

9. Beam of a many-coloured spectrum

Comparative literature in the second half of the nineteenth century

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Abstract

This article deals with the rise of comparative literature in the Netherlands. It discusses the role the discipline played in the nineteenth century, focusing on the relationship between comparative literature and related disciplines such as comparative linguistics and comparative mythology, on the principles on which comparative literature was based, and finally on its results. Emerging in the second half of the century, the discipline remained an auxiliary branch of Dutch studies, where it would eventually break through. Thus it helped to give Dutch philology a more international bent and prompted it to become more professional, adopting a positivistic and deterministic methodology.

Introduction

In the early twentieth century, Professor of Romance Studies Anton Gerard van Hamel wrote:

Any serious study of literature, no matter how much it wishes to limit itself by its choice of subject – a people, a person, a genre, an art form – is driven towards comparative literary history. Besides the one with which it is concerned and on which it seeks to focus all its attention, there are the many others that appear in the practitioner's field of vision. No pure, clear light can shine on the chosen subject that is not derived from the beam of a many-coloured spectrum.¹

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¹ Van Hamel, 'Wetenschappelijke beoefening der moderne letterkunde', pp. 103-104: 'Iedere ernstige studie der letterkunde, zij moge zich door de keuze van haar voorwerp – een volk, een persoon, een genre, een kunstvorm – nog zoozeer willen beperken, wordt gedreven in de richting der vergelijkende literatuurgeschiedenis. Naast het ééne waarom het haar te doen is en waarop zij de volle aandacht zoekt te vestigen, staat het vele dat zich eveneens op het gezichtsveld van

Though this beam must have been obvious to Van Hamel, anyone who consults Dyserinck & Fischer's *Internationale Bibliographie zu Geschichte und Theorie der Komparatistik* gets the impression that a comparative approach was given barely any consideration in the Netherlands prior to 1901.² I should like to show that this impression is misleading and that Van Hamel was not alone in his opinion. The issue is what role comparative literary history – or comparative literature, as it is often called – played in the Netherlands at that time, and what circumstances lay behind it.

I shall focus on the relationship between comparative literature and related disciplines such as comparative linguistics and, above all, comparative mythology; on the question of the principles on which comparative literature was based; and finally on the results that were achieved, or were at least in prospect. My findings are based primarily on contemporaneous specialist linguistic and literary publications and on articles in general cultural journals, particularly *De Gids*, which discussed comparative literature at some length. Several professors of Dutch literature also played a key role. Until the 1880s, they were more or less the only people in the Netherlands teaching a modern language at university level. Van Hamel wrote about one of them, Jan ten Brink, for example, that

from the very beginning, alongside Dutch literature he incorporated the literature of other nations in his teaching, in so far as the literature of the fatherland encountered it. And as is evident from some of his writings, from the *Series Lectionem* and the *Regeeringsverslagen* ['Government Reports'], he continued to do so throughout the seventeen years that he was in office, save perhaps for a few years.³

Although Ten Brink was no longer involved in linguistics, he deserves a place in this publication because he was a 'philologist' in the broader sense

haar beoefenaar afteekent. Geen zuiver en helder licht kan over het gekozen onderwerp opgaan of het moet zijn saamgesteld uit den stralenbundel van een veelkleurig spectrum'.

2 Dyserink & Fischer, *Internationale Bibliographie* (1985) refers only to Willem de Clercq's 1824-discussion mentioned below and two pieces on the matter by H.C. Muller from 1898.

3 Van Hamel, 'Wetenschappelijke beoefening der moderne letterkunde', pp. 127-128: 'reeds van den aanvang af, naast de Nederlandsche letterkunde de letterkunde van andere volken, voor zoover de vaderlandsche met haar in aanraking geweest is, in het kader van zijn onderwijs [heeft] opgenomen. En blijkens sommige zijner geschriften, blijkens de 'Series Lectionem' en de Regeeringsverslagen, is hij dit gedurende al de zeventien jaren van zijn ambt, een enkel jaar misschien uitgezonderd, blijven doen'.

attributed to the word from around 1900, as recorded in the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal* ('Dictionary of the Dutch Language') in 1921:

Academic practitioner of the arts; [...] currently used to denote anyone concerned with the academic study of the language and literature of any people, or in a broader sense anyone who makes a study of language and literature, history and archaeology.⁴

The historiography of comparative literature has a long tradition, starting with *Histoire des littératures comparées des origines au XXe siècle*, written by Frédéric Loliée in 1903, who gave the new discipline a rich history, thus helping to establish its legitimacy.⁵ My contribution provides an impression of the rise of comparative literature in the Netherlands. No in-depth exploration of this field is available for this country, such as that which Leerssen produced for the study of comparative literature in Great Britain.⁶ I shall provide a number of building blocks for such an exploration, and for a history of literary historiography in the Low Countries, that Baur already called for in 1939.⁷ I shall focus exclusively on the situation in the northern Netherlands in the second half of the nineteenth century, when comparative literature began to develop, though I shall on occasion extend the scope to the First World War.

4 *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal*: 'Wetenschappelijk beoefenaar der letteren; [...] thans als benaming voor ieder die zich toelegt op de wetenschappelijke studie van de taal- en letterkunde van eenig volk, of in ruimeren zin voor: iemand die zijn studie maakt van de taal en letteren, geschied- en oudheidkunde'. See also 'Philology': 'the science of the practitioners of the language and literature of a people, particularly with reference to those of the Greeks and Romans, later extended to the academic study of the entire culture of classical antiquity. Since the 19th century also applied to the study of the language and literature, history and archaeology of other peoples, and of other languages'.

5 Schrijnen gives a contemporaneous historical review from the Netherlands. Cf. Schrijnen, *Inleiding tot de studie der vergelijkende indogermaansche taalwetenschap*, pp. 22-36.

6 Leerssen, *Komparatistik in Grossbritannien*.

7 Baur, 'Inleiding', p. LXXX: 'A history of literary historiography in the Low Countries is still part of the *pia desideria*, and would be difficult without the aid of a comparative study of West European literary historiography – which has had a deep and continuous influence on it, and which itself has not been described sufficiently comprehensively'. ('Een geschiedenis van de letterkundige historiographie in de Nederlanden behoort nog steeds tot de *pia desideria*; en zou bezwaarlijk buiten de hulp kunnen van een vergelijkende studie der West-Europeesche literatuurgeschiedschrijving – waarvan zij doorlopend den diepsten invloed heeft ondergaan, en die zelf nog niet in voldoende samenhang werd beschreven').

Comparative linguistics

Comparative literature developed in the wake of comparative linguistics, which was very much in the ascendant in the first half of the nineteenth century. Just like comparative geography, for example, the language-based disciplines took their principles and methods from comparative anatomy. The study of anatomy already had a long tradition. But shortly after 1800, once the French scholar Georges Cuvier had published his *Leçons d'anatomie comparée* (1800-1805), it began to develop into an independent branch of science. The method used was comparatism, whereby separate phenomena were described and compared, not only to classify them and derive natural laws, but also to discover any missing connections.

Neither was comparative linguistics a nineteenth-century invention. However, under the influence of nineteenth-century positivism and developments in the natural sciences, it boomed.⁸ According to Dutch studies expert Jan te Winkel, it was his tutor Matthias de Vries who introduced the German method of linguistic comparison to the Netherlands.⁹ Like August Schleicher, De Vries and other Dutch linguists regarded language as a classifiable organism that obeyed immutable natural laws.¹⁰ Although Te Winkel was critical of comparative linguistics, he did gain some experience of it through comparative dialect studies.¹¹ Furthermore, he was one of the Dutch scholars who applied this method to the study of literature. In his inaugural lecture as professor of Dutch literature, Gerrit Kalff underlined the kinship between his field and that of comparative linguistics:

For many years the task undertaken by linguists has been to observe, record facts, collect, order, group, discover the circumstances in which these facts generally occur and the conditions on which they depend; if possible, to identify laws [...]. With the help of physiology and psychology, one attempts to study the growth of the language, learn about its life, even reveal the secret of its origins. If it is not to remain where it is, the study of literature must follow the same path, only via that path can it progress further.¹²

8 See, inter alia, Bakker, 'De grammatica in de negentiende eeuw', pp. 128-133.

9 Te Winkel, *De ontwikkelingsgang der Nederlandsche letterkunde*, p. 460. See also Noordegraaf, *Norm, geest en geschiedenis*, pp. 390-392.

