

Language, Literature and the Construction of a Dutch National Identity (1780-1830)

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12 The Founding Father of Dutch Literary History

Jeronimo de Vries

Lotte Jensen

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Abstract

Jeronimo de Vries (1776-1853) was the first to publish a complete overview of Dutch literary history, entitled *Assay at a history of Dutch poetry* (*Proeve eener geschiedenis der Nederduitsche dichtkunde*, first published in 1808-1809). This chapter opens up new vistas by placing this single work in a broader context in two respects. First, de Vries's literary history is considered as a telling example of the rise of Dutch cultural nationalism, which was partly a reaction to Napoleonic rule in Europe. This automatically brings politics in as a constitutive component of his main work as well, an aspect that is usually overlooked. Second, de Vries's other contributions to the field of literary history are also taken into account in order to reach a more complete view regarding his contribution to Dutch cultural nationalism.

Keywords: Jeronimo de Vries, cultural nationalism, Dutch literary history, literary criticism, scholarly editing

1 Introduction

One of the most influential literary historians of the Netherlands is Jeronimo de Vries (1777-1853). This clerk, who lived and worked his entire life in Amsterdam, was the first to publish a complete overview of Dutch literary history, starting in the thirteenth century and ending around 1800. In this book, entitled *Assay at a History of Dutch Poetry* ('Proeve eener geschiedenis

der Nederduitsche dichtkunde', first published in 1808-1809), Dutch literature is portrayed as reaching its peak in the seventeenth century, while the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century are considered as inferior eras in literary history. This view prevailed for a long time in schools and handbooks on Dutch literature until it became seriously contested in the 1980s by mediaevalists and dix-huitèmistes. The remnants of this 'standard discourse' are, nevertheless, still visible today.¹

Jeronimo de Vries is hardly ever mentioned in Dutch literary histories because he did not produce any literary work of his own of real significance.² However, in studies about the professionalization of Dutch language and literature as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century his pioneering role is widely acknowledged.³ Although de Vries was inspired by the works of many others, especially Hendrik van Wijn, Pieter Huisinga Bakker, Bernardus Bosch and Matthijs Siegenbeek, he was the first to present an integral and coherent vision of Dutch literary history.⁴ In 1989 he was therefore aptly given the title of 'founding father of Dutch literary history' by Willem van den Berg.⁵

Studies about the rise of Dutch as an academic discipline tend to focus solely on his *Proeve eener geschiedenis der Nederduitsche dichtkunde* and mainly deal with the poetical and rhetorical aspects of this work.⁶ Scholars like Evert Wiskerke, Jan Oosterholt and Francien Petiet have convincingly shown that de Vries's conceptualization of Dutch literary history was significantly influenced by contemporary ideas about the 'true poet', authenticity and national taste. This chapter opens up new vistas by placing this single work in a broader context in two respects. First, de Vries's literary history is considered as a telling example of the rise of Dutch cultural nationalism, which was partly a reaction to Napoleonic rule in Europe. This automatically brings politics in as a constitutive component of his main work as well, an

1 See on this standard discourse: Johannes, 2002. On the implementation in nineteenth-century schoolbooks and anthologies: Johannes, 2007. On the persistence of this image: Jensen, 2012.

2 His name for instance appears only twice in the most recent literary history of the Netherlands by van den Berg and Couttenier, 2009, pp. 72, 192. Some occasional poetry from his hand is listed in ter Haar, 1853, p. 31.

3 See van den Berg, 1989; Schenkeveld-van der Dussen, 1990, pp. 17-19; Wiskerke, 1995, pp. 223-260; Laan, 1997, pp. 44-45; van den Berg, 2010, pp. 17-21; Vis, [2004], pp. 16-18; Petiet, 2011, pp. 109-144; Mathijssen, 2013, pp. 194-199.

4 For van Wijn, see van Kalmthout, this volume. For Matthijs Siegenbeek, see Rutten, this volume.

5 Van den Berg, 1989.

6 See especially Wiskerke, 1995, pp. 223-260; Petiet, 2011, pp. 109-144; Oosterholt, 1998, 48-64.

aspect that is usually overlooked. Second, de Vries's other contributions to the field of literary history are also taken into account in order to reach a more complete view regarding his contribution to Dutch cultural nationalism. His *Proeve eener geschiedenis der Nederduitsche dichtkunde* was just one out of many publications that paved the way for the academic study of Dutch language and literature.

