

FLEMISH LITERATURE AND WORLD LITERATURE

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WORLD LITERATURE, EUROCENTRISM, WESTERN-CENTRISM

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Goethe is routinely credited with having coined the term and concept of *Weltliteratur* or “world literature.” We now know that Goethe actually was not the first to use the term; that distinction goes to the eighteenth-century Göttingen historian August Ludwig von Schlözer, who used it in his 1773 *Isländische Literatur und Geschichte*. Goethe’s use of the term was triggered by his reading of a Chinese novel; there apparently is still some discussion as to which novel this precisely may have been, and whether he read it in an English or a French translation. During Goethe’s lifetime, Germany as such did not yet exist, remaining, as it had been since the Middle Ages, a motley array of larger and smaller political entities, among which was the Duchy of Saxe-Weimar, where Goethe spent most of his life. Goethe, then, saw translation, and especially what he considered the German genius for translation, as playing an important role in hastening not only the coming into being of world literature, but also as a factor in creating, if not a political, then at least a cultural unity among the German-speaking people, a *Kulturnation*. Goethe himself was a prolific translator, directly or indirectly, from a variety of languages, with as most famous instance his *West-östlicher Divan* of 1819, consisting of translations, adaptations, and imitations of, as well as dialogues with, poems by the fourteenth-century Persian poet Hafiz.

Ever since Goethe, it has been a commonplace that translation is a necessary requirement for the study of world literature, as the multitude of languages, and hence of literatures, in the world is simply too great for anyone to master even a reasonably representative sample. That is why Richard G. Moulton, an Englishman

teaching at the University of Chicago, in one of the first books to systematically reflect on world literature, *World Literature and Its Place in General Culture* (1911), notes in its very first pages that “it is obvious that the study of literature as a whole is impossible without a free use of translations” (3). Against what he calls the prejudice that “the reading of translated literature is a makeshift, and savours of second-hand scholarship” he objects that undoubtedly something is lost in translation, but that “one who refuses translations by that fact cuts himself off from the major part of the literary field; his literary scholarship, however polished and precise, can never rise above the provincial” (4). He further cites the example of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who in his “Essay on Books” stated that he did not hesitate “to read [...] all good books, in translation. What is really best in any book is translatable; any real insight or broad human sentiment” (qtd. in Moulton 5). Albert Guérard, yet another European, French this time, working in the US, at Stanford University, devoted an entire chapter of his 1940 *Preface to World Literature* to what he called “[t]he indispensable instrument: translation” (17).

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Finally, in 2003, David Damrosch claims in *What Is World Literature?* that world literature is “writing that gains in translation” (282). Damrosch primarily meant that it gained greater circulation by now also being available to readers unable to read it in the original. Still, this claim, and its practice in the *Longman Anthology of World Literature*, edited by Damrosch et al., and *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, edited by Martin Puchner et al., has drawn heavy criticism from the likes of Gayatri Spivak, in *Death of a Discipline* (2003), and Emily Apter, in *Against World Literature* (2013). The anthologies in question are primarily meant for American undergraduate courses, but, given the hegemonic position of English as the world’s contemporary *lingua franca*, they are inevitably the internationally most widely disseminated of such anthologies. Basically, Spivak argues that such anthologies, in their aim to make foreign literary works readily accessible to US students, engage in what Lawrence Venuti, in *The Translator’s Invisibility* (1995), labelled “domesticating translation” (6), largely echoing what Goethe outlined in the Note on “Uebersetzung” (translation) he appended to his *West-östlicher Divan* (1819) as the second of the three kinds of translation he discerned. The first is “a simple prose translation” (Goethe 526, my translation). The third “approaches the condition of an interlinear version” and “leads us back to the original text” (532, my translation); it aims to preserve the latter’s strangeness, its foreignness. The second kind “is concerned with entering into the foreign situation, but really only with the intent of appropriating to oneself the foreign and to refashion it according to one’s own lights” (527, my translation). This kind of translation so to speak “naturalizes” the foreign text. In doing so it threatens to turn the entire world into the province of what Jonathan Arac called “Anglo-Globalism” in an article of the same title (2002).

Instead, Spivak and Apter plead for the old, or at least until recently conventional, comparative literature approach that prioritizes reading in the original and that, via the input of Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, and Ernst Robert Curtius, heavily leaned on

the philological tradition developed in first instance by a number of German scholars of Romance literatures, for whom the definition of a comparatist worth the name was that they (almost invariably a he at the time) could speak at least three languages without a discernible accent. Unfortunately, the three languages in question, or the four or five perhaps that the “true” comparatist mastered, were almost invariably the same: French, English, German, Spanish, and Italian, and, if the comparatist in question originated from a country or a place with another native language than any one of these five, in addition their native language, and perhaps yet another from the same language family, for instance the Slavonic, instead of one of the “big five,” but still always languages firmly originating in Europe.

