

A LOOK BEHIND THE VEIL:  
SOME ASPECTS OF THE PROMOTION OF DUTCH LITERATURE  
ABROAD

Joost de Wit  
Stichting tot bevordering van de vertaling  
van Nederlands letterkundig werk

The foundation for the Promotion of Dutch Literary Works was set up in 1954, 33 years ago. In 1960 Belgian Flanders joined the Dutch enterprise, and since then the Foundation promotes the literature of both the countries that make up what can be called the Dutch language area. The Foundation is located in Amsterdam. The office employs five people including myself, and has a board numbering eight persons who represent writers' unions, P.E.N. centers, publishers' associations and literary academies in both the Netherlands and Belgium. Board meetings are often attended by observers from both Cultural Ministries, who grant subsidies to the Foundation. These observers, however, don't have the right to vote, and so the Foundation retains its status as a completely independent organization. The Foundation's budget is paid entirely by the Ministries of culture of both countries. Recently, there have been talks concerning particular forms of cooperation with the Language Union (Taalunie) as well, an organization formed only a few years ago.

The task and purpose of the Foundation is first and foremost to help literature in Dutch gain popularity beyond the national borders, in whatever ways possible. It stands to reason that the literature should be submitted to foreign publishers and, need I add, published by them -- a process which is happening with greater regularity. All too often people get the idea that this second activity, that is, getting works published, is our *only* activity -- as after all, it is a process that is obvious and easy to measure. We are not an agency for getting books published, but a promotional institute pursuing the task of letting more people know more about our literature; to help, in a broad sense, this literature gain recognition. Of course, there are many ways to do this.

The beginning of this activity was a journal we used to publish with the not too original but plainly understandable title: *Writing in Holland and Flanders*. For the first fifteen years the Foundation published this journal in English and in French, but then lack of funds meant it could be issued only in English. About four years ago, due to an even greater shortage of money, we had to cease publication altogether. Given that unfortunate course of events, it gives me great pleasure to say that, in a meeting with both cultural ministers last month, priority was given to reviving the journal, and this time on a broader scale. This project might now very well be undertaken in collaboration with the above mentioned Language Union. It is our hope that the journal will be able to pay a great deal of attention to particular developments in Dutch literature. This could be done with thematic issues, but one could also discuss certain authors or groups of authors, with excerpts from their work, thereby introducing them to the international public. The new

*Writing in Holland and Flanders* will be mailed free of charge to all who are interested.

In our efforts to increase the readership of our literature, we have on occasion been assisted by cultural attachés, our official representatives abroad. As a matter of fact, this conference is a case in point, and there have naturally been many other examples of cooperation. There are wide differences from country to country, depending directly on the personalities involved. Another important factor is the size of the budget our embassy or consulate has to work with. If I may offer some positive criticism to offset the often-heard negative criticism, these budgets are in fact frequently pathetically low, and you can't get anywhere on good intentions alone. On the other hand, I must admit that we Dutch, and Flemish too, suffer from an awkward situation: culture, which falls under the cultural ministries domestically, has to be handled abroad by the ministries of foreign affairs; moreover, the foreign departments in the cultural ministries and the cultural departments in the foreign ministries are hardly shining exponents of the spirit of cooperation. Each department feels that it is up to the other one to act, and the minimal result obtained is what has led us to voice these critical remarks.

For some time now, we in the Netherlands have had the privilege of a Cultural Ambassador in The Hague. The creation of this post in itself demonstrates considerable initiative, but its budget is so disgracefully low that it is quite miraculous that anything has actually been accomplished.

At present there is a proposal under consideration in the Dutch parliament concerning cultural policy at the international level; there is thus some hope that solutions to various problems may be found, along with additional funds. All in all, funds for cultural activities have always been at the bottom of the shopping list, so we should spend what little we have as carefully and as effectively as we can.

Other ambassadors of our culture, specifically of language and literature, include the many professors of Dutch teaching abroad. We have frequently had occasion to work intensively with them and very successfully, I might add. Naturally, this cooperation differs from position to position, and is determined by whether the instructor is teaching language or literature, how large the language area is, the instructor's own incentive, time and money factors, etc.

