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Introduction (I)

Aims, Methods, Stories

C H R I S T O P H E R P R E N D E R G A S T

All the main terms of our title call for some clarification (“history,” “modern,” “French,” “literature”), and the introductory chapter that follows this one, by David Coward, is in part devoted to providing that. But, in explaining the basic aims of the book, it is also important to highlight what might otherwise go unnoticed, the normally anodyne indefinite article; it is in fact meant to do quite a lot of indicative work. The initial “a” has a dual purpose. It is designed, first, to avoid the imperiousness of the definite article and thus to mark the fact this is but *a* history, modestly taking its place as just one among many other English-language histories, with no claim whatsoever on being “definitive”; on the contrary, it is highly selective in its choice of authors and texts, and very specific in its mode of address. This in turn connects with a second purpose: the indefinite article is also meant to highlight a history that is primarily intended for a particular readership. In the sphere of scholarly publication, the general reader (or “common reader,” in the term made famous by Dr. Johnson in the eighteenth century and Virginia Woolf in the twentieth) is often invoked, but less often actually or effectively addressed. We take the term seriously, while of course remaining cognizant of the fact that conditions of readership and reading have changed hugely since Virginia Woolf’s time, let alone Dr. Johnson’s. While we naturally hope the book will prove useful in the more specialized worlds of study inhabited by the student and the teacher, the readers we principally envision are those with an active but nonspecialist interest in French literature, whether read in the original or in translation, and on a spectrum from the sustained to the sporadic (one version of Woolf’s

common reader is someone “guided” by “whatever odds or ends he can come by,” a nontrivial category when one bears in mind that a collection of Samuel Beckett texts goes under the title of *Ends and Odds*).

This has various consequences for the book’s character as *a* history. The first concerns what it does not attempt: what is often referred to, unappetizingly, as “coverage,” the panoramic view that sweeps across centuries in the attempt to say something about everything. We too sweep across centuries (five of them), but more in the form of picking out selected “landmarks,” to resurrect the term used by Virginia Woolf’s contemporary, Lytton Strachey, in his *Landmarks of French Literature*, a book also written for the general reader, if from within the conditions and assumptions of another time and another world. One point of departure adopted for the direction of travel has been to work out from what is most likely to be familiar to our readership. There are dangers as well as advantages to this trajectory. The familiar will be for the most part what is historically closest, which in turn can color interests and expectations in ways that distort understanding of what is not close. One name for this is “presentism,” whereby we read history “backward,” approaching the past through the frame of the present or the more distant past through the frame of the recent past. In some respects, this is inevitable, a natural feature of the culture of reading, and in some cases it is even enabling as a check to imaginative inertia (what in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T. S. Eliot described as the desirable practice of interpreting a past writer from a point of view that “will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past”). Eliot’s contemporary, Paul Valéry famously claimed that a reader in 1912 taking pleasure in a work from 1612 is very largely a matter of chance, but one obvious source of the pleasure we take in the remoter past is viewing it through our own cultural spectacles (Valéry reading 1612 via his own historical location in 1912, for instance). The risk, however, is the loss of the historical sense as that which demands that we try to understand and appreciate the past (here the literary past) on its terms rather than our own, while remaining aware that we can never fully see the past from the point of view of the past. On the other hand, if the past is another

country, it is not another planet, nor are its literary and other idioms, for us, an unintelligible babble. One of the implicit invitations of this book is for the reader to use the familiar as a steering device for journeys to places unknown or underexplored, while not confusing the ship's wheel with the design of the ship itself or the nature of the places to which it takes us. Indeed the literature itself provides examples and models for just this approach, most notably the genre of travel writing, both documentary and fictional, from the Renaissance onward, a complex literary phenomenon at once freighted with the preconceptions (and prejudices) of the society in which it is produced, but also often urging its readers to try to see other cultures through other, indigenous, eyes (think Montaigne's essay, "Des Cannibales" or Diderot's *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*).

