Discord and Consensus in the Low Countries, 1700-2000

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Published by University College London

Fenoulhet, Jane, et al.
Discord and Consensus in the Low Countries, 1700-2000.
University College London, 2016.
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In Dutch literary histories, the eighteenth century has always played a minor role. Sadly enough, this is partly due to the eighteenth-century authors themselves. In their struggle against the perceived decline of the Dutch nation, they established the study of Dutch language and literature. In their literary histories they turned towards the past, painting a rather bleak picture of the state of their own literary production compared to that of the seventeenth century (the ‘Golden Age’). Nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary historians adopted this comparison, thus reinforcing the idea of a failed century. Since the 1980s, the ‘forgotten’ eighteenth century has attracted new explorers from various disciplines. However, this revival reveals a historiographical split. On the one hand Dutch culture is labelled as moderate. On the other hand, researchers highlight the radical and conflicted nature of the Dutch public sphere. In this chapter we seek a middle ground between the two historiographical camps. In our opinion it is exactly the dynamic relationship between the search for harmony and the resurfacing of destabilising forces that makes eighteenth-century Dutch culture so interesting. In this chapter, we will describe the dynamics of this tension by analysing the representation of the natural world in eighteenth-century poetry and fiction. We will focus on the constant juxtaposition of two natural phenomena: one of nature’s smallest creatures – the worm – and one of its most impressive forces: thunder. We will describe how the mounting tension between discord and harmony dramatically culminates in various genres, e.g. political poetry, sentimental novels and country house poems.
Introduction

It is one of the most persuasive images of the eighteenth-century ideal of harmony and consensus; probably the first ‘communal literary selfie’, or the first group portrait of the literary guild: the ‘Panpoëticon Batavum’. It is a compelling communal project initiated at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Under the inspiring direction of painter Arnoud van Halen, a series of miniature portraits of famous and less famous Dutch writers is collected in a wooden cabinet, thus creating a ‘cabinet of curiosities’ of Dutch authors. For this portrait exhibition, the poet Lambert Bidloo writes an extensive collection catalogue in verse: a ‘temple for all the poets of the Netherlands’. Part of this cabinet of literary curiosities is still on display at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (Figure 2.1).  

The cabinet is both self-confident and vulnerable. The portraits are not obtrusive: they are rather small and one needs to open the drawers to admire them. But in doing so, the viewer is greeted with a group of authors who seem to present themselves proudly to the world. One only realises how fragile the project was when one considers that at the time of its conception, the Dutch cultural scene had just experienced several major intellectual crises: the ‘disaster year’ 1672 with its political division between Orangists and Republicans, the radical phase of the Enlightenment with its constant eruptions of public debate and fierce censorship and, last but not least, the ‘poëtenstrijd’ (war of the poets), the Dutch version of the Quérelle des Anciens et des Modernes, which culminated around 1710. At that time, Dutch citizens started to realise that the economic boom of the previous century had come to a standstill.  

Hence, the Panpoëticon appears to be a project directed at stabilisation after decades of conflict. By placing all Dutch authors of merit and all authors from other backgrounds who had moved to the Dutch Republic and had been ‘Dutchified’ in one cabinet and in historical perspective, Van Halen (Figure 2.2) and Bidloo tried to create a convincing image of a long, unified tradition of Dutch literature.

This is the canon of Dutch literary quality around 1700, the image that young and aspiring authors would try to emulate. It is therefore not surprising that later in the eighteenth century, in 1772, the Panpoëticon becomes the showpiece of Dutch literary society – ‘Kunst wordt door Arbeid verkregen’ (‘Art Is Won through Labour’). The learned and artistic societies of the second half of the eighteenth century are important instruments in the development of our modern civil societies. One of
their strategies to reach higher levels of civilisation and artistic output is to stress the ideal of ‘gezelligheid’ (sociability) as the essential path to welfare and well-being. Learned and artistic societies can and do consist of people from diverse denominations and social backgrounds, who
all try to overcome their differences through their common goal: the betterment of society. The Panpoëticon Batavum thus becomes a focal point of the ‘Age of Sensibility’, and an example of the eagerly desired harmony in the Dutch Republic of Letters. To underline this aim, ‘Kunst wordt door Arbeid Verkregen’ holds yearly contests, awarding winners with a portrait in the cabinet (Figure 2.3). Thus the literary family tree keeps on growing.