2 Life and Work of De Vries

Jeronimo de Vries was born in 1776 in Amsterdam into a family that belonged to the Mennonite sect.⁷ He was named after his uncle, the well-known Latin poet Jeronimo de Bosch, and raised in the same spirit. The classics played a very important role in his education: at the age of ten he began private lessons in Latin from the headmaster of the Latin school, Richeus van Ommeren. In 1792 he graduated with an oration in Latin verses, entitled *L. Icillii oratio coram Appio Decemviro habita versibus elegiacis expressa*. He continued his studies at the Athenaeum Illustre but left this institute in 1794 when he was appointed as first clerk of the municipality of Amsterdam. He owed this esteemed position to Jeronimo de Bosch. De Vries pursued his career within the municipality, where he worked the rest of his life – a total time of 57 years without any interruptions. His position was threatened only once, in 1798, when political regime changes led to a purging of the staff. De Vries, however, survived the purge and was allowed to keep his position, probably due to the fact that he had the tendency to adopt a neutral position in political affairs.⁸

De Vries nonetheless had many contacts with people who were quite outspoken in their political views. He was a regular contributor to the rather provocative and satirical periodical *De Arke Noach's* (1799), which brought him into contact with such Patriots as D.J. van Lennep, A.R. Falck, R.H. Arntzenius and C. Loots. All of their articles were written under pseudonyms in order to evade censors and critics.⁹ Some years later, de Vries became close friends with the well-known poet Willem Bilderdijk, a fierce adherent of Orangism. Their correspondence started in 1805, when Bilderdijk lived in exile in Germany. De Vries had written an extensive

7 An extensive life account is given by ter Haar, 1853.

8 In 1814 he was officially given the title of Clerk and Head of the Secretary ('Griffier en Chef van 't Secretariaat'). Ter Haar, 1853, p. 6.

9 De Vries wrote under the pseudonym of Eerman ('honorable man'). For a list of his contributions to *De Arke Noach's*, see ter Haar, 1853, p. 31.

review of Bilderdijk's *Mengelingen* (1804), and Bilderdijk felt the need to respond to it.¹⁰ It was the beginning of a lifelong and intimate friendship: Bilderdijk shared many personal details with de Vries and considered him as his 'only true friend'.¹¹ In 1817, their friendship came under severe pressure due to a financial disagreement, but de Vries decided to set aside his feelings of disappointment and restored their contact.¹² This incident, and the fact that de Vries's large circle of correspondents contained both Patriots and Orangists, again illustrates his conciliatory attitude: he was mainly driven by intellectual and literary ideals rather than ideological motives. The mere fact that he managed to maintain such a lifelong friendship with a troublemaker like Bilderdijk is a case in point.

The writings of de Vries can be divided into four different categories: literary history, editions, reviews and treatises. His main work, *Proeve eener geschiedenis der Nederduitsche dichtkunde*, falls into the first category. It was written in response to a prize contest, organised by the Batavian Society for Language and Poetry ('Bataafsche Maatschappij voor Taal- en Dichtkunde') in 1802. In 1805 de Vries, who was the only contestant, was awarded a gold medal. The work appeared in print for the first time in the proceedings of the Batavian Society in 1808-1809, followed by a separate edition in 1810. This volume carried the title by which the work is still known today: *Proeve eener geschiedenis der Nederduitsche dichtkunde*. A second, revised edition appeared in 1835.¹³ It is remarkable that de Vries wrote his most important and influential work at a relatively young age and that his views did not change much during his life. In 1838 he published a *Treatise on the National Character of Dutch Poetry* ('Verhandeling over het nationale in onze dichtkunst'), which presented the same ideas in a nutshell.¹⁴

10 [J. de Vries], 'Mengelingen door Mr. W. Bilderdijk [...]', *Vaderlandsche letteroefeningen*, 1805, pp. 91-95, 271-277. Bilderdijk's response was published in Bilderdijk, 1837, pp. 1-24.

11 On the friendship between de Vries and Bilderdijk, see Honings & van Zonneveld, 2013, pp. 200-202, 475.

12 Bilderdijk's other best friend was Johan Valckenaer. See Honings & van Zonneveld, 2013, pp. 337-338, 475.

13 De Vries, 1808-1809, de Vries, 1810 and de Vries, 1835. The second edition contains a new foreword by de Vries. The Library of the Radboud University in Nijmegen is in possession of a copy with another title page, which reads *Nederlandsche dichters*. The contents are exactly the same as in the editions of 1808-1809 and 1810. At the time of the publication of the first volume in 1808, a critic in *Vaderlandsche letteroefeningen* strongly recommended the publication of the entire work in a separate edition under the name which de Vries had used in some presentation copies for his friends: *Proeve eener geschiedenis der Nederduitsche dichtkunde*. See *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* (1809), 118.

14 De Vries, 1839. This essay was presented in four different societies in 1838 and also published in *Vaderlandsche letteroefeningen* (1839), 625-645.