After World War II it gradually became somewhat of a cliché to bash the discipline’s Eurocentrism and its concentration on the literatures I have just enumerated, especially when it came to world literature studies, which were usually seen as being part of comparative literature. In 1959, Werner Friederich, yet again a European, Swiss in this instance, Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, ironically complained at a conference on “The Teaching of World Literature” that world literature programs or courses in the US were undeserving of their name as they actually only taught NATO literatures, and even just a quarter of those—NATO at the time counted fifteen members. Just a few years later, the French comparatist René Etiemble fulminated against the cultural and literary myopia of French intellectuals who, when asked to list whom they considered the one hundred most important “world” authors, awarded sixty slots to ... French authors. He accused Western scholarship on world literature of tunnel vision and clamoured for the inclusion of Arabic, Chinese, Indian, and other non-European literatures. Since then, Etiemble’s call has been taken up by a host of other scholars, from A. Owen Aldridge in the mid-1980s to Shu-mei Shih in the early 2000s, and Aamir R. Mufti and Pheng Cheah in the 2010s. Concurrently, such calls have translated into greatly expanded anthologies of world literature, such as the more recent editions of the *Longman* and *Norton Anthologies* already mentioned. However, as I have had occasion to mention elsewhere (D’haen, “Major Histories” and “Major/Minor”), this has not led to greater inclusiveness of smaller or minor European languages; on the contrary.

BELGIAN LITERATURE?

In the eyes of the world, there is no such a thing as Belgian literature, not even as a “minor” literature in its own right. Everybody’s scholarly first aid vehicle kit these days, *Wikipedia*, includes an article on Belgian literature, but it immediately states that, given that Belgium has three official languages, none of which is its own, literature in each of these languages is usually considered a branch of the literatures proper to the nations that claim ownership of the language in question: French, Dutch, and

German literature. The same thing goes for anthologies of world literature: in the *Longman* and *Norton Anthologies* one will look in vain for something called Belgian literature. In the six volumes, spanning thousands of pages, of the most recent *Norton Anthology* we find just one text from Dutch, a one-page poem by the medieval poet Hadewijch, who is characterized as having lived in Brabant, on the border of present-day Belgium and the Netherlands. Apparently, she serves as representative for both countries, and for all of Dutch-language literature. French-Belgian literature, by the way, fares even worse. While there is plenty of French literature—or, rather, literature from the French—none of it is traceable to a Belgian origin. Of Belgian-German literature we best be silent, as there is nowhere any mention of it. Of course, none of this should surprise us. As to Dutch-language literature, Georg Brandes, the Danish critic and literary historian who at the end of the nineteenth century gained fame with a series of books on *The Main Currents of Nineteenth-Century Literature*, said the following in an 1899 piece on “Weltliteratur”:

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However many translations are taken up, it is nevertheless without a doubt that the writers of the various lands and languages differ widely with respect to the likelihood of acquiring world renown or just a certain measure of acknowledgement. Best of all is the position of the French, even though the French language is probably only fifth largest with regard to its use in the world. When an author is acknowledged in France, he is known across the entire earth. First in the second rank are the English and Germans, who nonetheless can however count on an immense reading public when they are successful. It is only the writers in these three lands who can hope of being read in the original by the most educated in all nations.

Italian and Spanish writers are much less advantageously positioned, but are nonetheless read by a certain public outside their homelands. Nearly the same is the situation among the French-language authors of Belgium and Switzerland, where only the exceptions (for example Cherbuliez, Rod, and Maeterlinck) are fully adopted in France. The Russian writers are certainly not read in the original outside their country, but the Russian population in its millions is a remedy for that.

Those who write in Finnish, Hungarian, Swedish, Danish, Icelandic, Dutch, Greek, and so on are in the universal struggle for world renown clearly positioned most disadvantageously. In the contest for world-renown these authors lack their weapon, their language, and for writers that about says it all. (25)

Needless to say, things have changed since 1899, but all things being equal, we here find in a nutshell what is the situation of Belgian literature, and Flemish literature in particular, even now. In Brandes's time, French fulfilled the *lingua franca* role English plays today, and, with Brandes anticipating Pascale Casanova's claim for Paris as the centre of the literary world, served as the arbiter of what was and what was not, and was never to be, world literature. Today, even works in French are filtered through English when it comes to making it on the world's stage. Belgian-French literature thus is in a doubly disadvantaged position. Its authors first need to be accepted, one could say almost naturalized, as “French” authors before even getting a chance for wider recognition. Note that in the *Norton Anthology* there is no mention of the Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949) Brandes still listed. Neither is there of, say, Georges

Simenon (1903-1989), probably the best-known Belgian-French author, and one as fully naturalized as one could wish, his commissaire Maigret even epitomizing mid-century Paris for many readers. For Belgian-Dutch or Flemish literature the position is worse still, given that even big brother Dutch literature proper, originating from the Netherlands, apparently does not carry sufficient weight on the world literature scale to even be noticed.

Dutch-language literature is, of course, not alone in this respect. Still, it has to be said that some of the other literatures that Brandes ranges with Dutch, and which we can all label “small,” “smaller,” or “minor” literatures, do better than Dutch. Greek is a case apart. Classical Greek literature always figures large in world literature, but in the *Norton Anthology* the modern variant is present in the guise of Constantine Cavafy, even if he hailed from Alexandria in Egypt. I did not note anything from Finnish, Hungarian, Swedish, or Icelandic, but there is at least one story from Polish, and a poem from medieval Welsh, and Norway is there with Henrik Ibsen. The situation is a little better in the *Longman Anthology*, where we find Icelandic literature represented by an extract from Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda* and one from Njal’s Saga, Old Norse literature with a passage from the *Saga of King Rolf Kraki*, as well as a scattering from other European languages next to the already well-known biggies. From the Low Countries there are two passages from Erasmus, but he wrote in Latin, of course. From Dutch, there is nothing.

