



'Unexpected free spaces? The Reception of Marie Gevers's Work in the 'Third Reich'

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Abstract. This article investigates the reception of Belgian French-speaking author Marie Gevers in Nazi Germany. Limited as her success may have been, the fact that her works were translated into German could come as a surprise, as their depiction of Gevers's native Flanders did not fully conform to the Nazi regime's literary and ideological expectations. The present paper looks into the processes through which Gevers managed to be introduced into the German literary market of the time and to be accepted – or rather tolerated – by the Nazi propaganda system.

Keywords. Marie Gevers, Translation in Nazi Germany / Vertaling in nazi-Duitsland, Flemish Literature / Vlaamse literatuur, Francophone Literature / Franstalige literatuur, Cultural mediation / culturele bemiddeling

Introduction: The 'Manifeste du Groupe du Lundi' and the issue of Regionalist Literature

If Marie Gevers is all but forgotten today, she was certainly one of the most successful French-speaking Belgian authors in the first half of the twentieth century. Although she was born in Flanders (1893 in Edegem, Antwerp), she wrote in French throughout her life and entertained a close relationship with famous writers such as Emile Verhaeren or Max Elskamp, who encouraged her to write from 1905 onwards. After the publication of a few volumes of poetry, she dedicated herself to prose and published her first novel, *La comtesse des digues*, in 1931. On 9 April 1938, she became the first Belgian woman to be elected into the Académie royale de langue et littérature françaises de Belgique.

In March 1937, she co-signed the *Manifeste du Groupe du Lundi*¹ and took part in the literary union around Franz Hellens which aimed to re-evaluate the Belgian belles-lettres, and more particularly literature in the French language.² The group advocated a view of Belgian literature within the wider frame of French literature, as they assumed an autonomous conception of Belgian belles-lettres would undermine their quality.³ Moreover, the manifesto raised the question of the legitimacy of so-called regionalist literature, the influence of which on the quality of creative writing was disputed. Even though the Groupe du Lundi did not explicitly ban regionalisms and the 'esprit de terroir' from literature, it stated that those elements should not be given a prominent space in the storytelling.

This criticism against regionalism veiled a generational conflict. As Klinkenberg (1992) states, the manifest pleaded for an 'institutional redistribution',⁴ i.e. the acknowledgment of a new generation of writers. It was absolutely no coincidence that Charles Plisnier, Marcel Thiry, Robert Vivier, Herman Closson and even Marie Gevers were elected to the Academy after the publication of the manifesto. In fact, the attack against folklore and realism embodied an attack against all aesthetic models of the nineteenth century, and thus against the authors of the 1880 generation, who were still dominating the Academy in the 1930s.⁵

However, the manifesto proved highly heterogeneous as it brought together authors from very different political and social backgrounds, which could explain the contradictions between the text and the personal positioning of the different signatories. More particularly, Marie Gevers's conception of regionalism (and literature) should definitely be clarified. Even if she signed the manifesto and recognized it in its totality, as she wrote in a letter to Robert Poulet in

¹ See the full text of the Manifest of the *Groupe du Lundi* in S. Gross and J. Thomas (eds.), *Les concepts nationaux de la littérature. L'exemple de la Belgique francophone. Une documentation en deux tomes* (Aachen: Alano, 1989), vol. 2, pp. 228-32.

² Alongside Gevers, the signatories included Charles Bernard, Arnold de Kerchove, Grégoire le Roy, Georges Marlow, Camille Poupeye, Horace van Offel, Hubert Dubois, Pierre Hubermont, Charles Plisnier, Robert Poulet, Marcel Thiry, René Verboom, Robert Vivier, Gaston Pulings, Herman Closson, Michel de Ghelderode, Henri Vandeputte, Eric de Hauleville, Franz Hellens and Paul Fierens.

³ See J.-M. Klinkenberg, 'Lectures du "Manifeste du Groupe du Lundi" (1937)', in *Lettres de Belgique. En Hommage à Robert Frickx*, ed. by R. Trousson and L. Somville (Köln: Janus, 1992), pp. 98-124 for a more detailed analysis of the manifesto.

⁴ 'Redistribution institutionnelle' (Klinkenberg, *Lectures*, pp. 108-9). All translations in this article are mine.

⁵ Klinkenberg, *Lectures*, pp. 108-9.

1935,⁶ her works remained characterized by a strong regionalism: her characters were inspired by Flemish farmers or bourgeois, while her stories always used her native landscapes as a backdrop. The label 'Regionalism', in her opinion, applied to every story that took place outside of a capital or big city. In great literature, she contended, the region or place that provided the frame for a story should always affect 'l'âme, le cœur, les sens des personnages' [the soul, the heart, the senses of the characters].⁷

Finally, it should be noted that Gevers opposed a complete assimilation of Belgian francophone literature into French literary history, believing that Belgian authors should always strive for a specificity of the Belgian belles-lettres. Gevers enjoyed great success, first in Belgium, later all over Europe, with her highly personal and regionalist novels. She was translated into several languages from the 1930s onwards, among others into Czech, Polish, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian. However, the most notable translations were those that circulated in Nazi Germany from 1935 onwards. These will be the focus of the present article.

