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Literary perspectives: The Netherlands

"Profound Holland" and the new Dutch

The liberal, atheist era has come to end in the Netherlands and contemporary Dutch literature reflects that, writes critic Margot Dijkgraaf. The new need for security is reflected in the work of two novelists in particular: Jan Siebelink, whose fiction, free of references to contemporary life, evokes the "profound Holland" overturned in the 1960s; and Arnon Grunberg, whose representations of male disintegration blankly refuse any such reassurances. But there is a parallel strand of current Dutch literature that sidesteps such concerns: novelists and poets with migrant backgrounds introducing new styles and identities into the Dutch literary repertoire.

Does the Netherlands have any great literature to boast of? This question is often put to me when I am abroad. So who then are the doyens of that Dutch literature? Many of the people I talk to are unable to name even a single writer from the Dutch-speaking world. Erasmus, Spinoza, Anne Frank — it appears that none of these are directly associated with the Netherlands, even though Erasmus lived in Rotterdam, Spinoza was born in Amsterdam, and *Het achterhuis* [The diary of a young girl] was written in an Amsterdam house overlooking a canal.

Anyone wishing to sketch a picture of Dutch literature of the past fifty years must look at five major writers: Willem Frederik Hermans, Gerard Reve (both now deceased), Harry Mulisch, Cees Nooteboom, and Hella S. Haasse.

Willem Frederik Hermans (b.1921) liked to call himself — and may well have been — the Netherlands' foremost writer. After his death in 1995, his publisher, De Bezige Bij, began the task of assembling a collection of his complete works: 24 large volumes featuring his novels, letters, essays, poetry, and drama. Hermans's main theme is man's futile endeavour to discover some order in the chaos that is reality. His characters find themselves in situations they cannot handle and are unsuccessful in their quest for an identity. Four of Hermans's major novels are set during the Second World War, a setting that befits his philosophical and sometimes nihilistic tone. Early this year in *Le Monde des Livres*, Milan Kundera expressed his admiration for and fascination with the novel *De donkere kamer van Damocles* [The darkroom of Damocles] (1958), which, although published in French translation, had been overlooked up until that point. The novel centres on a tobacconist who carries out acts of resistance at the behest of his macho alter ego. After the country is liberated, he discovers that he is suspected of having been a collaborator.

Kundera describes the book as at once obsessed with the real and in thrall to the improbable and the peculiar. He praises the dark lyricism and moral ambiguity of Hermans's world and notes, with something bordering on

incredulity, that this major novel is also an exciting thriller. Hermans demonstrates how an individual living during the Second World War can completely break with what is known to be the collective memory of that very same period.

Gerard Reve (b.1923) died in April 2006. Despite his controversial lifestyle, he was a popular writer in the postwar Netherlands, always seeking to push the limits in his work. His language combined the solemn and ironic with the quotidian, making him a ground-breaking writer. His debut, *De avonden* [The evenings] (1947), introduced an entirely new voice in Dutch literature and featured a style that was to leave its mark on many future generations. As a writer of novels, poetry, and epistolary works, he saw himself in a tradition linking romanticism with decadence, and he searched for a higher entity behind the many manifestations of "being". Consequently, his style often conveys a sense of biblical exaltation. God, love, and death are Reve's main literary themes. In both life and work, he had no qualms about raising taboo topics, whether of a religious, sexual, emotional, or literary nature.

For a long time, the Second World War was considered to be the most fertile theme in Dutch literature. The period 1940–1945 spawned a great many probing testimonies and autobiographical novels — by Jewish victims such as Marga Minco and G.L. Durlacher, for instance — while dozens of writers turned to the subject of second generation issues (Leon de Winter, Adriaan van Dis).

One of the best-known novels about the Second World War is undoubtedly *De aanslag* [The assault] (1982) by Harry Mulisch (b.1927), one of the major authors living today. His work has been translated into many other languages. *De aanslag* is a perfectly structured, gripping novel about an assault on a collaborator. The family in front of whose home the assault takes place is executed, except for an 11-year-old boy who remains obsessed with the question of guilt for the rest of his life.

