



Review

Critical Literary History: Two Good Practices

Inger Leemans and Gert-Jan Johannes, *Worm en donder. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur, 1700-1800. De Republiek* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2013)

Tom Verschaffel, *De weg naar het binnenland. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur, 1700-1800. De Zuidelijke Nederlanden* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2017)

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The eighteenth century is certainly not the most popular period in Dutch literary history. The works that were published and the authors that were active in this period are mostly unknown to the public. Ask an average group of first-year students in Dutch language and culture about their image of the eighteenth century and their answer will most probably be 'none'. Already in its own time, eighteenth-century Dutch literature suffered from a lack of appreciation. In the Southern Netherlands, French was the dominant language and Dutch literature only fulfilled a minor role in cultural life. The Dutch Republic was simultaneously caught in an all-encompassing mood of decline, which led to an idolising of past literary heroes – Vondel, Cats – and envious glances at the blossoming literary cultures of neighbouring countries, first France, later Germany and Great Britain.

Writing the literary history of this conspicuously unpopular period does not seem an easy task. First, there is the persistent image that this period is not interesting, not worth our attention, in short: forgotten for a reason. Secondly, the long history of neglecting and undervaluing this period has caused it to be a much less studied topic among scholars, thus offering the literary historian relatively few studies to base her/his narrative on. Seen in this light, the recent attempts to write the history of Dutch eighteenth-century literature by Inger Leemans, Gert-Jan Johannes, and Tom Verschaffel should be considered as remarkably successful.

This success is mostly due to the fact that these authors chose to take the 'problem' of eighteenth-century Dutch literary history – its bad image and long history of neglect – as the starting point of their venture. In doing so, they are not only offering a much more neutral and nuanced treatment of this period compared to older literary histories, they also critically review the practice of writing literary history itself: the extent to which it is connected to the already existing reputation of certain periods and how much it hinges on the questionable premise that

literary history is a monolingual, nationally oriented affair. This dual accomplishment puts the books by Leemans and Johannes and Verschaffel among the most valuable and relevant in the series *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur* [History of Dutch Literature, referred to as *GNL*] of which they are part.

Two Opposite Sides

Originally, the history of eighteenth-century Dutch literature was supposed to be captured in a single volume, written by the eminent literary historian Joost Kloek. The working title of his book was *Twee overzijden* [Two Opposite Sides], a reference to a famous Dutch poem by M. Nijhoff, 'De moeder, de vrouw' (1934), meant to express the great divide felt between North and South, the Dutch Republic and the Southern Netherlands, in this period in Dutch literary history. Sadly, Kloek was unable to complete the work, due to health reasons. The project was then taken over by Inger Leemans, Gert-Jan Johannes and Tom Verschaffel. At first, they still intended to write one combined history of Dutch literature in the eighteenth century. Along the way, however, it emerged that not only was the literary landscape of the eighteenth century strongly divided, the historiographic tradition diverged as well. The literary history of the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic has been widely studied over the last fifty years, which has led to a quite substantial body of scholarly work – monographs, articles, text editions – on which to build a literary history. For the Southern Netherlands, there is no such thing. Until this day, Dutch literature of the eighteenth-century Southern Netherlands remains a marginal phenomenon in academia. This led the general editors of the *GNL* series to decide that, by way of exception, the eighteenth century would be dealt with in two separate volumes, one on the Dutch Republic, written by Leemans and Johannes, and one on the Southern Netherlands, written by Verschaffel – an exception, they claim, based more on pragmatic than principle reasons (cf. Leemans and Johannes, 19).

One could wonder, however, if there are no more fundamental reasons for this failure to write a single unified history of eighteenth-century Dutch literature. Literary historiography was not a serious and actively practiced genre until the nineteenth century, when nationalism was a dominant cultural and political category. The genre formed an essential part of the larger project of creating a generally shared national identity, firmly rooted in an exclusively national past. But literary histories were problematic in this respect, as they usually revolved around one specific language – English, French, Dutch – and languages and nations do not necessarily coincide. This also goes for Dutch literature, whose origins lie in regions that, by the nineteenth century, were part of two separate nations, Belgium and the Netherlands. Nevertheless, from the very start there has been a strong tendency to think of Dutch literary history as a single unified narrative. Despite the odd separate developments, all in all there was enough coherence to speak of a Dutch literary history in the singular.

