

THEO D'HAEN (ed.): Dutch and Flemish Literature as World Literature

New York – London – Oxford – New Delhi – Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2019. 321 pp.
ISBN 978-1-5013-4012-3

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/WLS.2021.13.3.13>

As part of its special series of English-language publications, *Literatures as World Literature*, Bloomsbury Publishing released the volume *Dutch and Flemish Literature as World Literature* in 2019 under the direction of the comparatist Theo D'haen. In chronological order it collects 20 relatively short contributions by 23 authors, who are mostly literary scholars from various countries. They present their visions of the international or intercultural contexts of Dutch and Flemish literary works and phenomena spanning eight centuries. In this case caution forces me to loosely speak of “international or intercultural contexts” instead of “world literature”, which has become a notion, especially in Anglophone comparative literature studies, referring to the global circulation of works coming from national literatures mostly through the medium of English translation. International or intercultural contexts are more appropriate here as a basic concept, because the phenomena discussed in the first half of the book for example, in the section devoted to older literature, were not subject to the global dynamics of circulation in the modern sense. Those literary works which, in the Middle Ages and in the period of early modernity, made an impact outside of their original vernacular framework, can be considered, if anything, “European literature”. In fact, the German scholar of Romance literature Ernst Robert Curtius pointed this out on the basis of the origin and reproduction of literary topoi in his now classical study as early as 1948.

Therefore, in the case of the present publication, we must speak of international and intercultural contexts, even though most

of the contributing authors use the term “world literature”. They use it as a shibboleth, an agreed sign, sometimes with an obligatory reference to David Damrosch's 2003 book. However, in the brief introduction (1–3), the editor Theo D'haen does not suggest any clear methodological point of departure. In fact, it is not clear from this introduction what phenomena of Dutch and Flemish literature should be considered world literature and why. Instead, D'haen mentions only the names of Dutch painters, who are globally better known than writers, and in the last paragraph vaguely (and unfortunately only superficially) refers to the individual studies of the present volume. What can be considered world literature in Dutch and Flemish literature is probably only to be answered by these individual contributions, and indeed they do so, each in its own way, because the publication lacks a unifying principle. Before our eyes emerges a kaleidoscopic picture, a kind of literary-historical potpourri, a fragmentary and methodologically unclear picture of Dutch literature as “world literature”, which arose only on the occasion of this publication and apparently especially for reasons of prestige, i.e. in order to increase the value of particular literary phenomena by making them “world literature”, and in some cases perhaps in order to have an article printed in an international academic publication. Fortunately, there are a few obvious exceptions. On closer inspection, it is also striking that despite the reputation of most academics in the present publication, only a few of them have presented the results of personal research which is published here for the first time. More often, these are more

or less successful syntheses of previously published research, sometimes “telephone directories” of works and their translations into foreign languages, sometimes without any or without credible conclusions.

From the historical-chronological point of view, the first part of the publication contains five studies on medieval or late medieval literature: Geert H.M. Claassens on King Arthur and *Reynard the Fox*, Kees Schepers on Jan Ruusbroeck, Anne Reyners on the Brabant version of the *Romance of the Rose*, Bart Besamusca on German and Dutch court literature, Geert Warnar on the variations of the play *Elckerlijc* (*Everyman*). These studies, which could appear in any collection devoted to the comparative aspects of medieval literature, only in a few cases provide a deeper reflection on the problem of worldliness in the sense of global circulation/transfer of motifs/themes and works over the centuries. This is certainly true for the contribution about the Dutch late-medieval morality play *Elckerlijc* written in the 13th century, a glimpse of which is found by Geert Warnar several centuries later in the novel *Everyman* (2006) by Philip Roth. Incidentally, Warnar is also the only one of this group of authors who, in the case of medieval textual culture, is hesitant to use the term “world literature” (63) and in fact relativizes it from the point of view of older literary history. One will not encounter similar skepticism in contributions of other medievalists; their studies are sometimes reminiscent of university textbooks (Besamusca, Reyners). Moreover, Scheppers’s words on the mystic Jan Ruusbroeck sound naive: “We are all aware – witness this volume – that in today’s world the English language provides almost the sole linguistic entrance to global academic discourse; it is perhaps difficult to imagine that in the Middle Ages the dominance of Latin was even greater” (23–24). We can find other such trivialities in this part of the volume, which are actually an unnecessary submission to less educated readers who will hardly reach for this publication anyway. In connection with the inter-

national dissemination of the mystical writings of Jan Ruusbroeck, and also of the play *Elckerlijc*, which was originally made possible by translations into Latin, one may ask why there are no chapters in D’haen’s volume on the international reception of some Latin works of the *devotio moderna* movement from this cultural region, especially of *De imitatione Christi* by Thomas à Kempis, and also why the publication is silent about the writings of the European humanist and cosmopolitan Erasmus of Rotterdam, whose works were translated into vernacular languages and had an impact across Europe. Even if the editor quietly identifies the original vernacular form of literary works as a starting point for reflections on Dutch and Flemish literature (which apparently is the case), this starting point contradicts the medieval understanding of supranationalism and cultural overlaps, and remains captive to the traditional notion of Dutch literature as national literature, which this publication opposes programmatically (if it is possible to speak of a program here at all due to the absent concept).