10 Noordegraaf, *Norm, geest en geschiedenis*, pp. 369, 383.

11 Ibidem, pp. 426-429, 471.

12 Kalff, *Taalstudie en literatuurstudie*, pp. 9-10: 'Sedert lang stelt men zich ook in de taalstudie tot taak: waar te nemen, feiten vast te stellen, te verzamelen, te rangschikken, te groeperen, de

Just as linguists attempted to trace the historical origins and formation of words, said Kalff and his sympathisers, so modern literature scholars were keen to trace the development both of separate literary phenomena and of complete bodies of literature. And while linguists studied the verbal interaction between speakers, literary scholars explored the influence of one writer or literature on another.¹³

Comparative studies in other countries and Dutch pioneers

Kalff would later produce an instructive survey of the rise of comparative literature in neighbouring language areas, which also gives an impression of what aspects of them had resonated in the Netherlands.¹⁴ He thought most highly of the English, highlighting the work of Henry Hallam (1837-1839), William Paton Ker (1908), Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett (1886), and George Saintsbury (1911), among others. When it came to France, he referred to researchers like Fernand Baldensperger (1907-1939) and Joseph Texte (1898), who had written a programmatic paper on '*l'histoire comparée des littératures*' which was frequently cited in the Netherlands. Kalff had the least affinity with German comparatism, which arrived on a tidal wave of publications, because he found it much too concerned with detail. However, he did mention Johannes Scherr (1851), the author of a well-known analytical work. In a separate paper, Kalff (1916/17) would also add the name of the Italian Arturo Farinelli. The work of the Dane Georg Brandes (1872 onwards) and German Moriz Carrière (1884), though not mentioned by Kalff, was also well known in the Netherlands. The same applied to the German Medievalist Ferdinand von Hellwald, who had an intensive correspondence with De Vries and also published in Dutch journals like *Taal- en Letterbode* and *Noord en Zuid*.¹⁵ Another scholar who was in close personal contact with Dutch philologists was French Romanist and Medievalist Gaston Paris,

omstandigheden te ontdekken waaronder deze feiten plegen voor te komen en de voorwaarden waarvan zij afhangen; zoo mogelijk ook wetten te vinden [...]. Met hulp van physiologie en psychologie tracht men den groei der taal te bespieden, haar leven te leeren kennen, zelfs het geheim van haar oorsprong te ontsluiëren. De literatuurstudie moet, wil zij niet blijven staan waar zij is, dienzelfden weg volgen, slechts langs dien weg kan zij verder komen'.

13 Cf. Muller, 'L'étude scientifique de la littérature comparée', p. 269.

14 Kalff, 'Algemeene en vergelijkende literatuurgeschiedenis', pp. 454-461.

15 Von Hellwald's works include *Die holländische und die französische Phädra*. His letters to De Vries are now in Leiden University library. He also discovered the 'Second Part' of Maerlant's *Spiegelhistoriael*, which he published with De Vries and Eelco Verwijs.

who visited Leiden in 1875 to present a comparative study of the character Thumbelina at the university, which was celebrating its tricentenary.¹⁶

In international terms, the first attempts at the comparative study of literature are still regarded as having occurred in the first decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ The Netherlands was no exception. In 1824, Willem de Clercq published his study of the influence of foreign literatures on Dutch literature since the fifteenth century.¹⁸ This study, which two years earlier had been awarded a gold prize by the Second Class of the Royal Institute, was quickly reprinted and would come to be regarded as the very first example of a comparative literature study from the Netherlands. The fact that the Netherlands had more or less led the development was forgotten. Back in 1807, Nicolaas Godfried van Kampen had won a gold medal at Teyler's Second Society for a weighty tome exploring the poetry of the most familiar 'civilized peoples'. In 1829, in his inaugural lecture as professor of Dutch language and literature and national history, he would again present a comparative review. For some unknown reason, however, he would continue to be overlooked. The way Ten Brink gives De Clercq all the credit is typical.¹⁹ It was he who 'for the first time' pointed to the link between foreign literature and Dutch literature, and it was regrettable 'that his [De Clercq's] excellent method did not immediately receive more support'.²⁰ Later historiographers accepted this version of events. De Clercq had progressed the study of the influence of Spanish literature on Dutch literature 'by a large measure', according to Kalf, 'but then things began to shuffle along'.²¹

Kalf not only sold Van Kampen short, he also overlooked the contribution of other scholars, if only because another branch of study closely related to comparative literature – comparative mythology – was by now flourishing. After a time, the two would in fact more or less become identified with each

16 Paris, *Le Petit Poucet et la Grande Ourse*. See also Van Hamel, 'Gaston Paris en zijne leerlingen', pp. 489-490 (on the study presented to the university) and pp. 512-513 (on a study by Paris on the global tradition of a story about a wise little bird).

17 See for more recent historical reviews of comparative literature: Pichois & Rousseau, *La littérature comparée*, pp. 12-25, Weisstein, *Einführung in die vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft*, pp. 22-87, and D'haen, *The Routledge Concise History*, pp. 47-73.

18 See on this book: Brandt Corstius, 'Willem de Clercq als literatuurhistoricus', pp. 481-504, and Schenkeveld, *Willem de Clercq en de literatuur*, pp. 75-122.

19 Ten Brink, *De geschiedenis der Nederlandsche letterkunde*, pp. 8-9.

20 Ibidem: 'dat zijn [De Clerq's] uitmuntende methode niet terstond meer steun vond'.

21 Kalf, 'Algemeene en vergelijkende literatuurgeschiedenis', p. 118: 'een flinke scheut' – 'doch dan begint het gedroppel'.

other.²² With the publication of his standard work *Deutsche Mythologie* Jakob Grimm helped prepare the way for comparative mythology, which was later firmly placed on the map by Max Müller's 1856 work *Comparative Mythology*. In the Netherlands, it was above all archivist, MP and Indologist Petrus Abraham Samuel van Limburg Brouwer who in the 1860s and early 1870s would emerge as a champion of comparative mythology, publishing a series of articles in *De Gids*, which he also helped edit.²³

Comparative mythology and anthropology

The starting point of comparative mythology, Brouwer's studies suggested, lay in the assumption that man continually attained ever higher levels of civilization, building on earlier stages, and that in the earliest phase of development he was already equipped with the qualities that would continue to characterize him in later stages. For instance, from the very start the prefiguration of Western man, identified as Indo-German or Aryan, was as a 'bright, clever child'.²⁴ Another premise was that mythology was a reflection of the human mind in its original state. If modern man wanted to gain insight into himself and understand his place in the modern world, he could turn to myths and legends to learn what he was, did and thought in the past. Language studies remained an important tool. Language brought to light parallel myths existing among related peoples, myths that were said to have germinated from names and words, the concrete manifestations of thought and speech. This would not only give man an insight into his current state, it could also predict: 'Knowing the present, but above all the past is, in the field of the mind, the true secret of prophesy'.²⁵

'Let us imagine ourselves,' Brouwer invited his readers, 'in the childhood of the human race'.²⁶ For a long time, this childhood had been sought, in vain, in classical antiquity, and thus many mythical representations remained unexplained. Fantasies and speculation had had to be used to fill

22 See for example Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Literature*, pp. 10-11: 'comparative literature, which is more or less another name for comparative mythology'.