The balance of the familiar and the unfamiliar goes some way (but only some) to account for the content of this volume. All histories (including those that aim for "coverage") are necessarily selective, but the principles governing our own inclusions, and hence, by necessary implication, the exclusions, need some further explaining. Where are Maurice Scève and Louise Labé, both important Renaissance poets, both also based in Lyons (and thus reflections of the fact that Paris was not, as became the case later, the only serious center of cultural life in the sixteenth century)? Where, for the nineteenth, is Nerval and, above all, the great wordsmith, Hugo (the poet; he is there in connection with nineteenth-century theater)? Or where indeed, for the twentieth, is Valéry? The list is indefinitely extendable; even a list of exclusions itself excludes. But the particular examples mentioned here are chosen to illustrate a specific and important issue for this history: the case of poetry. Access to the nature and history of the sound worlds of French verse, along with the character and evolution of its prosodic and rhythmic forms, is fundamental to understanding it as both poetry in general and French poetry in particular. But that is difficult, verging on impossible, without a degree of familiarity not only with French but also with French verse forms that we cannot reasonably assume on the part of most readers of this volume. This has heavily constrained the amount of space given over to poetry and determined a restriction of focus for the most part to what, historically speaking, are the two absolutely key moments or turning points.

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There is the sixteenth-century remodeling of poetry, under the influence of Petrarch (often posited as the first “modern” European poet) and the form of the Petrarchan sonnet. Edwin Duval’s contribution gives us some insight into the role of Clément Marot in the earlier chapter of this Renaissance story, while Hassan Melehy’s chapter sheds light on the later generation of “Pléiade” poets to which du Bellay belonged. The key figure, however, is Pierre de Ronsard, founder and leader of the Pléiade group. Timothy Reiss’s account of Ronsard’s multidimensional significance as poet and public intellectual includes the invention of a foundational prosody based on the use of the twelve-syllable alexandrine verse form later codified, naturalized, and perpetuated in a manner that was to dominate most of the subsequent history of French poetry. In fact, Ronsard’s own stance was marked by hesitation and fluctuation, given the image of the decasyllabic line as more fitting for the “heroic” register favored by the ruling elites. Furthermore, the novel uses to which the alexandrine was put by Ronsard in many ways reflects the exact opposite of the normative and hierarchical status this metrical form was to acquire; for Ronsard it was seen and used more as a binding, inclusive form, bringing together, in the very act of poetry, the natural, the human, and the divine in a spirit of “amity” beyond the contemporary experience of strife and civil war. It is, in short, a rich and complex story of shifting values and fluctuating practices.

But where more extensive formal analysis of poetic language—and especially prosody—is concerned, the main focus here is directed to a moment more familiar by virtue of being closer to us in time, the nineteenth century, specifically the later nineteenth century and the constellation Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé. This is the moment of Mallarmé’s *crise de vers*, when the historical institution of French regular verse is, if not demolished (Mallarmé remained a staunch defender of the alexandrine even while recognizing that the days of its largely unquestioned hegemony were over), certainly challenged by the emergence of new forms developed to match new kinds of sensibility. Its most radical manifestations will be the prose poem and free verse, both of which will undergo further transformations in the twentieth century via Apollinaire, surrealism, and its aftermath (a glimpse of which is provided by Mary Ann Caws’s contribution on

André Breton and René Char). The most extended engagements with the technical details of versification, prosody, syntax, typography, and page layout are in the chapters by Clive Scott and Roger Pearson. This is sometimes quite demanding, but the rewards are more than worth the effort of concentration required. There is also here an intentionally invoked line of continuity (Reiss highlights it) linking the modern period to early modern developments in the history of French poetry.

More generally, the conversation about what's in and what's out can go on forever, and rightly so (however explained and defended in any given case, it is simply impossible to avoid a whiff of the arbitrary, along with the difficulty of transcending mere personal preferences). The important thing in respect to *this* history of French literature is to avoid its conversation becoming another eruption of disputes over membership in the canon. This is not to suggest avoiding it, period. To the contrary, the issue remains real and pressing. In fact, it never goes away, and is indissolubly bound up with histories and relations of cultural power. On the other hand, discussion can all too readily congeal into empty sloganizing orchestrated by the dead hand of academic habit. The question for this particular volume is more what, for a specific purpose or audience, will best work by way of providing windows onto a history and historical understanding. That too is indefinitely debatable. Short of the comprehensive survey, which this is not and does not aspire to be, what will count as best serving those aims is something on which reasonable people can disagree. The list of inclusions will nevertheless to a very large extent look like a roll call of the usual canonical suspects, and, leaving to one side futile infighting over promotions and demotions, this does raise some basic questions of approach and method regarding what this history purports to be.

