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## Le Génie du Nord: *Sélection* and the Advocacy of a Cosmopolitan Northern Culture

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# Le Génie du Nord: *Sélection* and the Advocacy of a Cosmopolitan Northern Culture

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## ABSTRACT

The article discusses the francophone review of art and literature *Sélection* published in Brussels (1920–22) and Antwerp (1923–33), Belgium, by André de Ridder and Paul-Gustave van Hecke. It takes as its point of departure the concept *Le Génie du Nord* [*The Genius of the North*], which was the title of a 1925 book published in Antwerp by De Ridder. The book mainly consists of essays previously published in *Sélection* between 1923 and 1924. De Ridder argues that France should not claim autonomy in the field of cultural production since throughout the centuries Nordic influence played a central role in its evolution. Although the book attracted little attention from the contemporary press, it offers a novel approach to the Nordic idea through the anticipation of a new classical order that distinguished itself from Southern classicism. While German expressionism is equally renounced, the book proposes a synthetic style — similar to the one that marked the gothic period — that also found expression in the art presented in *Sélection*. This style furnished a visual model for the invention of a new classical order stemming from the successful mingling of French rationalism with Flemish expressionism, a ‘constructive expressionism’ that became the precondition for a universal Nordic culture. The magazine was supportive of those French and Belgian artists who achieved a combination of the two styles — an ‘eclectic dualism’, in the words of Edmond Picard. Taking the origins of Gothicism and the Nordische Gesellschaft as case points of ideological complexity, the *Génie du Nord* concept forms an alternative discourse which intervenes in an ongoing art-historical and cultural debate that defines the identity of *Sélection*.

## KEYWORDS

Belgian art periodicals, André de Ridder, P.-G. Van Hecke, *Sélection*, Génie du Nord, Flemish art and culture, Northern classicism, Waldemar George, Gustave de Smet.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The artistic and literary review *Sélection* came into being in the troubled years that followed the Great War, a period that witnessed an ‘explosion of literary and artistic periodicals’ in Belgium.<sup>2</sup> Its conception epitomized erstwhile efforts for the emancipation of Flemish language and culture since the founding of the modern state of Belgium in 1830. It mirrored the unfortunate turn of the aspirations of the Vlaamse Beweging [Flemish Movement], which were exploited by and became subject to the German separatist policy in occupied Belgium (*Flamenpolitik*) in order to serve the ideology of Pan-Germanism.

Belgium occupies a special place in the history of linguistic nationalism in modern Europe. Most studies focus on the complex historical background of the three culturally diverse Belgian regions with particular regards to the emergence of a distinctive form of nationalism in the Flemish region.<sup>3</sup> Northern regionalism constitutes only one of the threads within this nexus of cultural trends including Pan-Germanism, Nordicism, and Gothicism. However, although most *fin-de-siècle* francophone Flemish reviews were centred around the concepts of the ‘mythe nordique’ and Edmond Picard’s ‘l’âme belge’, Belgian regionalism ‘never stood in opposition to internationalism’, which ‘had become a distinctive feature of the avant-garde’.<sup>4</sup> *Sélection* is no exception, for it introduced the novel concept ‘Le Génie du Nord’ [‘The Northern Genius’], which unveils a struggle for identity during a period when the Franco-German historiographical debate over the origins of gothic art was still ongoing and the confrontations between the North and the South were further accentuated by the prevalence of the concept of Call to Order (*retour à l’ordre*) in the post-war era.<sup>5</sup> The concept equally evokes ideas that identified Belgium as a cultural intersection (Paul Colin, Franz Hellens etc.) and is fuelled by earlier discourses on the (Northern) specificity of Francophone Belgian literature (Emile Verhaeren, Maurice Maeterlinck etc.). As an editorial note announced, the central aim

- 1 This paper was originally presented at the NCNC Future States: Modernity and National Identity in Popular Magazines, University of Brighton, March–April 2020, and is part of a post-doctoral research project on the concept ‘Le Génie du Nord’ in Western Europe between the wars, funded by the Research Centre for the Humanities in Athens. I would like to express my sincerest thanks to Tim Satterthwaite and Marnix Beyen for their valuable comments on the topic.
- 2 Francis Mus and Hans Vandevoorde, ‘Streetscape of new districts permeated by the fresh scent of cement’: Brussels, the avant-garde, and Internationalism’, in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, vol. III, *Europe 1880–1940*, ed. by Peter Brooker, Sascha Bru, Andrew Thacker, and Christian Weikop, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 336–60 (p. 349).
- 3 See also Shepard Bancroft Clough, *A History of the Flemish Movement in Belgium: A Study in Nationalism* (New York: R. R. Smith, 1930); *Écriture française et identifications culturelles en Belgique*, ed. by René Andrianne (Louvain: CIACO, 1984); *Nationalism in Belgium. Shifting identities, 1780–1995*, ed. by Kas Deprez and Louis Vos (London: Macmillan, 1998); Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La Création des identités nationales Europe XVIII–XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 1999); Marnix Beyen, ‘Eine lateinische Vorhut mit germanischen Zügen. Wallonische und deutsche Gelehrte über die germanische Komponente in der wallonischen Geschichte und Kultur’, in *Griff nach dem Westen. Die ‘Westforschung’ der völkisch-nationalen, Wissenschaften zum nordwesteuropäischen Raum (1919–1960)*, ed. by Burkhard Dietz, Helmut Gabel, and Ulrich Tiedau (Munster: Waxmann Verlag, 2003), pp. 351–81; Timothy Baycroft, *Culture, Identity and Nationalism: French Flanders in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2004); Marnix Beyen, ‘A Nation that Failed to be Ethnic’, in *Statehood Before and Beyond Ethnicity: Minor States in Northern and Eastern Europe*, ed. by Linas Eriksonas and Leos Müller (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 341–52; Susan Bainbrigge, *Culture and Identity in Belgian Francophone Writing: Dialogue, Diversity and Displacement* (Frankfurt: P. Lang, 2009); Anna Brigeveich, ‘Euroseptic regionalists: Flemish and Walloon identities compared’, *L’Europe en Formation*, 379 (2016), 95–121; Karen Shelby, ‘A Lion for Flanders: Literature, propaganda, and Flemish nationalism’, *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 9 (2016), 42–59.
- 4 Mus and Vandevoorde, pp. 347–48.
- 5 See Michela Passini, *La fabrique de l’art national. Le nationalisme et les origines de l’histoire de l’art en France et en Allemagne, 1870–1933* (Paris: Editions de la Msh, 2012); Eric Michaud, *The Barbarian Invasions: A Genealogy of the History of Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019) [1st ed. 2015].

of *Sélection* was to serve at the same time the Belgian, the French, and the European cause, a case that this article intends to explore further.

