Chapter 15

‘Streetscape of New Districts Permeated by the Fresh Scent of Cement’. Brussels, the Avant-Garde, and Internationalism

La Jeune Belgique (1881–97); L’Art Moderne (1881–1914); La Société Nouvelle (1884–97); Van Nu en Straks (1893–94; 1896–1901); L’Art Libre (1919–22); Signaux (1921, early title of Le Disque Vert, 1922–54); 7 Arts (1922–8) and Variétés (1928–30).

Francis Mus and Hans Vandevoorde

In 1871 Victor Hugo was forced to leave Brussels because he had supported the Communards who had fled there. This date could also be seen as symbolising the...
passing of the baton from the Romantic tradition to modernism, which slowly emerged in the 1870s and went on to reach two high points: Art Nouveau at the end of the nineteenth century and the so-called historical avant-garde movements shortly after World War I.

The significance of Brussels as the capital of Art Nouveau is widely acknowledged. Its renown stems primarily from its architectural achievements and the exhibitions of the artist collective ‘Les XX’ (1884–93), which included James Ensor, Henry Van de Velde, Théo van Rysselberghe, George Minne, and Fernand Khnopff. Another artistic society, ‘La Libre Esthétique’, took over the reins from ‘Les Vingt’ after it disbanded, putting on annual exhibitions from 1894 up until the war. The lawyer Octave Maus was the instigator of this bustling art scene, which included achievements in music (with Eugène Ysaÿe) and literature. And it was in this artistic climate, that a great number of magazines flourished (most of them in French), helping to set the international tone of the reform movement. Of these, the two main periodicals were La Jeune Belgique (Young Belgium) and Van Nu en Straks (Of Now and Later).

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Oddly enough, the first wave of francophone magazines appeared in a time of economic crisis; 25 of them were founded between the years 1874 and 1884. Belgium remained one of the strongest industrial powers in Europe despite the ‘Long Depression’, which started in 1873. Paul Aron contends that the depression prompted writers some who fearing they would be unable to find work befitting their social standing, to take up writing as a profession. This professionalization led to the emergence of dedicated literary institutions (with associated staff, ideology, and resources) and helps explain the unprecedented artistic, more specifically literary, growth of the 1880s.

The flowering of art and literature coincided with a similar burst of activity in science and technology and could only be fuelled by the expansionist policies and obsessive building campaign of Leopold II. Together with the mayor of Brussels, Jules Anspach, who wanted, like some second Baron Haussmann, to transform the city into a metropolis, he inaugurated a campaign of distinguished building projects, municipal improvements, and wide boulevards for better traffic flow. The World Fairs held at home and abroad—and especially those of 1897 and 1910 in Brussels—both stimulated and served as models for this urban renewal. The imperialistic tendencies of these

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World Fairs, sanctioned by King and State, also encouraged a certain internationalism in the sciences. Of particular note was the establishment of the International Institute of Bibliography by Paul Otlet and Henri La Fontaine. This organization and other initiatives spearheaded by the two lawyers had a pacifist objective, spawning the peace movements during and after World War I.

Meanwhile, the economy and industry created the capital, crises notwithstanding, needed for improving the education system, thereby elevating the general level of education, as well as modernizing the book industry. Notable figures in this regard included Henri Kistemaeckers, who published the Naturalists, and Edmond Deman, who published the Symbolists. However, the institutions for publishing magazines continued to be weak. Quite frequently, they were produced with private capital—from parents—and simply managed to survive because they required very little financial input, compared to publishing houses. It was emblematic of how weak the literary infrastructure was that Emile Verhaeren’s Eurocentric magazine, Pan, failed in 1894.

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Brussels was a city that attracted not only the French, but also British businessmen, and was home to an ever-growing colony of Germans. Moreover, it had an almost equal number of francophones and Flemish speakers and a growing bilingual population (people who were Flemish by birth but preferred to use French outside their immediate circle). French, at this time the language of bureaucrats and the elite, was also preferred in artistic circles, despite the existence of a vibrant Flemish theatre scene. This was undoubtedly influenced by the dominant cultural position of the French language throughout Europe and the prominence of Paris, which the Flemings also considered the epitome of culture.\(^{10}\) The internationalism taking root in France between 1885 and 1900 consequently also had an impact on Belgium, which itself became a leading force thanks to its multilingual character and openness to foreign literature and cultures.

This, in turn, raises the more particular question of how great a role the magazines of the fin de siècle might have played in this internationalism and whether Brussels, that mini-Paris, was truly a hotbed of the avant-garde. All told, the artistic–intellectual milieu comprised only a small group of modernizers: the radical circles from the Free University of Belgium (Université Libre de Belgique) and the Law Courts of Brussels, of which Edmond Picard was the ringleader, a handful of exiles, and people who had come to live in Brussels because it was less expensive than Paris. For the Dutch, for

\(^{10}\) See Raf de Bont and Tom Verschaffel (eds), *Het verderf van Parijs* (Leuven: Universitaire Pers, 2004).
instance, Brussels was merely a stopover on the way to Paris. In addition, Brussels provided an ideal stop for mostly French, but also German, avant-garde theatre productions, on their way, more often than not, to Amsterdam (Antoine and his Théâtre Libre, Aurelien Lugné-Poë, the Meiningen Players). The European intelligentsia loved to visit Brussels, including Freud and the Dane Georg Brandes. The German poet Ernst Stadler took up residence in the capital in 1910, as did Carl and Thea Sternheim in 1912, before the occupying troops delivered a number of new Expressionists (including Gottfried Benn and Carl Einstein). The Polish-born novelist Joseph Conrad arrived in Brussels in 1890, drawn to a post in the Congo. And since the middle of the century, legions of major Dutch artists (including Jan Toorop and Vincent van Gogh) had studied at the Academy in the Belgian capital. In the Brussels art circles these people moved in, the contact between Belgian artists and those in the English Arts and Crafts movement and Japonisme, then in its heyday, intensified from 1892 onward.

