fascination) for the construction of literary norms and standards in France has been for centuries, and continues to be in a certain sense, the classical paradigm of the 17th century (of course this standard is present elsewhere too, but the situation in France seems to me to be symptomatic). The initial question is then to what extent an author is following or respecting the classical standards, be it in a positive or in a negative way (*La Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* is a recurrent phenomenon). From Voltaire (who wrote the first modern literary history in France with his *Le Siècle de Louis Quatorze*) up to today, the criteria that support this perspective stay active and this polarization most of the time depends above all on the notion of the ‘absolute’: there is an absolute other that dominates the entire field of comparison and competition. This other is timeless (beyond death and decay) and ensures that all others in their temporariness are witnesses of incompleteness.

Let me give two examples of the way literary history in France constantly reinvests this classical standard in handling innovative creations.

In French literary history, Céline is always looked at from the starting point of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* and as the author who introduced popular language into the literary

discourse. Céline often tried to change this perspective: for him the texts coming after *Voyage*, such as *Mort à Crédit* and the novels of the 1940s and the 1950s, to start with *Guignol's band*, more evidently manifested a new subjectivity, whereas *Voyage au bout de la nuit* was a kind of adieu to the 'Old world'. He also tried to explain in the *Dialogues with the so-called professor Y* (1955)⁴ that his aim was not to enter into competition with the classical standard, but to create a new mode of being in relation with the other – the reader in this case – via a dialogue between the voices that resonate in the head (and it will be on this impulse that Beckett and other new novelists are going to continue).

A second example can be found in the so-called 'littérature blanche', a concept created by Roland Barthes and exploited after him to indicate a neutral voice distancing itself from literary conventions in the presentation of factual reality. Originating in Camus' *l'Étranger*, for instance, and illustrated in a particular way by Georges Perec, it culminates in the last decades of the 20th century in works by Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux and François Bon. What can be interpreted as a refusal of style (as Bernard Vouilloux defined it in *Écritures Blanches* – a collection of papers stemming from a symposium that was held at the Collège de France in 2007) is often presented as a return to classical sobriety and purity.

This endurance of the classical paradigm as a norm and as a continuing horizon of verification does not preclude that other perspectives arise and enter into competition with it (often leading to obfuscation and a more unconscious experience of the influence of the absolute criteria).

The 18th-century Enlightenment that is often considered as the period when French influence has been most important throughout the world, is an age of major confrontations between the classical standard and the rise of subjectivity. The final episode that is the major confrontation of ideologies at the time of the French Revolution will be an outburst of freedom so radical and fearful that a reaction in the other direction is inevitable. By the way, the reflection on the parallelism established between historical events and the cultural evolution has been exploited exemplarily by Beatrice Didier in *Littérature Française*:⁵

La Révolution tout entière apparaît comme un orgasme national. Cette lutte contre le père, ce sacrilège, ils permettent l'affirmation, la libération du moi collectif qu'est désormais la nation française. Mais on regrette le père que l'on a sacrifié. [...] Napoléon sera donc le surhomme, la sublimation du mythe de ce père.

And she shows how the major authors in 19th-century France have to cope with this situation, be it Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, Hugo or Zola. But before that evolution took place, 18th-century literature offers an illustration of a splendid overture and a joyful dynamism justifying its privileged position in the History of Literature.

The combination of subjectivism, materialism, empiricism and community spirit, those major components of the Enlightenment, gave rise to a very diverse literary discourse where authors are seeking intensely to situate the other from Diderot (in his dialogues, such as *Le Neveu de Rameau*, but also in his work for the *Encyclopédie*) to Sade as the most radical writer, from Voltaire as a leading epistolary author to Rousseau and his *Confessions*.

The 19th century shows a profound tendency to obliterate the 18th-century dynamism as well as its openings to the other and it retracts into an internalized literary discourse. Pierre Bourdieu has given a detailed analysis of this evolution in his *Les Règles de l'Art* with Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale* as the principal example.