23 The outline of comparative mythology that follows is based largely on Van Limburg Brouwer's, 'Nitisastra', 'Vuurdienst' and 'Vergelijkende mythologie'. See on this series of articles also: Aerts, *De letterheren*, pp. 248-249, who underlines the religious dimension.

24 Van Limburg Brouwer, 'Vuurdienst', p. 490: 'knap en schrandere kind'.

25 Van Limburg Brouwer, 'Nitisastra', p. 241: 'Het weten van het heden, maar vooral ook van het voorleden, is, op het gebied van den geest, het ware geheim der profetie'.

26 *Ibidem*, p. 29: 'Verplaatsen wij ons in den kinderlijken leeftijd van het menschelijk geslacht'.

the gaps in the knowledge of the original state of humankind. But thanks to comparative linguistics there was now a scientific method that could explain myths on the basis of facts rather than random guesswork. Comparative linguistics had managed to locate the very earliest stage of human civilization, in 'the grey prehistory of ancient India'.²⁷ It had discovered Sanskrit, and its similarities to the classical and Germanic languages, which had sprung from the 'Indo-European root'. Alongside this ancient Indian language, a whole spectrum of songs, proverbs, fables, fairy tales and other narratives had come to light, 'a treasure of inestimable value for anyone interested in the development of mankind'.²⁸

According to Brouwer, mutual comparison of the myths of various Aryan peoples had revealed that the original Indo-Europeans had taken their language and myths with them when they spread out across the world. Mongolian, Persian, Arabic, Bohemian, Russian, Spanish, and Italian versions of Indian stories showed how they had been transported to all parts of Europe, eventually reaching America.²⁹ Aryans, as they developed to adulthood, thus carried with them the impressions and narratives of their childhood wherever they went. Although they had sometimes forgotten the origin and meaning of these memories, they nevertheless remained in their consciousness.

Brouwer was firmly convinced that comparative mythology had now provided incontrovertible scientific proof in support of this theory. It had shown how stories had been handed down 'from mouth to mouth, text to text, nation to nation'.³⁰ It had spread across the Earth, always in a slightly altered form, depending on the qualities of the nations and individuals who had adapted them. And it did not stop at the discovery of this circulation of literature. The new discipline also showed how different peoples at different times had all felt a pressing need to communicate and hear something that was clearly a fiction. In 1871, Brouwer furthermore concluded that comparative mythology had brought man in the modern age to the realization that he was part of a bond of global proportions: humanity.³¹ There was therefore every reason to have high expectations of the new discipline. Brouwer predicted that an equally promising study of comparative religions would emerge, that could use the same methods

27 Ibidem, p. 23: 'den grijzen voortijd van het aloude Indië'.

28 Ibidem, p. 23-24: 'een onwaardeerbare schat voor wie belang stelt in de ontwikkelingsgeschiedenis der menschheid'.

29 Ibidem, p. 32.

30 Ibidem: 'van mond tot mond, van schrift tot schrift, van natie tot natie'.

31 Van Limburg Brouwer, 'Vergelijkende mythologie', pp. 29-30.

as its sister disciplines concerned with language and literature to study the ideas 'that man has formed for himself down the various ages concerning the eternal and absolute, concerning the essence of things'.³²

Comparative mythology in the Netherlands was to suffer a tragic loss in 1873, with the death of Brouwer at the age of only 44. In addition, around 1880 objections were raised to the new discipline, summarized by the theologian Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye, again in *De Gids*.³³ One such objection was that it too readily placed myths from very different eras in the same category by associating them with each other: 'It would be more or less the same if one were to explain the Netherlands of the nineteenth century on the basis of a psychological analysis of the Batavians'.³⁴ At the same time, the study of comparative mythology was said to be too limited – another demerit. It relied heavily on the etymology of names, which in fact often turned out to be chosen at random. Furthermore, it wrongly focused on the myths of related, and therefore civilized, peoples: 'One can no longer deny,' said Chantepie, 'that the most arresting similarities in terms of depiction and custom, myth and cult practices exist between peoples of the most divergent races, indeed between civilized and wild peoples'.³⁵

Chantepie and others contrasted this with anthropology, also a new but nevertheless more tried and tested discipline, which was also known as ethnology at the time. Anthropology also studied fairy tales, folk tales, folk songs and the like, but within the broader context of folklore. Anthropologists focused on original stories and customs, without worrying about what later, cultivated peoples had made of them. They preferred to listen to the 'wild peoples', or if necessary to members of the lower classes of modern societies, who were also regarded as primitive, thus explaining myths not so much on the basis of their distribution and development as of the state of mind of those who had originated them. A primitive literature could however help explain features of a more developed literature, because modern man was still to some extent a rough wild creature, with one foot still standing in a more uncivilized age. Such new anthropological insights did not however prevent comparative mythology from persisting for a time,

32 Van Limburg Brouwer, 'Nitisastra', pp. 39-40: 'welke zich de mensch in de verschillende tijden omtrent het oneindige en absolute, omtrent het wezen der dingen heeft gevormd'.

33 Chantepie de la Saussaye, 'Mythologie en folklore'.

34 Ibidem, pp. 226-227: 'Het zou ongeveer hetzelfde zijn, als wanneer men het Nederland der 19e eeuw wilde verklaren uit een psychologische analyse van de Batavieren'.

35 Ibidem, p. 229: 'Men kan niet meer loochenen, dat de treffendste overeenkomsten in voorstellingen en gebruiken, mythen en cultuspraktijken bestaan tusschen volken van de meest verschillende rassen, ja tusschen beschaafden en wilden'.

at least until the First World War.³⁶ It was probably for this reason that it was able to continue to inspire, and eventually become part of, comparative literature.

Comparative literature as a science

Brouwer had highlighted the scientific nature of the comparative method with reference to the similarities between mythologists and natural scientists: 'Just as natural scientists discovered the existence of the gulf stream which, through the middle of the Ocean, carries the products of South Africa to the American coasts, so the science of philology is currently rediscovering the path by which over the centuries tales have been carried by the great flow of peoples'.³⁷ This similarity gave Brouwer confidence that those practising comparative mythology and comparative history of religion would not shrink from the overwhelming quantity of unprocessed material from all Western and non-Western peoples in all ages: 'if we recall what scientific researchers have already sought and found, and what remains for them to seek, then historians surely have no reason to complain about the onerous task placed upon their shoulders'.³⁸

Like every other scientist, the literary comparatist should explain literary phenomena solely on the basis of hard, empirical facts that he had carefully collected, observed and assessed as impartially as possible. 'The mists which in the past were apparently dispelled by clever hypotheses lift forever when we know the facts', said Ten Brink during his inaugural lecture as professor of Dutch literature.³⁹ Observation and assessment also implied comparison, his colleague Kalff would later explain. He took this to mean 'the juxtaposing of two or more literary works, characters, phenomena,

36 See for example Speijer, 'De maan in nood', Schrijnen, *Essays en studiën*, and the anonymous review of Petrovitch's *Hero Tales and Legends of the Serbians*.

37 Van Limburg Brouwer, 'Nitisastra', p. 237: 'Gelijk de natuuronderzoekers het bestaan van den golfstroom ontdekten, die midden door de wateren van den Oceaan de voortbrengselen van Zuid-Afrika naar de Amerikaansche kusten voert en de gewassen der tropische gewesten naar het werelddeel dat wij bewonen, zoo werd thans ook door de philologische wetenschap de weg teruggevonden, langs welken gedurende den loop der eeuwen het verdichtsel in de groote stroombeweging der volken is voortgetrokken'.

38 Ibidem, pp. 239-240: 'wanneer wij ons herinneren wat niet al door den natuurvorschcr werd gezocht en gevonden, en wat hem nog te zoeken overblijft, dan voorzeker heeft de historicus geen reden tot klacht over het bezwarende van de taak, die hem op de schouders wordt gelegd'.