The internationalism of Brussels-based magazines was evident in their translations, literary criticism, cross-references, and influences. But openness to foreign countries was not exclusive to avant-garde magazines during the fin de siècle; in fact, it could be considered a common feature of the general magazines of the time, such as the


liberal *Revue Générale de Belgique* (first series, 1869–1914), although we would need to consider how this openness manifested itself. There was, in any event, an acute awareness of Scandinavian, Russian, and German literature. Beyond that, Paris—in the shape of authors such as Émile Zola, J.-K. Huysmans, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Verlaine, and later André Gide and Francis Jammes—remained the main point of reference for avant-garde literature.

**La Jeune Belgique and Van Nu en Straks**

Two generations of writers—one associated with the francophone review *La Jeune Belgique*, the other with the Dutch-language *Van Nu en Straks*—introduced the modern notions of autonomy and internationalism (often described as ‘cosmopolitanism’) into French- and Dutch-speaking cultural circles. The two periodicals (Figs. 15.1 and 15.2), which were actually more like movements, respectively brought about a renaissance in

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the eighties and nineties in French-Belgian and Dutch-language letters.16 Both were fairly eclectic. In *La Jeune Belgique* in the eighties, Naturalism in prose fiction went hand-in-hand with ‘art for art’s sake’ in poetry. In the nineties, along with *Van Nu en Straks*, it embraced Naturalism, Impressionism, Aestheticism, and Symbolism.17

Writing in French, the major contributors were Camille Lemonnier, Georges Rodenbach, Charles Van Lerberghe, Albert Mockel, Emile Verhaeren, and Maurice Maeterlinck (most of them Flemings). Their counterparts writing in Dutch—who were less well known abroad—were Prosper Van Langendonck, Cyriel Buysse, August Vermeylen, Stijn Streuvels, Karel Van de Woestijne, and Herman Teirlinck.18

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16 *La Jeune Belgique* began as a bimonthly in Dec ember 1881. It became a monthly from 1881 and a weekly from 1896 to Dec ember 1897. *Van Nu en Straks* ran in its first series, measuring 27 × 22 cm, for ten issues from Apr il 1893 to Oct ober 1894 and in a second series, at 21.5 × 17.5 cm, from 1896 to 1901.


The internationalism of *La Jeune Belgique* was limited in scope and duration. Under Iwan Gilkin and Albert Giraud, it was never far removed from the nationalism and anti-internationalism of Charles Maurras and Maurice Barrès. Just as Paris was (and remains) the centre for French speakers, Amsterdam was (and still is) the hub for Dutch speakers. *Van Nu en Straks* actively sought to collaborate with Dutch writers and opened its doors to the world. A famous slogan from Vermeylen, from the close of his essay ‘Vlaamsche en Europeesche beweeging’ (*Flemish and European Movement; 1900*) declared: ‘We want to be Flemings, in order to become Europeans’ (‘Wij willen Vlamingen zijn, om Europeërs te worden’). This is not too far removed from the slogan, ‘Let us be ourselves’ (‘soyons nous’) championed by *La Jeune Belgique*.

Although both of these reviews rejected Romantic nationalism as being utilitarian, they were not entirely outside the national tradition. For one thing, they published tributes to their predecessors. *La Jeune Belgique* honoured André Van Hasselt, Charles De Coster, and Octave Pirmez, as well as the foreign authors Victor Hugo, Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert, Alphonse Daudet, Zola, and the Parnassian poets. And despite being largely secular, the editors at *Van Nu en Straks* honoured their Catholic

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predecessors, namely, the influential Romantic poet and priest Guido Gezelle, Albrecht Rodenbach, and Hugo Verriest.

Jean Weisgerber observes that, in many ways, La Jeune Belgique was not avant-garde at all. There was no true collaboration between the men of letters and the visual artists; they were not interested in fusing art and real life; and the writing showed no revolution in terms of the language and little aesthetic innovation. Contrast this with Raymond Vervliet’s description of the Flemish Van Nu en Straks as ‘proto-avant-garde’. Van Nu en Straks did meet Weisgerber’s first two criteria, but it did not engage in formal or linguistic experimentation. Moreover, while both magazines were viewed by the general public as iconoclastic in their stance toward Romantic nationalism, they never displayed the aggressive messianic zeal of the historical avant-garde. La Jeune Belgique was certainly anti-establishment, but the magazine’s polemic was targeted primarily at the bourgeois mindset; it never questioned the Government itself. This was something that Vermeylen, on the other hand, did do in his biting, anarchist essays for Van Nu en Straks. What’s more, the latter magazine took the collaboration between art and literature to a new level by inviting artists to submit illustrations. La Jeune Belgique was not illustrated; hence, its only association with the art world was through reviews.

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This pronounced interest in the visual arts was nothing new. There were four magazines devoted to art and literature that pre-dated *La Jeune Belgique*, the first being *L’Art Libre* (1871–3), published by the artist Louis Artan and others. In magazines such as Théodor Hannon’s *L’Artiste* (1875–81) and Lemonnier’s *L’Art Universel* (1873–5), meanwhile, literature took a back seat to art criticism. Hannon’s magazine ran the motto ‘NATURALISME, MODERNITÉ’ on the cover created by Félicien Rops, following in the footsteps of Baudelaire and the French Naturalism of Zola and Huysmans. Beyond that, the people working at the magazine were Wagnerian experts and champions of Impressionism. When Lemonnier joined the ranks of *L’Artiste* after the dissolution of *L’Actualité* (1876–7; the fourth magazine in this category), it became an aggressive defender of Naturalism and was notable for the debut of the work of a 24-year-old student from Leuven: Emile Verhaeren.

Symbolism and engagement

*Le Jeune Belgique*, launched by Max Waller, was the result of the merger of two student newspapers: *La Semaine des Étudiants* (1879–81; The Students’ Week; 1879–81), produced by Verhaeren and others in Leuven, and *La Jeune Revue Littéraire* (1880–81).

