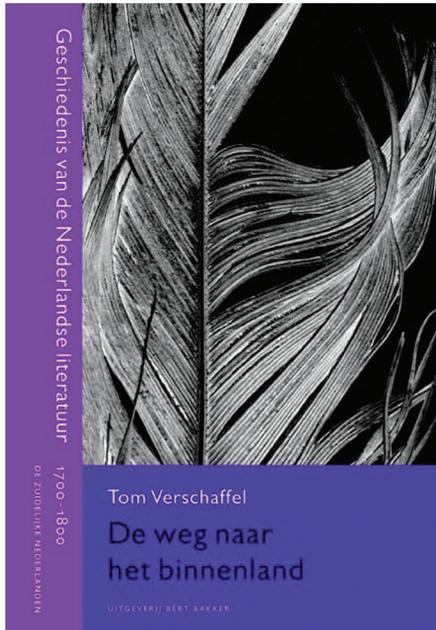


Review

Tom Verschaffel, *De weg naar het binnenland. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur. 1700-1800: de Zuidelijke Nederlanden*, Amsterdam, Prometheus, 2016, 332 pp. ISBN 978-90-3514-375-3.



De weg naar het binnenland by Tom Verschaffel is the latest (and final) contribution to the *History of Dutch Literature*, a series of eight volumes edited by A.J. Gelderblom and A.M. Musschoot. It serves as the Southern – Flemish – counterpart to *Worm en donder* by Inger Leemans and Gert-Jan Johannes (2013), on the Northern Dutch literature of the eighteenth century. This latest volume makes clear that the entire series is not so much a history of Dutch literature as it is a history of literature in Dutch. Tom Verschaffel convincingly argues that Flemish eighteenth-century literary (and by extension cultural) life was marked by multilingualism. His contribution to this literary history may be the final one, completing the chronological overview from the Middle Ages to present-day literature, but at the same time it presents an alternative way of looking at literary history. Unlike classical literary history,

Verschaffel does not present a systematic overview of ‘great’ or ‘canonical’ works of Flemish eighteenth-century literature – he even admits possibly no great works of literature have been written in the eighteenth-century Austrian Netherlands. What he does offer his readers is a thorough and clear image of its cultural life, with its French-speaking economic and cultural elite, its neo-Latin intellectual life, and its Dutch-speaking commoners.

In 1975, in one of the very few literary histories of the eighteenth century in the South, Jos Smeyers reluctantly admitted that the quality of eighteenth-century Flemish literature was not very high. An earlier history of Flemish literature, Snellaert’s *Histoire de la littérature flamande* from 1849, recently published online by DBNL, calls the eighteenth century ‘l’époque du sommeil’, the age of sleep (p. 15), and this image has lived on well into the

twentieth century. Because of this, it was very little studied. Smeyers modestly presented his 1975 overview as a non-exhaustive *status quaestionis*, and continued his entire career to uncover hidden and unknown aspects of this literary world. Verschaffel respectfully relies heavily on Smeyers's work, but from the very start he makes it clear that he is not looking for 'scarce flowers in the wasteland' (schaarse bloemen in het braakland, p. 18). The image of a 'wasteland' is a biased one, Verschaffel claims: it implies that the historical situation described is by definition a problem. Moreover, the image of the flowers in this wasteland suggests that the author is trying to 'correct' the negative image of the period. Verschaffel very consciously steers away from any aesthetic evaluation, and certainly from attempts to find 'flowers' where there might be none. As he says: 'This literature was what it was and in her time, did what she could and should do, and there is nothing wrong with that' (Deze letterkunde was wat ze was en deed wat ze in haar tijd kon en moest doen, en daar is niets mis mee, p. 18). If this means that there are no flowers, so be it: this book will not look for excuses or apologies. Verschaffel's goal is to analyze the position of literature in Dutch in the culture and society of the eighteenth-century Southern Netherlands, and he reaches this goal in an impressive way.

