

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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WESTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE - Literature

Contents

Ancient Period
Postclassical Period
Early Modern Period
19th Century
20th Century

ANCIENT PERIOD

Western European literature, unlike Western European literature, had a life—of a sort—in antiquity, prior to the Christian era. Of a sort, because it was an entirely oral life, had not yet conceded to the force majeure of the written, which is the hallmark of generative culture-- built, urban, economically driving, and historically influential society. But of a sort, for sure, for among the creations of pre Christian oral literature in Western Europe, are versions of some of the world's great tales, epics, and heroic records: epics from Iceland, mainland Scandinavia and Germany, which we know to be at the roots of numerous written masterpieces dating from the centuries after Christ.

POSTCLASSICAL (MEDIEVAL) LITERATURE

Church. As secular literature—think Ovid, Petronius, Horace—waned in the Roman Empire, the world of written literacy and thought morphed into the culture of the early Christian Church. Much of the written work to be created through that Church was written in Latin—such widely separated works as St Augustine's *City of God* (early fifth century), Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (730), King Alfred the Great's (849-899) chronicle of the History of England, the Danish tale of Saxo Grammaticus (1180- 1220)—and reflected the perspectives of the Catholic Church. (Furthermore, almost all works of science, philosophy, or jurisprudence, written throughout the mediaeval period, were created in Latin.) Among those perspectives were two which particularly shaped the development of culture, both theological and literary. There was the notion that the events of human life and history are of symbolic—often the thinking is allegorical, *beyond* symbolical--importance. There was also the notion that human life is a journey—the instance of Jesus Christ would be exemplary—that our true home is in the world beyond, and the church is our vehicle for reaching that home.

Preservation. Not only did the Church establish and bequeath the world view of mediaeval literature, but it was instrumental in preserving the literature that got produced in mediaeval culture, not to mention select texts of those ancient cultures, Greco-Roman, which though only dimly recalled were a hidden wellspring of the mediaeval energy in culture. The work of preserving-- in a world boiling with marauders, outlyers, and foes for prey—was largely carried out by monastic scribes; the first major monastery was established in 529, at Monte Cassino in Italy, and in the following three centuries monastic missions (Irish into Great Britain; Gothic into the upper Danube) preserved both Christian texts and a random assortment of ancient works—both of which assured what little continuity remained, between the 'ancient world,' now a memory, and the self-defining and diverse elements of a mediaeval world. Outside the monastery walls there slowly evolved a vernacular literature, written (or oral) in the languages (Old French, Old English, High German) themselves taking distinctive regional forms from the various late stages of Latin, which they had inherited.

The Vernacular. The vernacular was the area in which the new in both oral and written creativity was being formulated. Yes, there is a firm continuity, flowing on from pre-Christian tale, saga, prayer into the

mediaeval period. This oral flow gave birth to great works of imaginative power like the Poetic *Eddas*, the Anglo Saxon *Beowulf*, or the Germanic *Song of Hildebrand*, all of which were later recorded by Christian scribes, who infused this transformed work with the 'Christian perspectives' mentioned above. Among the distinguished landmarks, of literature directly written in western European vernacular, were the French *Song of Roland*, the poems and tales of Boccaccio (1313-1375) and Petrarch (1304-1374) (the first mediaeval writer to present himself as an individual with a daily life—when he describes the view of a beautiful mountain it is without the antique mythological apparatus mandatory in Hellenistic or Roman praise-poems, but from the perspective of an awed regular guy on a trip); Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1400)—a mini epic panning a social crosscut of pilgrims making their way to Canterbury; the peak of world experience in language, Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1320), which, in tracking human life in terms of a moral toward perfection, brings the sensibility and the creative light of the mediaeval period to its ultimate clarity.