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The Young Literary Review, 1880, in Brussels. Another periodical that came out of the same liberal, secular environment of the Brussels universities was La Basoche (1884–6), published by André Fontainas (who later moved to Paris) and others, which was the first Belgian periodical interested in Symbolism. La Jeune Belgique, for its part, was not as receptive to Symbolism. After Waller’s death in 1889 and the interregnum of Henri Maubel, interest in the movement was briefly revived when Valère Gille took over the helm from 1890 to 1891, although it reverted under the editorship of Albert Giraud and Iwan Gilkin to defending ‘art for art’s sake’. Its polemical rants—first against the old, academic art; then, from 1886, against ‘l’art social’ of the journal L’Art Moderne; and from 1891, against Symbolist aesthetics—eventually led to the founding of the breakaway review Le Coq Rouge (1895–7), which provided the dissidents of La Jeune Belgique with their own independent podium. The editorial board included well-known writers such as Georges Eekhoud, Hubert Krains, Maurice Des Ombiaux and Maeterlinck.23

La Jeune Belgique’s individualistic principle of ‘art for art’s sake’ and its nationalism obstructed any international focus. It was nevertheless a success, not only because of its gift for generating publicity (including happenings like ‘Le Banquet Lemonnier’ in 1883 and an invitation to Mallarmé in 1890), but also its inherent literary

quality. In the nineties it influenced the Catholic youth magazines: *Le Drapeau* (The Flag; 1892) and *Durendal* (1894–1914) in Ghent\(^{24}\) and was succeeded in 1899 by *Le Thyrse* (The Thrysus), published by Léopold Rosy.

A periodical with a much greater international orientation was *La Jeune Belgique*’s direct competitor, *L’Art Moderne* (Fig. 15.3), a weekly founded on 6 March 1881 at the Brussels Court which may have had anywhere from 250 to 500 subscribers. It was edited by Edmond Picard and, from 1888, also by Verhaeren, who became its driving force. It originally defended Naturalism but was open to the emerging ideas of Symbolism and included some true heavyweights amongst its staff such as Octave Maus, Jules Destrée, Eugène Demolder, Arthur James, and Georges Rodenbach.\(^{25}\) It championed socially oriented art (‘art social’), and drifted increasingly to the left to become more closely aligned with the Belgian Labour Party (Parti Ouvrier Belge, POB). *La Wallonie*, which emerged from *L’Elan Littéraire* (1885–6) and was directed by Mockel, held similar views similar to those of *L’Art Moderne*. Although published in Liège, it deserves some mention because of the pleiad of Symbolist writers, both


Belgian and foreign, who were amongst its contributors.\(^{26}\) Other periodicals such as *L’Art Social* (1892), *Le Mouvement Social* (1893), *La Revue Rouge* (1892–1893), which was supported by Verhaeren, and *Le Coq Rouge* lacked Party support and consequently readers.\(^{27}\)

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Between 1890 and 1900, many smaller periodicals appeared, including *Stella* (1894–5), *L’Art Jeune* (1895–6), and *La Vie Nouvelle* (1900), published by Christian Beck, which ardently championed the principles of free verse and affirmed Verhaeren as the master.\(^{28}\) Others included *Le Mouvement Intellectuel* (1892–1914), the successor to *Le Mouvement Littéraire* (1894), which showcased ‘Esoteric Idealism’ in a prelude to the Esotericism which would flourish in the post-war avant garde.\(^{29}\) Another periodical in this vein was *Anté* (1906–8), produced by Christian Beck, André Ruyters, and Henri


Vandeputte, whose close association with André Gide, helped give rise to the French literary magazine *La Nouvelle Revue française* (see Chapter 4).  

The triad of internationalism, Symbolism, and political commitment came together in *La Société Nouvelle. Revue Internationale. Sociologie, Arts, Sciences, Lettres* (1884–97; Fig. 15.4). Begun by Fernand Brouez, it focused primarily on criticism and essays, but also published many translations. Its extensive subtitle points not only to the fact that it covered both the sciences and the arts, but also, more importantly, to its internationalism. It wanted to be a ‘free podium for leftist Europeans’ (‘une tribune libre de la gauche européenne’), ‘a meeting place “for all those who realize that society is suffering and desire a better future”’ (‘un lieu “où se rencontreront tous ceux qui savent que la société souffre et qui veulent un avenir meilleur”’).  

It published Élysée Reclus and other prominent anarchists, and in return, the magazine’s staff writers were published in anarchist organs such as Jean Grave’s *Temps Nouveaux*. Because of its anarchist bent and the prominent role it played in spreading internationalism (for example, by promoting Scandinavian and Russian literature), *La Société Nouvelle* had a major impact, including on Dutch-language periodicals.

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Flemish periodicals in Brussels

Breaking with the Romantic-nationalistic, normative-utilitarian tradition was even more difficult for Flemings than it had been for the francophones. Their entire body of literature had sought to emancipate a language and culture that had been deemed inferior since the country’s founding in 1830, even though it belonged to a majority of the population. The critic and poet Pol De Mont was a pioneer in this regard, in defending the Parnassian poets and Impressionism. He launched a debate against the traditionalists and started some of the nearly twenty literary and non-literary periodicals published between 1888 and 1893 that tried to elevate intellectual discourse. Yet, De Mont never managed to start a movement or establish an avant-garde organ which was able to revolutionize ideas as well as artistic form. It took the appearance of the student-based, anti-establishment periodical Jong Vlaanderen (Young Flanders, 1889–90), modelled on La Jeune Belgique, to accomplish this. Jong Vlaanderen was itself the precursor of the only truely free vanguard organ in Flanders prior to World War I: Van Nu en Straks (see also Chapter 14). August Vermeylen, who had quickly found an

