



Review: Gijsbert Pols, *Naturalistische Moderne – Arno Holz und Lodewijk van Deyszel* (Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 2015)

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In the past few decades, scholars from Poland, Germany, Great Britain, Austria and other countries have played an increasingly important role in modern Dutch literary studies. ‘International Dutch Studies’ opened up new research areas by comparing Dutch texts with literatures in other languages or by situating Dutch authors in an international literary field. Gijsbert Pols’ study *Naturalistische Moderne – Arno Holz und Lodewijk van Deyszel*, the result of a PhD project at the Freie Universität Berlin, is an interesting example of this comparative approach. It discusses the oeuvres of two contemporaries who never met and who in all likelihood did not read each other’s works, but whose literary paths are very similar: the German author Arno Holz (1863-1929) and the Dutch writer Lodewijk van Deyszel (1864-1952).

The book’s point of departure is a 1931 article by the Dutch poet, scholar and critic Albert Verwey, in which these two authors are criticised for using a ‘naturalist procedure, the determining accumulation of graphic details’ (‘het naturalistische procédé, de konstateerende optelling van voorstellings-détails’).¹ Verwey saw writers as spiritual leaders with an important social function and therefore considered this naturalist type of literature far too introspective and narrow-minded. It is interesting to see that Verwey characterises van Deyszel and Holz as ‘naturalists’, whereas their style could also be read as breaking with French Naturalism. One could say that the movements they sought to introduce – van Deyszel’s ‘Sensitivism’ and Holz’s ‘Consequent Naturalism’ – precede in some respects early twentieth-century Modernism. In Dutch literary history, Naturalism and Modernism are often interpreted as counterparts: where the first movement has been said to be mainly concerned with describing physical reality as ‘objectively’ as possible, the latter is often understood to constitute Naturalism’s subjective reverse. Pols’ main objective is to understand how Sensitivism and Consequent Naturalism

¹ Gijsbert Pols, *Naturalistische Moderne - Arno Holz und Lodewijk van Deyszel* (Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 2015), p. 14. All translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.

function as a bridge between Naturalism and Modernism, and thus to unveil the modernist tendencies that are already present in (late) Naturalism.

Pols presents his argument in three substantial chapters, the first of which describes the historiographical and theoretical background of his research. Here, he introduces two texts which play a pivotal role in the study: van Deyssel's *Over literatuur* (*About Literature*, 1886) and Holz's *Die Kunst: ihr Wesen und ihre Gesetze* (*Art: Its Nature and Its Laws*, 1891). These two texts are often interpreted as theoretical underpinnings of Sensitivism and Consequent Naturalism respectively, while the practical result of these theoretical explorations could supposedly only be found in novels, plays and volumes of poetry. Pols convincingly shows that this separation of theory and practice is untenable: just as *Over literatuur* and *Die Kunst* have their own unique aesthetic qualities, literary texts (poems, plays or novels) can be used to develop poetical or theoretical notions. Pols therefore proposes to use the word 'project' to characterise an author's realisation of a literary 'goal' within a certain period ('Unter "Projekt" sei die Verwirklichung eines definierten Ziels innerhalb einer bestimmten Zeitspanne verstanden').² The introduction of the term 'project' is certainly this study's most important theoretical contribution. Not only does it tackle the problem of theory and practice, which are often mistakenly separated, it also allows for a more subtle and flexible analysis of an author's development:

Das Modell des Projektes lässt Zusammenhänge zwischen einzelnen Texten Holz' und van Deyssels aufleuchten, ohne die Interpretationsmöglichkeiten dieser Texte durch die Annahme zu beschränken, sie würden einer einheitlichen Ästhetik oder einer eindeutigen ästhetischen Entwicklung zugehören: "Konsequenter Naturalismus" und "Sensitivismus" sollen als eine Ästhetik *under construction* dargestellt werden, die sich sowohl kontinuierlich neu konstituiert und inhaltliche Widersprüche produziert, aber auch eine erkennbare Kontinuität aufweisen kann. (The project model highlights connections between individual texts by Holz and van Deyssel, without limiting the possible interpretations of these texts by assuming that they belong to a homogeneous aesthetic or a uniform aesthetic development: 'Consequent Naturalism' and 'Sensitivism' must be represented as an aesthetic *under construction*, which both reconstitutes itself constantly and produces intrinsic contradictions, while also showing a distinguishable continuity.)³

