

DOING DOUBLE DUTCH

THE INTERNATIONAL
CIRCULATION OF
LITERATURE FROM
THE LOW COUNTRIES

ELKE BREMS
ORSOLYA RÉTHELYI
TON VAN KALMTHOUT (EDS)

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Edited by
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CHAPTER 3

Breaching the Dyke

The International Reception of Contemporary Dutch Translated Literature

Nico Wilterdink (University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands)

On the 15th of July 2000, the English newspaper *The Independent* published an article on recently translated Dutch literature under the heading ‘Hail the New Orange Order’. The article starts with a reference to a current exhibition of Dutch paintings in the Golden Age, in the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum, and in particular to a painting by Rembrandt shown in this exhibition, which is ‘as expressive today as it was 370 years ago.’ And then it is asked: ‘Why has that same quality so rarely been visible in Dutch literature?’ One answer is that ‘Dutch writing did not have the art’s advantages of an international language.’ However, the article continues, this situation has started to change:

A few Dutch novelists made it into English in the early 1990s, the scholarly Cees Nooteboom at their head. And, over the past couple of years, a growing stream has been breaching the dyke. Hugo Claus, Renate Dorrestein, Arnon Grunberg, Tessa de Loo, Margriet de Moor, Marcel Möring, Harry Mulisch and Connie Palmen may not be brand names to British readers, but at last some of their work is available in English.¹

‘Breaching the dyke’: the metaphor is clear. It connects a well-known image of the Dutch landscape with the characterization of the international position of Dutch literature as historically isolated, obscure and invisible to the outside world. Only recently this isolation has diminished, it is suggested – a growing stream has been breaching the dyke.

This newspaper article is representative of the manner in which journalists and critics in different countries have, in the past few decades, written





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about Dutch literature. A recurrent observation is that this literature is largely unknown outside the Dutch-speaking population and does not play any significant role in the rest of the world. Sometimes it is added, as in the article just quoted, that this is beginning to change.

To give another example of this perception: just before the opening of the Frankfurt Book Fair of 1993, which placed Dutch and Flemish literature at the center of attention, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (10 October 1993) published an overview article of the history and current situation of this literature. ‘The Netherlands in not a country of great writers’, is the opening sentence of the second paragraph. In contrast to other small countries like Norway, Denmark and Portugal, the Netherlands did not bring forward literary authors who acquired real international fame, nor had its literature any foreign impact:

It sounds incredible, but a neighboring nation of fifteen million people – to which five million people from Flanders should be added – has not exerted any appreciable influence on the German literature.²

This perception of Dutch literature, however, is not constant over time and not everywhere the same. In this paper I will describe in broad outlines how the international perception and reception of Dutch literature (defined as literature from the Netherlands) changed since the 1980s, and how this varies among receiving nations, in particular the larger nations with which the Netherlands continues to have the strongest social and cultural relations: Germany, France, Britain and the United States. I will try to explain differences in the reception of Dutch literature between these nations from a sociological perspective. Furthermore, I will deal with the question to what extent and how Dutch literature is defined by non-Dutch reviewers as typically Dutch, and what meanings are attached to Dutchness in this context.³

The three main questions of this article are then:

1. How did the degree and nature of international attention to Dutch contemporary literature change since the 1980s, and what are the possible explanations for the observed change?
2. What are salient differences in the reception – attention, interpretation, appreciation – of Dutch contemporary literature between Germany, France, Britain and the USA, and how can these differences be explained?
3. To what extent and how is Dutch literature in translation defined by reviewers as typically Dutch, and which attributions of Dutchness are involved in these definitions?



**DATA**

These questions will be answered on the basis of articles about contemporary Dutch literature (including book reviews, written portraits of individual authors, and general overviews) in German, French, English and American newspapers between 1980 and 2012. The selected newspapers and the corresponding numbers of articles are specified in Table 1.

Source	Book reviews	Portraits	Overviews	Total
FAZ	202	47	26	275
BZ	31	9	0	40
Other German	11	7	4	22
<i>Total German</i>	<i>244</i>	<i>63</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>337</i>
M	60	26	7	93
F	24	8	4	36
Other French	5	1	1	7
<i>Total French</i>	<i>89</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>136</i>
T/ST	62	10	0	72
G	47	10	4	61
I	61	3	4	68
Other British	6	1	1	8
<i>Total British</i>	<i>176</i>	<i>24</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>209</i>
NYT	53	6	1	60
WP	33	3	1	37
Other American	11	1	2	14
<i>Total American</i>	<i>97</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>111</i>
Total	606	132	55	793
<i>fiction</i>	<i>460</i>	<i>86</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>583</i>
<i>poetry</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>nonfiction</i>	<i>133</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>145</i>
<i>mixed</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>34</i>	<i>16</i>	<i>56</i>

Table 1: Numbers of articles on Dutch literature (book reviews, authors' portraits, overviews) in German, French, British and American newspapers, and by genre, 1980-2012

FAZ: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (1993-2012). BZ: *Berliner Zeitung* (2000-2012). M: *Le Monde* (1990-2012). F: *Le Figaro* (1997-2012). T/ST: *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* (1985-2012). G: *The Guardian* (1980-2012). I: *The Independent* (1988-2012). NYT: *The New York Times* (1980-2012). WP: *The Washington Post* (1980-2012).





‘Dutch contemporary literature’ is defined here as literature (mainly fiction, but also poetry and literary nonfiction, broadly conceived⁴) which is originally written in Dutch by authors born and/or living in the Netherlands, who were productive in the period under investigation, 1980-2012. Flemish authors are not taken into account. The genre of children’s literature, in which Dutch authors have been internationally quite successful in recent years, has also been left out.

Despite these restrictions, this is a broad explorative investigation, which does not go into the details of the international reception of specific authors or specific books. Its primary aim is to gain insight into the changing position of one, relatively small, national literature in what may be called the world-system of literature, or in other terms, the global literary field.

