The Case of Holland

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Abstract
The article looks at three generations of Dutch and Flemish writers between the Second World War and the present day, arguing that it is possible to see how the subjects and style of narrative alter in relation to the penetration of translations of foreign (mainly English and American) fiction in Holland and in general to the growing internationalisation of fiction and the evident desire to address an audience outside Holland. While the post-war novels were deeply involved in national problems, stylistically dense and evidently addressed above all to a national public, the next generation had begun to transform national problems, and above all a fear of being irrelevant and provincial, into metaphors of an international condition; more recently contemporary Dutch and Flemish authors look for all kinds of strategies to make their work attractive to publishers in other countries.
Keywords: Holland, literature, translation, globalisation

The obstacle of working in a little known language, remarked one of Holland's finest post-war novelists Gerard van de Reve, "must in the end destroy any professional writer". His small country, he felt, was not big enough or open-minded enough to provide a living for a free spirited artist like himself. Reve dropped the 'van de' from his name and in 1953 went to England to write in English and become simply Gerard Reve. "Let us no longer express ourselves in a local argot," he boldly declared (Maas 2011: 164).

It was not to be. Notorious in Holland for his deeply pessimistic post-war novel *Evenings* (1947), Reve had no reputation in England and was never able to secure an English publisher. One hears so much of those writers – Conrad, Nabokov – who successfully changed language but little of others who failed; nor is much said about the pressures that prompt such attempts or the way they affect a writer's work.

In Reve's case there was an evident impatience to sever the ties between himself and the community that initially sustained him and to address his writing at once to an international audience. It is a desire that is becoming more common in many countries today as fiction is increasingly marketed worldwide and a growing emphasis is placed on international literary prizes whose judges very often read most of the work submitted in English[1]. Yet Reve's talent did not flower again until he abandoned his English experiment, returned to Holland and immersed himself in his country's national debate, raising hackles in this traditionally protestant society with an incendiary mix of Catholicism, homosexuality and obscenity. His genius needed his mother tongue, his home *milieu*, and an atmosphere of intense antagonism.

Despite domestic success, Reve's writing has remained largely unavailable in English, just one of his ten novels appearing in translation in 1990: Dutch critics are unanimous that *Parents Worry* is not his best, though to the English reader its ominously obsessive, anxious and insistent voice is immediately more engaging than the stilted prose the author wrote directly in English. Hence Reve raises interesting questions about the way writers position themselves with regard to a national and international readership, and the way publishers choose foreign books for translation. Does the writer in a small country who throws himself into a national debate risk remaining circumscribed in the local scene if that country does not happen to be the special object of international attention? Even a Dutch novelist who achieved considerable international fame, Harry Mulisch (1927-2010), a man frequently tipped for the Nobel, saw less than half of his fiction translated into English. In contrast, the Iranian born Kader Abdolah, who came to Holland aged 38 in 1988 and now writes in Dutch, has enjoyed considerable international success with novels about

[1] In what is ironically a poor translation the *Diversity Report 2008. Translation Statistics across Europe*, produced by the Wischenbart Consultancy, remarks: "Relevant parts of the writing of authors, particularly from smaller languages, are executed today in other languages then the originator's mother tongue, often enough further encouraged by authors pursuing careers in more than one country and one language, which allows them to aim at larger audiences". As for literary prizes, the Dutch author Gerbrand Bakker could not have won the prestigious IMPAC Prize if not translated into English.

Iranian life written in a sentimental and magical realist strain. His *The House of the Mosque*, which fits into a now established genre of migrant writers evoking the charms and horrors of their origins for Western consumption, was published in 21 languages. The obstacle then, for Reve, was not the Dutch language but the question of what can please worldwide.

Recognising that the Dutch market for literature was indeed too small to support many adventurous literary authors, in 1965 the government set up the Dutch Fund for Literature which today assists about 200 novelists or poets, granting them an average of 20,000 euros each for a book-length project and hence offering significant protection against commercial reality. The Fund also helps authors by promoting their work abroad and subsidising its translation into other languages (201 grants to foreign publishers in 34 countries in 2008).