Mediators and publishers

Gevers was introduced to the German literary market through her contacts with the German author and art critic Wilhelm Hausenstein⁸ and his wife Margot, with whom she developed a close friendship. Hausenstein, who took over the literary and ladies' supplement of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1934, advocated a German translation of *Madame Orpha*, which was published in the spring of 1935 by H. Goverts Verlag.⁹ The publishers intent to promote works 'which should be representative of the literature of their respective country of origin, with topics and a style that could be seen as characteristic for important genres in their national culture',¹⁰ was crowned with success, as *Frau Orpha* received good reviews in the German press. Gevers's 'powerful style'¹¹ allowed Eugen Claassen and Henry Goverts to provide a sharp contrast with other Flemish authors who were promoted by the Nazi Regime, such as Streuvels, Timmermans or De Coster, and their 'bäuerliche Schwere' [peasant heaviness].¹² They thus tried to steer clear

⁶ Marie Gevers to Robert Poulet, 1935, 'Robert Poulet: Correspondance à Marie Gevers', FS55 00024/0263/001-003, Archives et Musée de la littérature, Brussels.

⁷ *Correspondance à Marie Gevers*, 1935.

⁸ It is important to note here that Hausenstein was not a follower of the Nazi Regime. The critic was even excluded from the *Reichsschrifttumskammer* in 1936 because he had refused to revise his *Kunstgeschichte* (1928) and to eliminate or degrade Jewish artists in his text. He was even depicted as an 'agent of disintegration' at the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition in Munich in 1937. However, Joseph Goebbels issued a special permit and allowed him to stay in the *Reichspressekammer* and remain active as a journalist. (J. Werner, *Wilhelm Hausenstein. Ein Lebenslauf* (München: Iudicium, 2005), pp. 117-8).

⁹ Henry Goverts and Eugen Claassen founded this publishing house in 1934. They managed to work continuously until May 1945 without ever dealing with political events in Germany or publishing National socialist literature. Wilhelm Hausenstein was well acquainted with Eugen Claassen as he had also worked for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* (A.-M. Wallrath-Janssen, *Der Verlag H. Goverts im Dritten Reich* (München: Saur, 2007), p. 118).

¹⁰ Wallrath-Janssen, *Der Verlag H. Goverts*, p. 118.

¹¹ Wallrath-Janssen, *Der Verlag H. Goverts*, p. 120.

¹² Wallrath-Janssen, *Der Verlag H. Goverts*, p. 83.

of the political events throughout the Nazi era and found in Marie Gevers's works a 'positive Alternative zur sog. Blut- und Boden-Dichtung nationalsozialistischer Provenienz' [positive alternative to the so-called Blut-und-Boden literature of National Socialist provenance].¹³

Following the success of *Frau Orpha*, Gevers signed a three-year exclusive contract with the L. Staackmann Publishing House¹⁴ in Leipzig, which published *Die Deichgräfin*¹⁵ (*La comtesse des digues*, 1936), *Die glückhafte Reise*¹⁶ (*Le voyage de Frère Jean*, 1937), *Die Lebenslinie* (*La ligne de vie*, 1938) and *Versöhnung* (*Paix sur les champs*, 1943), all in a German translation by Eva Rechel-Mertens.¹⁷ Children's stories (*Glück: neun Lieder*, 1938, or *Heideglöcklein*, with illustrations by Felix Timmermans, 1938) as well as short stories in newspapers¹⁸ and anthologies¹⁹ were released alongside her novels. Some of her works were still published after the war (among them a new edition of *Die Deichgräfin* by Staackmann in 1948²⁰).

These productive exchanges with Germany during the Nazi regime proved very difficult after the Second World War, when Gevers was accused of collaboration. In 1939 she had attended a poets' meeting at the Belgian coast (in Het Zoute) organised by the Deutsch-Belgische Gesellschaft (allegedly under the supervision of German ambassador Otto Abetz, although his participation has never been proved²¹) and gave two interviews for the collaborationist newspaper *Le Soir*²² in 1941 and 1942. Furthermore, she had a new edition of her novel *Paix sur*

¹³ Wallrath-Janssen, *Der Verlag H. Goverts*, p. 120.

¹⁴ Unlike Goverts, who managed to work independently from the regime, Staackmann participated in the propagation of official National Socialist Literature. (Wallrath-Janssen, *Der Verlag H. Goverts*, pp. 50-1).

¹⁵ 1,000 to 4,000 copies were issued (source: Deutsche Nationalbibliothek).

¹⁶ Idem.

¹⁷ Eva Rechel-Mertens (1895-1981) worked as an assistant for Ernst Robert Curtius at the Institute for Romance Studies at the University of Bonn and worked as a French-German translator. She became quite famous as a translator after the Second World War with her translation of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

¹⁸ 'Die große Flut' (*Frankfurter Zeitung*, 1937); 'Herr Verdonck hat Grippe' (*Hamburger Tageblatt*, 1938); 'Fromme Nacht' (*Kölnische Zeitung*, 1939); 'Der Zaun' (*Rheinisch Westfälische Zeitung*, 1939).

¹⁹ M. Gevers, 'Schnee in Flandern', in *Flämische Weihnacht. Erzählungen flämischer Dichter mit Bildern alter Meister*, ed. by C.H. Erkelenz (München: Kösel-Pustet, 1937); 'Immerwährendes Kinderspiel: Kalender von Marie Gevers', in *Almanach auf das Jahr 1938. Mit Zeichnungen von Felix Timmermans. Ins Deutsche übertragen von Helmut Bockmann* (Leipzig: Staackmann, 1937); M. Gevers, 'Margarita', in *Flandern erzählt. Ein Sammelband flämischer Dichter*, ed. by K. Jacobs (München: Alber, 1943).

