Het Land, in Brieven.

Met Plaaten.

Derde Druk.

Te Amsterdam, bij Johannes Allart, MDCCCLXXXVIII.
Staging nature
Observation, imagination and experience in E.M. Post’s
*Het land, in brieven* (1788)

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Introduction

One entry into the canon of the eighteenth-century Dutch epistolary novel, aside from much more widely known examples by the writing duo Elizabeth Wolff-Bekker (1738-1804) and Aagje Deken (1741-1804), is *Het land, in brieven* by Elisabeth Maria Post (1755-1812) (fig. 1). The novel appeared in 1788 and saw a second and third edition that same year, followed by a fourth in 1792.1 *Het land, in brieven* – a title perhaps best translated as *The countryside, in letters* – portrays life in the countryside. We can read the word ‘land’ in the title as meaning ‘nature’ or ‘landscape’, which forms the main subject of the 55 letters that the novel comprises.2 Post published only one other epistolary novel and several volumes of poetry – all in all, a small body of work. The two novels are highly autobiographical, in that the events, situations and characters described in them can be traced back to the author’s life and the people close to her. For the reading of *Het land, in brieven* it is also relevant that the landscape described in the book is very similar to that surrounding the village of Amerongen in the province of Utrecht, where Post spent part of her life. It is characterised by a combination of flat river landscape surrounded by wooded hills. Equally important is that the author is introduced in the preface as someone whose intellect and education predisposes her to describe and accurately represent nature.

This article concerns itself with the observation, imagination and experience of nature in *Het land, in brieven*. It attempts to show that the author was driven by a desire to understand the inner workings of nature and that she did so along the lines of what was considered to be scientific at the time. She used faculties that were increasingly being used in the approach to nature in the second half of the eighteenth century: perceptual observation, literary imagination and emotional experience. The characters in her novel do not only trust the objective, empirical results of contemporary research (to which we find references here and there in the novel) but, in their approach to nature, also trust in subjective insights that result from their imagination and their feelings. That approach presupposes a certain view on empiricism – namely, ‘that knowledge grew not from sensory experience alone, but from a combination of sensation and sentiment’. This was a mode of natural science described as ‘sentimental empiricism’.3

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