Mulisch, the son of an Austrian collaborator and a Jewish mother, published his *magnum opus* in 1992, *De ontdekking van de hemel* [The discovery of heaven], a mythic-realist "total novel" about a chosen one charged with the task of returning the Stone Tablets to heaven. The same author wrote *Siegfried, een zwarte idylle* [Siegfried: a black idyll] (2001), in which the narrator unfolds the tragic tale of a fictitious son of Hitler. European schoolchildren recently voted it Europe's best novel (*Livres en Europe*).

But the Dutch author regarded as the European writer *par excellence* by readers outside the Netherlands is Cees Nooteboom (1933). In keeping with the proverb that a prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, his novels and essays do not receive the same degree of acclaim in his home country as they do abroad. The writer himself has ascribed this to his Catholic background or his cosmopolitan approach, but a more plausible explanation could be Nooteboom's brand of non-realist fiction, which Dutch readers may well find harder to get to grips with. His recurring themes, which include the transience of time and the unreliability of memory, appear, for instance, in *Het volgende verhaal* [The following story] (1991). It was not very well received in his own country, but was successfully translated into many other languages.

The only one of the big five to have published a new book recently is Hella S. Haasse (1918). She made her debut in 1948 with *Oeroeg*, a story based on memories of her country of birth, the Dutch East Indies, a former Dutch

colony. Through the story of the deteriorating friendship between the son of a Dutchman and a Sundanese boy, *Oeroeg* depicts the trauma experienced by many Dutch people who spent their lives in the Dutch East Indies until the war of independence that led to the colony's sovereignty.

Since her debut, Haasse has produced a substantial body of work comprising novels, plays, poetry, and essays. Her publisher, Querido, is also putting together her *oeuvres complètes* into a collection of quality editions. Her work has been translated into many languages, including French, in which it is available in nearly its entirety. During the 1950s, she concentrated on historical novels — *Het woud der verwachting* [In a dark wood wandering] (1949) and *De scharlaken stad* [The scarlet city] (1952) — while she later published cleverly structured novels that combined such themes as evil, the labyrinth, love, and marriage with mythological and existential issues. Mystery, and its potential unravelling, is another recurring theme. She has also written "documentary novels", based on real letters or other documents found in archives. These include *Mevrouw Bentinck of Onverenigbaarheid van karakter* [Mrs Bentinck or irreconcilable in character] (1978) and *Schaduwbeeld of Het geheim van Appeltern* [Shadow, or the secret of Appeltern] (1989).

The so-called "Dutch East Indies novels" (of which *Oeroeg* was the first) also occupy a prominent place in her oeuvre. They are partly set in her country of birth and examine colonial issues from different perspectives, reformulating and adjusting them in the process. *Heren van de thee* [The tea merchants] (1992), a documentary novel about an ambitious Dutch planter-pioneer who sacrifices his family to ensure the success of his tea plantation, became a huge best seller. *Sleuteloog* [Eye of the key] (2002) revisited the issues first broached in *Oeroeg*, albeit from a different perspective, that of an old lady reflecting on her friendships during her childhood in the Dutch East Indies.

The recently published short story collection *Het tuinhuis* [The garden house] (2006) is an excellent showcase of Haasse's stylistic and thematic qualities. As is common in Haasse's work, the essence of the relationships between people is never spelled out, merely hinted at. We can see but a fraction of the world, the writer suggests, and we will never learn its true nature. A common metaphor for Haasse's work is that of Indian batik patterns, in which a multitude of different figures form an elusive mosaic, all weird shapes and subtle colours.

Het tuinhuis contains old, unpublished stories as well as new ones. In terms of tone, subject matter and style, there is no difference between a story written in 1948 and one written in 2000. Striking formulations, intriguing characters, and an abundance of mystery are a constant. "De korè" ["The Kore"], for instance, features a couple staying on a Greek island, with the husband displaying a passionate interest in an excavation site. He falls under the spell of a young girl who, as she leaves, presents his wife with flowers — flowers of death, it transpires, as the woman has just learnt she is terminally ill.