In Sweden, for instance, the professor of Dutch happens to be a good translator. She also acts as a kind of clearing house for anything and everything Dutch happening in Stockholm, and has in addition become somewhat of a mother figure for the students, and occasionally for the translators she has guided and trained. The professors in London are also very active as translators, and they publish the noteworthy journal *Dutch Crossing*. The Dutch professor in Munich has become an advisor for both Germany and the Low Countries: we ask his advice on what we should do, and he in turn functions as a reader and go-between

where prestigious publishers like Hanser Verlag and Suhrkamp are concerned. "Our man in Paris" has generated a veritable revival there regarding the translation of Dutch literary works into French, and has succeeded in forming a kind of *comité littéraire*, in conjunction with our embassy, to kindle the interest of French publishers. The lady teaching in Warsaw serves a function similar to the one in Sweden.

Dutch professors in the United States have been active in a variety of ways. The University of California at Berkeley has the Queen Beatrix and the Rubens Chairs, in Georgia a six-volume series on 17th century Dutch literature in translation is being compiled, and the last of the twelve-volume *Library of the Indies*, of which Professor G.M. Beekman is the general editor, will be coming out in Massachusetts soon.

Several American universities also have writer-in-residence programs, which I will discuss later. And I have named only a few of the many examples of support and encouragement in the field of promoting Dutch literature, and there are many more individuals involved with even more activities. Lastly, but certainly not least, I should speak about the translators who are, all in their own ways, contributing to the spread of our literature abroad. The majority are native speakers of their country of residence. There are a number of exceptions to this rule, i.e. Dutch speakers living abroad who make excellent translations into other languages, but they are the exception. Then there is also a small group of translators based in the Netherlands, disadvantaged in that there is little or no contact with the other language areas for which their translations are ultimately intended. This situation leads to a twofold problem. Not only do these translators lose touch with the other language, but in the main they can only be translators, whereas the translators who live abroad can function as promoters as well: it means that they can actively seek local publishers.

I think it may be considered common knowledge what solitary and isolated lives literary translators on the whole have to lead and how dismal their incomes are. It is most encouraging to see that widespread interest in translators as a species, as it were, and their problems is definitely on the rise throughout the world. It is also a good sign that an increasing number of people and organizations are beginning to realize what a crucial role these individuals play, and therefore how necessary it is to grant them a decent living.

The number of congresses and conferences on translation and on the position and situation of the translator is markedly on the increase. To give a couple of examples, The International FIT Congress is being held in Maastricht in the Netherlands at the end of the summer with the intention of devoting a week to this subject, and next year in September the American P.E.N. Center will be organizing a large conference in New York to look into the problems of translators and translation. Moreover, in the Netherlands and Flanders officials are showing definite signs of being prepared to organize bilateral seminars on these issues, to get to know each other better, to speak out about problems, and wherever

possible to find mutually beneficial solutions. Just last month, I helped organize such a seminar with the Swedes, and at the moment I am busy trying to organize one with the Germans and also with the Portuguese.

I mentioned earlier that I would say something more about the artists-in-residence programs through which we are able to send a writer to each of three universities in the U.S. Some twelve or thirteen years ago, when the Dutch writer Esteban Lopez was visiting Minneapolis, Minnesota, he grabbed a chair, sat down and said: "Well, from now on, I'm the writer in residence here, so where's my money?" As you can well understand, this stirred up all the predictable complications, since even though things were easier and better twelve or thirteen years back, the situation wasn't as simple as that. As it turned out, it was primarily through Professor Ray Wakefield's enthusiasm and perseverance that Esteban was not only allowed to stay on in Minneapolis, but also able to do as he had wished: namely to teach Dutch literature alongside their own department member at the University of Minnesota. Then, after a few problems had been ironed out, the Ministry of Culture in The Hague offered financial help, and so our first writer in residence was officially an established fact.