The project is an ambitious one, the envy of many writers across Europe, but it is based on assumptions that may not hold. In his book, *Translation and Globalization*, Michael Cronin, an Irish academic, discusses minority languages and their struggle to maintain indigenous literatures: the recent intensification of global marketing strategies in the book trade, he claims, and availability of so much English writing on the internet, is drawing more and more languages into the minority language predicament. Statistics for the Dutch book market bear this out: if in 1946, only 5% of Holland's book production was made up of translations, in 2005 it was 35%; in the area of prose fiction the share leaps to 71%, almost three of every four novels on the shelves. Of those translations, 75% come from English (the majority from America). Though not always so dramatic, this trend is general across Europe with the result that the relation between the national experience and what people read is weakening[2]. Hence it comes as no surprise that public support for funding national literature is weakening too. In June of this year the Dutch government announced cuts of 20% in the Fund for Literature's budget; the less literature is perceived as a contributor to the construction of national identity, the less likely it is to receive special treatment.

[2] It goes without saying that this process is reminiscent of what happened in the film industry decades ago.

An obvious question arises: does the new commercial situation actually alter the kind of novel that gets written? If one considers the five most important writers in Dutch of the postwar period – Paul Boon (1912-1979), Gerard Reve (1923-2006), Hugo Claus (1929-2008), W. F. Hermans (1921-1995), and Harry Mulisch (1927-2010) – it is not hard to establish some relation between them, if only through the kind of society that they react against and address.

Here it has to be said that Boon and Claus were Belgian nationals writing in Flemish, a version of Dutch spoken by 6 million Belgians. Not only, then, is the readership for this language relatively small, but divided into two distinct groups who publish with the same Amsterdam publishers and compete for the same reading public and literary awards. Boon, for example, revised his fiercely colloquial first work, *My Little War*, thirteen years after its original 1947 publication to make it more easily readable by a Dutch as well as Flemish public, a move that indicates in the most obvious way how the desire for a larger audience will modify an author's prose.

The early writing of Boon and Reve is reminiscent of French and Italian existentialism, the extreme conditions of war and the near famine rations on which the Dutch were kept in the years immediately afterwards leading these writers to focus on the simple conditions of existence rather than concerning themselves with complex plotting or historical cultural analysis. *My Little War* is made up of 32 or 33 page fragments, each spoken in a hurried, indignant, energetic voice stringing together anecdotes and mini-biographies that give us the mood of the war and the rejection of any political chauvinism.

> WHO GIVES A SHIT ABOUT THE FATHERLAND even if the whole world now seems full of Belgian patriotism? I'm someone who just wants a bit of food on his table and some coal in his stove, someone who just wants the warmth of his bed and the body of his wife and the eyes of his child; who doesn't feel like the world revolves around him but like a man among men, who loves people AND NOT FATHERLANDS. (Boon [1947] 2010: 42)

Written in 1947, Boon's novel was not translated until 2010; indeed it is striking how recent many of the translations of these remarkable

authors are. Claus' *Wonder*, published in 1962 was not translated until 2008. Hermans' *The Darkroom of Damocles* waited from 1958 till 2008, and his masterpiece *Beyond Sleep* from 1966 to 2006. Reve's *Evenings*, which explores a young man's disaffection with his tedious, moralising, hypocritical parents and a post-war society that offers him no future and nothing to believe in, still awaits an English translation, despite enjoying a huge reputation in Holland.

The sense of meaninglessness and outrage in Boon and Reve's early post-war writing is shaped and galvanised, in Claus, Hermans and Mulisch, by an anxiety that what might seem to be random suffering and misfortune is in fact the result of some dark conspiracy that goes far beyond the Low Countries and the ken of the novels' protagonists. It is as if these writers had seen how they could use the specifically Dutch or Flemish condition of growing up in a relatively circumscribed cultural *milieu* as a metaphor for the universal concern that what is important in the world lies beyond one's knowledge or control.