Mythological symbols play a recurring role in Haasse's stories. This is true for another story from the collection, "Een kruik uit Arelate" ["A stone jar from Arelate"], set around Nîmes in the first century A.D. A shepherdess sets off for a neighbouring town to return her brother-in-law to his wife and their new-born child. He gives her an empty stone jar to carry back to the village. The reader is not given any details, but senses that disaster will strike before long. Equally dramatic is the fate of the Japanese woman in "Lidy Boeaja", which should be categorized under Haasse's Indies work. A hard-working woman falls victim to her authoritarian, self-centred husband, with whom she

had an arranged marriage, but who is now about to leave her. In this short story collection, Haasse once again demonstrates her superior literary qualities, by turning an inconsequential incident or minor historical fact into a poignant history, a beautiful, meaningful story that always appeals to the imagination and ingenuity of the reader.

Besides Hella S. Haasse, one of the few major contemporary writers to touch on the Dutch East Indies in their work is Adriaan van Dis (1946). Some of his novels take their inspiration from his formative years in a family that was repatriated from the Dutch East Indies. *Nathan Sid*, his 1984 debut, *Indische duinen* [My father's war, 1994], and *Familieziek* [Family fray, 2002] form a clever trilogy full of black humour that describes a son's love-hate relationship with his father and his youth in a family with part-Indies, part-Dutch roots. Van Dis has also written travel stories, most of which about Africa, the continent he has visited many times.

Paris, the city he moved to a few years ago, was the inspiration for his most recent novel *De wandelaar* [The walker] (2007). Van Dis's alter ego here is an old Dutchman with a heart condition, who lives in a small flat in Paris. One day he walks past a hostel housing illegal immigrants, where a fire has broken out. A dog suddenly jumps into his arms and from that moment on never leaves his side. The dog, the walker referred to in the title, is said to be from Africa, having arrived in the city after an interminably long journey. Through the dog, the protagonist is introduced to Parisians living on the margins, the *sans papiers* and the soup kitchens, poverty and the clochards sleeping in cardboard boxes.

Van Dis thus illustrates the rich westerner's guilt towards the less privileged. The protagonist can no longer close his eyes to the poverty, the gap between rich and poor, which is also a feature of life in Paris. He desperately tries to "do good" or to "make up" for something, but how to go about it? Van Dis's novel is highly topical, alluding to the explosive situation in the Parisian *banlieues* and to the recent fires in the centre of Paris.

This very subject — the presence or rather the alleged absence of topical issues from Dutch literature — has been a frequent topic of debate in the Netherlands. Dutch literature, it is claimed, does not pay enough attention to important current affairs. Where, some wonder, are the novels about 9/11, or the murders of politician Pim Fortuyn and film maker Theo van Gogh? Why are topical issues held in such contempt? Why are Dutch writers — in contrast to their American counterparts, for instance — always navel-gazing instead of opening themselves up to outside influences?

But if you ask writers for greater commitment to current social affairs you turn literature into something akin to a newspaper. An interest in the misconceptions of the day, an awareness of topical issues, and the reporting thereof are of no consequence whatsoever as to what literature can and should be. Newspapers, television, and radio are mainly interested in what is new and young: the latest film, the most recent book, the exhibition just opened. The novel, most Dutch writers seem to agree, has every right to break with this. What is more, its right to exist is based on completely the opposite principles: longevity, continuity, explication, and cohesion. Its duty lies elsewhere. A novelist must never feel compelled to comment on real-life events. A novel need not respond to the news of the day. Literature is born of private obsessions and interests, and demands detachment. The novel is a foil for the times. Against the spirit of the times, against transience and uniformity, the

novel must produce a unique and individual voice, which enters into a dialogue with its precursors, providing a historical, literary context for the existential questions that form the domain of literature. It must offer a space for insecurity, for candid expressions of doubt, a space where no one has a monopoly on truth. It is a refuge for the independent spirit.

On the other hand, literature, in whichever guise, always reveals something distinctive about the time in which it was created. It sheds a light on the processes of change that have a bearing on thought and sentiment. It illustrates the preoccupations of society, both above and below the surface. A novel with something very distinctive to say about the present-day Netherlands is *Knielen op een bed violen* [*Kneeling on a bed of violets*] (2005) by Jan Siebelink (1938). It has been an overwhelming success, selling more than 300 000 copies within a year — a figure unprecedented in the history of Dutch literature. Siebelink already had about 30 titles to his name when he returned to the subject of his 1975 debut, a father gripped by a dark religious fanaticism. The outcome is a book suffused with the zeitgeist. *Knielen op een bed violen* is the remarkable story of a nurseryman who falls under the spell of an orthodox Calvinist sect and ends up not only ruining his business, but also completely alienating his wife and two sons, right up until his dying day.