39 Ten Brink, *De geschiedenis der Nederlandsche letterkunde*, p. 45: 'De nevelen, vroeger door vernuftige hypothesen schijnbaar verdreven, trekken voorgoed op bij de kennis der feiten'.

or of entire bodies of literature – for those who dare – in order, through careful consideration of difference and similarity, more sharply to define, better to know, more deeply to explore, more purely to feel, more correctly to assess, that which is compared'.⁴⁰ Previously Kalff had argued that the study of comparative literature had hitherto 'restricted itself too much to the summarizing of related material incorporated into separate bodies of literature and to the juxtaposition of the various versions'.⁴¹

Excessive attention to detail could be avoided in various ways in a positivist approach, by drawing together the results of comparative analyses into a historical synthesis. Causal relationships would provide the necessary context. Literary historians should explain a literary work on the basis of the life of its author, which in turn would be explained by the period, location and other circumstances in which the work was written. The literary historian should also explore how various literatures had influenced Dutch literature – Italian literature largely in the seventeenth century, for example, French in the seventeenth and eighteenth, German in the eighteenth and nineteenth.⁴² Finally, comparative analysis – and here mythology and anthropology come into play – should also extend to the literature of 'uncivilized' peoples, in order to learn more about 'the nature of literary sensibility', about the emergence and development of literature.⁴³

Such a generalized approach to literature also afforded the opportunity to define laws which it obeyed. Successive professors of Dutch literature, on taking up their chair, highlighted the fact that the field of literature and aesthetics was subject to laws that could be identified and understood by empirical research and impartial analysis. The new generation of scholars, Henri Ernest Moltzer argued, could no longer make do with observing and recording literary phenomena, they must 'also attempt to trace the laws that govern them'.⁴⁴ His tutor Willem Jonckbloet had said the same

40 Kalff, 'Algemeene en vergelijkende literatuurgeschiedenis', p. 469: 'het naast elkander plaatsen van twee of meer letterkundige werken, persoonlijkheden, verschijnselen, of van gansche literaturen – voor wie dat aandurft –, om, door nauwlettende beschouwing van verschil en overeenkomst, het onderling vergelekenen scherper te begrenzen, beter te leeren kennen, dieper te peilen, zuiverder te gevoelen, juister te waardeeren'.

41 Kalff, *Taalstudie en literatuurstudie*, p. 24: 'te zeer [had] beperkt tot het opsommen van verwante stoffen die in onderscheiden literaturen verwerkt zijn en tot het naast elkander plaatsen dier bewerkingen'.

42 See for example De Beer, 'De studie van de geschiedenis der letterkunde', p. 334.

43 Kalff, *Taalstudie en literatuurstudie*, pp. 24-25: 'de aard der dichterlijke aandoening'. A similar view can be found in Muller, 'L'étude scientifique de la littérature comparée', pp. 269-270.

44 Moltzer, *De historische beoefening der Nederlandsche letteren*, p. 26: 'tevens de wetten trachten op te sporen, die hen beheerschen'.

thing: 'There can be no arbitrary, conventional rules; there must be rules discovered through research and experience, identified by comparison and assessment of results'.⁴⁵ Jonckbloet's successor Ten Brink reiterated this in 1884, citing his own tutor Cornelis Willem Opzomer:

beauty encompasses something universally human [...]. Our imagination, like our senses, is subject to fixed, immutable laws, and those laws apply not just to some, but to all.⁴⁶

What precisely these laws of imagination were, Ten Brink did not specify. But comparatism did reveal specific examples. An anonymous contributor to *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen*, for example, referred to the 'general law of development' ('Algemeene ontwikkelings-wet'), that identified three stages of development applying to folk poetry all over the world.⁴⁷ And the comparative study of fairy tales and legends, according to Professor Jacob Wijbrand Muller, had taught us that folk poetry as a whole was not 'composed by the people', that there was no such thing as collective authorship, as was often thought: 'a story is always composed by a single person, albeit almost always unknown, even if the "people" – unknown storytellers, that is – have subsequently altered the motif of the story or associated it with another motif'.⁴⁸ In expressing such ideas, comparative literature was also an important tool for other separate philological disciplines, such as Dutch studies.

Value and necessity

According to the law of causality, Dutch literature simply could not have come about by itself. The idea that it could not be understood properly

45 Jonckbloet, *Het professoraat in de Nederlandsche Taal- en Letterkunde*, pp. 18-19: 'Er kan geen sprake zijn van willekeurige, conventionele regelen; maar van wetten, door onderzoek en ervaring ontdekt, door vergelijking en toetsing van verkregen uitkomsten vastgesteld'.

46 Opzomer, *De waarheid en hare kenbronnen*, p. 151: 'bij het schoone is er iets algemeen menschelijks [...]. Onze verbeelding wordt, even goed als onze zintuigen, naar vaste en onveranderlijke wetten aangedaan, en die wetten gelden niet slechts voor sommigen, maar voor allen'. (Quoted by Ten Brink, *De geschiedenis der Nederlandsche letterkunde*, pp. 26-27).

47 Anonymous, 'ets over Homerus en diens zangen', p. 675.

48 Muller, 'De oorsprong van den Roman de Renart', p. 143: 'door het volk gedicht' – 'een verhaal is altijd door één, hoezeer bijna altijd onbekend persoon verdicht, al is het motief daarvan later ook door "het volk", d.i. door verschillende onbekende vertellers gewijzigd of met een ander motief verbonden'.

without any knowledge of foreign literature was widely held. In his history of nineteenth-century literature, Ten Brink therefore discussed the influence of Britain, Germany, and France on Dutch Romanticism, before turning his attention to the work of Dutch Romantics.⁴⁹ A Dutch-studies scholar must be acquainted with work written elsewhere, at least with the West European literature that had had an influence in the Netherlands. One particularly pleasing example was Bilderdijk, as explained in *De Nieuwe Taalgids* in 1907:

His mind had not locked itself within the confines of the only-Dutch. Da Costa compared him to Goethe. With his ballads he extended his hand to Schiller, with his religious poetry to Klopstock, in his rich language and verse to Rückert, who would follow. Looking further afield he reminds us of the oriental singers and the prophets; had he completed 'De Ondergang der Eerste Warelde' the similarity with Dante and Milton would have been more pronounced. Bilderdijk has now made us familiar with scores of great and lesser foreign minds. Yet he was curiously blind to the best of his poetic contemporaries, like Schiller, Byron and Shelley. [...] he also found it difficult to associate with another's train of thought. Nevertheless, in this respect, with his many translations, he parallels Goethe and Herder. As such he rises far above his contemporary Voltaire. He was also an unsurpassable scholar of the Classics. [...] His free translations of Horace, Ossian, and others are poetic jewels of the purest kind.⁵⁰

Tracing influences and the sources Dutch authors had drawn on was one of the essential methods in Dutch studies, Kalff argued.⁵¹ Comparative linguistics became a permanent part of his teaching programme and it

49 Ten Brink, *Kleine geschiedenis der Nederlandsche letteren* also explicitly highlights instances of foreign influence.

50 Koopmans, 'Bilderdijk-litteratuur', pp. 184-185: 'Zijn geest had zich niet opgesloten binnen de grenzen van het alleen-Nederlandse. Da Costa reeds vergeleek hem met Goethe. Door z'n balladen reikt hij de hand aan Schiller, in z'n godsdienstige poëzie aan Klopstock, wegens z'n taal- en verzenrijkdom aan de na hem komende Rückert. In de verte herinnert hij aan de oosterse zangers en de profeten; bij een voltooiing van 'De Ondergang der Eerste Wereld' zou de overeenkomst met Dante en Milton treffender zijn geweest. Met tal van buitenlandse grote en kleine geesten heeft Bilderdijk ons inmiddels bekend gemaakt. Merkwaardig blind echter was hij voor de besten van z'n dichterlike tijdgenoten, als Schiller, Byron en Shelley. [...] verder geldt van hem, dat hij zich moeielik in de gedachtengang van anderen kon verplaatsen. Evenwel is hij door z'n vele vertalingen in dit opzicht op één lijn te stellen met Goethe en Herder. Ver staat hij in dezen boven z'n tijdgenoot Voltaire. Ook van de Klassieken was hij een onovertreffelijk navolger. [...] Z'n vrije bewerkingen van Horatius, van Ossian en anderen zijn dichtjuwelen van de zuiverste soort'.

