

Le Romantisme
et après en France

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Nathalie Aubert,
Pierre-Philippe Fraiture,
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La Belgique entre deux siècles

Laboratoire de la modernité,
1880–1914

Peter Lang

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Introduction

This volume in French and English, with contributions from key specialists from Belgium, the UK and Ireland, investigates the intellectual climate and conditions responsible for transforming, in the years 1880–1914, the recently created state of Belgium, from an introvert young nation into a coveted centre of European *avant-garde* creativity. Thus this edited volume of essays explores the emergence of modernity, a moment which coincided with new ways of thinking about European nations. The advent of centralised states and the subsequent disappearance of vernaculars created on the continent at large new cultural practices, new relationships between art, literature and their audiences. The ideas of ‘unity’, ‘homogeneity’ and ‘continuity’ became the trademarks of self-legitimising discourses on the nation; Ernest Renan, in his famous *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?* (1882) drew a comparison between the nation and a ‘soul’ or ‘spiritual principle’ reflecting both a set of traditions and a will to share and shape the present and the future. The aesthetic revolution that took place in Belgium from the time of its fiftieth anniversary to the Great War bore witness to this reappraisal of the past, seen as a stock of self-defining images, and the need to situate Belgian creativity within a wider, more international context. The subject is developed from a literary and historical perspective and engages critically with key objects such as texts and images. The approach is comparative and offers a hitherto unexplored territory focusing on the Belgian contribution to the birth of modernity. The volume sets out first to explore the paradoxes and ambiguities of Belgian modernity: the unique nature of Belgian modernity lies in the fact that it was largely born out of a socially unified group¹ which, whilst rejecting the official nationalistic and artistically conformist discourse, was not

1 Most of them were ‘grands bourgeois’, and were also often lawyers.

contesting the social foundations of Belgian society. Socially unified but artistically hybrid, Belgian modernity adopted a paradoxical posture, which was both backward- and forward-looking. Their slogan, ‘Neither bohemian nor conformist’, provides the nodal point of this discussion on Belgian modernity.

This defining period for Belgian art and literature is characterised by a tension between two major tendencies. Firstly, by a desire to negate the world via a ‘symbolist’ or decadent syntax of regression and secondly by a need to participate in the renovation of aesthetic languages which urbanisation, industrialisation, mass-consumption and colonialism had suddenly rendered obsolete. The second part of the book addresses some of these tensions between tradition and innovation and the contributors show that this modernity is informed by a number of paradoxes such as its aptitude to shift – often in the same authors – from a language that negates positivism to one celebrating technological advances to the use of new materials in architecture or sculpture. This part also shows that, despite recurring tendencies, Belgian modernity remained overall an eclectic and individualistic phenomenon in which individuals (rather than members of coherently structured schools) exercised their ambition to apply new processes (poetic or otherwise) to a wide range of disciplines.

Finally, in the last part, Belgian modernity is defined as a dynamic of exchanges, both internal and external.

The aesthetic and literary climate of Belgium in the years 1880–1914 is presented as a place of tensions and paradoxes, but also of dynamism, largely due to a freedom of expression that is not common in continental Europe at the time. Paul Aron’s chapter explores the conditions that enabled *Art Nouveau* to flourish in *fin-de-siècle* Brussels. In his account, he reads the emergence of Belgian modernity against the backdrop of the theoretical framework developed by Carl Shorske in his *fin-de-siècle Vienna*.² He argues that, as in Austria, a politically disempowered bourgeoisie shifted its critical attention and creativity from politics to culture. This shift, or symbolic reinvest-

2 Carl Shorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1979.

ment, was engineered by a loosely connected group of dynamic 'esthètes' who, albeit not ideologically or aesthetically homogeneous, shared similar ideas regarding colonialism or the extension of the right of suffrage. This is precisely what Pierre-Philippe Fraiture examines in his chapter on Edmond Picard's travelogue *En Congolie* (1896).³ This narrative offers a good example of this tension between regression and progress, which fed, as Aron suggested, Belgian *fin-de-siècle* imagination and overall *Zeitgeist*. He appears in this book as a firm, albeit critical, supporter of King Leopold's colonial venture in Central Africa. Yet at the same time, he uses a language in which his poetic affinities with symbolism are manifest. In this stylistic exercise Picard repeatedly draws upon a stock of images mirroring primarily his own culture. With these fragments he reconstructs in the middle of the colony an imaginative landscape that owes more to Belgium than to his putative object (the Congo). This chapter also analyses the ideological consequences of this metaphorical operation. The following chapter focuses on the crucial role played by Leopold II in the creation of the Congo Free State (CFS). Lieve Spaas underlines the ferocity and profit-driven nature of a system where, in the name of humanistic ideals, the king of the Belgians was able to launch a most lucrative business venture of which he became the main beneficiary. She also describes the significance of the Tervuren-based 'Exposition Internationale de Bruxelles' (1897) where the CFS had its own