As an editor de Vries concentrated on seventeenth and eighteenth-century Dutch authors. His editions varied in length and form, as did his own input. His work about the seventeenth-century poet Jeremias de Decker, for example, took the form of a biography, interrupted by large fragments of the poet's work, while de Vries's edition of the eighteenth-century poets Willem and Onno Zwier van Haren was based upon thorough philological research. In most cases, it was the publisher who took the initiative and asked de Vries for assistance; in one case it was de Vries's eldest son who encouraged him to undertake the work.¹⁵

The third category, reviews, shows a strong preference for classical literature. De Vries often emphasised the importance of a strong classical education in general because it stimulated the 'true sense of beauty' and virtuous behaviour.¹⁶ In the periodical *Vaderlandsche letteroefeningen* he commented upon classical and neolatin editions of work by Homer, Plato, Ovid, Cicero, and many others.¹⁷ He also wrote reviews on neolatin works, for instance on *Poemata* (1803) by his uncle Jeronimo de Bosch.¹⁸ In addition, de Vries published an impressive number of critiques about contemporary Dutch authors, such as Bilderdijk, Hendrik Tollens, Jacob van Lennep, Nicolaas Beets and A.B. van Meerten-Schilperoort.¹⁹ In accordance with his poetical views he warned against subservient imitation of French authors and praised authenticity, purity, and works that expressed a typically Dutch character.

A final group of publications consists of treatises and articles about various topics. It includes essays on simplicity ('Over het eenvoudige', 1818), on the lack of respect towards the audience by public authors and speakers ('Over het gebrek aan gematigdheid en achting jegens het publiek van openbare schrijvers en sprekers', 1836), and on the national character of Dutch poetry ('Verhandeling over het nationale in onze dichtkunst', 1838). He also wrote an essay about the seventeenth-century poet Jan Six van Chandelier, whose poetry he considered to be 'brave and natural'.²⁰ De Vries wrote many necrologies for the *Amsterdamsche Courant* on professors and poets, for example J.M. Kemper, R. Feith, W. Bilderdijk, C.W. Westerbaen,

15 Namely with the edition of Hugo de Groot's *Proof of true religion* (*Bewijs van de ware godsdienst*). See de Groot, 1844.

16 De Vries 1804, p. 483.

17 For an inventory, see ter Haar, 1853, p. 33.

18 De Vries, 1804.

19 For an inventory, see ter Haar, 1853, p. 35.

20 'stout en natuurlijk', see: de Vries, 1810, vol.1, p. 191. See furthermore de Vries, c. 1822.

A.R. Falck, and S.I. Wiselius.²¹ By doing this he not only paid tribute to contemporary poets and writers, but he also brought their achievements to the attention of a broader audience.

De Vries wrote few primary works of literature himself. One notable example was a poem about his domestic life, 'Huisselijk leven' from 1807, which was published in *Vaderlandsche letteroefeningen*.²² It was written on the occasion of the birthday of his wife, Maria Gysberta Verhoeven, with whom he had three sons and four daughters. In this poem de Vries contrasted the brutality of the outer world with the pleasures of domestic life. He expressed his deepest love for his wife and their children, exclaiming that he was not able to live without her. It is one of the few instances that we encounter de Vries as a poet. The poem was censored before it was published because some of the verses could be interpreted as a critique on the French regime.²³ This poem fits in with a broader tendency: during these years many poets expressed their feelings of fear, anger and resistance against Napoleonic rule by writing domestic poetry.²⁴ Strong anti-French sentiments can also be found in *Proeve eener geschiedenis der Nederduitsche dichtkunde*, as will be discussed later.

De Vries's literary activities also included societal memberships. He was a member of at least twenty different societies spread throughout the Netherlands. He, for instance, held the position of honorary member of the Provincial Society of Utrecht ('Provinciaal Utrechts Genootschap'), the Society of Sciences of the province of Zeeland ('Zeeuwsch Genootschap van Wetenschappen') and the northern society Pro Excolendo Jure Patrio (Groningen).²⁵ He was also appointed as a member of several Belgian societies, located in Brussels, Bruges and Antwerp. Two of his memberships stand out: in 1807 he became a member of the Society of Dutch Language and Literature ('Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde') and in 1808 of the Second Class of the Royal Institute of Society of Sciences, Literature and the Arts ('Tweede Klasse van het Koninklijk Instituut van Wetenschappen, Letterkunde en Schoone Kunsten'). In the latter he played a very active role in compiling all sorts of reports related to philological activities.²⁶ One of the projects carried out by the Second Class was the compilation of a glossary of outdated words; each member contributed by making an

21 Ter Haar, 1853, p. 35.

22 The poem is dated 19 Feb. 1807 and appeared in *Vaderlandsche letteroefeningen* (1807), 87-88.

23 De Vries had to change two verses before it could be published, see ter Haar, 1853, pp. 8, 31.

24 Jensen, 2013, pp. 53-86.

25 Ter Haar, 1853, p. 38.

26 See van den Berg, 1999.

inventory, using the work of a single author: de Vries's task was to deal with the work of the Dutch humanist Dirk Volkertszoon Coornhert.²⁷

