Introduction

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This volume combines the expertise of a large number of distinguished academics and promising younger scholars, from Europe and North America, writing about their specialisations from a variety of literary, historical, and theoretical perspectives. It is intended to serve as an introduction to the major writings in French and also to the literary, cultural, and intellectual history of France over the centuries and of the French-speaking world. It should be of use to undergraduates, graduate students, and researchers alike.

Although most major French and francophone authors are covered in the course of the volume and can be easily referenced in the index, *The Cambridge History of French Literature* is inspired not only by period and historical concerns but also by topical and theoretical points of view. The topics outlined in this introduction, and addressed variously through the contributions to this history, were selected on the basis of their continuing interest to current and future researchers, their relevance to the place of French-language writing in European and world cultural production, and as a way of distinguishing this volume from other such volumes produced in the past. Contributors were encouraged to address one or more of the following topics in their essays, not necessarily as the focus of the essay but as a way of suggesting how the subject of their discussion is informed by one or more of these issues.

The oral and the written

While the earliest vernacular texts composed in French (from the late eleventh century to the early twelfth century) are marked by signs of orality in composition, rhetoric, and even manuscript presentation, what we read today as the signifiers of an oral or written text are imprecise and were often deliberately blurred in the Middle Ages. Far from indicating an evolution of mentalities, in which a culture would move from a period of primitive delivery into some

superior form of written transmission, the oral and written are both exploited contemporaneously throughout the Middle Ages and the two modes emerge as interdependent. Signs of oral composition continued to be exploited into the later Middle Ages, long after manuscript compilation had become commonplace, and questions raised about the truth value of speech and written communication extend, even by the thirteenth century, into intense debates about the proper language and format for discussions of theology, poetry, and history – prose or verse. Is oral communication to be trusted as more spontaneous and unmediated or distrusted as more likely to deceive? Arguments about the truth value of verse and prose, of rhetoric v. 'natural' communication, extend well into the early modern period and far beyond. Literary salons of the seventeenth century, often derided as spaces of artifice and rhetoric in which the veneer and sheen of sophistication overwhelmed any possibility of sincerity, could also be championed as sites of rhetorical inventiveness, in which a new language – often a language associated with women – presented an alternative, and some resistance, to patriarchal and hackneyed norms. And in the modern period, orality has re-emerged as central to an understanding of postcolonial writings, both because of the competing voices and languages that are highlighted by authors from nations subjected to colonial domination (as in internalised oral and written sources) and because the study of testimony and oral traditions – traditions that might challenge the terms of colonialist and imperialist languages – is currently being revitalised and revalorised. As the questions of literary value, and what constitutes a text, have been rethought in the second half of the twentieth century, in the twenty-first century texting, blogging, recorded interviews, and DVD commentaries – the spoken word as privileged indicator of subjective identity, critique and resistance – have emerged as critical to an understanding of literary and cultural production in the age of new media, in which quick oral transmission sometimes appears to be winning out over the written word.

Writing in / from the periphery

Following on from the issue of oral transmission is the question of the place and space of writing and speaking. Where are modes of communication produced and for whom are they destined? These are essential questions for understanding twenty-first-century issues about culture, especially global culture, but they are by no means new. From the late eleventh century, contact between Western Christendom and 'the East' (the Byzantine Empire and the Levant) had become ever more frequent with the development of

new trade routes and frequent travel, often in the form of Crusades. By the mid-twelfth century there were four prospering Latin centres surrounding Jerusalem and these inhabitants traded in culture and language as well as in goods. This early contact with the East influenced almost every aspect of French medieval literature – genres, themes, manuscripts – but the French language also absorbed influences from these encounters, as it coexisted with and slowly replaced Latin, moving into a dominant position as a sort of lingua franca across Western Europe. By the early modern period, a buoyant tradition of travel literature had developed that demonstrated an interest both in other peoples and cultures and in justifying a Western and Christian presence around the world. Texts that highlight contact between France and (the) new world(s) figure prominently in the period of the Enlightenment, at which time other peoples and cultures are often seen not as inferior to the European but as mirror images that can offer up correctives to Western Christian corruption. Anxieties persisted throughout the nineteenth century regarding religious and cultural adaptation: how far should Christianity go in adapting to other cultures' norms, including linguistic norms? Fascination with the 'Orient' and fantasised forms of 'Oriental exoticism' accompany the colonial aspirations of France through the nineteenth century into the first part of the twentieth century. The modern period has also seen, however, the development of an extraordinary range of writings from the French-speaking world that challenge the dominance of metropolitan France and Parisian intellectual authority. Questions of identity and belonging, covering the construction of community, language use, imperialism and indigenous subordination, become major thematic elements in literary and historiographical writings in the post-World War II era, while questions of geography and boundaries, literal and metaphorical, play a burning role in political and historical rhetoric into the twenty-first century.

