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Author(s): Adriaan van der Veen
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The Netherlands: Writing in a Small Country

By ADRIAAN VAN DER VEEN

DUTCH LITERATURE has always been the mirror of an essentially bourgeois society. As Adriaan J. Barnouw explains in a study of life in the Netherlands, ever since the late thirteenth century the prosperous burghers of the Dutch cities determined the tone and the fashion of life in the Low Countries (*The Dutch*. New York. 1940. pp. 163–168). The Burgundian Dukes never acted as patrons of Dutch letters. The language at their court was French; Dutch was good enough for tradespeople and craftsmen. This attitude changed in the Eighty Years' War, when the Dutch rose against their King, Philip II, Duke of Burgundy and King of Spain. The Prince of Orange, however, who liberated the Netherlands and the *Stadtholders* who followed him, continued to use French for polite conversation. Latin was the language of the scholars and Dutch was left to the middle class.

Consequently, the scope of literary interest was always determined by a burgher outlook, just as much as the Dutch cities reflected the burgher values. A visitor can almost notice all that, when he comes into the Netherlands at Hook of Holland and speeds through the clean Dutch polder landscape to Amsterdam. In spite of the tremendous industrial growth in the Netherlands after the war (forty-two per cent of the working population is employed in industry, only twelve per cent in agriculture) all elements of an essentially domestic culture still join beautifully. When the visitor comes to Amsterdam and takes a walk through the old city, he is further enveloped in this soothing, quieting Dutch atmosphere. Even in the modern parts of the capital he will feel nothing disturbing. The satisfaction about this sensible, loving planning will remain. None of the disturbances, cruelties and, in a certain sense, indecencies of the Machine age will trouble his peace, his tranquillity.

First impressions are seldom entirely wrong. In the *Rijksmuseum* the visitor will see not only the Rembrandts but also the Vermeers, the interiors by Pieter de Hoogh. He will marvel at the neatness, the perfect order, the domesticity and coziness of it all. Then perhaps, as the day comes to its end and fatigue temporarily darkens his mood, he may briefly wonder what might possibly be behind all that marvelous contentment, what it all might lead to.

A number of Dutch writers and artists with either a bohemian or aristocratic concept of life, who would have preferred to exist against a background of larger and nobler dimensions, could supply an answer. A Multatuli and a Vincent van Gogh were among the Hollanders who preferred to live outside their own country. They were convinced that all this contentment within the narrow scope of the burgher conception of life led to a sterile self-satisfaction.

It is a saving factor that particularly since the latter part of the nineteenth century the Dutch intelligentsia have become increasingly aware of their ties with the rest of the world. At that time the Netherlands regained consciousness again, rather uncomfortably, of the superior cultural achivements in the surrounding countries. The skepticism about the national virtues of the Dutch: neatness, prudence, orderliness, a healthy sense of realism, is therefore not surprising—in a sense these are national limitations as well as national virtues.

Complacency certainly has been shaken off almost fully since history caught up with the Netherlands in 1940. One can imagine

what it means when a country which for ages has had a stable economy and in consequence stable ideas about life is suddenly confronted with the relativity of its prosperity and the doubtful truth of its bourgeois thinking. In Dutch literature, unrest and pessimism had set in since 1880. Existence was no longer a calm reality but an alarming problem. Only through and after the German occupation in the Second World War, however, has this awareness pervaded the broadest strata of the Dutch population. (See Pierre H. Dubois. *Dutch Literature*. The Hague. 1957.)

This modified view of existence has had many consequences for Dutch cultural life. The disturbing sensation of living in a permanent crisis has done much to change the literary taste of the average Dutchman and has been the cause of far-reaching modifications in the nature of Dutch literary production. There is now much less demand than in the past for the type of novel dealing with life in middle-class milieus and with regional life. The bourgeois no longer seems the norm of all things.

Many of the younger writers today are highly resentful of contemporary society, and the background of their literary efforts is often ferociously pessimistic. Most of the younger Dutch novelists are concerned with the great problems of Western civilization, the loss of traditions and beliefs, the loneliness of contemporary men, the tension between East and West, and the like. As an English writer put it some time ago, disillusionment now reigns supreme. The light of many beliefs, faiths, dogmas and hopes has burned low during the past two to three decades. The Netherlands is no exception.

