

Nationalist Fervour and Scientific Impartiality in Willem De Vreese's Life and Work

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Willem De Vreese (1869-1938) was a Dutch-language philologist and fervent Flemish nationalist. He had grown up in Ghent in the 1870's and 1880's during a time when French was the language of the elite, with both French Walloon and marginalized Dutch dialects, known as Flemish, subservient to it.¹ De Vreese spent most of his career working on a single project: the *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta*. The *Bibliotheca* is an extensive collection of medieval Dutch-language manuscripts collected by De Vreese from not just Belgium and the Netherlands, but the entire European continent. When De Vreese loaded himself and his endless amounts of luggage onto the umpteenth train to some faraway place in Europe he did so not only to satisfy his own needs as a scholar, but also because he wanted to further the cause of Dutch medieval philology.² In a lecture to the society of Dutch philologists in 1900 De Vreese complained about the abominable state of the study of medieval Dutch-language manuscripts in comparison to such scholarship elsewhere in Europe. His proposed *Bibliotheca* had a definite nationalist goal and was to become the remedy to this problem.³ De Vreese wanted to give the Dutch language in Belgium an equal standing with French and this quest drove his work as a scholar.⁴

The Flemish nationalist movement in which De Vreese was active around 1900 was different from, for instance, German nationalism, which aimed at the unification of the German people in one state. It was largely geared towards changing language laws so that the Dutch-speaking Flemish population could emancipate itself within the nation's institutions and civil service. Since nationalism in Flanders was different from elsewhere in Europe, how De Vreese's role in the Belgian language dispute influenced

¹ E. Witte and H. van Velthoven, *Language and Politics. The Situation in Belgium in an Historical Perspective* (Bruxelles 1999) 64-66.

² J.A.A.M. Biemans, 'Willem de Vreese en de Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta. Over een Vlaamse geleerde en zijn levenswerk', *Literatuur* 6 (1989) 93-101: 94.

³ W. de Vreese, 'Over Middelnederlandsche handschriftkunde in verband met Taal- en letterkunde', *Taal en Letteren* 10 (1900) 337-347: 337.

⁴ Leiden University Library, Leiden, *Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta* (afterwards: LUL, BNM) Box BPL 3160, Folder 6.

his role as a scholar of Dutch linguistics is a question that needs to be investigated. From its birth in 1930 the Belgian state experienced increasing friction between the French- and Dutch-speaking populations. The Flemish dialects fulfilled the role of a low-status language and, especially during the nineteenth century, the state supported a policy of a single unitary language – French – in order to create a single national identity.

The Belgian struggles with nationalism, both nationalist movements within the state and the question what the Belgian national identity should be, were part of a larger historical reality in Europe. The nineteenth century has often been called the century of nations and nationalisms and, according to Ernest Gellner, nationalism only arose after the idea of the state had already been put firmly in place in the minds of Europeans.⁵ Gellner thinks of nationalism as an ideology, in which language and education plays an important role in the creation of a nation through the establishment of a higher culture and therefore his theory is most useful for scrutinizing De Vreese.⁶

The rise of nationalism in Europe permeated all aspects of life in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Because the subsistence of nationalism is dependent upon a system of nationalist education and a nationalist ideology in order to create homogeneity across the nation, it is not surprising that the institutions of (higher) education also turned towards nationalist ideas and topics of study, particularly in the case of the humanities.⁷ The nineteenth century is not just the century during which nationalism became firmly ingrained in European thought, it is also the century during which the modern humanities came into being. Discipline formation and institutionalization became more important as the professionalization of the humanities continued.⁸ While the sciences and the humanities drew further apart, the bonds within the humanities often

⁵ E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford 1983) 3-5.

⁶ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 7, 38-99, 137-141. Of course there is a multitude of different modern nationalist theorists which I have chosen to omit here because their work offers less useful categories for tackling questions concerning nationalism looked at through the lense of (higher) education and language in this essay; Istvan Hont, Hans Kohn, Hannah Arendt, Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm are among such omitted authors.

⁷ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 44-48.

⁸ R. Bod, J. Maat and T. Weststeijn, 'Introduction' in: idem ed., *The Making of the Humanities III: The Modern Humanities* (Amsterdam 2014) 13-24: 13.

remained very close, in terms of method, but also in terms of topics of interest.⁹ It is therefore not surprising that scholarship in the humanities as a whole turned to more nationalistic topics of interest.

