

CHAPTER TEN

FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF THE BELGIAN HISTORICAL NOVEL IN THE FIRST TWO DECADES AFTER BELGIAN INDEPENDENCE

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Belgium as a nation state did not come into being until 1830. The territory that from 1830 onward came to constitute Belgium had, in the course of roughly two centuries, been successively part of the Spanish, the Austrian and the French state. After the fall of Napoleon's Empire in 1814, the Allies had decided to (re-)unite the Southern and Northern Netherlands in the United Kingdom of William I, in order to construct a buffer state against France. But soon, King William's policy of centralisation and of "making Dutch" the gallicized South, together with his policy in religious affairs, aroused strong feelings of resentment among the southern Catholics. In September 1830, in the wake of the Parisian July Revolution, the southern regions eventually rose in revolt against the king. Whereas the goal of the uprising had initially been limited to an administrative separation between North and South, the unyielding attitude of King William led to a complete rupture. On October 4, the independence of Belgium was proclaimed during the Protocol of London. Belgium became a constitutional state, in the form of a monarchy.

Immediately after independence, the Belgian government was confronted with a serious anomaly. While a Belgian state suddenly did exist, a Belgian national consciousness for the most part still had to be "created."ⁱ Especially in the cultural-historical period of Romanticism, the concept of nation had grown to be immensely important. Moreover, there was a double threat of annexation. On the southern border, France endangered the young state: it had cheered Belgian independence during the Protocol of London partly because it reckoned that a rupture with the North would weaken the South and thus open up new perspectives for annexation.ⁱⁱ On the northern border, there was a Dutch threat: William I had strongly resisted the break-away of the South and would not officially recognize Belgian independence until 1839.

Thus, an enormous need for the construction and voicing of a unique Belgian identity came into being, especially because the new nation state also had to defend itself against international scepticism.ⁱⁱⁱ

Belgium was threatened to become the victim of the mainly foreign opinion that Belgian identity was merely '*une nationalité de convention*,' a national awareness which existed only in the rhetoric of a handful of officials and which could not possibly become a foundation for the new state. (Tollebeek 1998, 335)

The new nation state had to be provided with the necessary proofs of old age in order to legitimize and strengthen its independent status. Men of letters, historians, painters and sculptors all felt the necessity of providing their country with "a *raison d'être* within the international community" (Tollebeek 1998, 336).^{iv} It had to be made clear that the young Belgian state was not the artificial product of the diplomatic whims of the Great Powers, but the political manifestation of an old, as it were natural, consciousness or sense of nationality that united the Belgian people. Without a unique identity, an independent nation state simply was not defensible.

Within this context, literature was seen as a powerful tool in affirming—and especially safeguarding—the cultural and even the political identity of the nation. A *national Belgian* literature was explicitly called for.^v Literature was explicitly given the task of creating a Belgian consciousness by harking back to a past shared by all Belgians and by emphasizing the continuity of the present with that marvellous past. In literary circles, it had become clear by 1830 that the genre for which Walter Scott enjoyed great renown and which was imitated all over Europe, lent itself very well for the specific purposes of the young Belgian nation state. The historical novel had earned its credentials in the neighbouring countries as a genre well suited for the urgent task of providing a young nation state with a history as a nation, a shared national past, a collective cultural memory.^{vi} Historical novels were therefore granted a privileged status, mostly because they were considered to present a truthful image

of the glorious national, ancestral past—truthful, since it was modelled on historical facts and based on reliable source material.^{vii}

All these arguments in favour of an independent Belgium were intended for the sceptic neighbouring countries. The historical novelists, however, wrote primarily for their own fellow-countrymen, because without any knowledge of the national past, the Belgians would remain “strangers in their own home” (Tollebeek 1998, 336-337).^{viii} To this end, historical novelists made use of an organic concept of nationality, in which the terms race, blood and soil play a crucial role.^{ix} In images like “the soil of the mother country drank the blood of so many a brave son” (Ronsse 1845, I v), the national space is as it were brought into a genealogical metaphor, and thus into the dimension of time. By actively “drinking” the heroic ancestral blood, this national space becomes saturated with national time, i.e. a time that condenses the heroic ancestral struggles against all foreign oppressors who ever dared to assail the Belgians on their own soil.