Alterity and alienation

The Middle Ages, relatively free from the rigidity of nationalist thinking, are nonetheless marked by a particular meditation on otherness in all its forms, including religious, sexual, and ethnic. Madness, disease, sodomy, heresy – all of these haunt the borders of medieval texts and tell us more about the construction of medieval norms than they do about medieval tolerance. In the early modern period, a particular sort of alienation from the self, such that 'le moi', the sense of self as self, can be seen as quite separate not only from the body but from the social group as well. The self-confidence of

seventeenth-century political and religious thought gives way to a greater questioning in the eighteenth century. Issues of intimacy/privacy became the focus of much early modern writing, precisely at a time when notions of the private and public were changing, sometimes radically. These questions are central to the thought of social theorists by the mid-nineteenth century, and they are transmitted as well to the modern period, sometimes most memorably in literary form. The distinction between self and other, the other as untouchable and alien, the other inside ourselves – all of these are subjected to the scrutiny of psychoanalytical and philosophical investigation and the introspective attention of authors such as Proust, Beauvoir or NDiaye. These questions cut across literature and theory, and have opened new perspectives on madness, mourning, race, ethics and sexuality that continue to challenge the validity of fixed identity categories.

Literature and history

History as a discipline is already practised during the Middle Ages, though not always in recognisable form. Fiction and history can scarcely be distinguished one from the other but medieval 'historical' texts tend to be supplemented by a combination of chronicles, memoirs, and eyewitness accounts, with the aim of presenting some notion of verifiable truth. For the same reason, medieval authors often refer obsessively to a source text, real or imagined, to which they owe their material and their fidelity. From the Crusaders' chronicles to the *Grandes Chroniques de France* and the narratives of Joinville, Villehardouin, and Froissart, authors traced and constructed the genealogies and myths of a French, Christian identity and its shaping through the interpretation of historical events. The explosion of memoirs and the reutilisation of inherited themes and plots in the early modern period give evidence of a continued interest in the past but also accentuate, once again, the often uneasy division between history and fiction. History and the rewriting of history reaches a particularly crucial point at the time of the Revolution, during which politically opposed points of view were put forward to explain the same supposedly verifiable event. France's involvement in the two World Wars and the wars of colonial independence in the twentieth century further calls into question the relation of literature to history and the necessity of considering the individual point of view as well as the global. Literary texts are increasingly seen as essential to constructing and questioning a historical perspective. Modernity's yoking of literature to commemoration, personal and national, has led to

an expansion of the definition of literature to include testimony, archival investigations, verbal and photographic evidence and oral history.

Popular culture

Medieval literature often defies scholarly attempts to categorise it with reference to audience or genre. Bawdy tales include frequent religious references; sex and transgressive themes share centre-stage in romance and song with moralising denunciations of that very material; pious epics include all the barbarity and gore of twenty-first-century action films, and all seem to have been equally appreciated. For some, the popular might be distinguished from the learned by considerations of language, references and register, but actual audiences' consumption of genres and themes is difficult to determine, even to the point that the distinction between clerical and secular remains muddled. Popular culture is therefore everywhere in the Middle Ages and most literature seems to appeal to most people, regardless of social class. The question of popular culture manifests itself in increasingly interesting ways in the early modern period, from the bawdy tales of Rabelais, to satirical and revolutionary street songs, to newspaper editorials and the political theatre of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the modern period, in particular, popular culture has been increasingly recognised as an essential component of cultural analysis, and literary scholars have shown an increased interest in visual media of all sorts, from *bandes dessinées* to digital video and the internet. Film studies has developed sometimes in inter-relation with literary studies and the two fields increasingly overlap, offering new attention to reception and spectatorship, to authorship, and to genre.