THE GROWING FOREIGN ATTENTION TO DUTCH LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION

The number of books translated from the Dutch has increased during the past fifty years. This can be seen in Figure 1, which shows the average annual number of book translations over five or ten years’ periods since 1958.⁵ The growth accelerated in the 1990s and reached a peak at the beginning of this century, followed by a slight decrease since 2007.

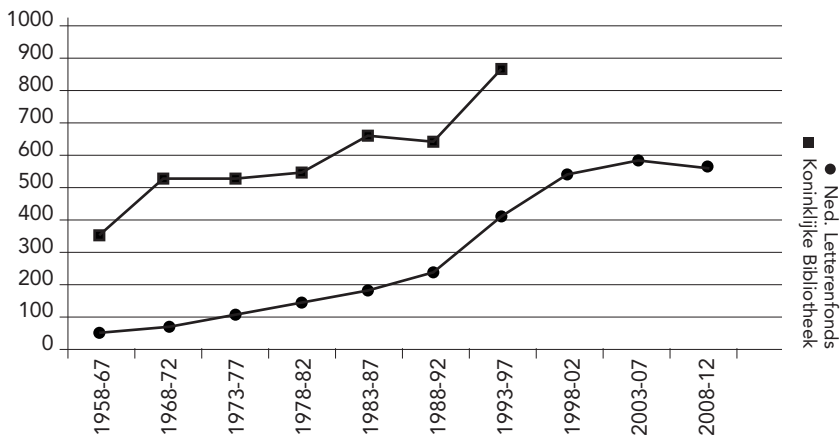


Figure 1. Annual number of book translations from Dutch, 1958-2012

This growth in translations corresponds more or less with the development of the *attention* to Dutch literature as indicated by the annual number of articles in the selected newspapers. This is represented by Figure 2, showing the annual total number of articles on Dutch literature in the English and American sources from 1980 to 2012. As the graph shows, there is an overall tendency



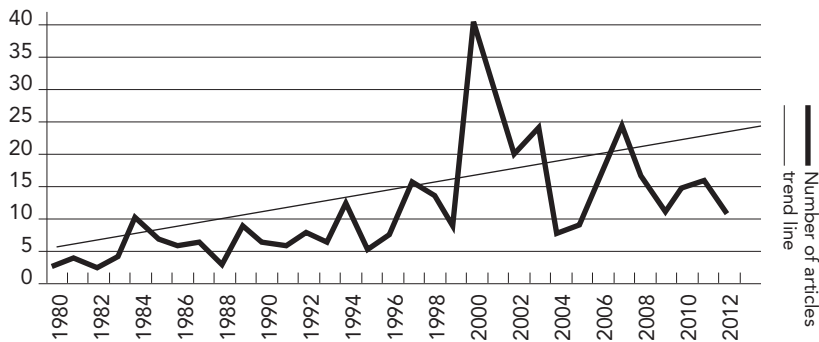


Figure 2. Annual number of articles on Dutch literature in selected English and American newspapers, 1980-2012*

* Corrected for absent data on *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* in 1980-1985 and *The Independent* in 1980-1987.

of increasing attention, but this is not a continuous process. The peak was in 2000; after that year the attention tended to diminish, though with fluctuations from year to year. Something similar can be said about the degree of attention in the French and the German newspapers. A strong increase in the 1990s and the first years of the new century was followed by a decline from about 2005 onwards, though again with fluctuations.⁶

The growth in the export of Dutch literature since the 1980s, as indicated by numbers of book translations, corresponding with an overall growth in foreign media attention for this literature, as indicated by numbers of newspaper articles, has been noted from time to time by journalists and critics in these same newspapers. The quotation from *The Independent* in 2000 cited in the opening paragraph illustrates this. Another, earlier, example is an article in the *New York Times* in 1985 (27 October) under the heading ‘The Boom in Dutch Fiction’. It describes how Dutch literature flourishes remarkably within the Netherlands, which is hardly noticed outside the country. Yet ‘publishers here say there is an awakening interest abroad in Dutch writing’. The number of translations tends to increase, but ‘the process has been slow, in spite of all the literary activity in the Netherlands’.

Much more outspoken about the growing interest in Dutch writing is an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 19 November 1993, shortly after the successful presentation of Dutch and Flemish literature at the Frankfurt Book Fair that year:

Only a few years ago, hardly anyone in this country was interested in knowing about modern Dutch literature [...]. Today, publishers





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and book sellers do good business with Dutch texts; today, the same people who had been completely ignorant declare that the Netherlands and Flanders provide Europe's most lively literature.⁷

Such statements are repeated again and again in German newspapers in later years. Thus, when Dutch novelist Leon de Winter received the *Welt-Literaturpreis* 2002 from the daily *Die Welt*, an article appeared in this newspaper about German interest in foreign literature in general and Dutch literature in particular (29 June 2002). It is observed that Germans are reading more translated books than they used to do, with a certain shift from English, American, French and Italian to Scandinavian and Irish writers. 'But above all, the growth of interest in Dutch literature has been really explosive.'⁸ The author of the article relates this to 'a renaissance of story-telling'⁹, a 'victory march of realism'¹⁰, in which precise and subtle descriptions of individual lives within recognizable social settings take pride of place again. It is in this kind of literature that Dutch authors are outstanding and have exerted a significant impact on the German literature.

This perception of increasing German interest in Dutch literature is also expressed in the frequent characterization of quite a number of contemporary Dutch authors – Cees Nooteboom, Harry Mulisch, Leon de Winter, Maarten 't Hart, Margriet de Moor, Anna Enquist, Arnon Grunberg, Connie Palmen, A.F.Th. van der Heijden, Jessica Durlacher – with such terms as 'success author', 'bestseller author', 'star writer' or even *Weltstar*, 'world star'. This usage started in the 1990s and continued in the first decade of the new century.