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entred with the radicals at the Free University of Brussels where he studied and made a name for himself, soon became the review’s chef de file. Van Nu en Straks had a considerable artistic and social impact and remained a model for the new guard even after the War, though—presumably from a desire to distinguish themselves—they reproached it for its individualism. The review’s lasting renown can be attributed primarily to the role of Henry van de Velde during its first incarnation (1893–4) in introducing its innovative vision of art and society—including the Flemish Movement; and the literature of Karel van de Woestijne, Stijn Streuvels, and Herman Teirlinck during its second incarnation (1896–1901). The first series was luxuriously edited and had a cover designed by Van de Velde (Fig. 15.2). Its floral design was similar to the book designs he had made earlier for his friend Max Elskamp and was a classic example of Art Nouveau. Van de Velde was also able to request illustrations from a network of artists including, among others, James Ensor, Georges Minne, Théo van Rysselberghe, Georges Lemmens, and Lucien Pissarro. There was even a special issue of the magazine devoted to Van Gogh. The second series was much more modest in its design. It had no illustrations hors-texte, and was published in octavo rather than quarto, which reduced the price considerably (from 30 to 8₣). The bibliophilic quality of the first series was unique, also compared to that of the Francophone periodicals, whose design was rather unpretentious.
In terms of purely literary value, the second incarnation of the magazine—when Naturalism was paired with Symbolism—remains the more interesting. In terms of aesthetics, it called—in a series of manifestoes written by Vermeylen, Van Langendonck, and Alfred Hegenscheidt—for a synthesis between an individual (‘art for art’s sake’, Thomas Carlyle) and a public aesthetic, finding its sources respectively in Thomas Carlyle and ‘art for art’s sake’ and the Arts and Crafts movement, Richard Wagner, and Walt Whitman. It thereby professed its belief in an intuitive, organic view of art, stemming from the people. The second series was also decidedly anarchistic (with echoes of Nietzsche and Max Stirner) and published some of the celebrities of the international anarchist movement through its connections to a francophone friend of Vermeylen, the art historian Jacques Mesnil. Also in this period, Vermeylen published his ‘Kritiek van de Vlaamsche beweging’, 1896 (A Critique of the Flemish Movement, 1896), in which he demanded that this movement assume a social role. He was quickly to distance himself, however, from the anti-parliamentarianism he espoused in this essay.

Regionalism

As a whole, the French-Belgian- and Dutch-language periodicals of the fin de siècle were characterized by their international orientation, but this was always underscored by
a national or regional inspiration. Among the francophone Flemings, this was expressed in what Jean-Marie Klinkenberg termed the ‘mythe nordique’, an exaggerated touting of their German roots to distinguish themselves from Paris.\(^3\) Even that most international of movements, Symbolism, took some inspiration from folklore, the oral tradition, and Germanic folk-tales and legends,\(^4\) in a way that was reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelitism and Medievalism of the Arts and Crafts movement.

After 1900 there were appeals to honour folk art from several quarters. The rise of regionalism had been prefigured by the themes of Naturalist authors who wrote about rural life (Lemonnier, Eekhoud, Buysse, and Streuvels).\(^5\) The successor to Van Nu en Straks, the periodical Vlaanderen (1903–7), was much less international and could be viewed as a manifestation of this prevailing regionalism, even though Vermeylen and Van de Woestijne had been outspoken critics of the rural novel. Only the Antwerp periodical De Boomgaard (The Orchard, 1909–11)—a belated offshoot of the Decadent movement as embodied by Oscar Wilde—professed any authentic interest in the international literary world. Among other things, these admirers of Van Nu en Straks

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\(^5\) For a discussion of francophone regionalism, see Denis and Klinkenberg, La littérature belge, 136–40.
published translations of young Viennese authors (such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Rainer Maria Rilke).

The Belgian periodicals, therefore, did not escape the regionalism taking hold in France in the wake of the Dreyfus affair, and in Germany, with its ‘Heimatkunstbewegung’ (Folk Art Movement). In fact, regionalism started to dominate after 1905 and went hand-in-hand with a prevailing nationalism, for which it was a breeding ground. One periodical that was emblematic of this conservative mood on the eve of World War I was La Belgique Littéraire et Artistique (1905–14), a supporter of the ‘Belgian Soul’ (‘l’âme belge’) that Picard had championed.36 More to the point, regionalism, with its appreciation of folk art, had never stood in opposition to internationalism, but had rather always been a part of, and, to some extent, a source of inspiration for it. Similarly, the turn to primitivism after the war would be an important source of inspiration for the historical avant-garde movements. By that time, internationalism had become a distinctive feature of the avant-garde.

A rocky start

Because of the national and international success of the Belgian brand of Symbolism discussed above, the various avant-garde movements of the historical avant-garde did

not get off the ground in Belgium until shortly after World War I. A variety of movements and ‘-isms’ overlapped and held sway within a relatively short period of time, without necessarily having any strict delineation. The Great War had left huge scars in Belgium, especially in Flanders, affecting even its linguistic and social relations, which would be thoroughly redefined in the years to come. The ‘Question flamande’ (Flemish Question) was more than a language dispute, and was tied to a much broader social struggle. The Dutch-speaking Flemings demanded equal treatment at all levels of society so as to be on a par with the French-speaking bourgeoisie. The flames had been fanned by the German occupiers’ temporary but very aggressive ‘Flamenpolitik’, a policy under which Ghent University had been Dutchified in 1916 and the small country’s civil administration split up into a Dutch-speaking and a French-speaking section (Flanders and Wallonia, respectively). While it is true that language issues had been a hot topic as far back as 1830, the discussion only really took off during the interwar period. \textit{The year} 1928 was a turning point in all this, and the main language laws were voted in between the years 1929 and 1932.\footnote{For a clear and concise overview of the historical evolution of the Belgian language laws, see Reine Meylaerts, \textit{L'aventure flamande de la Revue belge. Langues, littératures et cultures dans l'entre-deux-guerres} (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2004), 33–40.} Many have argued that these intra-national affairs were the primary obstacle to a more radical form...
of avant-gardism and would have, at least partially, precluded a receptive view of the modern world.  

