

“Bad Belgians, Bad Belgians,” or The Importance of Reading “Over Het Kanaal” (2011) Transnationally (Part Two)

By Mathieu Bokestaël – October 26, 2023

PART TWO – *Over Het Kanaal and a Transnational Scottish Literary Studies*

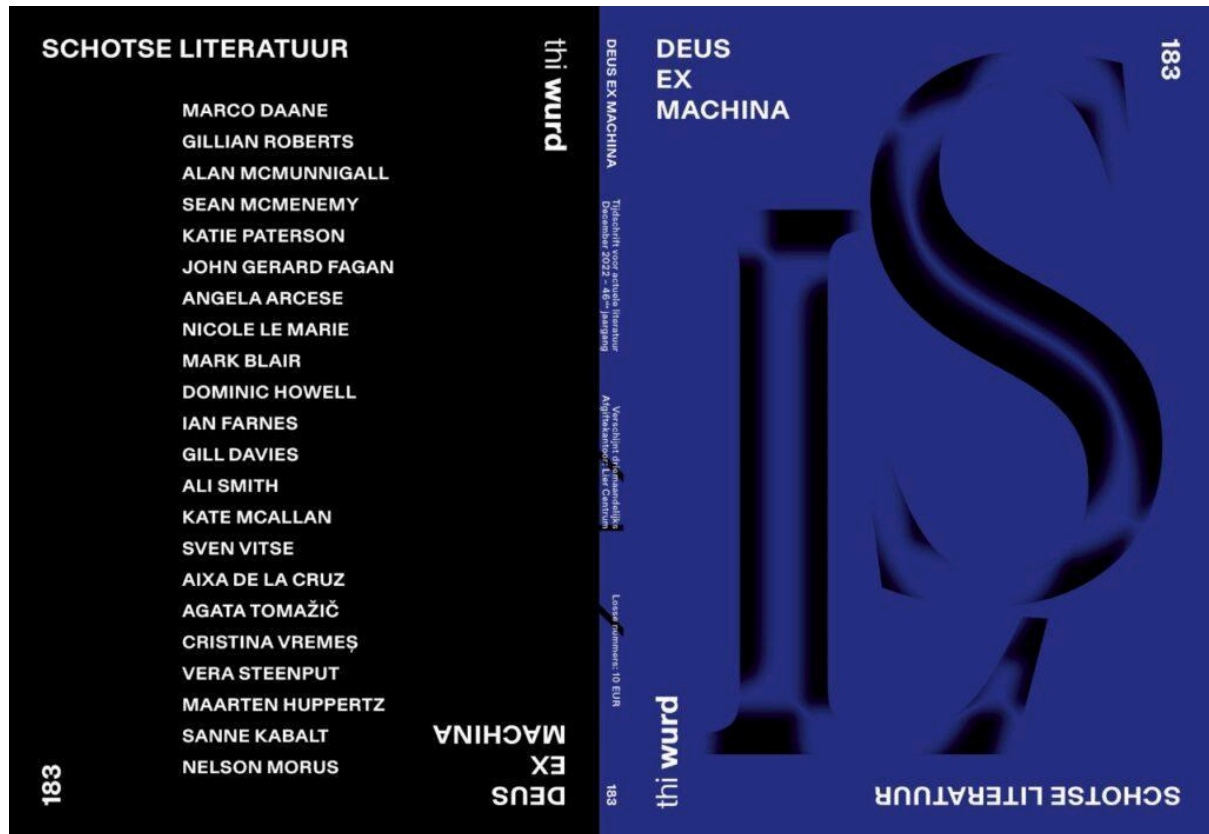


Figure 4: Cover of Flemish literary journal *Deus Ex Machina*'s 183 issue on Scottish Literatures

‘Why would anyone in India, Latvia or France ever want to study Dutch?’ This is by far the question I get asked most when I tell people that I used to teach the language and culture of Suriname and the Low Countries abroad. For many students of Dutch Studies, it seems, the answer to this question is connected to transnational histories and contemporary globalisation. Today the Dutch language is mostly associated with Belgium and the Kingdom of the Netherlands – which itself extends to overseas territories in the Caribbean – but the colonial histories of these countries entail that the Dutch language, for better or for worse, holds enduring economic and cultural power across the globe. Three of the four largest European ports, for instance – Rotterdam, Antwerp, and Amsterdam – are still situated in the Low Countries, unmistakably a direct effect of their former imperial and colonial power. Meanwhile, these ports are also symbols for the (coercive) cultural and historical ties that have, over the past few centuries, bound Belgium and the Netherlands to the rest of the world and continue to do so today. Such contemporary economic and cultural leverage, then, illustrates the transnational and globalised networks in which these countries continue to operate, and which literature inevitably also registers.

