



## Branches of the Germanic Oak

### Pangermanism, Omer Wattez and other German-Flemish Histories

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**Abstract:** This contribution considers the role of Omer Wattez (1857-1935) as a cultural mediator between Flanders and Germany and his involvement in the pangermanic movement. Initially a staunch pangermanist who was quite critical of romance cultures and their influence on the Flemish people, he tried to disseminate Germanic, and especially classical German literature in a series of essays as well as through a volume of translated ballads, which he considered the original form of poetry in the Germanic languages. In doing so, he inscribed himself in a tradition that had its origins in the early 19th century, but that had become marginal in Flemish literature around the turn of the century. Although he was at first blind of the political aims of German pangermanists, Wattez eventually separated cultural affinity from political collaboration and spent his time in Paris during WWI. In a volume of sonnets – a genre he had repudiated earlier – he expresses his disgust of German militarism.

**Keywords:** Omer Wattez – cultural mediation / culturele bemiddeling – translation / vertaling – Flemish movement / Vlaamse beweging – pangermanic movements / pangermaanse bewegingen

‘Those who claimed we should lean towards Germany because we are a Germanic people, are at least a few centuries late with their principles’.<sup>1</sup>

In an era rife with nationalist ideologies such as the 19th century, both Germany and Belgium were in constant search of models and traditions on which they could found their own identity, albeit for very different reasons: Belgium, a state seemingly created from scratch after an unscheduled revolution, Germany, a nation waiting to finally become a state. Belgians and Germans sought the roots on which to build their nations in their respective cultures and histories. During the first half of the century, this yielded an interplay of attraction and admiration between the two communities which inspired artists and intellectuals on both sides of the divide. In search of national roots, the two communities regularly consulted each other’s histories to construe a cultural memory, with a clear predilection for the medieval period. The interest was more or less symmetrical, and even if some German scholars considered Dutch as just a variety of German,<sup>2</sup> they did not attach any political consequences to this appraisal. As the century progressed and Germany gained its national unity, Belgium was reduced to mere periphery in the eyes of the German empire and its intellectuals. Their interest was mainly of a geostrategic rather than a cultural nature, while Flemish intellectuals, mostly from the more conservative range of the spectrum clung to an idealized, naïve view of Germany.

It is a well-documented fact that German interest in Belgium has its roots in romanticism and that it was originally a philological rather than a political matter. This was, ultimately, a consequence of the kind of thinking initiated by Herder, whose particularist reinterpretation of Aufklärung philosophy favoured national song traditions as a field of research.<sup>3</sup> With regard to Belgium, the first results of this avenue can be found in the work of Jacob Grimm, whose interest in Flemish medieval literature produced a first philological edition of *Vanden Vos Reynaerde*. He also included a number of Flemish folk songs in *Altdeutsche Wälder* (1813), and he was guided by the idea that Dutch and German cultures shared common roots only waiting to be revitalized.<sup>4</sup> A number of intellectuals from this romantic lineage who were more or less directly involved in Germany’s nation-building during the pre-revolutionary period of the 1830s and 1840s, followed suit by visiting Belgium, partly before the country was actually founded. The search for the German nation during and after the Napoleonic wars led them to look into the rich medieval culture on the edges of the Germanic world. Among them was Ernst Moritz Arndt (1769-1860), one of the opinion leaders of German nationalism, whose writings clearly call for a very broad interpretation of Germany’s borders, as in his essay *Der Rhein, Teutschlands Strom*,

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Zij die hebben gezegd dat wij meer naar Duitsland moesten overhellen, dit omdat wij Germanen waren, komen met hunne principien mistens een koppel eeuwen te laat.’ Paul Van Ostaijen, ‘Evolutie’, in *Verzameld werk. Deel 4: Proza. Besprekingen en beschouwingen*, ed. Gerrit Borgers (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1979), p. 420.

<sup>2</sup> See Carel ter Haar, ‘Nicht nur ein Appendix – zur Relation zwischen Germanistik und Niederlandistik’, In: Frank Fürbeth e.a. (eds.), *Zur Geschichte und Problematik der Nationalphilologien in Europa: 150 Jahre Erste Germanistenversammlung in Frankfurt am Main (1846-1996)* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1999), pp. 697-714.

<sup>3</sup> See Marcel Desmedt, ‘Philologische Kontakte zwischen Deutschland und Flandern in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts’, in Hubert Roland, Marnix Beyen, Greet Draye (eds.): *Deutschlandbilder in Belgien 1830-1940* (Münster: Waxmann, 2011), pp. 71-91, esp. pp. 72-73.

<sup>4</sup> Desmedt, ‘Philologische Kontakte’, p. 73.