Throughout most periods of the Dutch national life the appreciation of French literature has been great, mainly because French used to be the language of court, aristocracy, and upper classes. This has changed to a considerable extent. French literature still has a certain influence on the Dutch writers, but since the war the language and literature of the English-speaking peoples are preferred. When English or American writers come to Holland they are surprised to find that so many people know their work. Robert Lowell, the American poet who spent a winter in Amsterdam with his wife Elizabeth Hardwick, the novelist, felt more at home than would have been possible in Paris, Rome, or Vienna: they were "recognized," they could talk with these Hollanders as if they were in New York. In return they were kind enough to show a polite belief in the importance of Dutch writing, but they evidently had not the faintest idea what it was all about. The Dutch might be writers of genius or frauds. They had no way of judging them, except that their Dutch friends talked like reasonable people.

It is easy to guess the feelings of a Dutch writer when he reads a passage in Simone de Beauvoir's *Les mandarins,* in which one of the characters reflects on the horrible possibility of being a writer in Guatemala. Being a writer in a small country means, according to that character, that your words die at your feet. Imagine then the fate of the Dutch who not only live in a small country but also write in an unknown language. There seems to be no hope for them.

A more optimistic viewpoint is possible. When I was still living in the United States, W. H. Auden, the Anglo-American poet, reassured me that the Dutch language did not seem so strange to him: it looked exactly like German as it might have been written by James Joyce, he said. According to him writing in a small country meant that authors were not exposed to the dangerous split between commercial writing and work of literary significance. Dutch writers, he believed, would keep their literary integrity with so much greater ease.

Auden might be right. He overlooks, however, the pitfalls of provincialism. All decisions about the worth of Dutch literary work is left to the Dutch themselves. They have to be their own judges: they are never faced with world opinion. This means that

they are constantly in danger of being either too harsh or too lenient to themselves, and in any case always doubtful about their possible merits.

A large audience is, of course, not a necessary condition for creating masterpieces. Racine, Corneille, and all the great French writers of the seventeenth century addressed themselves to an extremely small audience. Yet they are by no means provincial writers. The small is perhaps all too often identified with the provincial. In the opinion of Allen Tate, the brilliant American poet, "we have tried to compensate for the limitations of the little community by looking at the big community, which is not necessarily bigger spiritually or culturally than the little community." Provincialism one might find anywhere, on a world scale or on the scale of the small country. In Dutch literature, however, it would be far less of a threat if through adequate translations of their work Dutch writers would be admitted to the stimulating and challenging international literary debate.

The Dutch reading audience is fortunately not limited to the Netherlands only. It is doubtful at present whether Dutch will continue to be used among the group of Indonesian intellectuals. There is, however, an interest of long standing for Dutch literature in the Union of South Africa. Afrikaans derives mainly from Dutch. Then there are the remains of the former vast Dutch overseas territories: the Netherlands Antilles in the West Indies and Surinam on the South American continent, where Dutch books are next to Spanish and American. Furthermore, the cultural frontiers of the Netherlands extend far into neighboring Belgium, where all through the Northern part Flemish is spoken, which is, for all differences of idiom, Dutch. There is a steadily growing two-way traffic of literary ideas and books between Belgian Flanders and the Netherlands. Many of the best selling books on the Dutch market have been and still are by Flemish authors, such as Marnix Gijsen, Gerard Walschap, Herman Teirlinck, Maurice Roelants, Willem Elsschot, Hugo Claus and before the war, Felix Timmermans and Stijn Streuvels.

It must be obvious that in Dutch literature with its Flemish components, there is no lack of variety. A delicate question, however, is whether Dutch literature has a satisfactory economic basis. It has not, although there is a comparatively large book market. Every summer more than three hundred Dutch publishers call on about fifteen hundred booksellers throughout the country with their Autumn lists—containing the greater part of the seven-thousand-odd new books published every year in the Netherlands: nearly three-quarters as many as are produced annually in the United States, where the population is roughly fifteen times as large.

Every year these seven thousand new titles include a good eight hundred novels and collections of short stories, the majority of which appear in the Fall. Book sales reach a peak just before December 5, Saint Nicholas's Eve, when it is customary to exchange presents. Books are many people's choice for the occasion, partly because the Dutch public is book-minded and books have remained fairly cheap (due in part to the wide range of paperbacks), but also because intense propaganda is carried on for books and reading.