To be sure, Dutch, and the other small literatures mentioned, is not alone in being neglected from a world literature perspective. The same thing applies to most other such literatures in the world. With specific reference to Europe’s small literatures, though, as I mentioned earlier, we could say that when it comes to anthologization, and to a large extent also theoretical discourse, their quasi-exclusion has been the price to be paid for the gradual inclusion of the larger non-European literatures of the world into the ever-expanding category of world literature. Friederich’s four or five NATO languages—English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish—together with the decidedly non-NATO Russian, and classical Greek and Latin, still make up the bulk of “European” literature in anthologies of world literature, next to large chunks, each of them equivalent to the total space occupied by European literature, of Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Arabic literature. In fact, works from non-European literatures these days usually gathered under the rubrics of postcolonial and multicultural literature, most often in English, now stand a much better chance to make it into such anthologies, or to become the subject of world literature theoretical discourse, as demonstrated by the works of Aamir R. Mufti and Pheng Cheah that I have mentioned before, or, most recently, Baidik Bhattacharya’s *Postcolonial Writing in the Era of World Literature: Texts, Territories, Globalizations* (2018).

The anthologies and the theoretical discourse I have been referring to almost exclusively originate in or from the United States, and quite obviously they reflect, at least to a large extent, typically American concerns, predilections, and, I would say, even prejudices. In other words, the process of selection, inclusion, and exclusion

involved, and the pertinent discourse, are steered by in first instance educational, but beyond this likewise larger cultural, political, and economic considerations having to do with America's shifting demographics and its diminishing influence in a fast-changing geopolitical reality. Europe, let alone its small nation states, looms ever smaller on an American horizon increasingly turned toward the Pacific and East Asia. Dutch-language literature nowhere enters into the new equation, let alone Belgian-Dutch or Flemish literature.

DUTCH AND FLEMISH LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

But how about Dutch-language literature in general, and Flemish literature in particular, in world literature beyond American academe and the *Norton* and *Longman Anthologies*? This too is a sad tale, or at least it has been so for most of the last one
20 hundred years or so. Let us have a brief look at how Flemish literature, as part of Dutch-language literature, has fared in the language that preceded English as the main vehicle of world literature: French. In 2008 Johan Heilbron contributed a chapter on “L'évolution des échanges culturels entre la France et les Pays-Bas à l'hégémonie de l'anglais” to *Translatio: Le marché de la traduction en France à l'heure de la mondialisation*, a volume edited by Gisèle Sapiro. To say that the picture Heilbron paints is far from rosy amounts to an understatement. Relying on both the *Index translationum* as well as other, also Dutch national, data, Heilbron arrives at the conclusion that

traditionnellement, le nombre des traductions du néerlandais vers d'autres langues est extrêmement faible. En dépit de la position de force des Provinces-Unies dans l'Europe pré-moderne et la forte présence d'éditeurs internationaux, les écrivains néerlandais ont été très rarement traduits et n'ont pas eu de véritable reconnaissance littéraire internationale. (“L'évolution” 322)

In fact, Heilbron here is only summarizing with respect to the French situation, backed up with hard figures, what he had already said in greater detail and more generally in a Dutch-language article of 1995, and an English-language one of 1999. In the latter article, “Towards a Sociology of Translation: Book Translations as a Cultural World System,” and loosely adopting Immanuel Wallerstein's well-known world systems theory but carefully distinguishing his own sociologically- and culturally-oriented approach from Wallerstein's economic historiographic one, Heilbron divides the global field of translations into central, semi-central or semi-peripheral, and peripheral languages and literatures on the basis of the number of book translations made from them, the so-called ex-translations.

For the period roughly equivalent with the late 1970s and early 1980s Heilbron found that four languages and their literatures could be deemed central: English, French, German, and Russian, with each of them yielding more than 10 percent of translations worldwide. In fact, English could be said to occupy a hyper-central position, accounting for more than 40 percent. Perhaps more surprisingly, he found

the following six languages to occupy a semi-central or semi-peripheral position: Spanish, Italian, Danish, Swedish, Polish, and Czech. The rest of the world's languages fell into the peripheral category ("Towards a Sociology" 434). The fact that this category included, for instance, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, and Arabic, all of them with huge numbers of speakers, goes to underscore the fact that the position in the global power field of translation does not depend on number of speakers, nor, Heilbron would argue, on the economic or political weight a country carries. Heilbron also specifies that in practice the difference between semi-peripheral and peripheral languages and literatures is highly debatable, as even the so-called semi-peripherals score only between 1 and 3 percent, while the real peripherals score less than 1 percent, and that in reality we can talk here of gliding scales changing over sometimes relatively brief time intervals. In fact, the overall system is dynamic, although most changes fundamentally affecting it operate over fairly long spans of time; the example Heilbron gives is the change from French to English as *lingua franca*, taking from the end of the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, with German for much of that same period occupying an intermediate role, less important than French but more important than English. In a more recent joint publication of Heilbron and Sapiro, the role of extra-literary and extra-cultural factors is squarely recognized when translation markets are said to be "embedded in the power relations between nation states and language groups" ("Translation" 383). And talking of peripherality: Dutch-language literature squarely fell into that less-than-one-percent category for the reference period mentioned.

