

Braving the North or Conquering the Sea:

A Comparative Approach to British, German and Dutch fiction on climate

As a Dutch scholar working on British literature people sometimes ask me why I don't research Dutch literature. Or they ask me whether climate fiction is a big thing in Dutch literature as well. I don't really have an answer to the first question – it's a matter of preference I suppose. I didn't really have an answer to the second question either – whether such a thing as Dutch climate fiction exists. Yet as I began to see the growing attention for British and German climate fiction, I became curious. How similar is Dutch literature to that of its neighbours? And where do the differences come from? These questions led me to seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, to German and British Romanticism, to the North and to the shore.

For a long time, my search for Dutch literature about climate went nowhere fast. And I still have yet to find a Dutch example of literary fiction in which the landscape, especially in relation to climate crisis, is central. Today I will spend the majority of my paper contextualizing this absence in Dutch literature, and compare it to some British and German works.

Isabel Hoving suggests that Dutch literature lacks the kind of Romantic tradition that British and German literature share. European Romanticism is typically explained as a consequence of the political turmoil of the late eighteenth century. **[SLIDE]** Yet the region that is now known as the Netherlands was not immune to this political turmoil either. Between 1799 and 1815 the Netherlands suffered the collapse of its overseas trade empire, became part of the French empire and then finally gained independence. Hoving proposes that the relatively late industrialisation of the northern Low Countries might be a reason why Romanticism never got hold in the Netherlands. Romanticism, this theory suggests, is a consequence primarily of industrialisation. The southern Low Countries, what is now part of Belgium, caught on with industrial advances imported from Britain, especially in terms of cloth and mining. The northern Low Countries on the other hand, were slow to industrialise. While the southern half of the country flourished – both in terms of population growth and economic development – the northern regions were sparsely populated and empty. The

Industrial Revolution didn't catch on in the Netherlands until the second half of the nineteenth century, over a hundred years after Britain. Yet the causal relationship between industrialisation and Romanticism doesn't always hold. Germany was also late to industrialise – although once it did, it did so very quickly. **[SLIDE]** By the mid-nineteenth century, when the German industrial revolution was really getting under way, German Romanticism had been in full swing for decades.¹ The lack of a Dutch Romantic tradition – or indeed a tradition of nature writing comparable to Britain and Germany – can therefore not be completely explained by either the argument of political turmoil or that of late industrialisation. The development of Dutch landscape perception before the nineteenth century, however, might shed more light on the different landscape traditions of British, German and Dutch literature.

[SLIDE] This mid-seventeenth-century painting by a master of Dutch landscape painting, Jacob van Ruisdael, is thematically similar to many Romantic paintings, including Caspar David Friedrich's 1824 painting *Ruine Eldena*. The thematics explored by Friedrich, and in Britain Turner, were supposedly also available to nineteenth-century Dutch painters. Yet to the extent Romantic paintings were made at all after the seventeenth century, they didn't hold the cultural weight of Friedrich's and Turner's paintings in Germany and Britain, respectively. Yet there's also a difference between the landscape paintings of these three painters that goes some way towards explaining the Dutch relationship with landscape and nature. Typically, some evidence of the human is present in Romantic paintings – including the industrialising landscape, as in **[SLIDE]** Turner's images of trains and steam ships, and the tiny human figures in many of Friedrich's works. In Van Ruisdael's paintings, the human is also featured – people, carts, windmills. Yet these images suggest a slightly different perception of the landscape. This is not the landscape of the pastoral tradition in which the machine, as Leo Marx put it, enters the garden. Rather, it is the landscape that is formed by humans. Van Ruisdael's landscapes are full of windmills **[SLIDE]** – an evidence of Dutch watermanagement. It is this

¹ This combination led to a paradoxical relation to the landscape, as Axel Goodbody notes: "Germany's comparatively late and rapid industrialisation and urbanisation gave rise to highly contradictory perceptions and transformations of a landscape which had already been saturated with symbolic meanings by the Romantics" (*Nature, Technology and Cultural Change* 5).

conception of the landscape, as something to be managed, that characterizes the Dutch relationship with landscape and which is instrumental to the absence of a Romantic tradition. Dutch watermanagement got underway on a large scale following a large flood in 1170. By the time Dutch landscape painting developed in the seventeenth century, then, the perception of the landscape as *maakbaar* – malleable – had been firmly established. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when Romanticism was developed in Britain and Germany, the idea of nature as something separate from humans, or something possibly threatened by humans, didn't exist in the Dutch cultural consciousness. The Dutch, Hoving suggests, tend "to see the landscape as the sign of the absence of a meaningful history, and of the absence of nature itself" (Hoving 167).

In the remainder of this paper, I will take the differences between these three traditions into the present. I will explore the pull of the north in British and German literature as a response to climate crisis and juxtapose this with a lack of climate crisis awareness in twenty-first-century Dutch literary fiction.