La Langue littéraire, recently published by Gilles Philippe and Julien Piat,⁶ offers a fine review of the different stages of this literary discourse that, even with changing diegetic contents, increasingly distances itself from the language of the other(s). A poetic idiom, the use of the *passé simple* and the *subjonctif du passé* are typical; the *discours indirect libre* constitutes the principal narratological character. Christelle Reggiani indicates in her contribution that it is only after 1980 that a significant change takes place. The distinction between discourse and *récit* disappears: the literary text fully assumes subjectivity and a pluralism of voices in a dynamic encounter with the languages in provenance of all sorts of social contexts and of course with the message of the media. The *discours indirect libre* together with the traditional 'Romanesque' (the major constituents of the novelistic 'doxa') vanishes as a consequence. All this is an accepted situation now, but what I want to stress here, and what is specific for the French context (even if it follows British example), is a fertilizing interaction between books written in French from all over the world. The Caribbean situation is exemplary in this respect with writers such as Edouard Glissant (*Tout monde*), Maryse Condé (*Ségou*) and Patrick Chamoiseau (*Texaco*). The philosophy of Gilles Deleuze accompanies this rhizomatic expansion.

In 2008, a conference organized by the SELF (Société d'Étude de la littérature française) took place in Paris on the reception and the teaching of French literature all over the world. As a leading notion, the antefix 'trans' was proposed to define and situate modern French literature and its reception. Different kinds of TRANS that dominate the actual literary discourse were discussed. A vertical transcendental paradigm has been followed in modern times by horizontal transitions, first mastered by dominant protagonists, but nowadays featuring more and more as a mosaic, fragmentary and poly-systemic ensemble. The absolute other was succeeded by prominent others and these are followed now by all sorts of others – *tout monde*. *Transference* pretends to surpass the competition of cultures in its desire to witness their mutual fertilization and to second and accompany these phenomena of transculturality. Literary creations, philosophy and literary criticism should proceed hand in hand.

An important signal in the literary world in France each autumn is constituted by the Prix Décembre – a literary prize that is meant as a reaction to the Goncourt business (Houellebecq's crying place in 2010) which has been awarded these last few years to the most original texts that were published in France (last year *La vérité sur Marie* de Jean-Philippe Toussaint) and that went in 2010 to Frédéric Schiffter for his essay *Philosophie sentimentale*. The latter is a sentimental journey meeting 'Schopenhauer, but also Nietzsche, Pessoa, Proust, the Ecclesiast, Chamfort, Montaigne, Freud, Rosset, Ortega y Gasset', with the author insisting that: 'Un philosophe peut m'instruire ou m'éclairer, mais son œuvre n'exerce sur moi aucun charme si en filigrane de ses concepts, de ses thèses, de ses arguments, je ne perçois pas le récit d'un chagrin personnel'.

A specific subjectivity is grounding here an original discourse dialoguing between different levels, transiting from emotive to cognitive language, from concepts to affects

and vice versa. This transitional use of text welcomes the other and does not stay in the realm of what Schiffter calls the bla-bla, the mono-directional discourse of institutional philosophers and *auteurs de métier*.

These considerations about transference and trans-culturality can be completed by the notions of trans-mediality and of trans-hierarchical practices. In his essay *Peindre l'Orient*, the leading Algerian author Rachid Boudjedra shows how the fascination with the Orient has marked European painters, but he demonstrates also with finesse and conviction how artistic exchanges between East and West may enrich art and create real masterpieces. The Lebanese writer Amin Malouf explains in various books the multiplicity of contacts and relationships between the cultures of the Mediterranean in the present as well as in the past (*Le périple de Baldassare*, 2000; *Origines*, 2004).

The combination of different media should certainly be mentioned as a virtual access to the other, not only with regard to illustrations and images but also as linked to music and to cinema. Comics, graphic novels, *telenovelle*, video-art, computer and internet creations play an ever-more important role. Many of these examples may be better understood if we retrace their origins or their predecessors as well as their ideological and psychological embedding.

As instances of trans-hierarchical thinking we could mention the renewed attention for different sorts of text that were considered as being of minor importance in the past and that open the horizon for other voices: oral literature, fairy tales, women's literature, popular genres and so on.

However, there has been forged yet another concept, by the French linguist Renée Balibar, that seems to me very important in this frame where the contacts with the other and the reactions that are their results feature as main orientation for a new History of Literature and one that is capable of establishing the necessary background. This is the notion of co-linguism. Renée Balibar wrote an alternative History of French Literature in only 100 pages or so, in which she brings to the fore as leading principles for an alternative History of Literature the different mutual influences between two or more languages (and their adherent cultures) that are present concomitantly. As a starting point she pinpoints the *Serment de Strasbourg*, the first text in French but this in a narrow and necessary combination with the same text in German. We can see in this way that there is no unique origin and that from the beginning culture is a melting pot (it is but one giant step now to applaud the – 'racially' very mixed – French football team for the 1998 World Championship).