Of vital importance in this discourse is the repeated referral to the fathers and ancestors and their love of freedom and national spirit. By explicitly using the pronoun “our” in relation to the forefathers, by expressly calling the contemporary nineteenth century Belgians (and, by extension, the later generations of readers) “their” sons, “their” descendants, and by constantly using the pronoun “we,” the historical novelists created a genealogy through which readers take part in that old glory, in that freedom and national spirit. An “imagined community” was created, to use Anderson’s terminology, and from being relative strangers, the nineteenth century Belgians could now become intimately familiar with their fatherland and its history. After all, they were born on that same “soil of heroes” and the same blood flowed through their veins. The only condition for becoming what they (or, to use the same discourse, “we”), as a nation and a people, once were, was *remembering*.

The image of the glorious national past did however not only consist of the heroic deeds of the ancestors and of their unremitting, never-ending struggle for independence. It also consisted of the daily ancestral life and the typical manners, customs and traditions of the forefathers. The saturation of national space with national time resulted in a discourse which held that the traditional, uncorrupted customs and manners were enclosed in the soil of the native country and that their survival was precisely guaranteed by that same soil. And those ancestral virtues and customs, in their turn, were put forth as the only adequate defence against the foreign threats of annexation and the only guarantee for permanent independence. In the preface to *Verwoesting van Maastricht* (Destruction of Maastricht) (1845), Ecrevisse writes:

These requirements of national character [deep-rooted customs, ancestral memories [...] and that idiosyncratic, uncorrupted national character that one nation possesses by exclusion of another] we possess in an extreme degree on our soil: as long as they exist, we do not have to fear the loss of our nationality. A nation is only then brought under the yoke when it has been robbed of these motives, when the singular feeling of being one nation has been extinguished. (Ecrevisse 1845b, I 9; my translation)^x

From the above, it may be clear that during the first two decades of Belgian independence the poetics of the genre was strongly determined by a number of functions the historical novel was called upon to perform. The following passage from the preface to Ecrevisse’s historical novel *De Drossaert Clercx* reveals the diversity of communicative functions assigned to the genre both by the novelists themselves and by contemporary critics:^{xi}

Shake the dust off of our old charters; show us our privileges; add lustre to the heroic feats of our ancestors; make the glorious forefathers appear before our eyes; teach us the customs, traditions and splendour of Belgium! Let everyone present his offerings at the altar of the fatherland (Ecrevisse 1846, 15; my translation)

I want to argue that important insights can be gained into the essentially hybrid character of the corpus of texts that are lumped together under the umbrella term “historical novel” in the 1830s and 1840s, by linking three main functions with three prototypical forms of historical novels. The three main functions that can be deduced from the quoted passage are 1) evoking nationalist feelings amongst the nineteenth century Belgians through the portrayal of glorious episodes from the ancestral past (i.e. a purely nationalist function); 2) disseminating knowledge about the national past (a more didactic function) and 3) stressing the genealogical link and continuity between the ancestral and the contemporary virtues and manners in order to check the progress of the alleged corruption of the national *genius* by France (which is feared to find a culmination in a future annexation) (i.e. a moral, ethical function as well as a nationalist one).

The distinction between the three models or prototypes can be formally described by making use of the Bakhtinian concept of *chronotope*, a concept that can function as a principle that “both defines

genre and generic distinction and establishes the boundaries between the various intrageneric subcategories of the major literary types” (Clark and Holquist 1984, 280). Generic chronotopes constitute the world view of a text, they form the family resemblances which connect a text with other texts. Each of the aforementioned aspects seems to enter into a preferential connection with one of three dominant generic chronotopes, and—more importantly maybe—each of these types was regarded as “national” to a different degree in contemporary criticism.^{xii}

Through the use of the concept of chronotope (literally, “time space”), two elements that are central to the genre of the historical novel are brought to the fore. These two elements are the genealogically viewed *time* (nineteenth century Belgians are intimately linked with the heroic past of the forefathers through the connecting link of the same blood running through the veins of the ancestors and their descendants) and *space* (traditional, uncorrupted customs and manners are enclosed in the soil of the native country and their survival is precisely guaranteed by that same soil). The term chronotope (borrowed from Einstein) is meant precisely to “express [...] the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space)”:

We will give the name *chronotope* [...] to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. [...] In the literary chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (Bakhtin 1990, 84)^{xiii}

Roderick Beaton’s characterization of the chronotope might be illuminating in this respect: “the chronotope [...] stands for the distinctive configuration of time and space that defines ‘reality’ within the world of a text, *as conceptualized within that world itself*” (Beaton 2000, 181; italics in the original).

