



Regionalism and a European View?

Gerard Walschap on the 'Heimatroman'

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Concepts like the 'regional novel', 'roman rural' or 'der Heimatroman' are genre designations that are quite problematic. First of all, it is difficult to find clear definitions of the genre 'regional novel'. It is indeed possible to make a list of its most prototypical characteristics, but attempts at a more detailed characterization get entangled in ambivalences and vagueness. Another problem, and a major one, lies in the fact that these and similar terms are usually used as normative rather than as descriptive concepts. Both in literary histories and in literary criticism the term 'regionalist literature' is rarely applied in a neutral, non-evaluative way, but frequently denotes a kind of second-rate literature. Moreover, this also holds for the contemporary use of the term, as some responses to recently published Dutch novels may show.¹

This contribution will illustrate how one of those supposedly among the most prominent opponents of regionalist literature, the Flemish author Gerard Walschap (1898-1989), said to have instigated the 'prose renewal of the 1930s' in Flanders, cannot adequately be described by a framework in which 'modernist' and 'regionalist' literature are seen as formal and ideological opposites.

The Regional Novel as an Uncanonized Genre

The negative quality associated with the designation 'regionalist literature' has to do with the historic development of the genre. At the end of the 19th century regionalist reactions arose against urban developments including the rise of an urban proletariat, the spread of poverty, secularization, and the loosening of moral standards, religious patterns and traditional ways of thinking. As a reaction to these modern developments, regionalism offered a particular form of crisis management, namely a retreat into traditional moral and religious patterns. Seen from the perspective of the citizens living in the late 19th century, the rural population was a kind of curiosity, a group that oddly enough had kept its faith in God, an interesting phenomenon to observe, but one that remained at a great distance from city life. This becomes clear in a quote from the late 19th-century Dutch critic and poet Busken Huet: "The feelings of a farmer are as profound as those of a citizen, but in his way of expressing himself, there sometimes is - as a result of his solitary existence - something significant and naive, something that has been lost in the streets of the city, where so much more distraction can be found, and where life has become much more complicated."²

An antinomian model also prevails in literary historiography, in which regionalism is associated with traditional narrative and mimetic poetics, and modernism with

1. Felix Timmermans, *Illustration in his calender for 1933 on rural life*.
[Lier, Stadsarchief]

1 When Gerbrand Bakker published his novel *Boven is het stil* in 2006 (translated as *The Twin* in 2008), critics who praised Bakker's style felt obliged to defend the book from being included in the regional genre. See Note 3.

2 For the original quotation: Holtrop, "Over het nut van de streekroman voor de literatuur", 104.

2. Cover of Gerbrand Bakker's *Boven is het stil* (2006): the renewal of the regional novel.



3 See De Geest, "Literary Historiography in Netherlandic Studies" and Kramer, *Regionalismus und Moderne*.

4 Cloostermans, "Boven is het stil". See also Drayer, "Kaïn en Abel in Waterland": "*Boven is het stil* is swarming with characters that would fit well in a regional novel: the sturdy farmer, the taciturn farm-hand. But the story easily transcends these stereotypes." And Janssens, "Het natuurlijk evenwicht eindelijk hersteld": "There is always some dispute about regional novels, because they do not reflect our multicultural society [...] But, *Boven is het stil* is not a regional novel."

5 Bemong, "Streekliteratuur in literatuurgeschiedenissen", 19.

formal experiments and rupture with the aesthetic tradition. In this view regional authors occupy the periphery of the literary system. The regional novel is seen as a genre outside the canon, one that only succeeds in reaching the core of the literary system in its non-typical manifestations. In other words: 'the best 'regional novels' are not the most typical ones'. The reason for this is that literary historians often follow the ideas and programmatic judgments of contemporary critics and advocates of literary modernism, and therefore consider a thematic and formal preoccupation with urban locations (e.g. Paris or Berlin), the characteristic of literary modernism, as the norm, and regionalism as synonymous with 'not modern' and even 'anti-modern', in other words as second-rate. Such perspectives are based on an ideologically charged contrast between the modern city and the 'Heimat', between metropolis and province, between progressive and con-

