5.2 Scientification and Popularization in the Historiography of World Literature, 1850-1950

A Dutch Case Study

Ton van Kalmthout

Introduction

In 1827, in one of his best known quotations, Goethe said:

I am more and more convinced [...] that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere, and at all times, in hundreds and hundreds of men. [...] National literature is now a rather meaningless term; the epoch of World literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.  

In Europe, interest in other cultures had began to grow in the course of the eighteenth century, a development connected with the expansion of the notion of 'culture' at the time. Formerly, it had been used exclusively in relation to individuals, but around 1800 it had also become applicable to collectives or even to the whole of humanity. The growing interest in foreign cultures seems to have been intensified by at least two factors. Firstly, a growing concern with preserving national character and national identity automatically focused attention on other nations. A nation could profile itself in comparison and in competition with other nations, which could also serve as a touchstone or as a source of inspiration. Secondly, the Enlightenment advocated the idea that all men are equal and that they all take part in a nation-transcending brotherhood, the human race. And since the spiritual life of a single nation was supposed to manifest itself in its national literature, the spiritual life of all mankind could be read in a transnational literature, in world literature.

In the quotation above, Goethe appears to have brought the term Weltschrift into wider circulation, primarily to denote the international dissemination of literary art, including non-Western literature. However, the meaning he attributed to the concept of Weltschrift did not immediately elicit a widespread response.
A much more businesslike and pragmatic notion of world literature was more common in the nineteenth century. It was seen as the sum of all literary works brought into circulation by all nations or by mankind in general over the course of time, or at least its undisputed highlights, such as the masterpieces by Dante, Shakespeare and Goethe. Viewed in this way, these international figures did not belong solely to the Italians, the English, or the Germans. Given the fact that their works were the spiritual heritage of the entire human race, they were also owned by other nations.

Since the nineteenth century, several literary histories have been written with the aim of describing the literary heritage of more than one nation or even of all mankind in a single comprehensive historical account. I want to explore the development of this historiographical genre in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century using a number of Dutch examples. In the Netherlands, the genre is part of a tradition established in the preceding period. I will follow two lines of evolution, which I shall refer to as (1) academization or scientification and (2) popularization or democratization. Both lines come together in a transnational literary history published during World War II. But now, back to Goethe’s era. While he was developing his cosmopolitan concept of literature, a young man named Willem de Clercq was writing a unique literary history. In the winter of 1820/21, the Royal Netherlands Institute of Arts and Sciences had announced a competition for a treatise on the following topical issue: “What influence has foreign literature, especially Italian, Spanish, French and German literature, had on Dutch language and literature from the beginning of the fifteenth century to the present day?” De Clercq submitted his manuscript after only a few months. In extended and printed form it would number more than three hundred pages.

His answer to the question was unique, and not simply because it was the only answer submitted. It pleased the Academy so much that it awarded De Clercq a gold medal. De Clercq had established a reputation at a single stroke. His book would continue to command the admiration of readers and, in the Netherlands, it even became famous as the first comprehensive comparative literary history ever written. At any rate, its author can be regarded as one of the pioneers of comparative literature. This field of study, inspired by emerging disciplines such as comparative linguistics, would flourish in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. In this process of discipline formation, the two tendencies mentioned above – scientification and democratization – can be distinguished. Tendencies I want to highlight here on the basis of a number of Dutch books written in the tradition established by De Clercq.

Scientification

In the Netherlands, history teacher Willem Doorenbos and the somewhat younger professor of Dutch Gerrit Kalf represent the scientification tendency. Unlike De Clercq, they both completed a university degree during which they acquired modern scientific views. In their generation the new scientific paradigm of historism emerged in the comparatist’s thinking. Just like any other man of science he was expected to describe and explain literary phenomena – from the smallest details to entire literatures – by collecting empirically observable facts and assessing them impartially. To this end, these phenomena must be compared and causally related to each other, as Kalf – the most important theoretician in this field in the Netherlands – prescribed around 1900. A literary work, for instance, might be explained by the life of its author and by other factors influencing its properties.

