



## Review

### **Jacqueline Bel, *Bloed en rozen: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1900-1945* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2015)**

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Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors' *A New Literary History of America* (Harvard University Press, 2009) is perhaps one of the boldest literary historical projects of the past few decades. It tells the story of American literary history in a large number of essays, sometimes about canonised authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson and Toni Morrison, but also about early songs of the Republic, the San Franciscan earthquake of 1906 and the atomic bomb. What makes this book fascinating is that it does present an overarching thesis, its fragmentary nature notwithstanding: that texts have always been crucial in representing America as a 'made-up', almost mythical place. 'In many ways, the story that comes together in the pieces of this book is that of people taking up the two elemental American fables – the fable of discovery and the fable of founding – and making their own versions: their own versions of the fables, which is to say their own versions of America itself.' (xxiv)

There is no counterpart to this endeavour in recent Dutch literary history. But when it comes to opening up the canon to new voices and texts, Jacqueline Bel's *Bloed en rozen* can indeed compete with Marcus and Sollors' book. Not only does this history of early twentieth-century Dutch literature discuss important writers (Louis Couperus, Cyriel Buysse, Carry van Bruggen, Gerrit Achterberg and countless others), it also mentions the Anglo-Boer War, the 1930s crisis, the emergence of Congolese literature, World War One diaries and the influence of film and jazz. Whereas this results in a fascinatingly broad history of the period, the book unfortunately lacks an overarching narrative. This makes *Bloed en rozen* more of a reference work than a literary history with a convincing thesis about the period 1900-1945.

Writing literary histories seems to have been a necessary evil in recent Dutch literary scholarship. Scholars still deem it crucial to do so, but both literary critics and academic peers have often expressed disappointment about the results. Two objections are typically raised against these books: either they have too much focus (in their theoretical scope or in their choice of material), or they lack focus. I am afraid that this review will take the second direction, although I do want to make clear that *Bloed en rozen* is in some respects a giant leap forward in writing the history of the interwar period.

One of the greatest challenges for scholars working on this period has been to overcome the tradition of influential male writers, such as Albert Verwey, Hendrik Marsman, Paul van Ostaïjen, M. Nijhoff and Menno ter Braak. They were not only among the leading modernist and avant-garde authors of their generation, but they also wrote important essays, they were engaged in the iconic polemics of this period and edited small yet highly influential journals,

such as *De Beweging*, *Forum* and *De Vrije Bladen*. As a rule, their opinions about middlebrow novels, literature by women or colonial literature were disparaging, and their institutional positions of power hastened the quick marginalisation of these works, even when initially they had been highly popular. Whoever wishes to write a more encompassing book about this period needs to steer away from the all too sacrosanct authors and texts and turn to middlebrow literature, to the literature of the Netherlands Indies, Surinam, the Antilles and Congo, and to the mass of politically engaged texts which were forgotten soon after they were produced.

Most recent Dutch literary histories did not succeed in throwing light on these less discussed topics, genres and authors. Popular companions to literature often presented the period as a succession of avant-garde revolutions, which made it very hard to do justice to middlebrow literature. Examples of this method are Ton Anbeek's *Geschiedenis van de literatuur in Nederland, 1885-1985* (1999), Erica van Boven and Mary Kemperink's *Literatuur van de moderne tijd: Nederlandse en Vlaamse letterkunde in de 19<sup>e</sup> en 20<sup>e</sup> eeuw* (2006) and G.J. van Bork and N. Laan's *Van Romantiek tot postmodernisme: Opvattingen over Nederlandse literatuur* (2010). *Nederlandse literatuur, een geschiedenis* (1993), edited by M.H. Schenkeveld-van der Dussen, chose the at that time 'revolutionary' approach of presenting a fragmentary narrative. Sometimes this book is reminiscent of Marcus and Sollors' *New History of America*, with its relatively extensive attention to institutional, historical and political developments, but Schenkeveld-van der Dussen's book is different in its still very canonical text corpus. A similar canonical focus can be discerned in the English-language companion *A Literary History of the Low Countries* (2009, edited by Theo Hermans). Two books approach this period from a cultural historical angle: *Literatuur en moderniteit in Nederland 1840-1990* (1996, Frans Ruiter and Wilbert Smulders) and *Geschiedenis van de moderne Nederlandse literatuur* (2013, Thomas Vaessens). Both books opt for a focus on the concept of 'modernisation'. In Ruiter and Smulders' case, this resulted in a rather original narrative with many lesser-known phenomena taking centre stage – although female and colonial authors were virtually absent. Vaessens' aim was not so much to tell a linear history as to present the argument that period concepts like 'avant-garde' or 'modernism' should be considered as cognitive 'frames'.

Needless to say, all of the titles mentioned above cover a longer period than 1900-1945, so a detailed, broad story of this period has yet to be written. *Bloed en rozen*'s scope is certainly detailed and broad. In no less than 1,141 pages – hundreds of pages more than the other volumes of the series *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur* – Bel mentions virtually all relevant genres and authors of between 1900 and 1945. Some genres are still slightly underrepresented – youth literature, for example – but all in all, this book is impressively comprehensive. Without doubt, even experts of this period will discover new perspectives. For me, the chapters about Flemish naturalist novels, lowbrow detectives around 1900, Congolese literature, the American influence on Dutch-language culture, and Dutch regional novels were eye openers. Bel also takes the time to interpret several canonical novels and volumes of poetry in greater detail, such as Louis Couperus' *De stille kracht*, Karel Van de Woestijne's *Het vaderhuis*, M. Nijhoff's *Nieuwe gedichten* and E. du Perron's *Het land van herkomst*. She always uses the wealth of available sources to undergird her interpretations. As in all volumes of this series, footnotes are absent, but a detailed set of bibliographical notes compensates for this (994-1061).

