

## *Royal Academy for Dutch Language and Literature*

### *an academy with a tradition and a future*

Ever since its foundation in 1830 Belgium has had a ‘national’ academy of science and literature, called *Académie Royale des Sciences et des Lettres de Belgique*, which originated from the academy *Thérésienne*. The latter was founded by Maria Theresa during the Austrian period in the history of the Low Countries. The Royal Flemish Academy, which was founded in 1886, emerged from the aspirations of the Flemish Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it demanded rights for its mother tongue in all facets of society including culture and science.

Especially in the newly-founded kingdom of Belgium, where the monolingual principle served as a guideline, it was taken for granted that the ‘national’ academy was to use French as the sole language of communication in its meetings, reports and publications. The alternative of a ‘Flemish’ section within the *Académie Royale* was discussed but rejected and subsequently a Flemish Academy was founded as a separate entity on 8 July 1886. Its task was to give advice, whenever appropriate, concerning the Dutch language and literature. Unlike the *Académie française* (°1635), which served as a model, the Flemish Academy was an academy of science and therefore during the first half a century of its existence it also counted scholars in the exact and applied sciences among its members.

It was up to those members to ensure the Dutchification of the Gent University as well as to provide the university with adequate Dutch terminologies in different academic fields. As far as scholarly endeavors are concerned, the Academy was committed to the compilation of dialect collections in order to guarantee the representation of the Southern Dutch dialect vocabulary in the seminal work of the Dutch lexicographic heritage, namely the Dictionary of the Dutch Language (*Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* or WNT), the compilation of which started in 1863 and was not finished until 1998. Furthermore, the Academy was instrumental in establishing Dutch as the language of instruction, including, among other things, active involvement in language purification. As for literary studies the Academy attributed to the flourishing of philological studies on the literary past and Middle Dutch manuscripts.

The Royal Academy for Dutch Language and Literature (*Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* or KANTL), as it was named in 1972, has always tried to ensure political neutrality and to preserve the balance between denominational and free-thinking movements in society although this matter caused certain frictions during the first

years. Some of the Academy's first members were appointed by political authorities, but later new members were always nominated by the existing members, of whom there were 25 until their number was elevated to 30 in 1930. While the Academy during the first decades had strong ties with the Flemish Movement, it always paid heed to the trap of collaborationism even though the Germans introduced the tempting '*Flamenpolitik*' during occupation in both World Wars.

During the first half a century of its existence the Academy also explicitly aspired to be an academy of science. It only let go of this ambition in 1938 when the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts (*Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten* or KVAB) was founded as a Dutch-speaking counterpart of the 'unitary' but French-speaking *Thérésienne*. Conversely, the Flemish example inspired the foundation of the Royal Academy for the French Language and Literature in Belgium (*Académie Royale de Langue et de Littérature françaises de Belgique* or ARLLFB) in 1920. For decades both academies of letters would administer the 'National Fund for Literature', which was established to award grants to writers. In Flanders this task was passed on to the newly-founded Flemish Fund for Literature (*Vlaams Fonds voor de Letteren* or VFL) in 1999, which has been centralizing and regulating the flow of grants for literature ever since. In the new federalized structure it was chosen to place the Flemish Academy, under the supervision of the ministry responsible for culture in contradistinction to the multidisciplinary KVAB, which falls under the jurisdiction of science policy.

### ***Members and work***

Aside from 30 ordinary working members there are 25 foreign honorary members and 5 extraordinary members: specialists in Dutch Studies from the French-speaking part of the country. Until 1941 there were also corresponding members. According to the current regulation working members become honorary members when they reach the age of 75. During the monthly meetings members give lectures on a topic from their area of expertise; writers often prefer the 'literary salon' setting when they read fragments from their own work and engage in discussions with other members. The membership composition is quite unique: two thirds of the members are academics (1/3 linguists, 1/3 literary scholars), and one third consists of creative artists, poets, novelists, essayists, and translators. Such an array is rather remarkable, especially in a period when academic fields have undergone a thorough remolding by dividing the former philology into linguistics and literary studies. There are not many

forums where specialists in Dutch Studies, linguists and literary scholars from all universities, can become acquainted with each other's work. They confer not only with each other but also with creative language professionals.

