The unimportance of writing well: Eighteenth-century Belgian historians on the problem of style of history

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Ce n’est pas un si grand crime
De ne s’exprimer pas bien
(It is not such great crime
Not to express oneself well)
Quinault

In the Southern Netherlands as elsewhere in Europe, Latin had been the language of intellectual life and higher culture for centuries. In the eighteenth century, it had lost this privileged position. It nevertheless remained the language of the church and the university and, to a certain extent, of education in general. This general view is reflected in the position of Latin as used in the historiography of the time. Even here, Latin went out of use, with the exception of the fields of monastic and church history and that of legal history.¹ For example, monastic histories were still frequently written in Latin, because they aimed at an international public, as they were meant in the first place for the (international) authorities and fellow monks of the order, and not, as were profane histories, for a socially broader but at the same time more local public.

Latin had become the exception, and most of the general, modern and profane histories were written in the vernaculars of the country. Since – as is now well known² – the reading public was growing in the course of the eighteenth century, and thus the group of potential history readers was becoming wider and more diverse, writers who wanted their books to be read not only by monks and jurists but also by (more or less) ‘common’ readers, had to take into account the fact that a great many of
those readers were not able to read Latin at all, or at least preferred not to do so. Latin had become ‘une langue qui n’est point à la portée du commun des lecteurs’ (‘a language which is not understood by the common reader’) and therefore, ‘l’histoire, dont la lecture est devenue un besoin presque général, veut être écrite dans la langue vulgaire’ (‘history, the reading of which has become an almost general necessity, needs to be written in the vernacular’).

History had to be written in the vernaculars, and therefore, during the first half of the century, most of the general histories were written either in Dutch or in French. The choice between these was essentially determined by the actual linguistic situation of the country. In those days the Southern Netherlands already consisted of Dutch-speaking and Walloon-speaking parts. The linguistic border between them was at the time more or less what it is today, and did not correspond with the borders between the provinces. The northern parts of (the provinces of) the country were Dutch-speaking. In the southern parts (of the same provinces) Walloon was spoken. The latter was a popular language, cognate to French, yet different from it. In the Dutch-speaking parts Dutch was used to write histories for the public. French – and not Walloon – was used in the Walloon parts. To complicate this picture there were French-speaking people living both in the North and the South. Moreover, even at the beginning of the century, there were authors who were bi- or trilingual, writing in French, Dutch and/or Latin, according to the circumstances and the specific public they were aiming at.

In the course of the second half of the century, the situation changed and became clearer. A Frenchification of the Southern Netherlands occurred in that period. This implied not only a diffusion and a generalization of the use of French, but also, as was said and lamented, a diffusion of French morals and (bad) manners; a francophilie affected at least parts of the population – especially, as some historians have indicated, the female part.

Traditionally this Frenchification is connected with the occupation of the 1745–8 period. During the Austrian War of Succession, the Southern Netherlands were occupied by the French (who after the war vacated the country for the Austrians, in accordance with the Treaty of Aachen). In those years, the French brought not only soldiers to Brussels, but also theatre, fashions and styles. Another explanatory factor is the fact that the Brussels court and central administration were French-speaking. The influence of these factors is undeniable, but the actual diffusion of French among the population of the Dutch-speaking parts of the Southern Netherlands must not be exaggerated. A study by Hervé
Hasquin on the French-speaking population in Brussels of the period reveals on the one hand that this French-speaking part was indeed increasing; it also made clear that on the other hand this part remained a rather small minority (not more than 15 per cent of the population of Brussels).