*Sélection* was Flemish and francophone, published first in Brussels and later in Antwerp by André de Ridder and Paul-Gustave Van Hecke. Its editors' backgrounds were literary; both wrote in French and Dutch. Van Hecke quit the direction of the review in 1926 but continued to contribute texts, introducing artists like René Magritte and Max Ernst to his readers, until 1928, when he opened the art gallery L'Époque in Brussels and launched the richly illustrated monthly *Variétés*, which promoted surrealist art. *Sélection* measured approximately 25 x 18cm, published illustrations in black and white, and had a total run of sixty issues between 1920 and 1933. It was circulated in Belgium (Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent, Liège, Tournai, Mons, Mechelen, Ostend) and abroad (Amsterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, Geneva, London, Barcelona, Milan, Luxembourg, Berlin, New York). Its readership mainly consisted of artists, writers, critics and museum professionals rather than collectors and gallerists — on whom most art reviews depended for their subsistence. *Sélection* was the outcome of the year-long collaboration of its two founders, but also of De Ridder's artistic contacts during his wartime exile in Amsterdam.<sup>6</sup> The two editors came from different social backgrounds, but shared important artistic, literary and socialist acquaintances dating back to 1909, when they first met. This article, however, focuses almost entirely on De Ridder, chief editor of *Sélection* from 1926 to 1933, who introduced the concept 'Le Génie du Nord', discussed here, and who still remains in the shadow of Van Hecke's multifaceted activity.<sup>7</sup>

### From Brussels to Antwerp

We want to become free Europeans, after having been honest patriots, as long as we still want to continue to be true moderns, apostles of living art and of the new spirit.<sup>8</sup>

*Sélection* was first published as *Bulletin de la Vie Artistique* [*Bulletin of Artistic Life*] in August 1920, a subtitle referring to its role as a gallery bulletin reporting on the activities of the Brussels-based Atelier d'art contemporain *Sélection*, a gallery of contemporary art De Ridder and Van Hecke ran between 1920 and 1922. The gallery specialized in modern art, furniture, and interior design. The review soon changed its subtitle into *Chronique de la Vie Artistique* [*Chronicle of Artistic Life*] in its second issue of 1920 and, again, in 1923, into *Chronique de la Vie Artistique et Littéraire* [*Chronicle of Artistic and Literary Life*], which better captured its new orientation towards literature. Initially, its sleek colour covers reproduced woodcuts by different artists (Paul Joostens, Léon Spillaert, André Derain, Geo Navez, Joseph Cantré, Georges Creten, and Frits Van den Berghe), but these were replaced from 1922 onwards by Gustave de Smet's *Harlequin* woodcut, which had appeared on its very first cover and was to become — with slight

6 See Manu Van der Aa, 'André de Ridder in Amsterdam 1914–1918', *Zacht Lawijd, literair historisch tijdschrift*, 14.2 (2015), 28–51.

7 About Van Hecke see Virginie Devillez, 'Paul-Gustave Van Hecke, Max Ernst & Co.: die Wahlverwandschaften der deutsch-belgischen Avantgarde 1918–1940', in *Deutschlandbilder in Belgien 1830–1940*, ed. by Hubert Roland and Marnix Beyen (Munster: Waxmann Verlag, 2011), pp. 424–45 (p. 429); Manu Van der Aa, *Tatave! Paul-Gustave Van Hecke: Paul-Gustave Van Hecke — Kunstpaus, modekoning en salonsocialist* (Brussels: Lannoo Meulenhoff, 2017).

8 '[...] nous voulons devenir des libres Européens, après avoir été d'honnêtes patriotes, pour peu encore que nous voulons continuer d'être des véritables modernes, des apôtres de l'art vivant et de l'esprit nouveau.' André de Ridder, 'Le Génie du Nord I: De la Méditerranée à la Mer Océane', *Sélection*, 1 (November 1923), 6–25 (p. 25). All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