*aber nicht Deutschlands Grenze* or his poem *Was ist des Deutschen Vaterland?*<sup>5</sup> Arndt visited Belgium as part of a Grand Tour through Europe in 1799. His outspokenness on geopolitical issues is clearly a consequence of anti-French reflexes during the Napoleonic era.<sup>6</sup> The fascination of Hoffmann von Fallersleben (1798-1874) for Flanders also needs little commentary, as he is considered the founder of Dutch philology. Having visited the low countries several times in the 1820s, Hoffmann collected Flemish popular songs in the second volume of his *Horae Belgicae* (1833). He corresponded with Flemish intellectuals such as Jan Frans Willems and Ferdinand August Snellaert, and he dedicated a number of poems to the Flemish people, e.g. ‘An den Stamm der Vlaemen’.<sup>7</sup> Ludwig Uhland (1787-1862), another German intellectual writing in a style akin to romanticism, who was a member of the Frankfurt parliament of 1848, had come to Belgium in 1844 to study medieval manuscripts<sup>8</sup> and, like Grimm and Hoffmann von Fallersleben, published Flemish folk song material in a collection entitled *Alte hoch- und niederdeutsche Volkslieder* (1844-1845), again partially based on texts and translations supplied by Flemish informants.<sup>9</sup> Much like Arndt and Hoffmann, Uhland considered Flanders – and, by extension, the whole of Belgium – part of the Germanic, and even part of the German cultural community. However, for all their talk of a Greater Germany, these German romantics’ interest in the Low Countries was primarily philological, not politically or ethnically motivated. More overtly political and even racist considerations didn’t come into play until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Added to this philological interest was the admiration of Belgium’s liberal constitution, which many German intellectuals saw as an ideal to be emulated, as was the case in large parts of the European liberal bourgeoisie – the Belgian constitution eventually became a model for Prussia’s and Austria’s constitutions. All this explains the increase in contacts between German and Belgian, specifically Flemish intellectuals and writers during the 1830s and 1840s, up until the German revolutions of 1848. During the decades that followed, there seem to have been few or no direct attempts from the German side to establish any kind of cultural exchange with Belgium or its Dutch-speaking community, if one discards the odd contribution dedicated to Belgium or Flanders in periodicals such as *Die Grenzboten*, which was originally subtitled ‘Blätter für Deutschland und Belgien’.<sup>10</sup> But it wasn’t until the 1870s and the unification of Germany that the interest was rekindled, now by a somewhat different kind of intellectuals, especially after the founding of the Alldeutscher Verband in 1891.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Both these texts were written in 1813 in the context of the decisive battle of Leipzig.

<sup>6</sup> See Walter Erhart / Arne Koch (ed.), *Ernst Moritz Arndt (1769–1860): Deutscher Nationalismus. Europa, transatlantische Perspektiven*. Studien und Texte zur Sozialgeschichte der Literatur Bd. 112 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> See Peter Hans Nelde, *Flandern in der Sicht Hoffmanns von Fallersleben: eine Untersuchung im Rahmen deutschflämischer Beziehungen im 19. Jahrhundert* (Wilrijk: Oranje, 1967).

<sup>8</sup> Herbert van Uffelen, *Moderne Niederländische Literatur im deutschen Sprachraum 1830-1990* (Münster: Zentrum für Niederlande-Studien, 1993), pp. 26-27.

<sup>9</sup> Desmedt, ‘Philologische Kontakte’, pp. 75-76.

<sup>10</sup> The subtitle was changed to ‘Eine deutsche Revue’ in 1842, when the journal relocated to Leipzig. It was to become an important forum for modern German literature in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Gustav Freytag became its chief editor. A digital version of the journal can be consulted at <http://brema.suub.uni-bremen.de/grenzboten/periodical/structure/282153>.

<sup>11</sup> See Bruno Yammine, *Drang nach Westen. De fundamente van de Duitse Flamenpolitik (1870-1914)* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2011).

This pan-German association was founded as a reaction to the so-called Helgoland-Sansibar-treaty, in which Germany renounced any further colonial expansion, but its members generally also deplored the limitation of Germany to the 1871 borders, the 'kleindeutsche Lösung' without Austria and the Eastern European areas which they considered Germanic. The underlying ideology was quite openly ethnic or even racist: theories like Arthur de Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853-1855) and its critical reception by circles surrounding Richard Wagner exerted an important influence on conservative German intellectuals.<sup>12</sup> The Verband also stated very clear expansionist geopolitical goals. Apart from support for all speakers of German worldwide and the further development of German colonial possessions, the main aim was the constitution of a genuine Greater Germany, which would unite not only speakers of German, but also of Dutch and Danish. Dutch especially, it was thought, could be substituted by German ('Hochdeutsch') for all official purposes. In Belgium, the movement was represented by German expats Adolf von Ziegesar (and later his adopted son, Haller von Ziegesar), Harald Graevell and Theodor Reismann-Grone. It materialized in the publication of the Brussels-based periodical *Germania*, which was edited by Von Ziegesar, financed by Reissmann-Grone, and contained contributions by German and Flemish authors.<sup>13</sup>

The Flemish contributors of *Germania* were clearly pangermanists, who supported a close cultural collaboration between Flanders and Germany, but their aims were much less political than those of their German counterparts. They were recruited mainly from the Brussels literary society *De Distel*, which concerned itself with the consolidation of the Flemish Nation, the strict enforcement of Dutch as an official language in Belgium and the propagation of Flemish literature that served these ideological goals. The history of this society and the internal struggles surrounding its pro-German choices have been examined by Greet Draye.<sup>14</sup> She shows that the literature promoted and produced in these circles was mostly anything but innovative. Some of its younger – and also better known – members, such as Prosper Van Langendonck, Victor Toussaint van Boelaere, Reimond Stijns or Isidoor Teirlinck may have made modest attempts at introducing more modern, naturalistic writing practices and at creating a link to the *Van Nu en Straks* movement, but they had little or no influence on the society's general stance. Its more influential members, the now all but forgotten Emiel Hendrik T'Sjoen, Johan Kesler, and most of all Jan Matthijs Brans, would rather look back than forward for their inspiration and remained faithful to nationalist romantic models which glorify the people of Flanders and its history. Although *De Distel* was a liberal, atheist society, certain catholic writers were revered precisely because they included nationalist themes and motifs in their work; Hugo Verriest and Albrecht Rodenbach would be cases in point, and Rodenbach's fascination with Germanic mythology and with composer Richard Wagner was another common interest. Indeed, all the authors mentioned above considered Germany a model, perhaps even the natural context for any truly Flemish art. Most members of *De Distel* were staunch germanophiles, or even pangermanists, and they

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<sup>12</sup> See the online essay by Eric Eugène, 'Wagner and Gobineau', <http://www.guschlbauer.com/Texte/GE5.PDF> (retrieved August 31, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Bruno Yammine argues that these activities were the preparation for the so called Flamenpolitik during World War I; See Bruno Yammine, *Drang nach Westen*, as well as 'De Flamenpolitik als voortzetting van de Duitse geopolitiek voor en tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog', in *Journal of Belgian History* 2/3 (2013), pp. 12-45.