²⁰ 13,000 to 19,000 copies were issued (source: Deutsche Nationalbibliothek).

²¹ F. S. Cuypers. 'Parlottes allemando-belges au Zoute', in *La Flandre Libérale* (20.07.1939), page unknown. There have been rumors about an encounter with Gevers herself, which she has always denied (see Marie Gevers's letter to the head of the *Association des écrivains belges*, 10.11.1944). According to a report in the German newspaper *Der völkische Beobachter* (01.07.1939), the meeting was organised upon the initiative of 'Belgian circles', to which Gevers would have contributed. (See H. Roland, 'Les relations belgo-allemandes autour de Raymond De Becker (1936-1940)', in *Raymond De Becker (1912-1969): Itinéraire et facettes d'un intellectuel réproposé*, ed. by O. Dard, G. Duchenne and E. Deschamps (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 119-44.)

²² M. Dehay, 'Un thé aux pommes chez Marie Gevers', in *Le Soir*, 11 February 1941; L.F., 'Marie Gevers parle de la littérature belge', in *Le Soir* (03.06.1942) (after an interview that Gevers had given to the French weekly journal *Comoedia* a few days earlier (30.05.1942). Gevers was allegedly appalled by the fact that her words had been distorted in the Belgian edition of the interview. (See J. De Beucken, 'Le cas de Marie Gevers', in *Vrai* (10.03.1945) and R. Dupierreux, 'Encore le cas de Marie Gevers', in *Alerte* (15.03.1945).)

les champs published through Les Éditions La Toison d'Or, which had close ties to the German foreign affairs office, in 1943. Some sources²³ assert that she published an article 'sur les influences allemandes qui ont compté pour elle' [about the German influences that counted for her] in Paul Colin's collaborationist newspaper *Le Nouveau Journal*, but said article is nowhere to be found²⁴. Gevers's 'lack of caution' during the War led to her exclusion from the PEN-Club and a reprimand from the Belgian Academy.²⁵

One could assume that her ambiguous position resulted from a (false?) naivety rather than from genuine sympathy for the National Socialist regime. She always asserted that one should not maintain 'des cloisons étanches' [watertight bulkheads] in intellectual networks and that she never left a 'geste de rapprochement' [gesture of rapprochement] unanswered in the literary field.²⁶ The charges against Gevers regarding her behaviour towards the German occupier should, however, be contextualised. Louis Carette, who had organised the poets' meeting at the coast, had assured her that the meeting with German authors was non-political and that she would not meet any representative of the National Socialist Regime.²⁷ It should also be noted that she did not know that the journalist who interviewed her at her house in Missembourg was Jean de La Lune, that he worked for *Le Soir* and that he actively collaborated with the Germans. Finally, she was not involved in the negotiations between her Paris editor Plon and La Toison d'or regarding the new edition of her novel *Paix sur les champs*, since she did not hold the publication rights. The fact that she was never invited to join the Europäische Schriftsteller-Vereinigung or the *Dichtertreffen* in Weimar from 1941 onwards,²⁸ even though she apparently did give a keynote

²³ J.-P. Bertrand, M. Biron, B. Denis and R. Grutman (eds.), *Histoire de la littérature belge 1830-2000* (Bruxelles: Fayard, 2003), p. 405.

²⁴ *Le Nouveau Journal* was published under Robert Poulet's and Paul Colin's direction. Colin had also been running the political and cultural journal *Cassandra* since the 1930s. Gevers had interrupted her collaboration with *Cassandra* in 1937 because the editorial line of the journal had become too political for her. The publication of an article in *Le Nouveau Journal* thus seems highly improbable in this context.

²⁵ For more about the campaign against Marie Gevers after the war, see the files at the Archives et Musée de la Littérature in Brussels: 'Deuxième guerre mondiale: campagnes contre Marie Gevers: lettres à R. Dupierreux, L'Express, Georges Rency, J. Thévenet, Edmond Glesener, Georges Linze, Ch. Decerf, William Ugeux, Pierre Bourgeois, Jo Gérard, le Soroptimiste-Club, Pourquoi pas, SGLF...', FS55 00018/0006/001-059.

²⁶ Gevers in a letter to the editor in chief of the newspaper *Le Matin*, 11 July 1939, after her participation in the poet's meeting in Le Zoute was strongly criticised in the press.

²⁷ Gevers to Louis Carette, 1939, 'Deuxième guerre mondiale: campagnes contre Marie Gevers', FS55 00018/0006/001/0059, Archives et Musée de la Littérature, Brussels.

²⁸ Gevers would have had many difficulties to join the Belgian section of the Europäische Schriftsteller-Vereinigung (ESV). The Germans maintained that the Belgians should be separated into two groups, viz. a Flemish group and a Walloon group. However, Flemish authors who wrote in French had to join the Walloon group even if they claimed a Flemish identity. In a letter to Robert Poulet, Guillaume Samsoen de Gérard went so far as to speak of two Walloon sections of the Belgian ESV, one that would be 'indisputably francophone' and a 'second one, that would include the Belgian francophone writers, who despite their Flemish origins didn't define themselves as Flemish, because they considered the differences outweighed the similarities between the two ethnic groups'. Gevers's name was mentioned in this second group, but she certainly could not be categorised as a Walloon writer even if she wrote in French. (See F.-R. Hausmann, *'Dichte, Dichter, tage nicht!' Die Europäische Schriftsteller-Vereinigung in Weimar 1941-1948* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2004), p. 267.)

speech in Munich in 1939,²⁹ further supports the claim that she never actively sought to support National Socialist causes.

