

第 2 部講演

Belgian Francophone Literature at the End of the 19th Century

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Introduction

This essay briefly considers the situation and characteristics of Belgian francophone literature at the end of the 19th century. This period, also called fin-de-siècle, is a glorious and meaningful phase in the cultural history of Belgium. This period is especially coloured by an artistic movement “Symbolism” which originated in France, but this aesthetic found a bigger success in Belgium. Belgium produced writers and artists who had an impact abroad for the first time. In this essay, I try to sketch out in particular the background of this movement taking a look at the origin of Belgian francophone literature.

Linguistic Background

When we talk about the literature of Belgium, we should not avoid taking account of its linguistic situation. There are at present three official languages in Belgium: Dutch, French and German. Among them, German speakers form the smallest group which consists of only 0.7% of the population. Since the area of today’s German-speaking community was ceded to Belgium after the First World War, the German language was not a big issue at the end of the 19th century, but it should be remembered that the Belgian royal family was originally from Germany.

Belgium declared her independence from the United Kingdom of the Netherlands after the revolution in 1830. On the one hand, it was a religious conflict. Catholic Belgian provinces were against the Protestant Netherlands. On the other hand, the pillar of the revolution was the aristocracy, who were French-speaking. Therefore, the French language was the only official language in Belgium till 1898. This linguistic politic had a definitive effect on the development of Belgian francophone literature. Even though there were a lot of Dutch-speaking people in Flanders, education was only provided in French for a long time. As a result, the intellectual class in Belgium became in principle French-speaking. It did not matter if they were from Flanders. And it is interesting to point out that the leading figures of Belgian francophone literature during the 19th century were mostly French-speaking Flemish writers.

Search for the Identity of Belgian Francophone Literature

In this context, Belgian writers tried to find an identity in national literature of the brand new state. But it was not an easy task, because the identity of “Belgium” itself was not evident. Moreover, there were not an inconsiderable number of people who said that Belgian literature could not exist. The point at issue was above all the relationship with the literature in France, which was a cultural centre at that time. As long as Belgian authors wrote in French, their literature could be absorbed into French literature so that their literature could not have autonomy. Furthermore, there were also many writers who preferred to be a part of French literature.

The question was whether their literature would be “French literature in Belgium” or “Belgian literature in the French language”. The former regards it as a periphery of French literature and the latter insists on the autonomy of Belgian national literature.

Because of this struggle for identity, Belgian francophone literature came to be developed quite late, in fact, much later than Dutch-speaking literature in Belgium.

As a pioneer of Belgian francophone literature, Charles De Coster (1827–1879) is to be mentioned in the first place. He published in 1867 a historical novel *La Légende et les Aventures héroïques, joyeuses et glorieuses d’Ulenspiegel et de Lamme Goedzak au pays de Flandres et ailleurs*, which is based on a medieval folklore in the German-speaking area. De Coster, who had a Flemish father and a Walloon mother, set the story in Flanders as the title suggests and he proposed with his literary works to define Belgian francophone literature as “Flemish-like literature in French”.

Belgian Symbolism and the Significance of Flemish Imagination

This literary identity was widely accepted during the 19th century. But it depended on the specific situation of the cultural scene in Belgium. From De Coster on, most of the writers of Belgian francophone literature were French-speaking Flemish; therefore, they had no obstacle to represent Belgian literature as “Flemish-like literature in French”.

Since the independence of Belgium, the centre of the French-speaking cultural centre has been Brussels. Brussels is nowadays a bilingual area of both French and Dutch, and the majority of the population is French-speaking. However the population of Brussels was initially mostly Dutch-speaking, because Brussels was situated historically in Flanders. During the 19th century, Brussels gradually became a French-speaking city as the capital of Belgium whose official language was only French until 1898.

Belgian Symbolism came up in this context at the end of the 19th century. Symbolism, when it first appeared in France, was not related to such national or racial feelings, but this movement was characterised by a deeply aesthetic concept, known as “Art for art’s sake”, in French “l’art pour l’art”. On the other hand, Belgian francophone literature was still about to establish its own identity so that it would be involved with national ideas. Consequently, some great writers came out of Belgian Symbolism so that the presence of Belgian francophone literature was approved internationally.

As Belgian symbolists, we can identify three writers in particular. They are Georges Rodenbach (1855-1898), Émile Verhaeren (1855-1916) and Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949). It is very interesting to point out that all of them are not only French-speaking Flemish but also they all grew up in the same Flemish city, Ghent. Ghent has been a centre of Flemish culture and Ghent University is the first Dutch-speaking university in Belgium. On the other hand, there were many citizens of the French-speaking middle-class, and during the 19th century, Ghent was also an important cultural centre for French-speakers.