De Vries was recognised for his many publications and activities on several occasions. In 1811 he was awarded a doctoral degree *honoris causa* by the college of the province of Gelderland ('Geldersche Hogeschool'). In 1829 he was appointed Knight of the Order of the Dutch Lion by King Willem I, while the Royal Academy of the Fine Arts honoured him twice with a silver commemorative coin.²⁸ At the municipality his 25th, 40th and 50th anniversaries were officially celebrated; poets added lustre to these occasions by composing special odes and songs. The Belgian writer Jan Frans Willems, for instance, celebrated de Vries with a song set to the music of the national anthem. Willems lauded de Vries's unconditional dedication to the city and the fatherland.²⁹

In 1851 de Vries retired. After a short period of severe illness, he died on 1 June 1853, at the age of 77. He died on the same day as his beloved uncle, Jeronimo de Bosch, a fact which his biographer, the clergyman and poet Berard ter Haar, explicitly mentioned.³⁰ De Vries was buried in the graveyard near Diemerbrug and reunited with his wife, who had died almost twenty years earlier. According to his biographer, he could be characterised as a loving Christian, who was averse to radical thought and deeply aware of the limitations of human knowledge.³¹

3 De Vries as a Literary Historian

With his many publications on poets and poetics de Vries played a pioneering role in the construction of a Dutch literary past.³² His activities do not stand alone but are part of a broader European trend: between 1780 and 1840 Europe saw an increased interest in philology, history writing and

27 Van den Berg, 1999, p. 157. Also see: W. Bilderdijk, J. Kantelaar, J. de Vries, *Verslag van de Kommissie der Tweede Klasse des Nederlandschen Instituuts van Wetenschappen, Letteren en Kunsten, betreffende het voorstel [...] tot een glossarium van verouderde woorden* (Amsterdam: Pieper en Ipenbuur, 1816).

28 Ter Haar, 1853, p. 26.

29 Willems, 1844.

30 Ter Haar, 1853, p. 29.

31 'Ik leerde hem hoogschatten en beminnen als den liefderijk denkenden en oordeelenden mensch en Christen, die wars van partijzucht en diep doordrongen van het "wij kennen te deele"', Ter Haar, 1853, p. 27.

32 'The construction of a Dutch literary past' was the main topic of a large-scale research project, headed by Marita Mathijssen. A synthesis of the result can be found in Mathijssen, 2013.

historical literature. Everywhere, authors and intellectuals engaged with their nation's past and started searching for their national roots in archives and libraries. According to Joep Leerssen, their activities reached a 'tipping point' around 1800.³³ He aptly calls this process 'literary historicism', which points to the 'presence of the literary preoccupation with culture's rootedness in the national past'.³⁴ It was sped up by the French Revolution, which produced new attitudes towards the past. The Napoleonic regime added something extra: the search for the nation's cultural roots now became part of the political agenda of intellectuals as well. By showing their nation's particular culture, they also resisted the French regime.³⁵

De Vries's main work, *Proeve eener geschiedenis der Nederduitsche dichtkunde*, should be read against this background. On the one hand, it was a clear example of 'literary historicism': the book was born out of a genuine interest in the nation's past and filled a void in the knowledge about the nation's literary past. On the other hand, it was also influenced by the current political climate: the dominance of the French led to a heightened awareness of what was typically Dutch. Around 1800, nearly all publications on Dutch grammar, literature and rhetoric carried an anti-French undertone, which was reflected in the great attention to linguistic purity.³⁶

Proeve eener geschiedenis der Nederduitsche dichtkunde was written in response to the following question: 'What advancement and what deterioration has Dutch poetry undergone during the eighteenth century, in comparison with earlier periods?'³⁷ In his answer de Vries argued that this question demanded an extensive overview of the developments that took place before the eighteenth century in order to make a satisfactory comparison. As a consequence of this thorough approach he ended up writing the first complete historical overview of Dutch poetry.

De Vries's answer was divided into three parts, corresponding to three successive periods: the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, the seventeenth century, and the eighteenth century. This tripartite structure symbolised the birth, maturity and decline of Dutch poetry, which reinforced the idea that the seventeenth century, more particular the first half of this century, should be seen as the summit of the nation's literary history. The underlying assumption was that poetical genius could flourish only during a fixed

33 Leerssen, 2010, p. xvi.

34 Leerssen, 2004, p. 239.

35 Leerssen, 2008, pp. 114-126; the Dutch case: Jensen, 2012 and Jensen, 2013.

36 See for instance Siegenbeek, 1806; Siegenbeek, 1810; Ypey, 1812.

37 De Vries, 1810, vol. 1, p. i: 'Welke zijn de vorderingen, welke is de verachtering der Nederduitsche dichtkunde, gedurende de achttiende eeuw, in vergelijking van vroegere tijdperken?'

period in a nation, when it had reached a certain degree of civilization but had not yet maximised its state of welfare. This view was taken from the Dutch scholar and poet Pieter Nieuwland (1764-1794), who emphasised the role of 'ingenium' or talent in producing arts and the influence of social and political circumstances on poets.³⁸ Following this societal scheme of rise and decline, de Vries argued that the Dutch Republic had reached its socio-economic and cultural zenith around 1650 and that this period was followed by an era of decline.