Balibar successively points to the co-linguism with Latin, which after a long period of constant cohabitation and legalization (The *Chanson de Roland* for example claims dignity by calling Charlemagne *magnes* in its first verse) will assume the role of a more latent factor of influence for, primarily, the theatre and poetry. She also claims, though, that 'Rivales mais constamment partenaires, la langue française et la langue anglaise n'existent que par un exercice mutuel. Il est impossible de présenter leur histoire sans mettre en lumière l'alternance de leurs influences en Europe. Le rapport à la langue et à la littérature italienne aux 13e et 14e siècles n'est pas moins éclairant'.⁷ By the way, co-linguism can also mean for Balibar the cohabitation of different layers of one national language (so for instance elevated cultural language and popular vocabulary in

Rimbaud's poetry). This method may constitute a major guide for framing and analysing the role of the other in literary history from Rabelais to Beckett and from Michel de Montaigne to Pascal Quignard.

The case of William Beckford, English author of the last decades of the 18th century, known for his travel-journals and for his novel *Vathek: an Arabian Tale* [1786], offers us another example stemming from this period when modern Europe was born. Beckford achieves an original combination of major influences originating from different regions of the world: the sense of curiosity and discovery, the seductions of the Orient, the fantasy that has its roots in the Gothic tradition and the shivering that testifies to the major collapse of orthodox beliefs. Ann Radcliffe (*The Mysteries of Udolpho* [1794]) and Mathew Lewis (*The Monk* [1795]) are important writers who have been inspired by Beckford. But one of the major reasons for the importance of this novel consists of the fact that Beckford wrote his book in French and that it was published as such (be it in 1787, after the publication of its translation in English – by Samuel Henley). Why did Beckford write his novel in French? Was it a necessity to take some distance from his mother language for a matter like this (as would be the case for Samuel Beckett according to his own comments)? In any case, Mallarmé, who practised English himself as a professor, was fascinated by this procedure and wrote a substantial preface for a new edition at the end of the 19th century, entirely written in 'mallarméen' style. His conclusion reads as follows:

Tout coule de source, avec une limpidité vive, avec un ondoisement large de périodes; et l'éclat tend à se fondre dans la pureté totale du cours, qui charrie maintes richesses de diction inaperçues d'abord: cas naturel avec un étranger inquiet que quelque expression trop audacieuse ne le trahisse en arrêtant le regard.

So Beckford could come to the simplicity most adapted to the kind of fairy tale he had in mind. But there are at least two other arguments that might be mentioned.

First there is this assertion of Balibar concluding her paragraph on *L'Europe des Lumières* (Ref. 7, p. 69):

Et parmi les langues nationales à la fin du 18e siècle, la langue française occupait une position avancée de porte-parole d'un rationalisme laïque universaliste. Position davantage conquise par rayonnement intellectuel que par pression économique ou militaire (en cela bien distincte d'un *leadership*).

We recognize in *Vathek* an ambiguous balance between the childish belief in esoteric phenomena and the urge to cast a critical eye on this other world of superstition and ghosts. Writing in French permitted this double position, belief for the content, critique in form – this is the major position of the fetishist formulated as: 'I know very well that, but nevertheless...' (and as far as fetishism is concerned Beckford, particularly with his famous tower building at Fountain Hill, shows other characteristics as well).⁸

Nevertheless, we should perhaps enlarge our scope. This leads us to an article of Françoise Morcillo.⁹ She writes: 'Is it possible to include this short story within a genre that includes the marvellous, the fantastic, the allegorical, the philosophical?' Her answer will be positive, and she concludes that in France the fantastic and the oriental had experienced a complex evolution all through the 18th century, starting from Galand's

translation of the *1001 Nuits – The Arabian Nights*, and that Beckford wanted to join this tradition and to conquer an original place in it (in France, until Mallarmé at least, he would not be recognized as such). I think Morcillo could have mentioned another example to support her assertion: the Polish count Potocki who used French for his famous *Manuscript of Saragossa*.¹⁰

All this merits a more precise analysis, and I think that these cases of bilingualism and co-lingualism give us a precious opening for an approach of the other as a main element for a contemporary view on literary history. Some other explorations of this orientation might be (for the French situation) the presence of linguistic confrontations in African literature (Kourouma in *Allah n'est pas obligé*) or with Maghreb-authors (Kateb Yacine or Rachid Boudjedra). This recalls the reflections of Deleuze on the role of minor languages (where examples include Kafka, Melville and Artaud, for instance). In 19th-century France, attention could further be paid to Jules Verne, who explores language and the universe as parallels, and who shows a curious amalgam of colonialism and cosmopolitanism. In Alexandre Dumas, as the major bestseller writer of the century, some of the same characteristics appear.