A limited but useful distinction is sometimes drawn between “history of literature” and “literary history.” In its most developed form, this is a long story, with a number of theoretical complications that don't belong here. A compacted version would describe history of literature as essentially processional, rather like the “kings and queens” model of history, with the great works paraded in regal succession—grand, colorful, arresting, but a parade lacking in historical

“depth.” Literary history, on the other hand, is the child of a developing historical consciousness in Europe from the Enlightenment through Romanticism to positivism, one that is increasingly attuned to cultural relativities, deploys the methods of philological inquiry to reconstruct the past, and finally emerges as a fully constituted discipline. In France, this kind of scholarly inquiry began with the archival compilations of the Benedictines of Saint Maur in the eighteenth century, and then in the nineteenth century, via the critical journalism of Sainte-Beuve, eventually penetrated the university as a professional academic pursuit (the key figure in this connection was Gustave Lanson). The overarching category to emerge from these developments and that came to guide the literary-historical enterprise is “context,” the social and cultural settings in and from which literary works are produced, the minor as well as the major. Indeed, in the emergence, and then later the explicit formulation, of the new discipline, the “minor,” as barometer of a “context” comes to assume for literary-historical purposes a major role. A hierarchy of value is, if not abolished outright (that is a move that will be attempted much later, with only partial success), partly flattened toward the horizontal plane in order to get a sense of broader swathes of the historical time of “literature.”

Our venture might, on the face of it, look as if it conforms to the processional template of history of literature (this is, after all, the expression used in the book’s title) rather than to that of the context-reconstructing endeavors of literary history. In reality, however, it is a hybrid mix of the two, using the first (the great works) as a lever for entry into a variety of historically framed contextual worlds. The resurrection of Lytton Strachey’s term “landmarks” acquires its proper force in relation to this hybrid blend: the “mark” as mark of importance or distinction, designating membership of a canon, but also “mark” as that which marks the spot, the historical spot, landmarks as signposts for a historical mapping. To this end, we also routinely, though not exclusively, deploy a particular method: focus on a single author and even a single work, reading out from text to context and then back again, in a series of mutually informing feedback loops within which the known (and often much-loved) texts are allowed to “breathe” a history. This does not, however, entail a dogmatic com-

mitment to the position whereby “close reading” is the only road or the royal road to literary-historical understanding. It merely reflects the pragmatic view that this method works well for the intended audience. In addition, what here counts as a context is flexible. In some cases, it is strictly literary, and often generic in focus. Thus, the account of Racine’s *Phèdre* takes us to some of the more general features of tragedy in the early modern period. The chapter on Voltaire’s *Candide* runs the discussion of its hero’s adventures and misadventures into the legacy of picaresque narrative and the history of eighteenth-century imaginative travel writing. The detailed analysis of Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* is set in the context of ideas about literary “realism” and related developments in the history of the nineteenth-century novel, with a side glance at nineteenth-century painting. Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* is similarly contextualized in a surrounding literary world (including Gide and Colette). “Context,” however, can also be taken in nonliterary senses: for example, the Wars of Religion in connection with Rabelais and Montaigne; modern urban history in connection with Baudelaire; the economic and political crises of the 1930s in relation to Malraux and Céline.

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I have already used the word “glimpse” in connection with one of the contributions. The term could be generalized to encompass the whole book as a collection of glimpses, angled and partial snapshots (which, with variations of scale, is all history can ever be). On the other hand, it is not just an assortment of self-framing windows onto the French literary-historical world. Its unfolding describes, in its patchwork and fragmentary form, the arc of a story centered on the nexus of language, nation, and modernity. David Coward outlines this story in terms of “the idea of a national literary culture” built on and in turn reinforcing notions of “Frenchness.” The story begins in the Renaissance, crucially with du Bellay’s “defense” of a new form of linguistic self-consciousness and his affirmation of the literary prospects for French as a national language and as a modern literary language on a par with other languages both modern and ancient. The seventeenth century was to confer both political legitimacy and institutional authority on this new self-confidence, with Richelieu’s

creation of the Académie française and then more broadly under Louis XIV in the context of the developing process of centralized state formation initiated in the sixteenth century by François I and Henri IV. It was also the moment when—notwithstanding the continuing power of the Church, the sonorously commanding tones of Bossuet’s orations, or the more radical defense of faith by the members of the Port-Royal group—the practices of literature and the expectations of the public came to embody a more distinctly “modern” look by virtue of a turn toward more secular interests: in science and philosophy; in moral psychology; in drama, both tragedy and comedy; and in the novel, with the whole notionally presided over by the rationally administering monarch and the worldly codes and manners of court and salon, even when the latter were ruthlessly dissected and exposed, whether in the comedies of Molière or the aphorisms of La Rochefoucauld.

