

Introduction
Mapping the Contemporary

Anna-Louise Milne and Russell Williams

This is a collection of essays about literature. The idea that literature is our first and principle port of call to explore contemporary fiction should not go without saying. If looking for fiction today, we might well turn towards other forms: television and film of course; mangas and video games as well. The corpus convened by this volume reaches in these directions. It includes essays that plot the massive development of graphic novels in the past two decades, that discuss crime fiction, the influence of film, the impact of television series and rock music. It also harbours various more or less fleeting intimations of YouTube and other online landscapes around the edges. One of the primary aims this collection gives itself is to blur the perimeter of the field of literature into the broader mediascape of digitally enabled or enhanced flows.¹ Another is to focus this discussion around writing *in* French, where there is still a tendency in the field to demarcate French and Francophone literature. Our claim is that part of what is signified by ‘the contemporary’ is a detachment from that prior demarcation. The impetus today must be, in part, to think production in a major world language such as French through polycentric, fluctuating constellations. This does not mean to say that there is now no stake or significance in the places where this contemporary literature is emerging and finding its mechanisms of transmission and distinction, as well as its forms of economic viability. On the contrary. The transformations of the landscape that these chapters collectively assess are very largely conditioned by structures of distribution and translation. So our claim is not that global information technologies have smoothed the factors of differentiation, although they have undoubtedly reduced the lag in connection; but rather that the unevenness of the terrain is more complex today than an opposition between French and Francophone can accommodate. Just as the separation of genres on the basis of high/low, insider/outsider polarities is no longer tenable.

This volume thus puts into effect two significant shifts. Yet it remains within a field broadly delimited by the claim that literature has some specific things to tell us about fiction and the work of the imagination. Or more forcefully, that it is in the work of literature, through the different ways in which it has been carried forward since the mid-1980s, that we can best explore how the French language tradition has grappled with the fictionalization of life. And perhaps more ambitiously still, that it is specifically in literature in French (as opposed to other major or minor world languages) that this exploration has found some of its more experimental forms, in part because of the prior trajectory of that tradition with its long and deeply rooted attachment to the autonomy and universality of the literary text.²

The periodicity of this collection reflects and bolsters that claim. Yet it is important to start by considering what founds it. For it is no small claim. On the one hand, it works with the suggestion that ‘everything’ changed in the course of the 1980s, and that it is difficult to understand the landscape of the contemporary, with the dissolving of demarcations outlined above, without considering a major reconfiguration of ‘the literary’. That is, of what literature was thought to be and to do. But on the other hand, it observes how the concept of literature has held out in different ways against fiction, preserving its pre-eminence as an expression of expectation or desire in some contexts, while seeking new forms of critical potential from within that waning pre-eminence in others. So what does literature continue to bring to and to borrow from the broad field of fiction; how does it in turn hold itself apart; and to what extent does the impulse of fiction still remain core to what we understand by literature in an era of accelerated, globalized media? These questions destabilize the previous hierarchy in which literature rose above the particularities of generic distinctions – between the novel, the non-fiction essay and autobiography, for example – but they do not fully dismiss it. For this hierarchy continues to have structural force and to echo across this otherwise radically divergent corpus, as can be noted at the apparently superficial level by the fact that the template of distinction, expressed by the austere seriousness of plain covers and stand-alone titles, characterizes many of the books discussed here. The deeper ramifications of how this ‘hautaine beauté’ / ‘haughty beauty’³ continues to condition the field are addressed in a number of ways through the following chapters. But by foregrounding fiction we problematize literature, while acknowledging that the notion of literature continues to shape what these chapters ask of fiction. It is from within their uneasy and evolving proximity that this volume is organized,

Introduction: Mapping the Contemporary

3

with the objective of considering how it conditions the critical horizons opening up in and for contemporary writing and reading in French.

