François Rosset
University of Lausanne, Switzerland
e-mail: francois.rosset@unil.ch
ORCID: 0000–0002–3654–4320

HOW TO STUDY LITERARY CULTURE IN THE ENLIGHTENMENT?

Abstract

It has long been known which books were read most widely throughout enlightened Europe and to which intellectual authorities particular social groups referred. After the long history of research about the 18th century, modernity has also inherited various research habits consisting mainly of constant verification of the recognised hierarchy of authors, publications, and actors of intellectual life.

However, the question remains: how to study this *literary culture* in given continent areas? Speaking of *literary culture*, we mean the prevailing patterns in the reception, evaluation, assimilation and imitation of literature, information and evaluation channels, local conditions that have a decisive influence on choices and opinions.

The author proposes to speak about this matter based on the recently completed work on literary culture in French-speaking Switzerland in the 18th century. Despite its specificity and evident provincialism, this example provides material for a general, theoretical and methodological reflection: is it worth researching production from the second (and further) shelf? If so, how should this material be approached? What does it tell us about the evaluation procedures? The article presents and analyses these issues.

Keywords: literary culture, Switzerland, Europe, canon, plurality.

Researchers usually approach the concept of literary culture from the sociological perspective, analysing mechanisms that solidify — deeply divided at a given moment and within a given context — procedures of internalisation and value judgements of literature. Results of studies in this manner provide information about practices related to literature functioning in a given environment. However, they also let us determine general conclusions about society's reception, circulation, and assessment of works.[1]

---

[1] One example of such approach is the book written by the prominent researcher of French classicism Alain Viala, titled *La culture littéraire*, Paris, 2009.

In these contemplations, let us think about these issues from a slightly different perspective — in a sense, more empirical and documentary — while building upon the results of original studies on the conditions and realities of the production and reception of literature in a specific and unique environment of French-speaking Switzerland in the times of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.[2] Remarks arising from these studies are of a decidedly more methodological nature rather than theoretical.

First, however, below are several essential pieces of information about the properties of this environment at the time. In contrast to the cultural metropolis (Paris), Switzerland is presented in the 18th century as a typical periphery. However, this is not just a geographical periphery (because, in principle, all French provinces located away from Paris are such peripheries) but, speaking more generally, a cultural one: political units like cantons or cities that are autonomous yet connected to the confederation through various agreements (such as Geneva) have old republican traditions that are characterised by, among other things, an almost complete lack of court culture in which positions determine everything, honours, one's image, commands of capricious fashion, dominant patterns in behaviour, taste, and art, and the will of the ruler, which is not always predictable and transparent. Furthermore, economically and politically leading territories are strongly marked by Protestantism (of the Calvinistic or Lutheran variety), with its characteristic promotion of morality and virtue, discretion in expressing affections, modesty in external appearance, reliability in work and other forms of individual commitment, social discipline, and — what is particularly important — spreading alphabetism as far as possible. Since the late 16th century, the dominant faith has contributed to the arrival of many Huguenots who were persecuted in France. Typically, they were educated, brave, resilient and resourceful people, including many intellectuals of the first class. Another peculiar condition of life in these territories is the shape of the landscape, with larger or smaller mountains standing practically all around, limiting the horizon from all sides and thus

---

    [2] Cf. F. Rosset, *L'enclos des Lumières. Essai sur la culture littéraire en Suisse romande au XVIIIe siècle*, Geneva, 2017. Similar studies have been carried out in other cultural areas, e.g., the following publications: R. McLean, R, Young, K. Simpson (eds), *The Scottish Enlightenment and Literary Culture*, Lanham, 2016; B. Becker-Cantarino (ed.), *German Literature of the Eighteenth Century. The Enlightenment and Sensibility*, Rochester, 2005; P. Weber, *Literarische und politische Öffentlichkeit. Studien zur Berliner Aufkärung*, Berlin, 2006 ; F. Portinari, *Le regole del gioco : saggi sulla cultura letteraria del Settecento*, Cesario di Lecce, 1999 ; A. Mattone, P. Sanna, *Settecento sardo e cultura europea. Lumi, società, istituzioni nella crisi dell Antico Regime*, Milano, 2007 ; Jerzy Snopek, *Prowincja oświecona. Kultura literacka Ziemi Krakowskiej w dobie Oświecenia: 1750–1815,* Warszawa, 1992.

favouring the sense of separateness within specified boundaries. Thus, for the French-speaking Swiss, Paris is — on the one hand — the capital of language and culture, which determines and imposes norms and models, a centre that fascinates and attracts. On the other hand, however, it is perceived as an emblem of otherness, towards which one feels detachment or even aversion, carefulness, sometimes to the point of fear, a paradoxical complex of moral superiority and cultural inferiority. All this is perfectly reflected in the letters written by Saint-Preux to Julie from Paris in the second volume of the famous *Julie, or the New Heloise* by J. J. Rousseau (1761), an unrivalled best-selling novel of its time in entire Europe.

Let us return now to the idea of *literary culture*, proposing — for these reflections — the simplest possible definition, explaining subsequently in the following monologue each of its parts. Literary culture is then: *a type of literary heritage, domestic or not (in the 18th century, it was typically European), internalised by a given society, which generates practices and imposes writing attitudes.*

What *society* are we discussing?