The resonance of Gevers's works in National Socialist Germany – limited as it may have been in comparison with that of other Flemish works³⁰ –, is nonetheless interesting, as it cannot be explained by a particular system-affinity from the author herself. In what follows, I shall examine to what extent Gevers could have benefited from unexpected free spaces, i.e. possible loopholes in the selection and censorship system of the NS regime. Of course, she may have escaped censorship for being a 'harmless' writer, who never wrote any politically subversive texts and exploited the potential of the regionalist literature, a genre very popular in the 1930s and 1940s. Even so, Gevers's work did not fully comply to the National Socialist conception of Flanders regarding identity, which could make the fact they were published an interesting anomaly.

A Flemish writer?

We could state that Marie Gevers's introduction to the German literary market occurred at a timely moment. She acquired popularity at a time when Flemish authors such as Stijn Streuvels, Felix Timmermans, Charles De Coster or Georges Eekhoud were being put on the map. Their works were first translated during and after the First World War by Anton Kippenberg and his publishing house Insel,³¹ and later contributed to the dissemination of the particular image of Flanders that National Socialist institutions widely exploited within the framework of their Germanic propaganda.³² Did Gevers fit in with this framework?

The goal of National Socialist propaganda was to present a constructed image of countries which were seen as closely related to Germany and which should be annexed to the Reich. If the issue of language was not foregrounded in National Socialist ideology (race was considered to be the first constitutive factor for the nation), it was capitalized on in the construction of a German-related Flanders in official discourses. The repression of the Flemish language in Belgium allowed the regime to illustrate the oppression of the Flemish people in an 'unvölkisch' state.³³ This issue became decidedly problematic in the case of the Flemish French-speaking bourgeoisie (the so-called Franskiljons), who for the Nazis did not deserve to claim the attribute 'Flemish'.³⁴ This distinction between the Flemish-speaking and French-speaking Flemish population facilitated

²⁹ I was not able to determine in what context this speech was given. See the correspondence between Gevers and Margot Hausenstein. M. Hausenstein, 'Correspondance à Marie Gevers', FS55 00024/0168/001-010, Archives et Musée de la Littérature, Brussels.

³⁰ Her popularity never came close to the likes of writers such as Felix Timmermans, by far the most translated Flemish author into German.

³¹ As part of the *Flamenpolitik*. See H. Roland, 'Die deutsche literarische "Kriegskolonie"', in *Belgien 1914–1918. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutsch-belgischen Literaturbeziehungen 1900–1920*, ed. by H. Roland (Bern e. a.: Lang, 1999).

³² See I. van linthout, "Flandern, halte dich bereit, als Westmark in dieser Welt deinen Platz einzunehmen": Westforschung, Literatur(-Wissenschaft) und Flandern im Nationalsozialismus', in *Griff nach dem Westen: die 'Westforschung' der völkisch-nationalen Wissenschaften zum nordwesteuropäischen Raum (1919-1960)*, ed. by B. Dietz, H. Gabel and U. Tiedau (Münster e.a.: Waxmann, 2003), pp. 325–50.

³³ Van linthout, *Flandern, halte dich bereit*, pp. 337.

³⁴ Van linthout, *Flandern, halte dich bereit*, pp. 338.

the propagation of the idea that French-speaking Belgium was ‘volksfremd’ [alienated], whereas Flanders was ‘in seinem Kern germanisch geblieben, ohne der Verwelschung seiner Oberschicht zu erliegen’ [remained Germanic in its essence, without succumbing to the Romanization of its upper class].³⁵ If some Flemish authors who wrote in French, such as Maurice Maeterlinck or Emile Verhaeren, were banned from the lists of permitted authors and works, others such as Charles de Coster and Georges Eekhoud were received in Germany without any difficulty.

Marie Gevers herself was not spared from the official view on French-speaking Flemish authors: she received negative press in official journals such as *Die Bücherei*,³⁶ which stated in 1939 that her works were ‘in unseren Büchereien wegen der begrenzten, uns erlebensmäßig fernliegenden Themenstellung nur in sehr beschränktem Umfang einsatzfähig’ [because of the limited, to our mind outlandish, subject matter, only to a very restricted extent deployable in our libraries].³⁷ However, no criticism whatsoever can be found in the private and semi-private press,³⁸ which simply ignored the fact that she wrote in French or did not consider it relevant as she expressed her genuine Flemish identity in her works:

Wenngleich die flämische Schriftstellerin Marie Gevers die Mehrzahl ihrer Bücher in französischer Sprache geschrieben hat, so bleibt davon der Grundkern ihres flämischen Volkstums unberührt.³⁹

[Although the Flemish Writer Marie Gevers wrote the majority of her books in French, this does not affect the core of her Flemish ethnic roots [*Volkstum*].]