Propaganda to stimulate book sales is the concern of a publishers' and booksellers' organization calling itself the "Association for the Promotion of the Interests of the Book Trade." Every year two Book Weeks are held, the first and most important of them for books in general, and the second for children's books. The former Book Week is invariably inaugurated at the end of February with a gala evening, usually held in Amsterdam and attended by Queen Juliana and Prince Bernhard. In order to stimulate the sale of Dutch books, everyone spending a certain minimum amount on them during this week receives a book (specially published for the occasion) as a present.

There are good grounds for drawing the attention of the reading public to Dutch books in general, for foreign books corner a large part of the Dutch market. English, German, and French books are often read in the original language, and in the leading dailies literary critics devote quite as much space to foreign literature as to Dutch—which is what the educated Dutch reader expects from them. Moreover, the wider reading public in the Netherlands reads a large number of novels in translation. In fact, more than half the annual production of fiction consists of translated works, three-quarters of them being translated from English and American (a situation which also prevailed prior to the war).

Accordingly, the Dutch author, writing for a European public of eleven million in the Netherlands and about five million in Belgium, finds himself up against stiff foreign competition. And there is, as I explained, no question of an exchange of literature on anything like a basis of parity—so far, little Dutch literature of real significance has been translated. Good Dutch novels achieve editions of from three to ten thousand copies, not much less than the size of editions enjoyed by a novel outside the best-seller category in England and America. In those countries, however, the writer may earn considerably more on secondary rights and magazine sales.

The Netherlands is a tiny country lying on the crossroads of two civilizations, the Germanic and the Roman. It is a land within narrow confines, prettily dotted with ancient towns and villages, every acre of land intensely cultivated. Yet with its strong winds and fast moving clouds it is not without a certain grandeur. Considering these contrasts, it might not be surprising that the literature of the Netherlands can be seen under two dominant aspects: that of the lyrical outbursts and of critical reflections, a contest of two elements, feeling and reason, realism and lyrical flight. In its highest form Dutch literature has always been of a lyrical nature, a kind of desperate reaction against the dignified bourgeois virtues. The Dutch are fascinated, indeed in love with respectability and yet through some inner force they are drawn towards a lyrical reaction, towards freedom—which is again a leading theme in post-war poetry and prose, and as such is much to the point in an overcrowded country.

The Dutch achieved complete mastery of the arts, in painting as well as in literature, in the great seventeenth century period of the Dutch republic. The dynamic expansion of the country after the Eighty Years' War against the Spanish was successfully won somehow created a wonderful harmony between lyrical flight and everyday realism. The separation between lyrical feeling and common sense became much more evident after the Dutch Golden Age.

Lyricism remained an exhaust valve for the Dutch writer but the return to the reality of everyday life was inevitable. The Dutch tendency to moralize and to preach, which is said to be part of the Calvinistic heritage, is to be noted in most Dutch literature. In many a period the danger of pettiness, provincialism, and quarrelsomeness could not be avoided, but an important saving factor usually was the Dutch sense of humor. Especially in the difficult years following the liberation there was a vogue for stories and books of a humorous nature, which were produced at an astonishing pace, presumably because laughter seemed the best way to surmount the irritation and disappointment caused by the seemingly slow process of recovery—laughter, work, and a good deal of the typical Dutch self-criticism. The Dutch are very keen on pointing out their own shortcomings, and in doing that they keep on looking beyond their own frontiers. A country with such a great need of surpassing its geographic and spiritual limitations cannot easily grow ridiculous.

The Dutch writer was in most periods roughly on the right path when he seemed conscious of the need to achieve a European level. The revival of the Eighties, for

instance, a general cultural renaissance in literature as well as in science, architecture, painting and music, united the best young talents of the Netherlands in an effort to base the cultural life of their country on a European standard. This new movement of the late nineteenth century stirred the hearts of the Dutch people, who awoke from their long slumber in the first half of the century. Lodewijk van Deyssel (1864–1953) and Willem Kloos (1859–1939), the principal spokesmen of the new movement which produced remarkable poetry, wanted to bring about "a revolution in literature." Art was to be passion, said Van Deyssel, and should be separated from logic, ethics, religion, politics, economy, and utility.