The tone in French, English and American newspapers is different. Individual authors, like Cees Nooteboom, Harry Mulisch or Hella Haasse, are sometimes highly praised, but they are not seen as belonging to a strong and influential Dutch current in contemporary literature. If a growing interest in Dutch literature is noted, it is against the backdrop of its historical obscurity. Thus, a review by the English writer Tim Parks of a number of recently translated Dutch novels in the *New York Review of Books* of 27 October 2011 was headed 'The Dutch are coming!', as if something new and unexpected was happening.

Yet all in all, foreign interest in contemporary Dutch literature did grow since the 1980s, as can be inferred from the number of book translations, the number of reviews and the content of some of these reviews. How can we explain this trend? I will suggest here, very briefly, five hypothetical explanations, which are not mutually exclusive but may supplement one another.

(1) First of all, we may regard the trend as a corollary of the vast and multifaceted process of *cultural globalization*, in which cultural products increasingly move across geographical and national boundaries and spread over the globe.¹¹ The worldwide growth in book translations over the years, in absolute numbers and relative to total book production, is part of this process.¹² This





cannot be the whole explanation, however, since the concept of cultural globalization is too general to account for the specific changes with regard to the reception of Dutch literature. The question is, to what extent similar trends of growing export and foreign interest are found for the literature of other nations or languages, and how to account then for the observed similarities and differences.¹³

(2) According to an opposite, historical or narrativistic type of explanation, the trend of increasing interest in Dutch literature can be viewed as the outcome of *chains of events*, which revolve around the discovery and launching of the work of individual authors, and include media and organizational events with a high impact on the audience of potential readers. Part of such a narrative would be the international breakthrough of authors such as Cees Nooteboom and Harry Mulisch in the 1980s and 1990s¹⁴, followed by the successful Frankfurt Book Fair of 1993, which spurred the international attention for Dutch literature in general.

(3) A more sociological or institutional explanation refers to *social networks, organizational structures and policies* that contribute to the international dissemination of literature. Translators, publishers, literary agents, booksellers, literary critics and academic literary specialists all participate in these networks. A particularly important role in the spread of Dutch literature has been played by the government-subsidized Foundation for the Translation and Production of Dutch Literature (NLPVE, founded in 1991 as the successor of the less active Dutch Foundation for Translations), which subsidizes translations, helps to establish relations with foreign publishers, and attempts to stimulate the interest in Dutch literature through information, propaganda and organizing or supporting literary events.¹⁵

(4) Another, *cultural* type of explanation refers to distinct traits of a national literature combined with changes in literary taste. Some critics and journalists writing about the growing interest in Dutch literature have suggested such an explanation. As the experimental currents of modernism and postmodernism have gone out of fashion, they argued, there is a renewed appreciation for social and psychological realism and good story-telling, and this is precisely the type of literary fiction in which Dutch authors excel.¹⁶ If and to what extent this argument is valid, is difficult to say. It is, in any case, not easily applicable to all Dutch fiction writers who have been internationally successful in the past few decades.

(5) Finally, a fifth explanation focuses on the *domestic book market*, in which social-institutional and cultural factors are intertwined. A flourishing market for domestic literature in terms of both supply (production of new titles) and demand (sales) is an important condition for literary export. The expansion of the domestic book market in the Netherlands during the 1980s and 1990s, combined with a lively literary climate (as foreign journalists often reported¹⁷), probably contributed to the growing visibility of its literature outside the national borders. There is, however, not a fixed and deterministic





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causal relation between the two. The expanding market on the national level enhanced the chances for an increasing international spread and appreciation of Dutch literature, but did not determine it as a predictable development.

Each of these five hypothetical explanations suggests possible lines of further research. Ideally, this research should take account of fluctuations over time, including the tendency of *declining* foreign interest in Dutch literature in recent years, as indicated by numbers of translations and the degree of attention in foreign newspapers.

DIFFERENCES IN RECEPTION: A COMPARISON BETWEEN GERMANY, FRANCE, BRITAIN AND THE UNITED STATES

As some quotations from newspapers already indicated, the interest in Dutch literature since the 1990s is much stronger in Germany – or, more broadly, the German language area – than in France, Britain, the United States or any other country or region outside the Netherlands and Flanders. Many more translations of Dutch fiction and literary nonfiction appear in German than in other languages; the translated books are, in general, better sold in Germany than anywhere else; and these books and their authors receive much more media attention than elsewhere. Newspapers such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* regularly report literary events in the Netherlands and presentations by Dutch authors in Germany. It is also in Germany that some Dutch writers, most notably Cees Nooteboom, have become famous public personalities and attained a status that surpasses their reputation in their home country.

This is different in other countries. In France, the interest in Dutch writing is more superficial, even though it increased in the past few decades, and more bound to special events, such as the presentation of Dutch and Flemish literature in the literary manifestation *Salon du Livre* in Paris in 2003 under the name ‘*Phares du Nord*’, ‘Torches from the North’.¹⁸ As this name suggests, Dutch literature tends to be viewed as coming from a Northern country faraway. Indeed, this literature is often classified as ‘Northern European’ together with that of the Scandinavian countries. The Netherlands in this perspective seems to be nearer to Sweden than to France. This attitude does not preclude incidental expressions of admiration for Dutch authors in French journals and newspapers.¹⁹ Such articles did not lead, however, to big sales, nor did they have a clear positive effect on French interest in Dutch literature in general.

Contemporary Dutch literature seems even more distant and unknown in the English-speaking world, particularly in the United States. There is more attention in Britain, where, moreover, journalists and critics sometimes show concern about the general neglect of Dutch, or, more broadly, ‘European’ (i.e. continental) or ‘foreign’ (i.e. translated) literature in their country. Thus, a short review of Mulisch’s novel *Last Call* [*Hoogste Tijd*] in *The Times* of 15 October 1987 opens with the remark:





The Dutch [...] buy our books and sometimes [...] even publish our novelists before we do. But do we reciprocate the interest? Are we to be spotted in a queue for the latest Maarten 't Hart? Sadly not; although, as one reads Maarten 't Hart, one can understand why.

