The Light of Industry: Modernist Aesthetics in Luxembourgish Literature, 1900-1940.

Dr. Anne-Marie Millim

University of Luxembourg

Department of Luxembourgish Language and Literature

Campus Walferdange, Bât. X, 0.26

L-7220 Walferdange

Luxembourg

With the rediscovery of significant iron ore deposits in its “Minette”-region in the 1860s and the introduction of the Thomas-Gilchrist process in 1879, Luxembourg’s steel industry developed exponentially, propelling the small and predominantly rural country to rank 6 in world steel production by 1913. The Industrial Revolution in Luxembourg, as elsewhere of course, was not only a revolution because it introduced a rationalisation and methodisation of labour processes. It also modified and multiplied the individual’s opportunities for physical, tactile, visual and artistic experience, offering new ways of defining and describing modernity. In order to counter the conservative adherence to the “soil,” which dominated politics and the arts, the major progressive writers of the period, Batty Weber, Frantz Clément, Nik Welter and Paul Palgen, expressed their desire for social and societal reform through metaphors of regeneration that were based on the visual spectacle of industrial production. Their portrayals of the “day”—the space allocated for productive activity since the ‘birth’ of the human being— and its various related temporal and spatial shapes, such as the seasons, the sky and the stars, stress that the actual and metaphorical light generated by the steel companies’ blast furnaces not only transformed the aspect, but also the structure of the day, thus shaking the cosmic certainties on which civilisation had been hitherto based. This aesthetic of progress, which associates the practical aspects of technology with the salutary effects of philosophical, intellectual, social and religious emancipation by relating “light” to “enlightenment,” “heat” to “power” and “industry” to “regeneration,” is characteristic of a specifically Luxembourgish “industrial modernism” that celebrates the obliteration of the boundaries between day and night as a liberation from the constraints of tradition. While this aesthetic can be detected in a variety of modernist writings, this article presents examples of cases in which it appears in a very developed form; in texts that make industry their primary object.

The writers under consideration are distinguished by their progressive desire to assert and emphasise the benefits of industrial progress, allegorising its inherent goodness, whilst attacking the exploitation of workers. Section One of this article examines how the industrial aesthetic pervaded the Luxembourgish press. Batty Weber (1860-1940), a liberal journalist, playwright and novelist, was one of Luxembourg’s most influential cultural commentators, whose daily column *Abreisskalender* (1913-1940) constitutes a priceless resource for cultural historians. Frantz Clément (1882-1942) wrote journalistic articles and prose fiction and had a strong political agenda, wishing to establish democratic ideals in Luxembourg. Section Two focuses on the industrial aesthetic in poetry, by firstly scrutinising some of Nik Welter’s (1871-1951) early work, which, before 1918, was very socially critical and anti-clerical, but became much more moderate after that. Paul Palgen (1883-1966) was an engineer and proliferous poet, who became part of the board of directors of ARBED, the major Luxembourg-based steel producer, in 1922. The texts under investigation are remarkable because they directly address the overlap between industrial and artistic activities in order to advocate the intellectual and cultural advancement of society. They portray industrial activities, infrastructures and the related changes to the landscape as symbols for a move away from conservative politics and aesthetics in order to allow Luxembourg to shed its agrarian identity and embrace a more cosmopolitan perspective. Reacting against a conservative government, which, as Antoinette Lorang has shown, was slow to face the challenges provoked by decades of massive industrial immigration, these writers sought to infuse what they perceived as a slumbering society with intellectual and creative energy.[[1]](#endnote-1) Prime Minister Paul Eyschen’s (1841-1915) decisive conviction that  « Nous ne sommes pas un pays industriel. Nous sommes un pays agricole, » expressed in a parliamentary meeting of 1897, is indicative of the protectionist and reactionary politics that reflected and shaped the inward-looking attitudes of Luxembourgish society in the first decades of the twentieth century.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Eyschen’s urban policy persistently advocated the one-family home, which demonstrates a worried wariness of industrial progress. The attachment to, and longing for, an ‘original’ home that is at the heart of such strongly protectionist attitudes is also reflected in literature. Willy Goergen’s poetry collection *Blummen a Blieder* [Flowers and Leaves] of 1905, for instance, is composed by micro-descriptive nature poems that encourage the contemplation and collection of natural details. Goergen uses light to accentuate the quaint protectedness of an idealised domestic sphere, displaying an introverted poetic stance that stands in stark contrast to Weber, Clément, Welter and Palgen’s staging of an extraverted industrial light spectacle. In his poem “Zwê Neijorschbiller” (Two New Year’s Pictures), Goergen uses light to affirm and embrace the confines of the home, rather than pushing them:

The friendly little winter sun

peeks into the front room of the home-house

and, with its warm finger,

wipes the icy flowers off the windowpanes.

