Staging literature in the Belle Époque


The Belle Époque in France was marked by an extraordinary flourishing of avant-garde magazines. While people generally remember the names of the most prestigious among them, like the *Revue Blanche* (founded in 1887), the *Mercure de France* (1890), and the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (1909), Maurice Caillard and Charles Forot’s 1924 survey shows that a total of 195 titles appeared between 1896 and 1914, an average of more than ten new magazines a year.¹ To make a name for themselves in such a difficult climate, magazines had to either belong to a relatively structured network or be part of a broader intellectual program. The regionalist movement, for example, whose most prominent representative was Jean Charles-Brun,² provided many magazines with a readership, including the 1900 creations *Le Beffroi, La Picardie, L’Action Régionaliste, La Revue Provinciale, La Gerbe Normande, Le Troubadour*, and *Le Souvenir Ardennais*. While many other titles (for example, Charles Péguy’s *Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, Jean-Richard Bloch’s *L’Effort*, Edouard Dujardin’s *Revue des Idées*, Paul Fort’s *Vers et Prose*, and Binet-Valmer’s *La Renaissance Latine*) also had their moments of glory, they had to use well-established methods to capture the public’s attention in such an overcrowded landscape. The fact that a large number of literary movements also appeared during the same period (including Jules Laforgue and Gustave Kahn’s *Vers-librisme*, Maurice Barrès’s *Décadisme*, Joséphin Péladan’s *Magisme*, Jean

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¹ “Les revues d’avant-garde. Enquête de MM. Maurice Caillard et Charles Forot avec une introduction et des conclusions,” *Belles Lettres* 62–66 (December 1924). This survey was republished in 1990 by the journal *Ent’Revues* at Editions Jean-Michel Place.

Moréas and Charles Maurras’s École Romane, Émile Verhaeren’s Paroxysme, Saint-Georges de Bouhélier’s Naturisme, not to mention Intégralisme, Visionnarisme, Sincérisme, Effrénéisme, and Druidisme) makes it easier to understand the Dadaists’ and Surrealists’ eager efforts to promulgate their movement after 1918.

It seems the Belgian poet Fernand Divoire was the first to come up with the idea of synthesizing this new field of knowledge, later formalized as the sociology of literature, in his witty Introduction à l’étude de la stratégie littéraire. The brief guide for high school pupils with literary ambitions appeared in 1912, followed by further editions in the 1920s after Louis Aragon, Claude Breton and their circle demonstrated their ability to create a stir both in public and among literary circles. Romain Rolland’s 1908 novel La foire sur la place (The fair on the square) depicted the decline in literary mores that had been the object of much comment since the Prix Goncourt (created in 1903) and the Vie Heureuse Prix Femina (1904) had led publishers and authors alike to treat the literary field like a fairground where all the old tricks could be pulled to attract customers. Bernard Grasset relished this game and soon became a master at it. For example, he filmed Radiguet signing the contract for Le Diable au corps several times to get the best angle for cinema newsreels, in order to take full advantage of the scandal surrounding the novel’s publication. In so doing, he was following in the footsteps of such pioneers as the Jeune France movement, who as early as the 1830s had played on their literary notoriety to attract a larger readership. Grasset set up in business in 1907 and clearly understood the need for a publisher to make use of all the resources that

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3 Ernest Florian-Parmentier lists more than forty for this period in Histoire de la littérature française de 1885 à 1914 (Paris: Bruguière, n.d.).
advertising had to offer. He knew that it now required more than just the humble advertisements used by Balzac to ensure that the 1,000 or 1,500 copies of a work aimed at a cultivated readership would find their way into their homes. Arthème Fayard had invented the popular series three years earlier, in 1904, printing 50,000 or 100,000 copies of each book with eye-catching cover designs, shocking titles (for example, *Chaste et flétrie* [Chaste and debased] launched the “Le Livre Populaire” in 1905), and countless other tricks of the trade to ensure a return on his investment.

