

WRITING LITERARY HISTORY,
1900-1950

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Bram LAMBRECHT and Matthias SOMMERS (eds)

MDRN



PEETERS

LEUVEN – PARIS – BRISTOL, CT

2018

A Catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

© 2018 – Peeters, Bondgenotenlaan 153, B-3000 Leuven

ISBN 978-90-429-3629-4
D/2018/0602/XX

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WRITING LITERARY HISTORY – INTRODUCTION

BRAM LAMBRECHT AND MATTHIAS SOMERS

In 1910, the year Virginia Woolf associated with the emergence of a distinctly modern sensibility, Gustave Lanson, the “father of literary history” in the Francophone world, published a frequently quoted methodological essay in which he compared the disciplines of history and literary history:

Historians have the past as their object; a past consisting only of indices and debris by means of which one reconstructs the idea. Our object is also the past, but a past which persists; literature is simultaneously of the past and of the present.¹

Innumerable literary historians have articulated a similar unease about treating literature as a historical object. Hans Robert Jauss, for instance, pointed out that “*Perceval* by Chrétien de Troyes, a literary event, is not historical in the same sense as the Third Crusade, which was occurring at the same time.”² Literary history always needs to grapple in some way with this paradoxical relationship between literature and history.

When setting out to write a literary history of a period in which writers and thinkers became acutely aware of such issues, one way to take on the task is to start from visions of time, historicity, and (literary) history that originated in the period itself. Brian McHale and Randall Stevenson, for example, use the vision of the city street at night, dotted with points of illumination from streetlamps as an image of fragmentation that frequently recurs in modernist texts. “For literary history,” they write, “there might be obvious advantages in thinking, or studying, a century in the terms in which it thought or understood itself: fragments reflecting its fractured history may also offer the sharpest, most incisive way of anatomising it. The question, then, is how to write literary history in fragments, without ceasing to write literary *history* altogether?”³

A ‘fragmented’ literary history of the first half of the twentieth century, lifting out specific events or phenomena which are presumed to be exemplary of certain paths of historical change is one approach which has the potential of revealing new aspects of literary change and perhaps even of adjusting our view of literary writing in general. Yet, a feeling of ‘fragmentation’ is only one characteristic of the shared sensibility of the early twentieth century. Visions of

‘integration’ of history (and of literary history in particular), it could be argued, were likewise present at the time. Notions of tradition as they were entertained by Yeats, Pound, and Eliot testify to this trend and form just one example of how a literary history of this period could go in a wholly different direction.

In an attempt to map these potential new directions, this book as a whole, like the conference from which it originated, ‘Writing Literary History, 1900–1950,’ organized by MDRN at the University of Leuven in 2015, aims to draw attention to theoretical issues by illustrating a variety of approaches to the practice of writing literary history with a focus on problems and caveats that are proper to a uniquely varied and complex period. For the scholars united in this volume, writing literary history implies going beyond tackling merely hermeneutic questions concerning literature from the modernist period. After an era of theory, mostly dominated by poststructuralist thinking in Anglo-American academia,⁴ literary scholars have rediscovered the history of literature. The importance of historical context was evidently already present in eminent twentieth-century theoretical schools⁵ – from feminist and queer studies to postcolonial readings –, but it ultimately served hermeneutical goals. This predominance of theory created a gap between modern literary studies on the one hand and early modern studies on the other, the latter being heavily influenced by Stephen Greenblatt’s New Historicism.

While there has always been at least some measure of dialogue between the practice of literary history and ‘pure’ literary theory, the reason why we place our stakes on the problems of writing literary history is because theoretical questions about literature in general now appear increasingly to be guided by the revitalized and newly confident practice of literary history. A revival of literary history in modernist studies does not necessarily mean a return of nineteenth-century philological, let alone biographical approaches. On the contrary, recent scholarship testifies to a highly critical attitude towards and a thorough revaluation of many crucial notions in the practice of literary history.