The scene we will be considering could be said to start with an end, that of an era we can designate by the very different figures of Jean-Paul Sartre and Roland Barthes. Their deaths, barely three weeks apart, coincided almost exactly with a relatively inauspicious new appearance in the form of Pierre Nora's journal, *Le Débat*, published for the first time in May 1980, which we will take here as a different sort of starting point.⁴ The aim of Nora's review was to create an alternative intellectual space that was explicitly positioned against the posture of 'engagement' or the pairing of literary and critical force represented at that time most emblematically by Sartre. Oriented more towards the social sciences, *Le Débat* was both the sign of the devaluing of the literary field, and instrumental in the advent of an anti-totalitarian consensus built on the ruins of the long cycle of revolutionary and avant-gardist thinking. Annie Ernaux, a key author in the field this volume explores, detailed the tenor of the moment with characteristically caustic economy:

Les « nouveaux philosophes » surgissaient sur les plateaux de télévision, ils ferrailaient contre les « idéologies », brandissaient Soljenitsyne et le goulag pour faire rentrer sous terre les rêveurs de révolution. À la différence de Sartre, dit gâteux, et qui refusait toujours d'aller à la télévision, de Beauvoir et son débit de mitraillette, ils étaient jeunes, ils « interpellaient » les consciences en mots compréhensibles par tout le monde, ils rassuraient les gens sur leur intelligence.⁵

The 'new philosophers' popped up on television and did away with the old 'ideologies.' They waved Solzhenitsyn and the Gulag at the revolutionary dreamers to make them cringe. Unlike Sartre, who was said to be senile and still refused to go on TV, or de Beauvoir with her rapid-fire diction, they were young. They challenged our consciences in words that we could understand and reassured us of our intelligence.⁶

In tandem with this backlash orchestrated most stridently against the 'intellectual' dissidence of May '68 came a newly permissive and exuberant harnessing of 'culture' in all its forms. François Mitterrand's omnipresent Minister of Culture Jack Lang signed off on countless initiatives to boost 'the arts', from the Salon du Livre, founded in 1981, to the 'biggest concert in the world,' launched in 1982 as the Fête de la musique, with a panoply of efforts in between to both protect and extend France's cultural heritage against increasingly international competition. Culture would be abundant, lucrative, democratic and easy-going. Under Lang's watch, there was money for French rap, just as there was for opera via a series of schemes

designed to bolster market forces. Included in these efforts was a particular focus on promoting or protecting book sales, which was achieved through the ‘prix unique’ / ‘fixed price’ mechanism established under the 1981 ‘loi Lang’.⁷ For some, this newly inclusive or consensual emphasis meant that literature could get back to the business of entertainment and, as a number of chapters here suggest, a ‘return to narrative’ was part of this tendency.⁸ For others, the switching of attention away from ‘la situation de l’écriture’ / ‘the situation of writing’, with its capacity to renew subjectivity, towards ever closer relations with media and cinema resulted in a period of ‘latence et d’observation’ / ‘latency and observation’, during which there was no measure by which to separate ‘le tout venant’ / ‘the all-comers’ from works of importance.⁹ Alain Badiou, writing in 2005, argued that the advent of what Marc Fumaroli termed the ‘État culturel’¹⁰ had also transformed the critical potential of ‘fête’ as a ‘brutal interruption of the ordinary regime of things’ into a ‘contre-manifestation’ / ‘counter-demonstration’, a rearguard action to stamp out the last of the political insubordination still hanging around after May ’68.¹¹ Those who, like Badiou, judged that this new ‘all-comers’ regime of ‘culture sans temps mort’¹² / ‘non-stop culture’ was encroaching ever more into the remaining spaces of opposition were pushed towards new forms or had to draw on marginalized and denigrated antecedents. No one direction emerged, and the result would be a range of discordant developments spanning flamboyant exacerbation of fictional licence through sceptical testing of fictional pitfalls to outright rejection of fiction and narrative. Exploring this map requires abandoning the ‘post’ that still tethered post-structuralism or postmodernism to a conception of the literary field, whereby a new critical movement would move us beyond now outdated forms.

So this volume invites the reader into a diffracted, polycentric landscape marked by a plurality of forms and modes of emergence and reception, turning towards dispersed and even discontinuous sites of experimentation rather than attempting to identify a hierarchy of significance or a new canon.¹³ The field has seen a number of experiments in critical anthology in the past two decades, again reflecting the very strong pre-eminence of traditional forms of anthology in French and the need to displace them.¹⁴ The moment for that sort of exemplary totality is now also past, and as this initial survey of the variable distance between fiction and literature – against the background of the more aggressive meshing of culture, state-led policy and market forces – already suggests, we need more relative perspectives. Before plotting how these perspectives shape the following chapters, however, we also have to consider the other major factor

delineating our field, that is, the spread and affirmation of French as a language of literary production across the globe, which accelerated massively from the 1980s on.