De Vries situated the dawn of Dutch poetry in the thirteenth century and named Jacob van Maerlant as the 'father of old Dutch poetry'.³⁹ This poet from Flanders occupied a special position because he did not belong to the clergy but was an ordinary layman. The historical stories set to rhyme by Melis Stoke were worth mentioning as well although his verses were not very fluent. However, their works were much better than those of the fourteenth century, when the intrusion of French words into Dutch writing began. Also society was heavily divided into rivalling parties, which made it virtually impossible for a fertile climate for poets to develop. A telling example was the translation of a fragment of Boethius into Dutch by an anonymous poet. De Vries did nothing to hide his disgust: 'This poet probably lived close to the French borders: who does not loathe this barbarian language?'⁴⁰

In the sixteenth century literature developed in a positive direction due to the political changes and religious improvements which the Reformation brought about.⁴¹ A clear gap between the Flemish and Dutch poets became visible. Whereas the language rapidly degenerated in the southern provinces, the Dutch humanist Dirk Volkertszoon Coornhert played a decisive role in freeing the Dutch language from its Flemish adornment. With him a period of civilization and enlightenment set in, as becomes apparent from the works of Marnix van St. Aldegonde, Roemer Visscher and Hendrik Spiegel as well. This positive development continued in the seventeenth century, when Dutch poetry reached its zenith with first-class poets like Pieter Corneliszoon Hooft, Jacob Cats, and Joost van den Vondel. They were surrounded by many other authors, whose poems were full of bravery ('stoutheid') and written in pure Dutch language. The works of

38 De Vries submitted his entry to the competition anonymously, using a motto by Nieuwland. This was taken from one of Nieuwland's lectures, which were collected by de Vries and published in 1824. See Nieuwland, 1824, p. 172.

39 'Vader der oude Dichtkunde', see de Vries, 1810, vol. 1, p. 3.

40 De Vries, 1810, vol. 1, p. 25.

41 De Vries, however, is less positive about the role the chambers of rhetorics played in these developments. See van Kalmthout, 1999, pp. 182-183.

Jeremias de Decker, for instance, were of outstanding quality, as he knew how to vary his expression in tone and sphere, depending on the topic he was writing about.

In the second half of the seventeenth century the quality of the poetry gradually deteriorated because of the growing influence of French authors and implementation of strict poetical rules by societies. Solid classical training lost its influence, with a disastrous effect: 'Almost all bravery, eminence and originality were bruised and crippled'.⁴² Despite this negative development, which only increased during the eighteenth century, de Vries noted some exceptions to this trend. Three poets stood out, namely Hubert Korneliszoon Poot, Willem van Haren, and Onno Zwier van Haren. Those poets were still influenced by the ancient poets and produced powerful and brave poetry. After 1775 literature seemed to be shifting in a positive direction again, but, according to de Vries, the overall conclusion could only be that eighteenth-century poetry should be considered a falling-off compared with the earlier periods. A second Joost van den Vondel had not made his appearance yet.⁴³

De Vries's method and approach can be characterised as scholarly, contextual and evaluative. The scholarly approach is visible in the many references he included to old and new bibliographical, historical and literary works. He was very accurate in informing the readers where he had extracted his information. Speaking of the seventeenth-century Dutch poet Pieter Corneliszoon Hooft, he, for instance, quoted positive characterizations of contemporary authors like Joost van den Vondel, Johan de Brune de Jonge and Geraerdt Brandt. He also quoted eighteenth-century comments by Willem Kops and Pieter Huisinga to underline his positive evaluation of Hooft. As members of the Society of Dutch Language and Literature, they had both published historical treatises on Dutch poetry and poetics. De Vries made extensive use of their works, especially the one by Huisinga Bakker that dated from 1781.⁴⁴

The most important source, however, were the lectures given by Matthijs Siegenbeek, professor of Dutch in Leiden, which de Vries had attended. These lectures were available only in manuscript and mentioned only incidentally in the introduction.⁴⁵ However, without these lectures, de Vries

42 'Bijna alle stoutheid, verhevenheid, hoogdravendheid en oorspronkelijkheid werd gekneusd en misvormd'. De Vries, 1810, vol. 2, p. 11.

43 De Vries, 1810, vol. 2, p. 361. De Vries's view on the eighteenth century is extensively discussed in van den Berg, 1994, p. 171-174.