In Balzac's novel *Illusions perdues* (*Lost illusions*), set at the beginning of the July monarchy and in the aftermath of a serious crisis in the French book trade, the journalist Émile Lousteau warns the hero Lucien de Rubempré that if he wants to succeed as a writer, it will take more than a single masterpiece. Serial fiction writers were well aware of the need to write works that would fit into collections and strove to imitate Alexandre Dumas's novel-writing “production line”, which was designed in line with the principles of Adam Smith and adapted to the era of the steam-powered printing press. Since ghostwriters had been helping the big names in the profession to make money well before the revolution of 1848, it is easy to see why the young Zola (who managed the Librairie Hachette publishing house’s advertising department from 1862 to 1866) had no qualms about putting his knowledge from the field of journalism to good use with his first publisher, Albert Lacroix, in 1864 and funding the launch of *Contes à Ninon* himself. Having learned from Louis Hachette to view literary works as “a market value that is intended to be sold for as high a price as possible to allow the writer to live,” Zola intended to integrate advertising closely with his novels – it

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10 Some rather unpleasant criticisms of this trend appeared in 1845 in Eugène de Mirecourt’s lampoon *Fabrique de romans. Maison Alexandre Dumas et compagnie* and in Louis Reybaud’s novel *César Falempin*, six years after Sainte-Beuve had raised the alarm about “mass-produced literature.”
plays a major role in *Au bonheur des dames*, for example— and his literary strategy. Taking into account the hate campaigns that surrounded the emergence of Naturalism, all budding writers after Zola knew they had to sacrifice their ideals to their careers to some extent. However, in the 1880s, the Symbolists reacted violently to the profiteers and sought, initially at least, to create publishing structures that were completely independent of the system. They hoped these would bring praise from their peers for their writing without having to contend with the judgment of the “common herd” that they so heartily despised.13

**Drumming up business: Publicity campaigns and editorial policies**

When a well-known writer like Barbey d’Aurevilly stubbornly refused a fixed-sum payment from Hetzel for one of his works or when Léon Bloy was troubled by the idea that the publisher Calmann Lévy was to entrust his latest manuscript to two paid readers rather than read it himself,14 the publishing scene had changed. Literature had moved on from the days when readers were in ecstasies over Lamartine’s *Méditations*. This “consecration of the writer,” as theorized by Paul Bénichou,15 was short-lived, however. As soon as the first shock waves from the slump resulting from the cessation of business in the July 1830 revolution were felt, the press came to the rescue of literature, offering writers an outlet for their works—as long as they wrote in the exciting new style that the newspapers demanded. This new style was criticized by Sainte-Beuve in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* on September 1, 1839, but the rot had started setting in at the end of the Ancien Régime. For example, Charles-Joseph Panckoucke, the bookseller and creator of the *Encyclopédie méthodique* (the successor to Diderot and Alembert’s *Encyclopedia*), was already beginning to look like the publisher of the future. He maintained what was probably the first writing team in literary history at his

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14 Jean-Yves Mollier, *L’argent et les lettres* for all of these examples.
hotel in the Rue de Thou. Although the French Revolution halted the progress of this “unofficial minister of information,” as he was called in Versailles, he had set an example that was to be followed by many younger publishers.

While Balzac depicted the lifestyle of the bookseller Dauriat, the “Padishah of the book trade,” in *Lost Illusions* and highlighted the extent of his power in the scene where the paper-makers, printers, distributors, bookshops, and authors all hurry to garner his favors, it was the journalist Elias Regnault who actually identified the emergence of this social type. His article on “the publisher” in *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* illustrated the reversal of the relationship between author and seller and demonstrated the dependence of the former on the latter. The Second Empire only served to increase discontent among writers, and their mutual assistance societies were powerless to improve their lot. Baudelaire alerted his fellow writers when Michel Lévy acquired the copyrights of contracted writers as part of the movable assets of the Librairie Nouvelle on the Boulevard des Italiens when he bought the business at the end of 1861. He was unaware, however, that Louis Hachette had earlier done likewise in acquiring the stock of the bookseller-publishers Victor Lecou and Louis Maison in 1854. Those titles enabled Hachette to launch his “Bibliothèque des chemins de fer” (Railway collection) in a blaze of publicity. Hachette and Lévy did not actively set out to derail literary authorship: they were merely heirs to a trend dating back to the 1770s. Publishers had been thrust into the heart of the new economy, which was attempting to meet the needs of

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18 Published between 1838 and 1842, the volumes of this famous physiology offer an excellent overview of stereotypical social figures of the day.
readers. As a result, the two men developed strategies to meet these demands, including the highly effective policy of creating collections aimed at generating customer loyalty.²²

