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The Changing Vocabulary of Literature: On the Migration and Transformation of Literary Concepts in Europe (1900–1950) – an Introduction

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Seen from a distance the main driving force behind the literature of the first half of the 20th century is change. Change, however, is a complex and even elusive category, as it regards different tempos as well as different relations between continuity and transformation. Behind the well-known and straightforward claim to “make it new” (Pound, see also Michael North’s 2013 *A History of the New* for a recent discussion of this slogan) and the widespread desire to return to the order of the past, a rich variety of strategies of reappropriating, recycling, reinterpreting, and redefining literary traditions can be discovered (at times clearly associated with a desire to innovate). Moreover, emergent and residual tendencies coexist, and different geographical contexts, cultural strata and media are characterized by diverging patterns of development, which is an easy reminder of the fact that change is frequently brought about by elements transferring from one specific discursive formation, social domain or medium to another. In any case, change as such is far from a clear-cut linear process. Furthermore, literary change is not merely an epiphenomenon of changes in the formal or thematic structure of literary texts, as it is necessarily related to the contemporary conceptualizations of and discourses on these texts. New literary phenomena may catalyze fundamental shifts in the system of terms, metaphors, and concepts employed by participants in literary culture to make sense of what they write and read. Conversely, the proliferation of new literary vocabularies may foster the introduction of a new literary doxa, as well as new systems of production and interpretation of individual texts.

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In *The Modern Movement*, the tenth volume of The Oxford English Literary History, devoted to the years 1910–1940, Chris Baldick begins each chapter with a short list of “new words” that entered English dictionaries (and hence the general lexicon) in that period. Though composed of a heterogeneous lexicon, these lists disclose much about the shifting socio-cultural context: new relations between literature and the market (*mass-medium*, *prepublication*), changing types of authorship and author-reader relations (*Bloomsburyite*, *cultish*, *fan-mail*), new literary techniques (*off-rhyme*, *introspection*, *montage*, *non-linearity*, *psychoanalyse*), recently introduced genres and media (*whodunit*, *cliff-hanger*, *tear-jerker*), transformations of the literary canon (*post-Victorian*, *Yeatsian*, *Woolfian*). Although such new, even fashionable words may certainly be strong indications of the changes pervading literary culture, the major part of the vocabulary that is used to conceptualize literature, however, includes words and concepts bearing witness of a long history in literary discourse, frequently dating back to antiquity. The question arises as to how these words and concepts, used in other contexts, by new protagonists, referring to new phenomena, acquire new readings, meanings and functions.

The central premise of the series of essays presented here is that a full understanding of the wide range of factors in literary change should take into account and carefully analyze the interaction between transformations of literary repertoires on the one hand and contemporary conceptual metalanguages on the other. Therefore, each essay offers a comprehensive reflection on a set of terms or concepts that played a key role in literary discourse in the first half of the 20th century. Our initial list included notions such as *rhetoric*, *revolution*, *image*, *poésie pure*, *abstraction*, *nobility*, *Kulturpessimismus*, *middlebrow*, *life*, *the organic*, *group*, *écriture automatique*, *international*, *technique*. Some of these are new coinages, specifically conceived to describe new literary phenomena, yet most are general notions with long histories, firmly rooted in everyday language and relevant to very diverse cultural and social domains. Nevertheless, our primary aim was to map the specific meanings these terms acquired in the literary field between roughly 1900 and 1950; precisely the fact that they are so broad and deeply rooted makes them interesting cases for the re-articulation of literary vocabularies. The focus is on how these concepts function as building blocks within broader metaliterary discourses that try to describe, interpret, and evaluate phenomena of change in the period that is usually associated with modernist literature. The concepts are not primarily interpreted as components of elaborate and consistent (philosophical, social, artistic) theories, but as parts of a more or less widespread and a more or less elusive literary doxa, discussed by and/or shared by different participants in the process of literary communication (writers, critics, literary historians, publishers, readers, etc.), and contributing to the idea (or, more

accurate: the various and often conflicting ideas) of literature at a given moment in history.