If, according to the National Socialist official press, Gevers cannot be ‘im eigentlichen Sinne zu den Flamen gerechnet’ [considered as Flemish in the proper sense],⁴⁰ the German reader can find in her works ‘stammverwandte Charaktere, Gedankengut, das gerade so gut einer unserer [deutschen] Köpfe formuliert und verwirklicht haben könnte’ [kindred characters, ideas, which could easily have been phrased and realized by one of our [German] minds].⁴¹ Even if her ‘Vorstellungswelt’ [imaginative world] and her education were ‘entsprechend von Frankreich her bestimmt’ [determined by French influences], her novels were still described as ‘lebendig’ [vibrant] and ‘liebenswert’ [likeable], since ‘den Unterton und Hintergrund [ihrer Romane] bildet doch die flämische Landschaft und das Volkstums Flanderns’ [the Flemish landscape and Flemish ‘Volkstum’ constitute the undertone and background of her narratives].⁴² The ‘flämische

³⁵ Fritz Peuckert, quoted in Van linthout, *Flandern, halte dich bereit*, pp. 339.

³⁶ See Ine Van linthout’s contribution to this volume.

³⁷ J. Peters, ‘Gevers Marie, Die Lebenslinie. Aus dem Französischen von Eva Mertens (1938)’, in *Die Bücherei* 1 (1939), p. 17-8 (quoted in Van linthout, this issue, p. 25).

³⁸ I.e. press that was not directly under the control of propaganda institutions such as the Propaganda Ministry or Rosenberg’s literary institution.

³⁹ *Leipziger Tageszeitung* (03.08.1937), page unknown.

⁴⁰ *Volksgemeinschaft Heidelberg* (07.11.1937), page unknown.

⁴¹ *Volksgemeinschaft Heidelberg* (07.11.1937), page unknown.

⁴² *Reichssender Köln* (27.04.1938).

Seele' [Flemish soul]⁴³ expressed in her works reminded German readers of the 'Niederung der Scheldemündung mit ihren vielen Deichen und Wiesen' [lowlands near the Scheldt with its many dikes and meadows],⁴⁴ which many Germans knew from the 'Bildern der niederländischen Meister her' [Dutch masters' paintings]⁴⁵ or 'aus der Zeit des Krieges' [from the First World War].⁴⁶ Novels such as *Die Deichgräfin* had the ability to awaken in the reviewers' minds an idyllic picture of Flanders, which they had already found in other Flemish authors' works:

Zu dem flämischen Schrifttum, von dem hier nur die Namen Timmermans und Coolen genannt werden sollen, hat sich bereits seit ihrer 'Frau Orpha' Marie Gevers wertig gesellt. Nun mehr legt sie, diesmal bei L. Staackmann, Leipzig, die 'Deichgräfin' vor, einen Roman, der aus der Ich-Erzählung heraustritt und ähnlich wie Coolens 'Dorf am Fluss' ein Stück Scheldelandschaft erfasst. Wer Flandern kennt, – nicht das zerschossene und tausendmal umgewühlte des großen Krieges, sondern das heile und in feinem Bestand vernünftig gesicherte, jenes Land, darin die fast riechhafte Ueppigkeit des Stillebens von jeher ebensogut gedieh wie die liebevoll behandelten Interieurs, weiß, dass hier der Himmel in behäbiger und vor allem auch weitsichtiger Rundung über der Erde gestülpt steht, da nichts den Horizont einengt. Ein solcher Himmel ist typisch flämischer Besitz, wie auch die schollenschwere Erde flämischer Besitz ist.⁴⁷

[Ever since her 'Frau Orpha', Marie Gevers rightly occupies a place in Flemish literature, of which only the names of Timmermans and Coolen should be mentioned here. Now, she presents, this time at the L. Staackmann publishing house (Leipzig), 'Die Deichgräfin', a novel which breaks out of the first-person narration and captures a piece of the Scheldt landscapes, just like Coolen's 'Dorf am Fluss'. Anyone who knows Flanders, not the one shot to pieces and thousandfold shaken by the Great War, but the one which is sound and reasonably preserved in fine condition, that country in which the almost sweet-smelling opulence of still life of all time has always flourished as much as the lovingly treated interiors – will know that, here, the sky rests over the earth in a stately and above all far-sighted arch, since nothing restricts the horizon. Such a sky is typical of Flanders, just like the clod-heavy earth.

If Gevers's work seems to conform to certain National Socialist ideas of the rootedness of Flemish culture, the translation of her works still contradicts the idea of an exclusively Flemish-speaking Flanders and of an oppressed and combative people on the margins of the Reich. The illusion that French and Flemish dialects could harmoniously coexist at the time when her novels were set, could also be seen as problematic by the propaganda machinery. However, authors like Streuvels or Timmermans, whose work did not refer to the Belgian political context either, were still widely read throughout Germany. This would support the claim that the depiction of

⁴³ *Deutsches Adelsblatt* (27.07.1937), page unknown.

⁴⁴ *Reichssender Köln* (27.04.1938).

⁴⁵ *Der Mittag Berlin* (30.07.1936), page unknown.

⁴⁶ *Hamburger Nachrichten* (19.07.1936), page unknown.

⁴⁷ *Eisleben Zeitung* (15.08.1936), page unknown.

'typically Flemish' features such as the landscapes around the Scheldt was actually the main criterion for German readers.