The unity. From Augustine in the fifth century, to Chaucer, Dante, and Petrarch, there are rough continuities within the vernacular achievements of mediaeval literature. In these writers the blessing of woman—as always a simulacrum of the Holy Virgin—elevates and charms the narration. Every creative voice, behind the vernacular texts, is a penitent sinner on the journey of life. Love of every kind, both licit and austere, and reckless, plays its part in the formation of narratives—whether of Petrarca's about Laura, Dante's about Beatrice, or Augustine's guilty love for Monica.

EARLY MODERN (RENAISSANCE) LITERATURE

Mindset change. Renaissance literature expresses diverse aspects of the new mindset that stage by stage replaces the main features of the mediaeval literary mind.

Rebirth. Rediscovery of the literature of ancient Greece and Rome was a principal driver of the period of Western Culture we know as the Renaissance. The tales of Homer, the histories of Herodotus, the dialogues of Plato, and the moralities of Seneca: all these works shone with a fresh secular life in which the citizen of the new Western European states was able to taste and hear the pleasures offered by the dramas of the fallen world, radiantly fallen and unredeemed. That this enriched new perspective began to find itself spread was due to diverse enabling causes. Two demand attention: the growth of energetic and viable cities, and the emergence of the movable type printing press, which owed its vigor to the genius of Johannes Gutenberg (1400-1468).

Economy. Throughout Europe a quickening economy intertwined with a new spirit of travel, wider spheres of personal contact, and a growing trade in commodities which 'spread the wealth,' and with it the investments-- in institutions (like Universities, Banks, and Exploratory Undertakings—through which culture as well as capital evolved.) Included in the cultural opening were startling discoveries in (for instance) astronomy, especially in the study of planetary motions and the centrality of the sun in our galaxy, the mind adventures of Galileo and Copernicus. Urban life itself began to configure—especially in centers like Genoa, Florence, Pavia, but also in Spain, France, and England. We are at the moment of Shakespeare's London and the social intellectual life that gathered around the Globe Theater!

Printing. The invention of a practical way of printing, with to us today such cumbersome manipulations of moveable type, was a lightening powerful discovery, which vastly increased the inter-cultural communicative powers of Renaissance culture. The very discovery of the classical world, after all, was based on the new facilities for recording, preserving, and distributing 'ancient texts.' Contemporary writers—imaginative tellers, poets, jurists, moralists and churchmen—now found a venue to which to bring their thoughts and opinions. The opening of a new industry, the book making business, began gradually to add its dynamic to that of the whole society.

Writers. Most relevantly, for the history of western European literature, the printing press gave to the emerging body of 'modern' writers, a way in which to embody and share a corporate sense—the community of writers—and to give substance to the beginnings of a culture of readers. By contrast with this opening Renaissance perspective, the mediaeval writer can barely have thought of himself as a 'writer,' and certainly not as a 'mediaeval writer.' The notion of the 'medium aevum,' of the middle age,

was not coined and refined until the early Renaissance, by which time writing had become a widespread action in society.

Diversity. The great writers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries worked on all the major genres, maintained a classical fervor for the epic, especially as it celebrated new nationalisms, opened powers of drama which spoke to a newly gregarious and literate public, and coaxed the lyric into new self-reflective postures.

Lyrics. For examples of the latter move, the lyric, we can recall the intimate declarations of love, death-fear, and sense of place, which glisten around the French *Pléiade*, in particular pervading the mid-sixteenth century French work of Ronsard, DuBellay, and Marot. John Donne, a 'metaphysical' as T.S. Eliot called him, proved the power of lyric intricacy to talk its way through love and death.

Fiction. If only to introduce the name of Cervantes, it would be essential to peek into the ripe origins of early Western European fiction. With the *Don Quixote* (1612) Cervantes makes fun of the chivalric hero of late mediaeval romance, and yet he does his job so well that we fall for the humanity of this dreaming idealist. Montaigne's self-awareness is replicated by Don Quixote's inability to act, without thinking of himself as at the same time a comic figure extracted from history.