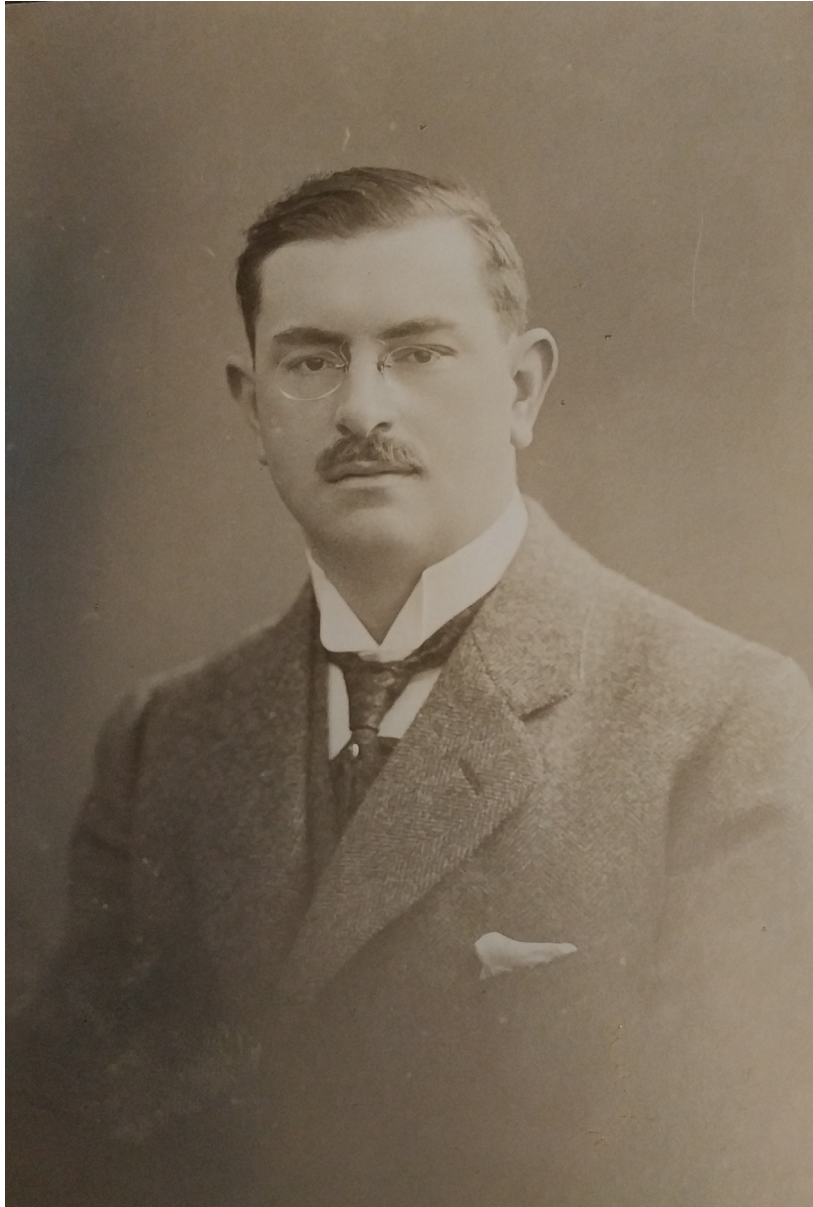


Fig. 1 André de Ridder in Amsterdam, 1918. Letterenhuis, Antwerp

tonal and textural variations — the signature cover image of the review (see Fig. 2).<sup>9</sup> *Sélection's* turn to literature not only reflects the literary persuasion of its two editors, but also coincides with the second phase of the review, which extends to 1927 and is marked by the closure of the art gallery and the relocation of the magazine's offices from Brussels to Antwerp, in the Flemish region of Belgium. In the years marking its third phase, from 1927 to 1933, *Sélection* adopted a new format. It transformed into a monographic series, titled *Cahiers Sélection*, presenting contemporary artists from

9 See Paul Hadermann, 'Les métamorphoses de *Sélection* et la propagation de l'expressionnisme en Belgique', in *Les avant-gardes littéraires en Belgique*, ed. by Jean Weisgerber (Brussels: Labor, 1991), pp. 241–74; Inge Henneman, 'Le mouvement *Sélection*', in *L'art moderne en Belgique, 1900–1945*, ed. by Robert Hooze and Piet Boyens (Antwerp: Fonds, 1992), pp. 148–85. On the literary networks of *Sélection*, see Daphné de Marneffe, 'Entre modernisme et avant-garde. Le réseau des revues littéraires de l'immédiat après-guerre en Belgique (1919–1922)' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Université de Liège, 2007).

Belgium or abroad. Having announced the intended publication of at least twenty-two *Cahiers Sélection*, the editors eventually published only fourteen booklets before the discontinuation of the magazine in 1933.<sup>10</sup> In the meantime, *Sélection* published a series of Tracts, mainly consisting of opinion essays on contemporary art by regular contributors to the magazine, such as the French art critic André Salmon, its general secretary Georges Marlier, and the two editors. Each of the three phases of *Sélection* carries its own significance and goes hand in hand with the activities of Van Hecke and De Ridder as well as the changes in economic status that they faced throughout its publication. The second phase could be seen as the apex of its reputation and success. The third phase is marked by financial difficulties accompanied by Van Hecke's leaving. *Sélection's* price was doubled from 3,50 frs to 7 frs in 1928 to balance the expense of its publication when profits were meagre.



Fig. 2 *Sélection*, no. 1 (November 1923). Cover by Gust de Smet

10 The published Cahiers were dedicated to Raul Dufy, De Smet, Ossip Zadkine, Tytgat, Léger, Chagall, Marcoussis, De Chirico, Gromaire, Pablo Gargallo, Willi Baumeister, Van den Berghe, Edward Wadsworth, and Kandinsky. The announced Cahiers that never appeared due to the discontinuation of the review proposed to present the work of Permeke, Max Ernst, Oscar and Floris Jespers, Lhote, Picasso, Lurçat, Georges Creten, Malfait, and Soutine.

The title of the review alone implies the eclecticism of its content. *Sélection* was sympathetic to artists working under the influence of cubism, expressionism and, with E. L. T. Mesens's intervention and Van Hecke's support, surrealism, but actively defended a small group of artists that worked towards a cubist-expressionist synthesis.<sup>11</sup> De Ridder described Flemish expressionism as 'constructive expressionism', conciliating two opposing streams: rationalism (order) and (figurative) expressionism. This combination was traced in works by not only Flemish, but also Northern French, Russian, and, more rarely, British and German artists, who possibly fit De Ridder's conception of the 'Northern mentality'. The selection of the artists for the monographic *Cahiers* was informed by this eclecticism. A closer look into De Ridder's art collection offers further insight into his aesthetic inclinations. Due to financial hardship, in 1929, he liquidated his art collection, which included works by the Belgians De Smet, Van den Berghe, Floris Jaspers Hubert Malfait, Léon Spillaert, Edgard Tytgat and Auguste Mambour as well as Jean Lurçat (b. Bruyères, Vosges), Louis Marcoussis (b. Łódź), and the Italian Giorgio de Chirico.<sup>12</sup> With Van Hecke's departure from the editorial board of the review, the appearance of the *Cahiers Sélection* coincided with De Ridder's liquidation, and was possibly published intentionally to boost the artists' cultural and commercial value.

A university professor of statistics and finance, De Ridder held teaching positions in Antwerp before his appointment as full professor at the University of Ghent in 1922. De Ridder had also made important contributions to the literary domain. Since 1905, he had been a literary critic and later editor of the Flemish francophone daily *La Métropole*, while he authored his own novels in the literary journal *Vlaamsche Arbeid*. He also published interviews, and critical and biographical studies on several Belgian writers such as Stijn Streuvels (1908), Hugo Verriest (1908), Pol de Mont (1911), and Northern French authors such as Jean de la Fontaine (1918) and Remy de Gourmont (1918), self-consciously published in Dutch.<sup>13</sup> His study of Flemish contemporary literature and monographs on several Flemish artists appeared in French, serving their promotion across Belgian borders.

De Ridder and Van Hecke played a leading role in the activities of the so-called Orchard Group associated with the dandyish literary journal *De Boomgaard* from 1909 to 1911. The group sought to introduce radical aspects of cosmopolitanism into Flemish literature and culture, moving beyond the aspirations of the late nineteenth-century Flemish Art Nouveau group Van Nu en Straks [Of Now and Later]. De Ridder's turn to the artistic domain is explained by his activity during the Great War. He fled Belgium to the neutral Netherlands, where he stayed until the end of the war. In Amsterdam, he established contacts with Flemings in exile, including De Smet and Frits Van den Berghe, and became familiar with the work of the second Sint-Martens Latem group, a colony of artists in East Flanders.<sup>14</sup> In the Netherlands, he also met the French cubist artist Henri Le Fauconnier (b. Hesdin, Pas-de-Calais), who stayed there during the war. Constant Permeke, a prominent member of the Latem group, spent the war years in England.