It is cosy inside

By the fire, which joyfully sings

and, through the breath of its flames

Brings life back into the cold room.” (l. 4-11)[[3]](#endnote-3)

Significantly, the poem portrays the sun as an active agent, who perceives and caringly warms the individual household. The fact that the domestic hearth fire, lit and harnessed by the human being, is seen to breathe warmth and life into the room can be seen as an indication of a circular gesture of self-containment. Light and heat, stored inside the home, are not metaphors for energetic cultural regeneration, but for its opposite; self-protective isolation. The static stability of the domestic environment is presented as a microcosmic haven beyond change.

I.Batty Weber and Frantz Clément

Moving away from a traditional, often agricultural and domestic, aesthetic, Batty Weber and Frantz Clément, like the Belgian poet Émile Verhaeren, identify the metropolis as the site of cultural interaction and regeneration. Unlike the village that harbours self-centred and often exclusive communities, for Weber,

the metropolis [is] the embodiment of the factory with its wonderfully interlocking organs, its necessary and perpetual high-performance in terms of quality and quantity, its speed, its cold and sharp practicality, its forced hunt for the maximum. […] Its maxim is to attain maximal efficiency.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Weber, along with the co-founders of the literary magazine *Floréal* (1907-1908), Clément, Welter, Palgen, Marcel Noppeney, Joseph Hansen and Jeanne Düren, posited that Luxembourgish culture was a “Mischkultur” that integrated French and German influences.[[5]](#endnote-5) The rational and efficient organisation of the metropolis offered the opportunity for both cultural expression and inspiration and allowed the individual to emerge from intellectual and artistic mediocrity and “master [his or her] world.”[[6]](#endnote-6) In a similar vein, Frantz Clément’s 1915 collection of columns *Die Kleinstadt: eine kultur-psychologische Studie* [*The Small Town: A Study in Cultural Psychology*] criticises the “flattening” effect of the small town on the consumption and production of culture:

All secretly and openly conservative spiritual powers share a deprecatory attitude towards the metropolis and metropolitan culture. The views that have arisen in direct consequence of the changed rhythm and needs of modern times, on the other hand, consider the metropolis as the necessary centralisation and potentialisation of all that characterises, and lends greatness to, our epoch.[[7]](#endnote-7)

This metropolitan centralisation presented optimal conditions for the “double de-centralisation” that the *Floréal* writers sought to bring about through their magazine: on the one hand, they wished it to showcase the country’s literary production and on the other, it was to offer a critical forum conducive to artistic development. While for conservative politicians and writers the city was “always a synonym for depravity and sickness,” as Myriam Sünnen has observed, for Clément and his colleagues, the infrastructure, population density and diversity of the metropolis directly encouraged intellectual progress and cultural health through the exchange of ideas.[[8]](#endnote-8)

For Weber and Clément, sites of industrial production mirrored and, to an extent, shared the spatial expansion, multitude of experiences and magnitude of stimulation generated by an international metropolis. Due to this association of industrial activity with cultural progress, industrial infrastructures were elevated to the realm of beauty. Batty Weber rather tentatively contemplates the aesthetic value of the industrial landscape in one of his daily columns:

The tall chimney of the Dommeldingen steel works is wearing a floating feather boa of white smoke, which slowly rises upwards and is drunk up by the air. If only one didn’t know it was a factory chimney. If only one day it appeared without precedent in the landscape, slender, high above human roofs, like a giant torch blowing white clouds of sacrifice towards the sky. Then it would no longer be ugly, but beautiful.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Slightly paradoxically, Weber seems to have embraced the cultural by-products of industry, such as sensual and intellectual expansion, as well as the aesthetically pleasing silhouette of the factory, but refrains from categorising the latter as entirely beautiful due to its industrial functionality. However, the fact that he does not differentiate between the “light-saturated sun-clouds” and industrial smoke demonstrates a definite willingness to aestheticise industry.[[10]](#endnote-10)