The most popular chronotope to be used in Belgian historical novels is what Bakhtin calls the *chronotope of the adventure novel of ordeal*.^{xiv} This generic chronotope is primarily used in historical novels that draw attention to the great episodes of the national past, in which national heroes are portrayed fighting for the freedom of their country. The narratological structure of these novels is that of the traditional adventure story: a national hero has to undergo all sorts of tests as proof of his loyalty to the heroine, but also—and more importantly—as a proof of his love for the fatherland.

One significant characteristic of the *traditional* chronotope of the adventure novel of ordeal as Bakhtin describes it (his analysis is primarily based on the earliest occurrences of the chronotope in Greek or Sophistic romances from the first centuries A.D.) is that its adventure time “lies outside biographical time,” as Bakhtin puts it. “It is not measured off in the novel and does not add up; it is simply days, nights, hours, moments clocked in a technical sense within the limits of each separate adventure.” It is an “empty time” that “leaves no traces anywhere, no indications of its passing” (Bakhtin 1990, 90-91). Space in these novels “figures in solely as a naked, abstract expanse of space” and is “measured primarily by *distance* on the one hand and by *proximity* on the other.” Thus,

[t]he adventure chronotope is [...] characterized by a *technical, abstract connection* [not an organic one, nb] *between space and time*, by the *reversibility* of moments in a temporal sequence, and by their *interchangeability* in space. (Bakhtin 1990, 99-100; italics in the original)

In the historical variants of the adventure novels of ordeal, some slight manipulations result from the demand of truthfulness that the historical novel had to meet: the characteristic “interchangeability” of adventure time and space is forced to a compromise with the required illusion of truth. Still, space is mostly regarded solely as something that should be overcome (e.g. in flight, chases, pursuits, etc.). All the actions take place against an abstract background. Roads that lead the characters from one castle or city to another are situated in a kind of no man’s land. Landscapes remain vague and abstract, little attention (or no attention whatsoever) is paid to the manners and traditions of the historical indigenous inhabitants and to the native country itself. “[T]here are absolutely no indications of historical time, no identifying traces of the era” (Bakhtin 1990, 91).

This abstract quality of time and space is a necessity in any adventure novel of ordeal. As Bakhtin explains, it is a prerequisite for the ruling principle of “chance” to be able to operate to its fullest:

Every concretization, of even the most simple and everyday variety, would introduce its own *rule-generating force*, its own *order*, its *inevitable ties* to human life and to the time specific to that life. Events would end up being interwoven with these rules, and to a greater or lesser extent would find themselves participating in this order, subject to its ties. This would critically limit the power of chance; the movement

of the adventures would be organically localized and tied down in time and space. (Bakhtin 1990, 100; italics in the original)

However, a characteristic adaptation to the traditional chronotope of the adventure novel of ordeal in historical variants of the genre is precisely the allotment of a certain amount of importance to the historical events, enough to bear an influence on the events in the individual plot line. Adventure time does remain “intensified” (events happen in the nick of time, “suddenly” and “at just that moments” reign supreme, together with the crucial notions of “earlier” and “later”), but a great difference lies in the fact that this adventure time is no longer wholly “undifferentiated,” as Bakhtin calls it: the actual historical context and historical time are no longer completely irrelevant with respect to plot adventures and to the characters.