In her introduction, Bel claims that she does neither settle on one theoretical model, nor on one particular aspect of literary life, but rather on a ‘polyperspectivist’ (‘polyperspectivistisch’, 25) approach: ‘[S]ometimes poetical discussions are central, then novels and poems; at other times institutions are discussed, such as publishers, literary journals or literary critique; then authors, movements, historical contexts or a poetical scandal.’ (‘[N]u eens staan poëtische discussies centraal, dan weer romans en gedichten; soms valt het licht op instituties, zoals de uitgeverij, de letterkundige tijdschriften of de kritiek; een ander moment weer op auteurs, stromingen, de historische context of een poëtische rel’, 25)<sup>1</sup> The question arises whether this approach results in a coherent narrative. The book is divided in only five parts: *fin de siècle* and *belle époque* (1900-1914), First World War (1914-1918), the ‘Roaring Twenties’ (1920-1930), the thirties (1930-1940) and the Second World War (1940-1945). How can all the above-mentioned phenomena be integrated into a chronological structure like this? Bel decided to divide the parts in many chapters (no less than 58), and to divide these chapters in sections – with a chapter encompassing up to 20 sections. These hundreds of sections do indeed present a dazzling range of topics, but it is quite a challenge to keep track of a central narrative.

The title of the book (*Blood and Roses* in English) reveals Bel’s central idea: she wants to show that ‘aestheticism and the pursuit of autonomy are only one side of the story’ (23) of this period. The other side of the coin is what Bel summarises as ‘the “blood”, the conflicts and the engagement’: ‘[D]uring the first part of the twentieth century, new ideologies and social issues kept struggling for a place, both in prose and poetry.’ (‘[D]e hele eerste helft van de twintigste eeuw bevochten nieuwe ideologieën en maatschappelijke kwesties hun plaats in proza en poëzie’, 22.) The combination of roses and blood to characterise this period is a fascinating one, as Bel surely realises: the poppy is *the* international First World War symbol, as the aesthetic visualisation of the blood spilled in the trenches. One could say that the combination of words ‘blood and roses’ may sound paradoxical to us, but this was less so in the interwar period, when the unprecedented violence (during the First and Second World Wars, the colonial wars, the Spanish Civil War, etc.) was witnessed as both a horrific and an aesthetic spectacle. It seems impossible to separate ‘blood’ from ‘roses’, when we realise that many respected writers during the interwar period chose either the communist or the fascist side; that aestheticist writers wrote poems, essays, diaries and newspaper articles about conflicts; and that the violent colonial politics were completely interwoven with European everyday life.

Given the fact that Bel’s is the first literary history to cover nearly every aspect of this period, you would expect that she would make the most of the opportunity to join the strands – but she does not. Quite the reverse: her hundreds of sections compartmentalise history in seemingly ‘autonomous’ parts – even when connections seem obvious. It seems counter-intuitive *not* to relate the mysticism around 1900 (chapter 1.7) to the ‘pillarisation’ of the 1920s and 1930s (3.4); *not* to relate colonial literature (1.12, 4.11) to orientalism (3.5), *not* to contrast New Objectivity (4.6) with regional novels (4.7), or to contrast the Russian influence (2.7), the German influence (3.7) and the American influence (3.8) with each other. Student readers, presumably an important target public, will probably face difficulties in separating main issues from side-issues, and in understanding the leitmotifs of the period. Sometimes several

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Dutch are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

phenomena are actually briefly linked to each other, but it takes an active and patient expert reader to tie all the threads together.

The best two parts of the book in this respect are the ones about the First and the Second World Wars. In the context of total war, it seems hopeless to make a distinction between 'autonomous' and 'engaged' literature. These two parts make it relatively easy to see that the avant-garde movements in Flanders (2.5) and in the Netherlands (2.6) were deeply influenced by the political situation, especially in Flanders, where the pioneering authors (Paul van Ostaïjen, Wies Moens, Gaston Burskens) were also the most controversial political activists. The part about the Second World War is perhaps even more convincing, because Bel meticulously shows how the nazified literary field in occupied Holland was divided into domains (an 'official' national socialist one, a clandestine apolitical one, an illegal activist one, and the secret camp literature of persecuted Jews and other victims of nazism), each with different rules and (im)possibilities. Institutions, politics and literary texts are here discussed together in a fairly natural way.

With *Bloed en rozen*, Jacqueline Bel delivers an impressive performance. She succeeds in wrapping up the results of the decade-long study of the period 1900-1945, arguably the most ardently debated period in the history of Dutch literature, and to include far more phenomena in her story than has traditionally been the case. It is a book to read and reread, and to use for opening up new vistas of this period. But in itself, it does not reward the academic field with daring vistas or provocative theses – which would have made this book as sublime a literary history as *A New Literary History of America*.