11 On the promotion of Flemish surrealism see An Paenhuysen, 'Surrealism in the provinces. Flemish and Walloon identity in the interwar period', *Image & Narrative*, 13, *The Forgotten Surrealists: Belgian Surrealism since 1924* (2005).

12 Caterina Caputo, 'E. L. T. Mesens: Art Collector and Dealer', *Getty Research Journal*, 12 (2020), 127–50 (p. 145, note 27).

13 Cf. An Paenhuysen, *De nieuwe wereld. De wonderjaren van de Belgische avant-garde, 1918–1939* (Antwerp: Meulenhoff / Manteau, 2010); 'André de Ridder', [schrijversgewijs.be](http://schrijversgewijs.be).

14 About the Latem colony see André de Ridder, *Laethem Saint-Martin. Colonie d'artistes* (Brussels / Paris: Lumière, 1945). About De Ridder's stay in Amsterdam during the war see Manu Van der Aa, 'André de Ridder in Amsterdam 1914–1918'.



Fig. 3 André de Ridder, Paul-Gustave van Hecke, Gust de Smet and Frits Van den Berghe. Letterenhuis, Antwerp

These contacts between expressionists, cubists and possibly Dutch De Stijl artists proved fundamental to the development of the Flemish constructive expressionism De Ridder promoted in *Sélection* after the war. Catherine Verleysen has traced a classic phase in the work of the second Latem group, which relates to the Call to Order concept promoted by the French salon cubist André Lhote and the influence of Léopold Survage, Fernand Léger, and the Purists, Ozenfant and Le Corbusier, in the early 1920s.<sup>15</sup> This 'classic' phase climaxes around 1925 and coincides with De Ridder's book *Le Génie du Nord*, which lays out his ideas on the establishment of a new classicism in the Northern regions of Western Europe, mainly in Belgian and French Flanders. The idea raises a fair amount of suspicion if we take into account the ideological ferment of this era, for it resembles the Germanic state of Burgundia subsequently envisioned by the German SS at the dawn of the Second World War. However, De Ridder's aversion to Pan-Germanism is evident in his activities during the Great War. In 1915, together with a group of Flemish war refugees in Amsterdam, he co-signed the Vlaamsch manifest [Flemish Manifesto], which overtly opposed the Flemish maximalism of the Jong-Vlaanderen [Young Flanders] group, the Flemish movement that had collaborated with the German occupiers hoping for the establishment of Flemish over French as the official language.<sup>16</sup> Flemish 'frenchification' was viewed as anathema to Flemish emancipation efforts, but De Ridder and Van Hecke, both Franco-Flemish writers, were involved in the Flemish Movement while clearly condemning separatism and the German machinations that threatened Belgian sovereignty. In fact, De Ridder's publications in French were met with hostility and provoked controversy among radical flamingantist circles, especially his contributions to the short-lived francophone monthly

15 Catherine Verleysen, 'Flemish Expressionism in Belgium', in *The Routledge Companion to Expressionism in a Transnational Context*, ed. by Isabel Wünsche (London and New York: Routledge, 2018); Virginie Devillez, *Le retour à l'ordre. Art et Politique en Belgique 1918–1945* (Brussels: Editions Labor-Dexia Banque, 2003); Inga Rossi-Schrimpf, *14/18 — Rupture or Continuity: Belgian art around World War I* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2018).

16 Frans Van Cauwelaert, Cyriel Buysse, Julius Hoste, Leo Van Puyvelde, André de Ridder, Arthur Buysse, Alberic de Swarte, and Léonce du Catillon, 'Vlaamsch manifest', *Neerlandia*, 19 (1915), 186–87.



review *Signaux de France et de Belgique* (1921-1922) launched by Salmon and Hellens in Antwerp.<sup>17</sup>

### *Le Génie du Nord*

Before its publication in 1925, *Le Génie du Nord* was advertised in *Sélection* as a critique of regionalism associated with Latin and Hellenic ideals, as well as of the neoclassical aspirations that had been revived in contemporary art and thought. The advertising note served as a straightforward statement against the French neo-classical aspirations of the Call to Order concept, understood as evocative of the French Latin tradition. It proposed instead a modern international 'septentrional' culture and promised a whole new programme for Belgian art. Dedicated to Van Hecke, the book was published in Antwerp and consisted of three essays previously published in *Sélection* between 1923 and 1924, and a fourth previously unpublished chapter. The first essay of the series, titled 'De la Méditerranée à la Mer Océane' (From the Mediterranean to the Atlantic Ocean), presented Belgium as a cultural crossroads, a land of invasion from the North, the South and the East. It suggested that Belgium incorporated foreign influences in order to enrich but not alter its own identity, an aspect of dilettantism previously promoted by the Orchard generation through its aspirations for European cosmopolitanism.<sup>18</sup> The essay described Belgium as a 'distinct formation between Gaul and Germania, at the crossroads leading from England to Italy, from France to Russia, through England'.<sup>19</sup> De Ridder further conceptualized the idea of a modern Northern classicism. The time, he wrote, has not yet come for us to 'enjoy the comfort of certitude, and repose on categorical imperatives':

We are in a full search process. And the more we search even without finding [...] the more we will deserve a new future, when we will succeed in creating a new art, unconcerned with outdated formulas, which in a few decades or centuries from now will end up being a new classicism, which is our own and belongs to us.<sup>20</sup>

The second essay underlined 'Les Dangers du Néoclassicisme' ['The Dangers of Neoclassicism'] and its persistent revivals. It associated Neoclassicism primarily with French culture, due to its inclination to Latinity, thus fostering discontent, as we shall see, among the book's French readers.<sup>21</sup> The third essay was given the title 'L'âme septentrionale' (The Septentrional Soul). It sought to define the Northern in relation to the Southern spirit. De Ridder explains that his distinction between the North and

17 'The fact that one runs a French journal points not towards "frankiljonism", believe me, but towards spiritual internationalism. The reason for founding "Signaux" has only been personal friendship and like-mindedness with French writers ... No politics was involved.' Letter from André de Ridder to E. de Bock, 19 September 1922 [AMVC R462] qtd. in Reine Meylaerts, 'Conceptualizing the Translator as a Historical Subject in Multilingual Environments: A Challenge for Descriptive Translation Studies?', in *Charting the Future of Translation History*, ed. by Georges I. Bastin and Paul F. Bandia (University of Ottawa Press: 2006), pp. 59–80 (pp. 68–69).