To get a more thorough image of the history of the humanities during this tumultuous period when institutionalisation and discipline formation went hand in hand with nationalist fervour, it would be interesting to look at a specific case within that history. In this essay the Belgian professor Willem de Vreese serves as that case. On the one hand he can be considered an archetypal nationalist scholar, on the other hand he is not because the nationalist cause he is invested in is not that of a homogenous national state. Therefore, the case raises interesting questions concerning the nature of nationalist scholarship without a state and the role of the scientific virtue of impartiality as a problematic concept for the nationalist scholar. Impartiality and objectivity, two ideals that many scholars strived towards in the nineteenth century seem to be hard to consolidate with the idea of nationalist scholarship.¹⁰ Especially when the scholar in question is, like De Vreese, working in the name of an emancipatory nationalism. Such a scholar will in all likelihood be motivated to influence politics through his scholarship. How can we place De Vreese within the history of the humanities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in a period when they became increasingly geared towards countries and their national identities?

To answer this question I will first look at De Vreese's place in the history of the humanities around 1900; by juxtaposing De Vreese's work and person against the developments in his discipline (philology) and the humanities in general. I will do this by looking at his life's work, the *Bibliotheca*, his bibliography and his life story through the use of his personal archives and some secondary sources. The next step will be to focus on the tension between De Vreese's nationalism and the epistemic virtue of scientific impartiality. How did De Vreese satisfy the demand of impartiality in the nineteenth century?¹¹ The most important published sources I will

⁹ K.R. Eskildsen, 'Leopold Ranke's Archival Turn: Location and Evidence in Modern Historiography', *Modern Intellectual History* 5 (2008) 425-453: 452-453.

¹⁰ L. Daston, 'Objectivity and Impartiality. Epistemic Virtues in the Humanities' in: Bod, Maat and Weststeijn ed., *The Making of the Humanities III*, 27-41: 27.

¹¹ H. Paul, 'The Scholarly Self: Ideals of Intellectual Virtue in Nineteenth Century Leiden' in: R. Bod, J. Maat and T. Weststeijn ed., *The Making of the Humanities II: From Early Modern to Modern Disciplines* (Amsterdam 2012) 397-413: 399-401.

use are normative articles as well as a defence he wrote in reaction to a review of his work. The primary source material concerning Willem de Vreese is to be found at the University Library of Leiden University where his *Bibliotheca*, along with his personal archives, is stored.

This essay will look at the history of the humanities in a similar way as the series *The Making of the Humanities*, which it simultaneously recognizes as an important stepping stone in the new field of the history of the humanities.¹² The work of Lorraine Daston will be instrumental for scrutinising the idea of impartiality, especially when it comes to her rendition of the difference between ‘the age old’ virtue of impartiality and the relatively new idea of objectivity.¹³ I will also look at the German book *Objektivität und Parteilichkeit in der Geschichtswissenschaft* to take a look at research concerning objectivity in the work of nineteenth century German historians.¹⁴

By taking Belgium scholar De Vreese as a case study, this essay attempts to show how nationalist scholarship might have worked in a case where the scholar in question was part of an antagonistic nationalist movement and so take one step further into figuring out how the humanities might have been influenced by the coming of age of nations and nationalism within Europe. As mentioned above, the cohesion of the humanities is taken as a starting point even though this essay focuses on a single discipline. By using the work of earlier scholars the essay hopes to juxtapose this specific case which would ordinarily be placed within the history of linguistics, next to the history of history, the history of literary studies and so on.

¹² The title of this essay has been inspired by the book series *The Making of the Humanities*: R. Bod, J. Maat and T. Weststeijn ed., *The Making of the Humanities I: Early Modern Europe* (Amsterdam 2010); idem ed., *The Making of the Humanities II: From Early Modern to Modern Disciplines* (Amsterdam 2012); and idem ed. *The Making of the Humanities III: The Modern Humanities* (Amsterdam 2014).

¹³ L. Daston and O. Sibum, *Objectivity* (New York 2007); Daston, ‘Objectivity and Impartiality’, 27.

¹⁴ By R. Koselleck, W. Mommsen and J. Rüsen (München 1977).