It could have been foreseen that in a country as contemplative, serious and religious as the Netherlands the intoxication of the soul and the senses of the Eighties would not endure. Many of the writers turned away from the individualism of the Eighties in a socialistic or ethical direction. Reasonableness and wisdom were stressed again more than beauty and color. The most important reaction against the Eighties was that of the idealistic pre-war socialists, eminently gifted poets like Herman Gorter (1864–1927) and Henriette Roland-Holst (1869–1951), who dreamed of a happier world, which, they thought, would surely come within a short time. They condemned the *l'art pour l'art* ideal of the Eighties as the product of an egocentric, capitalistic society.

After the First World War, which had bypassed the Netherlands but had not failed to touch it, there was little patience again and even less attention for a literature which emphasized humanities and ethical values. Certain facts could no longer be overlooked: the world was not as ripe for brotherly love as the pre-war generation had thought. The young writers showed their impatience by looking to their literature for dynamism and vitality. Under the influence of German Expressionism they attempted to break with all tradition. According to the poet Hendrik Marsman, leader of the movement, they aimed at a lyricism which reminded one of the "bright audacity of young animals and of the clear early morning light."

Only when the aesthetic movement of postwar vitality had spent its energy did the pendulum swing back toward reason, soberness, and contemplation. At the same time a far-flung attack against Dutch complacency and parochialism was launched in *Forum,* a literary monthly of decisive importance in Dutch literary life. At the time that the European crisis was touching the Netherlands the two principal figures in *Forum,* Menno ter Braak (1902–1940) and Charles Edgar du Perron (1899–1940) succeeded not only in responding to the totalitarian attack on civilization but also in giving Dutch literature once more a European outlook. The principal personalities of the *Forum* group—influenced by Stendhal, Nietzsche, and Gide—did not believe in objective standards by which literature can be judged. There is nothing but individual taste, they believed, which is in fact based on one's individual interest. Consequently, it is necessary to look for the motives behind the actions of the individual, his real intentions, which are often hidden under the surface. These *Forum* writers wanted less "surface," fewer beautiful words, and greater sincerity.

Even at the present moment, the loss of these foremost representatives of the Dutch intellectual conscience, on the first day of the German occupation of the Netherlands, is still felt. Ter Braak committed suicide when the Gestapo came to fetch him. Du Perron died of a heart attack the same day. The great poet Adriaan Roland-Holst, like the principal literary men of an older generation, the novelist Ferdinand Bordewijk, whose work moves between the two opposites of chaotic fear and severe discipline, and the literary phenomenon Simon Vestdijk, a novelist, poet and essayist, and an extremely subtle, astonishingly gifted writer, stay aloof from literary life.

Dutch critics and Dutch readers, faced with the extraordinarily productive Vestdijk, the author of at least sixty literary works, are often quite at a loss. There would be no problem if he could be classified as an industrious second-rate author. But that is impossible. His work has always been on an unusually high level. Critics have tried to pinpoint him by labeling him a wizard, or a psychological unraveler. In all his works he is undoubtedly a psychological individualist, attempting to free himself from all sorts of personal obsessions and anxieties by means of his writing. His novels fall in two categories: historical novels of a quite objective sort, and what are often more or less autobiographical novels of the present day, in which the world of Vestdijk's experience is directly reflected. Vestdijk is one of the first writers in Dutch literature to adapt modern psychological theories and assimilate them creatively into "personal property."

The foundations of existence which were already problematical to writers like Ter Braak and Du Perron, have fallen away completely for the principal prose writers of the postwar period. They share the lack of belief in all great causes, as I explained earlier, which is characteristic of the postwar generations everywhere. War, cold war, the quarrels of the older generation are not their affair. Yet they only seem indifferent. They probably do care about what is happening to the world, but their fear and anger are turned inside. Their pose of indifference is of vital importance to them to show the older generations that they do not trust them, and that if they care for anything it is for their own solutions to the problems of existence, which they unfortunately are at a loss to define.

Willem Frederik Hermans who certainly deserves to be called a Dutch "angry young man" is a kind of outsider, lost in the world, displaced in his own country. Life seems pointless to him, chaos the rule. He reveals in most of his work a strong disgust with all heroics about the time of occupation, which he has in common with his contemporaries, and a kind of despair about the fate of youth in a small country. This feeling of insufficiency and failure was clearly marked in his novel, *Ik heb altijd gelijk* ("I Am Always Right") about the nearly insane bitterness of a young Dutch soldier who after postwar fighting in the former Netherlands Indies has to return to the overpopulated Netherlands. In his novel, *De donkere kamer van Damocles* ("The Dark Room of Damocles") he impresses upon the reader more urgently than ever that the world of trust and fidelity is a lie: that of evil intentions is the only reality.