<sup>14</sup> See Greet Draye, 'Smartelijk te handelen': *Een politiek-culturele biografie van het Brusselse kunstgenootschap De Distel 1881-1928* (Brussel: Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten, 2004).

considered the Alldeutscher Verband an ally. German member of De Distel Harald Graevell, who was also briefly involved in the Alldeutscher Verband (see above), was given a podium for pro-German propaganda quite regularly in the late 1890s. Even if some Distel members, especially the more anglophile Alfons Prayon-Vanzuylen, strongly objected to the German imperialist ambitions advocated by the likes of Graevell, sometimes covertly, sometimes quite openly, the society as well as the journal *Germania* were clearly disposed to a pan-German solution for Flanders.

Within the Flemish movement, germanophilia was certainly not an exception. As Herbert Van Uffelen has shown,<sup>15</sup> it was the natural orientation for young intellectuals and authors in the early stages of the Flemish movement, when Belgium was still on unfriendly terms with Holland, and France was mistrusted or even despised for its cultural imperialist position, which often led to a contempt for French or romance literatures and cultures at large (see below). German literature of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century – roughly what Germans would call the *Goethezeit* – remained an absolute reference for any kind of literature. As mentioned above, this attitude yielded quite a bit of bilateral exchange in the 1830s and early 1840s, with Jan Frans Willems as one of the most active and valued mediators between the two communities, and Hendrik Conscience's *Leeuw van Vlaanderen* (1838/1843) as one of the most important export products. It is somewhat ironic that Flemish artists trying to design a unique identity used German models – it is telling, for instance, that Hippoliet van Peene's text for Flanders' hymn *De Vlaamse Leeuw* (1847) was inspired by Nikolaus Becker's belligerent *Rheinlied* (1840).<sup>16</sup> However, from the 1880s onward, as a new avantgarde started making its mark on the Flemish literary system, the influence of classic German literature became less and less prevalent, surviving, however, in nationalist circles of lesser literary importance, such as De Distel. In some cases, the admiration for Germany and its literature took almost irrational forms, as in the case of Pol De Mont, an honorary member of De Distel, who in a letter deplored not having been born in Germany.<sup>17</sup> De Mont might be said to be a quintessential pangermanist, whose adoration of German literature and music – as so many of his peers, he was a Wagnerian – briefly led him into activist, collaborationist waters during World War I. To be fair, however, De Mont did play an important role in the development of modern Dutch literature. The value of his own impressionistic work may be debatable, but he showed an extraordinary openness towards innovative tendencies in literature, wherever they came from. Thus, he introduced the Dutch Tachtigers-movement – a kind of literature that was hardly welcomed by De Distel and similar groups leaning towards pangermanism – to Flemish audiences and promoted the work of contemporary German authors such as Theodor Storm, Theodor Fontane and Detlev von Liliencron.<sup>18</sup>

In 1897, when the pangermanist leanings of the Distel society were being contested internally, its chief ideologists brought in another Germanophile to strengthen their position, i.e.

<sup>15</sup> Van Uffelen, *Moderne Niederländische Literatur*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>16</sup> The same kind of interchangeability of national symbols can be observed in the development of the German national hymn from 'Heil dir im Siegerkranz' (sung to the melody of 'God Save the Queen') from 1871 to 1818 to the current 'Deutschlandlied', for which Haydn's melody to the Austrian imperial hymn was recycled.

<sup>17</sup> Ludo Stynen, 'O ware ik in Duitsland geboren! Pol De Mont tussen germanofilie en pangermanisme', in *Verlagen & Mededelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* 124/3 (2014), pp. 237-272, esp. 237.

<sup>18</sup> Stynen, 'O ware ik ...', p. 247

Omer Wattez, who would remain a corresponding member until the early 1900s. Wattez (1857-1935) was a close friend of De Mont's for some time. Indeed, the biographies of the two men are strikingly similar: born in the same year, Wattez followed De Mont as a teacher of Dutch first at the Athénée Royal in Tournai and, again some ten years later, as a teacher at the Antwerp Atheneum. They visited Germany together in 1887.<sup>19</sup> As a writer, Wattez belongs even less to the canon of Dutch literature than De Mont. As a matter of fact, while De Mont is at least given some credit, Wattez is largely ignored in most surveys of Dutch literary history. As Stefan Van Den Bossche puts it, Wattez is a middle-brow author who clearly distanced himself from the literary avantgarde of his day, especially naturalism and the Van Nu en Straks-movement, but who attempted to make canonized high culture – which, for him, was mainly German or Germanic – accessible to a larger audience.<sup>20</sup> His own literary prose is often formulaic, uses romantic stereotypes in his landscape descriptions, is almost completely oblivious of modern city life or the newly developing industries, and features one-dimensional characters. Furthermore, these texts make little effort to hide their ideological goal: the edification of the Flemish people, the defense and promotion of Flemish culture and Dutch – or, as he more often calls it, Flemish – language. A good example is a story entitled 'Het lieve Walinnetje', included in the early collection *Jonge harten* ([Young Hearts], 1890). After an extensive description of the rolling hills of Southeast Flanders, the locals are introduced as follows:

On this side lived the Flemings, and beyond the mountains and forests, the Walloons. The former are proud of their glorious past. Despite years of oppression, they believe in the future elevation of their people. The latter, the Walloon, has, through school, arts and letters been educated almost exclusively in the ideas of French culture. The degenerated Fleming imitates him. Among the former was Walter Borreman.<sup>21</sup>

This young hero arrives in a small village in the Southeast of Flanders, where he was appointed assistant to the local tax collector. At first, he is infatuated with his superior's very reserved daughter, but when she shows no signs of affection, he visits a fair in a small village just across the language border, where he meets and promptly falls in love with a Walloon girl, Adeline. However, his feelings for her soon diminish when she shows no inclination to learn Dutch: 'He

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<sup>19</sup> Stefan Van Den Bossche, 'De nalatenschap van een literaire duizendpoot. Over de heimat-schrijver Omer Wattez (1857-1935)', in *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen* LXXII/4 (2013), pp. 328-350, esp. p. 332.

<sup>20</sup> Van den Bossche, 'De nalatenschap'.

<sup>21</sup> 'Aan deze zijde wonen de Vlamingen en, over de bergen en wouden, de Walen. De eersten zijn trots op hun roemrijk verleden. Ondanks jarenlange onderdrukking, gelooven zij aan de toekomstige verheffing van hun stam. De andere, de Waal, is door de school, door kunst en letteren bijna uitsluitend opgevoed in denkbeelden van Fransche kultuur. De ontaarde Vlaming aapt hem na. Tot de eersten behoort Walter Borreman.' Omer Wattez, *Jonge harten. Een bundel novellen* [1888] (Antwerpen: Opdebeek, 1925<sup>3</sup>), pp. 36-37. (translation mine, JC). The word 'stam' in this quote presents a particular translation problem, as 'tribe' would be both to narrow and lack the metaphorical reference to trees, which pervades the nationalist discourse. In this instance, I therefore opted for the more neutral term 'people'. Unless otherwise stated, translations in this article are mine.

realized that he could never turn Adeline into the ideal, truly Flemish woman who could bear and raise his children.’<sup>22</sup>

Similar scenarios and simple lessons can be found in most of Wattez’ work, both in his short stories and in the novella that is generally considered his most important original work, *Wouters jonge jaren* ([Wouter’s Early Years], 1900).<sup>23</sup> If this is a more convincing effort, it is primarily because of the autobiographical element: main character Wouter Leemans is obviously an alter ego for Wattez himself. All in all, the strength of Wattez’ literary output is mostly in the descriptions of the South Flemish landscape, where Wattez was at home and which he helped turn into a popular tourist destination by labelling it ‘the Flemish Ardennes’.

A recurring feature in Wattez’ work is his reference to German culture. His fictional characters like to read Goethe or Heine and they revere Wagner, Bach or Beethoven. It is telling that in the introduction to *Jonge harten*, which contains a dedication to an unnamed, kindred poet – possibly Pol De Mont –, Wattez quotes a tribute to Flanders by Hoffmann von Fallersleben:

Then we would sing with Hoffmann von Fallersleben, who wrote these stanzas in honour of Flanders:

Meadows and fields are  
green all around.  
So beautiful our country all over  
beautiful like a garden of delight  
Meadows and fields are  
green all around.

Merriment all around  
Pleasure all around  
Maidens with proud faces,  
Boys pious and bold  
Merriment all around  
Pleasure all around.<sup>24</sup>

This excerpt was taken from the poem ‘Vlaanderen boven al’ [Flanders above all], included in Hofmann’s *Horae Belgicae*. Another example of Hoffmann’s praise of Flanders is quoted at length in a Wattez novella entitled ‘Ideaal’ (originally ‘Jonkvrouw van Roozevelde’), where two young peasants admire a castle and overhear two young women who live there recite ‘the

<sup>22</sup> ‘Hij zag in dat hij van Adeline nooit de gedroomde echte Vlaamsche vrouw zou kunnen maken, die hem Vlaamsche kinderen zou schenken en opbrengen.’ Wattez, *Jonge harten*, p. 58.

<sup>23</sup> Omer Wattez, ‘Wouters jonge jaren’ [1900], in *Zuid-Vlaandersche novellen*. Nieuwe uitgave (Antwerpen: Opdebeek, s.a).

<sup>24</sup> ‘Dan zongen wij met Hoffmann von Fallersleben, die deze strofen ter eere van Vlaanderen dichtte: Beemden en velden staan / Overal groen. / Schoon is ons land geheel, / Schoon als een lustprieel / Beemden en velden staan / Overal groen.// Overal vrolijkheid / Overal lust. / Maagden met fier gelaat, / Knapen zoo vroom en draat, / Overal vrolijkheid, / Overal lust.’ Wattez, *Jonge harten*, p. 3. The uncommon word ‘draat’ is probably derived from the equally uncommon German ‘drat’ (‘brisk’, ‘swift’, or ‘bold’), which appears in some of Ludwig Uhland’s poems, as quoted in the Grimm dictionary.

beautiful song *Vlaenderen* composed in medieval Dutch by Hoffmann von Fallersleben'.<sup>25</sup> Not surprisingly, the two young men will eventually marry these women. In 'Natuur', another early story (originally entitled 'Lentezonne'), a group of students visit Trier, where they discuss philosophical points of view at the 'Brauerei von Herrn Müller', to end the day at their hotel drinking 'Niersteiner' and hearing the hero of the story, aptly called Emile Waldman and obviously another alter ego for Wattez himself, sing Heine's *Loreley* and Goethe's *Mignons Lied*.<sup>26</sup>

Rather than in his literary work, Wattez' importance should, then, be sought in his role as an educator and a cultural mediator who tried to introduce Germanic culture, and specifically high German culture, to his pupils – some of which would become famous as writers –, and Flemish audiences at large. To this end, he held lectures on related topics, such as Nordic mythology, the Nibelungen, Lohengrin or Tannhäuser legends. Many of these lectures were subsequently published in the *Verslagen en Handelingen* of the Royal Flemish Academy for Language and Literature, of which Wattez was also a member since 1905.