Almost all prominent writers were members of the Academy during the first sixty years of its existence. In the next period, some leading authors from the post-WW2 generation like Hugo Claus or Louis Paul Boon never became members. Perhaps, the Academy, which in the beginning was recognized as a precious achievement of the Flemish emancipation struggle, was later seen as a part of the establishment, but the decision to join or not to join the Academy may also have been purely accidental.

Safeguarding language and literature implies source study and an active publishing policy. Many of the published editions have presented the research results of the Academy's own members and, furthermore, studies undertaken in response to the prize question put forward by the Academy have been of utmost importance. To this very day the Academy as an academic publisher, meets the publication needs for works that are rejected by commercial publishers because of their insufficient profitability. The Academy's own journal *Proceedings & Reports (Verslagen & Mededelingen)* is presently edited according to the rules of peer review and is published in Open Access.

Not to be underrated as a form of publicizing academic research is the goal-oriented prize question policy of the Academy, owing to which a number of important PhD dissertations have been published and awarded prizes. In historical literary studies, which are currently less in vogue, such publishing policy has been of paramount importance. Without dozens, often pioneering, books on Middle Dutch literature, the rhetoricians, the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>-century literature, the discipline would have undoubtedly failed to fully reach its academic potential. Many fledgling researchers and young PhD holders managed to prove themselves in Dutch Studies due to the publishing opportunities offered by the Academy by means of which the latter has stimulated research at universities.

By virtue of the funds and bequests that have been entrusted to the Academy over the years it also has the opportunity to award literary prizes. Currently, a five-year prize is awarded each year alternately for essays, Old Dutch studies, literature and culture in the Low Countries, poetry, prose and performance texts.

The advisory function of the Academy has become less prominent in the past years because a number of the tasks and duties, which initially fell within its jurisdiction, are nowadays divided among different institutions and organizations. The previously mentioned Flemish Fund for Literature is the institution that is responsible for channelizing grants for the creation or translation of literature. Several public organizations have been founded to provide Dutch language advisory services, for instance the Language telephone (*Taaltelefoon*) and the Language Advisory Service of the Flemish Parliament, while the public broadcasting network VRT also has its own Dutch language advisory service. Policies concerning literature and language like spelling and grammar for Dutch Studies outside the Dutch-speaking world are the responsibility of the Dutch Language Union (*Nederlandse Taalunie* or NTU, °1980). The Dutch Language and Literature Council provides the Committee of Ministers of the Dutch Language Union (for Culture and Education) with direct advice in such matters.

In its own way the Academy sees itself as a promoter of written lore, the guardian of language and heritage. Exhibitions and book presentations are part of this role but over the years the Academy has also built up a well-stocked library comprising works in linguistics and literary studies, the history of the Flemish Movement, as well as its own publications or those of its members. Additionally, special collections, old editions, first editions of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century writers, fairground songs, dialect archives and letter collections are also preserved in the library stocks. The Academy's own archive itself is an important research source on Flemish emancipation.

### ***An academy for culture and scholarship***

During the last decades the Academy opened its doors and developed public-oriented cultural activities. At conferences, lectures and book presentations Academy members, writers and scholars, address a broader audience; during scholarly colloquia at the Academy researchers from different academic centers in Flanders and the Netherlands convene. In the past several years the Academy organized with varied success a series of conferences for a broader audience; in spring there is a series of conferences presenting the work of its own members and in autumn there is a series of conferences on all sorts of topics (dialects, onomastics, writers who are considered to be dual artists, writers and their translators etc.) Every year the Academy building houses dozens of meetings, events and book presentations by associations

and research centers whose work has ground in common with linguistics and language education, literature and literature studies as well as (cultural) history.

Not only does the Academy increasingly define itself as a vehicle for the dissemination of culture, but the successive ministers of culture also understood the importance of academic research in their area of competence and recognized the Academy as a partner who could offer necessary guarantees in this matter. They created the framework for the foundation of a research center, known as the Centre for Scholarly Editing and Document Studies (*Centrum voor Teksteditie en Bronnenstudie* or CTB) that could rise to the task of an academically responsible diffusion of important literary heritage including diaries and correspondence with and between writers, and could ensure the preservation and diffusion of text and language corpora. The CTB's mission dovetails with the earlier idea of collecting material and making it available. However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the preference is increasingly given to diffusion through digital channels using the opportunities of text technology and the young but dynamic academic area of digital humanities.

