



Review: A literary history for international students of Dutch

Gera, Judith and A. Agnes Sneller, *Inleiding literatuurgeschiedenis voor de internationale neerlandistiek* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2010)

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Judit Gera and A. Agnes Sneller's *Inleiding literatuurgeschiedenis voor de internationale neerlandistiek* aims to supply non-native speakers of Dutch with an introduction to the history of Dutch literature. With a view to this, the authors provide their readers with a succinct chronological overview of this literature from its beginnings in the Middle Ages until the present. This results in seven chapters, each of which is also used to present and demonstrate – through the analysis of one or more sample texts chosen from the period under discussion – a recent approach to literature.

Gera and Sneller's initiative is a highly laudable one. Non-native students of Dutch, who as a rule do not take part in the social and cultural/literary life of the Dutch language area, are – to a considerably greater extent than their native counterparts – initially unfamiliar with the cultural and literary canon of this area, in other words with a host of names and titles and with the frames of reference these are generally embedded in. These students should of course be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills for them to be able to credibly take part in discussions of Dutch literature – and obviously, this will require an effort greater than the one needed to bring native students 'up to speed'.

As Gera and Sneller indicate, the thing to do, then, is to offer this specific audience a 'survey [...] of the literature'¹ in the various periods of its existence. This book's primary ambition being to offer a first introduction to Dutch literary history, one can readily understand that it 'does not aim for completeness'.² Still, one can ask if it really succeeds in attaining the objective it sets out to achieve. After all, it counts a mere 168 pages, a considerable portion to which are devoted to bringing various theoretical approaches into practice – and therefore not to the announced survey. I believe, therefore, that this *Inleiding literatuurgeschiedenis voor de internationale neerlandistiek* could have done a better job at familiarizing non-native students with the canon of Dutch literature.

Let us take as an example the way the book treats the 1660-1790 period, to which the third chapter is devoted. In this chapter, Gera and Sneller focus on travel stories [130] and libertine novels, spectatorial literature, the satirist Jacob Campo Weyerman, the epistolary novel (Sara Burgerhart), Van Alphen's poetry for children, and classicist tragedy (Huydecoper) versus Langendijk's comedies. No mention is made of the paradigmatic struggle between ('classicist')

societies and ('romantic') geniuses and of the part played in this conflict by poets such as Bellamy, Bilderdijk and Van Alphen,³ nor of the equally paradigmatic rise of Sentimentalism or early Romanticism (Rhijnvis Feith). Literature in Dutch outside the Republic is ignored entirely. It could, I believe, have been most instructive to discuss the temporary persistence of Dutch literature in the north of France (Michiel de Swaen), as it offers a fine example of the fact that the frontiers of a literature are not transhistorical or beyond discussion. A brief sketch of the situation in the Spanish/Austrian Netherlands would have been useful to show how literature in Dutch survived here in the chambers of rhetoric and in a Catholic context – circuits which would go on to contribute to the reconstruction of Dutch literature in the decades following Belgian independence in 1830. And a discussion of the well-known 1788 treatise by Brussels lawyer J.B.C. Verlooy would have illustrated how international Enlightenment views regarding national identity anticipated the overwhelming importance of language in nineteenth-century Flemish nationalist discourse. The case of Verlooy also offers an interesting illustration of how literary history is written – in this case: how Flemish nationalist literary historiography would go on to frame this author as a herald of the 'Flemish renaissance' at the end of the 'dark' eighteenth century.

Not only is the way the canon of the period under discussion is laid out here somewhat erratic and summary, Gera and Sneller also present their readership with a mix of various stages of the canon of Dutch literature. This is made especially clear by the fact that they open their discussion of the 1660-1790 period by bestowing ample attention upon travel stories and libertine novels. Their doing so is clearly influenced by recent rewritings of the literary canon of the period. It is true that these texts were popular in their own time, but they enjoyed little respectability and were therefore initially excluded from the canon, as preference was given to 'serious' and edifying literature. This should have been mentioned,⁴ as an introduction to the canon of a literature should include important rewritings of this canon under the impulse of (in the broadest sense) ideological debates in literature and in literary historiography.

Another problem with Gera and Sneller's choices is that they are made at the expense of a properly historical approach to literature. This comes, I believe, as a corollary of their decision to use this volume as an introduction not only to the history of Dutch literature, but to various theoretical approaches for reading and analysing literary texts as well. In making this choice, Gera and Sneller remain, it would seem, tributary to the 'synchronic', text-centred approaches that dominated the greater part of literary studies in the twentieth century at the expense of literary historiography ('diachrony') proper. This is at least suggested by their introductory [131] remark that, '[i]n the discussion of literature, [...] we believe the text has to be the main focus of attention'.⁵

Which, then, would be specifically historical questions the present volume could have familiarized its readership with? This is of course not the place to go into a lengthy theoretical discussion of the problems involving literary historiography. I will therefore restrict myself to advancing a few suggestions as to which questions could be addressed in presenting a historical introduction.