Wattez' most important achievement as a mediator is his collection of translations entitled *Germaansche balladen*. It was published in 1909 in a quite prestigious series by Amsterdam publishing house Van Looy, which also published original work by Rodenbach, Perk and Kloos, as well as translations of Shakespeare plays. In his volume, Wattez gathers examples of ballads from Scandinavian, English, and Flemish literature, as well as a large choice of German ballads ('Duitsche meesterballaden'). The collection is preceded by an extensive introduction into the genre and its history, which Wattez had published separately one year before in the *Verslagen en Handelingen*. In it, he emphasizes the Germanic origins of the genre, which despite its name does not stem from the Romance cultures; indeed, Wattez backs this claim with an ethnic argument taken from Ernest Lichtenberger, the first full professor of German language and literature at the Sorbonne: 'Greeks and Latins,' says E. Lichtenberger, 'did not allow their emotions to dominate the story and rule its form; to decelerate or accelerate its plot.'<sup>27</sup> Germanic people, by contrast, do master this epic form.

Since the beginning of the renaissance – a period Wattez considers the source of cultural decay of the Germanic world – very few genuine ballads have come from France or Italy, where the genre soon petered out; but 'this is not the case of the Germanic ballad, which does not spread an air of *salons* and does not recall periwigged and powdered courtiers.'<sup>28</sup> This sort of black-and-white distinction between cultures can ultimately be traced back to Tacitus' *Germania*, a work that is most commonly read as a criticism of Roman decadence. Many of the virtues Tacitus sees embodied in the Germanic tribes – above all others, faithfulness and chastity – were construed

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<sup>25</sup> 'het schoone lied *Vlaenderen* door Hoffmann von Fallersleben in het Dietsch der middeleeuwen gedicht', Omer Wattez, 'Ideaal' [orig. 'Jonkvrouw van Roozevelde', 1885], in *Natuur, kunst, ideaal: Drie novellen* (Antwerpen: Opdebeek, 1925), p. 99.

<sup>26</sup> Omer Wattez, 'Natuur' [1885], in *Natuur, kunst, ideaal*, p. 40-45.

<sup>27</sup> 'Grieken en Latijnen', zegt E. Lichtenberger, 'lieten hunne gemoedsontroering niet toe het verhaal te beheerschen, den vorm er van te regelen; den gang te vertragen of te versnellen.' Omer Wattez, 'De Germaansche ballade. Haar ontstaan en hare beteekenis', in *Verslagen en mededelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde* 1908, pp. 329-394, this quote p. 330.

<sup>28</sup> '[d]at is echter het geval niet met de Germaansche ballade, die geene salonlucht verspreidt, en niet aan gepruikte en gepoederde hovelingen doet denken.' Wattez, 'De Germaansche ballade', p. 331.



as the opposite of the Roman culture of his day and are thus to be considered ironic rather than straightforward. The argument was later adopted in a non-ironic manner by German and Flemish authors – like Görres, Jahn, Arndt, but also Conscience or Wattez, who liked to quote Tacitus<sup>29</sup> – against French, and sometimes more generally against all romance cultures. Where those are characterized by superficiality, affectation and a lack of spontaneity, a distinctly feminine demeanour, and a predilection for the visual rather than the auditory, the Germanic cultures in Wattez' depiction are authentic, they have real moral substance, and they privilege the auditory, which is deemed much more profound than the visual arts. For Wattez, the almost physical aversion to anything French seems to originate in what he considers the extorted compromise of the Belgian state, which has systematically forced its Dutch-speaking population to forget its real roots: 'As I said before: they have tried to make us look elsewhere, make our hearts beat for what is foreign; they wanted to make us forget that we are a Germanic people, a sturdy branch of the Germanic oak.'<sup>30</sup>

The metaphor of the oak introduced in this passage is typical of the ethnic thinking of the time and fits in with the extensive descriptions of forests, the real home of the Germanic people, in Wattez' literary prose as well as his poems. Interestingly, Wattez links the opposition between Romance and Germanic cultures to an opposition of literary form: while the ballad with its straightforward, authentic narrative, creating its own form as it unfolds, is typically Germanic, the sonnet is quintessentially Romance. In French literature, Wattez claims, ballads do still exist, but they are now more form than content, bereft of real-life experience or real soul, 'chose fade', as he has Molière say – and in this, Wattez adds, they are much like the sonnet. His main argument culminates in what one may call a classic phonocentric stance: the demise of Germanic literatures started when printing was invented and the art of reciting poetry in public was abandoned in favour of solitary reading and writing. But this has deprived poetry of its original power, access to the soul:

Balladry was created by narrators and singers. Like music, it has access to the soul through hearing, not just through the eye like the written and printed poetry of our day.

The art of writing and printing has distorted and deformed the nature of poetry. These days poetry is read: the words are looked upon with the eye. The poet has had to acquiesce to this.