- 3 Edmond Picard (1836–1924), a well-known lawyer, art collector, critic, and man of letters, was one of these 'esthètes' and one of a number of personalities who were essential for the promotion of Belgian modernity on the cultural scene. As a patron of the arts, his house served as a cultural centre where members of the bar, politicians, musicians and artists mingled. Aside from the opulent surroundings enhanced by works of Rops, Van Camp, Artan, Khnopff, Courbet, Ensor and Van der Stappen, musical auditions and readings of unpublished works were held in the Picard home. Picard was also a militant socialist and passionate defender of the working man. He cofounded in 1865 the newspaper *La Liberté* which fought for universal suffrage and on 18 January 1866 he was asked by the workers' committee to assist in preparing a manifesto for electoral reform.

pavilion and which enabled Belgian sculptors to exhibit new works made of ivory.

In a context marked by the rapid growth of higher education and publishing, the group of ‘grands bourgeois’ mentioned above was instrumental in transforming the market relations between culture producers and consumers. Jean-Pierre Bertrand’s chapter is a perfect illustration of this. He evokes Verhaeren’s prose poems, the modernity of which is placed in the lineage of Baudelaire. Bertrand, however, places special emphasis on the cultural consumption which he links, at the time of the Second Empire in France, with the birth of the modern daily press. It is his contention that the Baudelairian conception of the prose poem is that of a form devoid of any narrativity and poeticity that creates its own rules of significance, beyond any pre-established codification. Thus he goes as far as saying that, as a genre, it was created *for* the daily press, and that the prose poem was to poetry what the ‘feuilleton’ was to the novel. His textual study of Verhaeren’s works are examined in this context. For his part, Patrick McGuinness discusses in his chapter Maeterlinck’s first book of poems, *Serres chaudes* (1889), and suggests how the volume registers a crisis of relations between poetry and the critical and literary discourses in the Symbolist-Decadent period. Connecting up the poetry and the theatre by revealing their metalinguistic and metatheatrical obsessions, McGuinness shows how Maeterlinck’s early work is defined by its desire to put language on show, and to make language the subject as well as the medium of expression. He concludes by showing how Maeterlinck adapts one of the key influences on French *fin-de-siècle* poetry, Walt Whitman, to his own ends to produce a poetry that is a paradox of repetition and innovation, originality and derivativeness, modernism and decadent exhaustion.

The fact that in Belgium, freedom of the press was a constitutional right also contributed to the appeal the country exerted on many political exiles from France (Hugo, Proudhon), providing artists with a tribune for their works. This ‘exception belge’ (to coin an expression that the French like to apply to themselves) meant an exceptional ‘porosity’ to external influences. This was also a deter-

mining factor for the development of Belgian art and literature as modernity in this country coincided with the birth of a *national* literature. In her contribution, Laurence Brogniez examines the idea according to which Francophone Belgian literature was born out of a 'symbolic deficit' (Christian Berg) and therefore proceeded to root itself in the tradition established in Flemish painting which endorsed, in a country devoid of any national literary tradition, the role of purveyor of identity and legitimacy. She traces back the tensions between tradition (archetypal figures) and innovation (trivial, contemporary ones) in the *Kermesses* which encompass the tensions between the pictorial model and the ambitions of realist literature.

Claire Moran offers a similar approach in her study of James Ensor, examining how the artist's work in word and image relies on a conception of modernity seen as a reinvention of the grotesque. Doing so, she shows how Ensor moved away from Impressionism and Post-Impressionism and stood against a trend artistically and ideologically subservient to the French model. She also demonstrates that, although he was of Flemish culture, Ensor's written work was accomplished in French and his inventiveness in this language was directly related to the reinvention of his visual work in the late 1880s. The interface between text and image is a characteristic of Belgian art of the time, as the two following chapters also clearly demonstrate. Barbara Wright, in her essay, focuses on Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte*, the first novel ever published with an illustration of 35 photographs. She remarks that the novel's major theme, *resemblance*, is repeatedly echoed throughout the book via descriptive, narrative and visual means. Her analysis concentrates more specifically on the dialogue, sometimes continuous, sometimes discontinuous, that is established between the text and the photographs that appeared in the first edition. This dialogue, she contends, constitutes the very modernity of Rodenbach's 'imagination analogique'. Denis Laoureux, for his part, shows that the publication of illustrated books during the *fin-de-siècle* era rejuvenated the debate on the aesthetic dialectics between words and images. This renewed interest coincided with the advent of a new generation of Brussels-based publishers. He focuses more specifically

on the significance of illustrations in Maurice Maeterlinck's works, his use of iconographic materials as an aesthetic dimension which, Denis Laoureux contends, underscores the playwright's ability to establish via his publications meaningful dialogue with noted painters and/or engravers such as Georges Minne, Charles Doudelet and Léon Spilliaert.