Epics. Gone the Homeric days when the 'epic' was as natural as God's own creation. Present the days when, reaching back to the great Roman self-glorification, Virgil's *Aeneid*, an 'anointed' court poet gives voice to the praises of some majestic leader. From *Os Lusíadas* of Camoens, celebrating the grandeur of the Portuguese Empire in the fifteenth century, to the vast attempt to 'justify the ways of God to man,' in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) is a century comfortable with grandeur of concept and the technical afflatus necessary to carry it through, to the level of centuries bursting with new aspirations, and a taste for the glitter of gold.

Drama. The sixteenth century is pregnant with significant plays, not only by Elizabethans (Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson)—risking and imaginative in their particularly triumphant century—but by Spaniards like Lope de Vega and Gil Vicente—the latter the Plautus of modern comedy. One can look back from here, over the shoulder, to the miracle and morality plays that served as drama for the Church, for a thousand 'mediaeval' years, and take deep measurement of the distances separating dramatic moments in culture. Not since Athenian tragedy in the fifth century B.C., had there been such intense understanding of the stage, as raised the curtains within the Renaissance theater.

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY LITERATURE

Inquiry. In an essay from the middle of the sixteenth century Montaigne asks 'que sais-je?', 'what do I know'? He thereby heralds his skepticism—though far it is from cynicism—which is a probing inquiring look at the perplexing world we are placed in. More or less in a similar vein, the other towering intellects of high 17th century literature—Donne, Descartes, Pascal, Bacon, Hobbes—raise searching inquiries into the nature of both nature and of human nature. (One might say that the early modern phase, of western European literature, is a way of restoring reason and balance, after the effervescence of Renaissance culture.).

Reason. Montaigne pries apart the secular human person. Reformation and counter-Reformation, swirling around him, raising questions about man's essential nature, broke like waves against a critical mind like Montaigne's, which always raised, about questions of faith and doctrine, examples, questions, and doubts drawn stylishly from everyday life; stylishly, drolly, modestly/immodestly. Descartes and Pascal, writers of great finesse, were at the same time affirmers of the supreme being, God, around the conception of whom they wrote some of their most telling meditations. In a famous riff within his *Pensées*, Pascal invites the thinker, in each of us, to choose between the meaningfulness of a god filled universe and the emptiness of a universe deprived of god. Descartes, like Pascal one of the forwarding geniuses of modern mathematics—worked a sublime god, the perfection of whose being was indirectly substantiated by the formative axioms underlying the algebraic-geometry of its precocious author. Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* accompanies these advances in human and empirical inquiry, by

declaring the essential importance, for man in society, of a broad and humane rationalism, which thinks us ahead to the progressive rationalism of the following century—the ‘good sense’ of a Voltaire or Diderot.

La Querelle. The benchmark argument, of this age of new perspectives, and great science, is the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns, a running dispute, among the writers and intellectuals of the century, over the relative merits of Ancient literature and culture, and Modern trends in literature and culture. The split comes down to style, in the widest sense. In Spanish, French, and English the Moderns --the *conceptismo* partisans in Spain, the Royal Society in England, the Descartes-followers in France—spoke out for clean language, clear thinking, and an accompanying ‘modern perspective’; the supporters of the *Anciens* sustained a traditional view of the Greco Roman heritage, the origin of good thought and solid culture.

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY LITERATURE

Split. Two major themes divide the literature of the eighteenth century in Western Europe. On the one hand, there is a clear continuation, in ‘progressive’ and modern thinking, from the daring scientific advances of the previous century into the rationalism that marked much of the literature and thought of the eighteenth century: the thinking of Diderot, de Lamettrie, Voltaire and ultimately Jean Jacques Rousseau, in whom scientific modernism blends with the rare sentimentality we have learned to call Romanticism. On the other hand there are developments in fiction and poetry which can be seen as trends toward Romanticism, thus toward the fierce adulteration of the Enlightenment mode.