Action is predominant in this type of novels and the primary goal is to make the heroes of the past serve as examples of patriotism to contemporary Belgians. That this effect was indeed attained by most of these novels becomes clear when we take a look at the contemporary reviews. In his review of the historical adventure novel of ordeal *Arnold van Schoorisse* (Arnold of Schoorisse), the critic P.F. Van Kerckhoven recognizes Ronsse’s aim as primarily national and he praises the effect of the novel on the contemporary Flemish reader:

The great images of Philip van Artevelde and Frans Ackerman rise on the national scene as if to remind the Flemings of the ancient greatness of their nation in order to increase the love for the holy native soil. (Van Kerckhoven 1845, 69; my translation)

The novelists seek to incite their fellow-countrymen to try to live up to the examples of the ancestors’ struggles against foreign tyranny:

Might we rekindle some sparks of that national fire, which glowed so fiercely in the bosom of our forefathers, and protect and secure those patriotic feelings [...] Let us be like our ancestors: *attached to our independent existence; proud of our past; hostile to all foreign yoke.* (Ecrevisse 1845b, I 16-17; my translation, italics in the original)

Nonetheless, what is regarded as a typically “national” and “Belgian” characteristic in historical novels is not the portrayal of these heroic deeds but the depiction of manners, customs, people, spaces, etc. The same critic Van Kerckhoven states in his review of Ronsse’s *Arnold van Schoorisse*: “The Flemings are, as it were, portrayers (painters) by nature; they share a love for the harmonious, but above all, for the colourful” (Van Kerckhoven 1845, 69; my translation). It is precisely a chronotope saturated with national influences, with many depictions of traditional manners and customs in a time and space that are portrayed as truly national (i.e., that bear evidence of some sort of national, historical continuity) that constitutes the characteristic trait of what is regarded as the “good,” “true,” “national” Belgian historical novel in the 1830s and 1840s. Such historical novels are not to be found in this first type.

A second type of historical novels is based on a combination of elements from what Bakhtin terms the *chronotope of the adventure novel of everyday life* with elements from what can be called a *documentary chronotope*.^{xv} In these novels, much more attention is paid to the different regions that came to make up the Belgian nation in 1830.^{xvi} Central aspects are elaborate descriptions of how those regions looked in the past and depictions of the ancestral, often rural life, the life that is “spread out along the edge of the road itself, and along the sideroads” (Bakhtin 1990, 120). Rather than to praise the love of independence and the heroic struggles of the forefathers, these historical novels aimed to fulfil the need of making the Belgian citizens familiar with every nook and corner of their new mother country by disseminating knowledge. By getting more familiar with the history and peculiarities of the different regions, the nineteenth century Belgians would no longer feel like strangers in their own home.

A typical trait in this second type is the narratological structural device of two characters travelling through a particular region. One character is usually an older, local inhabitant who is well acquainted with the region and its history, the particular dangers, the local traditions, etc. The other character is ideally a young and ignorant stranger who is ignorant but eager to learn from his guide. An anonymous critic of Heuvelmans’ historical novel *De twee reizigers, of verhalen van historische en plaetselyke geschiedenissen uit de 16e en 17e eeuw* (The Two Travellers, or Historical and Local Stories from the 16th and 17th Century) (1843) claimed that Heuvelmans’ structural device of two of these characters travelling through the Kempen (a rural region in the north of Belgium where an important historical battle had taken place in 1597) was an ideal means to make the reading public familiar with “numerous noteworthy particulars in the manners and traditions” of the local population ([Anon.] 1844, 396).

A characteristic trait of the chronotopical constellation of this type of novels is the way in which the local guide saturates space with historical time: more important than reaching the final destination are the guide's stories, which are meant to entertain the stranger while at the same time instructing him. The guide continually interrupts the journey so as to evoke as vividly as possible (for the accompanying stranger as well as for the reader) the historical events that have occurred along the road taken. Space comes to function as the stage of history, of historical time; the historical evocations that spring from the guide's stories populate the scene with figures from the national past. Characteristically, an extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator complements these stagings of national history with descriptions, digressions, observations and commentaries in which the reader is presented with more precise historical knowledge on a wide range of topics.

