Report from the Conference *Gender and Mediation: Reception of Belgian Literature in Czech- and Germanophone Cultural Spaces during Modernism (1870–1940)*

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From 15 to 17 April 2026, the international workshop 'Gender and Mediation. Reception of Belgian Literature in Czech- and Germanophone Cultural Spaces during Modernism (1870–1940)' was held at CEFRES — French Research Centre in Humanities and Social Sciences in Prague.[1] It was part of the research FNRS-PDR project 'La Belgique "lue" en allemande et en tchèque. Pour une approche multilatérale et non-hiérarchisée des transferts culturels' ('Belgium "read" in German and in Czech. For a multilateral and non-hierarchical approach to cultural transfer'),[2] directed by Petra James (Université libre de Bruxelles/MSH/MODERNITAS) and Hubert Roland (Université catholique de Louvain/FNRS), and convened by Petra James, Martina Mecco (Université libre de Bruxelles/MSH/MODERNITAS), Hubert Roland, and Quintus Immisch di Padua (Université catholique de Louvain). The conference was organized in collaboration with CEFRES, the Department of Czech and Comparative Literature at Charles University, the Institute of Czech Literature at the Czech Academy of Sciences, and the Institute of Slovak Literature at the Slovak Academy of Sciences. Following the first conference organized in the framework of the research project that took place at Maison Française in Oxford in April 2025, this year's conference highlighted women's roles in mediating Belgian literature in Czech- and Germanophone cultural spaces. Distributed in eight thematic panels, the speakers discussed translators, literary critics, writers, and editors as well as methodological and theoretical questions pertaining to the mediation and adaptation of Belgian modernism.

The conference opened with institutional greetings by Mateusz Chmurski, director of CEFRES, and Petr Šámal, director of the Institute of Czech Literature at the Czech Academy of Sciences, with opening remarks by Petra James and Hubert Roland, who welcomed the speakers and guests and presented the research project. The first panel, entitled 'Central European and Slavic Female Mediation of Maeterlinck', was dedicated to the figure of the writer and his reception in Central Europe. In the first contribution, Petra James (Université libre de Bruxelles) presented Maurice Maeterlinck's Czech major mediator Marie Kalašová, who authored the translation of a remarkable number of the Belgian writer's works and maintained a close friendship

1 https://cefres.cz/fr/events/genre-et-mediation/.
2 MODERNITAS — Maison des Sciences Humaines.

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with him. James presented Marie Kalašová as an example of the tension between her inclusion into literary networks and the invisibility of her own literary works (which was overshadowed by her skilful translations of Maeterlinck) that women as cultural mediators often faced. Agnieszka Kukuryk (Pedagogical University of Kraków) discussed how Maeterlinck was mediated to the Polish public by female literary critics. She proposed that Poland's status of semi-periphery encouraged the reception of Belgian literature, which is usually considered to be periphery because of structural affinities in the literary fields of the two countries. She illustrated this with the examples of critical texts by authors Gabriela Zapolska and Sofia Nałkowska. In the following paper, Laure Kazmierczak (Université de Mons) presented female translators of Maeterlinck's works into German and Russian. The translators Marie Lang and Clara Theumann were introduced as two feminist mediators of Maeterlinck in Vienna, which is all the more noteworthy as Maeterlinck soon granted exclusive translation rights to Friedrich von Oppeln-Bronikowski. As in the Germanophone spaces, female translators of Maeterlinck in Russia were less visible than their male counterparts. Because many collaborated with their husbands, their contributions have frequently been overlooked. The last contribution of the panel was delivered by Martin Brtko (Slovak Academy of Sciences), who gave an overview of Slovak translations of Maeterlinck up to 1948. He showed that the Slovak translations often appeared later than translations into other Central European languages (such as Czech), the first translation of a whole book being published only in 1943. Brtko presented the main figures and media (periodicals and anthologies) of the Slovak reception of Maeterlinck.