Analogous in this respect to the complex entwining of literature and fiction, the medium of French is a constant across this volume but the vectors of interaction between different sites are also variable, resulting in a complex cartography rather than a hierarchy of influence or pre-eminence. Rapidly changing technologies of distribution and publication, new forms of translanguaging as well as the structural significance of translation today extend our exploration from Siberia to Haiti, Canada to Morocco, Paris to New York, as well as holding it in a complex dynamic with Anglophone literature and theory. At one level, this significantly enlarges the range of the present collection relative to much other important critical work in French language literary studies. But more fundamentally, as the next two parts of this introductory discussion will show, it also transforms what it means to map the contemporary.

‘The French-Speaking World’

Institutional ‘francophonie’, which aims to promote the use of the French language wherever it is spoken or written globally, was but one arm of the ‘état culturel’ outlined above, but its impact had particular significance as relations of dependency between metropolitan France and the French-speaking world shifted towards less binding structures of influence and transaction.¹⁵ Driven by France’s firmly protective commitment to ‘l’exception culturelle’ / ‘cultural exceptionalism’ in the World Trade Organization GATT negotiations of 1993 and coloured by the rhetoric of diversity, what would become known as the International Organisation of La Francophonie gathered momentum through a series of summits that have met biannually since 1986. Its efforts converged with the modalities of the ‘fixed-price’ law for books, also mentioned above, as the means by which book publishing was protected by state adjustment of market forces. This not only ensured the preservation of ‘minority’ positions within the literary field, it also promoted networks of bookshops, two key mechanisms that met with similar initiatives in the better endowed areas of ‘la Francophonie’, notably in Québec, where local publishing took off as a result of equivalently protectionist strategies. The poorer countries of North and Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as the Caribbean, fared less well, however, leaving them largely dependent on France and Paris for much longer, and creating significant disparities in independence from the

traditional centre. Authors entering the field from these more persistently ‘peripheral’ spaces had little choice but to find the right door to knock on in the metropolitan space, while for intermediary players such as the literary magazine *Africultures*, everything hung on developing market share.¹⁶

Pascale Casanova’s major study of the complex processes of entry into the literary field, *La République mondiale des lettres* (1999) / *The World Republic of Letters* (2007), accompanied these years of partial fragmentation and redistribution, appearing at the end of the century as a vast consideration of different phases and places of adjustment by which the space of ‘literary freedom’ carved itself out new terrain. It was also in itself a reflection of the intermediary situation of French language and Paris-centric production at that time: previously pre-eminent, now waning, still waving.¹⁷ Casanova pointed out this intermediary moment herself in a new preface written for the 2008 reissue of the book in French, in which she responded to the observation that her book, with its totalizing yet critical ambition, could only be French. Developing from this, she differentiated between two modes of reception of its findings: that of dominated language spaces, where her analysis of structural rivalries and modes of traction upon them opened up strategic horizons for ‘new players’; and the Anglophone reception. She reserved her comments for the specificities of the strategic or ‘dominated’ reception. Here, she claims, her hypothesis was confirmed. What the strategic reception showed was how ‘the literary’ is structurally conditioned by emulation, yet also independent of those conditions in the sense that the ‘outsider’ can only break in with the joker of formal or stylistic innovation. The importance of borrowing dominant strategies underpins the ambition she expresses in her final remarks: that her work will become ‘une sorte d’arme critique au service de tous les excentriques (périphériques, démunis, dominés) littéraires’ / ‘a critical weapon in the service of all those coming from ex-centric literary spaces (peripheral, impoverished, dominated)’.¹⁸ In this sense, she positions herself as holding out a key to that door in Paris, setting her work in a mimetic relation to the combined ‘lucidity’ and ‘impulse to rebel’ of the subaltern writer determined to make her infraction.¹⁹

The present volume offers the means of reviewing the tight articulation between dominant ‘aesthetic invention’ and entry into the market that structures Casanova’s account. With chapters focusing on writing emerging from the African, American and Asian continents, as well as Europe, it gathers together discussion of multiple ‘marginal’ spaces, characterized by what Casanova calls ‘contiguïté structurale’ / ‘structural contiguity’ in the

field.²⁰ Read together and through the entanglements they reveal, they offer the means of assessing whether we can still identify something like the ‘rapprochement [...] entre des œuvres’ / ‘proximity between works’ that would underpin a concept of ‘the literary’ as the essential lever for breaking in.²¹ But within the context of this introduction, Casanova’s account is also significant for the way in which it binds together the extension of the map and the historicization of literary autonomy. Observing the persistence of ‘avant-gardist’ distinction within displacement to new territories brings back to the fore our earlier questioning of traditional hierarchies and prompts a broader consideration of what is at stake in our cartographic process.²²

