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**'Ein Querschnitt durch Flandern'. The 'anti-Belgian' image of Flanders in Friedrich Markus Huebner's *Flämishes Novellenbuch* (1918)**

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**Abstract**

In April 1918, the Leipzig publishing house Insel released its *Flämisches Novellenbuch*, curated by the literary translator and art critic, Friedrich Markus Huebner. This anthology of contemporary Flemish literature, which promised its readers a literary tour of 'real-life' Flanders, was part of a much larger number of translations sponsored by the German occupier during the First World War in Belgium. This article explores the image of Flanders that was propagated by Huebner in service of the German cultural propaganda, with a focus on its anti-Belgian undertones. Huebner's selection of short stories seems to represent Flanders as a poor, unfulfilled and rural nation, systematically oppressed by the Belgian state. In this regard, the anthology seamlessly aligns itself with the rhetorical strategy deployed by the German occupation administration – a narrative that casted the Belgian state as the true oppressor, while positioning the Germans as loyal allies and benevolent protectors of the Flemings.

**Keywords**

*Flamenpolitik*, Anthology, World Literature, First World War, Flanders

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**Ulrike Burki** holds a master's degree in Dutch and German culture and literature (University of Antwerp & University of Utrecht). Her research interests lie in the literary history of the Flemish movement and in the construction and circulation of national images through literary texts. Currently, she is working under the supervision of Kevin Absillis (University of Antwerp) and Elke Brems (KU Leuven) on a FWO-project about the representation of Flanders in German translations of Flemish literature that appeared during the First World War.

## **Word Count: 6975**

### **1. Introduction**

In his 2013 book *What is world literature?* David Damrosch advocates for viewing world literature as a 'mode of circulation'. Texts become part of world literature when they begin to resonate in new cultural contexts. The emphasis is on re-contextualization and re-interpretation: on the meanings that texts gain in translation. (p.6). Examined through Damrosch's dynamic lens on world literature, the translations of Flemish literary texts that appeared during the First World War serve as a compelling case study.

During the First World War (1914-1918), German authorities rolled out a large scale propaganda strategy in occupied Belgium. In an effort to disrupt the Belgian state, they systematically angled for the sympathy of the Flemish (Dutch-speaking) part of the Belgian population. Capitalizing on the notions of Germanic kinship and a deep-rooted cultural

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connection, the occupying forces tried to position themselves as a 'Brudervolk' assisting the Flemish people to liberate-themselves from 'Francophone oppression'

Numerous scholars have already investigated how art and literature became instrumentalized in service of this anti-Belgian propaganda (Govaert, 1990; Tiedau, 1998; Roland, 1999; Leonardy & Roland, 1999; Zajac, 2014; Van den Berg, 2015, Zindler 2017). For example: it is well known that the *Politische Abteilung* (PA) in Brussels, which was tasked with the coordination of the so-called *Flamenpolitik*, actively engaged with Flemish authors and strived to professionalize the Flemish book industry (Roland, 1999). Of particular interest here is the logistical and financial support provided by the PA for the production of German translations from Flemish literary works.

The support of the PA and the wave of *Flamenbegeisterung* that the *Flamenpolitik* instigated in Germany, caused a surge in the production of German translations from literary texts written by Flemish authors during the war years (1914-1918) (Van Doorslaer, 2006, p. 309). The Digital Library and Bibliography for Literature in Translation (DLBT) has registered 74 of them – a number that stands out significantly when contrasted with the mere 14 literary translations from Dutch (i.e., from the Netherlands) that appeared within the same time period (Van Doorslaer, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

The distinct Flemish character of these texts was strongly accentuated. Noteworthy in this regard is the emergence of several 'Flemish anthologies' during the war, bearing titles as *Flämische Erzähler* (1916); *Vlämische Sagen, Legenden und Volksmärchen* (1916); *Flandern: Ein Novellenbuch* (1918), and *Flämisches Novellenbuch* (1918). Notably, German publishers

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<sup>1</sup> A significant part of that book production was intended for the occupation administration in Belgium and for German soldiers who were stationed at the Flemish front. Particularly important in this regard are the bookshops of Georg Stilke. This German company had a large number of station kiosks in Germany before the war and successfully expanded those activities to Belgium and Northern France during the war years. Between 1915 and 1918, the company managed dozens of station kiosks and field bookstores in Belgium. Stilke mainly sold newspapers, magazines, pocket books, and post cards, but works on Flemish language, culture, and history, as well as (translations of) Flemish literature, also had a fixed place in his stores (Degreef, 2011).

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and translators tended to refer to these translations as 'Übersetzungen aus dem *Flämischen*' [translations from *Flemish*] in an effort to clearly distinguish them from translations 'aus dem *Niederländischen*' [from *Dutch*] or even 'aus dem *Holländischen*' [from *Hollandic*].