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As Heilbron notes, it is not that Dutch-language works were not being translated. Quoting earlier research, he mentions that although in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries some Dutch-language authors had some renown, none ever entered the ranks of world literature. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, very little was translated from Dutch, he notes. The situation only started to improve in the twentieth century, with the number of translations steadily rising to stabilize at some 500 to 600 titles per year from the 1960s to the time of Heilbron's writing his 1999 article. Notwithstanding these rising numbers, no Dutch-language writer had succeeded in gaining international recognition as a major literary figure. In fact, this is not really true. For one, Heilbron, like most translation scholars, only looks at book translations. As Luc van Doorslaer argues in "The Relative Neglect of Newspapers in Translation Studies Research" (2011), an article based on his 2000 University of Leuven dissertation, the Flemish naturalist author Cyriel Buysse was extensively translated, but most of these translations appeared in journals, and not in book form, and thus they have hitherto largely gone unnoticed in translation studies research. Undoubtedly, there is a whole field still to be explored here. But even when we look at book translations only, we can also unhesitatingly point to one Flemish author, Hendrik Conscience (1812-1883), who undoubtedly gained international recognition at some point, although we should immediately qualify this by saying that he has lost it in the meantime.

As Lieven D'hulst has detailed in a 2019 essay, Conscience enjoyed a truly international reputation throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, and he was avidly translated not only into French, German, and English, but also into Spanish, Italian, and Czech. Moreover, D'hulst demonstrates his case by way of Conscience's novellas and short stories, and not, as one would expect, by the example of what we now consider Conscience's most important work, the 1838 *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen* (*The Lion of Flanders*). Theo Hermans has chronicled Conscience's popularity more broadly in a *Low Countries* article of 2014. In any case, we can gauge Conscience's international standing by the fact that in 1886, three years after his death, his *Œuvres complètes*, in 11 volumes, appeared with the prestigious publishing house of Michel Lévy in Paris. What is perhaps even more illuminating is that no less than Alexandre Dumas (père) plagiarized Conscience's *De loteling*. And, according to Hermans (167), by 1942 more than 400,000 copies had been sold of the German translation of his *De arme Edelman* (*A Poor Gentleman*). Consequently, and starting from the premises

22 advanced by Heilbron, Sapiro, Van Es, and others, D'hulst argues that

Conscience's international career seems to contradict a well-known thesis of translation sociology, i.e. that the relation between intrantranslation and extrantranslation is an asymmetrical one: the more a language in-translates, the more its position among other languages is peripheral; the more it ex-translates, the more its position is central. Conscience is one of the most ex-translated authors of the second half of the nineteenth century, although his mother tongue is one of the more peripheral national languages of Europe. Unquestionably, one should not forget that the translations made into the central languages, German and French, actually serve as source texts (or indirect translation) in view of the broader European and North American dissemination of the Flemish originals. Be that as it may, there are no other examples of Flemish or even Dutch writers turning global during the same period. (115)

Still, what is equally unquestionable is that Conscience's reputation as of the end of the nineteenth century went into steep decline, never really to recover. This happened first on the national front, and then internationally. As D'hulst notes at the outset of his article:

The process of Conscience's rise and decline in his home country parallels to a large extent his international trajectory. Once read all over Europe and across the Atlantic, Conscience's work has now disappeared from the international canon, bookshops and libraries, while *Wikipedia* and other easily accessible or open resources reproduce without further notice and in many languages the same images and stereotypes that prevail in Belgium [i.e. that his prose is unreadable, that he is hopelessly romantic, and that the only thing now remembered of him is the cliché that "he taught his people how to read"]. Understandably, national and international trends mutually determine one another: Conscience, as "the chief" of the then new Flemish literature [...], the Flemish Walter Scott, served as an example of the emergent literatures of the nineteenth century, and his international image boosted his prestige at home. (105)

What we remember is that even this most translated of Dutch-language writers, whose international popularity at a given moment according to D'hulst was compa-

rable to that of Charles Dickens, ultimately failed to become an international classic, because that after all is what it takes to make it into the pantheon of world literature, or into leading anthologies of world literature.