44 Huisinga Bakker, 1781.

45 De Vries, 1810, vol. 1, p. viii.

admitted in the second edition, his work could never have been written.⁴⁶ Another important source was Hendrik van Wijn's manuscript on Dutch poetry before the sixteenth century, entitled *Historische en letterkundige avondstonden* (1800). De Vries's choice of poets and his very negative judgement of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were entirely based upon van Wijn. De Vries considered him the father of old Dutch literature, as becomes clear from a letter he sent to him when he offered him a copy of the book.⁴⁷ Their correspondence also reveals the interrelatedness of poetics and politics. Van Wijn was especially pleased to receive a work about the history of Dutch poetry in times of severe adversity and troubles: no nation had experienced such hard times as theirs had, but God had guided the Dutch people through again and again. He ended his letter with a poetical thought: 'the night still showed stars'.⁴⁸

The contextual approach is apparent from de Vries's great attention to societal and political influences upon the state of the arts. Every part opens with a description of the contemporary state of society and its impact on Dutch cultural life. One of the reasons that poetry could not flourish during the fourteenth century was the ongoing rivalry between internal factions, while the blossoming of the poetry in the Dutch Golden Age was possible only due to a general spirit of empowerment that was visible in the maritime exploits and trade and military bravery as well. As for the seventeenth century, de Vries adopted a conciliatory attitude: he praised the many victories of the stadtholders, while, at the same time giving full credit to statesmen such as Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, Hugo de Groot, and Johan de Witt.⁴⁹ Paradoxically enough, the internal political turmoil did not cause a cultural setback, unlike the case in the fourteenth century.

During the eighteenth century things rapidly declined: the relatively long-lasting peace that followed the signing of the Peace of Utrecht (1713) and the exceptional prosperity proved far from beneficial to literary life.

46 The manuscript of these lessons, which appeared in print in 1826, are kept in the library of the University of Leiden and are usually referred to as *Lessen over de geschiedenis der Nederduitsche taal, dichtkunde en welsprekendheid, 1800, 1801 & 1802* (hs Ltk 135). De Vries paid his gratitude to Siegenbeek in the second edition of *Proeve* (de Vries 1835, vi). On the sources which de Vries used, see Wiskerke, 1995, pp. 234-237; Vis, [2004], pp. 16-18; Petiet, 2011, pp. 113-116; Mathijssen, 2013, pp. 196-199.

47 Letter of Jeronimo de Vries to Hendrik van Wijn, 28 February 1811 and the response by Hendrik van Wijn, dated 4 March 1811 (Royal Library The Hague, 74 B 4-5 and 121 B 9).

48 'Gene Natie, gij weet het worstelde meer met moeilijkheden en tegenspoeden dan de onze en God bragt ons er eindelijk gelukkig door...En!....de nagt heeft sterren'. Letter by Hendrik van Wijn to Jeronimo de Vries, 4 March 1811 (Royal Library The Hague, 121 B9).

49 De Vries, 1810, vol. 1, p. 80.

The unstable situation and many internal revolts around 1748 did not relieve this situation but created an environment where ‘false taste and outwardly splendour’ took over.⁵⁰ A new period of bloom could be realised only if the vitality and spirit of the seventeenth century would return: ‘If one wishes to raise one’s nation, save it from slavery, and make it respectful to the most distant people, one should keep the soul active, with an extraordinary power’.⁵¹ This phrase can, against the background of French dominance during these years, also be read as a critical political statement.⁵²

The evaluative approach is apparent on nearly every page: the biographical information about the poets and the extracts from their works are larded with positive or negative adjectives, and the reader is highly encouraged to agree with de Vries’s opinion. Rhetorical questions and exclamation marks are abundantly used by de Vries to reinforce his statements: ‘What paintbrush was as powerful as that of Rembrandt? [...] O happy seventeenth century! [...] How many highly esteemed men there were, who played the Dutch lyre with fame, and by their example, esteem and friendship encouraged others to write lyrics!’⁵³ In de Vries’s evaluation of the poets two criteria played a decisive role: the purity of the language and the classics as a role model. As for the linguistic issue: influence of French was rejected altogether and seen as the main pollutant of the Dutch language. The Dutch language functioned as a ‘programmatic issue’ in the formation of a Dutch cultural identity: it was the main asset which brought cohesion to this collection of literature.⁵⁴ This anti-French sentiment was reinforced by de Vries’s view on the classics, which was, in a way, a continuation of the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*, which had already emerged in the last decades of the seventeenth century in France. De Vries was clearly in favour of the position of the ‘anciens’, claiming that the classics should be taken as a role model, but the main difference was that de Vries did not take the ancient poets as a standard that could not be surpassed. They primarily functioned as examples of good taste. However, the Dutch poets

50 ‘Valschen smaak’ en ‘uiterlijken praal’, see: de Vries, 1810, vol. 2, p. 6.

51 ‘Wil men zijn land verheffen, uit slavernij redden, bij de verste volken doen ontzien, men moet de ziel, met eene geheel buitengewone kracht, werkzaam houden’. De Vries, 1810, vol. 2, p. 390.

52 Cf. Jensen, 2012, p. 174.

53 ‘Wat penseel was zoo krachtig als dat van Rembrandt? [...] ô Gelukkige 17^{de} Eeuw! [...] Hoe vele aanzienlijke mannen waren er, die de Hollandsche lier toen met roem bespeelden, en door hun voorbeeld, achting en vriendschap en aanmoediging anderen tot de Dichtkunst opwekten!’ de Vries, 1810, vol. 1, pp. 88-90.

