I shout with joy! no higher welfare has ever caressed my soul,
Than the fact that I, o Netherlands, was raised on your soil,
I hope that some of the clear lustre that radiates from you,
A tiny little spark may descend on my skull.
I hope I will share in the honour, the fame which the ancestry
Brought to us and made us proud, and which surprised Europe.
I swear upon that inheritance, upon the faith and virtue of our fathers,
That thankfulness will flow through my veins.
I will remain, o fatherland! until the hour I die,
Proud of my beautiful, honourable name as a Dutchman!1

These verses are taken from one of the most nationalist poems ever written in Dutch literature: *De Hollandsche natie* (1812) by the Amsterdam poet Jan Fredrik Helmers (1767–1813). In this poem, which comprises more than three thousand verses, Helmers argues that the Dutch should be proud of their country: no other nation has such a glorious past. He demonstrates this by pointing to the late sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century. In this period the Dutch Republic rapidly grew to become a world power, experiencing a period of economic, scientific, and cultural growth. Helmers praises all the famous men of this age, such as the stadtholders William and Maurits of Orange, the sea hero Michiel de Ruyter, and the poet Joost van den Vondel. Helmers’ poem was a reaction to the political situation of his own time: in 1812, the Netherlands were occupied by the French, and

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Helmers hoped that this poem would cheer up his fellow citizens by reminding them of their impressive past.

*De Hollandsche natie* is part of a large body of Dutch nineteenth-century literary texts in which the national past is glorified. Between 1800 and 1850, a fundamental change took place in the Dutch literary system, as the national past became part of the literary present. All the successful writers of that period—such as Hendrik Tollens, Willem Bilderdijk, Jacob van Lennep, and Nicolaas Beets—made use of historical subject matter for their literary works, which were used as an instrument of nation building. New genres appeared—such as the historical novel and the narrative poem—while older genres were given new life by using historical topics. Romance and drama, for instance, regained new popularity due to the heightened interest in history.

The rise of historical genres was by no means specific to Dutch literature: the national past was integrated into the production of literature throughout nineteenth-century Europe. It was part of an international process that Joep Leerssen describes as a period and condition that might be called ‘literary historicism’, which points at ‘the presence of the literary preoccupation with culture’s rootedness in the national past’. This ‘pervasive common condition’ affected ‘the field of literature, as well as antiquarian and philological scholarship’.

The developments in the Netherlands should therefore be placed in their larger European context, not least because English, German, and French literature proved a fertile source for Dutch authors. The influence of such authors as Walter Scott and Lord Byron can hardly be overestimated. From the comparatist point of view, however, it might turn out that the development of historical genres followed its own national pattern in the Netherlands, since contemporary social and political circumstances had a considerable impact on the rise and fall of these genres.

Up to now, most attention, at least in the Netherlands, has been paid to the historical novel. This is understandable, because the historical novel, of which Scott is considered to be the founding father,