Under the circumstances, a lack of artistic activity during the War would seem self-evident. Moreover, some artists fled the country into exile in the Netherlands or England. Magazine production was further complicated by a number of material and political constraints, such as paper shortages and censorship on the part of the occupiers. What few journals there were (e.g., *Le Claque à Fond*) were authentic war documents, literally written at the Front to provide the soldiers with some distraction. This did not prevent Jethro Bithell from writing in his *Contemporary Belgian Literature* (1915) that ‘[... the living writers of Belgium [...]] will need readers after the war; and they deserve them’.  

Things were, nevertheless, brewing even during the War, as evidenced by the six-volume cahier series *Résurrection*, published in 1917 and 1918 in Brussels (not Namur, as indicated on its cover). At a time when the only Belgian Futurist, Jules Schmalzigaug, decided to take his own life in The Hague, the Brussels native, Clément Pansaers, ‘the only representative of Dadaism in Belgium’ (‘le seul représentant de Dada en Belgique’), started publishing his avant-garde review, *Résurrection*, in 1917.

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40 A frequently cited cliché from Paul Neuhuys. See Paul Neuhuys, ‘Quelques poètes’, *Ça Ira!*, 14 (1921), 64. It is, of course, no coincidence that the two examples cited from this period are
(see also Chapter 14). The Dadaism of Pansaers’ work notwithstanding, the real significance of *Résurrection* was its introduction of several influential German Expressionists (Carl Einstein and Franz Werfel, amongst them), though rendered in disgraceful translations by Pansaers himself. In addition, he wrote a series of outstanding ‘Bulletins Politiques’, in which he argued for a federal Belgian state, thereby aligning himself with the ‘Flamenpolitik’. It was hardly a coincidence that *Résurrection* was subsidized by the German occupying forces. Another periodical that appeared during the War, in addition to *Résurrection*, was the weekly *Vlaamsch Leven* (Flemish Life, Brussels, 1915–18). The general tenor of this illustrated weekly was not avant-garde, but several of its young staff, including Victor Brunclair (under the pseudonym Bardemeyer), Gaston Burssens, and Paul van Ostaijen, would go on to work for various avant-garde magazines.

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42 See Roland, *La ‘colonië’ litteraire allemande en Belgique*.
Playing catch-up

The true explosion of literary and artistic periodicals occurred just after the War, in the first half of the 1920s. Brussels was caught up like everywhere else in the spirit of the roaring twenties: ‘streetscape of new districts permeated by the fresh scent of cement’ (‘paysage de quartiers neufs tout imprégné de l’odeur fraîche de chaux vive’), writes Mercedes Legrand in a poem from 1925 entitled ‘Bruxelles’ and published in the journal La pipe en terre (The Clay Pipe). Nor was the art world spared from the social and political tensions of the day, which produced a short-lived, but intense, osmosis of politics and literature, although, according to Michel Huysseune, the avant-garde in Brussels was less politically motivated than in Antwerp. Moreover, just as in the cosmopolitan port of Antwerp, a strong wind of internationalism blew through the capital of Brussels during the interwar period. Influenced by the French movement ‘Clarté’, led by Henri Barbusse, and inspired by the pacifist ideology of Romain Rolland, a number of magazines (primarily in Antwerp and Brussels) openly endorsed Rolland’s ‘Internationale de l’esprit’. The official organ of the Belgian wing of ‘Clarté’

44 Mercedes Legrand, ‘Bruxelles’, La pipe en terre, 5 (1925), 36. La pipe en terre (1924–25) was the successor to the less successful Hélianthe (1919). It was run by René Baert and Albert Lepage, and published mostly poetry and starting with the third issue the editors expressed an explicit willingness to publish contributions in foreign languages.

was based in Brussels and called *L’Art Libre* (Free Art; Fig. 15.5): the editors made explicit reference to the periodical of the same name from 1871 (see above). It measured 36.5 × 27.5 cm and ran from 15 March 1919 to June 1922 in 53 issues under the direction of the flamboyant Paul Colin, who espoused an art of engagement from a vantage point of political and artistic internationalism, without succumbing to what he termed the ‘extreme’ avant-garde, a pointed reference to Dadaism, *De Stijl* (The Style), and other such movements. Because of Colin’s institutional affiliation with the ‘Clarté’ network, he had access to an impressive array of international writers to call upon for his magazine. France, Germany, and England were the most widely represented. The presence of German writers, in particular, was notable at a time in which ‘les boches’ (‘the Krauts’) were openly derided. Indeed, a drive for French-German reconciliation was symbolic of internationalist pacifism. Still, this did not prevent the Flemish laments from being largely ignored in *L’Art Libre*. Belgian art and politics were invariably characterized in negative terms: the review was against the establishment, against conservative art, and against the academy. A similar discontent was expressed, even more adamantly, in another magazine of the ‘Clarté’ movement, *Haro!* (Shame!; 1919–20), which was in print at about the same time (though an earlier version had been published in 1913 and 1914).
The formation of numerous ‘progressive’ periodicals in 1920 coincided with the birth of the ‘Académie Royale de Langue et de Littérature Françaises de Belgique’ in Brussels. It was at this moment, when an official agency was inaugurated, that what Klinkenberg calls the ‘centrifugal stage’ (‘phase centrifuge’) of Belgian francophone literature began.46 What he means by this is that starting at the end of the War, the nation-building mindset (in terms of a national identity) was replaced by a discourse in which francophone Belgium was seen as a part of French letters. The apparent contradiction in this thinking was merely illusory: ‘Everything points to the fact that it was not until the point at which this pole [i.e., a national centre, namely, the academy] officially came into being that the centrifugal force truly got going’, writes Biron.47 It seems that without a centre, there was no centrifugal force. Just because Belgian writers in the interwar period did indeed continue to look outward, it did not mean that domestic affairs no longer played a role in their literature or literary opinions. On the contrary, the two dynamics were inextricably intertwined.48

This interwovenness (or interference) was reflected in the Dutch-language ‘Clarté’ magazines, among other places. In Brussels, these were De Nieuwe Wereldorde (The

47 ‘Tout porte à croire que c’est à partir du moment où ce pôle a été officiellement institué que le mouvement centrifuge s’est vraiment amorcé’, Biron, La Modernité belge, 183.
New World Order (1919–20) and Opstanding (Resurrection; 1920–1). As with L’Art Libre, these periodicals were characterized by a strong political bent and their ‘format journal’, which hinted at the editors’ serious journalistic leanings. The Flemish question was much more present than it was in L’Art Libre: various arguments were used to develop a discursive model in which the Flemish ‘nationalist’ objectives were reconciled with ‘Clarté’s’ general internationalist aspirations. In a more general sense, it is worth noting that many avant-garde movements (not just the Belgians) vacillated between national and international aspirations. That is why the topos of Belgium as ‘the crossroads of the West’ (‘carrefour de l’occident’) is so widely cited in the Belgian context. The Belgian national structure was thus being touted, while at the same time to some extent, being eaten away from the inside by these allusions to its intrinsic international dimension.