It is also obvious that the Frenchification concerned in fact part of the upper class, but left the lower classes untouched. In other words: in the Dutch-speaking parts French increasingly became the language of the upper classes, while Dutch remained the language of the ‘people’. But French not only became the fashionable language for the social upper classes. It also became, more than ever before, the language of the intellectuals. It replaced Latin as the indisputable language for international communication; as the language of the république des lettres. So French was becoming the fashionable language of the upper classes, of functionaries and intellectuals. French, at that moment, also became the language historians simply had to (and actually did) use. The Imperial and Royal Academy of Brussels, founded in 1772, had a great influence on, and a certain power over, historiography and its evolution during the last decades of the century. In the Academy three languages were officially accepted (French, Dutch and Latin), but it is obvious that in practice, French firmly dominated. French was used in documents, publications and meetings. Yet this did not imply that literally every historian wrote in French. Smeyers has convincingly pointed out that, whereas French dominated the (historiographical) activities within the Academy, it hardly surpassed Dutch in the entries for essay competitions (written by ‘outsiders’). Frenchification remained, to a certain extent, the theory; an evolution that was counterbalanced by other – partly opposite – tendencies. There were also specific reasons why certain historians did not use the international language. Since Dutch remained the language of the lower classes, authors who definitely wanted to write for a broad audience and did not want to confine themselves to writing for an elite, needed to write in Dutch. Others explicitly deplored and disputed Frenchification. Well known in Belgian and especially in Flemish historiography is Jan Baptist Verlooy, who wrote a ‘dissertation on the neglect of the mother tongue in the Netherlands’ (Verhandeling op d’onacht der moederlyke tael in de Nederlanden, 1788), a rather extended plea for the use of the native language and against writing in French by Dutch-speaking authors. Another author, Verhoeven, indicated, like Verlooy, that all great writers, from antiquity on, had written in their own language. For those authors, the use of Dutch could be a statement of cultural politics.
But these authors were rather exceptional, and one might say that French was more or less accepted as the language historians ought to use. In 1779 Du Chasteler wrote a plan for a national history of the Austrian Netherlands. The language in which this history should be written is no point of discussion; ‘je ne m’arrêterai pas à discuter dans quelle langue cette histoire doit être écrite’ (‘I shall not take time to discuss in which language this history ought to be written’); that it should be French was completely self-evident; ‘la langue française est devenue tellement dominante dans nos provinces, qu’on ne peut guère lui refuser la préférence’ (‘the French language has become so dominant in our provinces that one could scarcely fail to give preference to it’). It was in fact to the – French-speaking – Academy that he presented this plan.

Although the use of French had become self-evident, some authors seemed to have felt the need to justify this choice. Custis (sometimes) wrote in French because this language was ‘universellement connue dans toutes les parties du monde’ (‘universally known in all parts of the world’). Lamoot, who published a plan for a history of Flanders in 1760, revealed that, unlike others, he did not believe in addressing such a history to readers of lower classes: ‘l’histoire n’est utile qu’à ceux qui la lisent. Ce n’est pas le bas peuple qui lit; ce sont les personnes aisées et instruits’ (‘history is only of use to those who read it. It is not the lower classes who read; it is the well-to-do and educated’). Such readers, even in the Dutch-speaking parts, understood either Latin or French, he argued. The history he proposed was to be written in French.

In other words, in using French, many of the historians of the Southern Netherlands wrote in a language which was not their own. Therefore, it was considered to be virtually impossible for them to write really well, let alone ‘beautifully’. They were aware of that and they apologized, by arguing that they had to use a foreign language and that therefore they should not be criticized too harshly on the matter of style. They said this in the introductions and the avis au lecteur of their works. This might of course be a captatio benevolentiae, a mere figure of speech, a strategic anticipation of expected criticism, an indication of a certain modesty, not altogether sincere. However, although some historians were obviously better writers than others, it is undeniable that the literary qualities of most of the works considered here were indeed rather modest. And this was noticed by contemporaries, as it is by today’s readers.

But to see whether Belgian historians of the eighteenth century did write well or not is not all that important. More interesting is the discourse on the importance, or, more precisely, the unimportance of this
question. A good style was, for a historian, a point of minor importance. He, ‘plus amateur de la vérité des faits historiques que de termes choisis ou de phrases ampoulées’ (‘more a lover of the truth of historical facts than of choice terms or bombastic phrases’), had, after all, other and greater goals to pursue. The primary mission of the historian was to serve the Truth. Beyond that, he had to serve his readers, to instruct and educate them by showing the truth and by indicating the lessons that history was believed to contain. In order to do this, a historian had to write correctly and comprehensibly. ‘s’il veut instruire, il faut qu’il s’explique nettement, et se rende clair et intelligible’ (‘if he wishes to educate, he must give lucid explanations and make himself clear and intelligible’). But ‘more’ style than that was not required.

The significance of the style of a historical text depended entirely on its contribution to the higher and specific goals history was meant to serve. Some authors stressed that an exuberance of style could even be dangerous, since it could distract the attention of writer and reader from what was really important. Others placed more emphasis on style, since it was a means to attract the attention of readers who would otherwise perhaps not read at all. Nelis pointed out that many interesting and important histories unjustly remained unknown and unread, precisely because their style was poor. Perhaps it was necessary to ‘plaire pour convaincre’ (‘to please in order to persuade’). But it is clear that even from a perspective which did stress this, style remained completely secondary. The style of a historical text could by no means represent a value on its own; its value lay only in its subordination, its service to the historical reality and its implications. It was in fact this auxiliary status of style that distinguished history from literature, a distinction which was unproblematic for the Belgian historians of the time. History and literature were thought of as two different – even opposite – issues.