We thus have a return of plot in the form of mystery and menace, with the post-war concern as to who had been responsible for war crimes and collaborationism frequently to the fore. Claus's *Wonder* has a feckless schoolteacher who follows a beautiful but mysterious woman only to become embroiled in a bizarre international conference of right-wing extremists gathering from all over the world to pay tribute to a wartime collaborator who sought Nazi support for imposing Flemish supremacy over Francophile Belgians. So many incidents in the book are inexplicable that the discovery that its narrator is now being held in a mental hospital comes as no surprise.

In Hermans' *The Darkroom of Damocles*, Henri Osewoudt believes he has been active in the Dutch Resistance, committing crimes and even killing in response to orders received from a certain Dorbeck. But when, after the war, Dorbeck turns out to have been a German agent and disappears, Osewoudt has to justify himself to the Allied authorities who mistake him for Dorbeck and arrest him. As the nightmarish story develops, the reader is again unable to find out what has happened and, as with Claus, unsure as to the sanity of the protagonist.

A quarter of a century later, Harry Mulisch's *The Assault* is still engaged in this debate about wartime responsibility. In the last year

of the war a notorious German collaborator is shot on his bicycle in the street where the twelve-year-old Anton Steenwijk lives. Since German reprisals are inevitable, the neighbours quickly remove the body from their own front door and drag it directly towards Anton's house, as a result of which Anton's parents are arrested and killed. Later in life Anton meets first the son of the assassinated collaborator, then one of his murderers and finally one of the neighbours who moved the body. Each is able to justify the role that he, his friends or relatives played in the incident, so that every attempt to attribute responsibility is undermined.

In Mulisch's 1992 novel *The Discovery of Heaven*, conspiracy is extended into the cosmos as we find a group of celestial beings, a wayward band of angels, conspiring to end the ancient covenant between God and man originally made with Moses. This is a novel of bizarre ideas and intellectual extravagance. Most curious of all is its alternation between densely realistic depiction of Dutch life and the sort of 'international' plot one now expects from, say, Umberto Eco, a dastardly conspiracy stretching back to the beginning of time and involving supernatural powers[3]. Reviewing the novel favourably in *The New York Review of Books* Coetzee nevertheless remarked that "the chapters devoted to the internal squabbles of Dutch politics of the 1970s are largely wasted on the foreign reader" (Coetzee 1997: 35) suggesting a tension between Mulisch's desire to address his fellow Dutchmen and at the same time to write an effective novel for a larger audience[4]. That Mulisch was not unaware of such problems is clear in a later work, *The Procedure*; reflecting on the translatability of his writing, the author remarks that Nabokov, a stylist who wrote "unforgettable sentences", comes off poorly in translation, while Dostoevsky who wrote "unforgettable books" can survive the worst

[3] Critics seeking to establish a morphology of the novel that achieves global success have identified the vast international/historical/religious conspiracy as a formula able to engage readers the world over, who see in globalisation itself a form of conspiracy.

[4] It is worth noting how attentive Coetzee is to this problem in his own novels which frequently address (or addressed) the political situation in South Africa, but without ever entering into the kind of detail that would have required more than an ordinary newspaper reader's grasp of South African politics, suggesting that the books were addressed more to an American and European audience than a South African.

travesties, because what matters is the story. Nabokov was "good", Mulisch remarks, but Dostoevsky "great", and he seeks to align his own work with the latter: "The language must disappear altogether, only the story must remain" (Mulisch [1998] 2002: 11).

Hermans writing also abounds with references to language, translation and the unequal relationship between major and minor languages and cultures. In *Beyond Sleep* these preoccupations are worked into the theme of conspiracy. Albert, a young Dutch geologist, whose father was killed on a scientific journey of discovery many years before, travels to Lapland to research his PhD; his professor is hoping he can verify a hypothesis that some of the lakes there were formed by meteorites, something that would make both men's international reputations.