For Weber, the aesthetic fascination of the chimney lies in its colossal size and its almost personified, superhuman power to overcome the limitations of domesticity and reach into the sky, far above the roofs of human homes. Frantz Clément, in his feuilleton “Ist Esch schön?” [Is Esch beautiful?], published in the *Escher Tageblatt*, a newspaper addressed to the working-class of the Southern ore capital, on 16 September 1913, similarly, but more decidedly, attributes quasi-moral qualities to the size of industrial buildings. The feuilleton, which can be seen as a manifesto for Luxembourgish modernism, contrasts the “bull’s eye pane lyricism” of “stale aestheticism” and the “little niceties of weakling art” to the “ruthless power” of “the young city” of Esch that ravaged “forests and meadows, snug corners and fine old houses.”[[11]](#endnote-11) The quaint narrowness of tradition, which leads humans to contemplate the world through minuscule pieces of blurry glass, is juxtaposed to the ever-expanding “ugliness” of the city that embodies the “beauty of the future.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Interestingly, Clément uses the metaphor of a giant breaking out of tight clothes—the latter are symbolic of restrictive “idyllic” ‘hominess’—to represent the ongoing birth of the modern city.[[13]](#endnote-13) He insists that the flowing slag and the “gawking eye of the cinder-container [which] outflashes all surrounding colours,” as well as “the fiery streamlets [that] run down the slag heap,” more than compensate for the beauty destroyed by the factory. The songlike noises of industry—“the rhythm of work”—represent the unifying heart of the area: “if the world were to crumble, we would only have to listen to these pulsations” to retrieve the happiness of “hard but victorious work.”[[14]](#endnote-14) The light radiating from industrial production—both actual and metaphorical—signifies the birth of the modern spirit, as it were. However, besides this “beauty born in Esch,” a second birth has to take place: as if in afterbirth, human beings have to cleanse their eyes and ears from the “fairy-tale beauty” prevalent in traditional precedents.[[15]](#endnote-15)

The energy of Clément’s imagery and rhetoric—Weber’s to a lesser extent—is distinctly reminiscent of the Italian futurists’ call for human emancipation, which must necessarily entail the destruction of the cosy but suffocating attachment to hearth and home. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s (1876-1944) “Manifesto of Futurism” of 1909 seeks to combat all forms of passive conservatism, including the arts: “up to now literature has exalted a pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep. We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer’s stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap.”[[16]](#endnote-16) The futurists wished to abolish poetic dabbling and tepid artistic expression and sought to replace them by violently bold, breathless outbursts of restless creativity. They describe their own emancipation as an avant-garde movement in terms of a birth: having seen “the very first dawn” they speed off in an automobile and fall into a “maternal ditch;” a “fair factory drain” full of “nourishing sludge.”[[17]](#endnote-17) Industrial structures, products and even waste are thus portrayed as elemental to the modernisation of the self and society, which, for Marinetti, occurs through “multi-coloured, polyphonic tides of revolution.”[[18]](#endnote-18) Clément’s visual language and use of light matches and perhaps mirrors the flamboyance of Marinetti’s “blazing [...] violent electric moons” and “red hot bellies of locomotives,” which embody the futurists’ belief in the regenerative value of the industrial process.[[19]](#endnote-19) Günter Berghaus has highlighted the desire for reform inherent in futurist thought: “the machine symbolised in a most succinct form [the] vision of an industrialised environment forming a ‘second Nature’ working to the advantage of humankind.”[[20]](#endnote-20) While Clément and Weber shared neither Marinetti’s right-wing tendencies, nor his extreme destructive lust, they did hope that industrial machinery would not only fuel the economy, but also afford new ways of intellectual stimulation and literary expression.