Hermans needs this climate of terror and chaos in which everyone is an outlaw. In such a climate he, as a Dutch "angry young man" is best able to scoff at the pitiful established order of things so virtuously maintained in the face of the chaos into which everything is destined to dissolve.

War, occupation, and the strong disillusionment which set in in the years following the liberation released a new poetic force. Such poets as Lucebert, Remco Campert, Gerrit Kouwenaar, and Hans Andreus believed that their real liberation had begun with the absorption of the many poetical innovations in France and the United States and their new appreciation of the astounding possibilities of a free and unhampered use of the language. Examples of this new poetry they found in the work of Antonin Artaud, René Char, Henri Michaux—in the surrealistic climate which helped them to overcome the paralyzing effects of the occupation.

Among other authors of the young generation should be mentioned Harry Mulisch, whose work, with its extraordinary imaginative strength, might be described as one of gay despair: he has a youthful buoyancy and charm which goes well with his most un-Dutch lightness of touch. One of Simon Vinkenoog's novels *Wij helden* ("We Heroes") is an illustration of Robert Margerit's thesis that man is a coward because he accepts life and at the same time a hero

merely because he lives. Behind this short novel one can sense a great deal of mistrust on the part of the author, who looks upon himself as spokesman for his generation. His cool aloofness conceals an internalized indignation, anger, and fear.

It is easy to understand that the loss of the Netherlands Indies created a need among writers who knew the country well to give expression to the nostalgia of many Dutch people for the past, for their life and work in the Indies that were, and are no more. H. J. Friedericy, a Dutch diplomat, now cultural attaché in London, wrote a number of books in a sober, concise style that is at the same time distinguished and deeply moving, in which he imaginatively recreates his past as an administrative official in Southern Celebes, a land that continues to haunt him, half a world away.

After the liberation, novels, stories, and poems about the hardships of the occupation and the spirit of Dutch resistance were published in an unending stream. Few of these books, however, were of lasting literary value. An exception should be made for *Het achterhuis,* the diary of the fifteen year old Anne Frank, discovered after her death in a German concentration camp in Poland and published in 1947. She wrote about her own moving experiences in the midst of her family while hiding from the Germans in a house along an Amsterdam canal. Since then a number of books have been written about either the experiences of the Dutch Jews who were hidden in Dutch homes or about the inhuman concentration camp of Westerbork, in the northern part of the Netherlands, where the Dutch Jews were held by the Germans before their deportation to Poland.

It is evident that the youngest generations of Dutch writers mirror in their work the widespread tensions which are felt in the era of the concentration camp. They find little comfort in pondering about what is awaiting them. Yet none of these young people possesses the melancholy awareness, typical of the pre-war generation, of having lost so many certitudes and values in the past havoc. They do not look back at former illusions, they never had any. The evils or the exciting cameraderie of the time of occupation do not mean a thing to them. What remains in their work is mainly the fear characteristic of our time—that of being closed in, being stifled with no way of escape. This, then, they have in common with so many other young writers everywhere.

If there is a difference it lies principally in the conditions peculiar to Dutch writing. The always existing fear of provincialism became so intense during and after the war that some of these young people find the obstacles of writing in a small country virtually impossible to overcome. In fact, in their poetry and prose they are doing symbolically what in the years following the war so many emigrating Hollanders did in reality: looking for living space. The contentment of former times, the enjoyment of small bourgeois virtues, will never completely return. The need for a closer contact with the other European countries, with the world, is greater than ever, especially in the field of literature and the arts.

For literature I see only one way out: the solution of the important question of translations. Fortunately, the Foundation for the Promotion of the Translation of Dutch Literary Work publishes a quarterly bulletin, *Literary Holland,* which contains synopses of important Dutch literary achievements. This Foundation has been doing useful work. Furthermore, with the highly readable quarterly, *Delta,* published in the English language, now entering its fourth year of publication, there is more reason to hope that Dutch literature will finally receive a better hearing.

Rotterdam