In a previous blog post on Annelies Beck’s *Over Het Kanaal* [*Across the Channel*] (2011), her Dutch-language novel on the plight of the Belgian refugees in the Glasgow of the 1910s,

I explored the affordances of reading the novel transnationally and transhistorically. I argued that reading the text in such a manner not only foregrounds a forgotten history of the First World War – the 250 000 Belgian refugees who are still the largest group of displaced persons to ever seek refuge on British territory. Rather, such a transnational and transhistorical reading practice also allows us to contextualise the broader postcolonial contexts in which Scotland and Belgium continue to posture themselves. Reading Beck's second novel on a Belgian expansionist project in late nineteenth-century Brazil alongside *Across the Channel* for instance reminds us of the long transnational histories of (forced) migration which continue to shape cultural and political discourses around migration, hospitality, and housing in Scotland, Ireland and Belgium. Finally, I argued that reading the texts transnationally also highlights the importance of *Across the Channel's* allied but asymmetrical focalisation strategy for the construction of the call to action that is at the heart of the novel.

While in the previous blog post I thus explored how a transnational and transhistorical perspective could offer new reading experiences and interpretations for the novel, in this post and through a short exploration of Flemish literary journal *Deus ex Machina's* latest issue on Scottish literatures, I wish to briefly highlight some of the questions *Across the Channel* raises for the study of Scottish literatures and a transnational Scottish literary studies. As I briefly showed in the last post, in the field of history, for instance, the complex entanglements of Scotland and Belgium (and for that matter Ireland) are well established,¹ but what about the arts? One could for instance think of Belgians like Georges Baltus, Jean Delville or Paul Artot, who all taught at the Glasgow School of Art – which features in Beck's novel – at the time of the influential Glasgow Style. Similarly, in his keynote speech at the 2022 World Congress for Scottish Literatures in Prague, Christopher Whyte, a poet and novelist who writes both in Scottish Gaelic and English, inquired into the disciplinary future of a potentially post-independence Scottish studies, arguing for a thoroughly multilingual approach. If the discipline of Scottish studies really wants to be a multilingual and transnational space, however, then should we also read beyond English, Scots, and Gaelic, and consider novels such as *Across the Channel*, novels not written in any of Scotland's official languages, nor by authors with claims to Scottish citizenship, but which still register and mediate Scotland's transnational or global histories?

Although I make no pretence of knowing the answer to the question above, I do believe that at the very least a transnational approach to Scottish literary studies can be fruitful. In its latest issue on Scottish literatures, for instance, *Deus Ex Machina*, a Flemish literary journal, comments on the culturally peripheral nature of both Scotland and Belgium. Contemporary literary institutionalisation, its editor argues, aggregates in London, Paris and Amsterdam, not in Edinburgh, Glasgow or Brussels, and this has similar consequences for Scottish and Belgian authors (De Clerck, 2022, p. 2). Beck's own publisher De Geus, for instance, was located in Breda, just across the Dutch border, when *Across the Channel* was published and it was still an independent press. When the publisher was bought out by a larger consortium and it became an imprint of Singel Uitgeverijen, that is, when its institutionalisation was accelerated, it even moved to Amsterdam, the very centre of Dutch-language publishing.²

Such peripheralisation of Flemish and Scottish authors, De Clerck argues, has normative consequences in terms of gatekeeping and language use. Ireland and Scotland are famously multilingual spaces, and so are Belgium and Flanders, with the latter also displaying a lot of regional variation *within* its Dutch language use. The centralisation of literary institutions, De Clerck argues (2022, p. 2), produces a form of homogenisation which

influences literary production, publishing, and distribution in both Belgium and Britain, privileging 'centralised' norms against 'peripheral' variations in the name of 'respectability' or 'economic viability.' Such centralisation produces a form of literary and linguistic reflexivity which James Kelman, Scotland's controversial first Booker Prize winner, famously called 'SELF' or 'Standard English Literary Form' (ibid.). Indeed, many protested Kelman's 1994 controversial triumph,³ and no other Scottish author would win the Booker Prize until Douglas Stuart in 2020. Despite a changing devolutionary context, then, the SELF became a norm from which it is still hard to deviate and which may only be challenged at one's own risk and peril.

Yet, is it not a risk worth taking? In an apt alliance with Alan McMunnigall from the Glasgow-based literary journal and explicitly anti-establishment publisher *thi wurd* (McMunnigall, 2022, p. 20), *Deus ex Machina's* latest issue resists such reflexivity by offering a selection of texts written in different variants of Scots and English, which are, in turn, intentionally translated into a series of explicitly normless and regionally-marked variations of Belgian Dutch (De Clerck, 2022, p. 3). De Clerck and McMunnigall argue that such multilingualism and intralinguistic variations suggest a 'porous' conception of national literatures, one that cannot be fixed by an essentialised linguistic identity. It is no wonder, therefore, that *Across the Channel* also seems to draw parallels between Belgium's cultural-linguistic divides and the diversity of Glasgow's populations, 'with their Catholics and Protestants, and their Scots and their Irish, and their black-haired folk and their redheads' (2011, p. 173).⁴ Such a drawing of parallels is not only a testament to the similarities between these two cultures. Rather, its almost comical investment in problematic stereotypes and cultural essentialism raises questions as to what constitutes 'Belgian' or 'Scottish' culture and identity, and perhaps suggests that beyond the transnational entanglements of a 'North Sea history' that moves, indeed, 'across the channel' as Beck's novel puts it, what Scotland and Belgium share most is the relentless interrogation of identity and culture that such a transnational history requires.