Whereas the institutional networks of the German literary translation policy have been mapped to some extent (Roland, 1997, 1999a, 1999b; Zajas, 2015; Van den Berg, 2015; Zindler, 2017), and the interest for particular Flemish authors (e.g. Cyriel Buysse and Felix Timmermans) have attracted a modicum of interest (Van Doorslaer, 2000; Van Gemert, 2005), the actual texts have thus far received little attention. Yet, to fully grasp how literary translations contributed to the *Flamenpolitik* it is essential to zoom in on the actual style and content of the texts that were circulated during the war years. Which ideas were circulated through literary translations? And how did they contribute to the discourse of the *Flamenpolitik*?

This article will focus on the image of Flanders emerging from the *Flämisches Novellenbuch*: an anthology of German translations of Flemish short stories curated by Friedrich Markus Huebner and published by the Insel publishing house in 1918. This *Flämisches Novellenbuch* provides a compelling case study for several reasons: firstly because Huebner himself, in his preface, characterizes the anthology as a 'Querschnitt durch Flandern' [a tour of Flanders] (Huebner, 1918, p.4) and secondly due to the emphasis Huebner placed on its potential as a 'hervorragendes, auch politisches, Aufklärungsmittel' [an excellent formative tool, also politically]<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, both the mimetic and the propagandistic potential of this anthology are reinforced by the genre-specificities of the international anthology.

## 2. The international anthology as a *mixtum compositum*

In their programmatic introduction to the volume *Translation in Anthologies and Collections (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries)*, Teresa Seruya et al. (2013) characterize the genre of the international anthology as a *mixtum compositum*, a configured corpus, thereby emphasizing the agency of

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<sup>2</sup> F.M. Huebner (1918, October 4) [Letter to Anton Kippenberg], Goethe und Schiller-Archiv, Weimar (50/82, 4).

the anthologist, who selects a number of texts and weaves them together into a new textual fabric:

An anthology is always more than the parts that the anthologist has selected. It is produced, edited, published and received as a *mixtum compositum* whose assembled parts have entered a new relationship, have been woven together to form a new textual fabric. Each item is decontextualized by selection and recontextualized by structure. As such any text or excerpt is, or can be, de- or re-historicized, -ideologized and, -politicized (p.7).

This process of de- and re-contextualization presents intriguing opportunities within the context of the *Flamenpolitik*. By selecting specific texts and re-introducing them in a new, coherent framework, anthologies are ideally suited for constructing an image of Flanders that appears representative, but is, in fact, meticulously curated. Moreover, anthologies typically include paratexts (such as prefaces and / or afterwords, as well as blurbs, cover illustrations and titles) that further explicate and legitimize the coherence of the selection.

For the *Flämisches Növelenbuch* the mimetic value of its selection is strongly emphasized. This is evident, for instance, through its title – indicating that this is a *Flemish* book –, but also through the extensive preface provided by Huebner in which he emphasizes that the stories are chosen to collectively create a comprehensive portrayal of the Flemish environment, culture, and society. I quote extensively due to the significance of this paragraph:

Hierbei bestimmend war nicht lediglich der rein literarische Gesichtspunkt, weshalb von dem einen oder anderen leicht ein Stück vorhanden sein mag, das persönlich noch entscheidender kennzeichnet. Vielmehr suchte der Herausgeber außer dem dichterisch Bedeutungsvollen möglichst das stofflich Eigenartige zu berücksichtigen, derart, dass ein jeder flämische Landstrich, jeder flämische Beruf, Typus und Daseinszustand im Bilde dieser Schilderungen deutlich vertreten wäre. Das flämische Novellenbuch

möchte einen Querschnitt sowohl durch das erzählerische können in Flandern wie andererseits durch die flämische Menschenwelt, durch die flämische Gesellschaftsschichtung liefern (Huebner, 1918, p. 4).<sup>3</sup>

Building on Seruya et al (2013) and Damrosch (2013) this article understands the *Novellenbuch* as a *mixtum compositum*, a new cultural product in which new meanings illuminate. With this in mind, I opt for a contextualized reading of the book as it was circulating within the historical and cultural context of the First World War. This implies that I will focus on the German target texts and include Huebner's extensive preface in my analysis. Additionally and concomitantly, I choose not to address the stories within this volume individually, but instead adopt a thematic approach that allows me to identify themes and motifs transcending the stories. However, to understand how the *Novellenbuch*, as a *mixtum compositum*, resonated in its own cultural context, it is needed to first provide a short introduction into the historical and discursive backgrounds of the *Flamenpolitik*.