All in all, then, the picture Heilbron dressed at the very end of the twentieth century is correct as far as the international standing of Dutch-language literature in general, and of Flemish literature in particular, was concerned. Heilbron also gives a number of reasons for this lack of translational success, and most of them come down to what, in terms outlined by Pierre Bourdieu (1992), Pascale Casanova (1999), and John Guillory (1993), can be subsumed under the label “cultural” or “literary capital.” I have already noted the absence of an international “classic” in Dutch-language literature. Dutch-language literature by now must also be about the only European literature that in the one hundred-plus year history of the Nobel Prize for literature has never had a winner. There has been one Belgian winner: Maeterlinck, the Belgian-French writer Brandes thought stood a fair chance of making it into the ranks of world authors because he had been fully adopted, or naturalized as I called it earlier, as a French author. It is not a little ironic that the only author to make it as such was a Fleming from Ghent writing in French. Although some Flemish authors are rumoured to have been among the possible prize winners—Hugo Claus, Louis Paul Boon, Herman Teirlinck—none has ever received the final accolade. Finally, bearing in mind the examples of Cavafy and Ibsen as representatives of modern Greek and Norwegian literature in the Norton and Longman anthologies, also the absence of what Mads Rosendahl Thomsen has called a “lonely canonical” (44) contributes to the abject neglect of Dutch-language, let alone Flemish, literature.

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What a combination of classics, lone canonicals, and Nobel Prize winners may do for a smaller European literature is shown in the case of Portugal, with a classic in the guise of Luís Vaz de Camões, a modernist lonely canonical in the person of Fernando Pessoa, and the Nobel Prize winner José Saramago. And since we are on the subject of Portugal anyway, it is perhaps also worth pointing out how differently Portuguese academe, and the Portuguese literary establishment in general, treat their Conscience lookalikes, authors of historical romances à la Walter Scott, novels of manners, and regional tales, such as Alexandre Herculano (1810-1877) or Camilo Castelo Branco (1825-1890). Instead of being held up to ridicule, as, to a certain extent, has been the case with Conscience, they are the subject of serious scholarly attention and, unlike the works of Conscience, their works are still readily available, some of them in the series *Clásicos da Literatura Portuguesa*, others in paperbacks, by regular publishers. What helps is that nineteenth-century Portuguese literature can boast at least one novelist of undeniably continuing international repute, Eça de Queiroz (1845-1900), as well as a number of important poets, again following the example of Scott's narrative verses from the beginning of his career, foremost among them João Almeida Garrett (1799-1854). In other words, whereas nineteenth-century Portuguese literature provides a complex context in which to situate writers working in a similar vein as their Flemish counterparts, Conscience stands alone.

Another factor that certainly also boosts Portuguese writers' chances of success in the international literary market is that, although Portugal itself is only a small European nation, and within Europe its language can be reckoned a minor one, worldwide the Portuguese-speaking community is one of the largest in the world, able to sustain a market big enough to keep in print its classics, and to keep up scholarly interest, in Portuguese-language countries as well as among the Portuguese diaspora, including academic, as in, for instance, the United States. In a chapter he contributed to the 2018 *Cambridge Companion to World Literature*, Stefan Helgesson provides a very interesting analysis of how the work of a little-known twentieth-century writer from Mozambique, José Craveirinha (1922-2003), circulates in a number of world literary contexts, regardless of his hardly ever having been translated, precisely because of Portuguese being an imperial language.

24 Notwithstanding all this, of Portuguese literature proper, i.e. that issuing from Portugal itself, of the three "world authors" I listed earlier, only Camões and Pessoa made it into the *Longman*, and only Camões into the *Norton*. Nor does Portuguese-language literature from beyond Portugal fare any better. The *Norton* only features Brazilians Machado de Assis and Clarice Lispector, the *Longman* likewise Machado de Assis and Lispector, next to Carlos Drummond de Andrade. For the pre-modern period Portuguese (in fact, Galician-Portuguese) literature does better, better anyway than Dutch-language literature, with selections from Dom Dinis and Martin Codax. For a still wider, and different, picture, you can turn to the recent six-volume anthology *Literatura-Mundo Comparada: Perspectivas em Português*, edited by Helena Buescu (2018-2020).

Unlike other European colonial powers, the Netherlands never imposed its own language upon its major colony, present-day Indonesia. Belgium ran its erstwhile colony, the present-day Democratic Republic of Congo, commonly called Congo-Kinshasa, exclusively in French. As at least a partial consequence of this, Dutch-language literature in general, and Flemish literature in particular, notwithstanding the fact that Dutch is taught at a significant number of universities worldwide, lacks an international support community that keeps alive popular interest also beyond the borders of the Netherlands and Belgium, as well as a postcolonial literature in the language of the erstwhile metropole. There are a number of writers from usually mixed Dutch-Indonesian descent writing in Dutch, but they all were born in the Netherlands, or moved there at a very early age with their parents, and they are considered simply Dutch authors. Some examples are Marion Bloem (b. 1952) and Adriaan Van Dis (b. 1946). There are also writers from the Dutch Antilles and Surinam writing in Dutch—names that spring to mind are those of Albert Helman (1903-1996), Cola Debrot (1902-1981), or Astrid Roemer (b. 1947), but they too are most often considered simply part of Dutch literature. Even though Caribbean literature in general has received increasing attention over the last few decades, with, for instance, Nobel Prizes for Derek Walcott and V.S. Naipaul, Maryse Condé consistently being rumoured as a contender, and Saint-John Perse in an already slightly

more distant past, Dutch-Caribbean literature does not figure in discussions focusing exclusively on literature in Spanish, English, and French. Naipaul and Walcott make their appearance in the *Longman Anthology*, next to Aimé Césaire, also from the Caribbean, and the same three authors figure in the *Norton Anthology*, next to Jamaica Kincaid and Junot Díaz, although the latter two are usually already considered “American,” that is to say United States, authors. The *Longman* also has a piece by Cuban Alejo Carpentier. No Dutch anywhere.