One salient feature of history in general and of literary history in particular is its *contingency*. The history of a given period is always and genuinely open: it is the product of a struggle of which the outcome is not predetermined, but the result of a battle between historical agents and the discourses they identify with. This does not amount to saying that historical processes take place randomly and accidentally (although chance is definitely a historical factor): in general, they can be linked to real, 'traumatic' events taking place and, more

specifically, to the competing ways in which these events are discursively framed. Historical struggle, then, is a 'political' struggle between competing symbolic formations interpellating – offering themselves as surfaces of inscription to – historical subjects. This would be a way to account for the precise nature of the relationship between literature and its context and, in doing so, to address the problem of 'causality' in literary history: literature does react to historical events and their discursive constructions, but not along the lines of simple cause-and-effect relations. Its causes are to be understood retroactively, after the historical process has taken place. Put differently: we can explain why, for instance, naturalism in the Netherlands manifested itself as it did, but it would be an illusion to believe that the factors identified in the process *necessarily* led up to the outcome that prevailed in historical reality.

If literary history really is the result of a competition between agents and discourses, which then are the factors that can help explain historical success? Discourses are most likely to become influential if they are apt to *forge a collective will*, which implies – more often than not – the identification of a common enemy, who is supposed to hinder the full unfolding of 'our' identities.⁶ The success of a discourse can also be furthered by the fact that other, competing, discourses are *dislocated* (robbed of their legitimacy and credibility) by historical events they are unable to integrate and account for. And another factor conducive to success is *repetition*: the more vigorously views are brought into circulation, the more likely they are to become accepted – to the extent even that they can become sedimented, in other words, transmitted over a period of time exceeding the success of the discourse of which they were originally a part.

The success and even hegemony of a discourse does not preclude historical change. This is, among others, due to what Derrida calls *iterability*: in being reproduced, discourses are always also displaced and therefore (sometimes drastically) modified. The unpredictable effects of the 'sliding of the signifier' usually come on top of those caused by *individual agency*: discourses often get a particular slant as [132] they are wielded by individuals. These particularisms can become influential if the subjects in question acquire key positions in social – in our case: literary – institutions. This being so is sometimes a matter of pure chance (one can, as a matter of fact, happen to be 'the right person in the right place'), but it is more often than not furthered by various factors, such as the membership of powerful social networks or the disposal of technical and/or rhetorical skills.

The reason why I discuss these historical mechanisms at such length in what is, after all, no more than a book review, is that they are crucial for an adequate description of literary movements, the succession of which is used as the backbone of this book. Gera and Sneller describe these movements as international phenomena defined by a limited set of characteristics, which usually, in one way or another, emanate from a wider historical context. Romanticism, for instance, has 'in the whole of Europe common features',⁷ and 'possibly finds its origin in the disappointment over the European powers' restoration politics'.⁸ Dutch romanticism, then, would merely be a local variant of the international phenomenon.

This can, unfortunately, hardly be accepted as an adequate representation of historical reality. To begin with, it would have been useful to point out that romantic discourse was articulated in competition with other discourses, among others those of Enlightenment and of Classicism, and constituted one of various possible reactions to historic events as well as discursive constructions these events give rise to – a reaction that, in retrospect, proves to have conquered the hearts and minds of many cultural and literary actors in Europe. In other words, Romanticism and other literary movements are by no means clear-cut phenomena with a solid, stable essence that are mysteriously and irresistibly triggered by what happens in the 'wider

historical context'. They are discursive constructions and, as such, partially stable, but always also undergoing processes of displacement and change (cf. early, high and late romanticism). They are, moreover, always 'localized'.

Dutch Romanticism offers an excellent example of this, as it differs considerably from Romanticism in the larger European literatures. This most certainly constituted an important source of inspiration, but its input underwent important changes in the process of its appropriation by the Dutch literary system. As a matter of fact, some characteristics of international romanticism met with such strong resistance that they became virtually suppressed, narrowing Dutch Romanticism down to a nationalist bourgeois Romanticism. In describing this process, one should do justice to influential interventions by individual agents such as Potgieter and Jacob Geel.

Dutch Romanticism is, for that matter, also very different from its Flemish counterpart. In the 1830s, the earliest Flemish Romantics (Willems and his 'language lovers') were, in the context of a budding Belgian state in which French was, in all respects, the dominant language, mainly preoccupied with the legitimation and codification of Dutch language and literature – which was of course not necessary at all in the Netherlands. Another important difference was the rise, in the wake [133] of Gezelle's literary activity, of a conservative Catholic ('neogothic') strain of Romanticism, which also existed in the Netherlands, but never acquired the same influence there.