Dutch literature in the South did not look outside its own borders; on the contrary, it focused on its own community, its own interior – hence Verschaffel's title: *De weg naar het binnenland*, the road to the interior. This interior was marked by multilingualism, with each community speaking its own language. The cultural and economic elite spoke and wrote French, the religious and intellectual elite used (neo-) Latin, and the 'common people' spoke (a local variety of) Dutch. This would imply that French was the preferred language for high culture, and therefore also for high literature. Indeed, one author may publish a text in Dutch if he wanted to reach a broad, mainly lower-class audience (very often for pedagogical purposes), but write in French to convince an upper-class, well-educated audience of the same issue.

However, although French was very fashionable, it was also associated with frivolity and moral decay (much as it was in the Northern Netherlands, although the dominance of French in the South was far greater). The most famous advocate of the Dutch language in the South is Jan-Baptist Verlooy, often regarded as one of the founding fathers of the Flemish Movement, but first and foremost an avid (and ultimately disappointed) supporter of a reunion of the Greater Netherlands. For the larger part of the population (including the intellectual elite), however, the Dutch Republic was a foreign country. The relation between North and South was one of mutual alienation, in a political, cultural and literary sense. While Northern Dutch literature did reach a part of the Southern reading public (albeit almost exclusively seventeenth-century literature: Vondel, Cats, Hooft), Southern Dutch literature remained a largely local issue, dominated by the chambers of rhetoric.

This may be related to an issue Verschaffel hardly touches upon: the diversity of local linguistic variety does not get the attention it might deserve, except for some tongue-in-cheek examples of local chauvinism. While in the Republic the process towards a standardized Dutch language was set in motion quite early on in the seventeenth century, in the Southern Netherlands 'Dutch' or 'Flemish' remained to consist of a large number of local dialects, despite some scattered (and failed) attempts to create a standard variety of Dutch, as Verschaffel correctly points out. Most European societies were multilingual

at the time, with French as the language of the elite and neo-Latin that of the clergy and academia, but the linguistic diversity of 'Dutch' in the Southern Netherlands contributed to the use of French, instead of Dutch, as *lingua franca* in everyday life.

Local chambers of rhetoric like *De Wijngaerd* in Brussels (with Jan Frans Cammaert), *De Olijftak* in Antwerp, and *De Fonteine* in Ghent were very active in the theatre world, translating, adapting, and staging many French plays. But the chambers of rhetoric gradually gained a questionable reputation: from guardians of literature and culture they seemed to evolve into societies of sociability, with an emphasis on lavish feasts and drinking. This reputation does not do justice to the literary efforts of these chambers, but the fact that the vast majority of the literary output consisted of occasional poetry, which did not appear in print, limits its resonance to the local community. Even in literary competitions the honour of victory did not reach much farther than the city limits.

Still, Verschaffel manages to lay bare larger evolutions and lines in Flemish cultural life, such as the continuing French dominance in poetics, the rise (and fall) of political and (semi-) spectatorial journals, the moral and religious dimension of most literary works (which, again, emphasizes the pedagogical dimension of Flemish Dutch literature). These literary works express different positions on scales ranging from a moderate, Catholic Enlightenment to a more radical (but no less Catholic) Counter-Enlightenment, and from loyal royalism to polemical satire.

This bird eye's view of the Southern Netherlands in the eighteenth century is Verschaffel's original and much needed contribution to the history of literature in Dutch. Still, the most enjoyable passages in the book are when Verschaffel recounts anecdotes of literary and cultural life, largely because these passages seem to owe their vividness to the joy and pleasure with which they were written. The strong point of this study is at the same time its weakest: as Verschaffel himself points out, this book is written by a historian, not a literary scholar. There are no systematic analyses of one author's oeuvre, but separate thematic discussion of the entire field, in which that specific theme is highlighted in selected individual works. This offers the reader insight into the field, but not the author's oeuvre, let alone the individual literary works as *literary* works. However, this is not so much a shortcoming, as it is an invitation for further research. Verschaffel has laid a very solid foundation. Now, the floor is open, and it is up to literary scholars to accept the invitation.

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