De Vreese's part in the history of the humanities

Topics within the humanities became increasingly focused on the own national state. At the same time the institutions in which the study within the humanities was performed changed as well. Universities across the continent started abiding by the Von Humboldt model developed in Berlin. The Von Humboldt University, which was created in 1810, was the first university that was founded on national instead of religious grounds or under the auspices of some ruler. Within a hundred years the model would conquer the western world with its ideas of research and academic freedom.¹⁵ This influenced teaching at universities; text-based source criticism and seminars in which students came in close contact with their professors became the reigning model in Germany and elsewhere. This was an idea that had originally been thought of by German historians such as Leopold von Ranke, Johann Gustav Droysen and Georg Waitz.¹⁶

The history of the humanities in the nineteenth century can therefore be pinpointed to three major changes. First of all a change in method; source based criticism, based on philology, became increasingly important across various disciplines. At the same time the so-called archival turn played an important part in changing the way scholars in the humanities did their research.¹⁷ Secondly, the formation of various new institutions in a, mostly, national form, for example national societies and national journals, museums and source publications on a national basis, became standard practice in the humanities during the nineteenth century. Thirdly, the new *cours de pratique* or *Übungen* revolutionized the way teaching was done at Universities. In the private chambers of professors students were allowed to study the sources in the closest possible way whilst learning from their professors and forming a close bond with them.¹⁸

The scholarly life of Willem de Vreese, born in 1869 in Ghent, mostly took shape after many of the nineteenth century changes within the humanities had begun to take place. His quest to raise the state of Dutch philology to equal heights with that of its European counterparts in France

¹⁵ T.A. Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University* (Oxford 2006) 130-131.

¹⁶ Porciani and Tollebeek, 'Introduction', 9.

¹⁷ Eskildsen, 'Leopold Ranke's Archival Turn', 551-553.

¹⁸ Porciani and Tollebeek, 'Introduction', 5-6; J. Tollebeek, *Fredericq en Zonen. Een antropologie van de moderne geschiedwetenschap* (Amsterdam 2008) 51-52.

and Germany had a definite nationalist ring to it. This is not surprising given the rise of nationalist scholarship in Europe and the fact that De Vreese identified with the Flemish nationalist movement that had gained increasing prominence in Flanders during his lifetime.¹⁹ Moreover, at Ghent University, where De Vreese was a professor for a large part of his career after having studied there, the language question in Belgium surrounding the Francophone Walloons and the marginalized Dutch-speaking Flemish population came to a head near the turn of the century.²⁰ De Vreese came from a Flemish family, but had, in his own words, ‘personally come to understand what it means to be taught in a language you’ve only learned in school and in which it therefore takes years to be able to think.’²¹ De Vreese’s nationalism expressed itself in his work as a scholar first and foremost, and it is not just the *Bibliotheca* that shows this but his wealth of other works as well. De Vreese fits into the history of his discipline, philology, and the history of the humanities in more than one way.

When De Vreese entered Ghent University he chose to study the Dutch language, even though he had planned on becoming an engineer. He did so because he felt he could serve the Dutch speaking Flemish population better by immersing himself in the study of Dutch language.²² Eventually De Vreese earned his doctorate in Germanic philology in 1891.²³ By that time the study of philology had safely embedded itself in most universities in Europe. Inherently nationalist, philology had come to be understood as a way, not just of looking at a nation’s language but as a way to understand its deeper roots and cultural system.²⁴ This is just what De Vreese tried to do when, as a student, he wrote several articles about the state of Dutch philology and the Dutch language in Flanders.²⁵ De Vreese

¹⁹ Witte, Craeybeckx and Meynen, *Political History of Belgium*, 71.

²⁰ Ibidem, 97.

²¹ Dutch: ‘Ik heb aan den lijve ondervonden wat het zeggen wil, onderwezen te worden in een taal die men alleen op school heeft geleerd en waarin men dus pas na jaren kan denken.’ LUL, BNM, Box BPL 3160, Folder 6.

²² LUL, BNM, Box BPL 3160, Folder 6.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ J. Leerssen, ‘The Rise of Philology. The Comparative Method, the Historicist Turn and the Surreptitious Influence of Giambattista Vico’ in: Bod, Maat and Weststeijn ed., *The Making of the Humanities II*, 23-35: 24.

²⁵ R. Roemans, *Het werk en de betekenis van Prof. Dr. Willem de Vreese* (Antwerpen 1950) 105-125.

too, strove to get to the core of what he believed was the Flemish language and, ultimately, Flemish culture.

Of course it was not just the study of language that had undergone change in the nineteenth century, leading to a shift between the scientific status of etymology and philology.²⁶ In fact, the rise of philology had become important throughout the humanities: the study of language in its original form had a deep impact on the way research was done within the humanities in many different areas, such as history and theology.²⁷ Philological techniques were used for scrutinizing ancient texts with rigorous attention in order to find historical ‘evidence’.²⁸ Combined with the new university model that had emerged via Von Humboldt in Germany, philology was a new force to be reckoned with within the humanities faculties throughout Europe.²⁹