54 See on the establishment of traditions and the issue of language: Leerssen, 2005, especially p. 159.

should use their imagination, feeling and national colours to create poems of the highest quality. Other contemporary poetic ideals also shone through, for instance in de Vries's preference for domestic topics. He quoted many children's poems and gave much credit to poets who had written about daily life in a sensitive way.⁵⁵

4 De Vries as an Editor

The activities of de Vries as an editor were very much in line with the views he developed in his *Proeve eener geschiedenis der Nederduitsche dichtkunde*. Between 1807 and 1827 he published editions of six writers: Jeremias de Decker, Joost van den Vondel, Hugo de Groot, Jeronimo de Bosch, Pieter van Nieuwland, and the brothers Willem and Onno Zwier van Haren.⁵⁶ All these authors had all extensively been praised in his main work.

The edition of de Decker consisted of a combined biography and anthology and was meant 'to increase the fame of Dutch poetry'.⁵⁷ According to de Vries, de Decker had not been appreciated enough as a human being and a poet, which made this double approach necessary. De Vries made use of an eighteenth-century volume of his poems but deliberately altered the spelling when it differed from earlier editions – an indication that he took his duties as an editor very seriously.⁵⁸ He also emphasised the importance of the very first publication of de Decker's poems, dating from 1656, because this was the only edition that appeared with full acknowledgement of the author. This volume had become very rare but also contained some letters of de Decker that de Vries annotated and included as an appendix to make them available to a larger audience.⁵⁹ De Vries also paid ample attention to the quarrels he had with one of the publishers about the copyrights, again indicating his awareness of the complexities of using previous text editions.⁶⁰

With his Vondel-edition of 1819, de Vries also aimed at making the work of a seventeenth-century Dutch poet known to a broader audience, particularly

55 See for instance his judgements about Arnold Hoogvliet and Dirk Smits: de Vries, 1810, vol. 2, pp. 90-95, 134-138.

56 Respectively: de Vries, 1807; de Vries, 1819; van Lennep, 1820; de Groot, 1844; van Nieuwland; 1824; van Haren, 1824-1827.

57 De Vries, 1807, p. ii.

58 Namely Jeremias de Decker, *Alle de rym-oeffeningen* (Amsterdam: H. Bosch et al., 1726), an edition compiled by Matthaeus Brouërius van Nidek. See de Vries, 1807, p. 1.

59 De Vries, 1807, pp. 47-48.

60 De Vries, 1807, pp. 71-53.

in the southern provinces. The initiative came from the Amsterdam publisher, actor and playwright Marten Westerman, who was also preparing a complete edition of Vondel's work. This edition, to which King Willem I subscribed, appeared between 1821 and 1824 in 21 volumes.⁶¹ The anthology of de Vries functioned as a warm-up for this publication; he expressed the hope that this selection of choruses would serve as a recommendation for Vondel's entire oeuvre.⁶² In contrast with his edition of de Decker he did not specify which edition he had used to compile his anthology; it merely presented a broad selection of the choruses, in a compact, and attractive volume, without any learned commentary.

A third seventeenth-century author whose work de Vries published was the well-known jurist Hugo de Groot. De Vries published a new edition of *Proof of the true religion* ('Bewijs van den waren godsdienst') and some of de Groot's other Dutch poems. He dedicated this work to his eldest son, with whom he had read many works by de Groot. Although his son preferred the Latin version, *De veritate religionis christianae*, his father convinced him of the added value of the Dutch poem. His son encouraged him to prepare a new, useful and handy edition with a few necessary explanatory notes, a task which de Vries happily accepted under the condition that his son help him. He hoped that this edition would revive the religious spirit of the past and that it would make de Groot's ideas better known.⁶³ De Vries followed the example of earlier editions that had included other Dutch poems by de Groot as well, in order to give a fuller impression of his thought. De Vries decided to include all his Dutch poems and dismissed the idea of making a selection because a complete edition did not yet exist. This decision indicates that de Vries was aware of his mediating role as an editor: he considered it his duty to pass on the works of older poets to new generations in a proper way. His thorough and professional attitude is also reflected in the fact that he offered an extensive overview of earlier editions of the *Proof of the true religion* and that he elucidated the choices he had made.⁶⁴

Although de Vries situated the height of Dutch literary life in the seventeenth century, he also published three editions related to eighteenth-century authors. One of these works did not consist of primary work but of a secondary piece about Jeronimo de Bosch. De Vries annotated a eulogy

61 The subscription lists are printed in the first volume. The name of de Vries is also included.

62 De Vries, 1819, p. vii.

63 See the introduction by de Vries in de Groot, 1844, p. iv.

64 See the introduction by de Vries in de Groot, 1844, pp. viii-xi.

on his uncle, written by David Jacob van Lennep and translated by the clergyman Cornelis Willem Westerbaen. The notes covered more than half of the book and were written in a very personal and admiring style. Clearly, they were not included only for their explanatory sake but were meant to augment the fame of de Bosch, who had played such an important role in de Vries's career. Speaking of the *album amicorum* of his uncle, de Vries, for example, revealed to his readers that the document was in his possession and that the many subscriptions illustrated the 'loving feelings' of so many learned men towards his uncle. He felt honoured that in 1808 de Bosch allowed him to add his own name to the long list of contributors and that he was even more touched that he could call him his uncle.⁶⁵