The modernizing impulse generated a turbulent dynamic of tradition and innovation, characterized by public disputes over governing values, norms, and models. With du Bellay’s polemic, we enter the age of the Quarrel, and its later offshoot, the Manifesto. To be sure, literary quarreling was not unknown in the Middle Ages, the most prominent the “querelle du *Roman de la Rose*,” with Christine de Pizan in the leading role as critic of the terms for the representation of women (more precisely “ladies”) in the later medieval romance. The paradigm of the modern quarrel was the seventeenth-century *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*, not least because of the institutional setting in which it was launched (the presentation on January 27, 1687, by the arch-modern, Charles Perrault of *Le siècle de Louis le Grand*, in the hallowed precincts of the Académie française). We may now see these disputes as self-advertising, transient blips on the surface of culture, the place where “public” discourse becomes mere publicity. But the quarrel in fact ran for decades, and if we have included a whole chapter on it, this is because the basic thrust of the case made by the Moderns (namely, that the modern equals the new) was to be the hallmark of all subsequent interventions of this type, the most noteworthy of which—also getting a chapter to itself—was the famous first night of Hugo’s play, *Hernani*, in 1830. Beneath the stridency, the bitterness, and the misunderstandings (paradoxically none were more “modern”

than the Ancients, Boileau, and Racine), the importance of the quarrel consists in its being an index of an emergent literary self-consciousness. It was no wonder that there were intense debates and acute differences over how “literature” was to be defined and who was to take ownership of the definition. What was fundamentally at stake was the significance of literature as part of a modern national patrimony, what later would be viewed and fought over as the canon of the “national classics” (“our classic authors,” as Voltaire would put it).

The attempt to build and secure the treasure house of the national classic would run and run, well into the nineteenth century, largely under the banner of “classicism,” an ideology in which the “classic” (as timeless great work) and “classical” as a set of literary and cultural values associated with the seventeenth century became fused in the rearguard enterprise of making historical time stand still or even go backward. There was however another, and altogether more influential, strain of literary self-consciousness underlying the polemical clash of opinion, one that pulled literature away from institutionalized centers of power, patronage, and control toward an ever greater sense of its own autonomy. This was partly a consequence of professionalization. In the seventeenth century, the idea of the professional literary “career” (as against the earlier image of the “amateur” associated in particular with Montaigne) was largely anchored in and governed by institutional settings. It would not, however, be long before being a professional was about the writer coming to operate more in the commercial networks of a modern market society, beginning in the publishers’ offices and coffeehouses of the eighteenth century and accelerating with the invention of new technologies of paper manufacture and printing, new outlets of distribution, and a huge expansion of the reading public. David Coward describes several of these developments in some detail. Their great nineteenth-century chronicler and diagnostician would be Balzac, above all in his novel *Illusions perdues* (one of the works discussed in the chapter on Stendhal and Balzac). But there was also another type of separation, geared less to moneymaking than to opposition, the writer as rebel and outsider. In the eighteenth century, Voltaire, master of the marketplace, was also the exile on the run from the authorities, as close as possible to the Swiss border in Ferney. After his death, he was belatedly folded back

into the embrace of state and nation with the transfer of his remains to the Panthéon in 1791, his public funeral a statement on a grand scale, a spectacle repeated almost a century later with the funeral procession of that other exile from the reach of power, Victor Hugo (also a skillful player in the literary marketplace, especially the heavily commercialized theater).