To understand the nature of the nation, its culture and its traditions, one had to study the origins of its language, and this was, partly, what motivated De Vreese in his quest to collect all medieval Dutch literature ever produced for his *Bibliotheca*, just as the brothers Grimm had tried to do in Germany by collecting and bringing together old folklore and folktales.³⁰ In this way De Vreese wanted to investigate how writing had originated in the regions of the Netherlands and Belgium: ‘In the first place, the development of writing in our regions has to be historically researched and explained’ he stipulated in a piece he wrote to introduce the *Bibliotheca* to his peers.³¹

The *Bibliotheca* was De Vreese’s attempt to create the Dutch language equivalent of many famous foreign publications of medieval sources De Vreese admired. He felt that by creating a collection which was equal to, for instance, the *Altdeutsche Handschriften* by M. Enneccerus, he would start the

²⁶ Leerssen, ‘The Rise of Philology’, 23.

²⁷ J. Turner, *Philology, the Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton 2014) 300-301.

²⁸ Turner, *Philology*, 303-305.

²⁹ C.M. Jørgensen, ‘Humboldt in Copenhagen. Discipline Formation in the Humanities at the University of Copenhagen in the Nineteenth Century’ in: Bod, Maat and Weststeijn ed., *The Making of the Humanities II*, 377-395: 377-378.

³⁰ Leerssen, ‘The Rise of Philology’, 30.

³¹ Dutch: ‘In de eerste plaats zal de ontwikkeling van het schrift in onze gewesten historisch dienen onderzocht en uiteengezet te worden’ in: W. de Vrees, ‘Een Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta’, *Taal en Letteren* 13 (1903) 271-286: 276.

process of bringing Dutch philology to what he felt was at equal heights with French, German, English and even Spanish, Italian, and Russian philology in Europe.³² Indeed, as De Vreese argues in an address held in 1900, almost every language in Europe seems to be further along scientifically than ‘we are in the Low Countries’.³³ De Vreese was thus emulating his colleagues abroad; just like them he based his philological work on what he thought was important for his perceived Flemish nation, even though his was without a state. He argued, further along in his address, that it was not the case that no one in the Low Countries could read medieval Dutch manuscripts, but no one thus far had done so in such a way that it resembled an established science.³⁴ This is noteworthy because it shows us that De Vreese desperately wanted to further the establishment of such a science, both in Belgium and the Netherlands.³⁵ In this way he tried to support the rise of Flemish ‘high culture’, which needed to be more firmly established in order for it to be useful as a tool for national emancipation of the Flemish people in Belgium.³⁶

In order to successfully undertake his grand project, De Vreese made dozens of archival research journeys through Belgium and the Netherlands, but also through Germany, France, Italy, England and even Russia between 1902 and 1911.³⁷ By travelling abroad, mostly in uncomfortable circumstances (he complained about unhelpful archivists), De Vreese followed in the footsteps of, for instance, Leopold von Ranke and Friedrich Bluhme, who both travelled extensively half a century before De Vreese

³² De Vreese, ‘Over Middelnederlandsche handschriftkunde’, 337.

³³ Ibidem, 338.

³⁴ Ibidem, 339, 343.

³⁵ When De Vreese speaks about ‘science’ he is using the Dutch word ‘wetenschap’ which has the exact same meaning as the German word ‘Wissenschaft’. He does not necessarily call philology an exact science, but rather uses the word science in a broader sense as covering both the exact sciences and the humanities. We should therefore keep the Dutch/German meaning of the word in mind whenever reading the word ‘science’ in this essay.

³⁶ Gellner asserts that ‘Nationalism is the consequence of a new form of social organization, based on deeply internalized, education-dependent high-cultures, each protected by its own state’ in which ‘high culture’ is ‘a literate codified culture which permits context-free communication.’ Gellner, *Nations*, 48, 35.

³⁷ W. de Vreese, *Over eene Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta* (1903) 40-41.

did.³⁸ In this way De Vreese was part of a generation of scholars who could benefit from the 'opening of the archives' that had taken place in the nineteenth century, resulting into an 'archival turn' in many disciplines within the humanities.³⁹ Like Ranke and Bluhme, De Vreese made use of his network inside and outside the university and inside and outside Belgium to gain access to foreign archives in the form of letters of introduction.⁴⁰

There is something quite paradoxical about the simultaneous focus on one's national identity and the European experience these scholars all had. International connections to peers across Europe seem to have become increasingly important for a nationalist scholar near the end of the nineteenth century and so an image arises in which a certain inconsistency in these scholars' lives is present. Incipiently, the rise of academic nationalism had led to less cosmopolitanism and less exchange of letters across borders. Yet, near the end of the nineteenth century international relations began to – paradoxically – pick up again.⁴¹