This is when the poetry of things became verse-making. Music no longer felt attracted to it much. The singer no longer carried the harp on his travels from castle to castle. The modern poet studies his lyrics in his study.

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<sup>29</sup> Omer Wattez, 'Wonderen der Germaansche wereld', *Verslagen en mededelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde* 1910, pp. 329-356; 'Germaansche cultuur in het Goedroenlied', *Verslagen en mededelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde* 1911, pp. 781-820; 'Over den Germaanschen oorsprong en de ontwikkeling der gotiek', *Verslagen en mededelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde* 1913, pp. 637-677.

<sup>30</sup> 'Ik zei het reeds: men heeft onze blikken naar elders doen richten, onze harten voor 't vreemde doen kloppen; men wilde ons namelijk doen vergeten, dat wij een Germaansch volk zijn, een kloeke tak van den Germaanschen eik.' Wattez, 'Wonderen der Germaansche wereld', p. 331.

Whoever wants to savour poetry nowadays buys a book and sits and reads in silence. When read aloud, it becomes almost unpalatable; the complicated word art requires a lot of cogitation and meditation and sometimes, it is a mystery. No composer will feel attracted by the tinkling of the sonnet or by the kind of sense-poetry that only gives us descriptions.<sup>31</sup>

The second section of the book publication *Germaansche balladen*, entitled ‘Duitsche Meesterballaden’, contains classic texts by canonical authors, such as Goethe’s *Erlkönig*, *Der König in Thule*, and *Mignon*, Schiller’s *Ritter Toggenburg*, the *Lorelei*-poems by Heine and Eichendorff, but also texts by authors who were quite successful in their lifetime, but are now largely forgotten, e.g. Emmanuel Geibel, Moritz von Strachwitz, or Johann Christian von Zedlitz. The ballads which Watzetz selected revolve around medieval tales or Germanic myths, such as the Loreley or emperor Barbarossa; more contemporary motifs, as can be found in Theodor Fontane’s ballads (e.g. ‘Die Brücke am Tay’, relating the recent collapse of a bridge, or ‘Kaiser Friedrich III. letzte Fahrt’ on the premature death of Germany’s second emperor), obviously do not fit into this concept. In his introduction to this section, Watzetz is very modest about his translation enterprise, stating that his main goal was to make his fellow countrymen acquainted with the art of the German ballad, and that he sometimes sacrificed rhyme for content in his translations, in keeping with his introductory essay, where he emphasizes the epic nature of the ballad.

Some good examples illustrative of Watzetz’ criteria and his translation strategies can be found at the collection’s core: two ballads by Uhland, ‘Des Sängers Fluch’ and ‘Das Schloss am Meer’, which Watzetz considers the paragon of German ballad poetry (‘In *Das Schloss am Meer* Uhland has, in my opinion, attained the acme of balladry’).<sup>32</sup> ‘Des Sängers Fluch’ is an interesting case, since it contains just about every characteristic mentioned in the introduction: according to Watzetz’ comment, the poem’s inspiration came from a chance meeting of Uhland with Napoleon – ‘the reviled oppressor of his German fatherland’<sup>33</sup> – in Paris, and its setting and violent storyline are reminiscent of the *Nibelungenlied*. This ballad – like many others in this volume, as Watzetz concedes – had been translated before. If one compares Watzetz’ translation with that by Dutch poet Jacob Ten Kate, which precedes Watzetz’ by half a century, it is striking how faithful Watzetz remains to the German original and sometimes sacrifices poetic effect to content, but also how meticulously he preserves the meter, in keeping with his musical interpretation of the ballad. Consider the opening stanzas in the original and in both Dutch versions:

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<sup>31</sup> Balladenpoëzie ontstond door zeggens en zangers. Zij had, evenals de toonkunst, toegang tot onze ziel door het gehoor, niet door het oog, gelijk de geschreven en gedrukte poëzie onzer dagen. / Schrijf- en boekdrukkunst hebben den aard der poëzie verwrongen en vervormd. Poëzie wordt nu gelezen: de woorden met het oog gezien. Daarnaar heeft zich de dichter moeten schikken. / De poëzie der dingen is toen verskunst geworden. De muziek voelde er zich niet meer zoo zeer door aangetrokken. De zanger droeg de harp niet meer met zich meê op zijne tochten van burg tot burg. De moderne poëet studeert zijne verzen in de studiecél. / Wie verskunst onzer dagen wil smaken, koopt een boek en gaat in stilte lezen. Luidop door iemand voorgelezen, kan men ze zelf bijna niet meer genieten; de ingewikkelde woordkunst vergt veel hoofdbrekend overdenken en nadenken en is somtijds een raadsel. Geen enkel toonkunstenaar voelt zich sterk aangetrokken door sonnettengetjingel en beschrijvings-poëzie, die alleen gewaarwordingen geeft.’ Watzetz, ‘De Germaansche ballade’, p. 350-351.

<sup>32</sup> ‘In *das Schloss am Meer* heeft, volgens mij, Uhland het hoogtepunt der balladen-poëzie bereikt’ (Ibid., p. 345).

<sup>33</sup> ‘den gehaten onderdrukker van zijn Duitsche vaderland’ (Watzetz, *Germaansche balladen* (Amsterdam: Van Looy, 1909), p. 75.)

**Des Sängers Fluch**

Es stand in alten Zeiten ein  
Schloß, so hoch und hehr,  
Weit glänzt es über die Lande  
bis an das blaue Meer,  
Und rings von duft'gen Gärten  
ein blütenreicher Kranz,  
Drin sprangen frische Brunnen  
in Regenbogenglanz.