Women's culture and *Heimatliteratur*

Gevers's (slight) popularity might perhaps be explained by a certain system-conformity of her works, but it might also have been a consequence of the increased demand for fiction after the wartime bans on English, American, Russian and French literature,⁴⁸ when 'apolitical' literature was encouraged by the Propaganda Ministry as 'an element of escapism [that] could only strengthen the regime's hold'.⁴⁹ Moreover, the themes and motives developed in her novels did correspond to popular models of German literature at the time. In several reviews, Gevers was said to portray 'die Eigenart des flämischen Bürgertums' [the peculiarity of the Flemish bourgeoisie] with 'fraulichem Wesen' [a feminine quality]⁵⁰ in a 'knapperen und bildhafteren Sprache, [als der deutsche Leser] sie im Allgemeinen im weiblichen Schrifttum gewohnt [ist]' [terser, more vivid language than [the German reader] is generally used to in women's writing].⁵¹ Critiques ranked Gevers in the list of '[e]mpfehlenswerte Lektüre, [...] besonders für Frauen' [commendable reading, [...] especially for women],⁵² and saw the author as part of a tradition of 'typical' women's literature and women's culture of the time.

In the National Socialist ideology, the role distribution between men and women in society was quite clear cut,⁵³ confining women to their household and elevating them to the status of 'Erhalterin der Volksgemeinschaft'⁵⁴ [guardian of the community] as a mother and faithful wife.⁵⁵ In this context, female authors were supposed to refrain from politics and were called upon '[um] das sittliche Gefüge der Gemeinschaft [zu] formen, stärken und erhalten'⁵⁶ [to form, strengthen and preserve the moral structure of the community] by writing 'nicht als Mensch, sondern als Mutter' [not as a person, but as a mother] in order that 'ihre unpolitische und entindividualisierte Lebenshaltung'⁵⁷ [her apolitical and de-individualized stance] could provide guidance for human behaviour. The Hitler era thus provided favourable conditions for literature written by women, but with specific themes and motives.

⁴⁸ Van linthout, this issue, p. 27.

⁴⁹ Van linthout, this issue, p. 26.

⁵⁰ *Neue Leipziger Zeitung* (19.07.1937), page unknown.

⁵¹ *Hannoverscher Kurier* (09.08.1936), page unknown.

⁵² B. Wagner, 1937 (source not mentioned).

⁵³ For a more detailed analysis of this role distribution, see E.M. Gehler, *Weibliche NS-Affinitäten. Grade der Systemaffinität von Schriftstellerinnen im 'Dritten Reich'* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2010).

⁵⁴ See the title of an essay of the National-Socialist author J. Berens-Totenohl (1938), in which she defines the role of women in society according to the Nationalist Socialist worldview.

⁵⁵ At least before the war. This role distribution changed after 1940.

⁵⁶ G. von der Decken, *Emanzipation auf Abwegen. Frauenkultur und Frauenliteratur im Umkreis des Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1988), p. 183.

⁵⁷ Von der Decken, *Emanzipation auf Abwegen*, p. 193.

Besides war novels, social and historical novels, the so-called *Heimatliteratur* was particularly fashionable, as it did not only portray lengthy landscape descriptions but also the lifestyles of different ethnic groups. Rural novels (*Bauernromane*) were favoured since they also expressed the *volkshafte* rural customs and traditions, especially when they presented 'Germanic' people living in border areas and outside the German Reich. Those texts were thought to highlight the 'Alltag der Familie, [...], Geburt, Tod, Hochzeit, Familienfeste und andere Ereignisse des Familienlebens' [daily life of a family [...], birth, death, marriage, family feasts and other events from a family life] and were constitutive of the National Socialist *Blut-und-Boden* literature.⁵⁸ The typical *Heimatliteratur* of this era was also characterized by a strong closeness of their characters to nature, as the National Socialist propaganda claimed that landscape and one's direct natural environment were essential for the roots of a community.

Gevers could strike a chord with German propaganda by emphasizing this vital symbiosis of man and nature. Even if she rooted 'zu stark in ihrer bürgerlichen Welt' [too strongly in her bourgeois reality] to belong to the category of rural novels,⁵⁹ critics did praise her for painting an authentic image of her homeland and its people, 'als erlebten wir in ihren Schicksalen ein Naturgeschehen, das ohne ihr Zutun über sie hereinbricht' [as if we experienced in their destinies a natural event, that befell them without their intervention].⁶⁰ In doing so, she joined the tradition of the presentation of 'Germans from abroad'. The fact that she was 'groß im Verstehen und Darstellen der Eigenart des Volkstums ihres Stammes, ihrer Rasse' [capable of understanding and presenting the specific nature of her people, her race so well]⁶¹ and that she could formulate this closeness to nature in a powerful, vigorous style – in a way akin to the old Dutch Masters, as one critic writes⁶² – contributed to her emerging success. Even in *Die glückhafte Reise*, which is set in France, she was considered successful in rendering a particular Flemish identity:

Die Menschen, die sie [die Reise] unternehmen, [sind] so unverkennbar flämischer Herkunft und tragen den Rhythmus ihrer Heimat so unbeirrbar in sich, dass auch dieses neue Buch wieder anmutet wie ein stilles, besinnliches Verweilen in einem der großen Landgärten von Buyseghem.⁶³

[The people who undertake this journey are so unmistakably Flemish and carry the rhythm of their homeland so unswervingly, that also this new book appears as a silent, contemplative lingering in one of the great gardens of Buyseghem.]