Literary Geopolitics

Casanova ends her vast study with a return to Barthes, in this respect closing where we also indicated an end before turning our attention towards the questioning of literature’s pre-eminence as a starting point for this volume. She also intends to turn away from Barthes, and she will do so with the Irish Francophone writer Samuel Beckett. The Barthes she quotes in conclusion is categorical in his expression of a continental divide between ‘the world’ and ‘literature’, between on the one hand, ‘le foisonnement de faits, politiques, sociaux, économiques, idéologiques’ / ‘the profusion of facts, political, social, economic, ideological’, and on the other, the remote climes, shrouded in ambiguity, of the literary work or ‘l’œuvre’.²³ Casanova’s aim through her study has been to contest this incommensurable gulf by showing that what Barthes configured as ‘geographical’ is better grasped as a temporal disjuncture. Works of literature are historically conditioned forms, caught in the glue of their ideological and social context of emergence. Yet they are dehistoricized, in order to gain entry to the other continent, the continent of literature, which knows only absolute values. The role of the literary critic is, then, to observe how this process happens, plotting the mediation between historically ‘extreme’ particulars, such as Beckett whose peripheral provenance and ‘impoverished’ style become the expression of ‘the literary’ in a gradual becoming of the World Republic of Letters that both absorbs Beckett and is changed by him. What Casanova thus describes can be seen as extensive and dynamic navigation between the two continents that, for Barthes, ‘seldom coincide’.²⁴ But it is also crucial to note that this process happens relative to a further totalizing ‘space’, the unifying Republic, which absorbs all extremes.

Some fifteen years later, Barthes's two continents again appear in a structuring statement that outlines a new set of horizons for literary studies. The essay in question is the 2014 'manifesto for the social sciences', entitled *L'Histoire est une littérature contemporaine* / *History is a Contemporary Literature* by the prominent scholar and editor Ivan Jablonka.²⁵ The shift in terrain is significant, not only because this essay reflects the extent to which the cursor has now switched back towards a valorization of literature from the drift towards 'scientificity' promised by *Le Débat*. Jablonka identifies a problematic proliferation and technicity in historical writing that leaves readers unmoved.²⁶ In order, he claims, to understand the real better, and to communicate this understanding with affect, we need 'des fictions de méthode' / 'fictions of method' that will find a place for 'les mots justes' / 'the right words' and 'la langue des gens' / 'the way people speak'.²⁷ His own successful works, *Histoire des grand-parents que je n'ai pas eus* (2012) / *A History of the Grandparents I Never Had* (2017) and *Laëtitia* (2016), which won the literary prize awarded by *Le Monde* newspaper and the Médicis prize for the best novel of 2016, despite also being a work of contemporary history, are examples of a broader trend within the French language canon towards the narrativization of history or what he calls, in English, *creative history*.²⁸ And their focus on individuals caught in the enormity of the Nazi and collaborationist system, or the tragic fate of a young girl raised under the 'protection' of the social services and victim of systemic abuse before her violent murder, corresponds to the emphasis he places on unveiling the 'la vie des hommes' / 'life of men and women'.²⁹

Jablonka's work in this respect is claiming to close the continental divide between the world and literature, and it is characteristic of what a number of critics have referred to as the 'transitive turn' in a finessing of the broader 'return to narrative' already mentioned. If plot and story have made a return in twenty-first-century writing, it is not just in the pursuit of entertainment, but also because they are engaged by the reparative dimension of literature, by its capacity to 'write for' in an effort to heal the wounds of history, both personal and collective.³⁰ This purposive positioning is inseparable from a significant opening towards the Anglophone academy, as Jablonka's use of the term *creative history* already suggests. His manifesto is peppered with references to James Clifford's *Writing Culture* (1986), to *gender studies*, *malestream history* and *the linguistic turn*. He carefully insists on a universalist incorporation of postcolonial and gender study paradigms, whose value lies, he writes, in the tools they provide for

Introduction: Mapping the Contemporary

9

better understanding of the world, as opposed to the means they might offer 'à chaque groupe de formuler sa « vérité »' / 'to each group to express its own "truth"'. This being said, the final flourish to his own emphatic claim that historical objectivity will always win out over the discourse of identities is a playful sign of a substantial transformation or 'Americanization' of the field: 'C'est un Juif et un féministe qui le dit.' / 'It's a Jew and a feminist who is telling you this.'³¹ He is referring to himself.