As it was part of the rise of philology; the close and careful study of sources that was a direct consequence of the archival turn was not lost on De Vreese either.⁴² Many of his articles closely scrutinize and heavily critique earlier readings of Dutch medieval and early-modern manuscripts, some of which he found during his travels, such as his article on a Vondel manuscript he found in Saint Petersburg.⁴³

³⁸ Unhelpful archivists: LUL, BNM, Box BPL 2999; Ranke and Bluhme: R. Eskildsen, 'Leopold Ranke's Archival Turn', 525-553; A. Esch, 'Auf Archivreise: Die deutschen Mediävisten und Italien in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts: aus Italien-Briefe von Mitarbeitern der Monumenta Germaniae Historica vor der Gründung des Historischen Instituts in Rom', *Deutsches Ottocento* (2000) 187-234.

³⁹ D. Saxer, 'Archival objects in motion: historians' appropriation of sources in nineteenth-century Austria and Switzerland', *Archival Sciences* 10.3 (2010) 315-330: 316-320.

⁴⁰ LUL, BNM, Box BPL 3000, Folder 5.

⁴¹ J.E. Myhre, 'Wider Connections: International Networks among European Historians' in: I. Porčani and J. Tollebeek ed., *Setting the Standards. Institutions, Networks and Communities of National Historiography* (New York, NY 2012) 266-287: 266-267.

⁴² R. Eskildsen, 'Leopold Ranke's Archival Turn', 423-435.

⁴³ W. de Vreese, 'Een eigenhandig handschrift van Vondel Ontdekt door Prof. Dr. Willem de Vreese in Verslagen en mededelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse

Another way in which De Vreese can be considered to be archetypal for his time is his involvement in (nationalistic) institutions. De Vreese was a professor at Ghent University from 1895 until he was forced to resign in 1918 due to his collaboration with the German occupier during the First World War in an effort to make Ghent University a Dutch language university.⁴⁴ Before this unfortunate turn of events he had been involved in the Flemish student movement which wanted Ghent University to become a Dutch language University.⁴⁵ Furthermore, he was also extensively involved in the Royal Flemish Academy of the Sciences (founded in 1886) of which he was an active member and for which he wrote multiple articles.⁴⁶ The Academy was undoubtedly an attempt to organize Flemish nationalist scholars and to provide the Flemish language with a solid base, just as the efforts made to turn Ghent University into a Dutch-language university had been a way to provide the Dutch speaking population with their own form of higher education.⁴⁷

During his lifetime De Vreese represented several *topoi* in the coming of age of the humanities. His involvement in philology and the way he put it to use fit especially well into the orientation towards national states within the humanities around that time. What is interesting about De Vreese is that his perceived nationality did not coincide with the state in which he lived, resulting in an everlasting battle by the professor for emancipation within that state. De Vreese is archetypal for the humanities near the end of the nineteenth century in the way he represents certain changes in method, discipline and topic. However, he also stands out because of the specific historical context in which he operates; he is a nationalist scholar who is not able to bask in the warm glow of a unified nation state.

Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde' in: J. Koopmans en C.G.N. de Vooy ed., *De Nieuwe Taalgids. Tweemaandelijks Tijdschrift* 5 (1911) 124-129.

⁴⁴ J.A.A.M. Biemans, *Vijftig jaar B.N.M. in de Leidse UB* (Leiden: Kleine publicaties van de Leidse Universiteitsbibliotheek 1989) 11-13.

⁴⁵ LUL, BNM, Box BPL 3160, Folder 7.

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ Witte, Craeybeckx and Meynen, *Political History of Belgium*, 97.

Nationalism and impartiality

Nationalist scholarship as it emerged within the humanities in the nineteenth century seems to be in inherent conflict with the scholarly ideal of the impartial – or objective – reconstruction of past and present human reality. Both of these contested epistemic virtues are held dear by scholars inside and outside the humanities. Even so, it is not always clear – and not always agreed upon – what it means to be impartial or objective across the plethora of different disciplines within human scholarship.⁴⁸ How must we give account of ideals like this within the nationalist scholarship and political reality of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century? As will become clear nationalist scholars might have adhered to impartiality and objectivity as a means rather than an obstruction in conducting their scholarship. Willem de Vreese as well was aware of scholarly demands of impartiality and objectivity. How did he take the need of having to be an impartial or objective scholar into account while at the same time using his scholarship as a means within his political struggle?

To get a clear view of the entanglement of these virtues within the scholarly and political life of Willem de Vreese I will first argue that impartiality and objectivity are two different, although closely related, ideals. I will then shortly look at Willem de Vreese from the outside and see how he might have satisfied certain demands of impartiality and objectivity. Lastly we will look at how De Vreese perceived his own impartiality or objectivity and how he articulated this in his own work.