49 De Marneffe draws a distinction between the journal format (‘format journal’) and the brochure format (‘format brochure’). These differ also in terms of content: in the former, the emphasis is on serious matters (‘sérieux’) and the periodical’s political leaning, whereas the latter comes closer to being an artistic artefact. See Daphné de Marneffe, ‘Entre modernisme et avant-garde. Le réseau des revues littéraires de l’immédiat après-guerre en Belgique (1919–1923)’, unpublished PhD thesis (University of Liège, 2007), 214–17.

50 Mus, ‘No man’s land ou terre promise’.


52 See, for example, Paul Colin’s monograph, *Belgique, carrefour de l’Occident* (Brussels: Société d’Editions, 1933).
Looking outward: *Le Disque Vert*

Internationalism was a multifaceted concept that could be deployed in a broader framework in ever-changing ways. Even the various art movements had their own ‘national’ connotations: Cubism was ‘French’; Expressionism was ‘German’; and Futurism was ‘Russian’ or ‘Italian’. These semantic distinctions were, of course, not unrelated to the issue of identity with which Dutch- and French-speaking writers were wrestling.

The first volume of *Le Disque Vert* (The Green Disk), initially also *Signaux de France et de Belgique* (Signs from France and Belgium, Fig. 15.6), in fact, opened with the following irrefutable declaration: ‘We are neither a national review, nor a bi-national, nor an international one’ (‘Nous ne sommes pas une revue nationale, ni binationale, ni même internationale’). Chief editor Franz Hellens was perhaps more interested in avoiding the political overtones associated with these terms than in renouncing an international orientation. Both *Le Disque Vert*, in general, and Hellens, in

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53 *Signaux de France et de Belgique* first appeared in 1921. The following year, Hellens launched *Le Disque Vert* with Mélot du Dy (6 issues, pp. 156, 28 x 18.7 cm), which merged with *La Lanterne sourde* in October 1922 and was rechristened *Ecrits du Nord* (3 issues, 158 pp., 23 x 16 cm). Volumes 2, 3, and 4 of *Le Disque Vert* appeared between 1923 and 1925 (10 issues, pp. 631, 23 x 16 cm), *Nord* in 1929 and 1930, and *Ecrits du Nord* in 1935. Lastly, in 1941 and 1952–1954, the final volumes of *Le Disque Vert* appeared.

54 Anon., [no title], *Signaux de France et de Belgique*, 1 (1921, republished Brussels: Jacques Antoine, 1970), unpaginated.
particular, showed a desire to transcend their own boundaries. Sophie Levie has suggested that a constant theme throughout this magazine, spanning the entire interwar period, was ‘the desire and the necessity [....] to redefine unremittingly the place of Belgian literature, in relation to other literatures and even in Belgium itself, as well as to safeguard its independence and authenticity’. 55

The collected *Le Disque Vert* opus, adds Levie, comprised a heterogeneous project that fell into three periods. From 1921 to 1925, the review provided a forum for modernist experiment, while also looking towards other movements abroad. Reversing the tack in *Nord* (1929–30) it turned back to the past in what proved a fruitless search for stability and ‘renewal through reduction’ (‘renouvellement par réduction’). 56. *The year* 1935 ushered in the beginning of the end: efforts to rediscover an openness of spirit failed time and again. As the title of the magazine clearly indicated, its foreign orientation was directed mostly towards France, if for no other reason than that is where

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56 Levie, ‘‘Ouvert à tous, difficile, cependant à ouvrir’. La revue belge *Le Disque Vert* 1921–1941’, 133.
the ‘esprit nouveau’ was most pronounced. To counteract the attraction of France, Hellens—who experienced the glory days of Belgian Symbolism—developed ‘a dialectics of assimilation and dissimilation, a dialectics controlled by a double logic, both external (recognition in the French camp) and internal (conquest of the Belgian sub-camp), which governs the condition of the Belgian writers of that period’.  

The periodicals discussed above dealt throughout with the influence of two new ‘épistémès’ (in Michel Foucault’s term) that would have a deep impact on the twentieth-century: Marxism (with which all of the ‘Clarté’ periodicals associated themselves, either explicitly or implicitly) and psychoanalysis, the subject of one entire special issue of *Le Disque Vert* and which would play a role in other avant-garde magazines; notably, as discussed below, those associated with Surrealism.

**The ubiquity of Paul-Gustave van Hecke**

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57 *Ca Ira!* drew a similar link between ‘France’ and ‘pays de l’esprit nouveau’, though it explicitly renounced French conformity and nationalism (which *Le Disque Vert* only did implicitly).

While the name of Franz Hellens was practically synonymous with *Le Disque Vert*, it was actually Paul-Gustave van Hecke who laid the foundation for the project. At the time, though, Van Hecke was also already involved in establishing *Sélection* (1920–33) with André de Ridder. They had previously worked together for *Het Roode Zeil* (The Red Sail, 1920), which was also published in Brussels and seen as the successor to *De Boomgaard* (The Orchard, 1909–11). *Het Roode Zeil* was a transitional magazine between *Van Nu en Straks* and the post-war generation, which because of its decadent nature was unpopular with other magazines such as *Ruimte* (Space, 1920–1) or *Vlaamsche Arbeid* (Flemish Labour, 1919–30).