This was also a leading thought behind the *GNL* project, undertaken under the auspices of the *Nederlandse Taalunie*, an organisation aimed at supporting the Dutch language at a supranational level. Each *GNL* volume was supposed to discuss one century of Dutch literary history as a whole, covering both the North and the South. At first glance, this approach seems to be a commendable attempt to overcome the old, nationalist paradigm of writing literary history, replacing it with a linguistically oriented narrative. In practice, however, the execution of this project was strongly dependent on existing scholarship on Dutch literature, and this

scholarship still contains many traces of the traditional, nationalist prism. Furthermore, from the seventeenth century onwards, political developments caused the northern and southern parts of the Dutch-speaking world to go separate ways, which led to a growing divergence in literary practices. As a result, it is impossible for the *GNL* to live up to its self-proclaimed goal of telling a unified story.

This impossibility is most strongly felt when discussing the eighteenth century, when North and South were indeed two opposite sides that seemed to avoid each other (paraphrasing Nijhoff). It is therefore no surprise that, specifically for this period, the original plan of having one volume per century had to be given up. But it is precisely because of this that the volumes concerning this period were able to shine. Liberated from the artificial goal of having to tell a single unified story, they could freely highlight the particularities of literary history in their specific region, during this specific period.

The North Side: Decline and the Spirit of Scrutiny

For the northern region, these particularities can be neatly summarised in the motif of decline. During the late seventeenth century, authors in the Dutch Republic were already worrying about Dutch literature, as it did not seem able to live up to its former high standards anymore. The ‘prince of poets’ Joost van den Vondel died in 1679. In the following decades, it became clear that no new poet with a comparably undisputed reputation would appear any time soon. Meanwhile, the Dutch Republic was also struggling politically and economically. It had to work harder and harder to keep up with surrounding countries and slowly moved to a more peripheral position in the international balance of power. Hence a discourse of decline emerged, which started to dominate public opinion from the 1730s onwards. The sense of urgency only intensified through the course of the century, eventually resulting in a cry for regime change by the early 1780s, when an opposition movement known as the Patriots rose to power. One of the main goals of this movement was to restore the Dutch Republic to its old glory, thus finally turning the tide and stopping the slow yet ever more devastating process of decline.

The literary culture of the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic should be placed against the backdrop of this overall experience of decline – largely unjustified in hindsight, but experienced as reality at the time. As Leemans and Johannes show, and as has been argued before by leading scholars in the field such as André Hanou, it was still a culture full of energy, almost continuously in transition, seeking new ways to be an author and to create literary art. The feeling of decline was partly responsible for this ongoing search for new forms and methods. As the status quo was not considered as good (enough), there was a strong motivation to try new, hopefully better ways of making literature. An example was the growing interest in French classicism in the early decades of the eighteenth century. As France was the dominant cultural power at the time, it seemed logical to look for literary models there. The sympathy for French models was, however, not undisputed, as the *Poëtenstrijd* [Struggle of the Poets] of the 1710s shows. In this cultural conflict, skilfully analysed by Leemans and Johannes in chapter 2 of their book, the proponents of French classicism stood against the defenders of domestic literary models, in particular that of Vondel. But both agreed that Dutch poetry of the day needed improvement, i.e. that change was necessary.

Another important driving force for literary change was the Enlightenment. This intellectual and social movement left many marks on eighteenth-century Dutch literature and literary culture. The overall spirit of scrutiny that can be found in Dutch literature of this period is a strong example of this. The title of Leemans and Johannes's book, *Worm en donder* [Worm and Thunder] also tries to evoke this spirit. It refers to two primary objects of study by eighteenth-century authors: the tiny worms and the grand spectacle of thunder and lightning. As it turns out, eighteenth-century Dutch literature is used to study both nature and man. Nature is scrutinised in pastoral poetry, the so-called *hofdicht* (a poem describing a country estate) and physico-theological writings, all discussed in chapter 5. Man and his relation to society are the object of study in ego documents, child literature and the upcoming genre of the novel, usually aimed at adolescents, teaching them how human beings tend to behave and interact. All these genres are extensively discussed in chapter 6, showing that this type of scrutiny also led to experiments with new literary forms, like the epistolary novel (Betje Wolff and Aagje Deken) and the autobiography (Gerrit Paape). In this way, the spirit of scrutiny fuelled the dynamics of eighteenth-century literary culture. This leads Leemans and Johannes to depict eighteenth-century literature in the conclusion as an experimental garden, used to test all kinds of new political, social and literary ideas (712-13).

The authors discuss many more relevant topics in their book, which has over 700 pages, excluding references. Among them are the rise of professional authorship, difficult in a language with a relatively small number of users, the role of societies [*genootschappen*] and the emerging genre of the journal in eighteenth-century literary culture, and the importance of literature for the late eighteenth-century Dutch revolutions, when practically all literary genres were used to propagate new political ideas or to attack political opponents. In most of these discussions, either the issue of decline or the spirit of scrutiny plays a decisive role, often both. Eighteenth-century literary culture in the Dutch Republic is thus presented by Leemans and Johannes as a lively affair, full of innovation and changes that were motivated by a sense of cultural crisis. Authors have tried to avert this crisis through a process of trial and error that brought us many literary works still worth of our attention: imaginary travelogues, satires, epistolary novels. Reading this literary history makes one keen to (re)read these works with a fresh eye and dig deeper into the intellectual and artistic experiments of authors like Hendrik Smeeks, Jacob Campo Weyerman and Hieronymus van Alphen.