II.Nik Welter and Paul Palgen

The poetry collections *Hochofen: ein Büchlein Psalme* of 1913 [*Blast Furnace: A Booklet of Psalms*] by Nik Welter and *La pourpre sur les crassiers* [*Crimson on the Slag Heaps*] of 1931 by Paul Palgen display similarly ebullient colour and imagery and generally demonstrate a triumphant belief in the beneficence of industrial progress. They tend to applaud the integration of industry into nature, as well as the replacement of nature by industry. Both Welter and Palgen are mesmerised by the light spectacle of industry, which, for them, establishes a connection between nature and the human being, rather than enforcing alienation. While sensitive to the plight of the industrial labour force, these poets do not actively rebel against social conditions, but rather express their empathy for and commiseration with the workers. Their trust that technological development leads to a new humanity overpowers their scepticism.

The composition of Nik Welter’s *Hochofen* of 1913 is likely to have been influenced by the founding of ARBED (Aciéries réunies de Burbach-Eich-Dudelange), a society reuniting several existing steel companies, the opening of new blast furnaces, the expansion of the railway network and the covering of the Alzette river in 1911.[[21]](#endnote-21) These advances confirmed and affirmed the human domination of nature and may have inspired Welter’s desire to impersonate industrial structures in order to emphasise their impact on the Minette region, such as the blast furnace in the eponymous poem:

Only a tower, raw, bulky,

I grow with my frame and shaft,

Like a fiend whose rage

Rests powerless between irons. (l. 1-4)[[22]](#endnote-22)

Welter’s anthropomorphised furnace acknowledges its potential to slight nature but then insists on its ability to lead “sense” towards the “good and the great.”[[23]](#endnote-23) The machine is presented as an autonomous self-regenerating and self-reproducing agent capable of generating the energy that fuels it: “By myself I renew the power / at work in me and around me” (l. 13-14).[[24]](#endnote-24) Paul Palgen’s “Les feux” presents the steel factory as a similarly independent agent capable of crafting its own technological descendants:

Acier, fontaines bleues des fours et des cornues,

glaise de feu fondue qui deviendra la chair,

les muscles et les os des machines futures,

quand la vapeur les gaz ou l’électricité

lui auront insufflé leur âme élémentaire. (l. 53-57)[[25]](#endnote-25)

The human no longer simply distinguishes him- or herself from the animal by using tools, but by “[devising] tools to make tools to make more tools,” to quote Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek’s paraphrase of Lewis Mumford’s argument on human tool-use.[[26]](#endnote-26) Thus the factory indeed becomes a self-perpetuating organism that gives birth to its products.

Beyond this self-proliferation, for Welter, the steel factory has a fertilising function in two ways. Firstly, it “[liberates] the ore” (“To the Place,” l. 2) from the captivity of its raw state, freeing it from its passive original state inside the mine and realising its full potential.[[27]](#endnote-27) By “ploughing” into the “depth” of the earth, the human being makes “life [sputter] from the stone” (“To the Land of the Red Soil,” l. 24), extracting the essence of natural power and using it to stage the ultimate birth of the “better human” who “drives towards the light” in vehicles made of steel—an idea that clearly recalls Marinetti’s visions.[[28]](#endnote-28) Secondly, the furnace impregnates the region by facilitating demographic expansion: “Villages become, cities grow / Wherever the smoky shadow falls” (“To the Land of the Red Soil,” l. 55-56).[[29]](#endnote-29) As in Clément’s manifesto/feuilleton, the industrial presence revolutionises the aspect and meaning of the place it occupies, which, here too, is seen as a genuinely positive development.

This powerful ability to mould the physical environment by defeating both nature and tradition is at the root of Welter and Palgen’s conceptions of a new form of beauty. In his eulogy to the “welcoming” South “To the Land of the Red Soil,” he uses blazing reds and describes palpably arduous heat in order to show that the aesthetic force of industry outdoes natural beauty in its unrefined form:[[30]](#endnote-30)

While others may flee to the mountains

To the green and murmuring abyss

Or in the ferryman’s boat

May rock through fragrant vineyards

I am at ease where

Man through his own power

Creates this earth anew

Following his wishes. (l. 9-16).[[31]](#endnote-31)