Owing to this background, Belgian symbolist literature in French had a lot to do with Flemish culture, and it is well known that it owed its international success to the “Flemish character” which worked abroad, particularly in France, as “exotic”.

For example, poet and novelist, Georges Rodenbach is one of the first Belgian writers who was

appreciated in France. His first and biggest success was brought by the novel *Bruges-la-Morte* (1892). In this novel, he depicted Bruges as a medieval and decadent city which was melancholic and forgotten by history. Rodenbach accentuates Flemish and “northern” characters of Bruges by describing its gloomy weather and referring to its cultural heritage, in particular the art of Flemish painting in the 15th century, known as Flemish Primitives.

After the success of this novel, Rodenbach continued to write similar works always about Bruges. In his whole work, Rodenbach exaggerated the particularity of Bruges as an exotic dead city so much that he provoked the bitter antipathy of its citizens. They were against his fake image of Bruges, because this city was actually not so dead but was modernising at that time with the construction of a new port and canals. After the death of Rodenbach, his friends wanted to put his monument in Bruges, however, the monument was finally built in Ghent because of the protest of the citizens of Bruges.

Émile Verhaeren was born near Antwerp and went to school with Rodenbach who was his classmate. Besides being an active art critic, Verhaeren was a famous poet widely known in Europe. His early poetry was strongly inspired by his home country Flanders. He describes the nature and people in the countryside in a sensual way which associates with Flemish Baroque painters like Jacob Jordaens (1593-1678). Flemish Baroque art was produced from the 16th to 17th century around Antwerp and was also represented by the other Flemish painters Anthony van Dyke (1599-1641) and Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640). Flanders possesses historically a rich heritage of paintings and it had a significant role for the making of Belgian cultural identity and inspired artists deeply at that time.

Maurice Maeterlinck, who is the only Belgian winner of the Nobel Prize in literature (1911), also owed his inspiration to Flemish heritage. His first prose work “Massacre of the Innocents” refers to the picture by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (ca. 1525-1569) who is a prominent Flemish painter of the 16th century. In his literary works, Maeterlinck did not describe Flanders as directly as Rodenbach and Verhaeren, however, he was connected to Flanders in another way.

He was appreciated above all for his symbolist poetic drama which attempted to describe the spiritual sense of inner life. Maeterlinck started to be interested in this subject since he got to know Flemish mysticism in the Middle Ages which had a significant influence on his drama. The main figure of this mysticism is Jan van Ruusbroek (1293–1391) from Brussels whose work Maeterlinck even translated from Old Dutch to French. Owing to his translation (1891), Flemish mysticism was “discovered” in Europe, then, Maeterlinck’s dramas were also regarded as “mystic”.

His most famous drama, *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1892), was made into an opera in this period with the music of Claude Debussy (1862-1918). Furthermore, many other composed for this oeuvre, such as Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) and Arnold Schönberg (1874-1951). In this drama, Maeterlinck inserted a few poems which Maeterlinck later said were inspired by Flemish old songs which his mother sang in his childhood.

While French symbolists, like Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898), Paul Verlaine (1844-1896), Arthur Rimbaud (1854-1891), stayed exclusively in the genre of poetry, Belgian symbolism flourished also in novels and drama which is one reason of their success, in addition, Flemish imagination played not a small role here to enrich the attraction of their francophone literature.

Reaction from Wallonia and the New Identity of Belgian Francophone Literature

As mentioned above, Flemish character played a prominent role in Belgian francophone Literature till the end of the 19th century. But the identity as “Flemish-like literature in French” could not be accepted by writers in Wallonia who were not “Germanic” as Flemish but “Latin” race.

The end of the 19th century was a turning point for Belgian francophone literature to the next phase. Owing to the Flemish movement, the status of Dutch language had much more presence. It became an official language in Belgium and secondary education in Dutch was spread slowly in Flanders.

Walloon people started to have a feeling that they were threatened by Dutch speakers, but, at the same time, with the diffusion of education in Dutch, there were less and less French-speaking Flemish writers, who were the pillar of Belgian francophone literature during the 19th century. Instead, Walloon writers have been representing Belgian francophone literature since this period.

Walloon writers became conscious of Walloon identity, and to make a difference from Flemish writers, they accentuated that they were Latin, furthermore, closer to “French”. Then, at the beginning of the 20th century, Belgian writers had to redefine the identity of their literature. The new generation denied the regional, in fact, “Flemish” character of Belgian francophone literature, and they intended to create a new identity of Belgian francophone literature, that was, “French literature in Belgium”.

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