The book deals with evil in the shape of deeply religious people who destroy a marriage, a paradise on earth, and a family. The gentle, indecisive, and lost protagonist grows increasingly isolated as the sect tightens its hold on him. But he is incapable of questioning and resisting the ancient texts served up as truth. The unswerving, loyal love of a wife for her husband forms an equally important theme. The protagonist's wife does everything within her power to understand her husband and to be sympathetic towards his religious mania, even though the religious fanatics are driving him towards bankruptcy. He ultimately loses and renounces everything that once made him happy: love, marriage, nursery, family, and fatherhood.

It goes without saying that until recently most late twentieth-century writers in the Netherlands were atheists. Religious belief was a taboo in intellectual circles. Religion appeared to die out in the 1980s, along with all the other big ideologies. Only the odd regional novelist still wrote Christian fiction. But the climate has changed in the Netherlands of today and belief in God is no longer seen as backward, either in literature or in politics. Religion is back on the agenda. It has staged a remarkable comeback in Dutch culture, as shown by the success of a novel such as *Knielen op een bed violen*. This book demonstrates the enduring sway of a deep-rooted and even God-fearing faith in the Netherlands. Fashionable notions such as "secularization", "globalization", and "global village" are a far cry from the world of this novel. This exceptionally successful novel lacks any sign of modernity: internet and e-mails, computers and television, infidelity and sex are all absent, nor is there any mention of remote holiday destinations or exoticism of any kind.

Siebelink has compared the world in his book to "la Hollande profonde", the old Netherlands, and to the God of yesteryear. This "profound Holland" represents a past that, since the 1960s and its leftwing, atheist philosophy, had slipped into the background, but clearly never ceased to exist. The religious mania that grips Siebelink's protagonist could also be said to touch on a completely different contemporary issue, which now manifests itself in the form of jihad. In the same way, the orthodox-protestants who get the protagonist in their grip seek to win new souls for their faith and to utterly destabilize the lives of the people they target.

Many people feel that something has been lost in the overwhelming secularization and de-Christianization of the West. People now want to regain a sense of security and respect for home-grown values and are seeking to establish a distinct identity in response to globalization. There is a need for more stability, something new to hold on to, a new ideology. Some people even argue in favour of a healthy kind of provincialism. Many are fed up with the dumbing down, materialism, and superficiality of consumer society and are looking for profundity in a new kind of religion.

Yet novels of the opposite calibre — nihilistic, postmodern, and replete with existential despair — are also extremely successful in the Netherlands. One of today's most talented writers is Arnon Grunberg (1971). Since his debut with *Blauwe maandagen* [Blue Mondays] (1994), he has joined the ranks of the Netherlands' most admired and productive writers. He already has nine novels under his belt. No less impressive is the sheer volume of text penned by Grunberg that does not appear in book form: columns, polemics, articles, serials — he is equally at home in all genres, as he is on television, where he hosts cultural shows. Grunberg, clearly, is extremely prolific.

Grunberg has written tragicomic novels under his own name as well as under the pseudonym Marek van der Jagt. All are populated by losers — young, male immigrants, failed writers, or editors who have lost their jobs — who are desperately trying to give meaning to an empty life. Carried by short sentences, plenty of repetition, pseudo-philosophising, and an endless run of one-liners, his work is often associated with slapstick. His early work centres on the struggle between mothers and their sons. These are young, ambitious men, on course for a great future. In his earliest novels, those young men bore a striking resemblance to Grunberg himself. The first major shift in his work came with *De geschiedenis van mijn kaalheid* [The history of my baldness] (2000), his first novel written under a pseudonym. In it, the writer was an invention and Grunberg no longer a character. *De asielzoeker* [The asylum seeker] (2003) heralded the next change of direction in Grunberg's writing. For the first time, the hero is no longer a young man, but middle aged. The narrator has already experienced the failure still awaiting the earlier protagonists. He has already lost his ambitions, while a terminal illness presages the end of a disillusioned life.