However, in spite of its glorious history, the Panpoëticon nearly completely disappeared from view. Its fame has been only recently revived in literary histories. The well-intended activities of Lambert Bidloo and his successors notwithstanding, many of the praised authors, especially the eighteenth-century ones, are lost to our cultural memory. The eighteenth century, to put it mildly, has not been the focus in Dutch literary histories ever since the beginning of the nineteenth century.
Inventing and forgetting the eighteenth century’s literary past

This is a bitter state of affairs, since the eighteenth-century authors themselves are responsible for the ‘invention’ of national literary histories. The inherent paradox, however, is that the reason for this invention is the realisation that the proud days of the Panpoëticon are over. The economy is stagnating and lagging behind other now more prosperous economies, such as the British Empire and France. Since there are hardly any apt economic theories to provide an explanation for this development, cultural critics blame the moral economy of the nation.\(^5\)

Eighteenth-century Dutch authors feel the need to struggle against the perceived decline of the nation by establishing the study of Dutch language and literature. They start to compare their own situation to that of the Netherlands of the seventeenth century, the century they now begin to call the ‘Golden Age’. Eighteenth-century authors and researchers feel the need to strive for improvement, by gathering knowledge

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Fig. 2.3 The Panpoëticon cabinet at the Dutch literary society ‘Kunst wordt door Arbeid verkregen’ (‘Art Is Won Through Labour’). Painting (1772) by P. C. La Fargue. Courtesy of Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal Leiden, S900
about literature. Therefore, university chairs are founded in Dutch Language and Literature. The new professors are supposed to help raise the level of language and literature. Their task is to show that the Netherlands have a rich literary past and that the Dutch language is indeed suitable for writing great literature.

However, in turning towards the past, they paint a rather bleak picture of the state of contemporary literature. The trend thus set by eighteenth-century authors is continued in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary histories. In their narratives, the eighteenth century truly fades away. In the new Dutch monarchy, after the fall of Napoleon, everybody tries to look back beyond the turbulent eighteenth century and keep their eyes fixed on the seventeenth century, the Golden Age, the time of Cats and Huygens, of prosperity and entrepreneurship. And so, the eighteenth century sinks into oblivion.

Furthermore, in the nineteenth century, literary historians increasingly apply aesthetic criteria. Writers are selected and canonised on the basis of the perceived ‘universal’ literary quality of their work, and not on the basis of their status or the appreciation they enjoyed in their own time, nor the role their work played within broader social developments. The eighteenth century has no place in this scheme: it is the era where the whole idea of l’art pour l’art is nonsensical, because art still has a distinct place and function in society.

The disregard for the eighteenth century is especially painful regarding eighteenth-century women: of the string of famous and valued female authors, such as Juliana Cornelia de Lannoy, Petronella Moens and Lucretia van Merken, only Betje Wolff and Aagje Deken can still claim some recognition. An additional unfairness is that as soon as literary historians do recognise literary quality, they invariably find an excuse to write it out of the eighteenth century. In this way, interesting authors such as Willem Bilderdijk and Jacobus Bellamy are consigned to a ‘pre-Romantic era’ not belonging to the eighteenth century proper. The Dutch literary historian G. P. M. Knuvelder even has the eighteenth century end in 1776, when he observes the first twinkling of the ‘Romantic era’ he holds in such high regard. In this way precious little is left of the eighteenth century.⁶

Knuvelder’s peers are even more scathing about the Age of the Enlightenment. In his prestigious and authoritative General History of the Netherlands of 1954, his colleague and contemporary, the historian Ph. de Vries, calls the eighteenth century ‘the absolute void’: ‘To the first half of the eighteenth century, not even the terms decline, deterioration, degeneration or decadence can be applied, because all of these terms
still suggest a certain development. Within the history of Dutch culture, it represents the absolute void.¹⁷

In order to give a reason for this huge void – to show how, after the glorious seventeenth century, the eighteenth century brought literature down to rock bottom – historians reach back to explanations from the eighteenth century itself. With references to authors such as the early eighteenth-century journalist Justus van Effen, they keep on blaming the presumed moral decline of eighteenth-century Dutchmen. Excessive prosperity and luxury are supposed to have weakened the nation’s moral fibre, making it unfit to produce literature of sufficient value. Hence, the eighteenth-century authors dug their own graves: if they had stopped complaining about the moral decline and lack of proper standards and values in their own era, a few authors might have been saved from the censoring forces of canonisation.