*Sélection* was more than just a magazine. In the summer of 1920, the gallery ‘Sélection, Atelier d’Art Contemporain’ had been founded to showcase Belgian and European avant-garde artists, in general, and the ‘Second Latem Group’, in particular (e.g., Frits Van den Berghe, Gust and Leon De Smet, Constant Permeke). The magazine was originally dedicated to covering the visual arts (more particularly, Flemish Expressionism), but as time went on it expanded its focus, both thematically and geographically. An Paenhuysen has proposed that *Sélection* reflected the ‘modern—

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59 The *Sélection* opus also went through various metamorphoses. In addition to the periodical *Sélection*, whose subtitle ‘chronique de la vie artistique’ (Chronicle of Artistic Life) was extended in November 1923 to include ‘et littéraire’ (and Literary), there were *Les Tracts de Sélection* (1921) and *Cahiers de Sélection* (1927–33). In 1923 the publication house also moved from Brussels to Antwerp.
Expressionism as a movement was traced back to French (not German) roots; both of the chief editors, who were bilingual, chose, for example, resolutely to publish in French and there was an interest in Primitivism, which had originated in Paris. This included, for the editors, not only *art nègre*, but also their own folk culture which both fitted into a larger artistic plan: the search for a universal art. According to Paenhuysen, this explains why the Flemish Expressionists were no longer referred to as Brussels artists, since ‘cosmic’ and ‘primitive’ were more appropriate terms.

Eight months after the last issue of *Sélection* appeared, the first issue of *Variétés. Revue mensuelle illustrée de l’esprit contemporain*, came out on 15 May 1928—yet another project under the stewardship of P.-G. Van Hecke (Fig. 15.7). Just as *Sélection*, *Le Centaure* (1926–30), and the aforementioned *L’Art Libre* had been affiliated with an art gallery, so too was *Variétés* (1928–30, 25 issues). The new magazine (costing 7.50₣ at 24 × 17.5 cm) would take a ‘new approach’ (‘nieuwe aanpak’) in its aim to become a ‘living expression’ (‘levendige uitdrukking’) of ‘intellectual activity’ (‘intellectuele activiteit’), in Van Hecke’s words. It was a particularly multifaceted magazine, in terms of both its choice of subject matter (art, literature, music, film,

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60 Paenhuysen, *De Nieuwe wereld*, 125.
sports, fashion, recreation) and its composition (text and image working together) and international orientation. The most famous issue appeared in 1929: the magazine’s only special issue out of 25 instalments was devoted to Surrealism and included the participation of such big names as André Breton, Raymond Queneau, Louis Aragon, René Crevel, and Paul Eluard. But this brings us also to a separate, and particularly complicated, chapter of Belgian letters: Surrealism.\footnote{The section that follows does not discuss all of the periodicals associated with ‘Belgian Surrealism’. For a complete overview, see Marcel Mariën, \textit{L’activité surréaliste en Belgique (1924–1950)} (Brussels: Lebeer-Hossman, 1979), 469.}

Surrealist magazines in Brussels

Brussels was the place where one of the most active groups in Belgian Surrealism came to prominence. In Belgium’s case, it was not the distinction between various major cities that matters—the metropolises around which the international avant-garde tended to amass—but between the metropolis (Brussels) and the provincial cities (such as Mons or La Louvière). As early as 1924, there was a ‘periodical’ (though it was more of a pamphlet; each issue having only one page) being printed—\textit{Correspondance} (1924–1926)—that established the founding principles for Surrealism in Brussels. Paul Aron has noted that in publishing the review, Paul Nougé was searching for ‘a new form of
intervention in the world of letters that shunned both the emphatic fervour of the manifesto and the ineffectuality of clandestine publication’ (‘une forme d’intervention nouvelle dans le monde des lettres, qui évite à la fois l’emphase manifestaire et l’inefficacité de l’édition clandestine’). 63

With a total of 22 issues, Correspondance outperformed Musique (1925, 2 issues), Gsophage (1925, 1 issue), Marie (1926–1927, 4 issues), and Distances (1928, 3 issues). This rapid succession of publications was a sign of the intense and varied level of artistic activity, animated by such figures as Paul Nougé, and E. L. T. Mesens, who, Paenhuysen suggests, was the most ambitious figure in Brussels Surrealism during the 1930s. 64 It was Mesens who was appointed interim chief editor for the special issue Documents 34, devoted to l’intervention surréaliste (June 1934). 65 That year, 1934, was a seminal year for Belgian Surrealism, which saw Breton’s conference in Brussels on 1 June and the exhibition Minotaure at the Centre for Fine Arts (see Chapter 12).

The influence of Parisian Surrealism may have been indisputable, but in Brussels the artists and writers did everything they could to distance themselves from France.

64 Paenhuysen, De Nieuwe wereld, 292.
65 Documents (1933–6), not to be confused with the magazine of the same name discussed in Chapter 11 above, was initially devoted mainly to cinematography. From the 1934 issue onwards attention turned more to political topics. Documents had 3 issues; in which the year was each time added to the title, as in Documents 33 for the first issue. The magazine was run by Stéphane Cordier, future animator of Acéphale.
Bibiane Fréché outlines the differences on four crucial points. To start with, the Brussels group refused to play the institutional literary game: they rejected the Surrealism label, published their eccentric pamphlet periodical, eschewed a hierarchical structure, and so on. In addition, they renounced French automatic writing (‘écriture automatique’), opting instead for more deliberate language experiments. Also, writing was a form of action for the Brussels group without necessarily being a means of uniting militant action with artistic experimentation, as Breton had intended. Finally, the collaboration between writers and other artists (musicians, for example) was closer than in the Parisian scene, where the literature came first. Starting in 1929 there is evidence of some convergence between the Brussels and Parisian Surrealists through various initiatives, but the divergence remained fairly marked.