Deus ex Machina's special issue is but one example of – in the words of De Clerck – a 'transnational, translinguistic and transcultural project' (2022, p. 3),⁵ and one that can only be encouraged. In his essay on the transnational flows in Graeme Macrae Burnet's *His Bloody Project*, Robert Morace for example seems to be motivated by a similar critical project and methodology. The novel, he argues, suggests 'the resistance associated with a minor literature [and] serves as a commentary on peripheries of all kinds' (2023, p. 35). Morace's article wants to consider 'the more subtle, multidirectional ways in which transnational flows manifest themselves in contemporary literature, especially in historiographic metafiction that transverse temporal as well as geo-political [sic] boundaries' (p. 25). As I have tried to show in these two blog posts, *Across the Channel* ticks all of these boxes, and is all the richer for it. It is a historical novel about how to write (a novel) about the war. It deploys its coming of age story to traverse the temporal boundaries of the war and the rent strikes. Finally, in doing so, it illuminates the geopolitical and humanitarian stakes of forced migration. If, therefore, *His Bloody Project* 'speaks of mid-nineteenth century Scotland while speaking to post-Devolution Scots' (p. 35) as Morace puts it, then *Across the Channel* speaks of early twentieth-century Glasgow while speaking to a contemporary transnational context shared by Belgium and Scotland.

Reading the novel in this manner allows not only for new reading experiences and interpretations to blossom as I tried to show in the previous post, but also raises questions as to the place of such books in the study of Scottish literatures. Are we to consider books

not written from Scotland, nor in any of its official languages, but which both reveal and are made possible by the transnational histories and networks in which the country always has and continues to participate, as part of the discipline of Scottish literary studies?

Beck's *Across the Channel*, especially, quite literally participates in those 'global' and 'primarily relational' (Pittock, 2022, p. 3) histories of Scotland, for the novel was born from a letter the author found in the Belgian Royal Archives (2011, p. 341). Whilst researching the 'Scottish years' of her great-grandfather, who fled the War and moved to Glasgow, Beck found Marie Claes' letter, which boldly addresses the Belgian King and denounces the Belgian consulate's ill-treatment of Hortense van Megroot, a fellow refugee. This letter would form the basis for Beck's novel, in which August Keppens, her great-grandfather, also plays a minor role.

Yet, would the question of the novel's inclusion in Scottish literary studies be differently answered if the author had no personal connection to that history or if there was no archived letter to explicitly tie *Across the Channel* to Scotland's extraliterary transnational histories? What if it was translated into English, Scots or Gaelic, or originally written in one of those languages by the Belgian author? Would it then be considered part of a transnational Scottish literature or would we still only be able to read the text comparatively, as a Flemish text always at one remove from Scottish culture, as the 'no true Scotsman' fallacy infamously and programmatically goes? If Scotland's transnational histories are getting increasing academic and public attention, then should the literature that registers them not also receive more attention?

These are questions with no definitive answers, but they are worth returning to again and again in our discipline of Scottish literary studies. This, then, is also the value of studying Dutch in India, Latvia, France, and, yes, Scotland. As with the Dutch East India Company's ties to India, the Hanseatic ties between Latvia and the Netherlands, and the numerous historical bonds between France and the Low Countries – think for instance of the Burgundian Netherlands and the Batavian Republic, there are also numerous ties that bind Scotland to the Low Countries. These are worth studying, and not only from the perspective of the discipline of history. Rather, literary scholars are most qualified to study how these transnational histories are registered in literature, and to examine which aesthetic choices are being made in the mediations of Scotland's global history, which literary modes are preferred, which metaphors employed, and so on. A multilingual approach allowing for external perspectives to Scotland and its literatures is therefore most adequate if we are indeed to consider its global history, literature, and culture. As *Deus ex Machina's* special issue shows, reading *Across the Channel* from Belgium, for instance, not only foregrounds forgotten transnational histories but also offers the opportunity to see the similarities between, in Morace's words, different 'cultural peripheries' and 'minor literatures' (2023, p. 35). I may just be a 'bad Belgian' of course, but such readings, I hope I have shown, can only be fruitful.

1. On this, see Pittock, 2022. [↵](#)
2. On this centralisation of Dutch-language publishing, see also Internationale Vereniging voor Neerlandistiek's recent discussion of a discipline of 'Dutch studies' that goes beyond its titular association with the Netherlands (2023). [↵](#)
3. On this, see also Kennedy, 2019. [↵](#)

4. “met hun katholieken en protestanten en hun Schotten en hun leren en hun zwartharigen en hun rossen” (p. 173, translation mine). For comments on the divide within the Belgian communities, see for instance pp. 264, 285, 288. ↵
5. “transnationale, translinguïstische en transculturele onderneming” (2022, p. 3, translation mine). ↵

BIO:

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