According to Kalf there were several ways to obtain a picture of the literary art of a large number of nations. Different national literatures could simply be placed side by side, highlighting perhaps their points of contact or other relationships. Kalf himself, however, inspired by comparatists like Posnett (1886) and Ker (1896),10 preferred an approach which fully abandoned the national pattern, concentrating, for instance, on literary currents or literary contents occurring internationally. As such, Kalf distanced himself from a compiling approach. Doorenbos had used this approach in his Handeling tot de geschiedenis der letterkunde (Guide to the History of Literature), published in 1870. This book examined Indian, Hebrew, Greek, Roman, Arab, Persian, medieval Christian, Castilian and Germanic literature in succession, as well as Italian, French, Spanish, English, German and Dutch literature.

Books like these and a growing number of partial studies by other authors show us that comparative literature took root in the course of the nineteenth century. Kalf provisionally completed a Dutch academic and nation-transcending literary history in 1923-1924, publishing his two-volume Westeuropäische letterkunde (Western European Literature).11 In this book, he attempted to abandon the national point of view completely. His foreword to volume I describes his aim: “Starting from the supposition that, during the Middle Ages, the nations of Western Europe more or less formed a unity in faith, civilization, art and other respects, I have tried to show the revelation of this unity in literature.”12 In the course of his life, Kalf had repeatedly defended extremely nationalistic ideas. Westeuropäische letterkunde, however, proved that he was also able to apply a pan-European perspective which would, he believed, reconcile nations. This is apparent from the broad perspective of both volumes which, incidentally, present a cultural history based on literary examples rather than a literary history in the narrower sense. The
first volume opens with an introduction about the genesis of nations and states, about the church versus the secular world, about the Renaissance and the role of clergymen and laymen. Chapter 1 deals with the three medieval estates, Chapter 2 with wise, amorous and foolish narratives, and Chapter 3 examines art, artists and their public. The first chapter of Volume 2 continues with the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, Chapter 2 discusses several genres of the Renaissance, Chapter 3 examines literary currents, and Chapter 4, finally, covers genres and writers like Spencer and Cervantes who also influenced the course of literature.

**Popularization**

Besides academization, comparative literary historiography included a popular-scientific tendency, representing a form of middlebrow culture: easily digestible, tailored to a mass audience of consumers for whom high culture was not accessible as a matter of course, but who wished to gain access to it. One representative of this new kind of historiography was Steven Margadant, an educated author, but not a trained philologist. Margadant opted for a less academic route. He studied mathematics and physics at the University of Leyden, but while teaching these subjects he also developed as a classicist. In the 1930s, he edited a number of popular scientific magazines. Two of his books were typically intended for a middlebrow audience: *De wereldliteratuur* (World Literature) (1930) and *Twaantigduizend citaten, aphorismen en spreukwoorden* (Twenty Thousand Quotations, Aphorisms and Proverbs) (1935).

Margadant never precisely explained the intentions behind his book on world literature. However, it must have had the same aim as the successful German book that served as his model: Paul Wiegler’s *Geschichte der Weltliteratur* (History of World Literature) of 1914. Wiegler declared that he wanted to bring the reader closer to the cultural wealth of the poetry and prose of the leading nations. His book presented only the main outlines, leaving aside the ballast of details useful for specialists. It only discussed writers who, according to Wiegler, still accorded with the perceptions of modern people, or who had lived a remarkable life. This must have been Margadant’s point of view too. His book had twenty-five chapters, beginning with the literary art of the Egyptians, Babylonians and Assyrians, of the Indians, Jews, Greeks and Romans. It continued with early Christian literature, Persian and Arab literature, the literature of the age of chivalry and of the Teutons. Then, several European literatures were examined in turn in each period. Margadant finished with the literature of East Asia. In his book, he acts explicitly as a guide surveying the whole. High literature was his standard and there was no place for folklore, even if it was artistic. Characteristically, how-
The historian must, with receptivity to all that is human and with real scientific love for truth, try to understand the coherence of what he notices as emerged in the wide scope of space and time. It has all grown from the bottom of the human heart, and who truly doesn’t want to deem something human strange will, by understanding, be able to approach the essence of all this; often, he must also consider other sides of the history of mankind — political, economic, philosophical history — in a given period and in a given region in order to achieve an insight why art had to form and to elaborate its performances in a particular manner then and there.26

Apart from sympathy and scientific sense, the literary historian should have the aesthetic sensibility needed to assess the value of verbal art. Furthermore, he should be able to distinguish textual relations: ‘He has to register influences, the more or less immediate connections, between works of art of a particular period and between these artefacts and nonartistic phenomena.27 With these requirements Walch declared his rejection of the prevailing inclination of some of his colleagues to confine themselves to aesthetic appreciation and to focus on their own time. According to Walch, this inclination was caused by ‘the rise of a social class which, although not elevated in traditions and not educated in the humanities, may and can assert itself culturally’.28 Walch adjured that this did not imply a negative judgment about democratized society. At the same time, however, he felt that democratization had developed to the detriment of historical awareness and tradition.29 Some ten years later, Walch would himself write a history of world literature.