Reviving the eighteenth century: harmony or conflict?

The upside of these developments, however, is that they left the eighteenth century as undiscovered territory. Only during the last few decades has it started to attract adventurous explorers. Since the 1980s, a series of researchers from various disciplines has risen to see what it has to offer. New attention has been given to the political culture in the Batavian-French period (1795–1813), to socio-economic developments, to the efforts to keep the East India Company and West India Company afloat, to the international financial crises of 1720 and the 1760s, to the moderate and radical Enlightenment, and to phenomena such as the birth of civil society and the rise of the public sphere. And luckily, there are a large number of researchers who investigate the forgotten authors and scribblers of the eighteenth century and publish new editions of their works.

However, this revival of eighteenth-century studies reveals a historiographical split. On the one hand, textbooks and articles highlight the specificity of the Dutch Republic and its Enlightenment culture. In line with the trend of diversifying the Enlightenment into different ‘Enlightenment families’, Dutch culture is labelled as moderate. The economic stagnation and the diverse nature of Dutch society, with its large number of religious and social groups occupying a relatively small area, is supposed to have led to a search for harmony, tolerance and stability. Science, philosophy and literature are regarded as means to stabilise society, thus leaving little room for radical voices.⁸ This is enhanced by
the fact that the Dutch Republic of Letters, as it focuses more and more on the vernacular, becomes limited in its scope. Catering to a relatively small group of readers, publishers and authors tend to seek common ground, thus publishing, for instance, general cultural journals rather than specialised journals for specific audiences, and trying to avoid open debates and fierce criticism.9

Over the last decades a growing number of articles and books has been published that contest this moderate reading of Dutch culture, and that highlight the radical and conflicted nature of the Dutch public sphere. As exemplified by Jonathan Israel’s Radical Enlightenment, historians recover the silenced voices of Dutch radical thinkers and revive interest in the politics of Dutch literature, in conflict, discord and criticism, thus discovering ‘the other eighteenth century’.10

In our textbook Worm en Donder, we have made good use of this new dynamics in eighteenth-century (literary) history. Seeking a middle ground between the two historiographical ‘camps’, we would put forward the thesis that it is exactly the tension between the search for harmony, in dynamics with constant and, at the end of the century, even mounting destabilising forces that makes eighteenth-century Dutch culture so interesting. In this chapter, we want to describe the dynamics of this tension through a case study of the eighteenth-century interest in the natural world, specifically in its smallest creatures – worms – and in one of its most impressive forces – thunder.

**Worms and thunder**

The natural world is one of the central themes in eighteenth-century Dutch literature. At the beginning of the century, authors use pastoral settings, evoking nature as an ideal for their own lives or bringing this ideal home in Dutch arcadias. Authors themselves also start to study the natural world. They employ the telescope and the microscope. They venture out into nature to study the stars and planets, the plants and animals. And they want to stimulate younger and older readers to do the same. Hence, they start to write what we would now call popular scientific publications. Here they follow the ancient tradition of reading the Book of Nature as a second divine revelation. More specifically they call their approach ‘fysico-theologie’, thus appropriating the title of William Derham’s *Physico-Theology* (1713), published in Dutch translation in 1728.

Perusing the Dutch epic, lyrical and dramatic texts, one is amazed by the frequent occurrence of two natural phenomena from the opposite
sides of the natural order: the tiny worm and the mighty thunder. Often, the worm is the subject of anatomical or biological studies. The worm reminds us of how marvellous is the construction of even the simplest organisms, and how delicately all functions are attuned to each other in the natural world. In religious poetry, the worm can remind the reader of man’s insignificance. He who studies the whole of creation is reminded that, within this gigantic whole, man is no more than a trifling worm. And after death, he in turn is consumed by worms.