Separation also meant what subsequently came to be understood as “alienation.” Rousseau is a key figure, his “solitary walker” and styles of first-personal meditation staging a new relation of non-belonging between interiority, self, and society; Beaumarchais’s Figaro speaks (out) in a manner virtually unthinkable in earlier periods; Diderot’s vagabond-beggar lives at the edge in more ways than one; the ultimate outsider, the incandescent Marquis de Sade, travels a trajectory from incarceration in the Bastille to confinement in the Charenton asylum. In the nineteenth century, Stendhal would use his heroes and their narratives to probe, expose, ironize, and finally reject accommodation with the social world. Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud would use the medium of verse and prose poetry to introduce new kinds of edge, at the very margin of society (associated with the world of the Bohème, in reality a very different thing from its sentimental representations) and a new experience of edginess, captured in the nervous rhythms of a vagabond consciousness never anywhere at home. It would all come to a head as the militancy that characterizes the age of the Manifesto comes into outright conflict with the state, most dramatically in two famous nineteenth-century literary trials, of Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs du mal* and Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, both in 1857, on charges variously relating to obscenity, blasphemy, and insult to public decency. There had been trials aplenty in the eighteenth century—though more commonly imprisonment without trial—but these reflected more contests of belief, ideology, and opinion. With the nineteenth-century trials it was the very idea of “literature” and its proper tasks that was at stake. In his correspondence, Flaubert repeatedly states his loathing of the nineteenth century (Baudelaire called it the Age of the Undertaker), opposing to it an insistence on the unconditional autonomy of literature. Whence his dream of the “book about nothing,” the novel as pure aesthetic artifact held together only by the force of “style” and disaffiliated from

both the demands of the marketplace and the imperatives of institutional belonging; literary art was in the process of becoming Art, self-conscious in the sense of being more and more about itself and hence internally self-supporting (the slogan “art for art’s sake” captured something of the spirit of this development).

These challenges to both state and market in their exercise of cultural power had another effect, increasingly felt in the twentieth century: ever-increasing critical pressure on the idea of literature as the reflection of a self-sealing national identity and the expression of a unique and distinctive “Frenchness,” culminating (for now) in the twenty-first century with yet another manifesto, resurrecting Goethe’s cosmopolitan idea of *Weltliteratur* for the age of globalization—“pour une *littérature-monde* en français” [for a world literature in French], published in *Le Monde* in 2007. On the other hand, apart from the more self-absorbed periods of nation-state building buttressed by notions of France as the cultural center of Europe and of French as a *lingua franca*, there has nearly always been an international dimension to the history of French literature from the Renaissance onward (not the least irony here is the fact that this history begins with a figure—Erasmus—who was not French). If du Bellay’s literary nationalism is a pitch for the singularity of French, his argument for the cultivation of a national language and the growth of a national literature paradoxically required an international soil: France was playing catch-up, borrowing and assimilating from the ancients, but also from modern Italian (above all the exemplary “modern” European poet, Petrarch). The thought was that, initially inferior, French would learn from other languages and literary cultures, but through processes of ingestion and osmosis would emerge the other side as the superior language of Europe. But this also points to something more general about the French sixteenth century. It was the most seriously multilingual of the European literary Renaissances, from Marguerite de Navarre’s creative interaction with Boccaccio to Rabelais’s “polyglossia” and riotous play with idiolects of French along with multiple other languages, both real and invented.

The seventeenth century is often seen, in these terms, as a hiatus, self-occupied with the projection of French monarchical aura and the creation of grand national-cultural institutions. But, while true to a

very great extent, this is to accept the terms of the projection itself, often just kingly propaganda. In reality, the internationalist dimension of French literary and intellectual culture remained alive and well, for example, in the epistolary circuits of the Republic of Letters and the influence of both Italian and Spanish sources on the theatre (though not English ones). It is an intriguing exercise in counterfactual literary history (of which more later) to reflect on what might have been the case if Shakespeare had been read and absorbed in the seventeenth century. The “discovery” of Shakespeare had to await the eighteenth century, followed by his consecration as the Master by the nineteenth-century Romantics. The Enlightenment more generally was to develop a pronounced obsession with things English (Voltaire’s *Lettres sur les Anglais* will imply that England is everything that France is not but should be). It also expands hugely the genre of travel writing, often positing the “Other” as both reference and device in a running campaign of opposition to authority. This in turn fed into Romantic cosmopolitanism, an imaginative and actual border-crossing phenomenon on multiple axes from Europe to the Near East, North Africa, and North America, with, in the European context, a strong focus on Germany (Mme de Staël’s *De l’Allemagne* is a key text). This was a literary and cultural opening to the world with another quarrel as its background, mobilized to sustain the challenge of the Romantics to an increasingly threadbare conservative nationalism based on a claim to the eternal validity of a French seventeenth-century “classicism” at once idealized and petrified (Sainte-Beuve memorably described the work of one of its nineteenth-century spokesmen as a form of “transcendental chauvinism”). Resistance thus there was, and there would be more to come, especially when in the late nineteenth century nationalism moved further to the right. These were dangerously regressive forces, exploding into public life and discourse around the Dreyfus affair, with a literary politics that glorified a “classical” past alongside a politics of ethnicity, blood, and soil as an attempted check to the “rootless” cosmopolitanism of modernity (“cosmopolitan” had already become a code word in racist discourse).

