CHAPTER 14

The Book Publishing Industry

Laurens Janszoon Coster as a Divisive Element

The Northern literary giant Willem Bilderdijk had been extremely satisfied with the look of his anthology *Avondschemering* [*Evening twilight*] (1828) by the Brussels printer Jozef Sacré. For him it had become a ‘splendid typographical specimen’.¹ His follower Jan Wap, who had drafted the publication, also gave high praise to the quality of the printing, in his Rotterdam journal *Argus*, a successor to the Brussels *De Argus*, which had to closed after eighteen months:

> For ourselves, we dare to anticipate that the splendid letterpress and form of this edition of poets’ earlier multilingual works, will leave those issued in the North far behind.
> —It is beyond doubt that the industry flourishes most in Belgium.²

At the time Wap’s pronouncement was certainly seen as a statement in the country where they believed the Haarlemmer Laurens Janszoon Coster had invented printing, and where this invention had been coupled emphatically with such Enlightenment ideals as civilisation and social well-being. The myth surrounding Coster, and the age-old Dutch reputation for producing and distributing maps and texts, greatly contributed to Holland’s national pride.³ It was bound to arouse annoyance in the North that a brat like Wap claimed the Belgians were better printers. He made it a recurring topic in his *Argus* because he was convinced that both parts of the country possessed separate qualities and had to learn from each other. One of the bold New Year greetings for 1829 in *Argus* sounded like this: “That Northern Printers will come into step with the Southern and keep up”⁴ *Argus* was not the first to make this comparison, which had already been made by its Brussels predecessor a few years earlier. *De Argus* had started a debate about the differences in printing quality between North and South, alongside existing discussion of book prices, copyright, reliability of the Southern booksellers and of course the reprint. Northern printers were not only more expensive but according to *De Argus* they also ‘used much worse printing; worse letters; worse paper’.⁵

For instance it was the Brussels *De Argus* that had also made the explicit comparison between the Dutch and Belgian muses almanacs. It anticipated
that in terms of printing, Jan Wap's *Belgische Muzen-Almanak* would not only equal the *Nederlandse Muzen-Almanak*, but would even surpass all Dutch almanacs:

A trifle in any case, which could be acquired very easily considering the current state of our Southern printers, and which would force all the Dutch printers trailing behind to think about their interests.6 Nonetheless the *Belgische Muzen-Almanak* did not live up to expectations. Lacking time, the printer Stéven had only been able to use lithographs for the first almanac, but he intended to replace them with lavish copperplate prints in subsequent issues.7 This did not happen, probably because the lithograph was much simpler to reproduce and therefore slowly but surely it superseded etchings, wood and copper engraving.8 The lithographs alone were already innovative compared with printing in the North. Lithographic techniques were developing very rapidly in the South at the time when the *Belgische Muzen-Almanak* began to appear.9 The publisher of the *Nederlandse Muzen-Almanak*, Johannes Immerzeel Jr., responded petulantly to the *Belgische Muzen-Almanak*’s illustrations 'which, so I have heard, […] have been peculiarly abused by lithography', he wrote to Jan Frans Willems.10 He himself only used engravings in his annual almanac. The disadvantage was that the drawing always had to be transferred onto wood or copper by an engraver. In lithography the illustration was the artist’s direct expression. That was partly why this technique was popular in the Romantic period.11

Lithography was invented in 1789 by Aloys Senefelder in Germany, but the Southern Netherlands played a large part in the development and dissemination of the technique. Carl Senefelder, the inventor’s brother, ran a lithographic press in Brussels from 1817. He advised the Amsterdam printer C.A. Spin on setting up a lithographic press alongside his ongoing printing business, but the most important lithographic press in the Kingdom was surely Jean-Baptiste Jobard in Brussels. His brother Ambroise ran a workshop in Amsterdam and later in Utrecht, where he introduced the new technique to Northern Netherlands printers. Owing to the time-consuming printing process, lithography was not as suitable for texts as it was for illustrations, sheet music and maps. Those maps also had great military importance. Lithography was introduced by J.E. van Gorkum at the Instituut der Militaire Verkenningen [Institute for Military Reconnaissance] in Ghent in 1825. The institute subsequently took over the Brussels printing firm Paulmier and relocated it in Ghent. The prominent lithographer Kierdorff was taken on; he had learnt the profession from Aloys Senefelder himself. Under his leadership the printer developed into a