While worms are mostly highlighted as an indication of God’s benevolent way of ordering nature according to the needs of all creatures in the Great Chain of Being, the worm is also presented as a destabilising force. Take for instance the pileworm, or shipworm. Around 1730, the pileworm starts to gnaw at the sheet piling of Dutch dykes, the very foundation of the nation. In so doing, the pileworm becomes a national disaster. Many writings are published about this threat (Figure 2.4). The

Fig. 2.4 Abraham Zeeman, *Pileworms gnawing at the Dutch dykes* (1731–3). Engraving published in P. Massuet, *Wetenswaardig onderzoek over den oorsprong [. . .] en de verbazende menigte der [. . .] kokerwurmen, die de dykpalen en schepen van enige der Vereenigde Nederlandsche Provintsien doorboren* (Amsterdam, 1733). Courtesy of Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, RP-P-OB-83.675
pileworm is seen as a plague from God, a punishment for man’s sins. It is hardly accidental that the struggle against the pileworm coincides with a wide campaign against homosexuals, or sodomites, as they are called at the time.\textsuperscript{11}

On the opposite side of the natural spectrum, we find thunder. In the eighteenth century, research into electricity experiences a boom. The lightning rod is invented. In time, this would make it possible to tame lightning, as it were. But at the same time, people realise that they cannot always go about with lightning rods attached to their heads. Man is still vulnerable to such forces of nature.\textsuperscript{12}

In the last decades of the century, worm and thunder start to appear together more frequently, for instance in a story by the Zwolle writer Rhijnvis Feith (1753–1824). It tells us about a man whose wife dies and whose child is subsequently struck by lightning. This makes him doubt his faith. But then, the following happens:

In nearly total distraction, I gnashed my teeth against heaven. I challenged its Omnipotence to destroy me [. . .] Suddenly, a flash of lightning, brighter than I had ever seen, enlightened the whole of the bleak surroundings. I shivered, I imagined I heard the thunder speak: Proud worm that lives in the dust! Who are you, to fight the Eternal?\textsuperscript{13}

In 1788, Elizabeth Maria Post (1755–1812) writes the epistolary novel Het Land, in brieven (The Land, in Letters, 1788). The theme of the novel is the life of a woman in the country, who ventures out into nature with her binoculars or her pocket microscope to study natural phenomena. She enjoys them, but sometimes is also overwhelmed:

And yet, not a single place on the whole earth is empty: everywhere, creatures are living. – How many infinitely multiplied millions of creatures are living here! How many are already lying in its soil and have been scattered by the elements! What a dizzying infinity! [. . .] And all of this earth is only a nothing compared to the universe! – Who is the maker of it all! [. . .] Here, I lose myself in his stupefying greatness, and feel myself to be no more than a worm, crawling in the dust.

This beautiful earth (I thought furthermore) will at one time burn with all of its offspring! when the planets will be shocked from their orbits with a dazzling noise; while God’s cracking thunders and his constant lightning bolts will shake creation. [. . .]
But at that fateful time, God’s covenant will be more solid than the shifting mountains. Heaven and earth may pass, but his words will remain whole within. The blessed will experience this, and they will rejoice in his faithfulness!14

Thus in the study of the natural world, worm and thunder converge constantly.

These passages are of importance, since they once again show us that Enlightenment and religion should not be regarded as opposites. From the quotes in which worm and thunder coincide, it appears that in Dutch Enlightenment culture, scientific interest in the natural world was supposed to impress eighteenth-century man with the realisation that he is a worm and that his redemption from God’s thunder is in the hands of the Lord.

The passages also display a high level of electric tension and apparent threat. Although God can perhaps guarantee the salvation of the spirit, the material world seems to be on the verge of breaking or burning down. It is this tension that is building up in the second half of the eighteenth century and that starts to infuse the ordered world of Dutch literature with a sense of doom.

The idyllic nature of Dutch country house poems

One of the favourite genres in Dutch eighteenth-century literature is the country house poem. ‘Hofdichten’ are long poems about the estates of the nouveau riche, who had acquired their wealth in the booming economy of the Dutch Republic and searched for various ways to display their achievements and to formulate the civic virtues of their community. Eighteenth-century authors catered to these needs by writing laudatory poems about the noble virtues and achievements of these merchants and politicians, as exemplified by their houses and fields.