Dort saß ein stolzer König, an  
Land und Siegen reich,  
Er saß auf seinem Throne so  
finster und so bleich;  
Denn was er sinnt, ist  
Schrecken, und was er blickt, ist  
Wut,  
Und was er spricht, ist Geißel,  
und was er schreibt, ist Blut.<sup>34</sup>

**Des Zangers Vloek**

(Ten Kate)

In overoude tijden rees voor des  
pelgrims oog  
Ver boven beemd en bosschen  
een burchtslot naar omhoog.  
Het lag in bonte gaarden, als in  
een bloemenkrans,  
Waar springfonteynen speelden  
in regenboogenglans.

Daar had een trotsche Koning  
zijn machtig rijk gesticht.  
Daar zat hij op zijn zetel met  
somber aangezicht.  
De dood lag in zijne oogden, de  
hel in zijn gemoed,  
Want wat hij sprak was geessel,  
en wat hij schreef was bloed.<sup>35</sup>

**Des Zangers Vloek**

(Wattez)

Een slot met wal en torens zag  
naar de diepte neer  
Van hooge, groene bergen, tot  
aan het blauwe meer.  
En rondom praalden tuinen  
met bloesemrijke krans,  
Met frisse springfonteynen in  
regenbogenglans.

Daar zat een fiere koning, aan  
zegepralen rijk,  
Hoogmoedig in zijn zetel, zoo  
somber en zoo bleek.  
Wat hij verzint is wrake, zijn  
blikken schieten woed',  
En als hij spreekt is't oorlog, en  
als hij schrijft is't bloed.<sup>36</sup>

While Ten Kate will use some artistic license, e.g. in the first stanza, Wattez generally follows Uhland's text a little more closely, which, however, does not at all result in wooden or unidiomatic Dutch. Despite his assertion that his translations are merely an instrument for understanding the German original, they can be read in their own right.

Wattez never abandoned his admiration for Germanic, and more specifically German literature. Of course, the outbreak of World War I and the occupation of Belgium made the contrast between the idealized, nostalgic vision of German culture and the real politics of the present-day German empire painfully clear. Upon the German invasion, Wattez and his family were relocated to France; he spent the next four years in Paris. It has been claimed that this is the only reason why he was not implicated in the activist movement that saw collaboration with the German occupier as a quick way to Flemish autonomy.<sup>37</sup> This is open to debate, but as things are, he demonstrated his allegiance to the Belgian state in the years that followed. During his stay in Paris, he wrote – or, as he himself put it, recited – a number of sonnets that reflected his state

<sup>34</sup> Ludwig Uhland, 'Des Sängers Fluch' [1814], in *Werke Band I: Sämtliche Gedichte*. Hg. v. Hartmut Fröschle und Walter Scheffler (München: Winkler, 1980), p. 252-254.

<sup>35</sup> J.J.L. Ten Kate, 'Des Zangers Vloek', in *Bloemen uit den vreemde*. Keur van Hoogduitsche poëzij, verzameld en overgeplant door J.J.L. Ten Kate (Amsterdam: P.M. Van der Made, 1857), p. 181.

<sup>36</sup> Omer Wattez, 'Des Zangers Vloek', in *Germaansche balladen*, p. 77.

<sup>37</sup> Karel Wauters, 'Omer Wattez', in *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, ed. by R. de Schryver e.a. (Tielt: Lannoo, 1998), pp. 3671-3672.

of mind in these years: *Sonnetten van een Vlaming in Parijs*, published at Vromant in Brussels in 1920. It is interesting to note that he chose the form of the sonnet, the very form he had discarded in his 1908 essay as a purely formalistic play on words and sounds. Still, he claims they came about in a very spontaneous manner and were accomplished ('orally') before being written down:

Most of them, under the impression of the situation and the news of the war, were produced orally or by ear and only written when they were finished. [...] I heard my poems from my own mouth before I saw them and followed the procedure of the ancient poets.<sup>38</sup>

The preference for the living voice is all the more plausible as these poems are presented as immediate reactions to war events. The volume is divided into three sections, whose titles speak for themselves: 'Far from my homeland' ('Ver van mijn vaderland'), 'Belgium and its hangmen' ('België en zijne beulen'), 'Hate against evil' ('Haat tegen kwaad'). Whereas the first section contains elaborate praise of Flemish art and music, Flemish medieval cities and the Flemish – especially south-east Flemish – countryside, the second is a vehement attack against Germany and the German intellectuals who were carried away by the imperialist ambitions of their politicians: 'your intellectuals, equally intoxicated, / Condoned the ruffraff that violated Leuven';<sup>39</sup> a response, in this case, to the destruction of Leuven in August 1914. The images Wattez chooses to express his disgust and anger are drawn from the same semantic field as his earlier work, as in the first poem of this section, tellingly entitled 'Ridder en Roover':

A knight with strong arm	Een ridder met een harde hand,
to punish things unheard of	Te straffen ongehoorde dingen.
to sing his deeds	Om zijne daden te bezingen
A poet strikes his chords	Een dichter, die de snaren spant.
A rogue raided Belgian lands	Een roover reed door Belgenland
And tried to chase us off our property,	En wou ons van ons erf verdringen,
to violate the people's law	Het volkenrecht den nek omwringen.
We fought but we were overpowered	Wij vochten ... werden overmand.
The world trembled for a while	De wereld heeft een wijl gesidderd
Our people were ennobled in the battle	Ons volk werd in den strijd geridderd,
America came to the rescue.	Amerika kwam bijgesprongen.
This should be celebrated and sung	Dat moet gevierd, dat moet bezongen.
I let my song resound:	Ik laat mijn lied dan luide schallen:
Hurrah! When tyrants fall.	Hoera! als dwingelanden vallen. <sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> 'De meeste werden, onder den indruk der toestanden en der oorlogstijdingen, mondeling of auditief gemaakt; slechts dan geschreven als ze voltooid waren. [...] Ik heb mijne verzen uit eigen mond gehoord, eer ik ze zag, en volgde de dichtwijze der ouden na.' Omer Wattez, *Sonnetten van een Vlaming in Parijs* (Brussel: Vromant, 1920), pp. 5-6 (my translation).