There is no Flemish postcolonial literature. Given what I earlier signalled as the postcolonial-inspired trend in present-day world literature studies, French-language Congolese literature may well stand a better chance of making it into contemporary anthologies of world literature than francophone literature from Belgium. The same may be true of Afrikaans literature, written in a language derived from that spoken by the Dutch settlers in South Africa. Whereas Afrikaans originally was the language of the white Apartheid regime, over the course of its development it also has been adopted by a sizeable portion of South Africa’s people of colour.

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WHY IS DUTCH-LANGUAGE LITERATURE HELD IN SUCH LOW REGARD?

The lack of internationally recognized literary figures is surely an important factor in Dutch-language literature’s low standing at the time Heilbron published the articles of his to which I have had occasion to refer, but as some of my recent remarks already indicate, there are others. Heilbron mentions the doubtful quality of translations from Dutch and their by and large being published by insignificant publishing houses. André Lefevere, a Flemish translation studies scholar who moved to the United States in the early 1980s, taking up a professorship at the University of Texas at Austin, is best remembered for his oft-anthologized article “Mother Courage’s Cucumbers,” analyzing the 1952 Broadway American production of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*. It was also the wider look he acquired from his move to the US that permitted him to cast a cold eye on Dutch-language literature and its fortunes, or misfortunes, in translation, from the vantage point of the late 1980s. He did so in a 1990 essay matter-of-factly called “Dutch in the United States,” and it effectively lays bare the weaknesses that prevented Dutch-language literature from making any impression in the US. Lefevere notes that Dutch literary works are being translated into English, albeit not in large numbers, that they do appear on the US market, that—contrary to Heilbron—the translations are no worse than those from other languages, but that notwithstanding all this they do not sell. Why not? Cultural capital again. Dutch as a language does not carry any prestige, at variance with Dutch painting or even—this is 1990!—Dutch electronics, meaning Philips. Again: no Nobel Prize!

When it comes to Flemish literature, we might add that Americans in general have

only a scant notion of what Flanders or Flemish stand for—Lefevere refers to Dutch painting, but he might just as well have said Early Netherlandic painting, a label that by and large has replaced the earlier Flemish Primitives. The result is that Breughel, Rubens, and Van Dyck for the average American have all become Netherlandic, and thus from the Netherlands, just like Rembrandt, Vermeer, Van Gogh, and Mondriaan. If Flanders means anything at all to Americans, it is probably as an exotic reference in Canadian John McCrae’s “In Flanders’ fields the poppies blow,” a poem about World War I. In fact, the only Dutch-language works that do awaken some interest in Americans have invariably to do with the wars, and specifically World War II for Dutch literature. *The Diary of Anne Frank* is about the only Dutch-language work one can safely assume most Americans, at least those of a certain age, and of European extraction, to have at least heard of. It is no coincidence that the only novel of Harry Mulisch to have had some success in the US is *De aanslag* (1982), translated as *The Assault*. The more recent success of Stefan Hertmans’s *Oorlog and terpentijn*, translated as *War and Turpentine* (2013), only goes to prove the point for Flemish literature.

Beyond this, Dutch-language literature is just too tame for American tastes. It is not for nothing that the Dutch literary scholar Ton Anbeek (1981), after a year teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, upon his return to the Netherlands in 1980 reflecting on the decided lack of enthusiasm for Dutch fiction he noticed in his American students, clamoured for more street-noise in Dutch literature in a brief article that became the talk of the town—that is to say the *Amsterdamse grachten-gordel*, where Dutch literary reputations are made or unmade—and that made his reputation, for better or worse, for the rest of his career. And other than Lefevere, who felt that English translations of Dutch-language literary works were no worse than those from other languages, Anthony Paul, himself a practising translator, in an essay in the same 1990 volume as Lefevere’s, did find fault with many of these translations, singling out by way of example what he calls “the shameful ineptitude of the American version of Mulisch’s *De aanslag*” (72). On the other hand, he underlines that a single good translator can make “an appreciable difference to the status of such an unfamiliar literature” (72), and he cites as examples Adrienne Dixon in English and Philippe Noble in French. Paul also blames publishers, or their editors, for often linguistically flattening translations from unfamiliar literatures in the interest of making them more easily accessible for audiences unaccustomed to this material. In fact, such interventions can kill a work or an author.