### 3. The *Flamenpolitik* as a discursive strategy

On August 4, 1914, German troops invaded neutral Belgium and occupied the majority of the Belgian territory. This occupied territory was divided into two zones: the so-called 'Etappengebiet' in West- and East Flanders, that was placed under direct military authority, and the remaining Belgian territory, subjected to the governance of the General Gouvernement in Brussels.

During the occupation of Belgium, the Germans exploited the growing discontent among Dutch-speaking Flemings in the predominantly French-speaking Belgian state structure.

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<sup>3</sup> For this anthology, the purely literary perspective was not the sole determinant. That is why, for certain authors, there may be other works that are more distinctive for them individually. In the first place, the editor aimed to select stories that are not only poetically significant, but also distinctive for Flanders, thus ensuring a clear representation of each Flemish region, profession type and state of existence. The *Flämisches Novellenbuch* seeks to provide a tour of the narrative abilities in Flanders and of the Flemish human world and the social stratification in Flemish society.

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By endorsing the Flemish resistance against 'Franco-Belgian oppression', the Germans aimed to rally the Flemish to their side and thus disrupt the Belgian state. Simultaneously, this Flemish-German rapprochement provided a moral rationale for Germany's military intervention in the neighboring country. The Germans portrayed their mission in Belgium as a noble undertaking, more specifically, as the liberation of Germanic Flanders from the cultural and political grip of Romanic influence (Wils 2022).

The propagandistic significance of this moral justification cannot be overstated. The issue of war guilt was a pivotal element in the propaganda efforts of all parties involved. And this issue soon became linked to the German invasion of neutral Belgium. The allied nations seized upon the invasion as evidence of Germany's 'barbaric expansionism'. It was a narrative that Germany in turn tried to counter rhetorically by presenting Belgium as an unnatural ethnic structure of French manufacture (Schaepdrijver 1997, pp. 139-140). Thus, ideologically, the *Flamenpolitik* and German power politics were two sides of the same coin. Germany's ethnic sympathy for the Flemish 'Brudervolk' seamlessly complemented their ideological offensive against imperialist French politics (Schaepdrijver 1997, p. 142; Yammine 2021).

In essence, the discourse of the *Flamenpolitik* was structured around an ethnically based dichotomy between the Germanic and Romanic character. Notions such as simplicity, authenticity and sincerity were associated with the Germanic character and played off against an idea of Romanic 'bourgeois' decadence, imperialism and inauthenticity (Schaepdrijver 1997, Leonardy & Roland 1999, Lobbes 2018). This discourse was consolidated and distributed by Huebner's *Novellenbuch*.

#### **4. Reading the literary output of the *Flamenpolitik***

The *Flämisches Novellenbuch* appeared in the spring of 1918 and was a project of Friedrich Markus Huebner, who selected, translated and edited the stories. Huebner was well embedded in the networks of the *Flamenpolitik*. During the First World War, he resided in Brussels, where



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he worked for the *Politische Abteilung* on professionalizing the Flemish book industry. A noteworthy achievement during this period was the establishment, in the summer of 1918, of a Flemish 'Boekencentrale' [book distribution center], responsible for supplying Flemish bookshops and overseeing trade regulations with the Netherlands (Roland 2009, pp. 62-67).

In various articles published in German newspapers and magazines, Huebner critically assessed the state of the Flemish book industry, which he believed had been systematically neglected in favor of Franco-Belgian culture. In a contribution to *Börsenblatt für den Deutschen Buchhandel*, for example, Huebner stated that 'Zeitungswesen, Buch und Buchhandel [...] in Belgien zu den bestgepflegten Mitteln [gehören] mit denen Frankreich die geistige Eroberung dieses Landes von jeher planmäßig betrieben hat' (1917, p. 921) [Press, books and book industry [...] in Belgium [rank] among the best-maintained means through which France has consistently pursued the intellectual conquest of this country]. And in a subsequent notice published in the same magazine a few months later, Huebner uses a similar register, when celebrating the initial successes of his 'Boekencentrale' and its contribution to the 'Wiederaufblühen des gesamten Bildungs- und Gesittungsleben in Flandern' [the revival of intellectual and moral life in all of Flanders] (Huebner, October 1918, p. 434).

This narrative of Romanic obstruction and Germanic dependency, that is apparent in Huebner's journalist pieces also resonates in his translation work. Fully in line with the official propaganda directives of the occupation administration (Wils, 2022, pp. 64-65), Flanders is portrayed as a kindred, yet dependent nation in need of liberation by 'big brother Germany'. Subsequently, I will provide a more detailed exploration of how this discursive logic unfolds within the *Flämisches Novellenbuch*.