In order to grasp the meaning and function of these concepts in the context of literary communication, it is important to specify their nature against the backdrop of the form and function of concepts in general. In her seminal book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, Mieke Bal discusses concepts as basic tools for the study of culture, emphasizing the distinction between *words* and *labels* on one side of the spectrum and *concepts* on the other:

To say that concepts can work as shorthand theories has several consequences. Concepts are not ordinary words, even if words are used to speak (of) them. [...] Nor are they labels. Concepts (mis)used in this way lose their working force; they are subject to fashion and quickly become meaningless. (23)

Although Bal admits that her concepts “to varying degrees” belong “to the category where ordinary and theoretical language overlap” (27), it is clearly her ambition to treat them as concepts, i. e. to strip them as much as possible of the “confusion” of everyday language in order to make them “productive” (23) for the scholarly (and interdisciplinary) study of culture. In contrast, the notions we are interested in here are nearer to *words* than to Bal’s *concepts*, as they are without exception ubiquitous in non-academic accounts of literature, and their meanings and functions show a high degree of flexibility (which might be one of the reasons for their popular appeal). Although some of these notions did (and some even do) figure prominently in the more regulated scholarly discourses on literature, we do not focus primarily on their role in the genealogy of the emerging discipline(s) of literary studies, neither on their potential use for the study of culture today. Instead, we want to take into account a wide range of historically situated and context-specific uses, which includes their role in the self-fashioning of literary authors, in the topical debates concerning the identity of literature and the proper ways of producing/consuming it, etc. In short, notions such as *life* or *image* constantly hover between the status of ordinary words and the status of concepts; they are, to use Bal’s words, “word-concepts,” as they plainly have common sense to them, and are often used in a self-evident fashion without any critical reflection on how and why they are used. On other occasions, however, their meanings are explicitly highlighted and discussed, or they are used by cultural participants in more specific, even idiosyncratic ways, which indeed makes them work as non-academic “shorthand theories” about literary objects and practices. In contrast to Bal, who aims to turn word-concepts into full-fledged intersubjective concepts, we want to canvass the tensions between the word and the concept, between the pre-theoretical everyday notion and its more advanced use as a miniature theory of literature.

In order to further characterize the kind of concepts listed above one should at least take into account three different dimensions, viz. time, place, and what we will provisionally call discursive formation (in a Foucauldian sense). To begin with, literary concepts showcase different temporalities. If a notion such as *middlebrow* (in its cultural meaning) appears to be coined more or less in the period which is at stake here, in response to major shifts in the social and cultural hierarchies at the beginning of the 20th century, a notion such as *rhetoric* obviously dates back to classical antiquity. The survival of the latter, however, proves that some of these literary concepts have more than nine lives and are able to flexibly adopt new functions and meanings time and again. Conversely, new words entering the lexicon always presuppose some kind of negotiation with the past. A relatively recent word like *middlebrow*, as it figures in the so-called ‘battle of the brows’ in the Anglophone cultural context of the 1920s and 1930s, cannot exist without the complementary yet older terms of *highbrow* and *lowbrow*, and draws upon 19th century ideas about phrenology and biological difference. Hence, most of the concepts that will be discussed here are marked by complex, and even contradictory temporalities, which will have to be specified in detail. The same pertains to the phenomena and realities these concepts name and describe. Ostensibly there runs a sharp dividing line between a notion like *revolution*, which is intrinsically linked to the history of the avant-garde and its discourse of rupture and innovation, and notions like *rhetoric* or *nobility*, which represent bygone social and cultural value systems situated at the ‘other side’ of modernity and modernism, as the social class of aristocracy is receiving fatal blows in the first decades of the 20th century and traditional rhetoric is, in the face of modernism, increasingly associated with depleted poetic forms. A closer look, however, reveals a much more complex picture, as in the 20th century notions such as rhetoric are to a certain extent severed from their traditional referents and receive different meanings in unprecedented discursive constellations, even to the extent that in the writings of some critics such concepts associated with tradition become key concepts for the development and formulation of cutting edge poetical theories. Conversely, revolutionary aesthetic ideas often draw upon the rediscovery of and reconnection with tradition. Hence, literary metalanguage in the modernist era, from *rhetoric* to *revolution*, inevitably discloses something about the intricate relation between the old and the new, tradition and contemporary culture.

Next to the temporal, there is the geographical dimension. The semantics of certain concepts are firmly rooted in nationally or linguistically specific literary contexts. This is most apparent in those notions that are difficult to translate; the term *Kulturpessimismus*, for instance, played a major role in German-language culture from Friedrich Nietzsche to Oswald Spengler and it is difficult, if not

impossible, to account for something like *poésie pure* without reference to the topical debates in the French literary context of the 1920s and the enduring influence of French symbolism. Still, apart from their local origins, it is equally true that most of these concepts are also profoundly transnational and migrate through different geographical and linguistic contexts, often acquiring new meanings along their way. A good case in point is the term *Kulturpessimismus*, which may indeed have its roots in a German cultural context, but has migrated throughout Europe in the wake of the immense success of Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* and gave rise to numerous similar pessimistic accounts of "World History" in all parts of the Western world, though often adapted to the different contexts in which these texts had to circulate. Similarly, after its propagation in the seminal essay by the French critic Henri Bremond, the notion of *poésie pure* becomes topical in discussions about the essence of poetry and literature in the 1920s throughout Europe, and figures prominently, to name but one example, in the writings of the Belgian avant-garde poet Paul van Ostaïjen (who mentions Bremond only in passing). In order to write the history of concepts, it is mandatory, in one way or the other, to chart such translations and migrations, to make sense of the hovering between the national and the local on the one hand and the transnational and European on the other.