Boundary crossing was, however, unstoppable, creating internal fragmentation and placing great strain on any assumption of a stable relation between nation, state, and literature, and in particular the

idea of a coherent and transmissible national literary culture (what Sainte-Beuve called the Tradition). In the late nineteenth century into the twentieth, this was to touch the very cornerstone of the tradition, the language itself. Mallarmé's *crise de vers* is a key turning point—a “landmark” if ever there were one—and his own poetry, in both verse and prose, actively estranges language from the known and the predictable comforts of easy consumption. His was a practice of language designed to unsettle, as it notably did, many of the writers and intellectuals who would cluster around Action française and its ultranationalist offshoots, clinging desperately to fictions of seventeenth-century political and cultural order to ward off the threats of both “strangeness” and “foreignness”: for Charles Maurras, Mallarmé was “un-French,” while later Robert Brasillach accused him of having acted “against the French language.” Proust's narrator in *A la recherche du temps perdu* remarks that “each great artist is the citizen of an unknown homeland which even he has forgotten,” and Proust himself, the prose writer whose work is deeply soaked in the history of French prose from the seventeenth century, claimed that “beautiful books are written in a kind of foreign language.” (Sydney Schiff, Proust's friend and the translator of the last volume of the *Recherche*, described Proust's style as “exotic and anti-classical,” one that it is “difficult to believe that any pure-bred Frenchman could have evolved.”) Breton and the surrealists took the modernist project of “making it strange” into an encounter of the language of poetry with the oneiric worlds of the unconscious, a place where the fabled French qualities of “clarity and “reason” no longer had purchase. From an entirely different direction, Céline (who hated Proust) launched an assault on the institution of “literary” writing by means of a radical use of demotic, creating in effect a style as anti-style. Camus, creator of the best-known “outsider” figure in twentieth-century French literature (along with the existentially dislocated hero of Sartre's *La nausée*) also captures the “stranger” in the term of his title, *L'étranger*, injecting into the tradition of first-personal writing the estranging force of a kind of stylistic blankness (the “zero degree” style made famous by the critic-theoretician, Roland Barthes, which would become associated with the cool and flat tones of the *nouveau roman*).

Camus's title also carries a third meaning, the *étranger* as foreigner, the Frenchman situated—in terms that have proved endlessly controversial—on the shores of colonial North Africa. The opening of French literature, that is, of literature in French, to forms of foreignness, a locus beyond France and the nation-bound definitions and understandings of “Frenchness,” is where the story ends, in a terminus reflected through the work and example of three figures. There is the Irishman, Samuel Beckett, migrating inward to Paris from Dublin and into French from English (while also often acting as his own translator). Beckett interrogates and recasts the basic forms of both drama and novel around “where now?”—as questions about writing itself (an interrogation also at work in the experimental moves of the French novel from Maurice Blanchot to Alain Robbe-Grillet). As an Irishman writing in French, Beckett's work also raises issues to do with the “identity” of (French) literature as well as other kinds of identity, existential and cultural. These too are issues for “franco-phone” culture beyond the shores of France itself, here represented by two key moments and two key writers: in the first instance, the writings of Aimé Césaire and their engagement with questions of colonialism, native land, and literary heritage; in the second, the novels of Assia Djebar as a window onto so-called “postcolonial” writing from the perspective of an Algerian woman whose family had roots in both Arab and Berber cultures. “Francophone” appears here within quotation marks for all the reasons stated and explored in the chapters on both Césaire and Djebar. A shorthand for this might be the curiously awkward terms (highlighted by Harrison) of Pierre-Jean Rémy's welcoming address on Djebar's admission to that august institution where in many ways much of the story of the relation between “literature” and “nation” begins—the Académie française.