However, after a short time, the relation between the two big bureaucratic machines, the university on the one hand and the Ministry on the other, threatened to fall apart. Fortunately, Professor Wakefield called on us to help, since we are a small non-bureaucratic office, so we began to function as a *postillon d'amour*, a go-between, for the two parties. This coming September, Ms. Marja Browsers, by now our twelfth writer in residence, will be going to Minneapolis. About six years later, the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor also became a candidate by volunteering to provide a similar position. The inevitable negotiations that followed for some years have borne fruit in the end: our sixth writer, Mr. Thomas Roozeboom, is going to teach there this fall. Likewise this autumn Benno Bernard will be going as the third writer in residence to Austin, Texas; last year Cees Nooteboom was a writer in residence for one semester at Berkeley; and there are more possibilities along these lines still up in the air.

The basic idea is that the payment of the author's salary is split fifty-fifty between the particular American university and the Dutch Ministry of Culture (Culture, because the exchange concerns a writer, not generally an academician). The Ministry is also responsible for covering the costs of two tickets and some extra expenses, while the Translation Foundation is responsible for arranging, coordinating and providing necessary materials such as books and translations of an author's work or texts that he or she will need while performing such a function.

The reason there are no Flemish writers involved in this project is simply that the officials in Flanders, despite repeated attempts on our part, have declared that they don't find the U.S. to be a country deserving top priority, and therefore they haven't wanted to participate or

contribute; and of course, as the old story goes, where funds are lacking productivity comes to a standstill.

It goes without saying that we are extremely pleased with the developments regarding the writer-in-residence programs. These programs are increasingly becoming an institution, recognized and appreciated both at home and abroad. They have wide repercussions and lead to writers' works being translated and consequently to a growing interest in our literature. It is therefore apropos to say a few words of praise on behalf of our Ministry of Culture as well as the American universities in question.

A pleasant side-effect of these visits abroad has been that mutual understanding has grown immensely. The authors frequently come back with a radically altered image of the American way of life, which will again be found in their books and publications. Similarly, there is greater insight into Dutch life at the other end, and the notion that our country consists of nothing but tulips and wooden shoes, or worse, heroin addicts and blue filmmakers, is dissipating.

In the end, needless to say, the issue here is Dutch literature, and it won't come as a surprise to you that this is no simple issue. Which books should, and most importantly, *can* be translated (I'm referring here to content)? Which books are appropriate for which countries, and who is going to determine that?

This last point, who's going to decide what goes where, is the easiest to answer, namely: the target country, the local publisher decides. He is, after all, the best qualified to determine the market. The whole of Dutch literature cannot be offered to the whole world, and so a preselection process is gone through first. This preselection is primarily based on the quality of the book under consideration, something that the Foundation can vouch for because it ultimately represents all the important literary organizations and organs of literary criticism in both the Netherlands and Flanders.

The staff members at the Foundation have been working there for between 10 and 30 years, so by now they know the market they are aiming for pretty well. Combined with advice and opinions from Dutch teachers at foreign universities as well as from translators living abroad, this makes for a pleasant norm regarding what should and should not be offered, and in which country.

In the beginning, that is, in the fifties, this was all still very laborious. There wasn't any money, there weren't any translations, we had no knowledge of the market. Nobody had ever heard of the Foundation. At present there is a large stock of translations in book form as well as in manuscript form. The market is known, and so is the Foundation.

Over the years the Foundation has started to be a part of the international circuit, where "everybody knows everybody". The big difference now, however, is that the competition has increased considerably. Many other countries, following the example set by our Foundation, have established their own institutes, and unfortunately the number of publishers in the world publishing literature of quality in translation is not as large as one might think.

In general publishers are of the opinion that Dutch literature is not lacking in quality. The problems usually lie elsewhere. Flemish literature is clearly influenced by the culture south of the border, Dutch literature more by the Anglo-Saxon culture. Flemish literature often puts more stock in language, Dutch literature more in content (there are exceptions in both literatures, of course.) The Dutch so often let their narratives take place in other countries that little of what is typically Dutch remains. Dutch books are often pretty gloomy and thin. There are other problems as well.