[SLIDE] In *The Idea of North*, Peter Davidson describes the north as a place of danger and magic, of both the Isles of the Blest and of ghostly menace: [SLIDE] "From remotest antiquity to the present ... and in almost every part of the world, two central ideas of north – endless dark and endless day – alternate and intertwine in patterns that are unending and self-replicating" (55). In the nineteenth century, Davidson suggests, "Antarctica, the Himalayas and indeed everywhere above the snowline became, by extension, 'norths'" (54). This means that the meanings, images and stories attached to the north are extended to other regions. In the twenty-first century, norths and honorary norths have become spaces thick with meanings, with past and present, with records of human destruction of the environment. They have come to function as symbolic canaries in the mine of climate change: [SLIDE] "The role of climate change canaries is thus to render global warming visible, to provide a sequence of what Kevin DeLuca has called 'image events': easily recognised iconic scenes, such as crumbling icecaps or dried-up riverbeds, which stand for wider issues" (231). In British and German postmillennial fiction, the preoccupation with the north is a continuation of the Romantic tradition. Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice*

[SLIDE], a sublime symbol of political failure according to Davidson, consequently becomes a foreshadowing of contemporary climate crisis [SLIDE].

Set largely in 2017, Franz Friedrich's novel *Die Meisen von Uusimaa singen nicht mehr* (2014) [SLIDE] draws explicit links between the north and climate crisis. The environmental examples in the novel are numerous: the fact that the birds have stopped singing – a theme in both 1997 and 2017 – echoes Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in which, following Keats' poem, 'no birds sing' in a landscape polluted by pesticides. The American student trying to settle in Berlin, notes that the world is experiencing the warmest February ever (292). [SLIDE] In Sybille Berg's 2004 novel *Ende gut* terror attacks, climate crisis, and floods signal the end of the world as the narrator knows it. She travels north, to Finland: a place without disease, without upheaval and supposedly untouched by crisis. Climate crisis is explicitly explored in Trojanow's *EisTau* (2011) [SLIDE]. The novel's main character, a glaciologist named Zeno, discovers that the glacier he always perceived as "his" – in the Alps – is melting, or dying. He takes a job as a lecturer on a cruise ship that travels through the Antarctic. As those of you who've read the novel know, he ends up staging a desperate protest against the inaction of populations and politicians. The novel draws on the hypocrisy of 'last chance'-tourism. It particularly, through the parallel between the death of the glacier and the Antarctic cruises, attempts to capture the grief inherent to climate crisis.

The pull of the north also surfaces in much postmillennial British fiction – an issue that I explore at more length in my forthcoming monograph *Climate Crisis and the Twenty-First-Century British Novel*. Actual and honorary norths are, as the explorer in Amy Sackville's *The Still Point* (2010) [SLIDE] writes, beautiful and terrible at the same time. In *The North Water* (2016), by Ian McGuire, [SLIDE] the Victorian protagonist imagines "northern ice fields and the great wonders he will no doubt see there – the unicorn and sea leopard, the walrus and the albatross, the Arctic petrel and the polar bear. He thinks about the great right whales lying bunched in pods like leaden storm clouds beneath the silent sheets of ice" (30). Yet in all of these Arctic novels, the north turns dangerous and gruesome: animals are slaughtered, ships are lost, men perish in a disorienting landscape in which distances are deceptive and snow storms rage.

Rebecca Hunt's *Everland* (2014) is no exception in this respect. Set in Antarctica it echoes the characteristics Davidson names as typical for norths and honorary norths. To the novel's characters, Antarctica is seductive and appealing, cruel and dangerous. One of them Jess, is so enamoured with the poles that she's had the coordinates of both the North and South Pole tattooed on her body (33). Her colleague Brix, on the other hand, quickly becomes disillusioned with Antarctica. Everland, the island they explore, has "none of the remote splendour she'd expected. Instead the Antarctic presented her with a rubble moonscape that had all the charm of a builders' yard" (21).

In these British and German novels, then, norths function as sites of climate crisis. It is hard, though, to find an equivalent space in Dutch literature. The sea would be an obvious choice. **[SLIDE]** It is significant for both its ties to Dutch history and identity, as well as with the consequences of climate crisis. This connection, however, is hardly ever made in Dutch literature. For a country in which 26 per cent of the land is beneath sea level, which forms the delta of several major rivers, and in which fifty-five percent of the country is at risk of flooding, this neglect is remarkable, to say the least. **[SLIDE]**

In his exploration of the "Dutchness" of Dutch literature, the critic Arie Storm praises the landscapes of particularly the older generation of Dutch authors, such as Willem Frederik Hermans and Maarten 't Hart. While Storm explicitly mentions that Dutch literature originates in the landscape – the soil, the air, the sky, the light, the sea – the defining characteristics of Dutch literature he proposes are an eye for detail, a sense of claustrophobia, of turning inwards, both physically and symbolically. This, he suggests, might be a consequence of seeking refuge from the sea and the wind. The author Frank Westerman suggests that the Dutch relationship with water is primarily one of "absent water", of creating barriers to keep it out (on van de Stadt 9). Historically, the Dutch have been very successful at this – so much so that 'watermanagement' has become a Dutch trademark. The Netherlands, a report by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development or OECD suggests, are a "global reference for water management" (20). Or, as this banner on the information centre of the Deltaplan in Zeeland suggests, **[SLIDE]** "Bring in the Dutch!".