In 1824, de Vries wrote an introduction to a new edition of Nieuwland's *Poems and Orations* ('Gedichten en redevoeringen'), which was first published in 1788.⁶⁶ With this, he fulfilled the wish of the Amsterdam booksellers ten Brink and de Vries, who wanted to add some biographical information to the reprint of van Nieuwland's writings. De Vries dedicated his laudatory sketch to Westerbaen as a tribute to his many literary activities. Again, the introduction by de Vries had a very personal touch. He shared many insights and anecdotes with his audience, such as the fact that his grandmother had lived in the same street as van Nieuwland and that she had introduced the child to de Vries's uncles Jeronimo and Bernardus de Bosch. Furthermore, de Vries elaborated on Nieuwland's playful, eager and intelligent behaviour as a boy and on his profound grief when his wife and daughter died. Anecdotes like these de Vries could have acquired only through his personal connections. With regard to the edition itself, de Vries expressed his regrets that it did not contain all Nieuwland's poems, including those that had been found after the poet's death, but he was confident that this omission would soon be rectified. He was right: only three years later a new edition of Nieuwland's posthumous poems ('*Nagelatene gedichten*') was published, with an introduction by his brother Abraham de Vries.⁶⁷

The most prestigious of all the editorial projects undertaken by de Vries were the complete works of Willem and Onno Zvier van Haren. It was again Westerman, the publisher of Vondel's oeuvre, who stood behind this initiative. Westerman had gotten hold of several manuscripts of Willem van Haren that

65 See the notes by de Vries in van Lennep, 1820, pp. 124-125.

66 Nieuwland, 1824, pp. iii-xxiv. The introduction by de Vries is dated 1 June 1824.

67 Abraham de Vries had already published this edition in 1797. A second edition appeared in 1816, and a third in 1827, with a new foreword by Abraham de Vries. See Nieuwland, 1827, pp. iii-xiv.

had not been published before and contacted de Vries requesting assistance with the editing and also asking him to prepare an introduction. Most of the work was done by Westerman, but de Vries played an important role in deciding the right order of the manuscripts and in correcting the proofs. De Vries dedicated his introduction to his brother Abraham and, again, shared some personal information with his audience: when they were young they used to read the works of the van Haren brothers at the country house of their grandmother, especially two works: *Human Life* ('Het Menschelijk Leven') by Willem van Haren and the episode of Rosemond out of *De Geuzen* ('The Beggars') by Onno Zwier van Haren.⁶⁸ Both fragments were also fully published in *Proeve eener geschiedenis der Nederduitsche Dichtkunde*.⁶⁹

5 Concluding Remarks

De Vries left behind an impressive body of writings on Dutch literature, including the first integral history of Dutch poetry. Although he is mainly remembered for his *Proeve eener geschiedenis der Nederduitsche dichtkunde*, this work stood at the beginning of an enormous output of reviews, editions and treatises on literary topics. Considering the fact that de Vries had a full-time occupation as a clerk at the municipality, his list of publications is even more remarkable. His working method was very efficient: he built his knowledge upon the works of many others and meticulously mentioned all the sources he used.

De Vries's main goal was to spread literary historical awareness to a broader audience. This went hand in hand with strong anti-French sentiments: in his *Proeve eener geschiedenis der Nederduitsche dichtkunde* he was a zealous advocate of linguistic purity and horrified by foreign influences; only the ancient poets were to be used as sources for inspiration. His anti-French attitude was intensified by the political situation that showed the growing supremacy of the French. This antagonism reinforced the national aim of his literary history and served as an expression of Dutch cultural identity by establishing a national canon.

The only thing missing in his oeuvre was, perhaps, a sequel to his *Proeve eener geschiedenis der Nederduitsche dichtkunde*. After the publication of

68 De Vries, 1824.

69 De Vries, 1810, vol. 2, pp. 195-200, 216-224. In 1874 a new edition of the complete works of Willem and Onno Zwier van Haren was published by J. van Vloten, which also contained their writings in prose.

this work, de Vries lived for almost another fifty years. He could have taken the opportunity to add another part to his influential work, but he refrained from that endeavour. Instead, he put all his effort into making available the works of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century authors who, according to his view, represented the very best of Dutch literary history. In doing that, he affirmed his view that poetical genius could flourish only during a fixed term and that the Dutch had left this era behind them. Consequently, it became the primary duty of literary historians to make this remote past accessible for new generations of readers. De Vries's literary history, albeit unfinished, and his many editorial activities were pivotal to the development of Dutch language and culture as an academic discipline.

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