There is certainly no doubt about the literary-historical quality of the contribution by the Italian scholar Marco Prandoni (68–81) on the Baroque playwright Joost van den Vondel (which is, by the way, the only contribution on the literature of the Dutch “Golden Age”, i.e. the 17th century). Prandoni shows the intercultural encounters of this classical author on the basis of his oscillation between the then ideological (religious) paradigms as well as on the basis of his interest in Chinese history. Let us add that in this respect Vondel was exceptional in his time also because in the 17th and 18th centuries it was not a Baroque mourning play and a Classicist tragedy, but a European opera that “omnivourously” absorbed a number of exotic motifs, including East Asian ones. Perhaps it was the Dutch 17th century, which gave the world many internationally famous painters, but not writers, in which the contours of the new bourgeois cosmopolitanism crystallized; these contours were not deter-

mined by literary aesthetics, but by trade and colonial expansion. And it is colonial expansion that forms the background against which the “worldliness” of several literary phenomena can be duly appreciated later in the 19th century, in the case of Dutch literature of its first “modern classic author” Multatuli and his political novel *Max Havelaar* (1860) which thematizes Dutch colonial policy in East Indies (now Indonesia). However, the contribution by the expert on Multatuli’s work, Jaap Graeve (82–103), is somewhat disappointing because apart from Multatuli’s biography and the later impact of his work (all of which can be found on Wikipedia nowadays), it does not focus on new research. It only summarizes the results of his own reception studies, or studies by other scholars of Multatuli’s work in translation.

A more productive approach to Dutch colonial literature as “world literature” is taken by Saskia Pieterse (146–160), who examines the literary representations of the historical phenomenon of indentured labor in the first half of the 20th century from the comparative perspective. This study, which hardly elaborates on the concept of “world literature”, shows that innovative stimuli for reflection on the international and intercultural contexts of literary production can be based mainly on cultural and socio-historical research.

Reception studies, limited to summaries of published books and their translations, usually bog down in the shallows of trivialized book history, which offers few possibilities for deeper historical and aesthetic understanding and leads to literary-historical positivism, especially to the fetishization of facts and to explicative determinism, or even worse, to a large, often confusing amount of material in foreign languages (translations) that cannot be mastered by the authors even at the primary linguistic level. This is the case with the study by Ruud Veen (122–145) about another (partly) colonial writer of the first half of the 20th century, the decadent Louis Couperus: the titles of translations of his works into Slavic languages (Polish, Czech) are beset with typo-

graphical errors. As the abovementioned contribution lacks an intellectual synthesis of material that could lead to further reflection (although the author offers an overview of translations in a three-page table), the question remains open how this study contributes to the understanding of Couperus’s international reception.

A similar summary of already existing results of reception studies by other authors is provided by the contribution of Elke Brems and Orsoly Réthelyi (183–205) about *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1919) by the only internationally known Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga. Although it is attractive that readers learn at second hand about the translations of this classical work into German, English, French, Hungarian, Czech, Slovak and Polish, the study does not answer the question of how this work influenced world historiography, how it represented an alternative to historical positivism and Marxism, how it contributed to the revolutionizing of French and international medieval studies especially after 1945. There are several studies that provide partly well-founded, partly hypothetical answers to these questions. The contribution seems to conclude that *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* was an internationally known but basically unread work (if this is partly the case, then it is only an anecdotal truth).

The study by the St. Petersburg scholar of Dutch literature Irina Michajlova and the theater director Sergei Tcherkasski (161–182), on the Moscow production of Herman Heijermans’s play *Op hoop van zegen* (1913) and its experimental reconstruction after a hundred years, is completely different, showing the vitality of this realistic drama as well as of the tradition of Stanislavski’s principles of psychological work with actors. The study is also interesting because it is not merely theatrological, but provides a brief historical overview of translations of Dutch literature into Russian and of Dutch-Russian cultural relations up to 1917. The authors do not suggest that Heijermans – whose international reputation cannot be compared

to that of Ibsen, Strindberg or Hauptmann – is a phenomenon of “world literature”; already in pre-revolutionary Russia he was known simply for the quality of staging. Unfortunately, the reference to this chapter in Theo D’haen’s introduction misleadingly states that Heijermans as “one of its [Dutch-language literature] most popular turn-of-the-twentieth-century dramatists became a favourite in Communist Europe” (3).