This expertise, and the population's faith in their government in this respect, has also led to a sense of complacency. The OECD report on water governance in the Netherlands calls this an "awareness gap": **[SLIDE]** "Dutch citizens take current levels of water security for granted. As a consequence, they tend to be less involved in water policy debates, to ignore water risks and functions when they develop property, and to be little concerned with water pollution" (18). Such an awareness gap – and faith in the authorities – was also mentioned as the reason why the 1953 North Sea flood resulted in so many fatalities. **[SLIDE]** Although people saw that the water was unusually high on the night of January 31st 1953, few warnings were issued. Once the flood struck during the night, lines of communications were severed. As a result, many people drowned in their beds, were stranded on rooftops or were swept away by the water rushing through the broken dykes.

The awareness gap that contemporary researchers note also existed amongst policy makers and government officials: by the 1990s, no one responsible for water management had experienced the 1953 flood. The fact that no major floods had affected the country since made them believe that the Netherlands had successfully controlled the water. A series of river floods in the mid-1990s changed this idea. But it was especially the growing awareness at the beginning of the twenty-first-century of the Netherlands' vulnerability to climate crisis that led to more policy, public service campaigns and preparedness drills in which massive floods were simulated. At the same time, a reverse movement has come to the fore – not aimed to create higher dykes or keep the water *out*, but to 'give back' land. In a recent book on Dutch floods, such projects are framed as a result of the success of Dutch water management: "We've come full circle, the battle with water has been concluded. The Netherlands can return land to the sea again" (136).²

[SLIDE] The 2008 novel *Geen Zee Maar Water* is set in one of these areas to be flooded: the Wieringermeerpolder in the north of the country. In the world beyond the novel this is generally seen as an economic matter. In the novel, however, the responsible minister explicitly draws a link between the flooding

² "De cirkel is rond, de strijd tegen het water is voltooid. Nederland kan weer land teruggeven aan het water"

and climate crisis: "We all know that the land is sinking and the water levels are rising. We can't go on forever just building higher dykes" (123).³ At the same time the novel suggests ambivalence about Dutch management. The epigraph reads: **[SLIDE]** "Ooit komt er een tijd dat we dit land met een zucht van verlichting aan de golven zullen prijsgeven" – "One day, with a sigh of relief, we'll abandon this land to the waves". This is a quote by Johan van Veen, a renowned Dutch engineer and father of the Deltaworks built to protect the country from another flood like the 1953 one. Returning the land to the sea, he suggests, will be a relief to the Dutch. National rhetoric, on the other hand, is mainly founded on protecting land from the water as a matter of national pride. Interestingly, *Geen Zee Maar Water* illustrates the extent to which there really is no unified Dutch relationship with the water.

In the novel the decision to flood the polder is met by severe opposition – which even leads to the blowing up of a dyke and the kidnapping of the minister. The national identity, then, may be one of watermanagement, but the regional identity is shaped by a different relationship. This is perhaps even more the case in the south of the country, in Zeeland, the province affected most severely by the 1953 flood. **[SLIDE]** There too, a polder will be 'returned' to nature, in order to compensate for the expansion of the Antwerp harbour. Here, of all places, the risk of flooding has not been forgotten: it is in the coat of arms of the province, in its motto – *lector et emergo*, I struggle and emerge – and in the cultural memory of the people living there.

[SLIDE] *Geen Zee Maar Water* might be a proto-climate fiction book – even though climate crisis isn't as central to it. Yet it illustrates the beginnings of a new, different awareness of the sea and climate crisis in the Netherlands. Only recently has awareness of climate crisis become part of Dutch watermanagement, for instance in the most recent 'national waterplan' (2016-2020) and the project 'Ruimte voor the Rivier'. As the water levels of major rivers in the country are expected to rise, an ambitious plan was drawn up to give more 'space' to the rivers, primarily by broadening them and designating areas as flood areas. The lack of Dutch climate fiction, then, may not only be a consequence of the

³ "We weten allemaal dat de bodem daalt en dat tegelijkertijd het waterpeil stijgt. Met het ophogen van dijken kunnen we niet tot in de eeuwigheid doorgaan"

Netherlands never really experiencing a Romantic period. Rather, it is the consequence of a centuries-old identity premised on the struggle and conquest of the water, and the malleability of the landscape. Now that public awareness is very slowly changing about the effects of climate crisis on the country, a concordant climate fiction might emerge as well. (2835 words)

THE TEXT OF THIS PAPER AND THE LIST OF SOURCES ARE AVAILABLE ON MY WEBSITE

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