A report in *The Observer* of 24 January 1999 on the state of the literature in the Low Countries is more explicit. The journalist observes with surprise and amusement that special organizations in the Netherlands and Flanders put great efforts into promoting and protecting their literature against the overwhelming influence of France, Germany and, today above all, the English-speaking world. After having admitted that he was almost completely ignorant about Dutch literature, the reporter explains:

To English ears the phrase 'fiction in translation' is bound to [...] dishearten the spirit of the most adventurous fiction-buyer. [...] The awkward fact is that, though we buy new fiction in ever-increasing quantities, we have small appetite for new fiction by writers with funny names. Our own literature provides, we believe, all the satisfaction we need. Just as we hardly question our historical superiority, we do not give its contemporary dominance a second look.

The perceived lack of British interest in foreign literature is explained here by referring to the extent and dominance of the English language and literature. Besides, a second reason is sometimes mentioned: the gap between the English or Anglo-Saxon 'empirical' taste and the typically 'European' literary style, which is defined as philosophical and reflexive. In this classification, Britain is placed outside Europe. Thus, in a review in *The Times* (8 August 2001) of Mulisch's novel *The Procedure*, the author is described as 'a very European writer, not widely read in Britain, celebrated in Europe, particularly in the Netherlands and in Germany, for his intense cerebral novels which take on the big questions – life, death, the human condition.' Nooteboom has been characterized in similar ways. Because these authors are part of a typically European literary tradition, reviewers suggest, they have hardly any chance to become popular in Britain.

If we summarize the observed differences between the four countries in a few catchwords, we may say that the American attitude to Dutch literature is predominantly one of indifference and ignorance outside a small circle of professional specialists; the English attitude a mixture of arrogance and self-criticism; the French attitude well-meaning but superficial; and the German orientation open, interested, often enthusiastic.

In order to explain these differences, I take as a starting-point the notion of the literary world-system or, in other terms, the global literary field. This is part of the more encompassing cultural world-system, which is connected





with the economic and the political world-system. The literary world-system consists of nationally or linguistically bounded literary fields, which are interconnected in unequal, asymmetrical relations of power and influence.²⁰ Some national or linguistic literary fields are dominant. A dominant field is more visible to the dominated one and exerts more influence on it than the other way around; the dominant field has, in other terms, a core or center position in relation to the dominated field. The English and American, the French and the German literary field are all dominant in relation to the Dutch literary field, but in different ways and different degrees. Variations in the reception of Dutch literature between the four nations compared can now be explained by 1) differences in the position of these nations in the literary and, more broadly, the cultural world-system; and 2) differences in the specific relation of these nations with the Netherlands.²¹

(1) As English became the unrivalled dominant, super-central language in the world in the course of the twentieth century, it also became dominant in the global literary field.²² It dominates the global production of books in all genres and the global market for translations. This means, among other things, that book translations *from* the English are by far the largest category (more than fifty percent) of all translated books worldwide, whereas on the other hand translations *into* English make up only a tiny fraction (less than four percent) of all books published in English.²³ In other words, the English-speaking part of the world is indeed relatively closed to the literature from other regions.

Within this vast, highly differentiated and dominant language area the cultural center shifted from England to the United States, together with shifts in economic and political power. The prevailing attitude to foreign literature in the United States can be interpreted as centrist and universalist, which is typical of a dominant power²⁴; the implicit assumption seems to be that American culture has universal significance, and that what is culturally important will find its way to the United States anyway. Apart from some academic circles, there is hardly any public concern about a lack of openness to foreign (i.e. originally non-English) literature, if this is observed at all.²⁵

This is different in Britain, as the quotations just given illustrate. Britain's weakening power and its increased dependence on 'Europe' gave rise to heated debates and ambivalent feelings about its complicated relations with the European continent. On the one hand, the widespread feeling that 'Europe' is a threat to British autonomy feeds the inclination to distinguish the English or Anglo-Saxon literature sharply from the European literature. On the other hand, the awareness of the dependence on 'Europe' motivates self-critical remarks about a lack of interest in European (or more in particular, Dutch) literature.

Before the dominance of English, French language and literature were hegemonic for a long time in Europe and the world at large, with Paris as the capital of the World Republic of Letters.²⁶ This changed after the Second





World War. Despite much resistance, the orientation in France towards Anglo-American culture and literature grew strongly, and the interest in the literature of smaller languages, including Dutch, increased at the same time.²⁷ Yet Dutch literature has remained peripheral in the French perspective, in which the hegemonic past lingers on.

German literature, in spite of its rich tradition and great prestige since the end of the eighteenth century, never acquired such a dominant position. German self-confidence grew during the nineteenth century, but was severely damaged by the defeats in the two world wars of the twentieth century. It was particularly after the Second World War that German intellectuals became highly critical about their own national cultural heritage and looked for positive alternatives in other societies. This makes it understandable that interest in literature from other nations grew, including that of smaller nations such as the Netherlands.

(2) The second basic condition which might explain the differences in reception among the nations considered is created by their specific social (cultural, economic, political) relations with the Netherlands. In general terms, we can say that the geographical, social and cultural distance between two nations correlates inversely with the intensity of transnational cultural exchange: the larger the distance, the less cultural exchange. Among the four nations compared, the distance with the Netherlands is the largest for the United States, the smallest for Germany, with France and England in between; and the differences in attention to Dutch literature correspond with this variation. I will focus here on the historically changing relations with Germany.