As one can infer from the above, this *Inleiding literatuurgeschiedenis voor de internationale neerlandistiek* seems strikingly reluctant to account for power struggles and competition as driving forces of literary evolution. This may be connected with the authors' theoretical and ideological position, which can be seen transpiring in their remarkable discussion of two romantic historical novels, *The House of Lauernesse* by Dutch female writer A.L.G. Bosboom-Toussaint and *The Lion of Flanders* by the Fleming Hendrik Conscience. Their judgement of the latter novel is, all in all, negative: they hold the *The Lion of Flanders* to be too partial and one-sided (pro-Flemish, anti-French), whereas *The House of Lauernesse* allows, in their view, 'a plurality of living and thinking strategies'⁹ to be expressed, and thus pleads the case of 'tolerance for dissidents'.¹⁰ It is not without frustration, then, that they have to admit that Conscience's novel was by far the more politically effective one: 'it has become a real myth in Flanders, a canonized monument of national romanticism, which is being appealed to even today'.¹¹ In light of the above, the divergent reception of these novels is not so hard to explain. As we said, a discourse is especially apt to function as a surface of inscription when it attempts to forge a collective will by identifying an oppressive force, against which all 'popular' groups must unite. In the case of Conscience's novel, the representatives of this generalized evil are of course the French-speaking foreigners, who are supposedly trying to rob the Flemings of their national 'Thing'.

This being as it may, it is obvious that Gera and Sneller's sympathies lie with a position advocating, as they believe Bosboom-Toussaint does, the peaceful co-existence of divergent views of reality. This may explain why the more belligerent moments of Dutch literature (the coup by the 1880 generation, the polemic between 'vorm' (form) and 'vent' (authorial personality) in the 1930s, the publication of the 'NRP' manifest in post-war Flemish poetry) are generally passed over in silence. Could it be that this 'pluralist' position also underlies the general concept of this book, which – as we pointed out earlier – also aims to familiarize the reader with a small range of theoretical approaches? These approaches are, to be precise: the study of literature as an integral part of the process of representation of reality, the study of

literature as a form of mimesis, a rhetorical-pragmatic approach, the criticism of ideology, narratology, the role of visibility in literature and postcolonialism.¹² They are presented here side by side, and a consistent effort is made to show the revelatory force of each approach.

In fact, what Gera and Sneller present their readers with is, roughly speaking, an image of the present consensus in the study of Dutch literature. In other words, an inventory of recent approaches that have acquired legitimacy as ways of eliciting meaning from literary texts. This 'canon' of theoretical approaches is, of course, itself an image of a historical state of affairs in the study of Dutch literature – and [134] each of these approaches would therefore have deserved a more lengthy theorization of its respective place in the development of literary and cultural theory in general and in the Dutch/Flemish context in particular. Gera and Sneller's apparent predilection for theoretical 'multiculturalism' may, for that matter, also explain why approaches centring on 'political' struggle and (more often than not) ruthless competition between historical subjects, social networks and surfaces of inscription – such as marxism and its recent postmarxist derivatives, literary sociology, discourse theory and recent psychoanalytic cultural analysis – are remarkably absent.

In conclusion, Gera and Sneller's *Inleiding literatuurgeschiedenis voor de internationale neerlandistiek* has to be applauded as a courageous and much-needed attempt to fill a gap in the textbooks available to non-native students of Dutch literature.¹³ However, for the authors to fully succeed in the mission they had set out for themselves, they should have painted a more complete image of the canon of Dutch literature and its various rewritings. In addition, it would have been commendable to use the limited space available for expounding the problems specific to literary history and not for briefly demonstrating the scope and usefulness of various theoretical approaches for interpreting literary texts. Useful and necessary as this may be, it is better reserved for classes dealing with literary and cultural theory and/or literary analysis.

Notes

- 1 Judit Gera and A. Agnes Sneller *Inleiding literatuurgeschiedenis voor de internationale neerlandistiek* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2010), p.10.
- 2 Gera and Sneller, *Inleiding*, p. 10.
- 3 Bilderdijk, whose work constitutes an important link between Classicism and Romanticism and whose views fiercely resist Enlightenment hegemony, is not discussed at all. Van Alphen is – as we mentioned – merely touched upon for his children's poetry and the enlightened pedagogical ideas supporting it.
- 4 This not being done is all the more surprising as Gera and Sneller themselves point out that 'the valuation of certain works at the time of their creation does not necessarily correspond with what later literary historians focus on', Gera and Sneller, *Inleiding*, p. 10.
- 5 Gera and Sneller, *Inleiding*, p. 10.
- 6 A good example of this is given where Gera and Sneller correctly point out that medieval Christian identity established itself through its antagonism with Islam and Judaism, Gera and Sneller, *Inleiding*, p. 13.
- 7 Gera and Sneller, *Inleiding*, p. 89.
- 8 *Ibidem*.

- 9 Ibid., p. 102. [135]
- 10 Ibid., p. 102.
- 11 Ibid., p. 103.
- 12 Other approaches are discussed in passing, with especially the inspiration by gender studies constituting a leitmotiv in the book.
- 13 This is not to say that what is offered is non-existent. One can refer, in this context, to *Niederländische Literaturgeschichte*, ed. by R. Grüttemeier and M. Leuker (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2006); and to *A Literary History of the Low Countries*, ed. by Th. Hermans (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009). It is, however, the first book in its kind to be published in Dutch.