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The entire history illustrated in this volume by a sequence of “landmarks” is thus framed in a very precise way: it begins (in the Renaissance) with a strong focus on the formation of a “national” literary consciousness but ends with its dispersal into a much wider arena in the age when the category of “nation” starts to crack and dissolve. It is a compelling narrative that, like all linear stories of this type, should

carry some provisos. It is, quite simply, too neat. A first caveat concerns the temporal framing of the narrative, what's called "periodization" and its basic unit of division and measurement—the century (a topic also touched on by David Coward). Ours is arranged as a succession of five centuries in the sense of each as the nicely rounded number of one hundred years. This notionally helpful, because tidy, division of historical time has rarely worked to anyone's satisfaction other than the purveyors of certain kinds of textbooks. Thus we have the "long" sixteenth century and the "short" twentieth century to accommodate realities and interpretations that overflow or fall short of the magical round number. Even more important is the fact that the "century" as we understand it is itself a historical invention, late in that other invention, "millennial" time (it was not until the latter part of the second millennium that "century" came to mean one hundred years). In Shakespeare's time "century" didn't mean a hundred years; it meant a hundred of *anything*. When we come across, in English translation, Nostradamus's sixteenth-century "Prophecies," gathered as a collection of "centuries," we might well be inclined to read this as reflecting prophecy on a grand scale, the epic sweep of apocalyptic vision across the expanse of "centuries" toward the End Time. In fact "centuries" here (a translation of *cents*) refers to the grouping of the prophecies in bundles of one hundred. As for the French term *siècle*, this didn't originally mean a hundred years either. A derivative of the Latin *saeculum*, it signified an "age" (the sense of the term in Perrault's encomium to Louis XIV). This, however, changed in the late seventeenth century. The older meaning of "age" remained, but the new more mathematical sense in the "age" of mathematics established itself. Perrault in fact was also instrumental in bringing about the semantic turn whereby, for a whole complex of reasons, the term eventually came to mean what it does today.

But, apart from the large quotient of both the arbitrary and the contingent in the shaping of the history as a set of numerically identical periods, there are other major shortcomings to the story. For example, just as "century" was a historical invention, so too was the image of the Renaissance as the origin of a postmedieval "modernity." This was in fact an invention of the Renaissance itself, in many ways a self-promoting historical fiction and one that proved robustly du-

rable. Even Sainte-Beuve, the greatest of the nineteenth-century French critics, claimed that French literature only properly “began” in the sixteenth century. There are of course problems with assigning the place of medieval literature in the scheme of things “French,” most notably the glorious flowering of Occitan troubadour poetry; it is not so much that Occitan became “French” as that Occitania became part of France through military conquest and political annexation by the French monarchy. But the picture of a “backward” *medium aevum* to be left behind in the name of a modernizing project was tendentious to a degree. It helped to secure a version of the Renaissance as providing both momentum for a form of “take-off” and a bedrock for a purposefully driven history. Secular modernity was intellectually designed to challenge the providentialist views of history sanctioned by theology, but that did not prevent it from installing its own teleology, the conception of history as governed by laws of ineluctability and sustained by a whole fable of “progress” whereby historical change is also felt to be improvement on the past. In the literary sphere this was most marked in the great quarrels and the argument advanced by the Moderns that what they stood for was not just different from, but superior to, the Ancients. It was a natural feature of the polemic running from the seventeenth century through nineteenth-century Romanticism to the self-advertisements of the twentieth-century avant-garde. But it was, and remains, also symptomatic of a wider cultural paradigm, an entire way of thinking conducted under the hoisted banner of the Modern.

There are, however, other ways of thinking, which capture what the mono-track linear history preferred by the myth of modernity leaves out. Raymond Williams sketched a model for cultural history incorporating literary history that is based on the tripartite schema he defined as the dominant, the emergent, and the residual. All cultural formations combine these three features, if in varying degrees. The myth of modernity always favors the dominant (winners’ history as “progress” story), while modernism would fall in love with the “emergent.” The “residual,” however, is what is left behind, discarded by the forward march of the modern, its sole function that of pasture for nostalgic reaction. A curious echo of some, but crucially only some, of this is to be found in a passage from Alfred de Musset’s *Confession d’un*

enfant du siècle, with which Sarah Rocheville and Etienne Beaulieu conclude their account of the Romantic movement:

The life offered to the youths of that time was made up of three elements: behind them was a past that was never destroyed and which still stirred about its ruins, with all the fossils of the centuries of absolutism; in front of them was the dawn of a vast horizon, the first light of the future; and in between these two worlds . . . something similar to the Ocean which divides the old continent from the young America, something vague and floating, a stormy sea full of shipwrecks, crossed from time to time by some white sail or by some ship blowing heavy steam. In other words, the present century, which separates the past from the future, which is neither one nor the other and which resembles both at once, where one does not know, at every step, whether he is walking on a seed or on remains.