Geographical proximity, strong trade and business relations, frequent cross-border traffic and migration, and the similarities of language – all these interconnected conditions contributed to intense cultural exchange between Germany and the Netherlands, and to a relatively strong German interest in Dutch society and culture, including its literature. Throughout the twentieth century, translations into German comprised by far the largest category of translations of Dutch books in general. Until quite recently, most books translated from Dutch into German were popular fiction written by authors who did not enjoy much literary standing, among them Flemish authors who wrote regional novels about country life. The Dutch language area, including the Southern Netherlands or Flanders, was often regarded as a province of the wider Germanic cultural area, in which it represented less refined, simpler, but also more authentic traits. The popular Flemish regional novels confirmed and gave substance to this image.²⁸

For the (Northern) Netherlands, or Holland, yet another image circulated among Germans: that of a country of philistine tradesmen, who were only interested in practical matters and money, and whose spiritual life was just as flat as their landscape. Immanuel Kant wrote already in this vein in 1764, and similar remarks were repeated again and again in the decades that followed.²⁹ As





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recently as 1931, Graf Hermann Keyserling contended, in a widely read book about European nations, that in Holland ‘a culture of ugliness’³⁰ prevailed, that even elite groups were ‘unspiritual’³¹ and that social life in general was characterized by a leitmotiv of ‘philistinism, banality and parochialism’.³² Such qualifications did not contribute to a serious interest among Germans for Dutch literature that counted in the Netherlands itself as important and sophisticated.

Such expressions of German superiority vanished after the war. The destruction perpetrated by the Nazi regime brought many Germans to self-criticism about their national cultural heritage and a search for positive counter models. The Netherlands could serve as such: a small, innocent country, tolerant and egalitarian, with strong democratic institutions, which in contrast to its powerful neighbor had remained immune to totalitarianism and extreme nationalism. This image of the Netherlands has been repeatedly evoked in German newspapers. In contrast to Germany, the Netherlands does not have to cope, in this perception, with the burden of a dark past. It is a more relaxed society in which humor and informal sociability are thriving. Such traits are recognized in contemporary Dutch literary fiction, which is said to distinguish itself from the heavier German literature by irony, lightness, directness and down-to-earth realism.

This image of Dutch society and culture undoubtedly contributed to the strong growth of German interest in Dutch literature from the 1990s onwards. The fact that it did not start earlier might have to do with the submerged continuation of the older image of the Dutch as money-oriented philistines without sophisticated or profound culture. But once this new interest arose, triggered by a few successful writers, it grew quickly, encompassing a widening variety of literary work. In the 1990s Germans discovered the Netherlands as a country of interesting, innovative, inspiring, even great literature, which could serve as an example for their own writers. This ‘Dutch wave’³³ had no counterpart in other countries.

PERCEPTIONS OF DUTCHNESS IN DUTCH LITERATURE

This assessment of Dutch literature in Germany illustrates that images of a certain nation and the reception of its literature in other countries are interconnected: on the one hand, national images have an impact on how the literature is received, interpreted and judged; on the other hand, this literature is a source of information about the nation concerned and contributes to the formation of national images. While the romantic nationalistic idea that a national literature reflects and reveals the essence of a nation is generally rejected today, at least in academia, the question remains, what makes a nation’s literature specific? Or, to put the more empirical question, to what extent are specific national characteristics *attributed* to the literature from a given nation, and what is the nature of these characteristics?³⁴ Here the question





is, to what extent is literary work by Dutch authors understood as typically 'Dutch', and what meanings are then attributed to Dutchness? In order to answer this question, I will again use the articles in the selected newspapers as my empirical basis.

The first thing to be noted is that the degree to which books by Dutch authors are defined as Dutch in these articles, is only limited. In literary reviews, the book in question is usually classified as Dutch by mentioning that the author is Dutch, that the book is translated from the Dutch (though even this information is sometimes lacking), and that, if applicable, the story is located somewhere in the Netherlands. But in most reviews, this is all.

A substantial number of articles however, about one quarter of the total, do refer to Dutch characteristics. These pertain in the first place to the literature itself. Most overview articles on Dutch literature and some book reviews attribute specific traits to this literature, which give it a distinct character. The most mentioned traits are social and psychological realism, the use of detailed, precise descriptions of everyday-life situations (often with a focus on family relations), and a sober, direct, clear style. Wild fantasies, metaphysical speculation and stylistic experiments have no place in this literary tradition.

These literary traits are often seen as reflections of characteristics of the nation – the Dutch national character or culture: soberness, realism, a practical orientation, traits which in turn are connected with commercialism and the religious tradition of Protestantism and more specifically Calvinism. Particularly the latter term is often used. Novels in which the main characters are orthodox Calvinists (such as those by Maarten 't Hart) are regarded as typically Dutch. In most cases, however, reviewers use the term Calvinism in a looser, less religious, metaphorical sense, as a term that summarizes an ethos of frugality, soberness, discipline and moral strictness which permeates Dutch society as a whole and has put its mark on its literature. Thus, in an essay on Dutch poetry published in *The Independent* on October 4th 2003, the South African novelist J.M. Coetzee writes that 'a national way of life strongly imbued with such Calvinist virtues of propriety, dutifulness and moral vigilance has not been conducive to boldness of thought'.

There is however, quite another image of Dutch society that is often evoked: the image of tolerance. Like Calvinism, the idea of tolerance goes back to the seventeenth century, when dissidents and religious minorities took refuge in the Netherlands, books forbidden elsewhere were printed here, and foreigners observed with surprise that in this country different religious groups could live together peacefully. It revived in the 1960s and 1970s, when the Netherlands became widely known for its sexual liberties, toleration of soft drugs and acceptance of euthanasia. In positive terms, it is associated with freedom, openness, plurality, and informality. Sometimes it is interpreted negatively, as indifference and tolerance-going-too-far, a lack of social control leading to confusion and disorder.