A third category consists of historical novels in which an *idyllic chronotope* (which often occurs in combination with a chronotope of the adventure novel of ordeal) is used to emphasize the genealogical connection between the forefathers and the nineteenth century Belgians. Historical novels like for example Ecrevisse's *De Bokkenryders in het land van Valkenberg* (The Goat Riders in the Land of Valkenberg) (1845) portray a remote and rural corner of the fatherland where the inhabitants have lived for countless generations in the same isolated place. This "unity of place," "the age-old rooting of the life of generations to a single place, from which this life, in all its events, is inseparable" (Bakhtin 1990, 225), ensures the continued existence and survival of the ancestral virtues, customs and traditions, which are preserved in a virtually uncorrupted state. Far-off corners of the mother country are believed and presented to be reliable sources of past traditions. The marginal regions guarantee the authentic survival of the ancestral customs through their geographical isolation, whereas the civilized centre of the country is associated with degeneration and corruption because of its interaction with other nations, i.e. other manners. Leerssen considers the contrast between central and peripheral regions to be a structural element of an international "grammar of national characterization":

Centrality carries with it the connotation of historical dynamism and development, whereas peripheries are stereotypically "timeless," "backward," or "traditional." It is a commonplace to say of remote corners that they have been "bypassed by history" or that "time has stood still here." In our chronotopical view of the world, journeying away from the centers of societal activity means metaphorically journeying backward in time. [...] the provincial countryside moves more slowly and is "closer to nature," as opposed to metropolitan "life in the fast lane." The entire genre of the rustic novel [...] partakes of this commonplace as much as the topos in late Victorian adventure romances that explorations into the undiscovered corners of the world may lead us to the remains of a still-persisting past (Leerssen 2000, 277-278)

The purport of this idyllic chronotope in the light of the context sketched above is the idea that the ancestral customs, manners and traditions live on in the nineteenth century inhabitants of these same regions, for they too have been raised on the same soil, and the same (heroic, freedom-loving, but above all, uncorrupted) blood runs through their veins. The idyllic chronotope thus provides the means to link past, present and future organically in "the distinctive configuration of time and space that defines 'reality' within the world of a text" (Beaton 2000, 181).

The relation between time and space in the idyllic chronotope can be characterized as

an organic fastening-down, a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory with all its nooks and crannies, its familiar mountains, valleys, fields, rivers and forests, and one's own home. (Bakhtin 1990, 225)

Significantly, the remote corner portrayed in *De Bokkenryders in het land van Valkenberg* is characterized precisely as "the soil where the bones of his ancestors rest, the place where his hut and his cradle used to stand" (Ecrevisse 1845a, 10). Moreover, the narrator stresses the fact that the inhabitants return to this very same place after each seasonal flooding of the river, continually rebuilding their huts and resuming their traditional, primitive way of life. Time in these novels is primarily structured by the change of seasons, agricultural cycles and religious holidays. The unity of place in the life of generations "weakens and renders less distinct all the temporal boundaries between individual lives and between various phases of one and the same life" (Bakhtin 1990, 225). This specific configuration of time and space in the idyllic chronotope is the reason why contemporary critics deemed this particular type of historical novel to be the most "national" of all three models (e.g. Sleeckx 1845, xii).

It is time to wrap up the argumentation of this contribution. In the first two decades after independence, Belgian historical novelists eagerly participated in the (politically orchestrated) nationalistic attempts to shape a recognizable *Belgian* identity for the people inhabiting the regions that

had been united as a buffer state against French threats of annexation in 1830. Because of the range of different communicative functions (nationalist, didactic and moral) allotted to Belgian literature in these decades, there emerged a number of different types of historical novels. These types were not only intended to legitimize the independence of the new nation state toward the international community; first and foremost they had to make the Belgian citizens aware of their shared past as a nation. In order to do so, the first Belgian historical novelists began to search for new norms and models for their own patriotic literature, which had to be the reflection and embodiment of a unique, national genius.^{xvii} Nineteenth century Belgians had to be made more familiar with the glorious past of the nation, since only sufficient knowledge of this past could inspire pride in their hearts, pride for their rich inheritance as a nation, pride for the ancient national traditions that had survived in spite of foreign government, pride that would result in national fervour and true patriotism.

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CHAPTER TWO

ⁱ Although Belgium had not been a separate nation until 1830, there had been a growing particular feeling of a Belgian national identity since the Austrian government, and especially since the Brabant Revolt (1787-1793). This feeling, however, was still largely undefined and certainly not as explicit as it would become after 1830, and the sense of national self-awareness was primarily to be found in intellectual circles. Cf. Bemong 2006a, 114, 117 and Bemong 2006b, 4 (and especially note 8) for a more extensive discussion of this point.