One need but consider how a rethinking of traditional periodization fuels theoretical advances such as those concerned with the Anthropocene or planetary time. Conventional literary periods lose their significance when measured against the vast timespans of human life and the history of the planet. However, from the opposite angle, that of the smaller scale, conventional periodization has also been scrutinized. Taking a comparatively brief amount of time as a ‘period’ in its own right, a number of studies has demonstrated the critical potential of, for instance, a specific year to shed an alternative light on literary history.⁶ A recent example of this approach is MDRN’s own *1947 – Almanach littéraire*, which presents a “X-ray” of one year in 47 contributions.⁷

Although the present volume carries a period indication on its cover, none of the essays collected explicitly address periodization as a theoretical issue. The period – the first half of the twentieth century – was taken as a starting point, and was chosen, not entirely at random of course, but precisely to highlight the relative arbitrariness of period demarcations. It avoids conventional definitions of the ‘modernist’ period as confined to the years 1910-1940,⁸ enabling a more integrated approach to modernist, non-modernist, pre-modernist, and postwar (or late) modernist phenomena. Moreover, our title, *Writing Literary History, 1900-1950*, deliberately allows a double approach. First, it entails the exploration of visions of literary history (and historiography) that originated *in the period* and which may acquire new relevance today for the study of its literature. Secondly, of course, it gives space to theoretical reflections, methodological proposals, and revealing case studies pertaining to the literary historiography *of the period* in question. However, as many, if not all, of the essays in this book show, both objectives naturally inform each other and, in actual practice, merge to reveal sometimes alternative narratives of history as well as new theoretical insights.

* * *

As a glance at the Table of Contents makes clear, each essay in this book is presented under the heading of a label (Style, Generation, Anthology,...), which sums up, if not the method in the strict sense, then at least the approach to writing literary history the essay in question advances. Aiming to embroider on the fruitful rethinking of traditional scholarly categories, these labels on the one hand evoke a range of concepts that have been familiar in literary studies for decades. In this way, they symbolize the solid continuity in the writing of literary history. On the other hand, each contributor to this book also sheds a new light on well-known concepts and methods, hence demonstrating their manifold possibilities.

Assigning specific concepts or labels to each individual contribution (instead of grouping several essays under encompassing titles), we also seek to do justice to the polyperspectivism in today’s literary studies. Of course, this programmatic stress on multidisciplinary does not exclude many cross-overs between the various contributions. Rather, we invite the reader to draw these parallels autonomously. Therefore, this introduction contains nothing more than helpful clues.

Almost all tags attached to the various essays have a long history of their own. The opening text of this book, for one, stresses the importance of a truly historicist viewpoint in the age-old discipline of stylistics. The study

of literary STYLE, Gilles Philippe claims in “Mind the Gap: Stylistics, Linguistics and Literary History,” can no longer restrict itself to merely linguistic analyses but ought to include historically contingent conceptions of literature in its methodological program. He highlights the importance of historical, national and genre-related stylistic differences which can only be explained with the help of literary historiography. While Philippe engages with the legacy of Leo Spitzer, Clément Girardi’s essay, “Creative Criticism vs. *Creative Evolution*: Thibaudet’s Experiments in Bergsonian Historiography,” examines the work of Albert Thibaudet – called by Spitzer “the greatest critic of contemporary France”⁹ – as an attempt to apply his interpretation of Henri Bergson’s writings on evolution to the practice of literary history. Girardi locates the meaning of what he calls Thibaudet’s “late bergsonism” in a dynamic use of the concept of GENERATION and reads his posthumous *Histoire de la littérature française* as more ‘bergsonist’ than is usually recognized. Related issues of style and TIME also animate Jan Baetens’s essay “‘Memory, of course, is never true.’ On Bullfighting, Writing, and History in Hemingway’s *Death in the Afternoon*.” In his close analysis of the interplay of text and image, of essayistic and novelistic prose, in Hemingway’s book on bullfighting, Baetens shows how the work encodes its author’s personal theory of ‘good writing,’ and, consequently, a vision of literary history – a theoretically informed judgment, as Baetens puts it, “of what we should continue to read and what deserves to be forgotten or superseded.”

A second contribution by Jan Baetens, this one co-authored with Ben De Bruyn, tackles head-on precisely this question of “what we should continue to read and what deserves to be forgotten”: their “In Defense of Canonization” emphasizes the necessity of selection in the practice of literary history. Taking stock of a prevailing ambivalence toward the CANON in literary studies and of a widespread anxiety over the politics of remembering and forgetting in today’s culture, they advocate confident value judgments in our curating of the literary past. A different take on the role of the canon in literary history is offered by Sarah Posman in her essay “Object with Love: Dodie Bellamy’s *Cunt Norton* as a Speculative Anthology.” In her interpretation of the provocative *Cunt Norton*, Posman lays bare the potential of the format of the ANTHOLOGY (or anti-anthology) as an agent in shaping literary history, and its canon. The term ‘agent’ is to be taken in a strong sense, as Posman aligns Bellamy’s book of poems with speculative realism’s aesthetic theory and especially with Graham Harman’s Object-Oriented Ontology. *Cunt Norton* is thus read as exemplifying an experimental ‘countercriticism’ that engages with the canonical works of literary history in their absolute ‘thingness.’

