

New Visions and Re-Visions in 20th and 21st Century French Literature

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In the twentieth century, the “death of the author” was proclaimed by literary critics. Since then, there has been a shift in focus from text to reader. This reorientation called forth changing critical paradigms, taking us from modernism to postmodernism and beyond. New ideologies shaped reader-oriented theories and opened up the field for feminism, gender and identity studies, as well as cultural studies. An ever-growing field of interdisciplinary approaches began to emerge, linking literature to the arts, psychology, philosophy, and the neurosciences. Moreover, compelling political and social events left their mark, one of the most significant being the expansion of the Francophone world, which forever changed the landscape of French letters.

Not only reading but writing was changing as well, as authors introduced new forms and techniques, rethought the very nature of and boundaries between genres, engaged in intertextual play, and were unafraid to cross borders.

We have come a long way from the turn of the last century to the start of the second decade of the present one and have been exposed to many changes in the field of literary studies. It is, therefore, relevant to stand back and take a comprehensive view of the new ways of seeing, or, as Nelson Goodman would say, new ways of worldmaking. It is equally essential to take another look at writers whose reputation was established early on in the twentieth century in order to assess their reception in the twenty-first century. Conversely, it behooves us to consider why some authors who did not fare so well in the previous century are now read with interest.

As we set out to examine twentieth and twenty-first century French and Francophone literature, we include texts that look back at the past and

others that anticipate the future, with special attention to perceived literary, cultural, and historical connections. These dialogues through time can be interpreted in more ways than one: as visions change, re-visions come to the forefront and as such present a rich forum for discussion.

The nine essays included in this issue provide insight from diverse perspectives into a period so rich and multifaceted that we must pause from time to time to take a closer look at it.

In her essay “Proust and George Eliot: An Intertextual Reading,” Inge Wimmers considers Proust’s lasting appeal to the twenty-first century reader by taking up her own re-reading of Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* from an intertextual perspective. Redefining intertextuality by linking it to the reader’s point of view and not to the practice of textual allusion or imitation, she sets out to discuss some compelling similarities between Proust’s and Eliot’s fiction—similarities of thought, perception, and style that become apparent as she studies their *oeuvre* from the vantage point of emotions, ethics, and psychology. She concludes that both writers show us how emotional memory constitutes the essence of our personal history, thus anticipating modern research in psychology and the neurosciences.

Pascal A. Ifri, in “Proust’s Innovative Vision of Literature as Seen through his Correspondence,” examines the novelist’s literary ideas. By carefully probing some of the most important letters of the monumental correspondence in which Proust discusses the innovative vision of his literary project in some detail, Ifri proposes a sort of Proustian aesthetics that not only complements the theories Proust offers in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* and in *Le Temps retrouvé*, the last volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, but that also helps us to understand them better and to see his novel in a new way.

For Gerald Prince, perhaps no French novel in the past fifteen years has received more critical attention than Michel Houellebecq’s *Les Particules élémentaires* and perhaps none has evoked stronger reactions with regard to the (literary) values it espouses and represents. In his essay, “*Les Particules élémentaires*: Self–portrait,” Prince invents the voice of the novel itself to provide a defense of it against various attacks and to discuss its narrative strategies, metafictional comments, and literary allusions. In so doing, he demonstrates how Houellebecq’s techniques, observations, and allusions probe into the nature of good literature and, more specifically, characterize the kind of text that *Les Particules élémentaires* is or aspires to be.

The intersection of past and present, memories and histories serves

as the basis for Kennedy M. Schultz's essay, "Moving Forward with the Past: History and Identity in Marie-Célie Agnant's *La Dot de Sara*." Schultz investigates Edouard Glissant's theory of H/history, recalling how Francophone authors once challenged Western conceptions of History as the only authoritative truth. By questioning previously established boundaries for history and identity, Glissant, in particular, suggests a new process of identity creation which seeks to include multiple perspectives and connections with one's lived experience as revealed through memories of one's past. This approach is now reflected in the works of immigrant writers such as Agnant, a Haitian immigrant to Québec. *La Dot de Sara* reveals the struggles that three generations of immigrant women face in establishing a secure identity while balancing their shared histories with their roles in contemporary society.

Contemporary French Theater has become an experimental space in which female playwrights actively reconfigure the mother figure. In "The Mother Figure in Contemporary Women's Theater," Sanda Golopentia discusses several innovative actualizations of the mother character: the mother-daughter continuum in Chantal Chawaf's *Chair chaude* (1976); the excessive mother in Denise Chalem's *À cinquante ans elle découvrait la mer* (1980); discontinuous maternity in Loleh Bellon's *De si tendres liens* (1984); trial maternity (maternité à l'essai) in Madeleine Laïk's *Transat* (1982); and, willful maternal eclipse in Denise Bonal's *Passions et Prairies* (1988).