The Encyclopédistes; Rousseau. Denis Diderot, Voltaire, Jean d’Alembert picked up on the empirical/scientific/social thinking of the previous century. The faith centered perspective of great scientific thinkers like Descartes and Pascal yielded to atheism (or militant skepticism) in the creators— Denis Diderot was the editor in charge-- of the *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772), the compendium of human knowledge to that date, and viewable as an *Encyclopedia Britannica* with a strong anti-clerical and populist slant, expressing the views of many of the leading liberal thinkers of Europe’s then most idea-driven country, France. The ‘rationalism’ dominating this seventeen volume text—the *Encyclopédie*-- was by no means sectarian or doctrinaire, and in fact it led creatively, in Jean Jacques Rousseau, a fellow spirit (1712-1778) registering the tenor of the age, into new horizons in pedagogy, psychology of human development, and the origin of human passions.

Sentiment. Rousseau blended high sensibility—to nature, to beauty, to curiosity—with a strong literary sense of passion and especially feminine wisdom of the heart. (We might think Goethe --1749-1832—at this point, for in his youthful shock classic, *Die leiden des jungen Werthers*—1774—he portrays a romantic young man, Werther, for whom the passions of unrequited love lead straight to suicide, and who has the Rouseauian character stamp written all over him. In the earlier part of the century, especially in England, the relatively new literary form of the novel was budding forth to meet a new literate reading public—a rarity still, in European culture—and from that garden of imaginative texts rose innovative and socially oriented works—Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year*, Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, not to mention the acid and erudite social sweeps undertaken in poetry and memoir by Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, and Jonathan Swift.

19thCENTURY.

Romanticism. This dominant movement, of literary sensibility in the early 19th century, is Romanticism, a product of great poetry of feeling and imagination—in England, think Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth’s *Prelude*—but also an heir, of the kind of *Sturm und Drang* poetry with which Goethe and Schiller, especially in their dramas, topped off the eighteenth century. The Romantic poet turns to self, the engine of passion, to nature, the true giver of meaning to humans, and to love—for all its dangers—as a source of depth. In the poetry of the romantic genius find simplicity of statement and feeling, separation from the metrical and verbal strictures of the poetry of ‘antiquity,’ and addiction to the visionary or dreamlike, a zone where Shelley famously captured the poet serving as one of the ‘unacknowledged legislators of the world.’

So powerful was the impulse of Romanticism that for the first thirty years of the century it drove its literary power across the continent of Europe, and beyond it, to Slavic lands where Dostoyevsky's *Underground Man*, Lermontov's *A Hero of our Time*, or Alexander Pushkin, in *Eugene Onegin* carried the cult of the passionate hero; carried further the image given a presence even in 'wild America,' where visionaries like Thoreau and Whitman, or transcendental philosophers like Emerson burned with a hard Romantic flame—to rephrase a renowned line of Walter Pater.

Post-Romanticism. In France, among the movements succeeding Romanticism, Parnassianism brought solace to the aesthetes, for whom Romanticism seemed inappropriately close to life, and not sufficiently close, as the Symbolist poet Mallarmé wished it, to the forms of abstract and severe consciousness which sustain 'true poetry.' Poets like Rimbaud and Baudelaire, in France, enter here with life-style poetry of great power, poetry through which the torturous soul of the poet airs its wildness, its complicity with the fallen wherever it asserts itself. In the fiction of post-Romanticism, where the novel is being hard driven to account for vast changes in life world—maturing industrialism, daring capital investments, ever faster moving urban environments, social experiments like Communism, increasing freedom for women to shape their half of reality—and to lift from readers life burdens to which fictional conceptions offered noetic ballast. Is it not as though Emile Zola, Gustave Flaubert, George Eliot, or Thomas Hardy would have been auto-generated by history, had they not been flesh and blood offspring of progenitors immersed in the ups and downs of turbulent cultural innovation?