The observation that literature is not just a sphere of authors and texts, but consists of material things embedded in a historical material culture also animates the chapters by Nadja Cohen and Anne Reverseau and by Emma West. Cohen and Reverseau explicitly advocate a focus on the materiality of literature in “The Material Turn of Literary History: On the Collective Book *Petit musée d’histoire littéraire*,” which sheds light on literary products as OBJECTS as well as on objects in literature. Looking back on a recent book project, they reflect on the methodological questions that arise from this focus on objects, but they also include a short essay by Anke Gilleir on the corset in modernist literature that fully demonstrates the new interpretations resulting from it. Emma West’s contribution, “Cover Stars and Covert Addresses: Strategies for Reading Magazines Across the ‘Great Divide,’” considers literature’s materiality in her comparative analysis of the ‘little’ modernist magazine *The Tyro* and the popular glossy *The Royal Magazine*. She grasps the medium of the PERIODICAL in its full complexity by drawing attention to modes of address in both cover design and editorial discourse. In doing so, West blurs the far too rigid conceptual lines between ‘little’ and ‘popular’ magazines, between ‘high’ and ‘low.’

The cultural ‘divide’ between the highbrow and the popular questioned by West is addressed in other essays as well. It plays a role, for instance, in Baetens’s essay, because of Hemingway’s ambiguous position in literary history. But this book goes further, reserving substantial space for those authors and texts that were once very popular but lost their popularity later on, especially among literary scholars, and ironically precisely *because of* their popularity. The end of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century saw a substantial rise of literacy rates, which led to the arrival of a mass readership. This development went hand in hand with technological improvements and a commodification of literature. The modernist period consequently became the era of the battle of the brows, in which several sociological and cultural groups claimed their own legitimacy in the literary field. The irony of literary historiography has turned the modernists from an intellectual minority to the iconic faces of interwar literary culture and has buried once successful writers in oblivion. Since approximately two decades, though, literary scholarship has seen the rise of concepts and disciplines such as popular culture studies, middlebrow studies, or intermodernism. These new concepts “which attempt to expand or challenge the monolithic construction of modernism,” Nicola Humble argues, “indicate an increasing critical awareness that there is something wrong with the way in which we have mapped the literary field of the first half of the twentieth century.”¹⁰

Our book also wishes to take stock of these new perspectives. In “Regional Literature as Middlebrow?” for instance, Dirk de Geest lays bare some mechanisms behind CULTURAL HIERARCHIES (which he proposes to rephrase more dynamically as “cultural hierarchization”). Opting for a functionalist perspective, De Geest studies regional literature in relation to the concept of middlebrow literature, which has often been understood too narrowly as a body of work written by women and aimed at a female readership. Bram Lambrecht’s contribution, “From Far and Near: Literary Knowledge, the Interwar Novel, and the Tradition of Oral Storytelling,” also seeks to better understand anti-avant-garde aesthetics in the modernist period. He claims that Flemish regional author Ernest Claes and many other folk and regional writers not only adopt the principles and functions of the TRADITION of oral storytelling, but also revitalize and actualize them in the modern genre of the novel.

Yet, in light of the essays on the role of the canon, highly canonized modernist writers – the usual suspects of modernist studies, we might say – figure in a number of essays in this volume. Kate Symondson’s and Matthias Somers’s essays, for instance, treat writers such as Virginia Woolf, Ford Madox Ford, and Ezra Pound in an effort to elucidate their relationship with (literary) history. Symondson zooms in on war writing by Woolf, Ford, and David Jones in her chapter “Abstract Visions: Modernist Approaches to Writing the First World War.” In doing so, she convincingly refines the popular image of modernist writers as anti-historical and, as Symondson phrases it elegantly, “too quiet on the subject of the western front.” Symondson makes it clear, moreover, that modernist war writings are stylistically distinct: ABSTRACTION – whether this stylistic feature is based on pictorial Impressionism or not – is used as a means of evoking the ineffability and incomprehensibility of war and not, as has often been stated, of refusing narrative. Somers’s essay, “Who is the Modern Aristophanes? Modernism and the Classical Tradition,” discusses Virginia Woolf’s appreciation and RECEPTION of Aristophanic comedy in an effort to demonstrate the need to carefully consider the means and modalities of classical reception when writing the literary history of the early twentieth century. The example of Woolf illustrates the distinctive way in which modernist writers seized on the difference, and ultimate ‘unknowability,’ of Greek culture precisely to revitalize classical literature, seeing these texts as essential parts of contemporary literature.