18 See also Christophe Verbruggen and Hans Vandevoorde, 'Transnational Brokering. The Case for Symbolism and Surrealism in Flanders', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire / Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis*, 92.4 (2014), 1343–58.

19 André de Ridder, 'Le Génie du Nord I: De la Méditerranée à la Mer Océane', p. 23, 25.

20 'Nous sommes en pleine recherche, je ne cesserai de le répéter, et plus nous aurons cherché, même sans trouver [...] plus aussi aurons-nous mérité de demain. Peut-être réussirons-nous, malgré tout, à fonder un art tout entier renouvelé, détaché à tout jamais des formules périmées et qui finira, d'ici quelques décades ou quelques siècles, par apparaître comme un classicisme nouveau, le nôtre qui nous appartient en propre.' André de Ridder, 'Le Génie du Nord I: De la Méditerranée à la Mer Océane', p. 14.

21 André de Ridder, 'Le Génie du Nord II: Les dangers du néo-classicisme', *Sélection*, 2 (December 1923), 113–33.

the South is not merely geographical but seeks to designate a 'spiritual North', which includes all the people who are racially distinct from the classic Latin genius and the traditional Southern spirit.<sup>22</sup> The North that De Ridder conceptualized included all Europeans who had escaped Greco-Latin influence:

those on whom the classical and rationalist Italian-French tradition has imposed itself less powerfully than the countries of the West [...] which shirk this exclusive ideal of perfection that is maintained even today, to the detriment of a more specifically contemporary ideal [...] The representatives of this imperialism [...] will be compared to others, more crude, more spontaneous, more enthusiastic, more enterprising, those symbolizing a free, lively and voluntary North.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from the three chapters that were part of the *Sélection* 'Le Genie du Nord' series, the content of the book was enriched by one more chapter under the title 'Dans la Marche Belge' (On the Belgian March), which formulates the idea that nationalism is the only path towards internationalism, a position drawn directly from August Vermeylen's oft-quoted dictum 'to be Flemings in order to be Europeans' which epitomized Van Nu en Straks's cosmopolitanism.<sup>24</sup> De Ridder appears to be highly conscious of the ideological implications of his positions, constantly emphasizing their apolitical, artistic, and literary nature. He rejects all expressions of imperialism, coming either from the South (Greco-Roman) or the North (Pan-Germanism). 'Let us repeat', he insists,

that this is mainly from the point of view of literary and artistic criticism [...] our apology for the North is not accompanied by the palinode [i.e. retraction] of any other world. So this plea is in no way undertaken in favour of a North that one might have to fear as a zone of political influence. Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism are hostile to us in the same way and to the same degree as Pan-Latinism.<sup>25</sup>

It is under 'the cloak of neoclassical nationalism' founded on Mediterranean ideals, De Ridder explained, that the clichés of academicism were 'reintroduced into our thought'. He equally criticised German neo-romanticism, which was, he contended, erroneously called expressionism, with its lack of equilibrium and order, its destructive and pessimist character. The Latin spirit and Southern influence are, nonetheless, deemed more dangerous than German neo-romanticism. Flemish 'constructive expressionism', on the contrary, appears orderly and optimistic, constructivist and colourful, an amalgam of expressiveness and structuring, an ordered impulse.

De Ridder's 'Northern Genius' concept concerned a shift in cultural dynamics from the Mediterranean to the North Sea. It involved exchanges between the Northern regions of France and Belgium, rather than Germany, and embraced all manifestations against Mediterranean cultural imperialism, which were identified as the achievements of the 'Northern soul'. Apart from Flemish expressionist artists, *Sélection* promoted a

22 André de Ridder, 'Le Génie du Nord III: L'âme septentrionale', *Sélection*, 19 (August 1924), 465–91 (pp. 471–72).

23 Ibid.

24 Theo D'haen, 'To be Flemish in order to become European: August Vermeylen and Flemish literature', in *Rifondare la letteratura nazionale per un pubblico europeo*, ed. by Alexandra Vranceanu and Angelo Pagliardini (Frankfurt: P. Lang, 2014), pp. 131–45.

25 'Répétons que c'est principalement au point de vue de la critique littéraire et artistique [...] notre apologie du Nord ne s'accompagne de la palinodie d'aucun autre monde. Aussi ce plaidoyer n'est-il aucunement entrepris en faveur d'un Nord qu'on pourrait avoir à craindre comme zone d'influence politique. Le pangermanisme et le panslavisme nous sont hostiles au même titre et au même degré que le panlatinisme.' André de Ridder, 'Le Génie du Nord III: L'âme septentrionale', p. 473.

range of painters. Included were not just those coming, remarkably, from the Northern regions of France, who worked initially under the influence of fauvism and subsequently shifted towards cubism, and Paris-based Russian-born artists such as Ossip Zadkine, Marc Chagall, and Wassily Kandinsky, who employed an expressionist, cubist or abstract idiom, but even, finally, the British Vorticist Edward Wadsworth, a painter of Northern industrial England, and the south German Willi Baumeister, who was presented as a cubist-influenced constructivist. This selection of painters roughly shapes De Ridder's mental map of the Northern Genius.

The conception of this idea by De Ridder gives further evidence of its ideological standing. Although the term was introduced in the Romantic era, by Madame de Staël — an oft-quoted example in the book — to indicate transcendence of national boundaries, its main impulse can be traced to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Belgium and France.<sup>26</sup> The term draws from ideas associated with the efforts to reconcile French Flanders with the French Latin national heritage, and to cut it off from its Germanic identifications. More specifically, the Northern French author-poet and journalist André Mabilde de Poncheville, under the impact of ideas propagated by the Northern French nationalist Symbolist novelist Maurice Barrès, was the first to employ the term 'Le Génie du Nord', announcing it as the title of his forthcoming book in 1920. The book is untraceable and its publication was presumably cancelled. It was, however, advertised in the first pages of De Poncheville's monograph *Verhaeren en Hainaut*, dedicated to the francophone Flemish poet Emile Verhaeren. The conception of the term 'Génie du Nord' appears to be founded on Verhaeren's 1898 speech 'Le Génie'.<sup>27</sup> Whether De Ridder had come across the announcement of De Poncheville's book title is unconfirmed but extremely likely, considering his interest in both Verhaeren and more generally all French titles discussing Belgian art and literature. As likely as not, it was this context that gave birth to De Ridder's concept.