Besides travelling through time and space, concepts travel between different discursive formations and social domains, between different arts, media and genres, which can have a strong impact on their meaning and function. For instance, notions such as *nobility* and *revolution* migrate from the domain of politics and social discourse to the domain of aesthetic theory, retaining some of their social and political connotations, but at the same time acquiring fresh meanings adapted to new discursive contexts, even to the extent that certain original connotations may be suppressed. Notions such as *littérature pure* and *cinéma pur*, as derivatives from *poésie pure*, offer examples of how a concept such as aesthetic purity undergoes fundamental changes as it moves from one genre to the other (poetry versus prose) and between different art-forms and media (literature versus cinema). The notorious complexity and vagueness of literary and/or aesthetic concepts is often a side-effect of this kind of discursive instability, which is evidenced in an exemplary way by the Spenglerian notion of pessimism, as it hesitates between an academic and a popular context, between history, philosophy and literature, between Germany and Europe, between its 19th century remnants and its role in topical debates during the interwar years.

From our initial list, we have made a selection of concepts that testify in an exemplary way of the temporal, spatio-geographical, and discursive complexity of literary concepts, situated between the 'old' and the 'new,' the local and the transnational, between literature *stricto sensu* and culture in its broadest sense.

The current issue of *Arcadia* includes contributions by Matthias Somers and Eric Trudel on *rhetoric*, by Nadja Cohen on *littérature pure* and *cinéma pur* and by Arne De Winde and Oliver Kohns on *Kulturpessimismus*. The next issue of this journal will comprise a second series of essays dealing with a selected number of notions related to literary change. With these essays, spread over two issues, we hope to offer a stimulating and nuanced take on the development of literary metalanguage in the first half of the 20th century.

In their essay on rhetoric, Matthias Somers and Eric Trudel argue that, despite the decline of traditional rhetoric as a cultural institution and despite repeated attacks by modernist writers, who equated rhetoric with obsolete poetic forms, the term was not really discarded as a means to reflect about new directions in literature. Drawing on examples from both Anglophone and Francophone literature, and paying special emphasis to the reappropriation of rhetoric as a critical term by the French critic Jean Paulhan, they elucidate a demonstrable tendency in modernist poetics to incorporate rather than simply expel rhetoric, although this meant that the term itself had to be reinterpreted in a fundamental way. Nadja Cohen sketches the genealogy of the concept of *poésie pure* and its derivatives. Bearing overtones of 19th century symbolist conceptions of literature, the term *poésie pure* becomes topical in the discussions about the essence of poetry in the 1920s in France. Almost simultaneously, it is argued, the idea of aesthetic purity is applied to other genres (such as the novel) and gives rise to new combinations (such as *cinéma pur*), which are used to delineate different genres and art forms and which can only be understood as a contemporary response to the latest changes in the media system. Finally, Arne De Winde and Oliver Kohns trace the evolution of the notion of *Kulturpessimismus* from Nietzsche to Spengler, showing how the idea of cultural decline does not exclusively tie in with a reactionary ideology that is at odds with modernity, yet can also be interpreted as a critical cultural force within the process of modernization itself.

To conclude, as they map the different meanings, functions and trajectories of a handful of crucial metaliterary concepts, the essays collected in this special issue reveal one more essential thing about literary metalanguage, viz. the fact that each notion is part of a larger network of concepts. Although the essays set out to describe one basic term, there is the constant awareness that this can only be done by describing clusters of concepts, by discussing (quasi-)synonyms and/or antonyms, by taking into account variants and alternatives. Jean Paulhan's notion of *Rhetoric* (with capital) cannot be understood without reference to his use of its counterpart *Terror*, the meaning of *cinéma pur* is inseparably related to *poésie pure*, etc. One can even take this idea a step further, since in the essays that will follow, each analysis of the semantics of a literary concept appears to be an analysis of its pragmatics in the first place. In the final analysis, a history of

concepts and discourses is also a history of the ways in which people have used them. Hence each history of concepts is also a history of practices and institutions, and vice versa.

Note: The series of essays presented in this introduction has been realized in the context of the research group MDRN, which engages in the study of the multiple functions, histories and mediatizations of modernist literature in the period 1900–1950 in different Western European traditions (www.mdrn.be).