It is not entirely clear whether history was considered to be part of ‘literature’, belles-lettres, in a broader sense of the term. According to the French classification system for libraries, which was also used more or less generally in the Southern Netherlands, history was a category on its own, distinct from belles-lettres. But on the other hand, there was the Brussels Academy, which consisted of two parts, deux classes, namely sciences and belles-lettres. The activities of the classe des belles-lettres were almost entirely historical, but this need not imply that the historical texts that were written in this setting, were considered to be literary. This becomes evident when we consider the attitude towards a specific genre that, at first sight, seems to bridge the gap between history and literature; that of the éloge historique. An éloge was a text devoted to a historic
person, a text that had the form of an oration and thus had to possess rhetorical qualities. The eulogist was expected to display knowledge both of history and of eloquentia; he had to be both historian and orator.

An éloge historique may be considered a historical text that had to have literary qualities. But considering the distinction that was made between those éloges on the one hand and the ordinary historical dissertations on the other, and the way both kinds of texts were clearly judged differently by the Academy, it becomes evident that both genres were not merely different, they were opposites, notably concerning the importance of style. For a eulogist, it was essential to write well; for the genuine historian, it was a minor matter. History and rhetoric were two different things; the orator had to worry about style, whereas the historian did not. For a literary text, style was the crucial part; in a historical text, it was superfluous.

Obviously, there was a distinction made between the ‘fond’ (‘la partie historique’) and the ‘style’, or (although these pairs of terms may have varying meanings) between res and verba, matter and manner. This distinction established, as far as historiography was concerned, an undisputed hierarchy. In itself it might be recommendable for a historian to write well, but if he wasted his time by worrying about style, he was overturning the natural order of historiographical values. According to this way of reasoning, it was indeed possible to write history without (having to think about) style, because style was considered to consist of additions made to the text; style was decoration; it concerned things that were not essential to the text such as rhetorical devices and ornamentation, which could therefore just as well be left out. It was possible – historians seem to say – to write without any style. As a genuine historian also should. The attitude towards style was negative: stylistic additions were always superfluous. When historians indicated how history should be written, they mostly concentrated on what an author should not be and not do. The historian was no orator, even less a novelist. His texts should not be too elegant, or ‘trop fleuri’. Declamations and rhetoric should be left out of academic dissertations also (‘ce style de rhéteur, qui est de si mauvais goût dans un mémoire académique’) (‘this rhetorical style, which is in such bad taste in an academic paper’).

The extreme version of this anti-rhetorical idea of history was that it was possible to present the past, the historical data, almost without intervening as a writer. This idea seems extremely naive to us, as – since Buffon’s ‘Le style est l’homme même’ and since (post)modern ideas on the content of the form – we generally accept that the dichotomy of content and form is absurd and unreasonable. ‘By the time we reach
the criticism of our own day we find that this whole distinction between matter and manner has been decisively rejected. To reject it has indeed become one of the principal dogmas of current critical thought’, Hough wrote in 1969.30

However, the historiographical praxis of the time reveals that a kind of history-writing with an invisible historian was almost a reality. In the first half of the century, histories were still very often like chronicles, annals. What a historian did was not so much ‘describe’ events, but rather collect and ‘mention’ them. Moreover histories of this period often contained lists (e.g. when the building of a church was mentioned, a list of the parish priests was inserted – in the text, not in a footnote), which offer a rather good example of a form in which historical data were presented without visible style.31 A great deal of information in history books was given in stereotyped series of stereotyped little biographies, in uniform descriptions of villages, parishes and so on.

It might seem as if these works were to be regarded as mere – more or less erudite – compilations of material, meant to be ‘consulted’ and ‘used’ by other writers. There were in fact authors who modestly pretended that the main objective of their work was to be useful for future historians, brighter and better writers than they were themselves. But otherwise this did not imply that they considered their work as essentially different from what a proper historian had to write; it simply meant that they – sincerely or not – considered their work as imperfect, susceptible to improvement. Nevertheless their works were actually published as completed works, and under the ambitious titles of ‘history of [a (geographical) entity]’. In fact what else could the history of a town or province be but a collection of the historical information concerning the subject – which was as complete as possible? According to this definition these histories were in fact proper histories. Therefore it seems to me that distinctions between, on the one hand, erudition (or antiquarian research) and, on the other, history (or philosophical or literary historiography)32 are inappropriate to describe the historiography under consideration here.