Grunberg's most recent novel, *Tirza*, which has been awarded many prestigious prizes, focuses on an ageing man, a former editor of translated fiction at a publishing house. Since being laid off, he has been loitering around the airport, as if he was collecting or dropping someone off. This protagonist has a daughter, Tirza, who he has lived with since his wife left him many years before. He lives for his daughter and does everything within his power to be a model father. Ever since she was a little girl, he has wanted to teach her about all the important things in life. Having made sound investments, he is well-off. But he experiences his freedom as too undisciplined; in the end, lack of discipline only leads to catastrophe. Stability and stasis, to him, are preconditions for love and happiness. He can handle the fact that his wife exchanged him for a childhood sweetheart and that some of his wealth has vanished through fraud, as long as he can look after Tirza.

The book starts when his ex-wife returns, suddenly, on the eve of his daughter's graduation party. The tragedy that unfolds in the following weeks is first-rate, drawn with great confidence and precision. Gradually, the father's fear of losing his daughter becomes tangible: she plans to travel to Africa with her boyfriend (who is a dead ringer for a notorious terrorist). The decent,

well-meaning protagonist inevitably gives way to a monster, the monster that lurks in all of us provided the right conditions are in place. It provides a clear illustration of Grunberg's nihilism, although he also tacks on a moralistic message at the end.

Alongside the flourishing of the novel — I am leaving aside the wealth of family sagas and autobiographical fiction for now — there is another notable development in contemporary Dutch literature, namely the emergence and ever-growing popularity of literary non-fiction. Authors such as Geert Mak, Annejet van der Zijl, Frank Westerman, Christine Otten, Joris Luyendijk, and Judith Koelemeijer are the stars of this genre.

The work of Geert Mak (1946) includes *De eeuw van mijn vader* [My father's century] (1999), a biography of the Netherlands in the twentieth century in the form of a family history, in which the author wonders what connects us to all those who lived in the past century. In 2004, he published *In Europa* [In Europe], a big tome that has also done extremely well in England and France. The book is based on Mak's tour of Europe in 1999, which set out to be some sort of final inspection: what was the state of the continent at the close of the twentieth century? At the same time it was a "historical journey", with Mak tracing, insofar as possible, the course of history, looking for any remnants. He travelled to Europe's far-flung corners, spoke to countless Europeans, learned about the influence history has had on their lives, and pieced together a gigantic puzzle of historic interconnectedness. The book has become a European best seller.

Younger authors such as Annejet van der Zijl [*Sonny Boy*, 2004] and Frank Westerman (*De graanrepubliek* [The republic of grain] 1999; *El negro en ik* [El negro and me] 2004) have also specialized in this new genre of literary non-fiction and with a similar degree of success. These authors deploy literary means to describe reality. Their books are rooted in meticulous journalistic or historical research, but read like novels. This is not a distinct new genre of course — with no visual media on hand authors had been painting with words as early as the nineteenth century — but the genre has undergone a remarkable revival in the last decade or so. It all began in 1996, with the publication of Geert Mak's *Toen God verdween uit Jorwerd* [Jorwerd: the death of the village in late twentieth-century Europe], which tells the story of a village in the northern Dutch province of Friesland during the so-called "silent revolution" between 1945 and 1995. It talks of farmers and money, of small shopkeepers and the encroaching city, and the decline of the countryside.

This success may well have its roots in the transformation of Dutch society. The disappearance of religious pillars in the 1960s, the second wave of feminism, and the sexual revolution meant that people lost their bearings and turned elsewhere for their points of reference — to other people's lives. And of course, biographies provide an excellent source for this. The success of literary non-fiction could be seen as a result of this development.

Another role is reserved for the baby-boomers who once sought to empower the imagination, but who now seem to be exploring their generation's impact on society, where it has taken them, and the repercussions of the changes in mentality during the 1960s and 1970s for which they were the catalyst. Is it an awakening, a need to justify past actions, doubt rearing its head, or merely nostalgia? Literary non-fiction plays a leading role in this process. Literature lays bare just how complex, ambiguous, and opaque life really is. But non-fiction, too, gains from ambivalence, irony, and paradox.

Throughout the previous century, Dutch literature was enriched by authors from Indonesia and the Dutch Antilles and by bodies of work in which the former colonies play a part. During the past decade or so, literature in Dutch has been hearing new voices from other parts of the world. They hail from Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Lebanon, and elsewhere, although most of the new literary voices betray a Moroccan note.