The South Side: Multilingualism and Slow Emancipation

Meanwhile, the Southern Netherlands were dealing with quite different circumstances. After the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-1713), the southern provinces came under Austrian rule and were henceforth known as the Austrian Netherlands. Within the Austrian Empire, which had its centre in Vienna, this region did not play a very important role. It was considered as peripheral. This also influenced the economic position of the Southern Netherlands in this age, which was relatively weak. The basic ingredients for a flourishing cultural and artistic life in the premodern world – a concentration of political and economic power – were thus lacking from the very beginning.

In addition, in the Southern Netherlands French was the official language of the political and cultural elite. Except for the lower classes, everybody could read and write French. French was also considered as the language of culture and art *par excellence*. There was thus little

reason for anyone to write in Dutch, or to translate texts from other languages – English, German – into Dutch, for that matter. There was only one exception to this rule. When one explicitly wanted to address a broad audience, for example during public festivities or in times of political turbulence, Dutch was the preferred language. As a result, Dutch literature in the Southern Netherlands of the eighteenth century is mostly limited to genres aimed at the general public, such as religious poetry and drama.

But even in these genres, Dutch texts often had to compete with French ones. Literary culture, then, was essentially multilingual in the Southern Netherlands. Authors who published in Dutch would almost always also publish in French. In this sense, there was no such thing as a Dutch author in the South at the time. To fully understand the literary history of this region in this age, it is very important to realise this. It is also at this point where the idea of writing a single unified history of Dutch literature is challenged the most.

The strong point of Tom Verschaffel's book is that he takes this problem as the starting point of his story. He opens it by stating, in my translation: 'A history of Dutch literature in the Southern Netherlands in the eighteenth century: it seems like a history without an object, and in a way, it is' (9). In the rest of his introduction, he further explains this point and demonstrates how marginal the position of Dutch literature was in the Southern Netherlands in the eighteenth century.

Following up on the problem, chapter 1 is entirely devoted to the topic of multilingualism. In the first part of this chapter, Verschaffel discusses the slow emancipation of the Dutch language in the multilingual, primarily French-oriented South. Despite all opposing forces, a slow emancipation process was indeed taking place in this French-dominated environment through the course of the century. This process was spearheaded by the Brussels lawyer Jan Baptist Verlooy, who wrote a well-known treatise in 1788 championing the use of Dutch as a literary language in the Southern Netherlands, and Willem Verhoeven, a broadcloth merchant from Mechelen. But even figures like Verlooy and Verhoeven also still published in French, which shows the enduring relevance of the notion of multilingualism for understanding this part of Dutch literary history. The second part of the first chapter deals with the relationship with the North, which turns out to have been quite asymmetric. Southern authors concerned with Dutch language and literature were looking at their northern neighbours for guidance and inspiration, but authors in the North were apparently not so interested in this cry for help and actually ignored them. As described before, the northern authors had their own concerns about the decline of their literature and how to stop it.

Verschaffel's volume is entitled *De weg naar het binnenland* [The Road to the Interior]. This title can be interpreted in several ways. It refers to the slow turn towards a domestic literary and linguistic culture, as initiated by figures like Verlooy and Verhoeven. It can also be read as a description of the reading experience evoked by this volume, in which Tom Verschaffel guides us on an adventurous journey to the little known and still inhospitable heart of South-Netherlandish eighteenth-century literature. This journey leads, among other things, to the world of the rhetoricians [*rederijkers*], a movement that is mostly associated with fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Dutch literary history. But in the Southern Netherlands, the rhetoricians were still quite dominant in the eighteenth century. What is more, they were among the very few literary institutions in the South for whom Dutch was the primary language. Through the festivities they organised, the rhetoricians contributed strongly to the

survival of Dutch literary culture in this era. Their activities are extensively discussed in chapter 2 of the book.