One of the best contributions in the volume is the one by Geert Buelens (206–229) about the interwar Flemish experimental poet and novelist Paul van Ostaijen, who absorbed many of the aesthetic stimuli of his time and of the literary past. His influence on the world neo-avantgarde has remained an untied knot in many respects. Buelens shows only a small but a significant part of his influence on the South African poet Wopko Jensma. The study is an example of a subtle poetic analysis that illuminates the intercultural transfer that poetry is capable of across ages and continents and thus becomes truly “world literature”. (Buelens himself does not use the term “world literature” but rather assumes that “world literature” is potentially any high-quality poetry).

In comparison with the novels by the Flemish Romantic author of the early 19th century, Hendrik Conscience, whose works were translated into European languages in the 19th century and served as a model of anti-French and anti-German nationalism in the Slavic world, the international reception of Paul van Ostaijen is an example of a spiritual inspiration crossing borders rather than a Romantic xenophobic mobilization caused by Conscience’s historical novels and stories of manners, which can hardly be integrated into any model of “world literature”, as the study by Lieven D’hulst (104–121) suggests. Unlike Buelens, who works with poetry, D’hulst uses the methods of book history, but proceeds more subtly than most other book historians represented in the volume. He focuses on the rhizomatic structure of the impact of Conscience’s translations and is also more cautious in his conclusions as he warns against generalizations.

The volume’s editor, Theo D’haen, has contributed a chapter on Dutch interwar poetry and/as world literature (218–229). Of the three Northern Dutch poets he selects (Jan J. Slauerhoff, Martinus Nijhoff and Hendrik Marsman), perhaps only Nijhoff can be considered internationally known, and only thanks to numerous translations of his poem *Awater* (1934). Due to the fact that poetry is a non-commercial matter and limited to a narrow circle of recipients, the classification of poetry as world literature goes beyond quantitative criteria such as the number of copies sold (!), which authors of several other studies in the volume take into account with respect to interwar literature. Thus, when it comes to the “worldliness” of poetry, it makes more sense to think about transcultural inspirations, returning topoi, motifs, poetic images, metaphors and keywords, intertextual references and thematic connections that are present in the works of well-read poets anywhere in the world. It is startling that D’haen generally speaks about the various “influences” on the above-mentioned poets but his international contextualizations are unsatisfactory. In the case of Nijhoff’s poem *Awater*, Dutch scholarship drew attention to the dialogue with several works of foreign literature years ago. Although the research admits some ideological congruence with T.S. Eliot’s *Wasteland*, mentioned also by D’haen, at the same time it shows that of all specifically traceable connections of *Awater* with canonical works of classical and modern world literature, this relationship is perhaps the most vague.

Fortunately, Bart Vervaeck and Dirk de Geest (248–259) proceed in a completely different way in their study of the postwar literary magazine *Barbarber*, which has remained internationally unknown. Its conception and the cultural setting of its authors and creators represented a breakthrough toward the globally-promoted neo-avantgarde aesthetics of the 1960s (new realism, poetics of the mundane partially inspired by Dadaism, pop art). Instead of superficial references to “influences”, Vervaeck and de Geest

point out the specific practices of defamiliarization and humor and the departure from political engagement that were witnessed in many countries during the “long 1960s” in the neo-avantgarde generation, whose aesthetic and social experiences were no longer informed by the trauma of war.

The situation of Flemish modernists Louis Paul Boon and Hugo Claus, the focus of Kris Humbeek's study (230–247), was different: they were both formed by regionalism and marked by the cataclysm of the 20th century, made use of dialect and reached for modernist aesthetic forms present in several literatures. Both are regional and at the same time deserve the attention of the global reading public (they have been translated, although they are often “untranslatable”). The question is how the criterion for their inclusion in “world literature” should be defined.

Hans Bertens's study of post-war (Northern) Dutch prose (260–270) clearly attributes a key role in the global distribution of modern Dutch literature to translation into German (the Frankfurt Book Fair of 1993 was decisive). However, instead of clarifying the socio-cultural factors of this phenomenon, including the reading middle class, the high level of literary discussions in German print, audiovisual and electronic media, etc., the author based his argument on the budget of the Dutch Foundation for Literature for translation of domestic literature abroad and by the “success” of some works translated into German.

