

# *A Turn in Belgian Poetry: 1880 and Its Revolutions*



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# 0 Introduction

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## *A Turn in Belgian Poetry: 1880 and Its Revolutions*

- → poetry in Belgium 19<sup>th</sup> century (1830-1900)
- → key period between 1850 and 1900
- → a strong tendency towards greater autonomy (high point around 1880)



# 0 Introduction

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- Evolution of the Belgian poetry as a system
- 1850-1900
- Francophone Belgian poetry (without losing track of the poetry in Flemish)
- From global view ('system') to more specific case studies
- Background



# 0 Introduction

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- 1 Belgian poetry in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: historiographical overview
- 2 Bibliographical reconstruction
- 3 Methodological background
- 4 Conclusion



# 1 Belgian poetry in the 19th century: historiographical overview

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→ *When was Belgian poetry born? when was the concept of “Belgian poetry” born?*

**1830:** Belgium declared its independence as a nation

**1880:** considered as a major turning point; search for autonomy

**1900:** French-speaking symbolists of Flemish origin



# 1 Belgian poetry in the 19th century: historiographical overview

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- What is poetry?
- Why does poetry exist?
- How is the production of poetry organized?



# 1 Belgian poetry in the 19th century: historiographical overview

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1830 (Belgium declared its independence as a nation)

- Nationalism
- Lack of political and economic stability
- Support the national élan
- Poetry: didactical function
- Ode, chanson, epic poetry, hymn



# 1 Belgian poetry in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: historiographical overview

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- No truly Belgian ‘literary system’
- French literature = a role model ⇔ call for a truly Belgian literature
- !!! the gap was filled by ‘foreign’ literature, by means of pirated editions  
→ forbidden by law in 1852



# 1 Belgian poetry in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: historiographical overview

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1880 (considered as a major turning point,  
search for autonomy)

- founding of the periodical *la Jeune Belgique* in 1881
- = the voice of a new generation of Belgian authors (gain international recognition for literary Belgium)
- Autonomization of literature
- Soyons nous



# 1 Belgian poetry in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: historiographical overview

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- An actual ‘turning point’?

Gilkin (1895): with the exception of De Coster, Pirmez, Lemonnier and Hannon, “literary Belgium before 1880 was a desert”

→ literary journals did appear between 1830 and 1880!

→ not just to be attributed to *La Jeune Belgique* alone!



# 1 Belgian poetry in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: historiographical overview

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1900 (French-speaking symbolists of  
Flemish origin)

→ outside the span of my research



## 2 Bibliographical reconstruction

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- repertoire of all the collections of poems in French, published in Belgium or written by Belgian authors in the period between 1830 and 1900 + survey of all literary journals in French-speaking Belgium between 1830 and 1900



## 2 Bibliographical reconstruction

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- 1830-1880: *National Bibliography*
- → 956 collections of poems, 89 of which are translations (approximately 10%)
- → the number of collections of poems increased from 1852 onwards



## 2 Bibliographical reconstruction

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1880-1900

- *Bibliographie des écrivains français de Belgique* by Jean-Marie Culot e.a
  - Translations?
  - Does not extend beyond the letter P



## 2 Bibliographical reconstruction

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- *Bibliographie de Belgique*
  - Translations are mentioned, but very rarely
  - 368 collections appeared in print (10 translations?)



## 2.1 How to explain the relative absence of translations?

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three possible explanations:

- literature proceeding by mimetism: reduced to a part of another (French) literature
- minor, peripheral models
- singularity, mixed literature (*une littérature métissée*) – from a generic (cf. *chanson, ode, ballade,...*) and thematic point of view → elements referring to the ‘Northern myth’



## 2.2 Reducing the corpus material

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Material: extremely rich and diversified:

- collections of poems
- programmatic texts, reviews and poems from a number of literary journals and other sources (as there are diaries and correspondence)
- anthologies, which reproduce poems by selecting and canonising them  
= ‘silent witnesses’: a social backbone to my research



## 2.2 Reducing the corpus material

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look for a hierarchy in the repertoire:

which (groups of) poets, which (collections of) poems have been canonised? What theoretical positions are prevalent? What about the manifests? What are the main models and where do they come from? Which is the common poetic genre? Which tendencies are going on?...



## 3 Methodological background

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- functional-relational systemic approach: the polysystem theory studies heterogeneous phenomena within the field of literature
- concept of translation as a generic category: a variety of discursive procedures
- concept of ‘transfer’



## 3 Methodological background

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- Even-Zohar: transfer is “the process whereby imported goods are integrated into a home repertoire, and the consequences generated by this integration” (Even-Zohar, Itamar. 1997. “Culture repertoire and the role of transfer”, in Target, p.359.)



## 3 Methodological background

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- ! polysystemic approach alone cannot be sufficient! → looking for other methodologies or concepts:
- → Sociological based theories?
- → Pragmatic approach?



## 4 Conclusion

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- Will I find specific ‘Belgian’ features in the field of poetry?
- → avoid trying to assign at all costs a certain homogeneity to the Belgian poetry
- → no total anarchy and disorder
- → not the most relevant question, more important: what are the different models, related to institutions



## 4 Conclusion

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two concrete examples:

- → focus on so-called typical Belgian *topoi* (Émile Verhaeren, *Toute la Flandre*)
- → transfer might influence versification: André Van Hasselt; translated and imitated (German) *chansons* (stayed close to the original german rhythm; no clear distinction between rhythm and verse)



status of Belgian literature: peripheral, yet ambitious