Lorraine Daston has stated that within the humanities the ideal of impartiality is an old ideal, preached throughout the ages - especially in the historical discipline – whereas objectivity is a modern ideal that emerged in both the humanities and the sciences in the nineteenth century.⁴⁹ Impartiality is often misunderstood and equated with objectivity, as in present times both terms are used as if they have the same meaning.⁵⁰ But, as has been stated by more than one scholar, amongst whom Daston might be the most important one, impartiality was by no means seen as ‘pure’ knowledge unhindered by the point of view of the creator.⁵¹ It did not

⁴⁸ Daston and Sibum, *Objectivity*, 371.

⁴⁹ Daston, ‘Objectivity and Impartiality’, 27.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ Daston, ‘Objectivity and Impartiality’, 31; H. Paul, ‘Distance and Self-Distanciation: Intellectual Virtue and Historical Method Around 1900’, *History and*

necessarily imply that a scholar needed to be neutral, but rather, quite literally, that one could not just take the view of any (political) party in contemporary politics or historical reality when constructing an (historical) argument, but needed to take all views into account.⁵² This ideal of being able to float ‘above the parties’ was a motto adhered to by, for instance, Leopold von Ranke.⁵³

Although objectivity could be defined as an ideal that ‘aspires [to create] knowledge that bears no trace of the knower – knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgment’, this wasn’t necessarily how nineteenth century scholars perceived it.⁵⁴ Objectivity was seen as something quite different and it was employed by many (German) historians in the nineteenth century as an ideal that was more important than impartiality since it allowed for political engagement through scientific source criticism (*Wissenschaftliche Quellenkritik*).⁵⁵ By staying as close to the sources as possible and using the right techniques and source criticisms (taught to scholars through the new ways of close and personal teaching at universities) one could reach historical objectivity and in that way form a political judgment.⁵⁶ As long as one applied oneself to the sources in an almost devoted way as a researcher, subjectivity could be overcome by allowing the sources their right of veto when it came to historical facts.⁵⁷

Nationalism and nationalist scholarship might seem to be inherently partial, since nationalism, by definition, excludes certain points of view. This

Theory 50 (2011) 104-116; R. Aerts, *De Letterheren. Liberale cultuur in de negentiende eeuw: het tijdschrift De Gids* (Amsterdam 1997) 313.

⁵² Political impartiality was quite a similar ideal: A person can be considered politically impartial if and when that person has ‘no preference over one party for a dispute to another’ according to Pierre Rosanvallon. Impartiality is more than mere neutrality; it is the elimination of prejudices and biases. P. Rosanvallon, *Democratic Legitimacy*, A. Goldhammer trans. (Oxford 2011) 94.

⁵³ Daston, ‘Objectivity and Impartiality’, 31.

⁵⁴ Daston and Sibum, *Objectivity*, 17.

⁵⁵ J. Rüsen, ‘Der Historiker als Parteimann des Schicksals. Georg Gottfried Gervinus und das Konzept der objektiven Parteilichkeit im deutschen Historismus’, in: Koselleck, Mommsen and Rüsen ed., *Objektivität und Parteilichkeit in der Geschichtswissenschaft*, 77-124: 79.

⁵⁶ Daston, ‘Objectivity and Impartiality’, 32-33.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, 31-33; R. Koselleck, ‘Standortbindung und Zeitlichkeit. Ein Beitrag zur historiographischen Erschließung der geschichtlichen Welt’ in: Koselleck, Mommsen and Rüsen ed., *Objektivität und Parteilichkeit*, 17-46: 45-46.

is especially true in the case of nationalism without a nation, as is the case in Flanders around 1900. Since activism in this case depends on the propagation of nationalist ideals and language in a hostile environment, where taking all views into account is simply not the goal. However, nationalist scholarship might still be seen as objective as long as it employs the right techniques associated with and accepted within the discipline in which the scholar operates. We can now begin to understand how Willem de Vreese conducted himself within both a nationalist and a scholarly atmosphere and how the nationalist motivation behind his scholarship might not have been as contradictive as it appears at first glance.