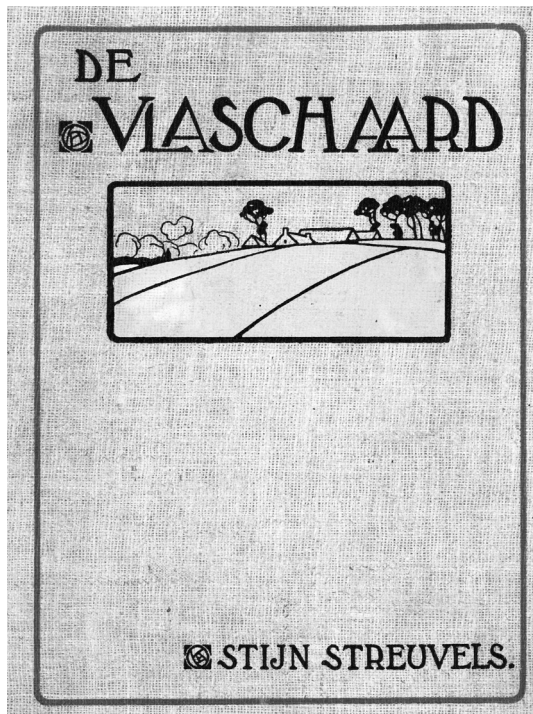
servative, between open and closed.³

When in 2006 a novel was published by the Dutch novelist Gerbrand Bakker, *Boven is het stil* (It's quiet upstairs, issued in English as *The Twin*), the critics hesitated to use the qualification 'regional novel', because they considered it a deprecatory one. [2] When the critic Marc Cloostermans of the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard* discovered to his horror that *Boven is het stil* met almost all the criteria of regional novels he knew, he wrote: "Well then: a very good regional novel, never thought I would ever write this", an indication that the regional novel in critical discourse still functions as an anti-model, 'as how it should not be done'.⁴ Regional narrative prose still seems to have an aura of commonplace representation, provincialism, traditionalism and inferior literary quality, in spite of the great popularity the genre has enjoyed and still does.

Characteristics of the Traditional Regional Novel

Over the course of time many different and very diverse terms have described the genre broadly covered by the expression 'regional novel'. Even in Dutch literary historical surveys the English and French terms occur: besides regional novel (streekroman), we also find mentions of 'peasant novels', 'le roman paysan', 'roman rural', 'roman régionaliste', 'roman rustique', etc. A certain consistency in nomenclature seems to have developed, particularly in the 1930s, which must be seen in connection with a stronger awareness of the genre: 'Heimatkunst', 'regionalistische roman' (regionalistic novel) and 'plattelandsroman' (rural novel) are most frequently used in this period.⁵

The essence of a traditional regional novel could be typified by the following seven pro-



tototypical characteristics: (1) the setting is a small village, a rural environment, offering obvious material for various conflict situations: social conflicts based on class differences and dependence of the poor labourers on the rich farmers, but also generation gaps, between parents - mostly fathers - representing a conservative, patriarchal society and their children yearning for freedom and a modern way of life. A prominent example of this last type of conflict is Stijn Streuvels' *De Vlaschaard* (1907) ('The Flaxfield'). [3] At the centre of the narrative is the fight between a stubborn farmer, who finds it hard to hand over his life's work to his son, who is becoming more and more rebellious. (2) The narrator's attitude towards this milieu is one of sympathy and involvement. Very often the region described is also the native region of the author. The aim is recognizability and an atmosphere of authenticity which must be seen as an attempt to excite the reader's sympathy. Consequently, we can speak of an indirect way of identity-building or an indirect identity-confirming function. The Dutch au-

thor Antoon Coolen (1897-1961), who was very successful in the 1930s with his Brabant regional novels, did not hesitate to present himself as a pure native of this province, although he was born in Wijnre in the province of Limburg. Coming from Brabant just had to be his trademark.⁶ (3) The environmental setting is constructed in an ideologically and morally charged opposition of the rural and the urban environments. Although a rural existence exposes the inhabitants to the constant dangers and violence of nature, their attachment to rural life is confirmed. (4) Stylistic characteristics are extensive picturesque descriptions, in which nature often fulfils a role as an actor in the narrative. (5) Regional language can be used to express the social oppositions mentioned above, and also serves to evoke the 'couleur locale'. (6) The narrative plot is typified by a loose structure in which the characters and the events are linked together not so much by the development on the event-level, but by the setting and the voice of the - often external - narrator. (7) The world view is conservative, conformist, romantic, nostalgic, idealising, suggesting timelessness and invariability. One could reformulate all these characteristics in a deprecatory way, which then would result in the common image of the 'regional novel' usually found in literary history.⁷