The seventeenth century had already provided illustrious examples, such as Constantijn Huygens’ Hofwijck (1653), Jacob Westerbaen’s Ockenburg (1654) and Jacob Cats’ Ouderdom en Buyten-leven (1655). Their country house poems provide inventive combinations between the ode and the didactic poem. The poet takes the reader on a literary tour around the grounds of the estate, taking breaks for meditations, observations, aphorisms, pleasant anecdotes and moral lessons. The natural world and country life are the main subjects: they are set off against the restless working life in the cities. On the estate, the lord and
his guests can rest and gain wisdom by studying books and the Book of Nature. The ordered natural world of the estate is read as the book of God. Creation is described as a continuous ‘Chain of Being’, from the tiniest worm to the most exalted angel, with men as the steward over creation. The world is one and indivisible. Through duty and responsibility, every link in the Great Chain of Being is connected.

One of the most famous eighteenth-century country house poems is *Zydebalen* (1740), a poem by Arnold Hoogvliet on the estate Zijdebalen, near Utrecht. In this poem we once again meet our little friends the worms, in this instance silkworms. Zijdebalen was home to a silk factory, yielding great economic value. This industry provides Hoogvliet with the opportunity to take a new path in his poem. Disregarding the traditional genre conventions with their strong opposition between the quiet country life and the rat race of merchants and politicians, Hoogvliet describes the silk factory and the home of the estate holder David van Mollem, thus adding the theme of economy and industriousness to the weave of the country house poem. In this poem, it is the combination of nature and human endeavour – through trade, technology and art – that constitutes the foundation of wealth and happiness.

In the decades that followed, *Zydebalen* would be copied as an example for many country house poems, but the harmonious order that formed the backbone of this idyllic genre, and of the whole of Dutch literature, came under high stress.

**Political lightning**

The political troubles of the final two decades of the eighteenth century unleash a veritable thunderstorm. The troubles have a profound effect on the dream that the literary authors had created around themselves and their audiences.

It is not always easy to remember how violent these years were, because the nineteenth century largely polished them away from national history. We now rather consider the Netherlands in the light of concepts such as tolerance and quiet sobriety. And those were indeed the ideals of the eighteenth century itself. Its pastoral poetry paints an idyllic world where shepherds and shepherdesses have loving conversations and make music. Children’s literature, like Hieronymus van Alphen’s famous poem ‘Mijn vader is mijn beste vriend’ (‘My father is my best friend’), summons a world of civilised regularity. But outside of
the safe bourgeois allotments, behind the orderly hedges of the loving children’s world, a rapidly changing reality threatens.

The united family of the Panpoëticon is also threatened. The ‘family members’ now come to realise that they have very different backgrounds, interests and ideologies. The family harbours Mennonites and Lutherans, Calvinists and Patriots as well as Orangists. When political tension mounts and develops into civil war, new dividing lines are drawn, destroying existing societies, groups and poets’ friendships. The staunch Orangist Willem Bilderdijk for instance becomes isolated from his Patriot colleagues.

In the 1780s, a cascade of political and satirical journals floods the Dutch market. Thunder and lightning become symbols of the political competition between the Patriot and Orangist parties. This is reflected in the titles of political journals: *The Political Lightning, The Veritable Political Lightning, Political Thunder*, etc. The Flushing poet Jacobus Bellamy, under his pen-name of Zelandus, is active as a poetical propagandist for the Patriot party. He is not a fan of stadtholder William V. In 1781, he writes a poem about him: ‘To the traitor of the Fatherland’:

Traitor! monster! mankind’s bane!  
Of all earth’s offspring most degraded  
May God now let his thunder reign  
And strike you with lightning of hatred!  
But no! It only makes you realise  
The gruesomeness of all your deeds:  
No lightning bolt can singe your eyes –  
No thunder can more horror breed!  
Your spirit can but cringe and whinge,  
And feel what its true nature is.¹⁵

The political uproar has a severe impact on the way literature is written. Lyrical poetry is reinvented in content and in form. Politically committed authors such as Bernardus Bosch appeal to their fellow countrymen in fierce verse:

Alarum! – the enemy! – run to! – emergency! – emerge!  
Every Dutch citizen as soldier wants to serve.  
Click clack, – fire, – screaming, – thunder, – drum,  
– banging, – Pandur, – Croatin, – Hussar, – all a tumble.  
The Sabre in the fist, here come the Batavians brave!  
Who choose a death in freedom over living like a slave!¹⁶
Poets start to call themselves bards and draw inspiration from the distant, rugged Germanic past. Jacobus Bellamy’s poetry also develops in the direction of noise and sound poetry, with staccato descriptions of military violence:

Filthy, yellow, lowly slaves bowing, crawling in their chains
Chains are fit for filthy slaves! Guns are fit for citizens.\textsuperscript{17}

Here, a large number of formerly cherished poetical conventions fly out the door. Dutch authors discover new literary forms for the new political genre, which features many more militaristic elements than the poetry that before was considered typical of the Dutch national spirit, and also would be thereafter:

Sweet and commendable to perish for your land.
The noble spirit chooses this over a spineless life.
I also strive for fame and yearn for such an end.
Oh, to defend the fatherland when danger’s rife.\textsuperscript{18}

The genre of the novel also takes on another hue. \textit{Historie van Mejuffrouw Cornelia Wildschut} (1793–6), the novel that the acclaimed novelists Betje Wolff and Aagje Deken write during their political exile in France, is a much grimmer novel than their earlier bestselling novel \textit{Historie van Mejuffrouw Sara Burgerhart} (1782). The characters are meaner and the tragedy larger. Eventually, Cornelia Wildschut comes to a bad end. After a stormy affair with a rake, she succumbs to remorse and regret. Such is the devastating effect of the thunderstorm. Several enthusiastic Patriot authors give up their pen, shocked by the conflicts engendered by their political ideals. \textit{Cornelia Wildschut} is left on the shelves: far fewer copies of this book are sold than the writers and their publisher had hoped.

Among the most striking examples demonstrating the effect of the turmoil are two country house poems written by father and son Willem and Cornelis van der Pot, on the subject of their estate Endeldijk.

**Endeldijk: the destruction of the garden of delight**

In 1768 Willem van der Pot publishes his country house poem \textit{Endeldijk}. The occasion is the visit of Princess Carolina, the sister of William V of Orange, to Endeldijk, Van der Pot’s estate. It once belonged to one of
the most famous statesmen of the Republic, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt. When Van Oldenbarnevelt came into conflict with stadtholder Maurits, and was ultimately beheaded, his wife was forced to sell the estate in order to pay the legal fees for her husband’s trial. Subsequently, the estate came into the possession of the Van der Pot family, who restored the house magnificently. What would be more fitting than to publish a country house poem on this garden of delight? Willem van der Pot does not hire a poet: he himself takes the pen in hand.

In his country house poem, Willem van der Pot follows the well-known trajectory of this literary genre. He describes his estate through an idealised order. The birds warble. The milkmaid squeezes the cream from the cow’s full udder while singing a song. The humble farmer, performing his duty to God and man, should be envied for the quiet he enjoys and small burden he has to carry. The landowner owns a true paradise:

Blessed the man who here, from his worries released
  can live in fruitful fields, contented and at ease.19

And yet, the country house idyll is coming under political pressure. On the one hand, Van der Pot praises the house of Orange, which he describes as closely related to his own.20 On the other hand, the sympathies of the rich Remonstrant merchant Willem van der Pot lean towards the republican side. He bought the former home of Van Oldenbarnevelt for a reason, and he furnished his estate as a lieu de mémoire for the ‘Dutch Drama’ of the Grand Pensionary’s demise, by hanging portraits of him on an honorary pillar. His son Cornelis van der Pot would later even supplement this modest pantheon with a memorial for the Patriot champion Joan Derk van der Capellen tot den Pol. In his country house poem, with the House of Orange as his witnesses, Willem van der Pot extensively stirs up memories of the time when Oldenbarnevelt, ‘The greatest hero of Holland’, was awarded with a ‘cut through his uncollared throat’ and how the Remonstrant ‘Religion of Peace’ was banned in the tumultuous Twelve Years’ Truce (1609–21).

Still, this does not suffice to say that Van der Pot is conducting political polemics. The raking up of violent conflicts from the past functions as a spell against potential disintegration in his own time. Poetry is put forward as a means to create unity. Willem voices the expectation that stadtholder William V will be able to protect the country against civil strife. As a free citizen, he apparently thinks it is his right to lecture the young William V on the subject of politics. In Van der Pot’s opinion,
William is to be schooled ‘in the power of Holy Right, in the Laws of our land in charter and chronicle, in Established civil duties’. In this way, he may develop wise policy. Van der Pot hopes the stadtholder will blossom into a tall tree, for each and every one to live safely under his branches.