Professor Ton Anbeek from Leiden, back from a year's stay at a Californian university, wrote an article a few years ago for a Dutch journal called *De Gids* (The Guide) about the lack of "street-life" or "street-noise" in our literature. He compared a couple of American literary bestsellers with a couple of Dutch literary bestsellers and showed why, according to him, the Dutch works could never become bestsellers in the U.S.. He stressed the differences in the manner of writing, the subject matter, etc. and hardly mentioned quality, which he considered to be self-evident. In spite of this, his article stirred up a considerable ruckus, for hadn't he claimed that none of us in the old country could write, and moreover, the question that immediately came to mind in response was "but why do we have to write just like the Americans do?" Naturally this isn't the issue. If this were the case, we'd have to turn around and write just like the Germans or the Poles, the Greeks or the Canadians. I think Anbeek only meant that there is little of our daily preoccupations reflected in our books, and that this is one less reason why a foreigner would read a Dutch book instead of a Scandinavian or a Spanish one. We talk about the same things that many other writers do, such as the constant struggle with existence, the eternal triangle, the relationship between children and parents, and the like. An awful lot of internationally acclaimed authors have already published a good many books on these topics.

Nevertheless, throughout the world between 50 and 80 literary books from our language area get translated every year. Once again, it is very obvious from this statistic which topics arouse interest worldwide (and this, apart from the *quality* of particular texts, poetry, children's books, etc.).

It cannot be a coincidence that a book like *Rituals* by Cees Nooteboom gets translated much more than his other works. This is undoubtedly due to its evident "un-Dutch" style and setting and its philosophical tone. This has also been the case with J. Bernlef's *Phantoms*

*of the Mind* with the syndrome of senility and all the problems of growing old as primary preoccupations. It has been especially true of Eddy Hillesum's *Diaries*, Hugo Claus' masterpiece *Belgium's Sorrows* and Harry Mulisch's *The Assault*. Evidently, the Second World War and the process of coming to terms with it still remain the number one hits when the literature of the Low Countries is mentioned.

The universal human themes are the ones that succeeded in previous years as well, with successes like *Turkish Delight* by Jan Wolkers (concentrating on eroticism, plus the tragedy of a brain tumour), *Day at the Beach* by Heere Heeresma (on alcoholism) and even earlier Streuvels' and Timmermans' books about living off the land and being in the great outdoors. This same rule of thumb applies to Dutch children's books in particular, which do very well abroad, concerned as they are with topics like "daddy's got a friend", how Dutch children get along with children of ethnic minority groups, drugs, sex and so forth.

Aside from the fact that all of this attention is, naturally, a good sign, it is our task to let the outside world know that lots of other good literature has been and is being written in the Low Countries. Consequently, it was very satisfying to find out during the same meeting with the Ministers that I mentioned earlier, that this is being realized by the governmental authorities in both Flanders and the Netherlands. It looks as if the Foundation will have more means at its disposal in the future, so that it can do even better than in the past years what it was meant to do: namely, offer support to others who in turn help the Foundation.

Before concluding this talk, I would briefly like to mention a few things concerning Canada, which is where we are gathered, after all.

We were very happy to have a visit some months ago from a trade mission of Canadian publishers, who were interested in strengthening the ties between our two countries. There was also a symposium on Flemish and Canadian literature in Flanders. Canada is an enormous country with enormous possibilities. From the Dutch language quarter we haven't done as much as we would like to, but it wasn't possible before because Canada wasn't really prepared. But now Canadian publishers have given us the green light, and we should follow through on this. More Dutch, and that means Dutch *and* Flemish, culture should be exported to Canada, and vice versa. We are now in the middle of a demonstration of mutual exchange organized by various official organizations, but we ourselves should do more. There should be more translating going on on both sides and the position of Dutch language and literature in Canada should be enhanced. I am therefore personally making a case for this to happen, and for the official organizations on both sides of the Atlantic to give this their special attention. It's well worth it.

Such a mutual broadening of cultural contacts on the literary level should, of course, be done with the cooperation of CAANS, the organization which has already been extremely active in the past, and to

which all of us give our fullest support; it is the organization that set up this conference, and to which we are all very grateful.

Thank you.

Translated by Wanda Boeke.