3. Cover of the first edition of Stijn Streuvels' *De Vlaschaard* (1907) by Emmanuel Viérin, brother of the architect Jozef Viérin. [Leuven, KU Leuven, Universiteitsbibliotheek]

6 Sintobin and Kusters, "Als een steen in oprimpelend water", 100.
7 See De Geest, "Literary Historiography in Netherlandic Studies".

4. Gerard Walschap, c 1930.
[Leuven, KADOC]



Gerard Walschap in the Late 1920s

In the period when this genre was quite popular in Flanders, Gerard Walschap made his debut. [4] Born in 1898 in Londerzeel, a small village in the province of Brabant, he was first published as a poet and a playwright, and by the end of the 1920s also as a novelist. At that point Walschap strongly opposed the literary mainstream of his time. In his reviews and critical essays he repeatedly rebuked three 'cardinal sins' of Flemish novelists: word-painting or aestheticism, the predilection for extensive descriptions, and provincialism or folklorism. Well-known (at that time) and very popular examples of this last school in Flanders were Felix Timmermans (1886-1947) and Ernest Claes (1885-1968). In later literary histories Walschap and Timmermans are commonly represented as each other's literary opposites. Walschap was not the only advocate of banning this form of

popular writing. His Antwerp colleague, Marnix Gijsen (1899-1984), also campaigned against what he called the 'weather reports' in Flemish novels. In his view and that of several young colleagues, descriptive passages that were too many and too long hampered the course of the narrative. Other shortcomings that were condemned were: a simplistic worldview, largely idealized representations of characters and settings, or to put it briefly, a lack of realism. Contrary to this, Walschap and his contemporaries first of all favoured a more profound psychological characterization (a demand formulated in particular by Maurice Roelants (1895-1966)), secondly, a dynamic style and a quick succession of narrative events (Gerard Walschap), and finally a profound interest in fundamental moral, religious and social problems as the main subject of the novel.

Walschap reviewed hundreds of novels in the first half of the 1930s, mostly in the Catholic weekly *Hooger Leven*. In these numerous literary reviews he not only sought to give shape to his own poetics, he also aimed at uplifting Flemish literature to an international level, which could only be reached by better and severer literary criticism. Therefore he urged critics to be harsh, irrespective of personal relationships and ties of friendship, and he advised all his colleagues to take the European novel as a standard. Flanders still had a long way to go, Walschap stated in 1928. He commented sneeringly on Flemish literature: "World literature? 'First Flemish, then European.' What do we care what other nations write? Ideas in our books? Just describe a farmer sowing, and when you also describe the open field behind him, you automatically have a large background, sometimes even a very far-reaching one, because Flanders is a flat country, and when the weather is fine, you can look astonishingly far [...]"⁸ Those who might interpret such

8 For the original quotation: Walschap, "Een huwelijksroman", 1449.

utterances as adversarial towards regionalist writing will be surprised when reading further in Walschap's critical work appearing in the same period. It is striking how Walschap severely criticized all forms of provincialism - as in the remark just quoted - but never heaped criticism on the genre of the 'regional novel' as such, in contrast to the later depiction of his poetics in overviews of literary history, where he is, as already mentioned, generally presented as the foremost adversary of regionalism.⁹