By freeing the book market of its pre-1870 shackles (including the intellectual property regime, the printer’s obligation to fill out a register announcing their works, and the policing of bookshops), the great Law on the Freedom of the Press of July 29th, 1881 inspired many fledgling writers to enter the profession. It did nothing to change the balance of power, however. Hence, as the young poets of the 1880s prepared to create non-commercial magazines for their verses and essays, they condemned the established system and dreamed of returning to the supposed golden age when writers had nothing to obey but their muse. This idyllic vision did not stand up to scrutiny: Corneille and Molière were dependent on patrons,²³ for example. However, as is often the case, the mythical narrative served as a backdrop to the young poets’ ambitions and explains the hundreds of magazines that emerged during this era.²⁴ Their condemnation and rejection of modern publishing practices implies that culture was now an industry in the fullest sense of the term, using the most modern advertising resources to sell books by the hundreds of thousands rather than individual masterpieces. At the end of 1877, for example, a number of large shops tested temporary stands containing new gift books for 1878 and, two years on, there were book stands in the shops all year round.²⁵ To the great displeasure of some, the book had well and truly entered the realm of merchandise. Bernard Grasset claimed to have introduced advertising to the world of literature in around 1910, and his successive biographers have taken his claim at face value. However, the generation of Pierre Louÿs, André Gide and Marcel Proust knew that this was not the case: money was the driving force in literature, as it was elsewhere.

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From magazines and specialist journals, including the *Bibliographie de la France*, advertising took over public spaces throughout France, announcing new serials, each more thrilling than the last. Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain’s novel, *Fantômas*, benefited from a huge press campaign, for example. Its thirty-two installments kept readers on tenterhooks from 1911 to 1914 and earned the Fayard publishing house and the authors a fortune. When Louis Feuillade’s first film adaptation came out in 1913, the walls of the Paris metro were plastered with the posters featuring the character. The novel was proof that crime fiction, inevitably presented as a serial, could not be sold without some prior consideration being given to the target audience and to appropriate marketing strategies. Like Ernest Flammarion, whose editorial policies were based on the tastes of the clients in his bookshops in Paris and the provinces, Arthème Fayard initially targeted a poorly educated readership, happy to buy low-quality volumes as long as they were cheap (they cost 13 French sous, less than 2 euros in today’s money). To attract readers and create the need to read and buy books, publishers had to generate a lot of publicity. After 1900, for example, competitions were organized to announce the start of almost every new serial in *Le Petit Parisien* and *Le Petit Journal*. Popular genres such as comic books for the younger generation were the first to be subject to marketing, though the term itself had yet to be coined. This explains the outraged reactions of the young poets, who were, nonetheless, responsive to the teachings of the then nascent field of literary sociology.

**Setting up strategies appropriate for the literary field**

Serial literature was not alone in being affected by such changes, unwelcome though they were for some. While the young Pierre Louÿs had confided his ardent desire in his private diary in April 1890 to make “a non-commercial edition [of his *Symphonies*, which had not yet

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been set down on paper], reserved for just himself and a few close friends," he changed his mind once he tasted literary success. His *Aphrodite* (1896) and *Chansons de Bilitis* (1898) were both published in the *Mercure de France*. However, the Symbolist review's director, Alfred Vallette, proved incapable of distributing his protégés’ works widely enough and Louÿs turned to Zola’s publisher, Eugène Fasquelle, for the launch of *Roi Pausole*. Francis Jammes, too, left the *Mercure* for Calmann-Lévy, who claimed to be the only publishers to guarantee fame for those who deserved it. While this was a bitter pill for Alfred Vallette, he never gave in to the lure of commercial publishing. He was happier to lose a few thousand readers when the 1910 Prix Goncourt was awarded to Louis Pergaud for *De Goupil à Margot*, which he published, than to change his professional practice and abandon his ideals. The successive departures of Jules Renard, Pierre Louÿs, and Maurice Maeterlinck did not shake his belief in what a publisher should be, but he remained an exception. This fact was highlighted with acerbic wit by Fernand Divoire, who laid the foundations of literary sociology by observing reality through the lens of disenchantment, thereby anticipating the work of Pierre Bourdieu. The foreword to the new edition of Divoire’s satirical essay in 1928 responded in advance “to particularly stupid readers and particularly malicious colleagues who claim the author of this handbook is a strategist who professes to be an arriviste.” Armed with his recent experience with the Dadaists and Surrealists, he revisited his 1912–13 essays (republished in 1914) and condensed them to produce a kind of guide to literary showmanship. They may have inspired Salvador Dalí (or *Avida dollars*, as the anagram-loving André Breton derisively nicknamed him). They were almost certainly read by Pierre Bourdieu, since Divoire was still on reading lists when Bourdieu was a student in Paris, preparing for entry to the École Normale Supérieure. Where Bourdieu the sociologist ascribes