Jan Walch’s book on world literature

Before Walch had been appointed professor in Paris, he made a career as a teacher of Dutch, as a journalist on several quality newspapers and as a Privatdocent of theater history at the University of Leiden. He also came to the fore as a playwright and a prose writer, and he published a handbook on Dutch literary history. After a thirteen-year professorship in Paris, Walch returned to the Netherlands in 1939 in order to become director of the Theater School in Amsterdam.30 He set about writing Het boek der wereldliteratuur (The Book of World Literature), which appeared in 1943. The book considers the Greeks, Latin literature, early Christianity in literature, the courtly love lyric, humanism and the Renaissance, and, finally, the nineteenth century. It does not therefore examine literature nation by nation, but rather period by period. Walch did not include a programmatic introduction like the one he had written for Margadant’s book. Neverthe-
he joined the Spanish Armada, he had love affairs and fought duels, he married a lady and became a priest after her death, again taking many lovers. Another strategyWalch used to captivate his audience was to present himself as a guide, just like Margadant—a guide on a jaunty stroll, a saunter through the world of literature. Again and again Walch takes a moment to draw the attention of his fellow walkers to the most beautiful places, not least in the final words of the book:

We have completed a long walk through the literature of Europe. We have not seen everything: I hope my readers, like myself, are not tourists who want to see everything, that they are content to be able to admire some beautiful things. [...] This journey has at least yielded a series of clues as to what is worth considering further. If it has brought my readers to such a further consideration of some of the indicated works, it will bring joy and gratitude to the compiler of this book.17

It is no mistake that Walch refers to the literature of Europe rather than world literature. Despite the title of his book—Het boek der wereldliteratuur—he again takes as his basis a strictly Eurocentric frame of reference. Non-European literature is almost entirely disregarded. For Walch, world literature is European literature. Moreover, Dutch literature gets preferential treatment. Even if it is poorer quality, Walch believes it is interesting for his readers because it comes from 'our own country' and because Dutch examples are more instructive for his readers than others.

Sometimes Walch responds to the current socio-political situation—a final way to conform to the views of his audience. In 1944, it was determined for largely by the German occupation of the Netherlands. Reading what Walch wrote about classical literature, one can detect hidden references to the modern era. The imperialistic Roman nation (read: Germany) is presented as having overridden Greece (read: the occupied countries).18 However, Walch's message is that, in the end, brute force will lose the battle to the spiritual civilization of the conquered. It was not for nothing that as early as 1941 a leading national-socialist newspaper called him a cowardly servant of the Jews.19 In any case, his attitude toward the Germans could hardly be described as submissive. This is also apparent from the fact that he did not omit Heinrich Heine, whose books had recently been burnt in Germany:

He was a Jew by birth, he converted to Christianity, but this had no profound effect on his emotional life. [...] His Deutschland, ein Wintermärchen is also witty, full of scoffing at his homeland in which his love for his country nevertheless repeatedly breaks through.20

Conclusion

Comprehensive histories of world literature written by an individual author have already been out of fashion for more than half a century.20 However, investigating a number of Dutch examples shows that, alongside the traditionally national-oriented literary historiography, an international sister discipline developed in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.21 An academic variant of this historiography developed from compiling national literatures to generalizing literary phenomena. Meanwhile, a popular scientific variant arising from the latter more or less retained the compilation approach. This middlebrow literary historiography can be regarded as a kind of poststructural literary education. Initially, it was in the hands of authors with no academic literary training, who were, however, accustomed to writing for a nonspecialist audience. Jan Walch, versatile as he was, tried to combine both subgenres, ending up in the field of popular science. Paradoxically, the historiography of world literature has often been motivated by nationalistic considerations, or has developed according to national patterns. Unlike Goethe's intentions in referring to Weltliteratur, his contemporary De Clercq, for example, had a nation-building intention: by researching systematically which foreign influences made themselves felt in Dutch literary history, he tried to denote the uniqueness of Dutch literature and hence the Dutch national character. The more comparative literary historians had to address a large audience, trying to conform to its way of thinking and its social context, the more they opted for such a nationalistic view. Furthermore, world literature was invariably considered from a Eurocentric angle.22 Although receptiveness to foreign literature can be identified at various levels in intellectual circles, the middlebrow audience in particular seems to have been internationally minded to only a limited extent, even less so in the past than in our own time. A time in which – as Erich Auerbach observed, adapting Goethe – our philological homeland is no longer the nation, but the earth.23