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There seems to be a tension, even a contradiction between these two conventional images: Calvinism (strictness, discipline, a strong moral framework) on the one hand and tolerance (permissiveness, informality) on the other. If this is noticed, it is sometimes resolved by making time-space distinctions. Some reviewers observed a radical transformation of post-war Dutch society from a conservative, puritan country with a narrow morality and parochial attitudes ('Calvinism') to an open, progressive, permissive, highly secularized, liberal society ('tolerance'), and remarked that Dutch literature gave expression and contributed to these changes.³⁵

A second way to reconcile the two prevalent traditional images of the Dutch national character is to suggest a geographical split – between the cities and the countryside, or between Amsterdam and the rest of the Netherlands. It is particularly in Amsterdam that the perceived Dutch traits of tolerance, individual freedom, libertarianism and licentiousness are situated. Amsterdam has been described as Europe's most tolerant city, where drugs are openly used and all kinds of deviant people can be seen in public places. It is romanticized as a warm city with a relaxed atmosphere of informal, easy-going sociability, where people meet in the numerous pubs on an equal footing. It is also described as wild, vulgar, rebellious, anarchistic, freakish, crazy, and decadent. A telling, if rather extreme illustration can be found in a review in the German newspaper *Tages-Anzeiger* (12 July 2003) of a series of seven novels by A.F.Th. van der Heijden (all translated into German), situated in Amsterdam in the 1980s:

In more than three thousand pages, A.F.Th. van der Heijden created and recreated from memories and the 'pain of imagination' something for which Amsterdam has become famous and infamous: the pubs, gay clubs, snack bars and 'brown cafés' full of junkies, whores and lost provincials, the canals, gutters and prisons in which drop-outs stumble, fuddled by alcohol and drugs, the houses occupied by squatters and the student rooms, in which dreamers, half-criminal drifters and far-out bohemians tried the sexual revolution and the rebellion against the state.³⁶

Besides such images of Amsterdam, it is remarkable *how often* foreign reviewers of Dutch literature refer to Amsterdam, as if the rest of the country does not exist or does not matter. This has to some extent a factual basis, as Dutch literary life is highly concentrated in this city, and a disproportional number of Dutch novels and stories are situated here. Yet, the 'Amsterdam bias' is striking, and probably stronger in the reception of Dutch literature abroad than within the Netherlands itself. An indication of this is that publishers give translated books sometimes a new title with 'Amsterdam' in it, with the intention, one may presume, to make the book more recognizable and attractive for potential readers.³⁷

The 'Amsterdam bias' illustrates a general mechanism of image formation: there is a selective perception of, and emphasis on, phenomena that fit in and confirm existing images. This pertains also to conventional ideas about Dutch





culture and character such as ‘Calvinism’ and ‘tolerance’. Literary critics, like other people, tend to affirm such ideas as they selectively perceive and interpret information – in this case, the information from literary work – in ways that correspond to the images that they already have and share with others.

Yet this self-reinforcing circularity of perception, communication and image formation does not mean that images are fixed and cannot change. New information that challenges existing ideas may come from literary texts, but a more immediate source of change are media messages about current events. As to the Netherlands, the idea of tolerance has been undermined since the beginnings of the new century by reports about dramatic events and political conflicts that lay bare growing tensions between native Dutch and immigrant minority groups.³⁸ In foreign newspapers’ comments on these issues (which included some articles by Dutch authors³⁹) the idea of tolerance was not simply brushed aside but reinterpreted in various, conflicting ways.

Images of a nation are, then, not simply given; they evoke criticism and controversy, are open to reinterpretations, and change over time. Yet the newspaper articles studied indicate a fairly high degree of consensus among the receiving nations about what is typically Dutch. In so far as disagreements were found, they were hardly related to national differences. The main difference along national lines – as has been described in the preceding section – consists of the particularly strong inclination among Germans to attribute positive traits to Dutch society, connected with a self-critical attitude toward their own national history and cultural heritage.

There are signs, however, that this is also changing. With fading memories of the Nazi period and the Second World War, the stabilization and normalization of German democratic institutions and the increasing dominance of Germany in Europe, this self-critical attitude, and the corresponding search for exemplary traits to be found in other societies, is weakening. This might explain why it is particularly in Germany that the recent tendency of declining international interest in Dutch literature can be observed, just as the increase of interest in the 1990s was stronger in this country than anywhere else.⁴⁰

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article I have tried to demonstrate empirically the fruitfulness of a sociological approach, in which the production, distribution and reception of literature is seen as being part of, and embedded in, social relations or social networks of different scope. Literary activities on the micro level – writing, publishing, book selling, reviewing – can be situated in nationally or linguistically bounded literary fields, which are interconnected in the global literary field, or literary world-system. On this macro level, some national or linguistic fields have a dominant position in relation to other ones. These interconnected literary fields are in turn dependent on, and part of, encompassing social (cultural, economic, political) networks.⁴¹





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In this perspective, the export of literature through translations is part of broader flows of transnational communication. Translated literature – fiction and nonfiction – is one way in which people acquire knowledge and ideas about other cultures and societies. In these transnational communication flows literary critics and journalists play a mediating role by selectively paying attention to some translated books and some authors, interpreting these books and assessing their significance. Sometimes reviewers interpret a translated book by making connections with supposed characteristics of the national society in which it originated. In this way, they inform readers about other nations' cultural and social life, often confirming well-known national images.

This perspective suggests different lines of further research. It is not necessarily opposed to, or sharply demarcated from, other approaches in the study of literature. It could serve as a framework for more detailed research about the international spread and reception of literature, in particular the spread from a small country such as the Netherlands to larger and more dominant nations and language areas.

NOTES

- 1 The inclusion of the Flemish author Hugo Claus in this series of names exemplifies a recurrent confusion about 'Dutch literature': whether it covers the whole Dutch language area, including Flanders, or is confined to the nation-state in which Dutch is the common language, the Netherlands. The article in *The Independent* suggests by its heading ('Hail the New Orange Order') and its reference to Rembrandt and the Rijksmuseum that it deals with the literature from the (Northern) Netherlands, but then it is inconsistent to mention Claus as one of the authors representing this literature. This paper focuses on the reception of Dutch literature as defined in national terms, i.e. literature from the Netherlands.
- 2 'Die Niederlande sind kein Land der grossen Schriftsteller [...] Es klingt unglaublich, aber ein Nachbarvolk von fünfzehn Millionen Menschen – dazu kommen noch fünf Millionen Flamen – hat auf die deutsche Literatur keine nennenswerte Einflüsse ausgeübt.' All English translations are by the author.
- 3 A more extensive report on this investigation is: N. Wilterdink, 'De receptie van Nederlandse literatuur in het buitenland: aandacht, interpretatie, waardering', Chapter 2 in T. Bevers, B. Colenbrander, J. Heilbron, and N. Wilterdink, *Nederlandse kunst in de wereld: Literatuur, architectuur en beeldende kunst 1980-2013* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2015), pp. 56-95, 403-405.
- 4 'Literary nonfiction' as conceived here includes journalistic reports, travel books, political essays, and scientific and scholarly work written for non-specialists. It excludes religious writings, educational textbooks and all kinds of 'how to' books. The fiction covers both 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' or popular writings. This operational definition of 'literature' largely corresponds with the demarcations in the dataset of Dutch translated literature compiled by the Dutch Foundation for Literature, which has been used for this research (www.vertalingendatabase.nl).
- 5 Quoted from J. Heilbron and N. van Es, 'In de wereldrepubliek der letteren', in T. Bevers *et al.*, *Nederlandse kunst in de wereld* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2015), p. 39, Graph 5.1. The upper line is based on data from the *Koninklijke Bibliotheek* (Royal Library) in The Hague, which collected