De Ridder's ideas sparked controversy in Belgium, but received little attention abroad. His concept was built on a set of ideas involving North-South antagonisms, which were pervasive in France and were centred on the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Franco-German historiographical debate over the origins of Gothic culture, with its inevitable ideological and political implications.<sup>28</sup> The exclusion of Flanders from this debate became De Ridder's motivating force to write his apology for the North. It is impossible to understand De Ridder's ideas without considering these debates and, more specifically, the controversy raised by the writings of the Polish-Austrian art historian Josef Strzygowski, *Orient oder Rom* (1901) and other texts that popularized his ideas through translations. The connection was in fact highlighted by the Parisian art critic Waldemar George in the pages of the sixth *Cahier Sélection*. George was an exponent of the 'Retour à Rome' ['Return to Rome'] idea, also propagated by the general secretary of *Sélection*, Georges Marlier. He later introduced the concept of neo-humanism drawing inspiration from the art of the Late Roman Empire.<sup>29</sup> De Ridder had invited him to picture Chagall 'in the light of the Northern spirit'. His

26 See Ann Jefferson, *Genius in France: An idea and its uses* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 60.

27 André Mabilde de Poncheville, *Verhaeren en Hainaut* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1920). 'I do not admit for a moment the epithet "degenerates" applied to people of genius by Lombroso. Far from being degenerates, people of genius are progenitors, since they transform, by appearing, their family and their race, often by their appearance a new era is inaugurated [...] A genius is the symbol of their time [...] not an adequate product of their environment, on the contrary they are contemporary with the time which is not yet; they live more in the future than the present.' Émile Verhaeren, *Impressions, deuxième série*, 4th edition (Paris: Mercure de France, 1926–28), pp. 215, 230–31.

28 See Passini.

29 See Nathalie Aubert, *From Art Nouveau to Surrealism: European Modernity in the Making* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 147.

text was accompanied by a long introduction discussing Strzygowski's doctrines. These were still met with suspicion,<sup>30</sup> but George had grasped precisely De Ridder's references and made allusion to his sources. The Belgian expressionist painter James Ensor was presented as the 'first messenger of the spirit of the North', just like the Swiss Symbolist painter Arnold Böcklin was portrayed as the major representative of the re-emerging Nordic style by Strzygowski. George's reference to Ensor is particularly interesting, for De Ridder was preparing a monograph on the artist at that time, which was to be published in 1930.

### Afterlife and Reception

But why does this kind of surly acrimony against France appear today? What is this reproach of stagnation worth? Does M. de Ridder forget that almost an entire French generation still lies on the battlefield? What is the value of this unexpected reproach against our ignorance of what is being done outside France? The truth is that France is more welcoming than ever to all manifestations of human genius. Are we no longer 'universal'? Despite the serious difficulties weighing on our intellectual life, who is more [universal] than us? May M. De Ridder be patient; France is still suffering, but is about to recover.<sup>31</sup>

The critical reception of *Le Génie du Nord* in France took a self-referential turn. The commentator of the wide circulation French daily *L'Intransigeant* understood De Ridder's ideas as a blatant attack against the fierce neo-classical revivals of Latinity as well as a denunciation of French cultural isolationism. It is unclear whether these interpretations constituted a misreading of the book's multiple content, or whether they grasped its references unambiguously. The 1926 *Sélection* survey 'La Jeune Peinture Française' ['Young French Painting'] enriches our understanding of the book's objectives as it appears to be complementary to its content. The survey needs to be examined in parallel with a second survey on 'L'Etat Actuel de la Peinture Belge' ['The Current State of Belgian Painting'], launched by the Belgian painter Roger van Gindertael and the *Cahiers d'Art* critic Tériade the same year. The former published responses by Belgian artists, dealers, and art critics who, in their vast majority, declared ignorance of and indifference towards contemporary French art, which was considered overrated, unimportant, and mediocre. To justify their positions, some respondents referred to De Ridder's book, revealing the target of his polemic, which was nothing less than the arrogant centrality of French contemporary art. The second survey invited Parisian art professionals coming almost exclusively from the close environment of the Parisian art review *Cahiers d'Art*. With the exception of De Smet, Ensor and Permeke, the great majority of the respondents ignored Belgian art but placed their hopes on its potential for international recognition.<sup>32</sup> The surveys raised centre-periphery rather than North-South antagonisms, though these overlap, be it explicitly or latently, in the book.

30 Waldemar George, 'Lettre ouverte à André de Ridder sur Marc Chagall et le Génie du Nord.' *Sélection*, 6 (April 1929), 16–24.

31 'Mais pourquoi cette espèce d'acrimonie un peu hargneuse contre la France aujourd'hui ? Que vaut ce reproche de stagnation ? M. de Ridder oublie-t-il que presque toute une génération française est restée sur les champs de bataille ? Que vaut ce reproche imprévu de méconnaître ce qui se fait hors de France ? La vérité est que la France est plus accueillante que jamais à toutes les manifestations du génie humain. Nous ne sommes plus "universels" ? Qui donc l'est plus que nous, malgré les lourdes difficultés qui pèsent sur notre vie intellectuelle ? [...] Que M. de Ridder prenne patience, la France souffre encore, mais elle guérira.' Anon., 'Quelques Livres Nouveaux', *L'Intransigeant* (24 December 1925), p. 6.

32 'L'Etat actuel de la peinture belge', *La Nervie — Inventaire 1* (1926), 26–40; 'La Jeune Peinture Française', *Sélection*, 8 (May 1926), 177–232.

In 1928, George had published two illustrated monographs dedicated to artists who were stylistically opposed in their choice of subject matter and approach to reality: Gromaire (b. Noyelles-sur-Sambre), who is compared to medieval artists, and De Chirico, who draws inspiration from the classical tradition. Each volume included the texts 'Chirico et les appels du Sud' ['Chirico and the calls from the South'] and 'Gromaire et le Message du Nord' ['Gromaire and the message from the North'].<sup>33</sup> The opposition of these two artists was accentuated by way of their spiritual inclination towards the North and the South. Such a confrontation, maintained Raymond Cognat, a prolific art critic and later chief inspector of Fine Arts, could only take place in France, the 'only possible meeting place, where no party is advantaged over the other'.<sup>34</sup> France was viewed by many as a meeting place of the two 'geniuses', a country where both elements constituted an integral part of its national identity. De Ridder sought to demonstrate that Northern France was closer to Belgian Flanders than to Germany, as many were inclined to believe.