51 Kalff, *Taalstudie en literatuurstudie*, p. 11.

taught him to look beyond his own language area, as testified by Schepers.⁵² Equally, the ideal Dutch-studies scholar should practise comparative literature, said Professor of Dutch Language and Literature Moltzer, in order to 'indicate to the Netherlands its place in the realm of world literature'.⁵³ Kalf agreed, and in 1916 bemoaned the fact that the discipline was still not a permanent feature of the university's teaching programme, if only because of its character-forming effects. It was said to rid students of prejudice, enhance their literary insight and prevent them from overestimating their own country's literature.⁵⁴

Comparative literature was used surprisingly rarely to play on nationalist feelings by favourably comparing the literature of one's own country to that of others. Almost by definition, it catered to a supranational way of thinking which, as was common in the nineteenth century, assumed that the literary output of a nation was a reflection of its spiritual life. Humankind had selected the canon of 'world literature' from the collected literatures of all peoples. The foremost works in that canon were those of champions like Shakespeare and Goethe. This reflected the human mind's level of development. 'The history of literature is also the history of human civilization', publisher and writer Pieter Boele van Hensbroek wrote in his manual.⁵⁵

The works of the best among every people, the poets – whether in verse or prose – are the most enduring monuments to times long gone. The writings of the peoples of the past, much more than the great ruins of antiquity, are the custodians of the legends, of the religion of the earliest ages, the earliest ages [...] whose memories have been preserved. [...] And later, in those times when myths made way for more positive ideas, literature has always been a wax plate on which the best of the tribe impressed their own thoughts and being, their view of life and the sensibilities of their entire age.⁵⁶

52 Schepers, 'Het nieuwe taalonderwijs', p. 338, idem, 'Het Nederlandsch aan gymnasia', p. 266-268.

53 Moltzer, *De historische beoefening der Nederlandsche letteren*, p. 34: 'aan Nederland zijne plaats aan te wijzen in het rijk der wereldlitteratuur'.

54 Kalf, 'Algemeene en vergelijkende literatuurgeschiedenis', pp. 471-472. De Vooy, *Uit de tijdschriften*, pp. 156-157 supported Kalf's view.

55 Boele van Hensbroek, *Der wereld letterkunde*, pp. V-VI: 'De geschiedenis der letterkunde is tegelijkertijd de beschavingsgeschiedenis der menschheid'.

56 Ibidem: 'De uitingen toch van de besten, die onder elk volk leefden, de dichters – hetzij in dicht of on dicht – zijn de duurzaamste monumenten van vervlogen tijden. De geschriften der voorbijgegane volken zijn voor ons, veel meer dan de grootsche ruïnes der oudheid, de bewaarders van de legenden, van het godgeloof der oudste eeuwen, der oudste eeuwen, [...]

In other words, such world-class literature embodied the very best of the human mind. This prompted some to ponder the quality of Dutch literature, which had barely made a mark on the world heritage.⁵⁷ But they could console themselves with the thought that the national was making way for the international, as the internationalist movement – on the rise since the start of the nineteenth century – also observed. All kinds of new technology had lifted the barriers between peoples in the previous century, pointing the way to cosmopolitanism that one day must certainly take the place of nationalist sensibilities. Or at least this was what Amsterdam literature scholar and language teacher Taco H. de Beer, for example, expected.⁵⁸ Just as the same diseases prevailed all over Europe, requiring the same cure,

so that unique national character of literature, whereby one nation believes it has found the artistic ideal in one direction, and the other in another, now ceases to exist. From now on art itself may have reached greater heights in one country than in another, but the differences between the prevailing national concept of art will no longer exist. Thus, striving together, one country and then another may urge the art movement forward, while generally only the choice of subject will betray the nationality of the artist.⁵⁹

Three approaches

How did comparative literature actually shine a spotlight on the literature of the entire world? Kalff roughly distinguished three approaches.⁶⁰ The

waarvan ons heugenis is bewaard. [...] En later, in de tijden, toen de mythen voor meer positieve ideeën weken, is de literatuur steeds geweest een waschplaat, waarin de besten van hun stam eigen denken en eigen zijn, hun levensopvatting en de gevoelens van heel hun tijd afdrukten'.

57 For example Muller, *Nederlandsche letterkunde*, pp. 12-15, who concurs with Hallam's view that the Dutch language area is too small for it to influence foreign literature.

58 De Beer, 'De studie van de geschiedenis der letterkunde', p. 339.

59 Ibidem, pp. 340-341: 'zoo houdt ook grootendeels dat eigenaardig nationaal karakter der literatuur op te bestaan, waarbij het eene volk in deze, het andere in geene richting het ideaal der kunst meent te vinden. Van nu afaan heeft *de* kunst in een land een grootere hoogte bereikt dan in een ander, maar houdt het verschil tusschen de heerschende nationale begrippen over kunst op. Zoo gezamenlijk voortstrevende, geeft nu eens het eene, dan weder het andere land den stoot aan de kunstbeweging, terwijl dikwijls alleen de keus der stof de nationaliteit des kunstenaars verraadt'.

60 The following is based on: Kalff, *Inleiding tot de studie der literatuurgeschiedenis*, pp. 454-459 and idem, 'Algemeene en vergeljkende literatuurgeschiedenis, pp. 458-461.

first simply juxtaposed individual national bodies of literature, as separate branches of literature, which were not therefore discussed as a single whole. The various literatures were sometimes discussed period by period. Comparatists in other countries like Brandes, Hallam, and Saintsbury, for example, employed such a synchronistic approach. In a few cases they might indirectly compare something or highlight a case of appropriation. The second approach in fact emphasized this procedure. It started from a national perspective, but systematically identified relationships between the literature of a certain nation and that of other peoples, as De Clercq had done in his time. Studies of the influence of and on writers or national literatures also formed part of this approach, as did the circulation of specific narrative elements among diverse peoples. The third approach was the only one genuinely to rise above the national perspective. According to Kalff, it was all about 'actual comparative literature, based on general literary material, forms, phenomena and movements, in order to learn the essence of literature in general by the comparison of separate literatures'.⁶¹

One example of this was Posnett's *Comparative Literature*, published in 1886. Kalff held Posnett – an Irishman who had settled in New Zealand – in great esteem, as one of the few who had attempted to clarify the emergence of poetry and the link between literature and society with a comparative study of primitive 'clan literature'. Kalff believed that the goal of Posnett and those of a similar mind was

to show that the emergence, rise, flourishing, and decline of literary movements are manifestations of a universal law; they attempted to identify a constant principle of social development, around which the phenomena of the growth and decline of a literature could be grouped.⁶²

The fact that the comprehensive literary historiography Posnett had envisaged barely got off the ground did not diminish Kalff's admiration for his fellow academic. Comparative literature – particularly German

61 'de eigenlijke vergelijkende literatuurgeschiedenis, die uitgaat van algemeene letterkundige stoffen, vormen, verschijnselen en stroomingen, om door onderlinge vergelijking van onderscheiden literaturen het wezen der literatuur in het algemeen te leeren kennen'.

