

Book Review

Jelle Krol, *Minority Language Writers in the Wake of World War One: A Case Study of Four European Authors*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, xii+346pp., 8 illustrations. ISBN 9783030520397

At the core of Jelle Krol's book *Minority Language Writers in the Wake of World War One* are four writers from small or minority languages: the Frisian Douwe Kalma, the Welshman Saunders Lewis, the Scottish Hugh MacDiarmid, and Roparz Hemon from Brittany. Krol's scholarly origins are in Frisian literature: in 2006, for example, he co-authored the still-authoritative history of Frisian literature, contributing the chapter on the two World Wars and the interwar period. The acknowledgements to this book suggest *Minority Language Writers* started out as a study on Kalma, whose first publications appeared in the years 1915 and 1916, and then became a comparative analysis of four European authors.

Krol has not chosen his four authors randomly. All of them were born in the period 1892-1900 and thus came of age just before and during the First World War. In Krol's characterization, they are 'typical vanguard writers' (p. 4) who entered their language's respective literary fields in the period 1915-1925 and who wanted change. Krol convincingly captures Europe's Wilsonian moment – the promise of national sovereignty offered by the American president as Europe's continental empires collapsed, burdened by the destruction of the war – and how



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these young artists pushed for more recognition of their language and their culture. Perhaps national independence was not on their mind: after 1918, it quickly became clear that new nation-states were only really created in Central and Eastern Europe, mostly out of the ashes of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Even though most of these writers became politically active (only Hemon did not), they mainly directed their energies to linguistic and literary means.

Krol's approach is largely literary-sociological, in the vein of Pierre Bourdieu and Pascale Casanova. In each chapter, he describes the writers' literary field and the genesis of their habitus as prominent individuals within those fields. Time and again, Krol addresses the problem how to define the literary field in case of a minority language literature. Where Welsh found itself in a rather strong position, paradoxically due to Wales' close connection with dominant England, for the other languages the situation was more difficult. Scottish literature, by contrast, 'generally means literature written in Scotland or by Scottish writers'; however, this is 'mainly in English with a little Gaelic and Scots' (p. 154). At the time of a national awakening, this situation becomes problematic. Meanwhile, Kalma worked to demarcate the borders of the Frisian literary field from the Dutch one (p. 67) and thus establish a certain literary autonomy.

Casanova provides a second set of methodological tools. Refreshingly, Krol does not draw on her work on the 'world republic of letters' (2004), but rather her later monograph on *littératures combatives*, or combative literatures. These literatures 'became a central terrain to national existence' (2011, 129), and thus differed from dominant, national literatures, which could separate the political and the aesthetic. In each chapter, Krol describes the writers' 'combative' entrance into the literary field, often in the form of polemical essays, manifestos, and other visionary texts. Through these writings, the writers Krol studies both carved out a space for themselves as representatives of a new sound and

a new generation, and expressed a specific literary-political desire related to the minority language they advocated for and the cultural community formed around that language.

From Casanova, Krol also takes four strategies that minority language writers employ while arguing for their language's cultural autonomy. These are distancing, connecting, unifying, and mobilising. Each writer attempts 'to distance themselves from the dominating language and its influences' (p. 304): although politically part of the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and France, respectively, Frisian, Welsh, Scots, and Breton were in the minds of these authors very different, both culturally and historically. Indeed, all four writers connected their present with the Middle Ages (p. 304), since during those times these minority languages were still widely used. Another connection consisted in emphasizing links with 'foreign' languages (p. 305): as he distanced Frisian from Dutch, for example, Kalma moved it closer to English, German, and the Scandinavian languages. None of these writers went at it alone: they wanted to 'unite the inhabitants of the regions in which they lived' (p. 306), which explains their efforts in both politics and education. Lastly, from this desire to unify also followed their attempts to mobilise fellow authors and speakers of their language (p. 307).

The first years after the war were marked by great artistic experimentation and innovation, and the four writers Krol discusses were no different. They experimented with new genres, which addressed the added literary-political goal of bestowing additional capital – in the Bourdieuan sense – on their literary fields. At the same time, their desire to modernise existed next to their harking back to the past. '*Reculer pour mieux sauter*', Krol calls it: taking a step back in order to make a 'substantial leap' forward (p. 321). The past, especially the medieval past, proves to be not only a rich imaginative source, but also a reminder of when times were better, linguistically speaking. This made the need to take a step back 'inevitable', in Krol's words (p. 321). Grounded in a

reimagined history, they could reposition their languages and their literatures in the world as it was changing and unfolding post-1918.

Krol's book is highly readable and brings four writers who, because of the language they wrote in, have often been peripheralized, into important discussions on the complex cultural politics of the post-war moment. The discrepancy between their nationalist convictions and the lack of concrete results for minority groups in Western Europe at the time is made all the more glaring by Krol's work. One wishes, however, that he would have pushed his conclusions a bit further than is currently the case. Here, a comparison with Ireland—the only Western European country that did achieve independence in the period Krol attends to—and Casanova's 'Irish paradigm' is instructive.

In *The World Republic of Letters*, she discerned a pattern in which literatures go from inventing a tradition and recreating a national language to receiving autonomy. Casanova based this pattern on the case of Ireland. Krol, however, has found no 'straightforward imitation ... in Frisian, Welsh, Scots or Breton literatures' (p. 321) of this pattern. That is a fine observation, but one wishes that the point would have been pressed more – that it would have led to a more sustained critique of Casanova's work. What is a pattern, if it is not imitated? What does the case of Ireland mean when it is not followed? Is it perhaps the world-historical exception, rather than the rule?

This feeling – that Krol undersells what his book does – is felt at more moments in the concluding pages. His work shows that the national movements Kalma, Lewis, MacDiarmid, and Hemon were active in 'coincides' with Miroslav Hroch's phase B of nationalism, and that these writers' strategies are 'in line' with John Hutchinson's work on the importance of the past for nationalist movements (p. 323). This is true, but it does more than confirm and provide empirical evidence for what others have already theorized. These four case studies ultimately ask

how work done in minority studies relates to the disciplines of European studies and world literature. That is a connection waiting to be made.

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