The case of George is highly controversial, as he appears to embrace a wide range of ideas — including De Ridder's — that imply racial discrimination, although these same ideas appear to strictly oppose George's ideological inclination towards fascism, springing from his sympathy for Mussolini. George gave a series of lectures as a co-organiser of the Salon Kunst van Heden in Antwerp in 1933, promoting his ideas on neo-humanism as presented in his 1931 book *Profits et Pertes de l'Art Contemporain* [*Profits and Losses of Contemporary Art*].<sup>35</sup> The Salon was divided into three sections: Les néo-humanistes français [the French Neo-humanists], Sélection de la jeune École de Paris [Selection from the Young Paris School], and Artistes italiens des groupes Valori Plastici et Novecento [Italian artists from the Valori Plastici and Novecento groups]. These neo-humanist ideas fuelled De Ridder's reaction against his former collaborator on *Sélection* and erstwhile champion of his ideas. In a series of three essays under the title 'Neo-Humanism', published in the Flemish review *Opbouwen*, launched by the architect Huib Hoste in Antwerp, he addressed pointed criticism to George's latinizing concept of neo-humanism, accusing him of sacrificing the achievements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to rediscover the 'epitome of the noble human' in Greco-Latin antiquity. De Ridder rejected cultural revivals and 'outdated scholastic beauty dogmas', and instead placed his faith in the birth of a new cultural order born out of the challenges of his own epoch. If Waldemar George, he continued,

expresses the hope that a pan-European culture and art will emerge [...] founded on a strict Western, therefore anti-Eastern, codex and a Mediterranean force, thus anti-Germanic and anti-Slavic ethics and aesthetics, then it goes against all of our beliefs as well as against our nature and aptitude.<sup>36</sup>

Ideas encapsulating North-South antagonisms keep resurfacing in *Sélection* until the early 1930s. The fifth *Cahier Sélection*, devoted to Fernand Léger (b. Argentan, Orne),

33 Waldemar George, 'Chirico et les appels du Sud', in *Giorgio de Chirico, Les Maîtres nouveaux* (Paris: Chroniques du jour, 1928); 'Gromaire et le Message du Nord', in *Marcel Gromaire, Les Maîtres nouveaux* (Paris: Chroniques du Jour, 1928).

34 Raymond Cognat, 'Gromaire et Giorgio de Chirico vus par Waldemar George', *La Femme de France* (21 November 1928), 22.

35 Waldemar George, *Profits et Pertes de l'Art Contemporain* (Paris: Chroniques du jour, 1931).

36 'Als Waldemar George de hoop uitdrukt dat een pan-Europese cultuur en kunst zouden ontstaan, met een enkel front, volgens de codex van een streng Westerse, dus anti-Oosterse, met een streng Middellandse, dus anti-Germaanse en anti-Slaviese ethiek en esthetiek, dan druist hij tegen heel onze overtuiging in, zoals ook tegen onze aard en aanleg.' André de Ridder, 'Neo-Humanisme II', *Opbouwen: halfmaandelijks tijdschrift voor architectuur*, 13 (15 September 1933), 201–06 (p. 206).

published in February 1929, includes an article under the title 'Nord-Sud' ['North-South'], authored by Tériade. The text focuses on the Mediterranean spirit of cubism through the example of the classic qualities of Picasso, Georges Braque, and Juan Gris, which are opposed to the Northern spirit of Léger. The latter represents, in Tériade's words, a classic phase in the evolution of Northern art. This distinction is made evident through a comparison between Picasso and Léger: Picasso is the liberator; Léger the constructor. In keeping with De Ridder's idea, Tériade endorses the concept of a Northern classicism in this text and employs relevant references to the Northern mentality in texts published elsewhere, notably on Marcoussis. In a monograph dedicated to Léger the year before, he had further accentuated the stark contrast between the Northern spirit in the work of Léger and the Mediterranean classicism of Picasso and synthesis of Latin classicism.<sup>37</sup> Tériade's positions secured him a place in the pages of *Sélection*, because they conformed to De Ridder's opinion.

Similar references were widespread in France throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Interpretations varied and often cancelled each other out. In *Picasso et la tradition française*, Wilhelm Uhde identified two major tendencies in Parisian art. The analytic style that was inherent to French tradition, according to Uhde, was evident in the works of the Impressionists, particularly Auguste Renoir, and found its most advanced expression in the work of Henri Matisse. Conversely, Paul Cézanne's and Georges Seurat's synthetic style culminated in the work of Picasso and was interpreted by Uhde as a Germanic element marking a total break with national tradition.<sup>38</sup>

Expressionism was at the heart of this debate. One of the 'Sélection' Tracts (*Études sur l'art nouveau*) was the 'Querelle de l'Art Vivant' ['Quarrel on Living Art'] by Georges Marlier, from 1929. The first part of this Tract constitutes a 'eulogy to deformation', in which Marlier seeks to legitimize the universal standing of expressionism as compared to Hellenic art, and its revival and influence over four centuries of European painting. He considered expressionism to be the continuation of the most ancient and universal traditions bearing the influence of Egyptian, Japanese, Chinese, Persian, African, Byzantine, Roman, and Gothic art. Marlier traced in expressionism a universal need for formal deformation rooted deeply in the most ancient traditions, which pre-existed and continued to exist after the ascendancy and decay of the classic Greek civilisation.<sup>39</sup>

Similar positions appear on a regular basis in *Sélection*. Discussing Baumeister in the eleventh *Cahier* of the review (see Fig. 4), George challenges the role that Germany played in the birth and development of expressionism, as it found precedent in French cubism and fauvism. Constructive expressionism, which had developed around the Bauhaus school, was not, he argued, a specifically German movement, but a rational and candid search for a collective style and a universal art.<sup>40</sup> This aversion to Franco-German influence had been nurtured by De Ridder since the early years of the review and is retained in his mature texts. His revisionist study of the expressionist movement, published two decades later, insisted that Flemish expressionism developed

37 Tériade, *Fernand Léger* (Paris: Cahiers d'Art, 1928) p. ix; Tériade, 'Nord-Sud', *Sélection*, 5 (February 1929), 7–10.