In the francophone literature arena, a second Surrealist group evolved in addition to the Brussels group, in the province of Hainaut. The ‘Rupture’ group was led by Achille Chavée and Fernand Dumont and published a cahier under the title Mauvais Temps. Although the Brussels group has received more attention in the secondary literature, André Blavier asserts in the special issue of Phantomas devoted to La Belgique Sauvage that ‘in Belgium, Surrealism was a Walloon matter—more specifically, a Hainaut

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A Flemish, Dutch-speaking strain of Surrealism never truly got off the ground. There were certainly Surrealist tendencies discernible in certain writers (Marc Eemans being chief among them), but there was no institutional grounding (in the form of a periodical, for example) during this period. It was not until the rise of the ‘Cobra’ movement, after 1945, that an artistic practice developed that could be considered reminiscent of the Surrealism of the historical avant-garde.

**Constructivist magazines in Brussels**

Finally, the radical antithesis to the Belgian Surrealists was embodied in *7 Arts* (June 1922–23 September 1928). This group also published a *Journal Hebdomadaire d’information et de Critique* (Weekly for Information and Critique; 1922–9), which advocated Constructivist art theories.\footnote{The Constructivist counterpart in Antwerp was *Het Overzicht* (The Survey). See Daphné de Marneffe’s chapter in this collection.} As the name of the magazine suggests, it was extremely multifaceted: ‘Our objective is vast. 7 arts: ALL THE ARTS’ (‘Notre objet est...
vaste. 7 arts: TOUS LES ARTS’

69 read its declaration of intent. The poetical views were succinctly formulated in a two-part slogan: ‘Art is the active expression of society’ (‘L’art est expression active de la civilisation’) and ‘Art is an organized invention’ (‘L’art est une invention organisée’). With a considerable 156 issues, 7 Arts was the most consistent of the Belgian avant-garde magazines (Fig. 15.8). According to Michel Huysseune, it was ‘the organ of the most advanced modernism in Belgium’ (‘le porte-parole du modernisme le plus avancé à Bruxelles’),

70 and Jean Warmoes even calls it ‘the true bulletin of the international avant-garde’ (‘le véritable moniteur de l’avant-garde internationale’).

71 The machine was made paramount by Pierre Bourgeois and other big city dwellers, including Victor Bourgeois (his brother),

72 Karel Maes, Pierre-Louis Flouquet, and Georges Monier. The factory and the study flowed together, as evidenced by the work of Victor Servranckx, among others. He articulated his approach in a manifesto entitled L’Art Pur. Défense de l’esthétique (Pure Art: In Defence of Aesthetics), which he wrote together with René Magritte. Servranckx championed the

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69 Anon., [Editorial?] ‘Objet, principes, tactique’, 7 arts, 1 (1922), 1.

70 Huysseune, ‘Bruxelles’, 133.


72 The Bourgeois brothers were also incredibly active in the Brussels art scene before the foundation of 7 Arts: in 1919 they founded the journal Au Volant (At the Helm), with Victor as director and Pierre as chief editor. After four issues, the magazine would fuse with Demain Littéraire et Social (The Future, Literary and Social; 1919) and produce a new project called Le Geste (The Gesture; 1919–20). Le Geste was run by Aimé Declercq and Victor Bourgeois.
notion of a Constructivist, geometric art that through its abstract nature was developing a universal art language that would speak to everyone. The diversity of the magazine was limited to artistic endeavours; politics was not discussed in 7 Arts.

The staff at 7 Arts could always unload their political views in some of the other magazines with which they were in close contact, such as La Lanterne Sourde (The Dark Lantern; 1921–31), from the art circle founded in 1921 at the Free University of Brussels by Paul Vanderborght and Pierre Bourgeois. Bourgeois concentrated primarily on the artistic dimension, while Vanderborght lent the magazine his international allure.73 Contacts with Egypt, Russia, England, Greece, and Spain, in particular, were fostered through Vanderborght’s travels or the establishment of international circles, such as Amities Belgo-Egyptiennes, FABER (Faisceau Amical ‘Belgique et Russie’), the Belgian Committee for Rupert Brooke, amongst others. The magazine would have only four issues, but the group organized a host of other activities, such as readings, art exhibitions, concerts, and so on. In addition, having connections with other magazines was an important and consistent aspect throughout La Lanterne Sourde’s existence.

After the art circle had distinguished itself through its vibrant, young university

73 For a detailed description of La Lanterne sourde, see Melanie Alfano, La lanterne sourde 1921–1931. Une aventure culturelle internationale (Brussels: Editions Racine, 2008).
magazine for two years (1921–2), it merged briefly with *Ecrits du Nord* (Northern Writings, 1922–3) and was eventually taken over by Pierre Bourgeois.

In conclusion, this final observation: the reader will notice that the periodization of this account ends in the mid-thirties and not after World War II. With a few exceptions, and with differences from region to region, the *terminus ad quem* of the historical avant-garde was situated around 1930–5. The transnational ‘Cobra’, an amalgam in the group’s name and associated journal of the cities of its members (Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam), had a dispersed influence after its formal end in the early 1950s, but thereafter a silence ensued before the so-called neo-avant-garde peaked in the early 1960s when some of the first avant-garde-movements (such as Surrealism and Constructivism) were to reappear in an extensively modified form.

Figure 15.1. Cover of *La Jeune Belgique*, 1:2 (15 December 1881)
Figure 15.2. Cover of *Van Nu en Straks*, 1 (1893) by Henri van de Velde
Figure 15.3. Cover of *L’Art Moderne*, 1:1 (Sunday 6 March 1881)
Figure 15.4. Cover of *La Société Nouvelle*, 1:1 (1884–85)
Figure 15.5. Cover of *L’Art Libre*, 1:1 (15 March 1919)
Figure 15.6. Cover of *Signaux de France et de Belgique*, 1:1 (1 May 1921)
Figure 15.7. Cover of *Variétés*, 1:1 (15 May 1928), unattributed illustration
Figure 15.8. Cover of *7 Arts*, 1 (6 November 1924)