Although Walschap criticized fellow writer Felix Timmermans for several books which he considered of inferior literary quality and suffering from the faults of literary laziness, he praised a few other novels by Timmermans, although they were situated in a rural context and with peasants and peasant life as main themes. In the case of *Boerenpsalm* (Country Psalm, 1935) [1], a novel about the tragic life of a farmer, Walschap reprimanded his fellow critics who had not been able to recognize the virtues of this book: "Leave the town", he wrote, "because you no longer know what trees are and wild flowers. You don't know anymore where the fruit comes from, lying so sickly in cotton wool on display in the window. [...] Your taste has been exhausted on the quays of an international seaport. The poetry of a little rural river doesn't mean anything to you anymore. [...] When you look around in your room: books, nothing more than books, erudition and no life. If you want to write about Felix Timmermans, leave the city."¹⁰ [5]



Regional and European

These quotations demonstrate how the opposition between rural and urban life does occur in the critical discourse of Gerard Walschap, but not in the form of a contrast between regionalism versus modernism. To Walschap, Timmermans' *Boerenpsalm*, a story with psychological depth told in the first person, was a successful example of new modern writing.

This is but one point that demonstrates why Walschap's pronouncements on the regional novel in his critical discourse should not be regarded as comments on a genre as such, but should be read and interpreted within their own discursive context. To escape from the normative dualist model, we have to ask other questions and reread his texts. It is important to focus on who wrote and spoke about regional novels, how they did so and with what intention. How was the

5. Felix Timmermans, c 1935.
[Lier, Stadsarchief]

⁹ In this context it is not unimportant to point out the fact that the term 'provincialism', with its negative connotations, was replaced by the more positive-sounding 'regionalism' by the turn of the 19th century. De Geest et al., "The Case of Regional Literature" point out how leading members of the 'Van Nu and Straks' circle attempted to place the regional novel on a higher plane.

¹⁰ For the original quotation: Walschap, "Felix Timmermans", 840.

6. Ernest Claes, c 1930.
[Leuven, KADOC]



concept constituted and articulated, and how is it used, in opposition to what?¹¹

Concepts of regionalism and regional literature do not only occur in opposition to modernism and modern literature. These concepts can be intertwined with other forms of identity articulation. Thus, other patterns can exist in which these terms figure. 'Regionalism' can also often be found in a framework that opposes the national and the subnational. In other words, regionalism is frequently considered the conceptual double of nationalism. But here also, we see that in specific discursive contexts the concept of regionalism escapes from these binary schemes. Walschap is a good example of how it is possible to undermine an opposition which reserves urbanity and modernism for internationalism, and provincialism and regionalism for nationalism.¹²

In several publications Walschap warned against the confusion between what he called the 'European standard' and the genre of the

novel. Those who think "that an urban novel meets a European standard and a rural novel does not, those who think that the level of a book is higher because the figures of its characters are more cosmopolitan, or because it deals with problems that are more international or intellectual", those, according to Walschap, confuse level with genre.¹³

And after the Second World War, when the fight against provincialism was decided, Walschap pleaded for a reconciliation between a European orientation and the expression of a Flemish identity, which he found in several forms of literature that were inspired by the Flemish people and landscape. We see how Walschap wanted to free Flemish literature from the corset of a confined provincialism, but at the same time did not want to lose the tie with Flanders and its 'popular' inspiration: "Real modern and European art should feed on the popular spirit without copying its forms", he wrote in 1934.¹⁴ Walschap argued his point with the example of the popular writer Ernest Claes. [6] He would even try to convince the reader that literature of European importance and 'Heimatkunst' were not mutually exclusive. Walschap defended Claes, who at that time and even now was considered the most typical example of provincialist literature, against those who simplistically lashed out against this genre. We should not call every novel not set in the city a provincial novel, Walschap warned. "To me our false recitations on so-called important subjects are much more provincial than a small book by Ernest Claes on the plaster figures of the little church of Sichem. Provincial in the pejorative sense is a literature that remains imprisoned by a rural mentality."¹⁵ The important thing is that one should not gape at 'folkloric peculiarities'. Walschap found intellectual humour in Claes' book, in which the spirit of the people was expressed with all its warmth and compassion. If the standard of universal

