

'Let Us No Longer Express Ourselves in a Local Patois'

Gerard Reve and England

164

[N O P M A A S]

Looking back, we cannot imagine Dutch literature of the second half of the twentieth century without great writers such as Willem Frederik Hermans and Gerard Reve. However, when these writers were at the beginning of their careers in around 1950, they found themselves confronted with a literary atmosphere in which they felt anything but comfortable. Reve saw that most novels at the time had some social or ethical purpose and that this was a literature dominated by Christianity. Around the end of 1951, he wrote: '99.8 % of Dutch writers are Christian writers, which is all the more tragic since they do not know that Christianity stinks, that the God of the Christians has been dead for centuries [...]. They are not even remotely aware that churches should be burnt to the ground and the places where they stood rinsed with carbolic acid.' According to Reve, who then had no idea that in 1966 he would be baptised into the Catholic Church, Dutch writers needed to become more heathen, but the problem was that such authors would not find a publisher and would sell few books to a readership that consisted of notaries' wives and elderly nurses.

Reve could speak from personal experience. In 1947, his novel *The Evenings* (De avonden) had caused a scandal among a large section of the literary world. However, another and equally significant group of readers had welcomed the novel with delight. *The Evenings* gave a voice to the cynical, disillusioned young people of the post-World War II period. The book sold well, but in a small language area even this success did not produce sufficient income for a decent living. And Reve wanted to make his living as a prose author, not as a supplier of short articles, reviews and page-fillers for newspapers. He looked with envy at countries with fully developed literatures, such as France, England and America. And it was in this direction that he sought a solution:

'Let us no longer express ourselves in a local patois, but instead publish our writings in, for example, English. The 863 Dutch people who usually buy our work will continue to do so. Perhaps then we can escape from the nurses and, more importantly, people will be able to get to know our work in Paris and New York.

'If we really have something to say, the work will find its own way and not be forever buried in Sunday afternoon social clubs and book groups, as it is here.'

Reve was the only writer to heed his own call. His decision to write solely in English was reinforced by an incident that occurred in Spring 1951. Every year



Gerard Reve in 1954.
Photo by Cas Oorthuys.

the Dutch government provided a number of travel grants to enable writers to expand their mental horizons. Authors competed for these grants by submitting a story anonymously. Reve had sent in an excerpt from *Melancholia*, a novel in progress, about a young man during World War II. During a raid his protagonist hides on top of a wardrobe, where the tension becomes so great that he masturbates. The jury awarded a grant for the excerpt, but the Culture Minister decided to revoke the award, because he believed the government should not reward such immoral literature. A commotion ensued, with a small group of right-minded people supporting Reve, but, significantly, the collection to compensate Reve for his loss of income met with little success.

King James and parliamentary proceedings

Reve had only studied English at grammar school for a couple of years, and he had had to leave that school early because he had failed a re-sit exam in – of all things – English. He sought help from John Vandenberg, a literary translator from English into Dutch. Vandenberg recommended a number of grammar books for Reve to study and worked with him on translations of some excerpts from his work. That summer Reve met the American poet and translator James S. Holmes, with whom he fell violently in love. Holmes, who with his partner Hans van Marle was already working on the translation of Reve's story *The Downfall of the Boslowits Family* (De ondergang van de familie Boslowits), was much more in tune with Reve's work than Vandenberg. Over the next year and a half, Reve and Holmes spent every Friday working on the English translation of *Melancholia*, with Holmes doing his best to limit the sessions to literary work, while Reve was inclined to interrupt them with amorous interludes. James Holmes, who translated works by many Dutch authors into English, sought to maximise his options for placing translations by steering a course midway between British English and American English, in a style that he referred to as 'mid-Atlantic English'.

Reve also tried other approaches during this time. He attempted unsuccessfully to gain admittance to English lectures and examinations at the university. Then he entered into correspondence with American universities that offered courses in creative writing. He even considered emigrating to America. However, these plans foundered on a lack of finance, so he was more or less forced to resort to private study. In his prose he employed a rather formal style of Dutch, including official phraseology and allusions to the classic seventeenth-century Dutch Bible translation. In order to master this same register in English, Reve diligently studied the King James Bible and read the proceedings of the English Parliament. After the failure of his attempts to travel to America, he turned to England for his future. From November 1950 to August 1957 he would no longer be part of Dutch literature, but instead endeavour to transform himself into an English-language author.

It soon became clear to Reve that to achieve a decent grasp of the language he would have to live in England. After a humiliating and demoralising period of going cap-in-hand to shipping companies and the Ministry of Culture, he finally made it to London in 1953 on a grant from the British Council. He was however required to take a course with the British Drama League, intended for directors of amateur theatre companies. Reve took a serious approach both to the course and to his immersion in English. He refused to speak his mother tongue with Dutch participants in the course; even with his then wife, the poet Hanny Michaelis, he spoke and corresponded only in English.

'Sir, I am a Dutchman'

Once in London, he tried to establish contacts with writers, magazine editors and publishers. In a letter to his wife Reve described his first meeting with Angus Wilson, which was the start of a long friendship. He had read Wilson's collection *The Wrong Set* and decided to visit the author. Reve wrote: 'I got to know his address and it was my courageous day.' In the gigantic block of flats

where Wilson lived no one opened the door when Reve rang. An average-looking man came down the corridor and Reve asked him if he was '0-2', the number of the flat. When he said yes, Reve asked if he was Angus Wilson. This too was confirmed. To which Reve responded: 'Sir, I am a Dutchman who started writing English two years ago. I read some of your work. I just came to see you and I don't come for any money, food, or assistance whatsoever.' Wilson was briefly taken aback, but then burst out laughing and invited Reve in. Reve wrote:

'He is 39, but looks 50, is completely grey and washed up. He is the caricatural representant of queerdom, with a ridiculous, very high-pitched voice. Immediately, in spite of my protests, he took me to a restaurant with a married couple that had just arrived. I thought I would have to go to bed with him for my career, but after the couple had gone and we were back in his flat we had very fine and frank talks. The first time, really, I met a queer without that horrible religion about it. At first, especially in the restaurant, he casted glances upon me which I took for proofs of desire. He showed me the luxurious swimming-pool of the flat and asked me if I would like to come and swim there some day. I answered, 'Like the little fish of that great Roman emperor?' He almost choked in laughter and said, "Don't be afraid. I am not going to talk with you about Michelangelo and boys' statues." There was, I must say, an immediate and deep understanding. Everything was like in a dream. I had never thought it possible that people existed with such an enormous, swift wit and deep sarcasm. Meeting him was a revelation. For the first time I felt completely freed out of that horrible circle of queerism. He said he had, for years and years, been running after boys, but now he had got a friend he didn't do it any more. I told him that I was only very slightly and occasionally interested in queerism.'

The next day Wilson was going on holiday for nine days; without hesitation, he offered Reve the use of his flat while he was away. He also promised to read Reve's stories.

Wilson was one of the many friends and acquaintances who would look at Reve's English stories in the years that followed. The problem was that some of these readers were English, and some were American, and they all had their own ideas about what constituted good writing. Reve received lots of advice, much of it contradictory, but he did not lose heart. He submitted the stories to magazines, but there were two problems apart from the language issue. Firstly, his stories usually took place in a typically Dutch setting (memories of his Communist youth in Amsterdam and of his family in Enschede), with which British editors did not feel a great deal of affinity. Secondly, there was the length of the stories. Most literary journals were not looking for stories forty to fifty pages long. His salvation came from another country. By a roundabout route which started with Angus Wilson, Reve came into contact with the American writer Eugene Walter, who was involved with *The Paris Review*. This magazine was founded in 1953; it was based in Paris, but addresses in New York, London and Geneva also adorned its stationery. It featured mainly creative work: English-language stories and poems and also in-depth interviews with authors. Over the years *The Paris Review* published many authors who were later to become world famous, from Philip Roth, William Styron and Jack Kerouac to Italo Calvino and V.S. Naipaul. Walter was enthusiastic about Reve's work and showed his story 'The Acrobat' to the editors. Editor-in-chief and financier George Plimpton liked it. 'The Acrobat', inspired by a short stay in Vienna, was published as the opening story in the fifth issue of *The Paris Review*, in Spring 1954. Plimpton announced

that its thirty pages made it the longest story they had ever published and that he found it a remarkable achievement for a first attempt in English. The same issue of *The Paris Review* included a contribution from Samuel Beckett and an interview with William Styron. Ten years later one of the magazine's editors stated that Reve's stories had come at the right moment for the editorial team; these stories were exactly what they were looking for at the time.

Three stories by Reve appeared in *The Paris Review* in the space of three years, which was a success, but his efforts to find an English publisher for a collected version of them was unsuccessful. Eventually the Dutch publisher G.A. van Oorschot decided to publish *The Acrobat and Other Stories* in English,

Gerard Reve in his secret
country house in France,
Drôme, 18 May 1998.
Photo by Klaas Koppe.



initially in the hope of finding an English co-publisher. This too was unsuccessful. The book, published in 1956, attracted hardly any attention in England. Out of desperation, a year later Reve decided to start writing in Dutch once again. The novel *In God We Trust* (Dutch title: *De drie soldaten*), which he wrote simultaneously in a Dutch and an English version, was never completed.

'Something human and warm-hearted'

From the early 1960s Reve's star rose rapidly in the Dutch literary firmament, but this did not result in greater fame abroad. He continued to look longingly at the English-speaking world and the massive sales that could be achieved there. He reacted with growing mistrust and anger to experts from universities and embassies, who were often of the opinion that his work was in fact untranslatable. All told, over the years only one novel by Reve has appeared in English translation: *Parents Worry* in 1990. In 1993, Richard Huijing, who translated this work, also edited the *Daedalus Book of Dutch Fantasy* and included Reve's 1949 novella *Werther Nieland* in this collection.

Reve retained his affection for England and its inhabitants. He visited the country almost every year and had a number of good friends there, including the Renaissance specialist Perkin Walker. In 1980 he even bought a house in Harwich. Inspired by his stay there, he revived his plan to write a new book in English. The working title of the book was *Guilty But Insane*. The main character was the young policeman Andy Moonley, who under the influence of the Moon Goddess would commit all manner of perversions. The action was set in Reve's house in Harwich and on the beach there. At the end of 1981, however, with over one hundred pages in manuscript, he abandoned the project. Reve realised that his English was not 'rich' enough. He felt that the English language was incomparable in its richness, precision and tension, but he himself had not been granted the ability to express his vision satisfactorily in it.

From the mid-1970s on Reve lived mostly outside the Netherlands, in France and Belgium. He never felt completely at ease anywhere and on reflection he could find fault with every country. However, the English still came out ahead of other nationalities: 'The French bourgeoisie is in general the worst kind of scum on God's earth. The Frenchman is moreover entirely a herd animal, one of the masses, with no ideas or world view of his own. Among the English you can find many people who have something human and warm-hearted about them. ■

Translated by Laura Watkinson

FURTHER READING

Further details about Gerard Reve's relationship with England can be found in NOP MAAS, *Gerard Reve. Kroniek van een schuldig leven*. Amsterdam, Uitgeverij G.A. van Oorschot. Part 1, 'De vroege jaren 1923–1962', published in 2009; part 2, 'De "rampjaren" 1962–1975' published in 2010. Part 3, 'De late jaren 1975–2006' will probably be published at the end of 2011.