62 'aantoonen dat het ontstaan, de opkomst, de bloei en het verval van letterkundige bewegingen openbaringen zijn van een algemeene wet; zij streefden ernaar een bestendig beginsel van maatschappelijke ontwikkeling aan te wijzen, waaromheen de verschijnselen van groei en verval eener letterkunde gegroepeerd kunnen worden'. Kalff, *Inleiding tot de studie der literatuurgeschiedenis*, p. 58.

Stoffgeschichte, with its flood of detailed studies on individual motifs – remained stranded in preparatory exercises, he believed.

This was a problem that Van Limburg Brouwer, too, had recognized. But in 1860, he had still been confident that it would be possible to work in a purposeful way towards the synthesis that was the ultimate goal of comparative literature. Comparatists, he said, must simply soldier on indefatigably, anonymously, without wishing to shine, satisfied with the mere idea that they were performing a useful service both to their contemporaries and to their descendants. However, they might be derided by ‘practical men’ who did not realize how much passion, courage, and perseverance it took to make such a sacrifice to knowledge and society, they would receive their reward in the end. Eventually someone would emerge who could assemble a ‘great and beautiful whole’ from the building blocks they had collected, ‘then the shrugging, disdainful world will cheer and raise a song of praise in honour of that study which they once regarded as nothing’.⁶³

Results from the Netherlands

As I have said, several initiatives had been undertaken in an effort to achieve such a ‘great and beautiful whole’. The Netherlands also produced several wide-ranging reviews in the second half of the century. One standard work was the *Handleiding tot de geschiedenis der letterkunde* (Manual to the history of literature) which the Amsterdam grammar school master Willem Doorenbos published in 1869-1873. According to the preface, it was his aim to ‘familiarize the reader with the content of the leading literary works of the best known and most developed peoples’.⁶⁴ When it was reprinted, Doorenbos added that he wanted to open readers’ eyes ‘to the wealth of ideas and ideals concealed in artworks of the greatest genius that humankind has produced’, now that, in the modern age, ‘such an expansive material world is being revealed to us’.⁶⁵ The *Handleiding* included Indian, Hebrew, Greek, Roman, Arabic, Persian, Medieval Christian, Castilian, and Germanic

63 Van Limburg Brouwer ‘Vuurdienst’, p. 492: ‘grootsch en schoon geheel’ – ‘dan zal de nu nog schouderophalende en minachtende wereld wel gaan toejuichen en een loflied aanheffen ter eere van dat eenmaal nietig geachte onderzoek’.

64 ‘den lezer met de inhoud der voornaamste litteraire werken, bij de meest bekende en ontwikkelde natiën, bekend te maken’.

65 Doorenbos, *Handleiding*, p. VI: ‘voor den rijkdom van ideeën en idealen, verscholen in de kunstwerken der fijnste vernuften, die de mensheid opleverde’ – ‘ons zulk een ruime materiële wereld geopenbaard wordt’.

literature and, period by period from the Middle Ages onwards, Italian, French, Spanish, English, High German, and Dutch literature. Doorenbos had originally planned to adapt Scherr's *Allgemeine Geschichte der Literatur* (General history of literature), but decided to write an original work 'to the extent that it is possible in such matters'.⁶⁶ He targeted a wide audience, planning through translation to meet the needs of 'his compatriots, no matter how learned or ignorant'.⁶⁷

In 1874-1875, a competing manual was published by Johannes van Vloten, entitled *Beknopte geschiedenis der nieuwe letteren* (Concise history of new literature). Twenty years later, it was also reprinted. As the title suggests, this was a concise history, so the scope was narrower. For the purposes of the book, 'the new literature' began with the emergence of the Roman, Germanic, and 'Slavonic' peoples after Antiquity. Van Vloten's was a rather inaccessible book. In over five hundred pages, he examined the 'Age of Genesis' (chapter I), the period 'From the fourteenth to the sixteenth century' (II), the period 'From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century' (III) and 'The nineteenth century' (IV).⁶⁸ There was no table of contents, nor were there any sub-headings for the sections; there was only an index of names. Referring to the production of the book, Van Vloten explained – perhaps apologetically – that the project had been initiated by publishers Van Kampen & Zoon and that he had constantly battled against a shortage of time whilst writing it.⁶⁹

A third manual appeared in 1909-1910: *Der wereld letterkunde, voor Nederlanders bewerkt* (World literature adapted for the Dutch) by Boele van Hensbroek. It aimed 'to spread awareness of the literatures of the world; to rank their products and to elucidate them with reference to the lives of poets and authors; sometimes to partially recount them'.⁷⁰ The book explores the literature of Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, China, and Japan; it looks

66 Ibidem: 'in zooverre bij dergelijke onderwerpen daarvan sprake kan zijn'.

67 Ibidem: 'zijne min of meer ongeletterde landgenooten'. In 1886 his reviewer Hoffman (p. 64) recommended the book for 'all those wishing to prepare themselves for the Dutch Language and Literature examination or for the B certificate in one of the foreign languages' ('allen, die zich voor het examen in de Nederlandsche Taal- en Letterkunde of ook voor de acte B. in eene der vreemde talen wenschen te bekwamen').

68 'Wordingstijd' – 'Van de veertiende tot de zestiende eeuw' – 'Van de zestiende tot de achttiende eeuw' – 'De negentiende eeuw'.

69 Van Vloten, *Beknopte geschiedenis der nieuwe letteren*, pp. 1-2.

70 Boele van Hensbroek, *Der wereld letterkunde*, p. VI: 'de literaturen der wereld te doen kennen; hare voortbrengselen te rangschikken en toe te lichten in verband met het leven der dichters en schrijvers; soms ze gedeeltelijk weer te geven'. See on this book: Van Kalmthout, 'De duurzaamste monumenten van vervlogen tijden'.

at the literature of the Hebrews, the Arabs, and the Persians, of India and the Dutch East Indies archipelago, as well as Greek, Roman, Romanesque, Italian, Spanish, English, German, Scandinavian, Slavonic, and other literatures. Boele did not, however, discuss Dutch authors because, he said, detailed works were already available on them. But at least as important was the fact that *Der wereld letterkunde* was an adaptation of a German book, Otto von Leixner's *Illustrierte Geschichte der fremden Literaturen* (Illustrated history of foreign literatures) of 1882.⁷¹ In adapting this work Boele removed Leixner's chauvinistic German nuances, and added a large number of illustrations from Dutch collections.

In the meantime, smaller studies were also published. One typical example was an article that Sanskrit expert Hendrik Kern submitted to *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsche Taal- en Letterkunde* (Journal for Dutch linguistic and literary studies) in 1893, on 'The saga of Karel and Elegast among the Mongols', followed up in 1913 by bookseller and librarian Rimmer van der Meulen, with an article on 'The saga of Karel and Elegast among the Lithuanians'.⁷² In 1881, Te Winkel wrote an article on the influence of Spanish literature and Ten Brink produced some pioneering work in 1889 with a book on the comparative study of epistolary novels, entitled *De roman in brieven. Eene proeve van vergelijkende letterkundige geschiedenis* (The epistolary novel. A sample of comparative literary history), a collection of essays highlighting scores of parallels and cases of influence and imitation in Dutch and other European epistolary novels. Some ten years later Ten Brink's *Romans in proza* (Prose novels) which he referred to in the introduction as a 'study of comparative literary history',⁷³ was published in instalments. Though this list is by no means exhaustive, it does at any rate show that comparative literature had clearly taken root in the Netherlands.

The professional infrastructure

This is also evidenced by the calls for comparative literature to be taught. De Beer, for example, saw potential for such a subject in secondary schools, provided it was limited to 'the main phenomena' and 'the events of recent

71 The book constituted parts 3 and 4 of Von Leixner's *Illustrierte Literaturgeschichte der vornehmsten Kulturvölker* (1880-1883), reprinted as Von Leixner, *Geschichte der Literaturen aller Völker* (1898-1899).