Flemish literature, then, suffers the fate of other small or minor literatures in translation, only more so, as it faces the extra hurdle of being the junior branch of what is already a minor literature. It also suffers from the fact that, unlike its “senior” counterpart, the region it comes from has no immediately recognizable image abroad. When you mention the Netherlands, or—*pace* the “other” Dutchmen—“Holland,” tulips, windmills, and wooden shoes automatically jump to mind the world over. “Flanders” calls forth no image at all; if anything, it is the epithet “Belgian” that

summons recognizable images of ... beer, waffles, and chocolate. But most foreigners would not know where to situate Belgium either. Worse again, if Brussels usually rings more bells than Belgium does, it is often in a negative sense. To recall just a few literary examples, Victor Hugo, Baudelaire, and Verlaine found little positive to say about the Belgian capital, scathingly comparing it to Paris by making fun of the near homology, in French, between the name of the little river Zenne running through nineteenth-century Brussels like an open and smelly sewer, pronounced “Senne” in French, and the “real” and glorious Seine of Parisian fame. Or, if one wants a more recent example, consider Robert Menasse’s *Die Hauptstadt* (*The Capital*, 2017), which ridicules Brussels as the capital of the European Union.

An additional disadvantage is that Flanders has no major Dutch-language publishers, and that Flemish authors first have to make it in the Netherlands, or again, Amsterdam, before they even stand a chance of being picked up in the international circuit. Most often, this already—and certainly so in the past—involves a flattening of what is “Flemish” with respect to linguistic norms and usage under the guise of “improving”—read: easing the acceptance, and hence enhancing the marketability—of the work for a Dutch readership, indispensable for even moderate commercial success. Belgian-French authors, by the way, face the same problem, though for them it is Paris rather than Amsterdam that sets the rules.

27

A TURNING POINT?

I have repeatedly had occasion to refer to articles published at the end of the twentieth century, and to the 1980s as a sort of turning point. Indeed, as Heilbron also notes, as of about 1980 things start to improve. For one thing, this is when translations from Dutch start making an impression abroad. Earlier I mentioned how Anthony Paul praised Adrienne Dixon. Dixon had been active as a translator from the 1960s, with translations of a.o. Harry Mulisch’s *Het stenen bruidsbed* (*The Stone Bridal Bed*, 1962), Anna Blaman’s *Op leven en dood* (*A Matter of Life and Death*, 1974) and Gerard Walschap’s *Een mens van goede wil* (*The Man Who Meant Well*, 1975), next to Louis Paul Boon’s *De Kapellekensbaan* (*Chapel Road*, 1972). However, her breakthrough, and that of Dutch-language literature in the US, only came when her 1983 translation of Cees Nooteboom’s *Rituelen* (*Rituals*) won the Pegasus Prize, which brought with it publication by Louisiana State University Press. The translation garnered unanimously favourable reviews in the American press. Nooteboom became popular in Germany with the translation of *Het volgende verhaal* (1991) as *Die folgende Geschichte* (1994), which was lavishly praised by the then extremely influential German literary journalist and television host Marcel Reich-Ranicki. Translations in many other languages followed, and for the last few decades Nooteboom has repeatedly been rumoured for the Nobel Prize. What has not harmed Nooteboom’s popularity is that for some fifty years now he has been active as a travel writer, often

in more general or popular periodicals, that for the same span of time he has lived part-time in Spain and publishes in Spanish, and that he is part of a wide European network of writers and artists, among whom is, for instance, the well-known German philosopher and publicist Rüdiger Safranski.

Philippe Noble became active as a translator from Dutch into French with a rendering of E. Du Perron's *Het land van herkomst* (*Pays d'origine, Land of Origin*, 1935), which appeared with Gallimard in 1980. Since then, Noble, who is also an influential editor with Actes Sud, which over the last forty years has established itself as a major player in French publishing, has translated almost all of Nooteboom, Mulisch's *De aanslag* (*L'Attentat*), and works by F.P. Thomése, David van Reybrouck, Arnon Grunberg, and Oek De Jong, and also Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* (1860) and *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

28 Most commentators agree that the Frankfurter Buchmesse of 1993, where the Netherlands and Flanders were joint host countries, marked the decisive breakthrough of Dutch-language literature on the international scene. In "Dutch Literature in Translation: A Global View" (2020), Jack Martin detects another spike in the number of translations from Dutch on the occasion of the Frankfurter Buchmesse of 2016, when the Netherlands and Flanders once again acted as joint hosts. In "L'évolution des échanges culturels entre la France et les Pays-Bas à l'hégémonie de l'anglais," Heilbron also draws attention to the fact that Claus's *Het verdriet van België* (*The Sorrow of Belgium*, 1983), translated by another noted translator, Alain van Crugten, as *Le Chagrin des Belges*, and Mulisch's *De aanslag* not only have been translated by undoubtedly very competent translators, but that these translations have appeared with prestigious publishers such as Hanser and Klett-Cotta in Germany and Julliard and Calman-Lévy in France. Add to this Actes Sud in France, as well as Gallimard, with whom several of Noble's translations of Nooteboom have appeared, Pantheon in the US and Penguin Classics in the UK for *The Sorrow of Belgium*, the translation of *Het verdriet van België*, and Random House in the US for *The Assault*, and it will be clear that the pre-1980 situation, when Dutch-language literary works were translated by sometimes inept translators and appeared with marginal publishers, no longer applies. Moreover, many if not most of the works whose translational reception in English, French, or German I have been briefly detailing, have also gained entry into other languages. *Het verdriet van België*, for instance, has been translated into Persian, Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, Finnish, Italian, Croatian, Modern Greek, Ukrainian, Romanian, Polish, Swedish, Slovenian, and Hungarian, and I am probably missing a few languages.