Finally, a book on the writing of literary history also raises the question of the relevance and the future of literary studies. Such reflections and debates are very fierce nowadays, but the concluding essay by Stuart McWilliams, “Move Fast and Break Frames: The Question Concerning Luddism,”

demonstrates that they are not new. Linking the ‘Two Cultures’ debate, initiated by C. P. Snow, to present-day discussions, Stuart McWilliams elucidates the recurrent difficult relationships between TECHNOLOGY and the humanities, between innovation and tradition, between the realm of logic and that of magic. Having reached McWilliams’s chapter at the end of the book, the reader will notice a parallel with the beginning, where Gilles Philippe had already touched upon distant reading and digital humanities. Yet, from the necessity of canon formation in Baetens’s and De Bruyn’s text and the call for a fresh take on canonized writers in Symondson’s and Somers’s essays to advocating an inclusive view on literary phenomena in De Geest’s and West’s contributions: every single essay in this book directly or indirectly addresses the future of literary studies.

Endnotes

¹ Gustave Lanson, *Essais de méthode, de critique et d’histoire littéraire*, ed. Henri Peyre (Paris: Hachette, 1965), 33, our translation. The essay was originally published in *Revue du mois*, 10 October 1910, 385–413. “L’objet des historiens, c’est le passé ; un passé dont il ne subsiste que des indices ou des débris à l’aide desquels on en reconstruit l’idée. Notre objet, c’est le passé aussi, mais un passé qui demeure ; la littérature, c’est à la fois du passé et du présent.”

² Hans Robert Jauss, “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,” trans. Elizabeth Benzinger, *New Literary History* 2:1 (1970): 7–37.

³ Brian McHale and Randall Stevenson, “Introduction: On or about December 1910, London,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Literatures in English*, ed. Brian McHale and Randall Stevenson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 3.

⁴ Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008).

⁵ Even poststructuralist theory has never been as rigidly autonomist as has often been claimed; see Seán Burke, *The Death and the Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

⁶ The mother of all such studies, from ‘social discourse theory,’ is no doubt Marc Angenot, *1889: Un état du discours social* (Montreal: Éditions du Préambule, 1989). Examples focusing more strictly on literature are Jean-Michel Rabaté, *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), and Myriam Boucharenc and Claude Leroy, eds., *L’année 1925 : L’esprit d’une époque* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Paris Ouest, 2012).

⁷ David Martens, Bart Van den Bossche, and MDRN, eds., *1947: Almanach littéraire* (Brussels: Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2017).

⁸ Examples abound, but a prominent one is Chris Baldick, *The Oxford English Literary History*, vol. 10: 1910– 1940, *The Modern Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). McHale and Stevenson likewise follow Virginia Woolf’s suggestion that modernist literature took a start “on or about December 1910” (*Edinburgh Companion*, 1).

⁹ Leo Spitzer, “Patterns of Thought in the Style of Albert Thibaudet (Part One),” *Modern Language Quarterly* 9:3 (1948): 259.

¹⁰ Nicola Humble, “Sitting Forward or Sitting Back: Highbrow v. Middlebrow Reading,” *Modernist Cultures* 6:1 (2011): 42.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book finds its origin in a conference on literary history organized by MDRN at the University of Leuven in September 2015. MDRN would like to thank first of all the conference convenors Sascha Bru and Bart Van den Bossche. It also extends its warmest thanks to all the institutions and people that made possible the organization of the conference: the Research Council of the University of Leuven, for its long-time structural funding of MDRN's program and the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO Vlaanderen), for its financial and intellectual contribution. Furthermore, the conference and the resulting book would not have been possible without the practical groundwork carried out by the numerous junior researchers associated with MDRN as well as by Mia Hamels. We thank Peeters Publishers, who generously agreed to enlarge their MDRN series with this new volume, and of course all those whose participation made 'Writing Literary History' such an enriching experience.

The editors of this book wish to express their gratitude to Jan Baetens and Dirk de Geest, who initiated work on this book and kindly assisted us in word and deed.