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30 Lesage, “Des avant-gardes en travail”.
intimate knowledge of the rules of the field to habitus, Divoire the satirist highlights the potential for writers to indulge in cynical manipulation of the literary field and its rules. His *Introduction à l’étude de la stratégie littéraire* opens with a definition of this new science. He claimed that it should be taught in a laboratory to be opened by the authorities. To arouse his readers’ curiosity, he continued: “Our science will therefore be the art of preparing a campaign to triumph in the literary world.”32 Divoire’s preface called for the post of “chair of literary strategy” to be created “as soon as possible”33 since he felt that the advice dispensed by established writers to their young admirers in cafés was inadequate at a time when Taylorism was all the rage and the number of free universities was on the increase. Based on a meticulous observation of literary mores by a writer whose Belgian nationality made him an outsider and thus placed him in a privileged position as an observer of French literature, these analyses were those of a Flemish poet who had long written for the “Les Treize” column created by Léon Bailby at the right-wing nationalist paper *L’Intransigeant*. In *Les Entretiens Idéalistes* in 1909, he outlined an analysis of the work of prophets and mages, who had proliferated since Nietzsche put forward his reflections on the Übermensch. Nietzsche and the occult writers Sar Péladan and Eliphas Lévi, among others, came in for severe criticism in this work: these criticisms became much more widely disseminated with the publication of his theoretical work in 1912. Chapters of Divoire’s handbook were devoted to the need for magazines and manifestos, essential to any fledgling group. He also looked at how literary friendship circles worked and how to organize the festivities and banquets that his contemporaries were so fond of. Finally, he addressed literary criticism, by then an institution, and literary prizes, which had increased in number every year since 1903. In his 1928 edition, Divoire estimated the annual amount of prize money on offer at 350,000 francs (now 270,000 euros) and cited one of the most sought-after prizes, the “promotional literature” prize, worth

33 Ibid., 12.
20,000 francs (16,000 euros). This prize was donated by the Chambre syndicale de la publicité française (the federation of French advertisers), whose president had expressed his joy the year before at the successful marriage of literature and advertising.\textsuperscript{34} In addition to this check, which was won by Le Figaro columnist James de Coquet that year, the sum of 15,000 francs was shared between Princess Bibesco for her prose promoting Lanvin perfumes, Colette for her eulogy on Ducharme silks, Pierre Bost for his Dim stockings prose, and various other writers who had understood that literature could no longer be separated from advertising. Eugène Schueller’s detergent business Monsavon and the wine merchants Nicolas were among the companies who sponsored the prize, demonstrating that major retailers had understood the benefits of developing solid links with writers. Basile Zaharoff, Europe’s best-known arms dealer, assisted Bernard Grasset in his efforts to create the rather unfair Prix Balzac, which could only be awarded to a Grasset author, in 1922;\textsuperscript{35} the playwright Edouard Bourdet condemned such dubious practices in the character Moscat, the hero of his 1927 play, Vient de paraître (Just published). Divoire goes on to point out that the Dadaists and the Surrealists were no exception to the rule. By organizing disturbances, fights, processions, and public protests, they were merely following in the footsteps of their Belle Époque predecessors, who saw attracting attention and being the talk of the town as imperative. As Théophile Gautier explained in his Histoire du romantisme,\textsuperscript{36} “being bold” had been the thing for thrusting young littérateurs since the premier of Victor Hugo’s Hernani. Hence, the Decadents and the followers of the many other post-1880 movements to have emerged in the wake of Symbolism had no need of a literary strategy laboratory to imitate the boisterous actions of the Jeune France in 1830. Even Tristan Tzara seems to have understood the importance of dressing in “literary” fashion. Both he and Breton attached particular importance to their clothes since they believed that the minor author and songwriter Théodore

\textsuperscript{34} Divoire, Stratégie littéraire, 43.
\textsuperscript{35} Boillat, La librairie Bernard Grasset, vol 3, 22–5.
Botrel had failed to be taken seriously for his habit of wearing traditional Breton garb, which had make him look like a “postcard regionalist.” Divoire further probed the weaknesses of his literary contemporaries by stating that a public conversion to Catholicism, such as that of Claudel at Notre Dame, was only useful if it came at an opportune moment, adding that the same was true for joining political movements, including anarchism and socialism. Furthermore, reminding his readers that calligrams had been used by caricaturists at the beginning of the July Monarchy to mock Louis-Philippe, Divoire took a critical stance to the typographic experiments of Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars. No avant-garde writer appeared sincere enough to be spared in his virulent critique of the countless ways of developing a strategy to earn public acclaim. The final version of Divoire's satire revealed the most up-to-date methods of generating publicity. Evening book signings in bookshops on the main boulevards and boasting of literary excellence on the radio or, even better, in the cinema newsreels enabled the most astute writers to benefit from opinion-shaping friends in high places. This practice was well established in the press of the 1830s. Advertisements arose from the rather indelicate practice of singing the praises of a book in an article in return for a substantial payment from the book’s publisher. In an era of mass-produced advertising, writers and publishers had to prove they were capable of adjusting their tactics to circumstances. That is precisely what Bernard Grasset was doing when he made Raymond Radiguet sign his contract several times for the camera, transforming the moment into an initiation ceremony for the high priest of new literature. Anyone who saw this scene projected onto a white shroud (used as an improvised cinema screen in small venues) would enter into communion with the author and would not rest until they had bought their precious copy of Le Diable au corps, in a literary recreation of the mystery of Christian transubstantiation. Grasset no longer, therefore, just organized the “fair on the square” (La foire sur la place), as he was