The same thing can be said with regard to the latest bestsellers from Flanders. I have already mentioned Van Reybrouck, whose *Congo: Een geschiedenis* (*Congo: A History*, 2009) has been translated into French, German, English, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Finnish, Polish, Spanish, Italian, Serbian, and Chinese, and is probably being translated into many more languages right now, and his more recent *Revolusi*, about the Indonesian struggle for independence against the Dutch, surely

is about to follow the same path towards success. Stefan Hertmans's *Oorlog en terpentijn* (*War and Turpentine*, 2013) has been equally successful. As McMartin puts it in his 2019 KU Leuven dissertation *Book to Book*, *Oorlog en terpentijn* “stands out as one of the few novels from Flanders to have achieved widespread international circulation and success in recent decades. Not since Claus's *Het verdriet van België* [*The Sorrow of Belgium*] [...] has a novel from Flanders travelled so well, so far, so quickly” (170). The book was not only a runaway success in Belgium and the Netherlands, where it won several prizes, but was also quickly translated into more than thirty languages, and shortlisted for several foreign literary prizes, among which is the Man Booker International Prize, and it was also commercially successful. Frank Albers, for instance, in his article “Orpheus in the Trenches: Modes of Translation in Stefan Hertmans' *War and Turpentine*,” quotes Simon Schama praising Hertmans's novel in *The New York Times*. On the strength of all this, Hertmans's subsequent novels have also been widely picked up in the international book market.

All things said, and notwithstanding some undeniable successes, we cannot help but notice again the relatively weak position of Flemish literature within the overall context of Dutch-language literature in translation. Jack McMartin notes that the percentage of translations from Flemish literature in the total of translations from Dutch declined from 30 to 20 percent in the twenty years from 1998 to 2018 (“Dutch Literature” 150). For Flemish source publishers the numbers are even worse, as McMartin sees a decrease from 21 to a mere 13 percent in the same twenty years. Undoubtedly, the latter has everything to do with the fact that a first requirement for Flemish writers to make it into the big wide world beyond Putte, a village marking the border with the Netherlands, is to find an Amsterdam publisher. For the same period, McMartin (151) has also detailed how translation into German remains most important, with some 25 percent, followed by English and French, at 10 to 12 percent each, and then Spanish and Italian, and then again, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Danish and Chinese, all of them with some 5 percent each. Using Heilbron's terminology borrowed from Wallerstein, McMartin labels the first three languages central, the next four semi-central or semi-peripheral, and all others peripheral, with less than 3 percent each, and always taking into account, of course, that in many languages no translation is going on from Dutch at all.¹

Those familiar with discussions of world literature, or with the introduction Elke Brems, Theresia Feldmann, Orsola Réthelyi, and Ton Van Kalmonthout provided for the 2020 issue of *Dutch Crossing* devoted to the transnational circulation of Dutch-language literature, will have noticed that throughout this article I have been talking of two different conceptions or definitions of world literature. One has to do with world literature as a canon, whether explicitly defined as such or implicitly established via anthologies. The other definition has to do with what Damrosch, in *What Is World Literature?*, defined as circulation beyond the culture of origin, whether in the original or in translation. From all I have said it would seem that both Dutch-Dutch literature, originating from the Netherlands, and Flemish or Belgian-Dutch

literature, as the minor or what I have called the junior branch of Dutch-language literature, have clearly joined the ranks of world literature in the second definition, as many of their products increasingly circulate beyond the borders of their “country of origin.” However, McMartin notes that a large number of actual translations rely on translation grants from government agencies promoting Dutch and Flemish literature abroad, and thus bypass real market logic (*Boek to Book*; “Dutch Literature”); therefore, this upbeat message needs serious qualification, although he also notes that things have been rapidly and fundamentally changing over the last decade or so (“A Small”). Moreover, following Nicky Van Es and Johan Heilbron (2015), for both subsidized and non-subsidized translations distinction should be made between their symbolic and commercial success, the former being more often the case than the latter. As to the first definition, pertaining to a canon of world literature, it remains doubtful whether Flemish literature, and Dutch-language literature more in general, has succeeded in satisfying the criteria required. Only time will tell

30 whether any Flemish writer, any Dutch writer, will ever make it into that pantheon of world authors, and into the anthologies consecrating them as such, but there is hope, as Jack McMartin and Paola Gentile, in a 2020 article in *Translation Studies*, refer to Hertmans’s *War and Turpentine* as a “future classic.” Perhaps the same may shortly be said of Marieke Lucas Rijneveld’s *De avond is ongemak* (2018), which earned the Booker International Prize in 2020 with its English translation by Michele Hutchison as *The Discomfort of Evening*. In the meantime, however, recent scholarly books such as *Doing Double Dutch* (2017) and journal issues such as that of *Dutch Crossing* just mentioned, focusing on the transnational trajectories of Dutch literature, help clarify the patterns of power—linguistic, cultural, economic, historical—underlying world literature in its various, and shifting, guises.

NOTE

1. For even more recent data on the international circulation of Flemish literature, see McMartin, “The International Circulation of Dutch Literature from Flanders.”

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