One of the main characteristics of the intellectual climate and conditions that were responsible for transforming the (relatively) young nation into a centre of European avant-garde creativity, was, as we have already mentioned, an unprecedented openness which translated itself into an ability to absorb external influences, and later, to establish exchanges either with other countries or indeed, inside the different communities forming this complex multicultural society. One of the first and most efficient avant-garde movements in that respect was Les XX. Although not studied as such in this volume, a large number of personalities and artists examined here have been either taking part directly (Picard, Maus) or indirectly in this original enterprise of promotion of the arts. Indeed, during the 10 years it existed (1884–1893), Les XX became the most important artistic group of its kind, bringing together the arts through lectures, readings of new poetry and musical performances. The hosting of lectures and performances given essentially by Belgian, French and English artists identified the avant-garde elements at home, and nurtured and sustained them as well. This internationalism, unique in its genre, as well as the unification of the avant-garde in the literary, visual and musical spheres were characteristics that would remain with the Belgian avant-garde well into the twentieth century (one can think of Christian Dotremont and Cobra for example).

It is right therefore that the last part of the book is specifically dedicated to this dynamic of exchanges – internal ones first of all, as Richard Bales shows, when he explores the complex relationships established within the 'groupe de Gand' between the all-but-forgotten poet (and painter) Grégoire Le Roy and his friends Maurice Maeterlinck and Charles Van Lerberghe. This chapter illuminates a little-known and somewhat brief episode of literary history (which ends

when Le Roy moves to Antwerp after Van Lerberghe has moved to Brussels, Maeterlinck staying in Gand) where Bales shows the three writers at work, exchanging ideas and themes engaging in a creative, if not totally successful for Le Roy, literary life. The three men were Flemish, yet all of them chose to write their works in French, the language of symbolic power. This is an essential aspect of Belgian modernity as it is only after 1884, when the Catholic party elected a majority to Parliament and turned out the Liberals who had governed for 30 of the previous 38 years, that the Flemish language and culture started to be positively encouraged.⁴ The geographical proximity of France, the country which invented and therefore nationalised the concept of modernity, is the main factor behind this complexity. Despite Léopold II's attempt to create the conditions for the emergence of a truly national literature, French literature – canonised and universalised by several centuries of cultural practices – remained a predominant point of reference. Consequently young Belgian authors often sought their legitimacy in Paris. In fact its most prominent representatives (Maeterlinck, Rodenbach, Verhaeren et al.) established very strong links with the Parisian literary scene. This, of course, was largely due to a determination to occupy the cultural field, but also depended upon individual artistic relationships as in the mutually enriching Jarry-Elskamp encounter.

In her essay, Jill Fell focuses on Alfred Jarry's woodcuts and poetry and shows that the French writer was, in the early years of his career, deeply influenced by Max Elskamp and Émile Verhaeren, two writers whom he admired and had elevated to the status of *élus* for their ability to innovate. As in Laoureux's contribution, Jill Fell underlines the crucial and innovative role played by Belgian publishers, in this case, Brussels-based Deman and Lacomblez. Nathalie Aubert explores another aspect of the kind of links that had been created at the time between Belgium and France when she examines the article

4 Flemish was established as an official language in the courts, the Flemish University of Ghent was founded, and currency was finally printed in both French and Flemish languages.

that Camille Lemonnier dedicated to Alfred Stevens in *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. The author of *L'Ecole belge de peinture 1830–1905* had been commissioned by the French journal to present Belgian painters in a series of articles, and Aubert analyses the reasons why Lemonnier chose, in 1878, to represent Belgian modernity in painting with a 'peintre de genre' whose contribution to modernity is, to say the least, problematic unless his modernity is not aesthetic, but can be traced in an ability to understand cultural consumption, in a buyers' market.

With the chapter that Christian Berg dedicates to Jean de Boschère,⁵ who, around 1912, had endeavoured to embrace modernity wholeheartedly (abandoning the lyrical prose praised by the Symbolists), and the prose poem, we return to an aesthetic dimension of modernity. Berg demonstrates in his chapter that, not only did De Boschère exert a significant influence on the London avant-garde poetical scene at the beginning of the twentieth century, but also, via Ezra Pound and *The Little Review*, on the American avant-garde as well. Indeed, he shows that the first texts that Pound sent in June 1916 to the famous avant-garde review that Pound was to run from 1917, were by De Boschère, and were published in French. Berg therefore rightly underlines a little-known dimension of Belgian modernity, that of exporting itself on a strategically crucial avant-garde scene.

In conclusion, we hope that this volume will have shown how, born out of a strong identity manifesto – Rodenbach's well-documented 'Soyons-nous' – which was an attempt to forge a Belgian cultural paradigm, in the end, it was the ability of Belgian art and literature to be at a crossroads, and to absorb as well as export its belonging to its time that characterized this moment. Lemonnier's 'Soyez de votre siècle'⁶ was received by a group of individualities forming an avant-garde, swarming according to individual journeys beyond the limits of any artistic movement and beyond the boundaries of this small country.

5 Before the Second World War, the author signed with his real name, "De Bosschère" as Christian Berg explains in his chapter p.215.

6 *L'Art libre*, 01-08-1872.