Visual culture

While visual culture has exploded in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the taste for and emphasis on visual material goes much further back in French history. Manuscript culture is inseparable from medieval literature, and a full understanding of medieval texts is impossible without some consideration of the forms in which they were transmitted. In sacred books and romance, illustration plays a major role as miniatures comment on and disrupt the texts they pretend to be explicating. Knowing where a text figures in a manuscript can be as enlightening to a reader as understanding its commentary; it can tell us what associations were being made between one text and another at the time of its inscription, as well as the occasions on which it might have played

a role. The increasing prominence of visual material in the early modern period is demonstrated not only in paintings and sculptures and the return to Classical models, but in the attention paid to architecture, theatre of all types, and political pageants. This is a period when a building can speak not only to its predecessors and its own ambitions to rival ancient splendour, but can also portray its patron in all his/her ambition and desire to be associated with grandeur, reason, or clever play. Painting and photography in the nineteenth century, and cinema in the twentieth century, became dominant modes of artistic expression and the recording of reality, and challenged literary modes of representation. Poets and novelists engaged in writing art criticism, drawing the fields of the verbal and the visual more closely together, while the questioning of relations between the different senses and different media, through synaesthesia and the *transposition d'art*, allowed new exchanges to be developed. From Romanticism to realism, Symbolism, and surrealism, and equally through both literary adaptation and auteurism in cinema, the interrelation between literature and visual culture is opened out in new ways with divergent results.

Sexualities

The medieval period has often been described as the moment when Western Christian sexualities developed rhetorically and were set in place through law and religious orthodoxy. Yet neither homosexuality nor heterosexuality appear as firmly established discursive entities in medieval genres: both are ever-present as competing modalities and attract throughout the period the kind of polarised polemics that marked the close of the twentieth century. Discussions of alternative sexualities and cross-dressing abound in the early modern period, not only in the 'libertin' writings of the eighteenth century but also in writers such as Montaigne and the rage for memoirs, letters, and anecdotes that characterise their literary production. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new explorations of sexual pathologies and perversion intersect with a flowering of 'decadent' writing. While the autobiographical and questions of eroticism and exposure dominate some twentieth-century writings on sexuality and intimacy, the latter part of the century witnesses a newly politicised (and differently embodied) engagement with sexuality in the wake of HIV/AIDS. Contemporary writing in French today shows increased attention to the reshaping of societal structures to incorporate alternative forms of family, shifting identity politics, and transgression as an end in itself.

Women writers

While largely a domain limited to men, writing in the Middle Ages was not exclusively masculine. From the *trobairitz* to Marie de France and Christine de Pizan, women often fired the first shots of discontent with the status quo and offered witty corrections to patriarchal modes of social organisation. In spite of the many restrictions imposed on women in the early modern period, each century produced writers of subtlety and distinction. Women increasingly engaged in literary work during the Renaissance period, following the royal model of Marguérite de Navarre, and the emergence of the literary salon in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries coincided with a greater emancipation for women's writing and an increase of control over their production. From questions about the value and status of women's writing in the nineteenth century, to questions about the senses, sensuality, the intimate, and the melancholic in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, writing by women has come to the fore in France and the French-speaking world in the modern period, and has presented a challenge to traditional notions of genre and stable categories of identity. While much feminist scholarship of the twentieth century was occupied with excavating women's writing and bringing it to a wider public, the twenty-first century has seen a remarkable expansion of women into important positions in all modes of literary and artistic production, including film-making, photography and installation art.

Literature and religion

Much of medieval literature is touched by an encounter with religious thought. Clerics, both as patrons and authors, left their mark on contemporary literary production, but not always in ways that would receive an ecclesiastical imprimatur. Although it is clear that some texts were composed for monastic audiences, for religious propaganda, or as philosophical/theological apologiae, this would hardly account for those texts that are the most popular and well known amongst a modern audience. Nor would it indicate that medieval literature is subject to monologic interpretation. Many of the age's texts are subversive of religious dogma even when they were produced for what would seem to be a church audience; and many of the lyrics and romances take on topics that would have been anathema to orthodox church figures. Religion in the early modern period is no less present in the literary texts, though again not from any one point of view, but it cannot be interpreted without understanding its link to the religious struggles that left such a mark on the

period, from the Wars of Religion to the Edict of Nantes. The sixteenth century could even be termed a golden age for religious poetry, philosophy and theatre, despite the sometimes polarised presentation. Yet the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth century are equally marked by religious questions, particularly in the rise of secularisation and the critique of religion that followed on from Enlightenment thought. The confrontation between religious dogma and reason becomes more politicised and increasingly central to philosophy throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and in the modern period, questions of personal faith and doubt give way to broader questioning of the relation between religion, nation, culture and prejudice. The tumultuous events of the twentieth century reinstated religion as a major issue in the construction and analysis of culture, from the after-effects of the Dreyfus Affair and representations of the Shoah and the Occupation in France, through to contemporary engagement with the importance of Islam in French and francophone writing.