They were initially labelled Moroccan–Dutch authors: young Dutch writers who had been born in Morocco and had come to the Netherlands at an early age. This is true for authors such as Abdelkader Benali, Naima El Bezaz, Hafid Bouazza, and Mustafa Stitou, who have confirmed their status within Dutch literature in recent years. Fouad Laroui, who originally wrote in French, has also since made a name for himself on the Dutch literary scene.

Both Benali and Bouazza made their debuts in 1996, the former with *Bruiloft aan zee* [Wedding by the sea], the latter with *De voeten van Abdullah* [Abdulah's feet]. Both were praised for their vivid, innovative style. Benali had mixed different traditions and a wide range of literary genres and blended them into a potent visual universe. Eastern ingenuity went hand in hand with the Western novelistic tradition. Bouazza was applauded for his baroque language, derived from the so-called *Tachtigers* or Movement of Eighty, a group of writers who revolutionized the literary scene in the 1880s. This was a language replete with sensory perceptions and original, sometimes even bizarre words and expressions, including a sprinkling or two from the eighteenth century. In 1994, the then 19-year-old Mustafa Stitou published the poetry collection *Mijn vormen* [My forms]. His talent was unmistakable from the start.

A new sense of inspiration had found its way into Dutch literature. And this inspiration was here to stay. Benali has since published big novels, several plays, an account of the war in Lebanon, columns, and has also taken up a post as writer-in-residence at Amsterdam's Vrije Universiteit. Bouazza, meanwhile, has dedicated himself to the translation of Arabic poetry, has compiled anthologies, and has also written several plays and big novels. Mustafa Stitou is still publishing new work as well.

This new generation of Dutch authors of Moroccan origin were initially seen as "migrant writers" and were often invited as a group to speak at literary events showcasing "migrant literature". But while the use of the word "migrant" is peculiar at the best of times, it is completely misplaced in art, in literature. In his essay "Een beer in bontjas" ["A bear in a fur coat", 2001], Bouazza poked fun at the labelling game by introducing the label N.S.M.A.N.N. (*Nederlandse schrijver van Marokkaanse afkomst met Nederlandse nationaliteit*, or Dutch Writer of Moroccan Origin with Dutch Nationality). He ridiculed the tendency to applaud the "exotic" in the migrant writer and the desire to place him or her in clearly defined "lodgings". He argues that the transfer of culture need not necessarily be the main objective of literature by migrant writers: they are writers first and foremost, "language is their identity, style their passport". Whether they draw on the resources of their country of origin or on those of their country of arrival, literature is rooted in the imagination, in uprootedness, in a kind of homelessness and outsider position, which can be neither defined nor labelled, but which is familiar to all writers.

"Dutch culture", Bouazza writes in the same essay, "is a robust, caring mother kangaroo. There are worse pouches for writers." Fouad Laroui noted something similar in his essay "Vreemdeling: aangenaam" [Stranger: pleased

to meet you, 2001]. Laroui, born in Morocco, partly brought up in France, and now living and working in the Netherlands, writes his novels in French, but publishes his poems (*Verbannen woorden* [Forbidden Words], 2002) in Dutch. In "Vreemdeling: aangenaam" he reports on his encounters with "strangeness" in a number of different countries and concludes that he has discovered at least one location where it is pleasant to be a stranger: Amsterdam.

Trying to get a handle on life — that alone is the novel's *raison d'être*. Or, as Hella S. Haasse once put it during a conversation with me,

Where mere words fall short, literature does something that broadens your view on reality. Broadening, that's what it is. You suddenly learn about experiences that are not, you might say, your everyday reality and that cannot in fact be put into words. Literature's prime quality is that even if something cannot be described it can be hinted at.

Time and again literature asks the questions "where do we come from?" and "where are we going?" — the very same questions that are being asked day in, day out about Europe. A writer tells stories that open readers' eyes, introducing them to worlds they either have no knowledge of or know about only in clichés. In literature, you are not only yourself, but also the other. It can add to our knowledge of the past and to our understanding of the other, our (new) neighbours. That is why it is so important for new Europeans, migrants from both inside and outside the continent, to pick up their pens as well. This is happening in Dutch literature as it is around the world.

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