Reading the works of Willem de Vreese, it becomes obvious that he highly values the close study of sources and the application of the right kind of techniques when studying them. He makes it abundantly clear, over and over again, that one needs to be well acquainted with the different kinds of dialects, use of (or lack of) interpunction, and other characteristics involved in the reading of medieval and early modern Dutch-language texts if one ever wants to come close to understanding the philological historical reality behind them.⁵⁸ In one of his normative texts, he makes it clear that an intensive knowledge of the art of palaeography is needed to determine the exact date of a manuscript:

palaeography needs to interfere: the peculiar forms of the script, the abbreviations, their character, their number, their form, the paper, everything has to and can contribute to determine the date of a manuscript as closely and precisely as possible.⁵⁹

Work concerning manuscripts cannot be precise enough, according to De Vreese; to be as precise as possible one had to return to the sources and find out and take into account where they came from, when they were written down, whether they were translations, where they had been collected, how many people had worked on them and in what kind of

⁵⁸ De Vreese, 'Over Middelnederlandsche handschriftkunde', 340-345.

⁵⁹ Dutch: 'Ook hier dus moet de handschriftkunde tusschenbeide komen: de eigenaardige vormen van het schrift, de afkortingen, hun aard, hun getal, hun vorm, het papier, alles moet en kan medewerken om den datum van een handschrift zoo nauwkeurig mogelijk te bepalen.' De Vreese, 'Over Middelnederlandsche handschriftkunde', 347.

circumstances they had been written down.⁶⁰ De Vreese tried to display his objectivity without losing his political zeal by going back to the sources as much as possible and making it as clear as possible how one had done this in any written scholarship.

Like any other scholar, De Vreese reviewed and was reviewed by his peers on a regular basis. In 1902 he wrote a defence for *Het Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal* [Dictionary of the Dutch Language] – of which he himself was an editor from 1891 to 1895 – in which he criticized the writer of a review of one of its latest editions.⁶¹ His main point of critique was that the original writer – a Flemish man – had not been as impartial in his critique as was originally thought. He had looked at the piece from a perspective that was too much that of the southern Low countries; of Flanders. The original critique had been that *Het Woordenboek* did not put enough emphasis on Flemish words. De Vreese asserted that this is an unfair criticism that stems from an imprecise reading of the work. The critique is not just failing to be impartial but also:

the result of an incorrect view on the nature, the layout and scope of *Het Woordenboek* and most of all of inaccurate reading and erroneous understanding of what was indeed to be read in the *Dictionary*, printed black on white.⁶²

De Vreese's own subjectivity, due to having been an editor of *Het Woordenboek* is brushed away by his impeccable close reading.

In another article he writes, he is, yet again, reacting to criticism, this time made against his own work. It deserves mention that besides working on his *Bibliotheca* De Vreese also spend a great amount of time purging the Dutch language in Flanders from Gallicisms, something the *Dictionary of the Dutch Language* also tried to do.⁶³ It is the critique that attacks this particular habit that he reacts to the most. De Vreese refutes statements that he is

⁶⁰ De Vreese, 'Een Bibliotheca', 271-273.

⁶¹ *The Dictionary of the Dutch Language* is a monolingual dictionary for Dutch words between 1500 and 1921 was published between 1864 and 1998. A. Moerdijk, *Handleiding bij het Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal (WNT)* (The Hague 1994) 1-21; De Vreese's editorship: LUL, BNM, Box BPL 3160, Folder 6.

⁶² W. de Vreese, 'Het Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal en de critiek in Zuid-Nederland', *Verslagen en mededelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde* (1902) 59-80: 62.

⁶³ Roemans, *Prof. Dr. Willem de Vreese*, 105-125; Moerdijk, *Handleiding*, 1-21.

trying to make the Flemish variant of the Dutch language too northern by explaining that he can justify what he has written and that he has based it on thorough historical philological research.⁶⁴

De Vreese's use of different terms that pertain to either impartiality or objectivity are entangled and he never actually writes down the word 'objective' whereas he does speak about looking at manuscripts from different points of view. For instance, when he is complaining about the state of Dutch-language graphology, he states that when describing manuscripts 'the description usually only takes one point of view.'⁶⁵ At the same time he does end a report on the Dutch philological congress with the statement that more medieval Dutch language pertaining to Flanders needs to be researched for 'the greater glory of the *Dietscher* fatherland!'⁶⁶ A statement one would be hard pressed to find in any contemporary scholar's work.

When looking at a scholar such as De Vreese we must keep in mind that the terms 'objectivity' and 'impartiality' are descriptive terms that may or may not always be applicable to every situation. Daston has stated that: 'It would be highly misleading to claim that nineteenth-century historians agreed about the meaning of impartiality or objectivity.'⁶⁷ When De Vreese speaks about the impartial or partial judgment of others, or his own thorough research, he might not always fall into neat categories concerning the two epistemic virtues of impartiality and objectivity.