The second panel, 'Belgian Symbolism in Central Europe', addressed various aspects and agents of this cultural exchange. Tomasz Zielnik (University of Wrocław) presented female Polish translators of Belgian literature between 1880 and 1914. He highlighted a problem that was touched on several times during the conference, namely the lack or fragmentary nature of archival documents concerning female mediators. In addition, a significant number of Polish translations were published anonymously. Nevertheless, as Zielnik emphasized, several relevant biographies of female translators could be studied more closely, for instance that of Wanda Haberkantowna, a specialist in natural sciences and pedagogy, who also asserted her voice as a translator through her annotated translations. Quintus Immisch di Padua then presented a paper on Erna Rehwoldt, the little-known translator of Émile Verhaeren into German, and her cultural networks, including Belgian writers as well as mediators of Belgian literature, such as Rainer Maria Rilke and Stefan Zweig. Next, Nina Papcunová (Slovak Academy of Sciences/CEFRES) presented a paper on the way three prominent Belgian modernists — Maeterlinck, Verhaeren, and Rodenbach — were received in Slovakia during the first third of the 20th century. Papcunová emphasized the importance of translations, not only into Slovak but also into Czech and German, which many Slovaks could read, for the reception of and interaction with international modernist movements in Slovakia during that period.

After this second panel, Martina Mecco (Université libre de Bruxelles) and Quintus Immisch di Padua (Université catholique de Louvain) presented their work with Digital Humanities in visualizing the reception of Belgian literature in Central Europe. As part of the research project 'La Belgique "lue" en allemande et en tchèque',

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they collected and visualized data pertaining to the publication of translated Belgian literary works and to networks between cultural agents. Their presentation demonstrated the potential for effectively integrating digital humanities methods, such as the R programming language, to literary research projects.

The first day of the conference was rounded off by a keynote speech by Paul Aron (Université libre de Bruxelles), followed by a reception at the residence of the Belgian Ambassador in the Czech Republic, His Excellency Jurgen Van Meirvenne. In his keynote speech, Paul Aron highlighted the international character of Belgian modernism and emphasized the importance of the journals, salons, and exhibitions that had an impact beyond Belgium's borders.

The first panel of the second day centred on mediator figures. Michał Mrugalski (Humboldt University of Berlin) explained how Belgian modernism was understood as a model for national autonomy in Central Europe, especially in Poland. He presented two key figures of Polish modernism, Maria Dąbrowska and Juliusz Kaden-Bandrowski, who drew on their own experiences of living in Belgium in their literary works.

Caroline Siebert (Leipzig University) presented Czech publisher Kamilla Neumannová, whose publishing house brought several French and Belgian titles to the Czech public. Despite being closely connected to Czech modernist journal *Moderní revue* and its editor Arnošt Procházka, Neumannová shaped her publishing house's programme and set her own priorities, particularly emphasizing realistic and naturalistic writers such as Camille Lemonnier and left-leaning authors. Hubert Roland (Université catholique de Louvain/FNRS) focused his contribution on the writer and cultural patron Thea Sternheim, a pivotal figure in Belgian-German and European cultural relations. Her extensive networks, Roland suggested, should compel us to consider her as a *Kulturmittlerin*, or mediator of culture. The next paper, by Wilken Engelbrecht (Palacký University Olomouc), focused on the mediation of Dutch-language Belgian literature in the Czech lands, with a particular focus on Lída Faltová. As one of the most important mediators from Dutch to Czech, Faltová authored 39 translations, including ten works by Belgian (Flemish) authors, such as Stijn Streuvels, Willem Elsschot, and Ernest Claes.

The second panel was dedicated to female translators of Camille Lemonnier, often portrayed as the 'Belgian Émile Zola'. It was opened by Julia Glunk's (University of Freiburg) presentation of Lemonnier's German translator Nelly Pins. Archival research by the speaker shed light on the biography of Pins, who signed her translations with the androgynous pseudonym 'P. Cornelius'. In contrast to the other (male) German translators of Lemonnier, only a few biographical details are known about Pins. In the next talk, Clément Dessy (Université libre de Bruxelles/FNRS) offered a broader view on the German reception of Lemonnier. He showed that a number of translators, both male and female, expressed interest in translating some of Lemonnier's work, thus ensuring that it would continue to circulate in the Germanophone space after Lemonnier's first translator, Stefan Zweig, had moved on to translating Verhaeren. The next contribution by Martina Mecco (Université libre de Bruxelles) focused on the Czech reception of Camille Lemonnier. In particular, two mediators of his work stand out. One is Josef R. Márek, who undertook the majority of Czech translations of Lemonnier for the publishing house run by Josef R. Vilímek, and later

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collaborated with Otakar Štorch-Marien's publishing house, Aventinum. The other is Růžena Thonová, the translator of several of Lemonnier's works and a prominent mediator of other Francophone literature, as well as works by Gustave Flaubert and Honoré de Balzac.