David Bellos, in "French as a Foreign Language: The Literary Enterprise of Antoine Volodine," approaches what he considers one of the strangest figures in the literary landscape of contemporary France. According to Bellos, Volodine's fictions all resemble each other except for names and settings, plunging the reader into a world where the Revolution has failed and its protagonists are either dead, incarcerated, or in hiding. The protagonists keep the memory of their political dreams alive by telling the stories of their lost comrades. The authors of these narratives are themselves the subjects of other narratives. Thus Volodine's not entirely imaginary construction of a ruined world beyond defeat simultaneously denies individual authorship (by distributing stories among the characters of the fictions) and reasserts human individuality through the memorializing function of storytelling. In addition to influences from science fiction and thematic sources from France's continuing nostalgia for the revolutionary road, Volodine's dream world seems quite unrelated to the main trends of contemporary writing.

Although most people associate Tristan Tzara only with the Dada

movement, which, along with surrealism, has passed into popular culture and advertising to the point where we no longer recognize these roots, Tzara's poetical texts, written between 1918 and 1961, reflect some of the most significant artistic and historical moments of the twentieth century. Ruth Caldwell, in her article "Tristan Tzara's Poetical Visions: Ironic, Oneiric, Heroic," studies Tzara's masterpiece, *L'Homme approximatif*, and shows not only the influence of Dada and surrealism, but also how this work, published in 1931, reflects the uncertainty of the *entre-deux-guerres* period and critiques social problems still relevant today.

It has been more than sixty-five years since the end of World War II. At first, the least painful way to cope with its memory was to suppress its reality, for the war was necessarily coupled with trauma. Today, we may restore individual realities and shape a more truthful memory by returning to texts written during and after World War II. In "Béatrix Beck: The 'Barny Cycle': Writing to Inform and Heal the Self," Myrna Bell Rochester and Mary Lawrence Test focus on the first six books, published between 1948 and 1967, by French-Belgian novelist and short-story writer, Béatrix Beck (1914-2008). In so doing, they trace the episodic development of Beck as a writer, which parallels the itinerary of her semi-autobiographical protagonist, Barny. In these books: *Barny* (1948), *Une mort irrégulière* (1950), *Léon Morin, prêtre* (1952), *Des accommodements avec le ciel* (1954), *Le Muet* (1963), and *Cou coupé court toujours* (1967), we see both Barny and the nation go through the various stages of forgetting and remembering, healing and recovery. In discussing these stages, the authors of this essay draw on Judith Lewis Herman's 1992 study entitled *Trauma and Recovery*, thus viewing them in a new light.

In "Contemporary French Fiction In and Out of Screens," Eliane DalMolin explores the ways in which the widespread craze for reality TV has now extended its contamination to the comparatively more traditional discipline of literature. Today, there is no use denying the American domination in the creation of reality shows. French television has followed suit and, as a result of the cultural flooding of such a model, recent French literature has also been swayed by the empire of television in general, and the power of reality TV in particular. This being said, DalMolin delineates the increasingly porous frontier separating and conjoining reality TV and literary representation by questioning the adoption and consecration of banality as the basic principle of this porosity, and by examining the consequences of such a sustained exposure to images of a trite reality on the quality of traditional cultural artifacts such as books. Ultimately, she won-

ders why, in all forms of cultural representation, high or low, a spectacle of great banality has now been elevated to the rank of acclaimed cultural production.

As readers make their way through this volume, they will discover new readings of long familiar authors, like Proust and Tzara. They will also be encouraged to re-evaluate works depicting historical events, as is the case in Beck's "Barny Cycle" where critical stages in the characters' dilemma resulting from World War II are elucidated through a psychological study closer to our own age. Other essays offer insightful dialogues through time by highlighting intertextual relationships (Proust and Eliot; Glissant and Agnant). Several essays focus on different kinds of border crossings as we move from the twentieth to the twenty-first century. Going beyond the established boundaries of a genre seems to be one of the more notable directions in the elaboration of new literary forms, such as Volodine's inspirations from science fiction and revolutionary writing while dismissing the long honored distinction of author, narrator, and character. Perhaps most striking is the redesigning of a genre in contemporary French theater by women playwrights, most notably in plays where a maternal figure reinvigorates the staging of relationships and the invention of technique. Equally illuminating is how television, especially reality TV, has had an influence on French literature. Should it be viewed as the nefarious influence of the banal or as a possible reinvigoration of literary creativity through images and imaginary processes from another sphere? And finally, a common theme in more than one essay is the question of identity, ranging from probings into the inner self to historical and cultural questions of identity in an ever expanding and changing world.

Notes

1 In conclusion, I would like to thank all the authors for their inspiring contributions. Most especially, I thank Inge C. Wimmers for her support in identifying potential authors and for added encouragement throughout the entire editing process.