- information on all book translations from the Dutch; the lower line is based on data from the *Nederlands Letterenfonds* (Dutch Foundation for Literature), which covers translations of literary books, i.e. fiction, poetry, and literary nonfiction (as specified in footnote 4).
- 6 Exact numbers in Wilterdink, 'De receptie van Nederlandse literatuur in het buitenland', p. 62, Table 2.2.
 - 7 'Vor ein paar Jahren hätte es hierzulande noch kaum jemanden interessiert die Kontur der modernen niederländischen Literatur kennenzulernen. [...] Heute blüht das Geschäft mit niederländischen Texten; heute verkünden dieselben, die damals nichts mitbekamen, aus den Niederlanden und Flandern stamme Europas lebendigste Literatur.'
 - 8 'Geradezu explosionsartig aber wuchs vor allem das Interesse an der holländischen Literatur.'
 - 9 'eine Renaissance des Erzählens'.
 - 10 'Siegesszug des Realismus'.
 - 11 See for an introductory overview of cultural globalization processes in connection to economic and political globalization: D. Held *et al.*, *Global Transformations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), esp. pp. 327-375. A summary of theories on cultural globalization is D. Crane, 'Culture and Globalization: Theoretical Models and Emerging Trends', in: D. Crane, N. Kawashima, K. Kawasaki (eds.), *Global Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1-25.
 - 12 This growth is indicated by UNESCO statistics on translations since 1979, the Index Translationum (www.unesco.org/xtrans). See also G. Sapiro, 'Globalization and Cultural Diversity in the Book Market: The Case of Literary Translations in the US and in France' in *Poetics* 38 (2010), pp. 419-439. Another aspect of cultural globalization could be the growth of media attention to foreign art and literature. A study of changes in the coverage of various art forms, including literature, from other countries by French, German, Dutch and American newspapers between 1955 and 2005 found a steady increase of this attention in Europe but not in the United States; S. Janssen, G. Kuipers, M. Verboord, 'Cultural Globalization and Arts Journalism: The International Orientation of Arts and Culture Coverage in Dutch, French, German and U.S. Newspapers, 1955 to 2005', in *American Sociological Review* 73 (2008), pp. 719-740.
 - 13 According to UNESCO's Index Translationum the total number of book translations from small languages (i.e. all languages apart from the six largest in terms of translations) actually decreased from the 1980s to the 1990s; Sapiro, 'Globalization and Cultural Diversity in the Book Market', p. 424, Table 1. This suggests that the increase in the export of Dutch literature was indeed different from trends in translations from other small languages.
 - 14 Nooteboom's breakthrough came with winning the Pegasus Prize 1983 for his novel *Rituals* (original 1980, English translation 1983). Mulisch's first international success – both commercial and reputational – was with the translation of his novel *The Assault* (original *De aanslag*, 1982) into French (1984), English (1985), German (1986), and subsequently more than twenty other languages.
 - 15 In 2010, this Foundation became part of the Dutch Foundation for Literature, which also gives financial support to a number of individual literary writers. About the Foundation's policy and its impact: Heilbron and Van Es, 'In de wereldrepubliek der letteren', pp. 43-51.
 - 16 This argument was put forward in the articles in *The Independent*, 15 July 2000, and *Die Welt*, 29 June 2002, quoted above.





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- 17 As in the articles in the *New York Times*, 27 October 1985, and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 October 1993, quoted above.
- 18 Extensively reported in *Le Monde*, 21 March 2003.
- 19 An example is a highly positive review of W.F. Hermans' novel *De donkere kamer van Damokles* (*The Darkroom of Damocles*; original 1958; new French translation 2006) by Milan Kundera, the Czech writer who became a French writer, in *Le Monde* 26 January 2007, where he presents his reading experience as a surprising discovery of a great novelist completely unknown in France.
- 20 The concept of 'world-system' has been developed by Immanuel Wallerstein, who defines it primarily in terms of inequality in economic power; see e.g. I. Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). The notion of a cultural world-system, which is connected with, but not reducible to, the economic and the political world-system, has been suggested by A. de Swaan, 'The Sociological Study of the Transnational Society', Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, Papers in Progress No. 46 (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 1995); it has been used for the study of translations by J. Heilbron, 'Towards a Sociology of Translation: Book Translations as a Cultural World-System', in *European Journal of Social Theory* 2 (1999), pp. 429-444. The concept of 'literary field' (as a specification of 'cultural field' or the 'field of cultural production') is from Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995; original French edition 1992), and *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).
- 21 I do not deal here with the, often considerable, national variations in the reception of individual authors – such as the extraordinary success of Maarten 't Hart in Germany, or the relatively high appreciation of the work of Hella Haasse in France –, which may be related to national cultural differences. See for this more detailed analysis N. Wilterdink, 'De receptie van Nederlandse literatuur in het buitenland' and 'Schrijvers en hun reputaties', in T. Bevers *et al.*, *Nederlandse kunst in de wereld* (2015), pp. 75-80, 102-109, 117-140.
- 22 A. de Swaan, *Words of the World: The Global Language System* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).
- 23 J. Heilbron and G. Sapiro, 'Outline for a Sociology of Translation: Current Issues and Future Prospects', in M. Wolf and A. Fukari (eds.), *Constructing a Sociology of Translation* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007), pp. 95-97. English dominance in this respect only increased since the 1980s; Sapiro, 'Globalization and Cultural Diversity in the Book Market', pp. 420-424.
- 24 As argued by Norbert Elias in his analysis of the 'sociogenesis' of the concepts of civilization and culture in *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000; original German edition 1939), pp. 3-43.
- 25 An exception is the Three Percent initiative of the University of Rochester, launched in 2007, which derives its name from the fact that 'only about 3% of all books published in the United States are works in translation'. As to fiction and poetry, 'the number is actually closer to 0.7%'. 'An even greater shame is that only a fraction of the titles that do make their way into English are covered by the mainstream media.' Three Percent aims to help change that 'by bringing readers information about goings-on in the world of international literature, and by providing reviews and samples of books in translation and books that have yet to be translated'. Quoted from www.rochester.edu/College/translation/threepcent.