This stanza juxtaposes three different manners of ‘being in the world,’ to use Heidegger’s term: first the evasive movement towards an idealised far-away place; second, the passive surrender to a natural substance that moves relentlessly, but without consciousness, and third, the confident state of having actualised personal potential and possessing complete control over one’s surroundings.[[32]](#endnote-32) Unlike the travellers, the speaker does not simply identify with the visual and olfactory characteristics of his chosen place, but rather feels ideologically integrated in a place that will accommodate his needs indefinitely, so that there is no need for him to travel to satisfy them. The human-made beauty of the industrial site is entirely benevolent; the “twinkling” furnaces greet the speaker invitingly with their “shine of beauty” (TLRS, l. 35-36), unlike the unresponsive mountains and rivers that are completely devoid of such humanised presence.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Palgen demonstrates a similar belief in the supremacy of the artificial beauty produced by industry over nature’s creations. In his address to the “Les fumées,” he exclaims:

ô les degrés du ciel que vous avez montrés

à nos spleens de l’au jour le jour, du terre à terre,

et les trônes que vous nous avez révélés

au fil du vent et des poussières

souffles de nos efforts et fumées de nos souffles

essorés dans l’éther,

omniprésence de notre pensée

sur la terre et sur la mer. (l. 95-103)[[34]](#endnote-34)

Palgen gradually deepens the meaning of the industrial presence in these two sequential stanzas. He applauds the industrial smokes for adding to, and thus maximising, the visible spectrum of celestial variability and for consequently expanding the range of human experience, alleviating the uniform melancholy and boredom of everyday life. The changing colours of the sky do not merely provide visual excitement, but also reveal previously unfathomed notions of sanctity (“trônes”)—a sanctity that is altogether human. Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* can help us understand Palgen’s concept of human sanctity developed in this poem. Aristotle’s postulates that “every craft is concerned with coming to be, and the exercise of the craft is the study of how something that admits of being and not being comes to be, something whose origin is in the producer and not in the product.”[[35]](#endnote-35) The illuminated changeable skies can thus be seen as a canvas for the activity of steel production, visualising the actualisation of human ideas. Indeed, for Palgen, the smokes are not just symbols but visible signs of human thought being concretised. Karl Marx’s observation that “at the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement,” is instrumental in explaining the self-affirming satisfaction felt by the human being when contemplating the skies.[[36]](#endnote-36) By visualising and confirming “notre pensée,” the human being can “act on the external world [to change] it,” which in turn “changes his own nature.”[[37]](#endnote-37) The light and smoke in the sky are thus proof of human self-sufficiency and self-conception and, for Palgen, establish the human being as the demiurgic engineer of the world.

Like for Weber and Clément, for Welter and Palgen, this “demiurgic” potential is evidenced by the size of industrial structures, but also the ability to artificially create natural forms.[[38]](#endnote-38) Welter’s “On the Stage” describes an industrial city in which furnaces, “growing higher than churches” (l. 23), tower over human crowds.[[39]](#endnote-39) In Palgen’s “Les fumées,” the “fumées rousses” roll onto the “toits blancs des aciéries” (l. 71 ; 73), similarly demonstrating the human triumph over natural gravity.[[40]](#endnote-40) The description of sparks as “fiery carnations” (Welter, TLRS, l. 44) and “fleurs de fer” (Palgen, “Les feux,” l. 49) also exemplify the creation of a powerful “second Nature” whose intensity, productivity and mesmerising beauty outdo all previously known aesthetic forms.[[41]](#endnote-41)

The modernist industrial aesthetic described in this article is also evident in other writers’ poetry and fiction, such as Jean-Pierre Erpelding’s *Heiβe Sommertage* (1921), Nicolas Molling’s *Die Flammende Stube* (1921), Albert Hoefler’s *Nächte* (1923) and Pol Michels’s *Panorama* (1933), among others.[[42]](#endnote-42) These works, although certainly inspired by the light spectacle of the steel factories, tend to either omit it or engage with it much less consistently than Welter and Palgen, usually dedicating no more than one or two poems to the industrial origins of their style. They employ bright colours and imagery of fire, stars and general luminance to translate the magnitude of human potential and to thus insert themselves into the modernist tradition burgeoning in Luxembourg’s literary scene, but it seems that they, like Weber, struggled to reconcile industry and art. Although industry was not as frequently represented in Luxembourgish literature as one might expect, considering the enormous changes it brought to the country’s economic, social and political situation, it is nevertheless true that its presence helped to shape a modernist aesthetic that visually mimicked the industrial spectacle and employed this imagery as a means of emancipation from more traditional forms of expression.

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