Notes

2 In writing this contribution I made grateful use of data gathered by Brenda Houbinga, MA, during her internship and her research for her Master's thesis at the Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands in The Hague. I am also obliged to Prof. M.H. Schenkewold for her comments on an earlier version, which appeared in Dutch with slightly different emphases and details: Ton van Kalmthout, Verschillende fragmenten tot een geheel vereenigd. Nederlandse geschiedschrijving over de wereldliteratuur, 1834-1944, in Zdenka Vrčeková et al. (eds.), Proust perspectieven. Handelingen van het colloquium van de sectie Nederlandse van de Karel van Boeijenstichting te Proust op donderdag 25 en vrijdag 26 maart 2012 (Prague, 2012), 27-52.
The Historiography of World Literature

Dutch history of world literature it is discussed separately in Van Kalmthout, 'Verschillende fragmenten'.

6 On De Clercq see, for example: I. de Costa, Herinneringen uit het leven en de omgang van Willem de Clercq, medegedeeld in de Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen (Amsterdam, 1860), and [P.J.] Chautetie de la Sauysaye, CLERQW. (Willem de); in P.C. Molhuysen and P.J. Blok (eds.), Nieuw Nederlandsch biografisch woordenboek, vol. 3 (Leiden, 1914), 236-240.

7 Original quote: welken invloed heeft vreemde letterkunde, inzonderheid de Italiaansche, Spaansche, Fransche en Duitsche, gehad op de Nederlandsche taal- en letterkunde, stins het begin der 16e eeuw tot op onze dagen?

8 On the creation of De Clercq’s Verhouding: A. Pirenne, Willem de Clercq naar zijn dagb., met medewerking van De Clercq jonge kleindochter, a. h. (Haarlem, 1898), 145-146 and 156. See also J.C. Brandt Coetsius, Willem de Clercq als literatuurhistoricus en criticus, Verslagen en Mededelingen Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde, nieuwe reeks, t. 4 (1961), 481-504; M.H. Schenkenveld, Willem de Clercq en de literatuur (Groningen, 1962), 75-122, and W. van den Berg, De ontwikkeling van de term ‘romantiek’ en zijn varianten in Nederland van 1840 tot 1875, 293-304. I have quoted the 1910 reprint.

9 See, for example, J. te Winkel, De ontwikkelingsgang der Nederlandsche literatuur, reprint (Haarlem, 1925), vol. 4, 453; Gerard Brom, Geschiedschrevers van onze letterkunde (Amstel- dam, 1944); G.P.M. Knoyvelde, Handboek tot de geschiedenis der Nederlandsche letterkunde (Den Bosch, 1971), vol. 3, 364-365; W.J.C. Boutenink; Clercq, Willem de Willem de Clercq en P.J. Verkruysse (eds.), De Nederlandsche Vraag van middeleuwen tot hedendaagse van de Priese auteurs (Weesp, 1984), 130-140.


11 For a more detailed account of the emergence of comparative literature in the Netherlands, Van van Kalmthout, Beam of a Many-Coloured Spectrum: Comparative Literature in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century (forthcoming). D’haen, Conische Historie, 47-73, gives an overview of the international emergence of the discipline over the past two centuries.


13 Uitgaande van de onderstaande, dat de volken van West-Europa gedurende de Middel- euwen in geboel, beschaving, kunst en andere opzetten min of meer een eeuw vormen, heb ik getracht de openingbar dier eeuw in de literatuur te doen zien (p. iv).


18 The publisher ordered a translation from Margadant. After the second chapter, however, he went his own way, only using Wiegler's book as a source of data. According to Mar-
gadant himself his book could not even be called a free adaptation; S.W.F. Margadant, De wereldliteratuur, Geschiedenis der letteren (The Hague, 1930), ix, xi.