11 See Kramer, *Regionalismus und Moderne*, 8-9.

12 Ibid.

13 For the original quotation: Walschap, "Vlaams literair minderwaardigheidsgevoel", 1325.

14 For the original quotation: Idem, "Een standaardwerk over Vlaamsche volkskunst", 1433.

15 For the original quotation: Idem, "Zeven dagen letterkunde", 2068.

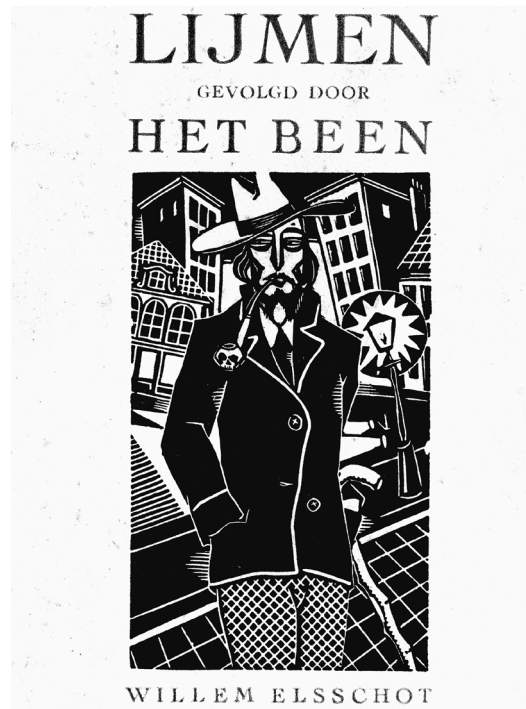
humanity was fulfilled, Walschap saw no restrictions for a combination of a modern, European inspiration with a national, popular one.

Regional and Catholic

A complicating factor in all this, however, was that the regional novel was a special favourite of the Catholic critics, who occupied a dominant position in the literary field in the 1930s.¹⁶ Consequently, when we look at the concept of 'the regional novel' in its context, we see a third axis, namely an opposition of regional and Catholic to urban and non-Catholic (and thus immoral).

How this opposition functioned can be clearly illustrated by the Flemish author who was seen as the antithesis of regionalism, the Antwerp author Willem Elsschot (1882-1960), whose novels and stories were mostly set in an urban context (especially in Antwerp, but also in Paris), and who was highly praised abroad precisely for this and for his plain and sober style. [7] Dutch critics such as Jan Greshoff and Menno ter Braak, editor of the authoritative periodical *Forum* (1931-1935), were enthusiastic about Elsschot's compact, terse style of writing, which they considered a welcome and even vital change to the dominant tendencies in Flemish literature. Ter Braak stated in an expressive formulation in which he rebuked the folkloristic and regionally coloured language of Elsschot's colleague Timmermans, that the former had been loudly overrated in his own country. "Willem Elsschot's novels [...] are written in a very common Dutch, which here and there betrays his Flemish origin, but nowhere cultivates the provincial idiom."¹⁷

The Catholic Flemish critic Urbain Van de Voorde wrote a review in *Dietsche Warande en Belfort*, a leading Catholic periodical, in 1934, in which he compared newly



7. Henri van Straten, Cover of Willem Elsschot's *Lijmen en Het Been* (1932/1938; 1943).
[Private collection]

published work by Felix Timmermans and Willem Elsschot. He opened his contribution with a remark about "Felix Timmermans, who is wrongly considered an important author by certain European countries, and who could be replaced to advantage by Willem Elsschot as the ambassador of modern Flemish literature."¹⁸ But after a profound comparison between the two authors and after elaborate praise of Elsschot's qualities, Van de Voorde came to the conclusion that Timmermans was after all the "only real personality in our literature". The reason why he came to this conclusion, unexpected at first glance, was that Elsschot did not bring any renewal from the pessimistic line of thought that had dominated the Western world since the 19th century. This way of thinking completely fits with the comment of another Catholic critic, the Jesuit Emiel Janssen, on contemporary writing in Flanders: "The rural world is a much better inspiration for the novelist than the city. Because it is more normal! There we find calm, and tradition, solidarity and faith."¹⁹