Her exaltation of the Flemish landscapes and of the wandering of her characters (in *Die glückhafte Reise*) also reminded the critics of the German Romantic tradition and more

⁵⁸ Von der Decken, *Emanzipation auf Abwegen*, pp. 196-7.

⁵⁹ *Reichssender Frankfurt* (08.12.1938).

⁶⁰ *Reichssender Frankfurt* (08.12.1938).

⁶¹ F. von Bressensdorf in *Deutsch-Niederländische Gesellschaft* (date and page number unknown).

⁶² H.d Haase, review of *Die Deichgräfin*, journal and date unknown.

⁶³ *Magdeburgische Zeitung* (1938), page unknown. Buyseghem is a village near Antwerp.

particularly of Joseph von Eichendorff's *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts*.⁶⁴ Nature seemed to come to life in her works, almost as a character in itself, so that the reader could vividly experience a year in the life around the Scheldt.⁶⁵

Marie Gevers's poetic force was not limited to powerful and influential landscape descriptions, but also encompassed the depiction of people, their everyday lives and the entwinement between them and the landscapes.⁶⁶ The faith of Susanne in *Die Deichgräfin* roots itself in the river (the Scheldt), 'deren Duft sie [Susanne] spürt, von dem sie den Atem der Strömung und den Pulsschlag der Flut [fühlt]' [of which she smells the scent, of which she senses the breath of the current and the pulse rate of the tide].⁶⁷

The enthusiasm for nature even amounts to a certain kind of animism⁶⁸ in Gevers's works: The characters develop an intimate relationship with nature and this initial phase of contact becomes some sort of religion. The author uses religious terms in her descriptions of the forces of nature, e.g. in *Frau Orpha*, where she sees fall (*boomis* in her Flemish dialect) as a 'church service of the trees'⁶⁹ (*boommis* in Flemish):

Parmi les mots flamands dont une traduction erronée favorisait mes rêves, se trouvait le mot employé en patois pour 'automne'. Le vrai mot flamand est 'Herfst'. Mais les paysans ne le disent guère. Il semble prétentieux, comme par exemple en français 'Vesprée' pour 'soir', l'automne s'appelle 'Boomis'. Je n'ignore plus aujourd'hui, que cela signifie 'Bavo-mis', c'est-à-dire 'Messe, ou kermesse de Saint-Bavon'. Le patron de Gand est fêté le 1er octobre.] / Dans mon enfance, j'interprétais ce mot d'une manière bien plus poétique : je traduisais : 'Boommis : Messe des arbres' parce que boom veut dire 'arbre'. Cet automne flamand m'était la messe des arbres. Cérémonie mystérieuse et magnifique où, venus dans leurs plus somptueux manteaux, ils le jetaient comme une offrande aux pieds nus de l'hiver. Le sens mystique qui me manquait à l'église, je le retrouvais pour donner une signification à chaque geste de l'automne.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ *Frankfurter Zeitung* (20.07.1937), page unknown and *Berliner Bär* 29 (1937), page unknown.

⁶⁵ *Hannoverscher Kurier* (09.08.1936), page unknown.

⁶⁶ In an interview for the French journal *Comoedia*, she explained how she conceived literature as a whole. More than for literature or arts themselves, she was looking for a 'sense of magic', the unraveling of the mysterious bond between man and nature: 'Voyez-vous, ce que je cherche dans la littérature, ce n'est pas la littérature elle-même, ce n'est pas l'art non plus. C'est un je ne sais quoi d'indéfinissable que j'appellerai, faute de mieux, "sens de la magie", la révélation du lien mystérieux qui unit l'homme à la nature' (A.-M. Cabrini, 'Quelques moments avec Mme Marie Gevers, Membre de l'Académie de Belgique', in *Comoedia* 49 (1942), p. 7). *Comoedia* was founded in Paris in 1941 under René Delange's direction. The weekly paper took on the title of another journal, which was daily published between 1907 and 1937. Even if it was under the supervision of the German administration during the War, their editorial line was not overtly collaborationist (O. Gouranton, 'Comoedia, un journal sous influences', in *La revue des revues* 24 (1997), pp. 111-9).

⁶⁷ *Deutsches Adelsblatt* (1937), page unknown.

⁶⁸ I.e. the belief that all natural things, such as plants, animals, rocks, and thunder, have spirits and can influence human events. (Source: Cambridge Dictionary Online).

⁶⁹ 'Messe des arbres', M. Gevers, *Madame Orpha ou la sérénade de mai* (Paris: Attinger, 1933), p. 59.

⁷⁰ M. Gevers, *Madame Orpha ou la Sérénade de Mai* (Paris: Attinger, 1933), p. 59.

[Among the Flemish words of which the incorrect translation fostered my dreams was the dialect word for 'autumn'. The real Flemish word is 'Herfst'. But the peasants don't use it. It sounds pretentious, just like the French word 'Vesprée' to say 'evening'; autumn is called 'Boomis'. Today I know it means 'Bavo-mis', that is 'the mass, or fair in honour of Saint Bavo'. Ghent's patron saint is honoured on 1 October. / In my childhood, I used to interpret that word in a much more poetic way: I translated: 'Boom-mis: church service of the trees' because 'boom' means 'tree'. That Flemish autumn was a church service of the trees to me. Mysterious and magnificent ceremony where, dressed in their most sumptuous mantles, they threw it as an offering at the bare feet of winter. The mystical meaning I missed at the church I found back to give meaning to every movement of the autumn.]