Literature and politics

Medieval subjectivity was not constructed entirely through religious discourse, despite what some scholars have argued, and many of the most influential texts from the period concentrate precisely on the contested borderline between philosophy, theology and politics. Vernacular saints' lives, to take just one example, offer a privileged view of how religion constructs communities as well as controls them, and how it serves to validate and question notions of sovereignty and servitude. An imagined politics dominates in the early *chansons de geste*, as rebellious noblemen wage war against their legitimate lords and feudal models of reciprocal duties and protections come in for critical examination. The Inquisition and the uneasy journey towards a unified French identity in the late fifteenth century produced a mass of political documentation in which both truth and Christian values are shown as contingent and malleable. With increased royal patronage of the arts and literature, it is difficult to separate politics and writing in the early modern period. For the first time, the theatre, for example, became a symbol of national prestige, and playwrights were expected to produce works depicting the heroism of great leaders. This politicisation of literature (or rather open admission of politicisation) comes to the fore in the late nineteenth century, when authors openly use their works to address political issues and influence political opinions. This tendency continues in the first half of the twentieth century, as writers return with due obsession to the relation between literature and politics, the

problem and challenge of committed writing, culminating in the events of 1968. This inter-relation of politics and literature, never absent from the history of French writing, evolves nonetheless in the twenty-first century into a more theoretical questioning of politics itself and of the politics of writing. The development of new modes of transmission and commentary in the form of shared internet sites and blogs has further destabilised the boundaries between political and artistic production and opened the door to new understandings of the literary.

Memory and testimony

The earliest text of vernacular French literature deals with a virgin martyr and the need to memorialise her and others' sacrifices as constitutive of Christian communities. From the bloody wars of religion, including the Crusades, to the struggles for a centralised kingship, medieval literature struggles with how language communities construct a shared past and process profound losses and a sense of shame. These problems plague the early modern period as well, as religious massacres and natural disasters are celebrated, bemoaned and commemorated in diverse ways, depending on religious and political affiliation. Memory acquires a particular significance and fragility in the period, not least in the part played by antiquity in early modern culture and the impetus to recreate and better the past. Modern texts have found new strategies to represent ungraspable impressions: memories of events whose magnitude and violence threaten to collapse conventional literary forms. New modes, new forms, new temporalities of writing emerge from such experience and have been particularly innovative in the period post-World War II.

Autobiography

Though largely an early modern invention, autobiography exists in the interstices between medieval genres. The *Confessions* of Saint Augustine carried enormous weight throughout the Middle Ages and prompted a host of authors to tell their own autobiographical tales of conversion and salvation. Lyric poetry also flirted with autobiographical revelations, especially in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; and the first biographical texts in the vernacular tradition, the *razos* of the troubadours, explicitly linked biography and autobiography to history, as bricks in the construction of cultural capital. Augustine continued to be immensely influential in the early modern period, as witnessed by the *Essais* of Montaigne, and at the same time, as new theories

of the self were developing, so too interest in autobiographical writing was growing, culminating in the extraordinary confessional writings of Rousseau. The genre of autobiography, upheld within nineteenth-century analysis, and the foregrounding of the modern self in isolation, is effectively parodied and dismantled in the subsequent century in a range of texts which put on display authors' doubts about truth, the transparency of the literary text, and the coherence of the identity produced by an 'I' in writing. This deconstructive approach to autobiographical writing is more than matched, however, by an outpouring of do-it-yourself video practitioners, bloggers, and social networking sites, for whom the expression of the self in writing, pictures, images and music becomes the dominant mode of expression – popular and literary – in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

It is our hope that through the essays that follow you will not only get to know the present better by visiting the past, but also be illuminated by that past through encountering its continual rewriting, forgetting, inscription, and reinscription within the dominant paradigms of the ages that followed. We do not expect a linear reading of the material any more than we expect a linear development of the literature that is being cited. French literary history circles back upon itself through time and advances across what Michel Foucault called *epistèmes* by denying its debts to the past and reconstructing a present from its detritus. Writing in French is as healthy and productive as it has ever been, and it is our hope that in celebrating the diversity of that production we can contribute to its continued vitality.