

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

William Marx, *The Hatred of Literature*, translated by Nicholas Elliott (Belknap Press, 2018)

Thanks to Nicholas Elliott's fine translating skills, and only three years after its initial publication at Presses de Minuit, *The Hatred of Literature* (*La haine de la littérature*) fittingly comes out in translation in the United States, a country otherwise known as the 'Suing Society'. Though in no position to mete out justice, William Marx – a self-appointed defence attorney for the occasion – brilliantly takes up the cudgels for literature, which seems to have been repeatedly disparaged throughout the centuries. Over nearly 190 pages of pleading, readers of *The Hatred of Literature* are made to attend this mock trial through a series of four indictments (authority, truth, morality and society) whose boundaries are porous enough to allow some examples to overlap, such as Plato's *The Republic*.

With what exactly is literature being reproached? Its former hegemony leading onto a turf war which eventually paled into insignificance (authority); its mendacity which in the meantime has been solved by philosophers like Maurice Blanchot, Tzvetan Todorov and Peter McCormick (truth);¹ its occasional immorality which could also be seen as plain transgressiveness or subversion (morality); and its illegitimacy through its alleged lack of usefulness – an invalid claim that Cognitive Literary Studies would have easily countered (society).² Because literature, like any object, is unfit to plead, the onus is on William Marx to do it.

But expect neither court cases nor legal judgements involving literature, as Marx merely uses this lexical field rhetorically to create a kind of judiciary-inspired hermeneutics to seduce his readers – a sensationalism of sorts reflected by the title itself which is inspired by one of Flaubert's melodramatic ejaculations. So, is hatred perhaps too strong a word? One could legitimately question whether all the instances provided in *The Hatred of Literature* are cut from the same cloth.³ In other words, could these antagonists have harboured other more subtle individual emotions such as jealousy, scorn, fear, moral anger, resentment, rancour, moral disgust, or indignation? Or, rather than a single emotion, could these enemies of literature have been under the sway of a constellation of emotions?

As Marx reminds us, literature remains a somewhat elusive concept which 'does not have a proper definition':

¹ See chapter 8 of Jean-François Vernay, *The Seduction of Fiction: A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary Interpretation*. Trans. Carolyne Lee (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

² See Terence Cave, *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) and my review of it in *Transnational Literature* : https://dspace.flinders.edu.au/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2328/37627/Vernay_Thinking_with_Literature.pdf?sequence=1

³ Among the cases under scrutiny, readers will come across 'Plato's banishment of poets' and 'Socrates's aggressive attitude towards poets' (42), Charles Percy Snow's 'succession of good-natured platitudes' (60) combined with 'more or less direct homophobic allusions' (63), Gregory Currie's argument against psychological novels (96), the bowdlerising of *Huckleberry Finn* (130), the mocking of *The Princesse de Clèves* on the syllabus of a recruitment examination for administrative officers (157), *inter alia*.

Book reviews: *The Hatred of Literature*, by William Marx, translated by Nicholas Elliott. Jean-François Vernay.

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Our current conception of literature, focused on the novel, poetry, theatre, and the essay, is relatively recent. It was not until toward the end of the eighteenth century that the word literature (or its equivalents) finally eliminated its rivals in the European languages and began to be used in reference to such a heterogeneous body of texts. (186)

Therefore, it is only logical that ‘anti-literature’ – that which defines itself *against* literature – should be an even more elusive and all-encompassing concept. In a nutshell, one could define it as anything which antagonises literature, ranging from archived and contemporary broadsides to public disgrace (courtesy of former French President Nicolas Sarkozy), not to mention censorship (in the form of bowdlerisation and bans), book-burning and other manifestations of so-called hatred.

By raising a defense of literature and resisting those who indulge in slighting its potential, William Marx cooks up a few blindingly clever counter-arguments which occasionally segue smoothly into biting ironies, if not witty punchlines (‘With friends like Snow, literature doesn’t need enemies’ [64]) and razor-sharp wry humour.⁴ For instance, after quoting a couple of Nicolas Sarkozy’s repeated mocking rants, Marx sarcastically adds:

This heart-wrenching picture is enough to bring tears to your eyes: the forty-year-old mother reading Madame de la Fayette in one hand while preparing a meal for her children with the other – a twenty-first-century version of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. Surely, international conventions will soon ban obligatory reading of masterpieces as inhumane and degrading treatment. (157)

After answering the main charges and contesting some of the complaints, the author of *Un savoir gai*⁵ counter-attacks by laying a charge against homophobia, which he rightfully detects in C.P. Snow’s snide comment (62). But the following sweeping generalisation might be too much of a stretch: ‘As I have earlier had occasion to note, anti-literature has always been highly compatible with homophobia, all the way through the twentieth century’ (146).

If it is often said that writers have a way with words, and William Marx is quintessentially articulate. In many respects, *The Hatred of Literature* is an apt illustration of the intellectual playfulness which underlies French critical writing. Authors like Marc Porée, Michel Schneider, Jean-Jacques Lecercle, and the like, often make extensive use of a clever mix of wit and erudition which largely account for the much sought-after pleasure of the text – a treat which, sadly enough, one all too rarely experiences when perusing nonfiction.

Jean-François Vernay

⁴ See the postscript he adds to the *Princesse de Clèves* study case. ‘The rest is history: *The Princesse de Clèves* became the symbol of opposition to the president-elect; its print run increased by unprecedented amounts; discussions were organised by the media; public readings were held on the street, in theaters, and at universities; books were published; the novel was transposed to the present day in a good film adaptation; and Madame de la Fayette was added to the prestigious Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, the ultimate recognition for a French author.’ (162)

⁵ *Un savoir gai* (Paris: Presses de Minuit, 2018) is a more personal book in which William Marx discusses his homosexuality.