<sup>39</sup> 'uw intellectuëlen, meê beschonken,/ Verschoonden 't krijgsgeboeft' dat Leuven schond'. Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>40</sup> Wattez, *Sonnetten*, p. 49.

Yet Wattez did not abandon his pangermanist views altogether; rather, he now distinguishes more clearly between an idea of cultural alliance and imperialism, as in ‘Germaansche broeders’:

We, Flemings, do not hate Germanic people, Because we are Germanic ourselves, We only hate those who think they should be master of all.	Wij, Vlamen, haten geen Germanen Omdat wij zelf Germanen zijn. Wij haten dezen slechts die wanen Dat z’aller meester moeten zijn. <sup>41</sup>
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Next to ‘Duitser’, he now also uses the term ‘Pruis’ in a clearly pejorative sense to refer to the enemy:

The Prussians wanted to carry their flags Too far across the river Rhine But their glory will wane for sure; Their recklessness give way to pain.	De Pruisen wilden hunne vanen Te verre voeren over den Rijn; Doch hunne glorie zal wel tanen; Hun overmoed vergaet in pijn. <sup>42</sup>
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Elsewhere, he revisits the Rhine metaphor and the related Nibelungen legend, which was one of the staples of his own essayistic repertoire, in a direct apostrophe of the Germans: ‘You had your Rheingold but were not satisfied, you wanted the gold from our rivers as well’<sup>43</sup>.

Some poems bear explicit titles, such as ‘Duitsch imperialism’,<sup>44</sup> ‘Pruisich militarism’,<sup>45</sup> ‘Wandalenwerk’<sup>46</sup> (ibid. 62) or ‘Meuchelmörder der ‘Lusitania’<sup>47</sup>. In contrast, the true achievements of German culture are highlighted: ‘Gotieke kathedralen’,<sup>48</sup> ‘Duitsche toonkunst’,<sup>49</sup> or ‘Wagner’<sup>50</sup> evoke the values that still bind Flemish and German people.

Wattez, it would seem, was neither the pragmatist who, like some Flemish intellectuals, welcomed the German invasion of Belgium as a means to realize Flemish emancipation, nor did his penchant for an ethnic pangermanism make him completely blind for the dire consequences of Germany’s imperialism. His conversion, if one can call it that, is illustrated by his rather aggressive reaction to an article published in the Dutch *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* in the 1920s. When that newspaper sarcastically listed some of the advantages of German hegemony for the Flemish movement, Wattez, under the pseudonym Joost, published a rebuttal in the Flemish newspaper *Handelsblad*, stating that the Flemish movement had never taken a pangermanic position. This in turn prompted Wattez’ former pupil Paul Van Ostaijen to an ironic

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 51.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Gij had uw Rijngoud, maar waart niet voldaan, /Gij lusttet ook het goud van onze stromen [...] (Wattez 1920: 56)

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

comment: 'We would just like to point out an error to our learned colleague: he has not always been as resolutely anti-pangermanic as he is now. Erreur ne fait pas compte, business people would say.'<sup>51</sup> Van Ostaijen was to honour his former teacher later by making him a character in his grotesque story *Intermezzo* under the name 'Homard-el-pan-Germahn'.<sup>52</sup>

In the end, Wattez would pledge his loyalty to the state of Belgium. He remained faithful to his nostalgic view of German literature, too. However, it should be noted that as a member of the royal Flemish academy, he continued to play a role within the Flemish literary system after 1918, where he did not let his own nostalgic fascination for romantic 'Germanic' art get in the way of a fair treatment of younger or more adventurous writers.

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<sup>51</sup> 'Enkel wilden wij onzen konfrater zijne vergissing aanduiden: zoo absoluut anti-pangermanistisch als nu, is hij niet altoos geweest. 'Erreur ne fait pas compte' zouden de zaakjeslui zeggen' Paul Van Ostaijen, 'Evolutie', in *Verzameld werk. Deel 4: Proza. Besprekingen en beschouwingen*, ed. Gerrit Borgers (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1979), p. 420. This article was published posthumously in Van Ostaijen's collected works; according to editor Gerrit Borgers, it was intended for publication in the newspaper *Vlaamsche Gazet – Het Laatste Nieuws*. Van Ostaijen's own view on the matter could not be clearer: 'Flemings and Germans are two peoples, which may have been one tribe before, but who are now and have been long since *two peoples who have absolutely nothing in common with each other*' ('Vlamingen en Duitschers zijn twee volkeren, die waarschijnlijk vroeger wel één stam gevormd hebben, maar nu en sedert lange jaren reeds bestaan er slechts *twee volkeren die absoluut niets met elkander gemeen hebben*').

<sup>52</sup> Paul Van Ostaijen, 'Intermezzo' [1929], in *Verzameld werk. Deel 3: Proza. Grotesken en ander proza*, ed. Gerrit Borgers (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1979), pp. 251-266 (this quote p. 263).

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