37 Divoire, Strategie litteraire, 130.
38 Ibid., 165–72.
accused of doing, nor did he find the one in a million writer that would generate publicity for him by offending the middle classes. Rather, he sought to take up a permanent position in the media spotlight. While mental illness, which regularly left Grasset unable to work, prevented him from successfully completing his campaign to occupy the media stage, his nickname, the “Napoleon of publishing” (which was changed to the “Führer” during World War II), demonstrated that he partly succeeded in applying the lessons in editorial strategy that he had learned from observing his peers.

**Staging literature**

Guy Debord caused a scandal when he developed a theory that the West had become a “society of the spectacle” after 1945. However, as a student of the Surrealists and the leading theorist of Situationism, he knew full well that this “society” possessed a long history and that both the Romantics and the Naturalists had inspired countless more recent writers to copy their excesses and temperamentality. A little more cynical or perhaps less naive than the majority of fledgling writers, he also knew that the reason why René Julliard launched the young literary ingénues Françoise Sagan and Minou Drouet in 1954 like L’Oréal products was to compete with his great rival, Gaston Gallimard. Eight years earlier, in 1946, Gallimard had returned a sense of normality to Parisian publishing after World War II by organizing the “nuit de la Série noire” (the Série Noire crime fiction collection evening). The prison stripes and imitation ball and chains worn by the guests were a spectacular display of the publishers’ desire to debunk the ideals of the Resistance. Whatever Sartre had to say with his theory of engagement, people no longer cared about morality. The hep cats who livened up the jazz cellars of Saint-Germain-des-Prés after the Liberation heralded the dawn of a new era with a flourish of trumpets and saxophones. Rather than make a complete break with the past,

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however, this new era merely systematized the initiatives adopted earlier. Such staging would only work, however, if people believed that everything had changed. Such was the case in the realm of literature since advertising had gradually invaded and transformed it, much to the regret of both Sainte-Beuve and Lucien de Rubempré’s first literary companions in the Cénacle, a name reminiscent of Christ’s Last Supper and perhaps of the betrayal of one of his disciples. New writers still seek new ways of making a name for themselves, demonstrating that the staging of literature has always been part of literature itself. The Belle Époque was more receptive than other periods to such strategies because the editorial system was becoming increasingly ossified and closed off to innovation, needing a good shake-up for it to evolve. This is what the Symbolists and all the literary groups that founded the hundreds of reviews strove for. These reviews were often supported by the book distributors that they set up, such as the Comptoir d’Éditions de la NRF, the precursor to the Gallimard bookshop in 1919. Only the Gallimard bookshop and the Mercure de France survived into the twentieth century, but the Revue blanche nevertheless enjoyed huge success with the novel Quo vadis?, and its example was followed by a number of small Surrealist publishing houses in the 1920s, such as René Hilsum's Sirène. José Corti’s bookshop in Paris and his work publishing Julien Gracq was likewise testament to his lifelong refusal to bow to advertising. However, Gracq’s recent entry into the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade collection of classic works, which plays a full role in modern information and communication rituals, seems to indicate that his survival into the twenty-first century has been entrusted to a disciple of Fernand Divoire. Although Gaston Gallimard never passed his baccalauréat, he was very quick to subscribe to the many small poetry journals which reflected the lively intellectual atmosphere of the literary avant-garde. Like Michel Lévy, who signed Henri Murger on the basis of his press success with La Vie de Bohème and Gustave Flaubert for the scandal that surrounded the prepublication of Madame Bovary in the Revue de Paris, he always managed to generate reams of publicity for his authors. Balzac warned his readers in the 1830s that literature could no longer dispense with
advertising because it was everywhere, especially in the newspapers, and this could not fail to inspire those who wanted to continue to claim literature as their guiding light.

Translated by Clare Ferguson