De Vreese was most definitely concerned with his credibility as a scholar, since he does defend himself against accusations of being too partial, too Dutch. He does this by assuring his readers that he has looked at the sources thoroughly and considered them from all possible angles and has therefore let the sources speak for themselves. His use of the term impartiality rather than objectivity pertains mostly to the use of sources and

⁶⁴ Willem de Vreese, 'Taalzuiveraar's Borstwering', in: *Verslagen en mededelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde* (1900) 28-111: 28-29, 49, 109.

⁶⁵ De Vreese, 'Over Middelnederlandsche handschriftkunde', 340.

⁶⁶ *Dietscher* in this sentence refers to the Dutch-speaking population of both the Netherlands and Belgium. It is a name and I have therefore chosen not to translate it into English. W. De Vreese, 'Rede gehouden door den heer Dr Willem de Vreese, werkend lid der Academie. De gedenkstukken onzer middeleeuwsche letterkunde', *Verslagen en mededelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde* (1905) 431-448: 448.

⁶⁷ Daston, 'Objectivity and Impartiality', 31.

the reading of texts. He therefore defines his scholarship in a similar way as some of the German historians described by Mommsen, Rösen and Koselleck. By using the right palaeographical techniques and thoroughly studying the sources in their own right De Vreese tries to distance himself from critique concerning his political standing.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper the question was posed how we must place Belgian professor Willem De Vreese within the history of the humanities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period when these studies became increasingly geared towards countries and their national identities. The question how this nationalist turn in the humanities might have affected De Vreese's scientific impartiality was also posed; especially since it is hard to imagine a nationalist activist to be impartial in a political way. We have seen that De Vreese is quite archetypal for a scholar in the humanities during his time and that he, like some of his peers, did not necessarily perceive a problem concerning the combination between being a nationalist and an impartial or objective scholar. However, De Vreese has turned out to be less archetypal for his time than at first glance: his nationalist scholarship did not coincide with a national state and this, consequently, is exactly what makes him a worthwhile case study. The question how we must place him within the history of the humanities cannot be answered unambiguously because De Vreese does not seem to fit into the history of the humanities in just one way.

One of the most interesting aspects of the life of Belgian professor Willem de Vreese is his devotion to furthering medieval Dutch-language philology as a science within Europe. And this is not just because of his worthwhile contributions in the craft in the form of his *Bibliotheca* and countless articles on the matter, but first and foremost because it illustrates an important shift in the history of the humanities: the turn towards nationalist scholarship. What especially makes De Vreese an interesting figure in this dynamic period within the history of the European continent and the history of the humanities is the fact that his nationalist scholarship took place against the background of a divided Belgian state with two distinct linguistic groups: the French speaking Walloons and the Dutch speaking Flemish. His scholarship was entirely driven by his Flemish

nationalism; it had even been the reason he had decided to study the Dutch language in the first place. However, his nationalism did not coincide with the national ideology of the state in which he was living. It agitated against the state in an effort to emancipate a language and perceived nation: that of the Flemish people within Belgium. His work in the field of Dutch-language philology was driven by a need to further this kind of scholarship within Belgium so that his field could develop as an established science. De Vreese's nationalistic scholarship was of a kind that was more vehement and had as a goal not the glorification of the nation, as was often the case with nationalist scholarship, but also, and more importantly, its emancipation. De Vreese therefore tried to influence politics by making a conscious effort to contribute to the creation of Flemish 'high culture'.

When the nation state became ever more important as a topic for scholars within the humanities, especially historians, using that scholarship for pursuing nationalist goals became more and more tempting.⁶⁸ Historians – and other scholars with them – needed new ways to deal with the demands of scholarship in order to be able to pursue their nationalist goals while simultaneously being perceived as credible scholars. Whereas impartiality had been a way of letting all the different – historical – parties speak, it was, by some, perceived as dry and unhelpful in contemporary political situations.⁶⁹ The new epistemic virtue of objectivity had become a way to deal with this problem, by letting the sources speak for themselves and by using the right kind of techniques one could at the same time be perceived as objective and politically active. This was exactly what De Vreese tried to do when he wrote his scholarly articles on the history of the Dutch language in Belgium and the Netherlands. He put great worth on his own knowledge concerning the craft of source criticism and used the new found techniques of source criticism to be objective and in this way influenced politics through scholarship. De Vreese is not necessarily an extraordinary case, but by looking at him we can try to illuminate just how the humanities as a whole changed during the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.

⁶⁸ Daston, 'Objectivity and Impartiality', 30.

⁶⁹ Rösen, 'Der Historiker als Parteimann des Schicksals', 85.