Of course, these histories did not only consist of lists and series. Most of the texts were surveys of historical events which were sometimes merely mentioned, and sometimes more extensively reported in what can be seen as ‘narratives’. They were always in a strictly chronological order and divided, in a stereotypical way, according to two rythmes de base (basic cycle) of history, which are le rythme annuel (annual cycle) and le rythme dynastique (dynastic cycle) (in the last case, the history is divided in chapters which all consist of a term of office of a prince).33 Thus the form of these histories was highly standardized. This standardization
was a means of removing, to a certain extent, the stylistic uncertainty for the historian, and the need to be adventurous as a writer.

In the course of the century however, the evolution of historiography demanded the growing intervention of the writing historian. It was no longer acceptable for his work to be seen as mere ‘compilation’, unlike that of older historians, who would have admitted without hesitation that they were compilers and who described the work of the historian essentially as the ‘collection’ (albeit critical) of historical data. It was increasingly stressed that a qualitative intervention of the historian was required, an intervention situated in two fields. First, indication of explanations (motives, reasons, what was called ‘reflexions’) in history was called for. It was necessary to ‘apropéndir les causes, les circonstances & les suites’ (‘go deeper into the causes, the circumstances and the effects’). Historians became convinced that history could not be useful and therefore was not interesting when, as was the case in a great deal of the older historiography, historical facts and data were presented without being linked and explained satisfactorily.

Second, there was the expanding need for discussion and criticism. Of course, the idea of a critical attitude towards traditions and sources had already been firmly established. Yet in the second half of the century, innovations which had developed in and around the Academy, in particular, considerably increased the possibilities for putting this principle into practice. Fields of research in what were later called the ‘auxiliary sciences’ (archaeology, numismatics, etc.) became more developed. Furthermore, critical historiography, until then reduced to parasitical additions to ‘proper’ histories (introductions, footnotes, dissertations and discussions at the end of the volume, pièces justificatives, etc.), now received a historiographical form of its own: the historical dissertation. Historians did not just write ‘histories’ devoted to geographical entities (towns, provinces): they also wrote monographs on specific problems. It is obvious that in such texts, the person who writes is omnipresent and clearly perceptible. But nevertheless, style remained a superfluous quality for this critical, researching and problem-solving historian of the end of the century. In spite of being more modern and more scientific than his predecessors, he too showed some reluctance to use rhetorical devices and stylistic ornamentation. He stressed the subordination of style to the (changing) content just as much.

The anti-rhetorical attitude evidently does not imply that the eighteenth-century Belgian historian was advised to write badly. Of course it was better to write well; ‘il est toujours blamable d’avoir plus mal écrit que l’on ne faisoit communement de son temps’ (‘it is always
reprehensible to have written less well than others did in one’s time’). Of course a historian who was able to use a good style was worthy of praise and compliment. And historians were actually judged on their style by their colleagues and bibliographers. Thus not all talk of style was negative. There were ideas on what historical writing should be like – even though these were very often expressed in a critical and negative way. What remained when superfluity was lifted from the historical text was a way of writing that was good and at the same time appropriate for history. It was ‘clarté, netteté, précision’ (‘lucidity, clarity, preciseness’). It was ‘l’aisance & la simplicité, qui conviennent à la narration historique’ (‘fluency and simplicity which are fit for historical narrative’).

A historical dissertation aimed to solve a problem and to convince the reader to accept the proposed solution, and therefore had to be written in a style that focused on argument and discussion, criticism and interpretation, correctness and precision. The text had to be clear and perspicuous, and the information and the argument could not be buried under (hidden behind) a (decorative) style. Also the style of a proper history had to be transparent, since a historian had to focus on the content, on the historical reality and truth, which he was to present in as pure a form as possible. The language of the historian was transparent. The idea was that of a plain, unadorned language. History was artless. It needed to have the same qualities the historical reality was believed to have: it was simple and natural (following the nature of history itself). A historical text had to be like the past. The historical style was noble, as were the character and the characters of history, its meaning and mission. The historian’s language, for that matter, was ‘le langage simple & noble de l’histoire’.