This is an instance of the notorious *mal du siècle* held to characterize a key dimension of Romantic sensibility and outlook. The moment between the forms of the residual and the horizon of the emergent is “dominant,” but as a moment of uncertainty and confusion, adrift on an ocean without a compass, a non-place (Musset here is an uninhibited mixer of metaphors) between seeds and remains. But there are other values that can attach to the residual (if not precisely to the cultural and literary remnants Musset has in mind), enabling us to approach the past in terms of what pseudo-providentialist accounts exclude. One form of the “residual” is as the trace of the might-have-beens of history and involves the thought that much of the story could have unfolded otherwise. This returns us to the intriguing possibilities offered by the counterfactual in history mentioned earlier in connection with the French seventeenth century and the absence of Shakespeare from its world of literary reference and influence. I would like to conclude this “introduction” with two further counterfactuals, if only to highlight the deep questions that remain when trying to “introduce” something as vast and complex as a “history” of French literature.

The first takes us back to the staple of “periodization,” the division of time into centuries. Apart from the latter being a relatively late historical invention, endowed moreover with adaptive flexibility (expandable to “long” and contractable to “short” as need arises), the entire temporal arrangement could have been different. The historian Daniel Milo has shown how the dating of chronology in the Christian era could have gone in a different direction, when disputes over how to date the Easter cycle led some Church figures to suggest dating the year 1 CE from the Passion rather than the Nativity, thus pushing everything “back” thirty-three years. This thirty-three-year delay would of course have had many consequences for where we delimit centuries, place literary movements, and locate authors. Proust, for example, situated “between two centuries,” would be wholly a nineteenth-century writer. The dwindling band still clinging to the view that French literature “begins” with the Renaissance in the sixteenth century would have a problem with dating the Renaissance itself. Then enrich the counterfactual by mapping what would have been the case if the Republican calendar introduced in 1793 (and backdated to 1792) to celebrate the foundational character of the French Revolution had stuck. Between them, the sixth-century monks and the eighteenth-century revolutionaries would have ensured an outcome whereby year 1 would have been in 1759, *Du côté de chez Swann* would have appeared in 154, and this volume in 258.

The second example concerns the relationship between counterfactuals and the idea of history as turning points, forks in the road, those taken and those not but which might or could have been. It is represented here in the chapter on Rabelais by Raymond Geuss. I have spoken of literary history as the seeing of literary works in context, by which is meant primarily the (manifold) contexts to which they belong at the moment of their own production (genres, publics, mentalities, etc.). But there is another sense of “context” that matters to historical understanding, that of a writer’s or a work’s “posterity,” the futures of reading and rereading into which the work is sent out without any foreknowledge of the postbox to which it will be delivered. As David Coward notes, literary history is also a history of readings, the transformation of the successive environments in which works are read. Returning to Valéry’s example of the work written in

1612 interesting a reader in 1912, there is nothing here that guarantees that outcome. The work is not sent out into the future with a certificate of survival attached (nor, by the same token, of extinction). This imparts to literary history an element of haphazard convergences and disjunctions of taste and interest over time. In the standard literary histories (the ones that prefer tidiness to disorder), the posterity of the work, its historical afterlife, often comes out as a tale of “influence,” sometimes, moreover, converted into a strong causal account of literary-historical change. It is also a way of exercising imaginary control of the field, the principle of “influence” grasped as a kind of fathering process, granting a quasi-paternal authority over what comes after. The alternative to this lies in the sphere of imagining alternatives. This is intellectually risky and can easily degenerate into preference fantasies (the “if only” and “what if” that so often confuse the might-have-been with what we would like to have been). But in its more disciplined guises, counterfactual history may hold lessons for literary history. For Geuss, part of the point of reading Rabelais is not just to recover a literary past but also a set of possibilities for that past’s future, of which our present was but one. His closing reflections on Rabelais and his contemporaries as embodying at a historical crux or crossroads a now-lost or suspended alternative to the “main road to modernity,” the latter the one actually taken and the former a real but unrealized possibility, are then perhaps the best place to close an introduction that, while reproducing a “story,” signals an openness to other stories—of literary production, reception, reading—cast in multiple tenses of the imagination.