Naturally, one can only talk about the part of society that uses the written language. In this context, individual societies of Europe are unequal, but we must add that literary culture does not concern only littérateurs. Indeed, it turns out that even very poorly alphabetised people have contact with certain forms of literature, like oral literature, or literature that is read aloud, as well as popular audiences of village fair theatres, or even servants listening in on home theatre plays in elite communities. Nonetheless, the fact remains that today, we cannot find traces of such practices.

We should immediately know that the social group that encounters literature is much broader than the classically listed group of authors and readers of printed works. Let us add here that when we talk about the written word and the practice of writing, we need the studies to include all types of writing, not just what we typically qualify as "literature" and add the adjective "great." Most written documents of this period do not qualify as such "literature". These are notes of all kinds, private or public chronicles, journals, ego-documents in the broadest sense, correspondence, reflections, fragments of books, inventories, minutes of meetings of various associations, speeches, sermons, prescriptions, meteorological diaries, logogriphs and other language games. Indeed, it turns out that each document of this type contains direct or indirect traces of the author's or the supposed recipient's contact with "literature".

Such a society should be, however, differentiated. After all, we are not talking about society as an abstract concept but about a specific social group living in conditions that determine its nature. Geography is the first such condition. We do not think similarly, do not evoke the same images and figures, do not tell the same fairy tales if we live surrounded by natural barriers or permanently situated in front of a wide-open landscape, an almost infinite horizon, like in eastern Poland, or by the sea or ocean, on an island, or in the heart of a great continent, up or down, in a small, isolated community, or a big city. In each situation, the eye is accustomed to slightly different dimensions and forms, and the imagination is fed different images and associations, the sense of identity and discourse that expresses it are based on different parameters. The physical context of human life is also associated with a climate that sets the rhythm of our daily lives, imposes customs and shapes mentality, and directly impacts human activities, methods of survival or development, or the economy. Folk art and its elite varieties are born in such conditions. Naturally, we can refer to idealistic definitions of beauty that assume a universal dimension, but we actually see that art takes a definite form in countless varieties rooted in separate contexts. Literary culture is always between consciously or unconsciously adopted truths and universal patterns and their varieties. It is a space of dialogue between opposing and complementary dimensions, often difficult and turbulent, completely unconscious or even silent.

Another significant issue determining the properties of a given community is language. Polish researchers of the Enlightenment know this very well, standing in front of multilingual domestic documentation dominated by French, not quite rare remnants of Latin, and Polish, which had not yet been stabilised uniformly, not to mention Yiddish or regional subdialects, or non-Polish supradialects practised domestically in various communities in the Republic of Poland. We know that the choice of a given idiom in literature is not just a matter of language but depends primarily on various conditions of the statement. The choice of French is a status determinant for Polish aristocrats, while, e.g. for Doctor Samuel Tissot, it is, inversely, a way to popularise medical knowledge outside the chosen population of readers of scientific literature, still predominantly written in Latin.[3] Language is also the background of disputes of

---

[3] Cf. forewords to numerous papers by Tissot where the question of purpose of a given text is always analysed against the background of the language used. E.g., *Avis au peuple sur sa santé* (1761; translated into Polish as *Rada dla pospólstwa względem zdrowia jego*, 1785), as the first treatise of social medicine in modern history, had to be written in a language available to the supposed recipient. On the other hand, the medical and moral work *L'onanisme* (1760) is a French translation prepared by the author

a political and philosophical nature (in a sense given by Rousseau for these two fields taken together) in an era when the so-called "national consciousnesses" are being born, which is evidenced by, e.g. sharp critiques of Bodmer and Breitinger, ardent defenders of German culture, against succumbing to the dominant French models. Many documents, not only scientific, provide evidence that the attitude toward the practised language seems to be a ubiquitous topic when the writer asks themselves the most straightforward questions about the very fact of writing. Novels in letters are often a kind of practice dealing with these topics, when authors attempt to give each character an appropriate style, or even variety of language, according to the determined personality and origin of a given character. Of course, the more a given culture is marked with centralism and strong normativity, the more often this topic materialises as a manifestation of peripheral communities, frustrated by the lack of recognition of their separateness.

The specified collective of writers should be analysed compared to the political system where it lives. We treat writing under a strong monarchy with an effective control and censorship apparatus, with clearly defined aesthetic expectations of the ruler, differently than writing in a small republic where everyone knows the governing representatives of the people almost personally, or in small states (e.g., German or Italian) where the regulation of literature depends mainly on the will and whim of the currently ruling prince. In monarchies, the figure of the king is continuously presented in works of literature in this or other forms as a personification of a good-natured patriarchal ruler or as a ruthless tyrant, like a proto-figure generating potentially infinite varieties of a metaphorical nature. However, when reaching for a pen, citizens of a republic will practically always consider their position and responsibility for state order and the correct behaviour of other citizens. They will write about this directly or not, but it will always be the imposed starting point when writing.

The weight of faith was already mentioned with the example of Switzerland. Indeed, there were few areas in 18th-century Europe with unified faith. Even Catholicism differs significantly in its impact on the production and reception of "literature" if we observe its influence on the communal consciousness and the production and reception of literature in Spain, Austria, France, and Poland. It is just as challenging to use the single concept of Protestantism to merge English Puritanism and Pietism of the Moravian Church or Calvin's confessional state and independent

---

himself after the publication of the original titled *Tentamen de morbis ex manustupratione* (1758); in the foreword, Tissot acknowledges that he had encountered difficulties when translating words and sentences that could sound completely obscene in the vernacular language and have completely different effects in the reader than intended.