ⁱⁱ For a discursive analysis of the anti-French sentiments in the prefaces of Belgian historical novels—sentiments springing from the French threat of annexation—see Bemong 2004.

ⁱⁱⁱ Examples of this international scepticism can be found in Stengers 1981, 7-9 and 16-18; Lope 1991, 433-440; Tollebeek 1998, 335-338.

^{iv} Cf. Bemong 2006a, 119-121.

^v During the first two decades after Belgian independence, the question of whether this national literature should be written in Flemish or in French was of secondary importance. In 1846, Pieter Ecrevisse, author of several Flemish historical novels, expressed the predominant unproblematic attitude towards the bilingual status of a Belgian national literature in the preface to *De Drossaert Clercx* (The bailiff Clercx): "Create, and help to create a patriotic literature; it will be the staunchest pillar of the national building! Write in French or in Flemish; but be Belgians in your writings!" (Ecrevisse 1846, 15; my translation). Cf. Bemong 2006a, 114-115.

^{vi} The Belgian critic Charles Faider voiced this widespread opinion as follows: "when one recalls that the basis of patriotism is [...] the memory of a heroic past, one might finally come to the conclusion that the historical novel is a necessity for a free nation" (Faider 1836, 144; my translation).

^{vii} Cf. Bemong 2006b for a discussion of the demand of truthfulness with regard to the historical novel in Belgium in the period 1830-1850.

^{viii} Assmann states in this respect: "Through its cultural heritage a society becomes visible *to itself and to others*" (Assmann 1995, 133; italics added).

^{ix} Cf. Bemong 2006a, 121-122 for an analysis of this discourse.

^x Cf. also Bemong 2006a, 122.

^{xi} Detailed analyses of the poetological stances of both the novelists and contemporary critics can be found in Bemong 2006b.

^{xii} Using the three dimensions Fokkema distinguishes in the study of literary codes, one might argue from a historical-relativistic point of view that the specific pragmatic functions the genre of the historical novel fulfilled in Belgium in the 1830s and 1840s were largely responsible for the syntactic and semantic characteristics of the

genre. In my doctoral thesis (Bemong 2007b) I have designed a theoretical framework that combines Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope with a range of structuralist-narratological theories, such as Barthes' theory of functions, Greimas' theory of actantial logic, Genette's theories of focalisation and narration and Hamon's theory of description, in order to describe the syntactic and semantic characteristics of each model. In the limited scope of this article, I restrict myself to the discussion of the different chronotopes from a purely genological point of view.

^{xiii} Many theorists have pointed out the vagueness surrounding Bakhtin's chronotope concept. Morson and Emerson, and Keunen, amongst others, have clarified how a distinction can be made in Bakhtin's examples between what could be called "generic chronotopes" or "chronotopes of whole genres" on the one hand, and "motivic chronotopes" on the other (Morson and Emerson 1990, 374; Keunen 2000). This distinction greatly enhances the operational potential of Bakhtin's concept for the analysis of literary texts, a potential my analyses exploit (cf. Bemong 2007a).

^{xiv} Bemong 2007a presents an analysis of precisely such an historical adventure novel of ordeal, namely Joseph Ronsse's *Arnold van Schoorisse* (1845).

^{xv} The term "documentary chronotope" is not coined by Bakhtin himself, but by Keunen (cf. Keunen 2001, 424-427).

^{xvi} An important issue Belgian nineteenth-century historiography and historical literature were confronted with was the problematic geographical unification brought about by the September Revolution: all of a sudden, historically different, independently existing principalities were brought together in a new nation state. One of the major issues to be dealt with was the question as to how such diversity could be adequately integrated into a *Belgian* unity, so that the national history could surpass the mere juxtaposition of the histories of the old principalities. The solution opted for by the majority of Belgian historians and novelists was to tie in Belgian history with the history of one particular principality, namely Flanders. Cf. Bemong 2006a, 115-116.

^{xvii} According to the critic Domien Sleenckx, Belgian national literature had to be "the truthful mirror of our manners, customs, notions, national spirit, civilization and artistic feeling" (Sleenckx 1845, ii; my translation).