#### **4.1. *Flämisches Novellenbuch***

The *Flämisches Novellenbuch* comprises 22 texts written by 17 authors, all of whom were alive at the time of the anthology's publication. The youngest one was Felix Timmermans, who was

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32 years old in 1918. The oldest one was the then 59-year-old Cyriel Buysse. In his anthology, Huebner aimed to construct an image of real-life Flanders. Not only by presenting an ostensibly representative selection of recent prose, but also by framing that selection in the preface as a tour of real-life Flanders. The preface serves as a valuable entry point for comprehending the depicted image of Flanders within the anthology. In the subsequent section, I will delve into a more detailed discussion of the preface.

#### 4.1.1. Preface

Huebner's preface functions as a reading guide, offering its readers some advice on what to look out for on their 'tour of Flanders'. The text commences with an introduction to the constitutional structure of Belgium, emphasizing the pronounced dichotomy between the French-speaking (Romanic) and the Dutch-speaking (Germanic) population. Within this context, the constitutional framework of Belgium is portrayed as structurally disadvantaging the Flemings. I quote extensively due to the pivotal importance of this paragraph:

Hier hat nur ein gewisser Teil den Anschluss an die Macht, an den Erwerb im Großen, an die vaterländische Politik – jener Teil der Belgier, welcher durch die Sprache, Denkweise, Gesellschaftsstil, Verschwägerung und Geldverkehr zu Frankreich steht. Bildet doch schon der staatsrechtliche Aufbau dieses Belgien [...] nur die verwaltungstechnische Wiederholung Frankreichs in einem kleineren Umrisse. In solch künstlichen Vertrag aber passten von jeher nicht seine Einwohner anderen, germanischen Gepräges. Und so wurden diese, die Flamen, wofern sie nicht ablassen wollten von ihrer ererbten Sprache und Volksart, im eigenen Lande zu Bürgern zweiten Ranges und müssen sich, an der Entfaltung ihrer besten Möglichkeiten verhindert, ohne Größe und Geschichte durchs Dasein fristen (Huebner, 1918, p. 1).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Here, only a certain segment of the population has access to power, to wealth and to national politics – that segment of the Belgians who align with France through language, mindset, social style, marriage and economy. After all, the constitutional structure of Belgium is no more than a bureaucratic repetition of France within a

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First of all, it is important to note that the Romanic-Germanic dichotomy played out here is not conceptualized in geographic terms, but rather in terms of language, thought processes, community style, in short: of 'national character'. Huebner focusses on the friction between the French-speaking bourgeoisie and the Flemish-speaking lower social classes. The Flemings who are disadvantaged by the constitutional structure of Belgium are those who do not renounce their Germanic heritage – and thus explicitly not the Flemish, French-speaking bourgeoisie.

The social exclusion of the 'Germanic Flemings' as elucidated by Huebner, serves as an explanation for the flourishing artistic production in Flanders. Art becomes a medium through which the Flemings project and fully unfold the potential, that they find constrained in the Belgian public sphere. Or in Huebner's words: 'In der Kunst gibt dieses kleine Volk den vielen Kräften Spielraum, welche es in der Wirklichkeit anzusetzen keine Gelegenheit sieht. Und es ist die Kunst, die sie noch des Gefühls versichert überhaupt so etwas wie ein Vaterland zu haben (Huebner, 1918, p. 2).'<sup>5</sup>

Thus, according to Huebner's assertions, there were plenty of options for this Flemish anthology. The preface characterizes Flemish literature as typically depicting the Flemish country and its people, making it ideally suited for a literary tour. Or, as stated in the preface: 'Um den Flamen in seinem Hause und in seiner Landschaft, in seinem Erwerbe und seinen Vergnügungen, in seinem Character und seinen Idealen kennen und begreifen zu lernen, werden sich [...] für den Fernerstehenden die flämischen Kunstschöpfungen stets als das anschaulichste, zumindest als das zugänglichste Mittel anbieten' (Huebner, 1918, p.3).<sup>6</sup>

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smaller outline. In this artificial structure, the inhabitants of a different, Germanic character have never fitted in. Thus, the Flemish, if unwilling to give up their inherited language and way of life, are doomed to be second-class citizens in their own country. Hindered from unfolding their full potential, they must endure existence without grandeur and history.

<sup>5</sup> In art, this small nation provides an outlet for the forces for which it finds no opportunity in reality. And it is art that assures them of the feeling of having something like a homeland at alle.

<sup>6</sup> To get to know and understand the Flemish people in their home and in their landscape, in their work and in their pleasures, in their character and their ideals, Flemish artistic creations will always present themselves to outsiders as the most illustrative, or at least the most accessible, means.

The discourse in the preface aligns seamlessly with the Germanic liberation rhetoric briefly outlined earlier. Flanders is depicted as a rural nation, struggling to free itself from 'Franco-Belgian occupation'. In the subsequent paragraphs, I examine how the selection of literary short stories reinforces this discourse. My examination will focus specifically on those aspects that are highlighted by Huebner in his preface: the representation of the Flemish landscape and of the Flemish character.