This notion of an aesthetic 'under construction' returns in Chapter 2, in which Pols analyses the ways in which Holz and van Deyssel represent their own development with the (implicit) use of several models of historical change. In *Die Kunst*, Holz revisits his early works, such as the poetry book *Das Buch der Zeit* (*The Book of Time*, 1886), and comes to the conclusion that these works did not succeed in modernising literature because they held on too much to older, Romanticist literary models. However, *Die Kunst* attempts to identify and remedy these shortcomings, meaning that Holz uses his own literary development to illustrate what modern literature should look like. At the same time, he attacks French naturalist Émile Zola – the

² Idem, p. 34.

³ Idem, p. 35.

epitome of literary Naturalism – for not being radical enough in his objectifying ambitions: Zola was still a ‘metaphysic’, whereas Holz presents his own work as truly positivist. According to Pols, Holz’s interpretation of history is somewhat paradoxical: on the one hand, he starts from a positivist belief in progressive historical change (‘Fortschrittsnarrativ des Positivismus’), while on the other hand he defends the idea of paradigmatic change.⁴ In the former logic, Zola functions as a necessary but superseded stadium in literary modernisation, whereas in the latter Holz’s consequent Naturalism is seen as a radical revolution in literary history. After some years developing his modernisation ‘project’ in several different types of literary texts, Holz ‘finishes’ the project stage with the volume of essays *Revolution der Lyrik (Revolution of Lyrical Poetry, 1899)*.

Van Deyssel’s sensitivist poetics differs from Holz’s consequent Naturalism: Van Deyssel does not aspire to positivist, objectified literature, like his German colleague, but to a literature in which sensitive narrators offer detailed accounts of their individual experiences. But these differences exist on the level of literary practice, whereas Pols in this second chapter concentrates on Van Deyssel’s and Holz’s interpretations of (literary) history. Seen from that perspective, the resemblances between the two authors are obvious. Van Deyssel’s interpretation of history likewise combines positivist and revolutionary discourses; he too considers Zola to be a prototypical modern author whose oeuvre needs to be challenged by younger writers; and he also identifies unsuccessful attempts to modernise literature, albeit not in his own works but in the oeuvre of his colleague Frans Netscher. Pols of course acknowledges these similarities, but he does not answer the question what they mean. Can we conclude that the Dutch and German late nineteenth-century literary fields are similar? What does the omnipresence of Émile Zola demonstrate about the dominance of French poetics in the international literary discussion of that time? Does it make sense that an author within a marginal field like the Dutch one chooses a similar authorial position as an author within a more respected field like the German one? Unfortunately, such sociological and cultural historical questions are left untouched in this book, even though they would have been very appropriate in a comparative study like this.

The third chapter analyses the concrete literary practices of ‘Sensitivism’ and ‘Consequent Naturalism’, both in *Over literatuur* and *Die Kunst* and in all other types of texts. To take just Van Deyssel as an example: various texts are taken into account, from the novels *Een liefde (A Love Story, 1887)* and *De kleine republiek (The Small Republic, 1888)* to his experimental prose poetry such as the poem ‘Menschen en bergen’ (‘People and Mountains’, around 1888-1891). This chapter shows how Van Deyssel’s Sensitivism breaks with Naturalism’s belief in an objective representation of reality. The sensitivist’s aim is to experience a so-called ‘epiphany’ by catching a glimpse of the sublime metaphysical world that hides behind physical reality. On the other hand, Sensitivism shares with Naturalism the ambition to unmask conventional ways of seeing and experiencing the world:

Andererseits hält der Sensitivismus an der naturalistischen Annahme fest, der zufolge sich aus dem Aushebeln der Konventionen die Wahrheit ergebe. Die negative epistemologische Praxis wird somit initiiert in der Erwartung, dass aus diesem Aushebeln eine neue, wahrhaftigere Epistemologie hervorgehe, deren exklusiver

⁴ Idem, pp. 75-6.