To have any chance of success, Albert must secure aerial photographs of the area from a professor in Oslo but, unable to speak Norwegian and unaware of crisscrossing enmities between various older professors, he is sent on a wild goose chase from one remote station to another. Soon he begins to fear that he is being denied a chance of success by jealous colleagues. Although the trip seems hopeless without the maps, Albert proceeds to Lapland, meeting three young Norwegians who will accompany him and carry out their own research. On their first evening together one of the Norwegians complains:

> Our language is of no consequence in the rest of the world […]. The most advanced studies are written in foreign languages. The great minds come to us in English by way of English textbooks, a language we can read quite easily, but which we can seldom speak or write without making mistakes. I notice it even now, as I am trying to explain this to you. If I were speaking Norwegian, I could be more subtle, more precise. (Hermans [1966] 2006: 79)

Norway thus presents itself as even more disadvantaged than Holland, its scientists condemned to a sense of inferiority and a consequent drive to achieve something that might put them on the map. When Albert discovers that one of the Norwegians has the aerial photographs that he was looking for he becomes convinced that he has been duped in a race for worldwide recognition.

Later, discussing his family with another of the Norwegians, Albert reveals with some embarrassment that his mother is

widely considered "Holland's foremost essayist" (Hermans 2006: 169), which turns out to mean – and here Hermans pushes his disparaging view of Dutch intellectual life to the limit – that she is famous for her reviews of English and French novels, "as many as fifty a month" (p. 169). Not that she actually reads these books; she has subscriptions to foreign newspapers and simply cuts and pastes. Albert is fascinated and appalled by his mother's success and what it says about Dutch culture. Staying within Holland's boundaries and praising the work of foreigners, she has achieved a fame that does not bear examination. On the other hand, since Albert's father died in his own search for international glory, it is his mother's shrewdness together with Dutch gullibility that has made his middleclass upbringing possible.

Convinced that the Norwegians are misleading him, Albert eventually sets off alone into the desolate landscape, gets lost and seems doomed to end as his father did. Surviving the most extreme experiences of isolation, discomfort, cold and hunger, he eventually returns to urban Norway where a bored American tourist, an older woman eager to take him to bed, complains "how irritating it is to find a big nation like the United States being copied the world over in the silliest ways" (p. 295). There are "more and more people nowadays" she observes, and here we can't help feeling that Hermans is taking a swipe at his compatriot Reve, "writing poems, and even novels, in the most awful broken English". They are "wasting their energy on a sort of spiritual enslavement" (p. 295).

In short, *Beyond Sleep* establishes an underlying geography which locates a harrowing existential reality in the savage polar wilds, and success, celebrity and culture in the *lingua franca* of New York and London, while, between the two, in the provinces of Holland and Norway, are only disaffection and yearning, mediocrity and paranoia. Not unsurprisingly, in 1973 Hermans abandoned his native country for Paris; the search to emancipate oneself from national limits ironically begins to establish itself as a theme in Dutch literature.

If one turns from this post-war generation to a clutch of recently translated contemporary Dutch novelists, it is intriguing to see how many of the themes remain, together with a shared abruptness that seems to be typical of Dutch writing, a willingness to push the

didactic side of the novel to a blunt extreme. All the same the anxiety to find a form and content that will appeal to an international public could not be clearer, while the fact that all these novels have been translated so soon after publication indicates a certain success.

The forty-year old Arnon Grunberg is presently Holland's most successful and frequently awarded author of literary fiction. His first two novels, *Blue Mondays* and *Silent Extras*, are engaging presentations of young protagonists in search of visibility in a world bereft of principles and deserving only of endless and merciless irony. Inevitably his heroes eventually abandon Holland and head for New York, where Grunberg himself now resides and keeps a blog, in English. If these early works often feel like witty re-workings of the more powerful disaffection to be found in Boon and Reve, his more ambitious novel, *The Jewish Messiah*, spoofs the larger canvas and quest for ultimate truths that Mulisch attempted in *The Discovery of Heaven*. Issues arising from the Second War are still to the fore, as the insufferable and unfeeling young Xavier Radek, grandson of an SS officer decides to dedicate his life to comforting the Jews, becomes the homosexual lover of a rabbi's son, has himself messily circumcised, preserves an amputated testicle in a jar and calls it King David, and eventually learns Yiddish specifically to make a Yiddish translation of *Mein Kampf*, until eventually he becomes Prime Minister of Israel and provokes nuclear war. While earlier Dutch writers seem outraged by the world's meaninglessness but never appear to doubt the value of their art, Grunberg's writing hovers on the edge of disbelieving slapstick. To those unaware of the Dutch tradition behind it, the book could well come across as post-modern provocation pushed to the point of hysteria.