#### 4.1.2. *Red, yellow, green, orange and purple*

Those who read the *Flämisches Novellenbuch* as a 'tour of Flanders' are presented with a predominantly rural landscape perpetually bathing in sunlight. The reader looks out over sunlit cornfields, adorned with shades of gold, yellow, red and orange. This is exemplified in Gustaaf d'Hondt's story 'In den Vennen' [In the Fenlands], where the reader joins the narrator on a contemplative journey throughout the natural environment. The narrator's emotions, which heighten as the sun descends beyond the horizon, are artfully intensified through the elevated use of color and language:

Und wenn dann die Sonne bisweilen blutrot in den tiefen purpurnen Westen schlafen ging und sie ihr letztes Licht in einem Dunste von ferner Feuerlohe voller spukartiger Blutflecken über die Bautenmasse warf, dann konnten wir stehen und still und schweigend gaffen, bis die herandunkelnde Dämmerung allmählich alles unter den zunehmenden Nebellasten verbarg (d'Hondt, 1918, p. 262).<sup>7</sup>

A similar scene is depicted in Piet van Assche's story 'Bauer und Vagabund' [Farmer and Vagabond], in which the farmer Maarten stares for a long time at the sun setting over the polders. In this story as well, the sunset unfolds as a natural spectacle adorned in red, yellow and purple: 'Rot und Orangengelb flammten durch die Ritzen, flossen über die

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<sup>7</sup> And when the sun went to sleep blood-red in the deep purple west and threw its last light over the mass of buildings in a darkness of distant flames full of spooky bloodstains, then we could stand and gape silently until the approaching twilight gradually hid everything under the increasing fog loads.

dunkelbeurpurten Wiesen und Felder und troffen in die Sumpfflächen. Als später die Farben haltlos ins Breite zerliefen, violett und grau, erhob sich, tief am Boden hinschwebend, allerorten der Nebel und die Wolkenherde ward auseinandergetrieben (Van Assche, 1918, p. 93).<sup>8</sup>

This vivid portrayal of the Flemish landscape can also be found in 'Die wilde Jagd' [The wild hunt] by Karel van den Oever. The story is set on a sultry summer evening in the Zundert heathland in the Limburg Kempen region. After a glowing scorching summer day, a tempest is unleashed, marking the onset of a witch hunt, the so-called 'Tilkjesjacht'. In the first two paragraphs alone, we find references to a 'sengendblauen' [scorching blue] sky, a 'weißblendende Sonne' [white-blinding sun], a 'grellgelbe Hitze' [brilliant yellow heat], a warmth resembling 'geschmolzener rostbrauner Bronze' [melted rust-brown bronze], bushes like 'helle Beete dunklen Goldes' [bright beds of dark gold] and a sun described as 'flammengelb' [flame yellow] and 'rotiggrün' [red-green] (Van den Oever, 1918, p. 218).

#### 4.1.3. *Die Sonne... Die Sonne...*

The predominance of rural settings in the selection is justified by Huebner in his preface as a consequence of the Flemish people having limited opportunities to partake in the bourgeois life of the metropolis. Huebner notes in the preface that the metropolis is primarily the domain of the French-speaking bourgeoisie. The few urban landscapes that emerge in the stories consistently carry a negative connotation. The urban landscape is typically depicted as a place of moral decay, where the Flemish characters experience a sense of alienation.

A prime example in this context is Herman Teirlinck's story, which also serves as the concluding piece in Huebner's compilation. Teirlinck's contribution is titled 'Sommergequäle'

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<sup>8</sup> Red and orange-yellow flames flickered through the cracks, flowed over the darkly purpled meadows and fields, and dripped into the swampy areas. As later the colors aimlessly dissolved into the wide expanse, violet and gray, everywhere the mist rose, hovering low to the ground, and the herds of clouds were scattered.

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[Summer agony] and was originally published in the collection *Zon. Verzamelde beschrijvingen*. This story is the ninth 'description' in that collection and is situated in the heart of Brussels. The story commences with the introduction of the central character, Joris Antie, a representative of the firm Geeraard Antie & Son. Having spent the day at a Brussels fair, he is now enjoying a glass of cognac on a terrace situated along the central Anspach Avenue. From this point, he observes the gradual descent of the sun in the west, toward the Brabant countryside:

Das Streicheln der Sommerabendsonne treibt allenthalben in der Luft, wahrlich mit einer langsamen Liebkosung führt sie diesen stickenden Sommertag seinem Ende zu. Sie liegt irgendwo im platten Brabant, draußen vor dem Westtore der Stadt; aber bis herein zwischen die hohen Häusermauern hängt das leichtrote Gespinst der zartrotten Abendglut und färbt und überzaubert sie. Es verwandelt die grauen Dächergiebel, spreitet purpurne Töne über die schwarzen Schattengründe und bepudert mit zartem Veilchenblau und hellem Orangengelb die kleinsten Lichtreste, die stellenweise auf blendenden Glasscheiben oder weißen Fenstervorhängen noch verweilen. [...] Aber hienieden, aus dem Gewühle der Kaffeehäuser und der fleißigen Kaufläden, knattert schon das fahlgelbe Gaslicht und das Grün der elektrischen Lampen. Der kalte Flimmerglanz bringt in das Glas Eiskognak des Herrn Antie – da erstirbt die rosige Glut (Teirlinck, 1918, p. 370).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The caress of the summer evening sun wafts through the air everywhere, and, with a gentle caress, leads this stifling summer day to its end. The sun rests somewhere in the flat Brabant, outside the western gate of the city; but everywhere in between the tall houses hangs the light red web of the soft red evening glow and colors and enchants them. It transforms the grey roofs, spreads purple tones over the black shadowy grounds and dusts with delicate violet blue and bright orange yellow the smallest remaining shimmers of light still lingering here and there on glass panes or white window curtains. [...] But down here, amidst the hustle and bustle of the coffee houses and the busy stores, the pale yellow gaslight and the green of the electric lamps is already sputtering. The cold flickering glow reflects into the glass of cognac of Mr. Antie - there the rosy glow fades out.

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From the terrace, Joris observes the city rush past him in a whirlwind of colors, fragrances and sounds. After a while, he becomes acquainted with a certain Stelle D'Alency, who convinces him to attend a dance show in the Brussels Summer Palace. After the performance Joris and Stella end up in a nearby restaurant, where they indulge in oysters and champagne. Joris starts to feel increasingly estranged within this bourgeois milieu, but they decide to prolong the evening at Stella's residence. However, when Stella starts coming on to him and then requests proper compensation for her services of the evening, the joviality dissipates for Joris, prompting him to hastily depart the city. At the break of dawn, Joris hurries to the train station, where he and a fellow passenger become mesmerized by the beauty of the rising sun. And this proves to be exactly what Joris requires to come back to his senses. The story concludes with an astonished dialogue between Joris Antie and the fellow passenger:

'Hehe!'

'Sie meinen, mein Herr?'

'Dort auf dem Bahnsteig, bei den Amtszimmern, der goldene Flecken ... sieh da: die Sonne!'

'Die Sonne ... die Sonne. Ach, tatsächlich!' (Teirlinck, 1918, p. 402)<sup>10</sup>

Structurally, Teirlinck's story occupies a meaningful position within the anthology. Spanning 33 pages, it ranks as the second longest story in the collection and, moreover, it is the very last contribution.<sup>11</sup> In terms of content, this story serves as a counterpoint against which the rural depiction of Flanders emerges even more forcefully.

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<sup>10</sup> 'Hehe!'

'You mean, sir?'

'There on the platform, by the offices, the golden spot ... look there: the sun!'

'The sun ... the sun. Ah, indeed.'

<sup>11</sup> The order of the contributions is relevant. Correspondence between Friedrich Markus Huebner and his publisher reveals that it was decided at the last minute to completely reverse the order – from an alphabetical arrangement to one motivated by content. F.M. Huebner (1917, August 25) [Letter to Insel], Goethe und Schiller-Archiv, Weimar (50/82, 4).

At first glance, there are substantial resemblances between the representation of the metropolis and the countryside. Much like in the preceding stories, the reader is immersed in a spectacle of colors and sounds. However, whereas these overwhelming sensory impressions evoke a synesthetic, at times nearly mystical connection with the environment, in Joris's case, it appears to provoke more of a synthetic intoxication. The outcome of this intoxication could scarcely contrast more with the stories discussed earlier: rather than experiencing complete harmony between self and nature, Joris becomes increasingly estranged from this bourgeois milieu.

#### 4.1.4. *A village at the crossroads of the world*

An examination of the urban / rural landscape in this anthology seems to uncover several key elements in the Flemish national image constructed within this anthology. Nature and rurality, with the sun as a central motif, constitute a significant discursive marker upon which ideas of community and authenticity are based. The metropolis, on the other hand, with electric light as its central motif, functions as a discursive counterpoint, where facets of individualism, inauthenticity and bourgeois decadence light up.