72 Kern, 'De sage van Karel ende Elegast bij de Mongolen'; Van der Meulen, 'De sage van Karel en Elegast bij de Litauers'.

73 'studie van vergelijkende letterkundige geschiedenis'.

times'.⁷⁴ Others also wanted to establish a special chair in the subject, as other countries had done, or were planning on doing so.⁷⁵ In 1885, for example, a plea by A.W. Kroon-Star Numan for a general doctorate in modern literature taught by professors of modern philology had been published in *De Gids*. Eight years later, Kalff again called for such a study programme to be established.⁷⁶ He believed it should be taught in Amsterdam, preferably by the professors of modern languages who were still teaching up north in Groningen. One of them, Germanic studies expert Barend Symons, rekindled the debate on a supra-disciplinary study programme in 1898, at the first Dutch Philology Conference.⁷⁷ But for the time being it would not progress any further than debate at this and subsequent conferences.⁷⁸

Symons' colleague in Groningen, Van Hamel, rallied to the cause, again in *De Gids*, with a call for a 'faculty' of modern philology and literature for the comparative historical study of modern languages. Van Hamel dearly wanted the faculty to be dedicated to the memory of Allard Pierson, who had died in 1896. He depicted the former professor of aesthetics and modern languages at the University of Amsterdam as the John the Baptist of comparative literature. Van Hamel dreamed of what it would be like if Pierson were still alive:

74 De Beer, 'De studie van de geschiedenis der letterkunde', p. 325: 'de voornaamste verschijnselen' – 'de gebeurtenissen van den laatsten tijd'. A list of books he provided on pp. 328-329 to familiarize readers with the Middle Ages and the Reformation included: *Gesta Romanorum*, Erasmus' *Lof der zotheid*, the *Reinaert*, Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, *The Vision of William concerning Piers the Plowman* by William Langland and the prologue to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. – On comparative literature in secondary schools, see also Van Kalmthout 2006.

75 E.g. in Lyon (1896), at Columbia University (1899), at Harvard (1904), at Dartmouth College (1908) and at the Sorbonne (1910). Chairs were also established in Switzerland and Italy in the second half of the nineteenth century. See Pichois & Rousseau, *La littérature comparée*, pp. 18-22; Kalff, 'Algemeene en vergelijkende literatuurgeschiedenis', p. 475 calls the Netherlands 'backward' compared to other countries, where professors and *privaatdocenten* (another university post) of comparative literature, West European literature etc. had already been appointed. According to Cooper ('Vergelijkende literatuur en philologie'), the study of comparative literature in America did not amount to much around 1900, though he did highlight some preparatory initiatives. But Van Hamel, 'Vergelijkende literatuurgeschiedenis' had already drawn the attention to the courses taught at the Department of Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York as an example for courses on comparative literary history in the Netherlands.

76 Kalff, *Het onderwijs in de moedertaal*, p. 125.

77 According to a review by Talen, written in 1898, the issue of the doctorate was a quintessentially topical issue.

78 See Spruyt, 'Het algemeen candidaatsexamen' and Speyer & Woltjer, 'De wenschelijkheid van één algemeen doctoraat in de letteren', and for the debate also Baints, *De opleiding der leeraren in de moderne talen* and Schepers, 'Een paar gedachten over het Tweede Philologen Congres te Leiden'.

A flourishing centre of literary studies established at the University of Amsterdam; / Pierson predominating at the centre with the might of his talent and knowledge, with his artistic nature and his lofty ideals; / alongside him, and beneath him, fellow professors and young lecturers, devoted to different aspects of study, teaching the literature of modern peoples, as servants of knowledge, obeying a calling to initiate their students in the academic practice of their beloved subject; / among those representatives of distinct literatures one – why not Pierson himself? – more uniquely talented and equipped to learn about their connections, the mutual influence of one upon the other, attending to chapters of ‘comparative literature’; / the literary centre forging close ties to a circle of historical studies of modern languages – chairs in the Romance, Germanic, Slavonic language groups; / this ‘faculty’ of modern philology and literature taking deep root in university life, though not anxiously shutting off the path to the world outside, educating philologists by the scholarly nature of its methods, whilst also according ‘non-students’ their share of the civilizing influence of its labours.⁷⁹

This was not such a strange fantasy, as Pierson had created a kind of comparative art studies, with lectures on Greek art and literature, mythology, and rhetoric, on French, German, and English literature, as well as Dutch and Italian literature.⁸⁰ But he was no longer around, and the new chair would take some time to materialize.

79 Van Hamel, ‘Wetenschappelijke beoefening der moderne letterkunde, 252-253: ‘Een bloeiend centrum van letterkundige studiën, gevestigd aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam; / Pierson dat centrum beheerschend door de macht van zijn talent en zijn kennis, door zijn artistieke natuur en door de hoogheid van zijn ideaal; / naast hem, en onder hem, ambtgenooten en jonge docenten, zich aan verschillende onderdeelen van die studie wijdend, doceerend de letterkunde der moderne volken, zich voelend dienaren der wetenschap, geroepen om hun leerlingen in te wijden in de wetenschappelijke beoefening van het vak hunner liefde; / onder die vertegenwoordigers der bijzondere literaturen één, – waarom niet Pierson zelf? – meer bijzonder begaafd en toegerust om te leeren hun onderling verband, het wederkeerig inwerken van de eene op de andere, hoofdstukken behandelend uit de “vergelijkende letterkunde”; / de litteraire centrum nauw zich aansluitend aan een kring van historische studiën der moderne talen, – leerstoelen voor de Romaansche, de Germaansche, de Slavische taalgroep; / deze “faculteit” van moderne philologie en letterkunde haar wortelen diep slaande in het universitaire leven, maar toch niet angstvallig afsluitend den weg naar de wereld daarbuiten, philologen vormend door de wetenschappelijkheid van haar methoden, maar ook aan “niet-studenten” hun aandeel gunnend aan den beschavenden invloed van haar arbeid’.

80 Schelling-van der Laan, ‘Kunst als geneesmiddel’. On the other hand, however, Pierson had little interest in tracing influences in literature. See Pierson’s quotations in Kalff, *Taalstudie en literatuurstudie*, pp. 9-10.

This undoubtedly disappointed Classicist and essayist Hendrik Clemens Muller, who around 1900 took on the role of pioneer of comparative literature, repeatedly calling for a special university degree course on the subject.⁸¹ It seems he wished to put himself forward as a candidate for the professorship, with various lectures and papers.⁸² In 1904, for instance, he published his *Lectures on the Science of Literature* discussing comparative literature in general, the 'literature of different tribes and nations', and the 'literature of the different races of mankind', and ending with comparisons between the literature of the (in his view superior) 'Aryan race' and the 'Semitic race'. Just like Kalff, Muller drew his inspiration for these lectures from Posnett, whom he referred to as his 'forerunner'. Of course it is by no means certain whether others regarded 'Dr. H.C. Muller, glowing with passion and with a thirst for books' as suitable professor material.⁸³ In *De Gids*, the authoritative critic Willem Gerard van Nouhuys had at any rate made mincemeat of his book on *Nederlandsche letterkunde*.⁸⁴

Dutch practitioners of comparative literature were therefore still reliant on individual study. A number of bibliographies were available to them.⁸⁵ They described a plethora of publications; in 1904, the second edition of Betz' bibliography listed some six thousand titles. The Dutch publications accounted for only a small proportion, however. As late as 1923, Kalff expressed the view that Dutch libraries were poorly equipped for comparative studies, though the same could be said of those in other countries.⁸⁶ Nor was there any professional association; anyone who wanted to consult their fellow comparatists was able to do so only occasionally at a literary conference. A first, less than heavily attended, Congrès d'Histoire Comparée des Littératures was for example held as part of the Congrès International d'Histoire Comparée during the Paris World's Fair in 1900. Van Hamel, who attended the meetings of literary scholars, would later describe them as follows:

81 See Muller, 'L'étude scientifique' and idem, *Lectures on the Science of Literature*, pp. 10-11, 123 and 138-139. The title of the latter publication, referred to the work of renowned comparatist Max Müller: *Lectures on the Science of Language, delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain*.