This complex weaving together of French universalism and Anglo-American categories pulls the map in a different direction to Casanova's concern to think her own positioning in relation to peripheral and excentric spaces. And its articulation of how Barthes's two continents are superseded is equally if differently significant:

Il y a, sur la carte des écritures, deux continents : la fiction romanesque et le non-texte académique, tous deux nés au XIX^e siècle. On peut vivre heureux sur ces deux continents (j'ai moi-même publié un roman et produit un grand nombre d'articles spécialisés), mais on peut aussi estimer que ces espaces sont aujourd'hui bien défrichés, de plus en plus saturés, et qu'il est possible de s'aventurer dans les zones inhabitées du monde. En ce sens, mon *Histoire des grands-parents* et *Laëtitia* sont des explorations. Dipesh Chakrabarty proposait de « provincialiser l'Europe ». Je propose, pour ma part, de sortir du XIX^e siècle. C'est un troisième continent qui s'ouvre à nous, celui de la *création en sciences sociales* – une enquête pluridisciplinaire, une hybridation, un texte-recherche, une littérature-vérité, une exaltante aventure intellectuelle.³²

There are two continents on the map of writing: novelistic fiction and academic non-textuality, both of which were born in the 19th century. One can live happily on either of these continents (I myself have published a novel and many academic articles), but one can also judge that these spaces are today well-trodden, more and more saturated, and that it is possible to set off on an adventure into uninhabited parts of the world. In this sense, my *History of the Grandparents I Never Had* and *Laëtitia* are explorations. Dipesh Chakrabarty argued that we should 'provincialize Europe.' I suggest that we should get out of the 19th century. There is a third continent ahead of us. It is called *creation in the social sciences* – pluridisciplinary enquiry, hybridization, text-research, truth-literature, an intoxicating intellectual adventure.

Where Casanova's attention was to forms of intrusion into the structures of literary consecration, Jablonka imagines a new continent and reconvenes the old paradigm of the adventure novel setting out into 'uninhabited' territories. This is done in implicit rejection or displacement of the

postcolonial reconceptualization of the relations between multiple but finite continents. In contrast to the centripetal force of Casanova's adaptable but self-perpetuating World Republic, Jablonka's emphasis on writerly strategies for defamiliarization, propelled outwards by the avidness of the writer, imagines a fresh start. A new page.

Shifting Coordinates

So how does the mapping undertaken by this volume operate alongside these geopolitical precedents? As previously suggested, it works with a series of relative and overlapping perspectives on a field that is continuous, if structured by different regimes of consecration. There is no one organizing principle such as 'literariness'; no clear vector of movement – from North to South, or outside to inside; no stable generic designations. It starts from an 'in-between' space, that of the Mediterranean, thereby recognizing the importance of destabilizing the organizing process that so often reaffirms the centrality of the European continent and its traditions. Edwige Tamalet Talbayev's exploration in Chapter 1 of Mediterranean Francophone writing begins in the early 1980s, offering a different displacement of our chronological starting point, and draws out the disruption of the ex-colonizer's language in works by Abdelkebir Khatibi and Assia Djebar, before addressing the question of narrative more directly through readings of Colette Fellous and Tahar Ben Jelloun. This displacement of a metropolitan transformation between the demise of Sartre and the rise of Nora also enables a different perspective on Barthes. Tamalet Talbayev quotes his acknowledgement of 'what he owes to Khatibi', thereby situating her chapter in tension with a presumed polarity of metropolitan centre and 'excentric' periphery. This releases cross-currents into the geographies of interaction and redirects the model of belatedness ('les « tard venus »') that still structures Casanova's study.³³ Barthes's attention in this short and peripheral essay within his own sprawling corpus is to how Khatibi positions the complex interculturality of the Maghreb as the space in which 'la compacité terrible [...] de l'égo occidental' / 'the terrible compactness of the Western ego' comes apart.³⁴ In itself, this is a challenge to the cartography of continental divide that has had such structural significance for the mapping of literature. And it is characteristic of how the relative and polycentric approach developed in this volume realigns the temporal and spatial dynamics from within our map of contemporary fiction in French, rather than projecting a world or new continent beyond.