But these descriptions of nature and the countryside are also relevant from a stylistic point of view. In his preface, Huebner situates Flanders at the crossroads of 'die großen Geistesströme des ganzen Erdteils' [the great intellectual movements of the entire continent] (Huebner, 1918, p. 3). Not only geographically – Flanders's central location in Europe – but also spiritually. Precisely because bourgeois life was made inaccessible to the Flemings, they would be all the freer in their artistic expressions. Or as Huebner puts it in his preface: 'An den flämischen Künstlern fällt geradezu ins Auge, wie sie neue im Auslande aufkommende Arten der Wahrnehmung und der Wiedergabe meist als die ersten erlauschen durchproben und selbstständig weiterentwickeln' [It is remarkable in Flemish artists how they, often among the



first, keenly perceive and experiment with emerging forms of perception and representation from abroad, subsequently independently advancing and developing them] (Huebner, 1918, p. 3).

The fact that Huebner seems to inscribe the selected works in the international avant-garde is interesting. At the time Huebner was working on his anthology, a generation of young, anti-bourgeois, and (most often) German-minded artists stood up in Flanders, actively engaging in the international artistic space the war had opened. Avant-garde poets in Flanders found inspiration in German expressionism and incorporated it into their own stylistic experiments. Moreover, as has been extensively researched by Hubert Roland (2009), Friedrich Markus Huebner's himself was also well-versed in the expressionist movement and regularly published on the subject.

In this regard, it seems all the more remarkable that Huebner, in his selection of stories, does not introduce Flemish avant-gardism, but instead focusses on authors that are linked with Flemish impressionism (f.e. Teirlinck, D'Hondt), naturalism (f.e. Buysse, Van de Woestijne) and new mysticism (f.e. Timmermans, Sabbe). A possible explanation for this is the fact that this anthology was meant as a 'Volksbuch', directed to a wide reading public of (primarily) German soldiers stationed at the western front.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, the stylistic repertoires of the selected authors continued an already familiar image of Flanders and adapted it to the context of the *Flamenpolitik*. The collected stories present an image of Flanders as a lush idyll, disturbed by modernity and industrialization. Noteworthy in this regard, is that the industrialization project is deemed the exclusive domain

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<sup>12</sup> That is also the reason why Huebner argued with his publisher that the book should not cost more than 3 Mark and that, in terms of format and size, it should be designed to be handy enough to fit into a soldier's backpack. F.M. Huebner (1916, August 21) [Letter to Anton Kippenberg], Goethe und Schiller-Archiv, Weimar (50/82, 4).

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of the French-speaking bourgeoisie. To really capture this, I will shift my focus from the depiction of the Flemish environment to the characters inhabiting this imaged Flanders.

#### 4.1.5. *A life boat on a little river of absinthe*

Regarding the social order within the envisioned 'human world', it is noteworthy that most of the characters stem from the lower social classes. Additionally, a significant number of characters opt for complete withdrawal from society. These self-reliant individuals are particularly interesting, in the context of the above mentioned anti-Belgian occupation discourse that was circulating in the *Flamenpolitik*. They seem to re-emphasize the distinct connection between the Flemish people and their homeland, while also implying that the potential of the Flemish people cannot be fully realized within the existing social framework. Examples of such self-reliant characters include the nomadic puppeteer Bert ('Puppenspiel' [Puppet show]), the reclusive Piet ('Wilde Jagd' [Wild hunt]), the wild 'Vagabond' from 'Bauer und Vagebund' [Farmer and vagabund], and the titular protagonists from 'Markus und Theus'.

The striking underrepresentation of characters from the upper social classes is also addressed in the preface and explained as follows: 'Die einst flämischen Oberklassen haben sich zumeist zersetzt und sind äußerlich und inwendig zu Nachahmern der Fremde geworden' [The higher classes in Flanders have surrendered and have become imitators of the foreign, both internally and externally] (Huebner, 1918, p.3). According to Huebner, because of the dominance of Romanic influences in public life in Flanders true 'Flemishness' is primarily expressed by individuals that stem from lower social strata or by those who deliberately choose to completely withdraw from society.

An additional noteworthy aspect in this context is the recurring theme of drunkenness and alcohol consumption. The stories of Constant van Buggenhaut, Cyriel Buysse, Frans

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Verschoren, Piet van Assche, Lode Baekelmans, and Gustaaf Vermeersch feature instances of alcohol abuse, often leading to violence and sometimes even death. An intriguing reflection on this alcohol abuse is found in 'Der keusche Jüngling und die betrunkene Mutter' by Karel van de Woestijne. In this story, an addicted mother rationalizes her alcohol abuse as a form of escapism, as a means to escape her impoverished and unjust life:

Mein Sohn, mein Söhnchen lieb: ich erzähle dir jeden Tag die gleiche Mär: wie ich von der Wirklichkeit also verzehrt worden bin, dass beim besten Willen von der Welt mir kein anderer Ausweg möglich scheint als diese Entrinnungsbarke auf dem schönen Flüsschen des Absinths (Van de Woestijne, 1918, p. 252).<sup>13</sup>

Other stories in this anthology contain more active forms of protest against the social order in Flanders. Lode Baekelmans and Gustaaf Vermeersch, for instance, address the social and economic exploitation of Flemish laborers by French-speaking businessmen. And Cyriel Buysse's contributions 'Gemeindewahl' [Municipal election] and 'Der Herr Bürgermeister' [Mr. Mayor] examine the limitations of the Belgian political system in representing Dutch-speaking Flemings. However, despite the protagonists in these narratives feeling wronged and harboring a desire to rebel against social injustice, they consistently lack the strength and determination to do so.