82 Besides those already mentioned: Muller, 'Vergelijkende letterkunde', idem, *Nederlandsche letterkunde*, idem, 'Nogmaals: de vergelijkende letterkunde' and idem, *Studiën op het gebied van letterkunde en geschiedenis*.

83 Van Hamel, 'Wetenschappelijke beoefening der moderne letterkunde, p. 126: 'de van ijver en leesdorst gloeiende Dr. H.C. Muller'.

84 Van Nouhuys, 'Driemaandelijksch letterkundig overzicht', pp. 490-500.

85 Betz, *La littérature comparée*; Jellinek, *Bibliographie*.

86 Kalff, *Westeuropesche letterkunde*, vol. I, pp. V-VI.

A picture of the field appeared to us with all its unique traits: the word 'European literature' was uttered and expanded upon; the literature of the Middle Ages was positioned within the field; the Renaissance was identified as the broad, common field where modern literature began and from which it branched off into national literatures; besides the study of major movements, detailed studies were also presented: the study of the influence of a single author, of imitation and of poetic translation; Shakespeare's name was mentioned, he above all, the most; and also those of Petrarch, Voltaire, Lessing, Herder, Goethe; drama also played its part; the lyric was touched upon, and even one particular genre of lyrical poetry, the song of sorrow, the elegy; tribute was also paid to the honourable calling of the study, to its meaning for civilization, particularly for the bringing together of modern cultural nations.⁸⁷

Apart from an occasional conference such as this, researchers had to rely on specialist comparative literature or other journals to exchange new ideas.⁸⁸ The Berlin-based *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Literaturgeschichte* (Journal for comparative literary history) (1886-1910) was for example fairly well known in the Netherlands.⁸⁹ In 1897, an anonymous reviewer bemoaned the fact that the Netherlands did not have such a journal.

87 Van Hamel, 'Wetenschappelijke beoefening der moderne letterkunde, p. 125: 'In al zijn bijzondere trekken is het beeld dier studie daar voor ons opgetreden: het woord "europeesche letterkunde" is er uitgesproken en toegelicht; de litteratuur der middeleeuwen is binnen het gebied dier studie geplaatst; de Renaissance is aangewezen als het groote, gemeenschappelijke gebied waar de moderne letterkunde een aanvang neemt en vanwaar zij zich in nationale letterkonden vertakt; naast de studie der groote stroomingen heeft zich de détail-studie laten zien: de studie van den invloed van één enkelen auteur, van de imitatie en de poëtische vertaling; Shakespeare's naam is genoemd, deze bovenal, deze het meest; maar ook die van Petrarca, van Voltaire, van Lessing, Herder, Goethe; het drama heeft zijn deel gehad; maar ook de lyriek is aangeroerd, en zelfs één bijzonder genre van lyrische poëzie, het lied der smart, de elegie; ook aan de zedelijke roeping dier studie is hulde gebracht, aan haar beteekenis voor de beschaving, met name voor eene onderlinge toenadering van de moderne cultuurvolken'. The conference proceedings were published in the *Annales internationales d'histoire* 1901-1902, 6th Section: 'Histoire comparée des Littératures'.

88 Pichois & Rousseau, *La littérature comparée*, pp. 21-23 discuss various specialist journals from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

89 On this leading *Zeitschrift*: Schulz, 'Max Koch and Germany's First Journals of Comparative Literature'.

Concluding remarks

Shortly after the First World War, in his inaugural lecture, Dutch-studies expert Jacob Prinsen would give some thought to comparative literature. Despite some valuable work, the Netherlands was 'not among the leaders' in the field, he felt.⁹⁰ This would indeed appear to be the case. Of course Dutch comparatists encountered the same difficulties as their fellow comparatists in other countries, not least the expanse and complexity of their field of research. This demanded an exceptional level of erudition and made it impossible to obtain an overall view of the entire field. Secondly, the scientific mission of generalizing and identifying laws not only entailed a certain superficiality, but also a temptation to speculate, and thus to lose sight of the characteristics of individual peoples and literatures.

Furthermore, the professional infrastructure for the practice of comparative literature was still largely absent, more so than in neighbouring countries. The fact that the new discipline managed to get off the ground at all was despite, rather than because of, the academic climate of the time, which was rather bleak. It is a telling fact that the impressive reviews produced by Doorenbos, Van Vloten, and Boele van Hensbroek all came from outside the university world. Limited resources were available because higher education legislation did not provide for comparative literature, and included only the 'history of Dutch literature' among the list of mandatory subjects. Comparative literature therefore remained an auxiliary branch of Dutch studies, where it would eventually break through. If we are to believe Kalff, students of Dutch were happy to abuse the non-mandatory status of this auxiliary subject:

He is free to ignore Classical literature, as well as the literature of other Germanic peoples and West European literature in general. Many make use of this freedom, to the detriment of their own development, later to the detriment of grammar or secondary school education, and ultimately to the detriment of the literary civilization of our people.⁹¹

90 Prinsen, *De geschiedenis der Nederlandsche letterkunde*, p. 22: 'niet mee vooraan'.

91 Kalff, 'Algemeene en vergelijkende literatuurgeschiedenis', pp. 465-466: 'Hij heeft vrijheid om de klassieke literatuur, mitsgaders de letterkunde van andere Germaansche volken en de West-europeesche letterkunde in het algemeen aan zijn laars te lappen. Van die vrijheid maakt menigeeen gebruik, tot schade van zijn eigen ontwikkeling, straks ook van zijn onderwijs aan gymnasium of hogere burgerschool, tot schade eindelijk der letterkundige beschaving van ons volk'.

Some also believed a greater focus on comparative literature at university would be a blessing in the sense that it would to some extent counterbalance the 'specialism frenzy' that increasingly seemed to have the academic world in its grip.⁹²

The constant reviving of nationalism also helped keep the new discipline in the shadow of the history of the national literature.⁹³ Thinking in national terms was taken for granted to such an extent that it also continued to determine the structure of most manuals of comparative literature. It was not until the First World War had tempered nationalist ideas that society became more receptive to supranational ideas. Nevertheless, comparative literature had raised quietly opposing views prior to that time, helping to give Dutch philology a more international bent, and prompting it to become more professional, adopting a positivistic and deterministic methodology.

Prinsen and Kalff were not incidentally discouraged by the limited results achieved by comparative literature studies. After the war, Prinsen was to be dubbed 'the most talented pioneer of such comparative literature studies in the land'.⁹⁴ Kalff began publishing his *Westeuropesche letterkunde* (Western European literature) in 1923, still inspired by Posnett and acting on what he himself had written in 1914: 'A small nation such as ours, whose ancestors were known as the captains of Europe for their expansive merchanting, and which plays an important role in international intellectual life, is appointed for such work'.⁹⁵

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92 See for example Muller, 'L'étude scientifique de la littérature comparée', p. 283, and idem, *Lectures on the Science of Literature*, pp. 14 and 139.

93 See, inter alia, Van Sas, *De metamorfose van Nederland*, pp. 551-566 and 577-591.

94 De Vooy, review of Prinsen, *Handboek*, p. 264: 'hier te lande de meest talentvolle baanbreker van zulke vergelijkende litteratuur-studie'.

95 Kalff, *Inleiding tot de studie der literatuurgeschiedenis*, p. 59: 'Juist een klein volk als het onze, welks voorouders om hun uitgebreiden transito-handel de schippers van Europa heetten en dat nog een belangrijke rol vervult in het internationaal geestelijk verkeer, is voor zulk een werk als aangewezen'.

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