16 Missinne, *Kunst en leven*.

17 For the original quotation: Ter Braak, *De persoonlijkheid van Willem Elsschot*, 35.

18 For the original quotation: Van de Voorde, "Vlaamsche Letteren", 52.

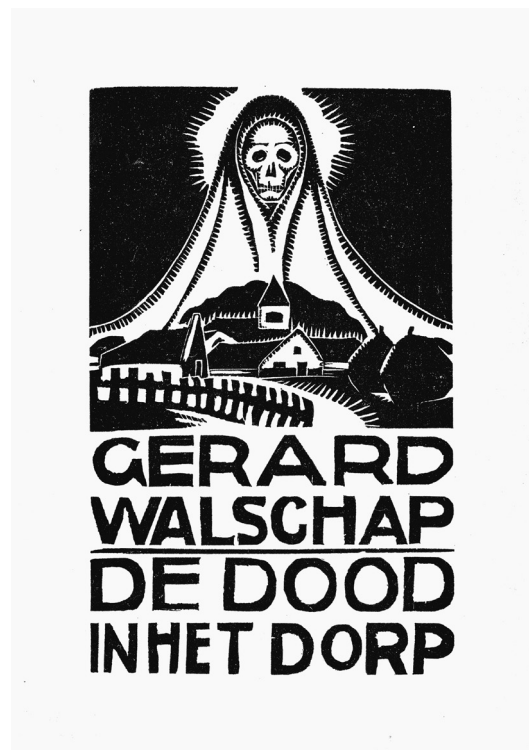
19 For the original quotation: Janssen, "Werelden", 437.

8. Cover of Gerard Walschap's *De dood in het dorp* (1930).
[Leuven, KADOC]

Gerard Walschap, from Modernist to Regionalist?

Two final questions remain: what kind of novels did Gerard Walschap write himself? And how were they received? Ambiguity predominates on this level. The most striking example of inconsistency in the reception of Walschap is his novel *Houtekiet*. Written in 1939 and considered Walschap's masterpiece - also by the author himself - it was called a "regionale roman" in the *Letterkundig Lexicon voor de Neerlandistiek* (2002) while in 1998 Jean Weisgerber, author of several studies on avant-garde and modernism, called this novel a modern one.²⁰

But contemporary critics also had great difficulties in categorizing Walschap. With his novel *Adelaide*, a controversial critical statement on Catholic morals, published in 1929, Walschap had put into practice what he had fervently advocated as the renewal of Flemish literature. *Adelaide* was a novel which attracted attention, both by its provocative theme and by its unusual style, which mixed direct, indirect and free indirect speech.²¹ Although Walschap had conceived the story about Adelaide as a true modern Catholic novel, Catholic critics revolted, but at the same time most of them could not but help acknowledge that a first-rate author was at work and that a very individual voice could be heard. One year later, Walschap published two volumes of short stories, with titles like *Volk* (1930) and *De dood in het dorp* (1930) [8-9], that at first look very much like traditional regional stories. They are inspired by characters and events in a small village, but undoubtedly express - as the author states himself - a tragic view of life. Catholic critics now hesitated and secretly hoped that the lost sheep might come back. In the 1930s Walschap published several novels that swerve between traditional storytelling and cautious experiments.



Most of the Flemish critics regarded him as a modern author, and he promoted this image in a determined process of self-presentation. The Dutch critics were not so sure. They admitted that in a certain sense Walschap had succeeded in becoming a European author, which was synonymous with being a modern one, and staying Flemish at the same time. On the other hand some doubts could be heard too: "Is Walschap basic or oversimplified?" the Dutch modernist poet Martinus Nijhoff asked.²²

From the mid-1930s on more and more criticism could be heard of Walschap's writing. New names of novelists turned up, some of them continuing the tradition of Walschap, called the 'new realistic' movement (such as André Demedts (1906-1992) and Marcel Matthijs (1899-1964)), and others embroidering on the attainments of Maurice Roelants, designated the 'new psychological' movement, as Pierre Buckinx stated in 1937.²³