Commercial arguments, which in literary studies belong at most in the footnotes (usually giving information about the cost of publications and the number of copies sold), often appear throughout the volume as central arguments. A similar journalistic superficiality is characteristic of the contribution by Frank Albers, devoted to the Flemish author Stefan Hertmans's international bestseller about the World War I, *War and Turpentine* (*Oorlog en terpentijn*, 2013). Hertmans's novel was a brief success that can clearly be included in the canon of modern Flemish literature, but that is hardly a rea-

son for anyone to dedicate a separate chapter to it in a 300-page volume dealing with eight centuries of Dutch literature and its international implications.

Moreover, if this publication lacks a separate chapter on a key work of 20th-century Dutch literature that is truly not a flash in the pan, but is famous throughout the world (and will be for a long time), it is a chapter on *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1947). Furthermore, it fails to mention the second globally most famous Dutch writer of the 20th century, the diplomat and author of detective stories from ancient China, Robert van Gulik. The fact that van Gulik wrote his novels about Judge Dee in English cannot be an obstacle to his inclusion in “world literature”, quite the contrary. A certain compensation for the frustrations with the abovementioned shortcomings and superficiality is provided by Hans Demeyer's critical reflection (271–283) on global identities in the contemporary novels of Jeroen Theunissen and Nina Polak. The identities of the literary characters of these two (as well as many other contemporary authors) have their origins in the bourgeois experience which have been internalized by readers in prosperous democracies, and this is exactly what allows for the understanding and positive reception of these works outside the Netherlands and Belgium (especially in the West).

The last article, by Tom van Kalmhout (295–311), is devoted to a somewhat difficult, albeit historically interesting topic of literary and autobiographical works of Dutch emigrants in Australia in the years 1945–1990. With all due respect, one could imagine a perhaps more relevant complementary chapter on literary creative migrants in the Netherlands and Flanders from the end of the World War II to the present. It is a pity that no one has written it for this volume because writers such as Jana Beranová, Jan Stavinoha, Abdelkader Benali, Hafid Bouazza, Kader Abdolah and many others are really those whose experiences co-create the global character of contemporary Dutch and Flem-

ish literature. One could also imagine a chapter on how internationally acclaimed film adaptations contributed to the international promotion of the novels of Harry Mulisch, Ferdinand Bordewijk and Multatuli.

Thus, the volume *Dutch and Flemish Literature as World Literature* leaves us puzzled about what it does not include and what it should have presented more subtly, so that we could speak of a compact volume of comparative studies bringing new knowl-

edge, rather than popular information on selected phenomena. It also leaves us puzzled by the lack of clarity regarding the concept of world literature which could be valid for the development of literary cultures from the Middle Ages to the present.

Translated from Slovak by Róbert Gáfrík

ADAM BŽOCH

Institute of World Literature SAS

Slovak Republic

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3943-3669>

JIANKAI WANG: 中国当代文学作品英译的出版与传播 [Zhōngguó dāngdài wénxué zuòpǐn yīng yì de chūbǎn yǔ chuánbō – A history of publication and traveling of English-translated contemporary Chinese literature]
Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2020. 403 pp. ISBN 978-7-309-14825-1

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/WLS.2021.13.3.14>

Over the past several decades, the cultural turn has exerted a powerful influence over translation studies. It is no surprise that the cultural turn has gained wide popularity among Chinese academics as well. What is worth noting is that China has undergone more than a century of translation practice both inward and outward, which has provided a fertile ground for scholars to explore and analyze the various aspects of translation. The outward translation starting from 1949, spanning over 70 years, is a rarity in the history of translation and serves as a valuable resource for understanding the interplay among politics, literature, translation, and culture. There have been several important studies that look into the phenomenon, such as Qiang Geng's (2010) case study of the Panda Books series, the translation of a particular writer, such as the study of Yan Mo by Zhiqin Jiang (2019), or the more comprehensive analysis conducted by Xiuhua Ni (*A study on outward translation of Chinese literature [1949–1966]*, 2021), that focuses only on the first seventeen years; yet it is not hard to notice that these studies, though done in a detailed and focused way, have

one serious drawback and that is a lack of systematic view on China's unusual outward translation.

This challenge was taken up by Jiankai Wang more than six years ago. Building on his previous efforts that include research on a history of China's translation of English literature since the May 4th Movement in 1919 and the study of the translation of English literary works in China's modern literary journals, he now presents us with *Zhōngguó dāngdài wénxué zuòpǐn yīng yì de chūbǎn yǔ chuánbō* (*A history of publication and traveling of English-translated contemporary Chinese literature*, 2020), which represents his endeavor in mapping out the political, social, and translational aspects of China's seven-decade translation practice in a systematic and comprehensive way. The book takes as its research object the 70-year English translation of Chinese contemporary literary works, which is divided into four time periods. Thus, the book contains four parts, in correspondence to the social and economic development of China; each part delves into the four aspects of the social context, the publication of the English-translated contemporary literary works, the role of the translators and