More and more in the course of the 20th century multiple forms of encounters between different cultural traditions, between specific generic formulae, combinations of fictional, autobiographical, historical, philosophical and scientific materials seem to constitute the core matter of literature. In France, the novel is exemplary for this evolution, going from *A la recherche du temps perdu* by Proust¹¹ and *Les Faux Monnayeurs* by Gide¹² via Malraux and Céline to 'new novelists' such as Butor and Simon and on to the generation of Nobel Prize winner J.M.G. Le Clézio as a real cosmopolitan and universal author. The theatre as a major location for intermediality shows how text can be interpreted and imbedded in numerous ways and this attitude permits us to enlarge its critical function. Beckett, Genet and Ionesco are the most important instigators in this field (in close cooperation with their respective theatre directors) and they were followed by Duras and her lyrical theatre, and by Koltès and his dramatic vision of borderline people. More recently, Ariane Mnouchkine and her Théâtre du Soleil have shown how a politically motivated attitude and a personal reprise of tradition (the Greek one as well as Japanese No-theatre for instance) can be harmonized. Valère Novarina, in his own way, transforms the theatre into a cradle for innumerable linguistic and formal creations incarnated by an immense host of characters.

Poetry, even more than other genres, figures as a playing field and a terrain for adventure and exploration. This was already so during the first decades of the 20th century with *Alcools* of Guillaume Apollinaire and the *Cahiers* of Paul Valéry; René Char made the most intense combination of metaphysical background, political engagement and poetical sensitiveness while Francis Ponge worked most concretely on the versatile and sponge-like material of language. The universal intentions of Yves Bonnefoy, the philosophical profoundness of Michel Deguy and the experimental eagerness of Jacques Roubaud are only a few examples of the rich palette of actual poetry in France.¹³

The openness to the world and the ongoing dialogue with the other so often forced back by contemporary history finds its guiding voice in living poetry as it is sung and declaimed, used as an emblematic sign for uniqueness and freedom, a real prophet of the

strength of Literature. Let us end with a quotation from Edouard Glissant the Antillean poet and novelist, the first part of his poem ‘Acclamation’:

Prenez-moi au brasier de boues de tôles de manguiers
 Que tarisse le mot limpide et finisse l’aridité
 Où fut la paille et toute chose non cernée
 Il est temps d’arrêter l’errance immense et il est temps
 D’armer le champ aux continents
 Qui passent nous hélant au large de midi
 souci, sel d’écumes sur la mort posées, mon noir pays.
 Prenez-moi dans l’été qui n’a pas de printemps, ô cri.¹⁴

Notes and References

1. By the way: my considerations in this article about French Literary History aspire to be exemplary for literary history in a more general sense.
2. C. Ackerley, S. Gontarski (2004) *Companion to Beckett* (Grove Press); M.-C. Hubert (ed.) (2011) *Dictionnaire Beckett* (Paris: Champion).
3. Cf. F. Céline, *Romans*, Paris, Gallimard (La Pléiade), 4 vols, 1981–1993.
4. D. Hollier (1989) *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
5. B. Didier (1976) *Littérature Française*, vol 11, p. 8 (Arthaud).
6. G. Philippe, J. Piat (2009) *La Langue littéraire* (Fayard).
7. R. Balibar (1991) *Histoire de la littérature française* (Paris: PUF), p. 29.
8. Fetishism is a major indication for the changing ideological frame (paradigm) at the end of the 18th century: having lost the firm belief in an absolute Other, be it God or his terrestrial representative, not having found a horizontal relationship that replaces it, the errant, craving mind (and body) recurs to simulacra and stand-ins, *godemichés* and female attributes (such as the women’s shoes adored by Restif de la Bretonne).
9. F. Morcillo (2007) L’exotisme littéraire: relecture du conte de *Vathek* de William Beckford. *Anales de Filología Francesa*, 15, p. 197 sq.
10. É. Klene (2010) *Jean Potocki à nouveau* (Amsterdam: Rodopi).
11. V. Descombes (1987) *Proust—philosophie du roman* (Paris: Minuit).
12. P. Lepape (1997) *Gide le messenger* (Paris: Seuil).
13. M. Bishop (2002) *Contemporary French Poetics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi).
14. In *Le sel noir* (1960). This final poem of the collection invites us, passing over the Caribbean isle, to listen to the voices of the continents, to combine the geographical ensembles and their respective histories.

About the Author

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