### ***At the crossroads of networks***

As a consequence of an amalgam of scholars and creative writers amongst its members the Academy is situated at the crossroads of various networks, the publishing business, the research community, the heritage conservation. One of the networks is incidentally forged between the academies, as it is realized in the cooperation between the Academy of Dutch Language and Literature and the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts concerning the National Biographical Dictionary (*Nationaal Biografisch Woordenboek* or NBW). This dictionary publishes biographies of scholars and artists who are professionally active in Belgium and who have distinguished themselves by meritorious work in research or culture. Collaborative relationship with other custodians and curators of the Dutch-language literary heritage like the Antwerp House of Literature (*Letterenhuis*) and the National Archive is self-evident.

As far as international cooperation is concerned, there has always been successful collaboration with the Huygens Institute for Netherlands History of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (*Koninklijke Nederlandse Academie van Wetenschappen* or KNAW) in The Hague, which provides access to historical sources and literary texts, maintains the Dutch literary heritage and publishes texts. There is also close collaboration

with the Meertens Institute of the KNAW in Amsterdam in the field of dialectology, the discipline that studies and takes stock of linguistic heritage. Similarly to the International Society for Dutch Studies (*Internationale Vereniging voor Neerlandistiek* or IVN) and the previously-mentioned Dutch Language Union, the Academy devotes attention to the emissaries of Dutch Studies by attracting honorary members from abroad.

### ***A contemporary academy***

In the latest years the Academy has taken a step towards a contemporary approach to culture and heritage without losing sight of its traditional advisory, publishing, librarian, and heritage-caretaking tasks and activities with its own members. The questions, with which the Academy is confronted and on which it expresses its opinion, are naturally evolving with time. One of such issues is the external pressure that national languages have to cope with due to the hegemony of English, especially if scholarly activities in national languages are discouraged by research-funding policy. The Academy has published its standpoint on the topic warning against the excesses of Anglicization at the expense of the preservation of Dutch as a fully-fledged language for academic activities and (higher) education. Besides external challenges, there are also internal ones, namely the pressure experienced by standard Dutch from language varieties like the Dutch interlanguage (a semi-dialectal variant sometimes dismissed as suburban or soap-opera Dutch), as well as the question regarding the position of Flemish Dutch in the Dutch-speaking world. These are matters that the Academy cannot ignore. As far as literature is concerned, the Academy also cannot ignore its role as a forum for debate and discussion. For instance, an important and fascinating challenge is represented by a debate concerning the choice of literary works that belong to the canon of Dutch-language literature. The Academy is planning to organize such a debate shortly and participate in it.

### ***A glance into the future***

Due to external changes in politics, culture and the academic world the Academy has been forced to reinvent itself on a several occasions during many years of its existence. The Academy as the driving force of the Flemish emancipation in culture and science has, as a result of those changes, evolved into a modern institution for the dissemination of culture and academic research, which still sees itself as the custodian of the Dutch language and a reflection platform for and a partner in academic Dutch Studies and the world of culture.

In the years to come the Academy intends to do its utmost best to occupy this role by focusing on the following objectives:

1. The Academy intends to vigorously fulfill its advisory and indicative functions for the benefit of the government and the public debate.
2. In consultation and collaboration with the field of Dutch Studies and culture the Academy intends to make its contribution in shaping the government-promoted, integrated literature policy, in particular by taking the lead in the discussion on the implementation of the literary canon.
3. Through its research center the Academy intends to make a goal-oriented contribution to the production of digital editions and the sustainable conservation of linguistic heritage, which should partly compensate for the volatility of academic policies at universities. In this manner the Academy wants to meet the needs for a robust and sustainable Flemish Institute for Dutch Language (*Vlaams Instituut voor het Nederlands*).
4. Through its publishing policy the Academy intends to allow the publication of valuable editions that have no chance on the commercial market.
5. The Academy intends to encourage public participation through a range of activities for the broader audience interested in the Dutch language and literature.
6. The Academy intends to make her collections more accessible by extensive cataloguing and by joining cross-institutional initiatives whenever necessary and appropriate.