The general structure of Verschaffel's book is very similar to that of Leemans and Johannes. The main difference is that Verschaffel skips many items, because they simply did not occur in the Southern Netherlands, such as the rise of the (Dutch) novel and the development towards professional (Dutch) authorship. Aside from this, both volumes start with an extensive discussion of the problem facing Dutch literary culture in their region in the eighteenth century – the insignificant position of the Dutch language and the resulting situation of multilingualism in the South, the growing sense of crisis regarding Dutch literature and Dutch culture more generally, and the negative evaluation of contemporary artistic practices that followed from that in the North. They proceed to discuss literary institutions – chambers of rhetoric, societies, journals, the theatre. Thirdly, they discuss poetics – what were the ideas about good poetry and good drama and did these evolve throughout the century? A fourth part is devoted to the main subjects of eighteenth-century literature. In Leemans and Johannes' volume, this part covers four chapters, including the ones on nature and man as objects of study discussed before. Verschaffel limits himself to one chapter, in which two topics are discussed: religion and Enlightenment. In the fifth and last part, the relationship between literature and (political) power takes centre stage. This relationship works in two ways, as both Leemans and Johannes, and Verschaffel show. On the one hand, there is literature as a foundation of political power – odes celebrating a prince or emperor. On the other hand, there is literature as a revolt against existing powers. The latter type is mainly found in the last two decades of the eighteenth century, when both the Dutch Republic and the Southern Netherlands were caught up in revolutionary movements. Literary authors played a significant role in these movements, thus showing the power of words, which turned out to be a rather effective tool for performing politics.

Conclusion

Working in the periphery of a given object of research – in this case Dutch literary history – has some significant advantages. First of all, there is less established knowledge to be considered. Not to be envied is Hugo Brems, the author of the *GNL* volume on postwar Dutch literature (*Altijd weer vogels die nesten beginnen*, 2006), whose book was immediately criticised by people who thought they knew better what should have been in it or what should have been left out. The authors responsible for the seventeenth century, Karel Porteman and Mieke Smits-Veldt (*Een nieuw vaderland voor de muzen*, 2008), did not have an easy task either. This period has been so widely studied that it is virtually impossible to synthesise all findings and do justice to every aspect that has been put forward. The authors of the eighteenth-century volumes were more at liberty to follow their own path and thus to make a clear point in their stories – and they did. Another, related advantage is that when a certain period is less appreciated and less studied, it almost automatically raises questions about the reasons for this, thus stimulating a critical awareness about the practice of writing literary history that the authors of the other volumes were less inclined to. This gives the books by Leemans and Johannes and Verschaffel added value compared with the other volumes. They are not only clear and insightful depictions of the eighteenth-century literary landscape, but also critical reflections on literary historiography.

Of course, this does not mean that the two books discussed in this article are beyond criticism. Both are using a clear thematic structure. This structure supports the arguments the authors seek to make, but it also produces some loose ends. Leemans and Johannes chose to discuss the epistolary novel mainly in chapter 6, in the context of literature as a means to study man. But they also deal with the novel as a genre in chapter 3, on poetics, which hardly refers to any famous examples such as *De historie van mejuffrouw Sara Burgerhart* by Betje Wolff and Aagje Deken (1782). At this point in the book, this certainly raises a few eyebrows. Verschaffel, on the other hand, discusses the few examples of eighteenth-century Dutch novels from the South in a chapter that is for the most part devoted to the genre of drama, a place where you would not expect it, and also would not search for it.

More in general, the two volumes are difficult to use as an introduction to the eighteenth century for non-experts, which is unfortunate as there are so few experts. This has nothing to do with the authors' style, which is very accessible and dotted with ironic side notes that make their texts a pleasure to read. But digesting 700 pages on the North and 300 pages on the South still takes a considerable amount of time, time that laymen are unlikely to spend on a topic that they are unfamiliar with or consider as unimportant. Even Dutch language and culture programmes will not generally have this time at their disposal. These tend to cover eighteenth-century literary history as part of broader course modules on early modern literature, which devote, at best, seven to eight weeks to this period. During this time, students are also expected to read primary sources, and this them with little time for studying a handbook. There is, in other words, a great need for books as clear, convincing and well-written as those by Leemans and Johannes and Verschaffel, but then much shorter.

The latter criticism is not so much directed at the authors of *Worm en donder* and *De weg naar het binnenland* but rather at the *GNL* project as a whole. Now that this series has been completed at last, the Dutch-speaking world has gained eight volumes of up-to-date, enticing literary history. There is, however, a major risk that these histories will never reach the audiences they deserve, simply because of their size. How many non-experts will buy the entire series? How many professors will ask their students to do so? Not many, I am afraid.

Therefore, I end this article with a suggestion. Would it not be a good idea to rework these volumes into manageable handbooks of 100-200 pages maximum per period? That way, the valuable insights produced by Leemans, Johannes, Verschaffel and all the other authors of the *GNL* series will reach a much broader audience, and stimulate the general knowledge of Dutch literary history – which is poor, at least in the Netherlands – in a much more effective way than the current volumes ever can.