20THCENTURY

Introduction. Into a century concealing within itself the forecast of two massive wars, the global threat of nuclear annihilation between two 'super powers,' and the civil extravaganza of the internet, with its startling possibilities (and threats) for the human community—into this apocalyptically pregnant century the preceding century made a fairly stately entrance. Novels, both experimental and technically daring, were offering promise of an upgrade in artistic expressiveness, an upgrade still not toxified by the odor of gasses and the stench of trench warfare: we talk Marcel Proust, whose *Remembrance of Things Past: Swann's Way* (1913) celebrates memory and the intricate hold it has, on the elaborate mini-ceremonies that compose upper middle class life; James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), the verbal tapestry constituting one ordinary guy's single day in Dublin, a day filled with the ordinary but as unordinary as any construction in language pushed to the point where it plays ruthlessly with its own meaning; Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924) in which room still abounds for reflection on man's nature and destiny, albeit under the shadow of a war still being anticipated. If these texts herald a stately entrance, it is not that they do not have, behind them, a peace-shattering World War I, but that total war, globally comprehensive, is still (probably) unimaginable to these inheritors of a quieter century; inheritors still swathed in the intellectual disputes and inspirations generated by such as Nietzsche and Freud, and joined by poets of the greatness of Eliot (*The Waste Land*, 1922), and Rilke (*Sonnets to Orpheus*, 1923).

We have already named, in introducing the first quarter of the 20th century, some of the literary creators who most shaped the imaginative work of the entire century. Taking the pulse of the century, many critics have gone on from the point where we were simply introducing it, and opined that the literary greatness of the century headed for decline by the thirties. To claim this would of course have meant ignoring splendid writers who speak to our lived condition as eloquently as (and often more interestingly than) Homer himself. We are in the biggest of leagues, however, when we jump into the present calculation, and had best watch our words, before including with the greatest even a sturdy list like Huxley, Sartre, Grass, Kundera, Beckett, and Camus.

Where we are. Actually we have this time added another century, possibly, by a certain perspective, further depicting the chart of decline. We are deeply invested, now in a twenty first century dominated by the internet, the internet publishing business, the vulgarization of the creative literary process, which has been entrusted to innovators with little foundation, and the hot blooded industry of the best seller. An old fogey perspective, this, but meant to provoke, while shaking the dust off the lumpy bodies of anitiquity.

Suggested readings

Freedman, Ralph, *The Lyrical Novel*, Princeton, 1963.

Friedrich, Hugo, *Die struktur der modernen Lyrik*, Munich, 1956.

Friese, Wilhelm, *Nordische Barockdichtung*, Munich, 1968.

Hamburger, Kate, *Von Sophokles zu Sartre*, Stuttgart, 1962,

Hamburger, Michael, *The Truth of Poetry*, New York, 1969.

McLuhan, Marshall, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Toronto, 1965.

Discussion Questions

Do you see any unity in the development of Western European Literature? What do you think of the view of a nineteenth century giant of criticism, like Matthew Arnold, for whom the foundations of western European literature, and culture, were Christianity and the Greeks, what he called Hebraism and Hellenism? Does that sound very parochial in our era of Globalism?

The woman on the street is likely to remark that her favorite kind of reading is novels. From what kind of cultural setting, in European literature, does the novel derive? Why did the ancients not write novels? Not read novels? Or did they? And at what period? Does the book publishing industry make most of its money off novels? Is there any precedent in Western European literature for the explosion of interest in informative nonfiction?

Is a movement like Romanticism, in Western European literature, anticipated in earlier stages of that literary tradition? What separates the sensibility of Jean-Jacques Rousseau from those of—this is a purely fanciful assortment—Chaucer, Boccaccio, Ben Jonson, Shakespeare? Is it the stress on the lonely sad mortality of man, which bubbles up from *Werther*, or the sense of the infinite in the Lake Country, which Wordsworth puts at the center of *The Prelude*?