- 26 P. Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge etc.: Harvard University Press, 2004; original French edition 1999).
- 27 As is indicated by the strong growth of translations into French since 1980. Sapiro, 'Globalization and Cultural Diversity in the Book Market', pp. 424-425.
- 28 Heilbron and Van Es, 'In de wereldrepubliek der letteren', pp. 31-35; U. Kloos, *Niederlandbild und deutsche Germanistik 1800-1933* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992).
- 29 E. Zahn, *Das unbekannte Holland. Regenten, Rebellen und Reformatoren* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1984), pp. 84-95.
- 30 'eine Kultur der Hässlichkeit'.
- 31 'ungeistig'.
- 32 'Philiströsität, Banalität und Banausentum'. Graf Hermann Keyserling, *Das Spektrum Europas* (Stuttgart/Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1931, 5th edition), p. 256, 260, 267.
- 33 'holländische Welle'.
- 34 This is akin to the central question in 'imagology', a branch of literary studies that, in a critical reaction to the view that literature is the reflection of national cultures or characters, studies how images of nations are expressed in literary texts. This article's object, however, is different in that it does not investigate literary texts directly but interpretations of literary texts by reviewers. Besides, the approach is more sociological in that it regards the production and reception of literature as being part of social relations, and as one of several kinds of ways in which people communicate and develop ideas about social reality, including images of other nations. It does not assume, as imagology does according to one of its proponents, that 'it is in the field of imaginary and poetical literature that national stereotypes are first and most effectively formulated, perpetuated and disseminated' – as if, for example, daily media reports and comments on current events would only play a minor role. Nor is it taken for granted here that 'the literary record demonstrates unambiguously that national characters are a matter of commonplace and hearsay rather than empirical observation or statements of objective fact.' Quoted from J. Leerssen, 'Imagology: History and method', in M. Beller and J. Leerssen (eds.), *Imagology. The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters* (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2007), p. 26. It is an open question to what extent, and how, national images are related to empirical observations and experiences. Cf. N. Wilterdink, 'Images of National Character', in *Society* 32: 1 (1994), pp. 43-51.
- 35 Thus, in an obituary of writer and sculptor Jan Wolkers in the *Washington Post* (21 October 2007) it is noted that his 'sex-charged books helped to shake off the shackles of postwar conservatism in the Netherlands.' Similar remarks about Wolkers in *The Times*, 24 November 2007, and *The Guardian*, 27 November 2007.
- 36 'Auf über dreitausend Seiten hat A.F.Th. van der Heijden aus Erinnerungen und dem "Schmerz der Vorstellungskraft" nach- en neu geschaffen, wofür Amsterdam berühmt und berüchtigt wurde: die Kneipen, Schwulbars, Frittenbuden und "braunen" Cafés, in denen Fixer, Stricher und gestrandete Provinzler verkehren, die Grachten, Rinnsteine und Gefängnisse, die von Alkohol und Drogen benebelte Aussteiger stolpern liessen, die besetzen Häuser und Studentenwohnheime, in denen Träumer, halb kriminelle Herumtreiber und durchgeknallte Bohemiens die sexuelle Revolution und den Aufstand gegen den Staat probten.'





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- 37 Thus, a selection of short stories by the Dutch author Nescio (1882-1961) was published in English under the title *Amsterdam Stories* (2012). A collection of short stories by Simon Carmiggelt became in German *Heiteres aus Amsterdam* (1980), another one was published in Italian as *Il venditore di aringhe e altri racconti di Amsterdam* (1992). Arnon Grunberg's first novel *Blauwe maandagen* (1994; English translation *Blue Mondays*, 1997) received in a Portuguese translation the title *Amsterdã blues* (São Paulo, 2003).
- 38 A widely discussed book about the dramatic events in the first years of the twenty-first century is *Murder in Amsterdam* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006) by Ian Buruma, the Dutch-British essayist writing in English, with the suggestive subtitle *The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance*.
- 39 Such as Marcel Möring in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of 15 May 2002, Leon de Winter in a series of columns in *Die Welt* in 2004 under the title *Holländisches Tagebuch* (Dutch Diary), and Abdelkader Benali, author of Moroccan origin, in *The Observer* of 3 October 2010.
- 40 An upsurge of international and specifically German interest in Dutch literature can be noted in relation to the Frankfurt Book Fair of October 2016, in which the Netherlands together with Flanders was 'guest of honour' (*Ehrengast*). It remains to be seen how this will work out in the coming years.
- 41 See for an explicit and systematic use of this multi-level field approach in an empirical study of selection mechanisms in the spread of Dutch translated literature to the Anglophone world: N. van Es and J. Heilbron, 'Fiction from the Periphery: How Dutch Writers Enter the Field of English-Language Literature', in *Cultural Sociology* 9 (2015), pp. 296-319.

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