Dimitri Verhulst's *Problemski Hotel* is equally willing to offend. Verhulst is Flemish and there are echoes of *My Little War* in the novel's organisation into 22 fragments. But the setting couldn't be more topical and international: a detention centre for asylum seekers from all the world's war zones and disaster areas. The novel opens with its narrator, the photographer Bipul Masli, complaining that his perfect photograph of a child dying of starvation in "the magnificent setting" (Verhulst 2005: 11) of an African garbage dump is spoiled by the absence of any flies and ends with the same narrator being photographed himself in the detention centre, the

photographer waiting until a fly settles on his nose to take the perfect shot. In between, every kind of ugliness and atrocity, every sort of racism and ethnic stereotyping, is contemplated in the flippant tone of one more interested in shocking than sympathising. A closing chapter entitled "Naturalization Exercise No. 4545KFSD45B: 'Louis Paul Boon tells a Gag at the Tavern'" (p. 145) retells a joke from an earlier chapter in Boon's very recognisable style, as if to suggest that the ultimate demand of these abject asylum seekers will be that they learn to recount their suffering in a celebrated Flemish manner.

Other novels combine a characteristically Dutch solemnity with a deliberate vagueness of setting and context. *Tomorrow Pamplona*, by Jan van Mersbergen, has two characters with the reassuringly English-sounding names of Danny and Robert who drive overnight from an unnamed Dutch town through France and Spain to take part in the Pamplona bull run. Danny, the fragile hero, is a boxer on the run from a traumatic end to a love affair in which he behaved disgracefully and looking for some kind of expiation in Pamplona. As in Hermans' *Beyond Sleep*, the world divides into extreme physical and emotional experience on the one hand – fighting, eroticism, confronting the bulls – and complete cultural debasement and triviality on the other, which, as so often, is seen as an invasion of Americana. Somehow these two poles sustain and intensify each other, leaving no space for a more articulated culture between. Van Mersbergen captures the relationship neatly when he has a Spanish bartender complaining to the Dutchmen (in English) that the Americans have ruined the bull fiesta. "Without the Americans the fiesta would have been forgotten long ago. They write about it, make films, take photographs, print T-shirts. They keep the fiesta alive and at the same time they kill the fiesta" (van Mersbergen [2007] 2011: 110).

Entitled *The Window Dresser*, Christiaan Weijts' novel sets up a conundrum of moral responsibility of the kind that in Hermans and Mulisch would have had to do with the war and the German occupation of Holland. Here a violent eco activist group attacks a large department store known to invest in such things as arms trafficking and child labour. Trapped between the two forces is the talented artist and window dresser who is redesigning the store and whose long lost love turns out to be a member of the eco warriors.

At every possible moment Weijts stresses the sameness of urban environments and their shared life, a similarity that is then extended to the consciousness of their inhabitants.

> Globalisation, he thinks, inevitably leads to uniformity. Across the globe, almost everybody begins their working day to the same little tune that tells them Windows is starting up. During the day they use the same programs – Word Outlook, Excel, read the same books – Grisham, King, Brown – in the evenings, and watch the world's news on homogeneous TV channels, with the same headlines at the bottom of the screen next to a stock market stream. Why do we need so many people, you ask yourself, if they all end up having the same experiences? (Weijts [2009] 2011: 44)

Thus in the frame of a recognisably Dutch seriousness does Weijts question what it might mean to have a national identity in the modern world.

A *caveat*: one of the curiosities of the contemporary publishing scene is that although we are led to believe that fiction from all over the world is being made instantly available to us, nevertheless we find ourselves having to distinguish between writers addressing an international public and writers content to speak to a home audience. When I visited Holland in July many shop windows featured the novel *Tonio* by A. F. Th. Van der Heijden, an author celebrated for his seven-volume autobiographical saga about life in Amsterdam, *The Toothless Time*. Considered one of Holland's foremost contemporary authors, Van der Heijden is not translated into English. Perhaps, addressing itself specifically to Dutch readers, his work might, in Coetzee's words, be 'wasted on foreign readers'.

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