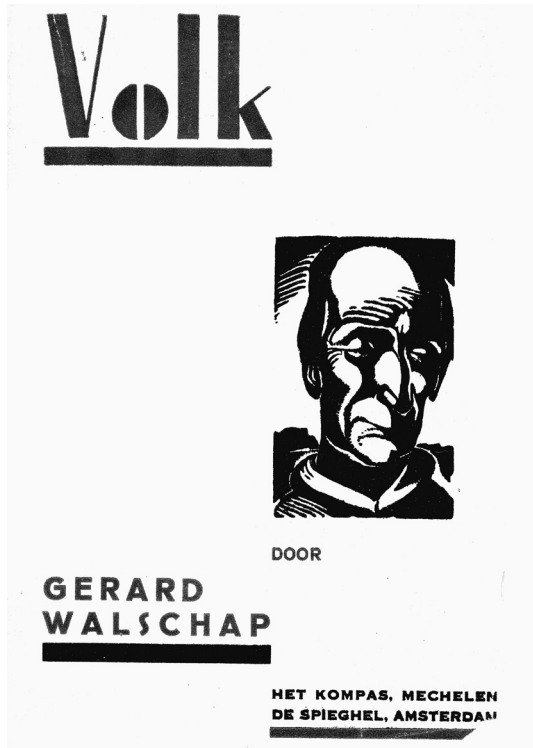
Filip de Pillecijn (1891-1962), Willem Elsschot, René Berghen (1901-1988) and espe-

20 Bork et al., *Letterkundig Lexicon*; Weisgerber, "Walschaps romantheorie".

21 Adelaide is the name of the main character, a young woman who, partly due to heredity and partly due to a bizarre piece of advice from the village priest, goes mad and commits suicide.

22 Nijhoff, "Elementair of simplistisch?", 770.

23 Buckinx, "De evolutie van den Vlaamsche roman", 296.



cially Maurice Gilliams (1900-1982) became representatives of the second movement, and promoted themselves as such, the 'promising new generation'. Although most of them did recognize the merits of Walschap, they also criticized him and rebuked stylistic shortcomings and the provincially minded atmosphere in his novels. Jan Vercammen wrote in 1934 that to his regret Walschap had still not been able to release himself from the "rural, folkloric environment".²⁴ In 1937 the Flemish novelist Paul Lebeau (1908-1982) considered Walschap a representative of the Flemish "boerenliteratuur" (peasant literature). In this critical review he shoved Walschap by the side of his (former) polar opposite Felix Timmermans, and made a plea for a specimen of new prose: *Elias of het gevecht met de nachtegalen* (Elias, or the struggle with the nightingales, 1936) by Maurice Gilliams: "Indeed, this is a complete new sound in a literature that only makes itself noteworthy when it can portray peasants, living as thinking plants. [...] What is new here: a sensation of life detached from

the countryside, a philosophical spirit."²⁵ After the mid-1930s leading Flemish critics and authors started disapproving of the 'boerenroman' (peasant novel), which for them connoted folklorism and provincialism. The new literary objectives were to pay increasing attention to the psychological development of characters and to achieve stylistic refinement, and these were presented as incompatible with the regional genre.

Conclusion

We can say that Walschap takes different positions at the same time: he writes from the inspiration of folklore and yet is opposed to dominant narrative folkloric writing as well. He remains attached to his Flemish inspiration, but also aspires to bring his own novels and criticism to a European level. A polarized interpretation of the concept of the 'regional novel' as the anti-model of modernism is not useful for inquiring into works belonging to the genre, and needs conceptual refinement and modification. When seen in its discursive context, 'regional novel' reveals itself as an assembly of different characteristics, functioning in different oppositional frames. The contradictions and apparent paradoxes in the discourse can be explained by examining the other discursive and ideological patterns with which such statements are intertwined. Interrelations between the 'modern' and the 'regional' generally are much more complex than a simple antinomial model suggests.²⁶

9. Cover of Gerard Walschap's *Volk* (1930).
[Leuven, KADOC]

24 Vercammen, "Bekende namen", 504.

25 Lebeau, "Gilliams' Elias", 469.

26 See Mecklenburg, *Erzählte Provinz*. See also Kramer, *Regionalismus und Moderne*, which demonstrates how Thomas Mann as a modern author uses regionalist ideas, in order to formulate far-reaching aesthetic and political claims about cultural modernism.