38 Wilhelm Uhde, *Picasso et la tradition française. Notes sur la peinture actuelle* (Paris: Editions des Quatre-Chemins, 1928).

39 Georges Marlier, *La Querelle de l'Art Vivant*, Tract *Sélection*, 3 (Antwerp: *Sélection*, 1929).

40 Waldemar George, 'Baumeister et l'art allemand', *Sélection*, 11 (January 1931), 16–18.

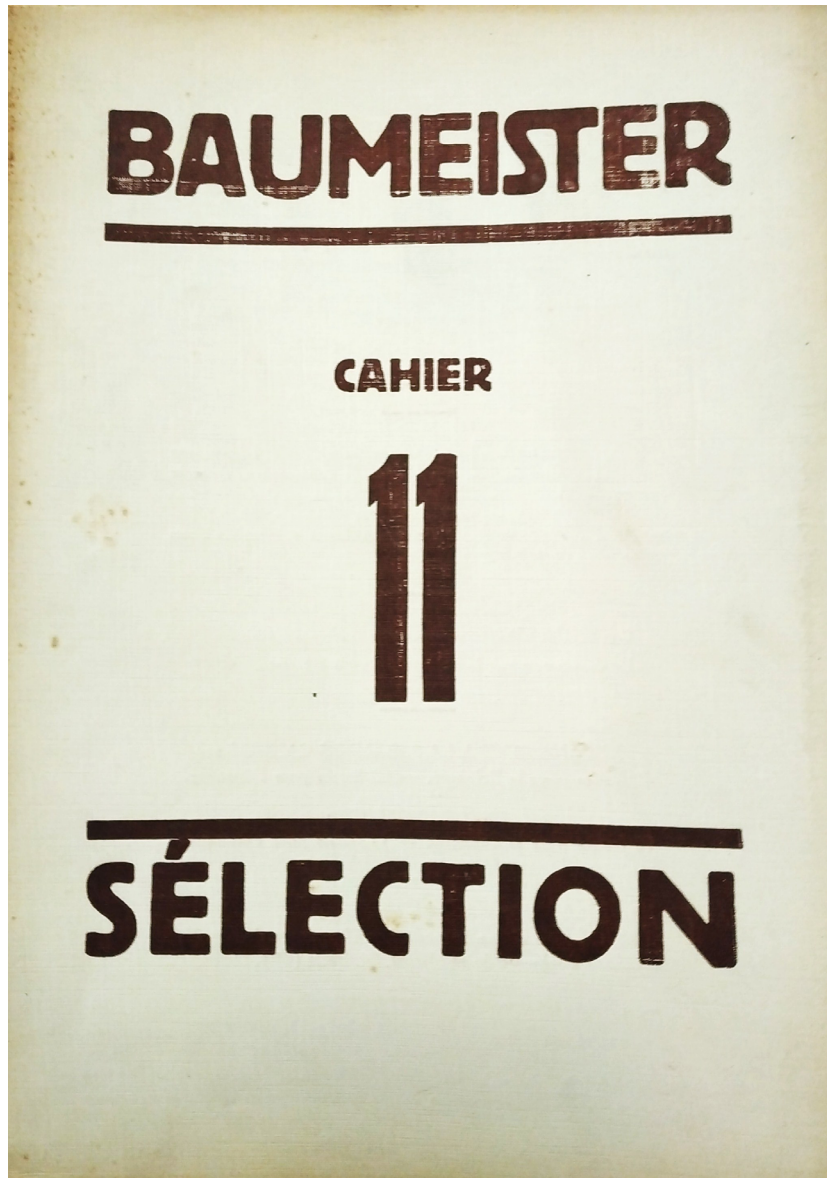


Fig. 4 *Sélection Cahier 11*, Willi Baumeister (Antwerp: Sélection, 1931)

simultaneously to but independently from German influence, representing its most coherent, homogenous, and enduring manifestation in Europe.<sup>41</sup>

### Conclusion

The Franco-Belgian circle that gathered around *Sélection* embraced De Ridder's positions to a certain extent, but cultivated views that expressed individual rather than collective aspirations. De Ridder's anticipation of a Northern classicism is part of the widespread

41 'Although I do not wish to underestimate the pioneer role played by Germany in this international movement, it would nevertheless be very unfair to measure expressionism mainly by the achievements of the protagonists of *Die Brücke* and *Der blaue Reiter*; this would overlook much of what was accomplished in other countries, sometimes in very different directions, which proved to be far more durable, often much more valuable, than the experiments of the first German Expressionists, many of which were lost along the way.' André de Ridder, 'Plastiek — Het ontstaan van het expressionisme in België', *West-Vlaanderen*, 2 (1953), 94–101 (p. 94).

discussion of the Call to Order concept that marked the period immediately following the Great War. The dynamics that were at play were cultural rather than merely stylistic. Though it was presented as a critique of regionalism, the *Génie du Nord* introduced, in reality, Northern regionalist rhetoric interpreted in terms of Flemish cosmopolitanism. Moreover, it nurtured the anticipation of a Northern modern classicism, becoming a rhetorical weapon against the cultural imperialisms of Germany and France. De Ridder sought to dissociate France from its Latin past and to stress its debt to the Northern mentality. The ubiquitous influence of Peter Paul Rubens, for example, was an oft-quoted case in the book. French cultural identity, according to De Ridder, was held in common with Belgian Flanders, which had contributed more vividly to the development of French culture than vice-versa. Considering the status of Paris as an artistic metropolis, it is interesting that De Ridder sought to legitimize the role that Flanders played in the evolution of French culture by reducing Southern influence to sterile academicism. Aspiring to shift the paradigm from literature to art, from Flemish francophone literature to painterly 'constructive expressionism', De Ridder sought to lay the foundations for an international Northern culture, which found parallels in examples of artistic and literary exchanges between France and Belgium from the Middle Ages to his own time — exchanges that he cited copiously in his book.

*Sélection* became a vehicle for the dissemination of ideas associated with Flemish emancipation from the French cultural yoke, advocating French liberation from Southern cultural imperialism, while at the same time offering a novel understanding of the Call to Order concept in the European context. De Ridder sought to impose Flemish expressionism as an international Northern current and promote the ideas of a universal Northern culture in a pan-European setting, although he was mainly concerned about the echoes of his ideas in France, which *ipso facto* explains the programmatic statement of the review, declaring allegiance to the Belgian, French, and European cause.

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