In his country house poem, Van der Pot weaves the bloody division from the past of the Dutch Republic into the fabric of the natural country world, thus reconciling the opposing parties. In the past, wars have passed over the country as a destructive tempest, but now the skies are clear again. In this way, Van der Pot’s country house poem constitutes a literary place for meeting and reconciliation of the two rival political factions.

But behind this beautiful idyll, thunder clouds are gathering. The country house poem may represent the country estate as an idyllic place of unity and harmonious coexistence; it is also a battleground. The Arcadian peace of the secluded garden has to be wrung from a world full of threats. This becomes drastically clear at Endeldijk.

During the Patriot Revolution, the house becomes the backdrop for the fierce fight between Patriots and Orangists. The new owner, Cornelis van der Pot, the son of Willem van der Pot, is a committed Patriot, who is dragged into the rapidly developing civil war of the 1780s. At the height of Patriot power in 1787, he even uses the house as a prison: he has his Orangist neighbour temporarily locked up there. But when the situation changes, on the invasion of the Prussian army, Van der Pot is forced to flee to France. By way of retribution, his house is torn down stone by stone.

When, after years of exile, Cornelis van der Pot returns, he vows to restore the estate to its former glory and to write a poem about its destruction and restoration. Not until 1799 is the severely tested poet able to take up his lyre and compose a country house poem: Endeldijk in Its Destruction and Restoration. In the poem, he addresses his beloved estate to remind it of the horrors it has suffered:

You have experienced how you were destroyed,  
the raging mob, while screaming wild and mad, devoid  
of honour and duty both, the predators made you prey  
who heatedly pursued their mischief, robbery;  
whose wanton wilfulness was still not satisfied  
with the destruction of the excellent paintings, pride  
of place, of clothes, of linen and the beds cut up  
the statues and the ornaments, the plates and cups,  
that were all pulverised and scattered to the ground,
but still renewed their rampage, the humble house tore down
the stately chapel – holy poem – the honourable cell
and yet another building, erected there as well
were all demolished totally, torn to the ground.\textsuperscript{21}

The eighteenth century had its own disaster tourism, it seems: ‘It is cer-
tain that […] many a stranger visited the shameful scene.’\textsuperscript{22}

Through his country house poem, Van der Pot tries to revive the
estate at least on paper and to restore its place in Dutch cultural memory.
Step by step, he revisits his memory of the estate as it used to be, and
he has it torn down stone by stone by a furious mob, to rebuild it subse-
quently, both on paper and in reality:

The mist has lifted, and the enemy is slain.
As much as I was able, I made you new again
and restored your appearance, from rubble and the dust\textsuperscript{23}

In the meantime, he uses the poem as a fierce accusation against the
injustice perpetrated against himself and his property. Annexed to
the poem are a number of trial proceedings, from the legal fight Van
der Pot had undertaken against the people who had demolished his
country house.

Hence, by the end of the century, the country house poem has
developed from an idyllic ode into a legal and political battleground.
The form of the country house changed accordingly. The country house
poems of the final two decades of the eighteenth century (and there
would not be many more, because these are the swansong of the genre)
are no longer learned didactic poems, but short, emotional-reflective
evocations of nature. They thus develop into the more lyrical poetry that
would characterise the nineteenth century.

\section*{Epilogue}

And what was the fate of the Panpoëticon? The cabinet of portraits was
blown up when a ship loaded with gunpowder exploded in Leiden in
1807 (Figure 2.5). Legend has it that bits and pieces were picked up from
the streets and the portraits were separately sold to private collectors.\textsuperscript{24}
The result mirrors the fate of the literary family in real life: for a long
time, it was scattered. Luckily for the cabinet the Rijksmuseum bought
parts of it at the end of the nineteenth century. Recently, the collection was honoured with its own Wikipedia page. So after centuries, the Dutch literary family has found its place in a successor of one of the most compelling eighteenth-century inventions for collecting and canonising knowledge: the encyclopaedia.

Fig. 2.5 Joannes Bemme, *Explosion of the gunpowder ship in Leiden*. This event marked the beginning of the breaking up of the Panpoëticon Batavum. Courtesy of Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, RP-P-1936-579