Although the anthology does not paint an idyllic picture of Flanders, the depicted Flemings generally evoke sympathy. Despite enduring the weight of social injustice, the focus remains on their genuine piety and profound authenticity. In this regard, Herman Teirlinck's aforementioned contribution can be perceived as a powerful counter-narrative. The bourgeois acquaintances of Joris Antie in Brussels stand in stark contrast to the 'simple Flemish'

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<sup>13</sup> My son, my dear little son: I tell you the same tale every day, how I have been consumed by reality to such an extent that, with the best of intentions, no other escape seems possible for me than this escape boat on the beautiful river of absinthe.

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individuals. These bourgeois figures are excessively lavishly dressed, frequent decadent dance and dining establishments and employ an affected French lexicon ('Mon Loup', 'Mon amour!'....), both in the original Dutch source text and in the German translations. In short: they seem to embody a superficial insincerity that sharply contrasts with the simple sincerity displayed by the Flemish characters throughout the anthology.

## 5. Conclusion

An examination of the *Flämisches Novellenbuch* reveals an image of a rural Flemish society populated by sincere individuals and brimming with artistic potential. Nevertheless, this potential is portrayed as being stifled by the pervasive influence of Franco-Belgian culture. To fully comprehend the implications of this image, it is important to acknowledge that the anthology was neither compiled nor read in an ideologically neutral context, but emerged against the backdrop of a deeply politicized context.

As previously demonstrated, the *Flamenpolitik* constructed a discourse that inverted the occupation logic. Within this narrative, it was not the Germans but rather the French-speaking elites who were depicted as the true occupiers of Flanders. This reversal enabled (Germanic) Germany to position itself as a benevolent savior, or even as an elder brother lending a hand to the culturally affiliated yet oppressed Flemish population.

As I have demonstrated, Huebner's *Flämisches Novellenbuch* constructs an image of Flanders as a nation eagerly awaiting this extended hand. The anthology portrays Flanders as a kindred little brother, continuously failing to realize its full potential. The dominance of Romanic influences in public life constrains the Germanic Fleming to a life of poverty and alcohol abuse. Every attempt to escape this misery inevitably proves futile.

That this anthology was intended to circulate a well-curated image of Flanders is also evident from the way it was distributed and promoted. For instance, the extensive correspondence between Huebner and his publisher reveals that the book was widely distributed

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in the occupied territory and in the so-called 'Feldbuchhandlungen' [field bookstores] aimed at German soldiers. Moreover, numerous advertisements and descriptions appeared in the press channels of the German occupation administration in Belgium, each time strongly emphasizing the extra-literary representativeness of the 'Flemish image' in Huebner's anthology.

Noteworthy in this regard is a review by fellow Insel-translator and art-critic, Alexander Rudolf Schröder, in the Insel-published magazine *Der Belfried*, in which he recommended the book to those who want to get to know 'real' Flanders:

'Stofflich ist das Büch eine ware Fundgrube [...] mit jeder Seite ein Stück Flandern mehr erfassend bis sich aus all dem das Bild ergibt, wie Flandern selbst den besten seiner Söhne vor Augen steht. [...] ,Und in diesem Sinne sollte das Buch auch von Literaturfremden sorgfältig gelesen werden, es erspart mit seinem harschen Realismus dem, der sehen will, viel Arbeit und mancher wird mehr daraus lernen können als aus einem ganzen Stoß Leitartikel' (Schröder, 1917/18)<sup>14</sup>

The *Flämisches Novellenbuch* constructed an image of Flanders that could readily be instrumentalized in the service of *Flamenpolitik*. Examining this anthology as the outcome of a deliberate and purposeful (i.e., 'composed') circulation process allows for a deeper understanding of the propagandistic motives that underpinned its creation. By translating, curating and circulating Flemish literature a sub-national Flemish identity was constructed, solidifying and legitimatizing the discourse of the *Flamenpolitik*.

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<sup>14</sup> This book is a real treasure trove [...] with every page revealing a piece of Flanders until an image is unveiled of a Flemish nation as it is viewed by its most caring inhabitants. [...] 'And in this regard the book should be read carefully even by those who are not familiar with literature; with its harsh realism it saves those who are curious a lot of work, and many will be able to learn more from it than from a whole pile of articles.

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