Protagonist der sensitivistische Autor ist. (On the other hand, Sensitivism holds on to the naturalist assumption that truth can be attained when conventions are dislodged. The negative epistemological practice is thus initiated with the expectation that a new, more truthful epistemology will arise from this dislodgement, with the sensitivist author as its exclusive protagonist.)⁵

Unmasking conventions might bring the naturalist to the conclusion that unmediated statements about the world do not exist: there is always a subject experiencing the world in a certain way. This means that the relentless search for a truthful representation of reality, hidden behind the conventions, will in the end lead Naturalism to a realm that is close to Modernism. An 'in-between' movement like Sensitivism demonstrates how this subjectivist idea can spring from an essentially naturalist search for the truth – and therefore demonstrates that Naturalism could also be understood to be a proto-Modernism.

This conclusion might surprise Dutch readers, since in the Netherlands Naturalism and Modernism are often interpreted to be mutually exclusive. In the English scholarly tradition, however, research on the continuities between late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century literature abounds. Pols only mentions David Weirs *The Making of Modernism* (1995), which claims that late nineteenth-century Decadentism (a movement in many ways comparable to Sensitivism and Consequent Naturalism) has similarities with Modernism, but there are several more recent books on this subject: Douglas Mao's *Fateful Beauty* (2008), Andrew Goldstone's *Fictions of Autonomy* (2013) and Simon Joyce's *Modernism and Naturalism in British and Irish Fiction, 1880-1930* (2014) – the last title was probably published after Pols finished the book's manuscript. Fredric Jameson's *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013) even demonstrates that Zola's naturalist narration tends towards becoming pure 'affect' or style: a statement remarkably similar to Pols' thesis about the modernist tendencies in late Naturalism.⁶ The German-Dutch focus in this book minimises other interesting international connections. And even within the German or Dutch fields one would be able to find literary authors who could be integrated in this study, which would broaden the scope considerably. Pols himself wrote articles on Dutch authors like J. van Oudshoorn and Carry van Bruggen in the last decade, authors who could be placed within the same realm between Naturalism and Modernism.⁷

Perhaps Pols left these authors out of the study to safeguard *Naturalistische Moderne's* project logic. By defining a project as a 'definite goal' the author wants to reach, the issue of authorial intention is introduced into this book – or, to be more precise, the issue of strategy. This is the term used by Pols to refer to the techniques authors deploy to have their projects succeed.⁸ One could expect, however, that not every oeuvre can be analysed as easily with this project logic as Holz's and Van Deyssel's. These authors both reflected very explicitly on their own development and their ideas about modern literature – but this constant reflection on

⁵ Idem, p. 128.

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London/New York: Verso, 2015 (2013)), pp. 45-77.

⁷ Gijsbert Pols, 'Onderweg naar het Andere: een literair-historische visie op Willem Mertens' *Levenspiegel*', *Nederlandse Letterkunde* 11 (2006), 4, 333-53; Gijsbert Pols, 'Eva's overgave', *Spiegel der Letteren* 50 (2008), 3, 297-322.

⁸ See for instance Pols, *Naturalistische Moderne*, p. 19.

one's own position is fairly uncommon. This means that *Naturalistische Moderne* will mostly be of importance to German and Dutch audiences interested specifically in the oeuvres of Holz and Van Deyszel, or more generally in (consequent) Naturalism, Sensitivism and Modernism in the Netherlands and Germany. An extensive international history of Naturalism, Modernism and everything in between is yet to be written.

Author's biography

Laurens Ham is Assistant Professor of Modern Dutch Literature at Utrecht University (the Netherlands). In 2015, he published a book version of his PhD thesis, 'Door Prometheus geboeid. De autonomie en autoriteit van de moderne Nederlandse auteur' ('Captivated by Prometheus: The Autonomy and Authority of the Modern Dutch Author'). His research focuses on the links between authorial posturing, political criticism and narrative empathy in Dutch literature from the nineteenth century onwards.