This rather naïve and impressionist conception of religion would be easy to manipulate in the context of National Socialism's harsh anticlericalism. Gevers reiterates an image of peasants irrationally and mystically related to nature and reinforces the construction of a devout Flanders free from all forms of dogmatism and thus easier to appropriate for the German Reich.

The issue of conformity to National Socialist literary patterns can also be extended to Gevers's main characters, in particular to the *Deichgräfin* Susanne, who renounces her personal happiness and, as the novel progresses, becomes an autonomous individual who takes it upon herself to care for the embankments around the Scheldt after her father's death. Surprising as it may seem, the most appreciated female character type in National Socialist literature was not dependent on a man, but extremely independent. The young girl at the centre of a story was to appear as unconventional, hardworking and close to nature, family and *Heimat*, as is Susanne's case.⁷¹

In this respect, *Die Deichgräfin* was certainly not innovative, as German readers had already found a similar set-up in staunch National Socialist writer Josepha Berens-Totenohl's novel *Der Femhof* (1934). Here, protagonist Madlene has to manage the affairs of a castle without any male help. The conception of the woman as mistress of an estate does not per se contradict her ideological role as a mother: motherhood was, in this ideology, not to be limited to family circles, but extended to the whole community. This social awareness of community, however, did not imply any political preoccupations, which were exclusively 'male' terrain. The heroine thus manages to conform to her social role of 'Erhalterin der Volksgemeinschaft' [guardian of the community]⁷² and denies herself personal happiness for the good of her community.

Conclusion

If some representative aspects of Gevers's works made her eligible for an appropriation by the National Socialist officials and explain how her works could circulate in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, we can still argue that Gevers's novels did not comply with the ideological aspirations of the regime in several decisive respects.

On the level of identity, Gevers turns out to be a pure *Franskiljon*,⁷³ who systematically refused to express herself on the Flemish question. Her depiction of an idyllic Flanders, in which

⁷¹ Von der Decken, *Emanzipation auf Abwegen*, pp. 242-3.

⁷² J. Berens-Totenohl, *Die Frau als Schöpferin und Erhalterin des Volkstums* (Jena: Diederichs, 1938).

⁷³ But so were Charles De Coster and Georges Eekhoud, who enjoyed an even larger popularity in Germany.

she fed the illusion of a perfect balance between the Flemish and the French language, contradicted the National Socialist construction of a combative Flanders rising against the Belgian, mainly francophone oppression. But other (and much more popular) authors such as Streuvels or Timmermans also depicted that particular image of an idyllic Flanders, without acknowledging the political tensions in Belgium at the time. The fact that she wrote in French was actually quite irrelevant for German readers, as long as they could find – what they considered to be – ‘typical Flemish’ traits in her novels. As Gevers was introduced to the German market by a publishing house and a mediator that had not been brought in line (*gleichgeschaltet*) by the regime,⁷⁴ one could also assume that the adding of a ‘Flemish’ tag to the title of her translated novel *Frau Orpha, ein flämischer Roman* [Mrs Orpha. A Flemish novel] was a strategy to make her work more palpable for the literary controlling apparatus, as it accentuated her Flemish identity and cultural background.⁷⁵

In this respect, it should also be noted that she was promoted by the private or semi-private press, whereas the official press avoided to rank her among the recommendable Flemish authors, so that she was rather tolerated than promoted on the German literary market of the time. We could further hypothesise that she only received positive press in popular newspapers and journals because Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels prohibited negative reviews of authors in official press and demanded that critics should exercise themselves in the practice of the observation of art and books, which was ‘weniger Wertung, als vielmehr Darstellung und damit Würdigung’ [more of a description and an appraisal than a judgment].⁷⁶

As she kept quiet about the political realities of the time, she could hardly have been considered as a subversive – and thus unacceptable – author by the censorship system. We have seen that the themes and motives she developed in her novels fitted in with National Socialism’s image of women in a specific women’s culture, which applied to literature as well as to society at large. Gevers’s conceptions of regionalism and her closeness to nature corresponded to the prevailing models in German women’s literature of the time and, as they did not contradict the National Socialist image of Flanders as a related, Germanic people, would have been acceptable for the Ministry of Propaganda. The question that now remains is to what extent she was conscious of this possible appropriation, and if her alleged naivety towards the National Socialist regime’s intentions was a strategy that stimulated the promotion of her works abroad. We could therefore argue that Gevers herself did not intentionally seek out ‘free spaces’ and that the anomaly in the reception of her works was in fact due to Germany’s cultural policies of the time, which tolerated non-aligned publishing houses such as Goverts for a certain period of time.

Finally, her success in Nazi Germany should be nuanced as her popularity was extremely limited compared to major Flemish authors such as Felix Timmermans or Charles De Coster. Nevertheless, she remains a very interesting case in the study of the reception of Belgian literature, and more particularly of francophone, literature in Nazi Germany. It would also be interesting to investigate the role of the German translations in the circulation of her works in Eastern and Northern Europe, as the latter could be a direct result of the former.

⁷⁴ Wallrath-Janssen, *Der Verlag H. Goverts*, p. 120.

⁷⁵ Van linthout, this issue, p. 29.

⁷⁶ I. Van linthout, *Das Buch in der Nationalsozialistischen Propagandapolitik* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2012), p. 166.

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