19 Wiegert, Geschichte, vii.

20 It was also available bound in linen for fl. 10.75, and in quilted leather for fl. 18.75 (prospectus in the archives of the Kruisman publishing house, The Hague, Amsterdam University Library). In the Dutch East Indies the book cost fl. 12.35 (advertisement placed by the bookstalliers Visser & Co in Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch Indie, 9 January 1930).

21 Margadant, Wereldliteratuur, ix, xi.


23 (S.W.F.) Margadant, Wereldliteratuur, in Het Vaderland, 7 March 1930; advertisement placed by the Kruisman publishing house, The Hague, in Het Vaderland, 12 March 1930.


25 Margadant, Wereldliteratuur, ix, xi.

26 ‘[De] geschiedschrijver moet, met onverwankelijk voor al wat menschelijk is en met de echte wetenschappelijke liefde tot de waarheid, trachten den samenhang te begrijpen van wat hij daar als onder zich, in de wijde strekking van Romein en tijd, ziet gegroeid. Het is alles gewassen [sic] uit den bodem van het menschelijk hart, en wie waarlijk niets menschelijks zich vreemd wil achten, zal in het begrip tot het wezen van dit alles vermogen te naderen; [dan] zal hij ook dikwijls anderen zijden van de levensgeschiedenis der mensch- heid – stanskundige, economische, filosofische geschiedenis – in een bepaald tijdvak en onder een bepaalde hemelstreek moeten bezien om tot het inzicht te komen, waaronder stuk en daar de kunst juist op die bepaalde wijze haar voorstellingen moet vormen en zetten.’ (Jan Walch [Walch in Margadant, Wereldliteratuur, v-xii).

27 ‘Hy zal de invloeden, het minder en meer onmiskenlijk verband hebben vast te leggen tussen de kunstwerken van dien tijd onderling en tussen deze en andere kunsten, om de zaken te organiseren. ’ (Ibid., vii.)

28 Walch in Margadant, Wereldliteratuur, vii-xii.


30 Walch, Het boek der wereldliteratuur (The Hague, [1933]), 211.

31 Ibid., 11.

32 a-Gravesande, Johannes Lodewijk Walch, 191.

33 ‘Wanneer u een boek hebt gelezen, dat u heeft ontsnapt of heeft doen schatten […], hebt u er dan weleens over nagedacht, dat honderden geschichten van mensen op honderduit- zenden plaatsen van de aardbol aandoeningen van zodanige of van vernietigende aard hebben ervaren, ook door het lezen, of […] door het horen voorlezen? / In dit boek wordt dat iets van verteld van wat, de eeuwen door, lees-genot gaf van de wereldliteratuur’ (Jan L. Walch, Wereldliteratuur, 11).

34 Original quote: ‘[…] het is vaak romantischer dan een roman. En het is een ware “geschiedenis”, Walch, Wereldliteratuur, 17.

35 Cf. ibid., 75, 98, 107 en 112. Walch constructs a similar contrast between the Teutons and the Gauls (p. 100). Cf. also: ‘En dan oversprenken de barbaren Germanen Frâle’ (p. 120: ‘And then, the barbaric Teutons overwhelm Italy’.

36 ‘De ruglijkste taal en houding van prof. dr. Jan L. Walch. De directeur van onze enige Toneel school laat zich in de kaart kijken, in Volk en Vaderland, 3 October 1941, 7. This anonymously published article by August Heyting rejects Walch because of his essay ‘Het nationaal-socialisme, in Het Vaderland, 16 May 1933. Here, it was printed in Walch’s personal column “Scherven uit gisteren, wanten onder de pseudonym van Krammer.”

37 ‘Hij was jood van geboorte, ging tot het christendom over, maar zonder dat dit op zijn gedeeldelevan belangrijke invloed had. […]’/Gezigt is ook zijn Deutschland, ein Wintermärchen, vol spot met zijn vaderland, waardoor toch telkens de liefde broekest, Walch, Wereldliteratuur, 582.


40 See also D’Haeze, Routledge Concise History, 6-46.

41 In his essay ‘Philologie der Weltliteratur’, in Erich Auerbach, Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Romanischen Philologie (Berlin/Munich, 1907), 310.
The Making of the Humanities

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