The third and last panel of the second day, 'Literature and Geopolitics', examined the political implications of mediating Belgian literature. In the first talk, Maria Diletta Giordano (Sapienza University of Rome) examined the representation of Belgium in the German journal *Das literarische Echo*. Until the second half of the 1930s, this journal demonstrated a significant interest in Belgian culture and became one of the most prolific platforms for its Germanophone reception. She underlined the centrality of figures such as Friedrich Markus Hubner and Alfred Ruhemann, integrating archival research with the study of periodicals. In the next talk, Adrian Armstrong (Queen Mary University of London) analyzed Rudolf Alexander Schröder's translation of Guido Gezelle's poetry published amidst the First World War in 1917 as an element of the 'Flamenpolitik' of occupying Germany. This is, as Adrian Armstrong showed, evident in Schröder's choice of poems and in his attempts to render Gezelle's West Flemish dialect. The third contribution to this panel, by Julie Crombois (Institute for the Equality of Men and Women/Université catholique de Louvain), focused on the context of the Third Reich, exploring the circulation of women's writing. As examples, she drew on Marie Gever's German translations and reception of the German writers Gertrud von Lefort, Irmgard Keun, and Vicki Baum in Belgium to show how the aesthetic and perceived moral messages of a writer's works influence the circulation of literature. The second day of the conference was concluded by a keynote speech delivered by Mario Zanucchi (University of Salerno), dealing with a panorama of female translators of Belgian literature in German and emphasizing their 'translatory authorship'.

The third and last day of the conference was opened by a presentation of the research project 'Lost in Archives'[3] by Alissa L'Abbé (University of the Bundeswehr Munich) and Grave Evans (Goethe University Frankfurt). This ongoing project aims to highlight women's contributions to fields in which their contributions are undervalued and often forgotten — namely the publishing business, dramatic texts, and military literature —, while uncovering the mechanisms behind their devaluation and historical erasure.

The following panel, 'Mediation and Adaptation', explored creative and innovative forms of engagement with Belgian culture and literature. Ola Sidorkiewicz (Université libre de Bruxelles) discussed the rewriting of Maeterlinck's *The Life of Termites* by the Polish émigré Stefan Themerson in his novel *Professor Mmaa's Lecture*. Helga Mitterbauer (Université libre de Bruxelles) presented the field of fashion and design as a place of modernist culture. Women in Brussels, Vienna, and Prague were active figures in the Arts and Crafts movement. Furthermore, fashion magazines can be viewed as platforms for modernist culture, where one could find articles on women's rights and women's health alongside developments in fashion and design. Jovanka Šotolová's (Charles University, Prague) contribution centred on another prominent Belgian writer, Georges Simenon, and on one of his Czech translators, Běla Vrbová-

3 https://lostinarchives.hypotheses.org.

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Pavlousková. Šotolová also discussed her translation strategies, presenting key excerpts that clarify the process of adapting Simenon for a Czech audience.

The closing panel, 'Challenging the Concept of Autonomy in Literary Theory', addressed broader theoretical questions that represent a key methodological aspect of the project. Martin Hrdina (Czech Academy of Sciences) discussed the various factors that influence the autonomy of a literary field, critically engaging with Bourdieu's conceptual framework in his analysis of the reception of Czech and Belgian literature in the London-based review *Atheneaum*. Josef Šebek (Charles University, Prague) questioned the applicability of the literary field model to social and geographical spaces that are neither monolingual nor socially and politically unified, suggesting alternative analytical frameworks (social field, network, cultural transfer). Lastly, Anna Schubertová (Charles University, Prague/Czech Academy of Sciences) focused on various re-readings and interpretations of Bourdieu's notion of literary autonomy in literary theory, and on the concepts of ethical and aesthetic autonomy.

In conclusion, the diversity of topics addressed during the conference, as well as the discoveries and re-evaluations of archival materials, underscores the importance of the project's core research questions and demonstrates the significant potential of scholarship that focuses on female literary figures. The many interesting discussions and explorations of new topics inspired by this conference undoubtedly merit ongoing dialogue and development.