

The

Heart that Skips a Beat

Charlotte Mutsaers' Poetic Prose

In Russian folk music 'skachok' is a term used to describe an 'unexpected and capricious leap from major to minor'. The definition comes from the introductory chapter of Charlotte Mutsaers' *The Marchioness* (De markiezin, 1988), a book constructed as a dialogue between two highly imaginative women friends, which is just as hard to categorise as her other books: prose it is, most certainly, but a very compact, poetic kind of prose, without a clear story line, but also full of 'unexpected and capricious' transitions. 'Skachok' denotes a formal principle which, in Mutsaers' view, is based on 'how life is lived': 'Someone calls you his best friend and then sticks a fork in your heart as if it is a tasty morsel' is followed by another three examples because Mutsaers does not explain 'how life is lived', she gives examples instead, she likes to catalogue and make lists, and they cut to the quick. They deal with betrayal and deceit, sudden catastrophes, the lightning that strikes a rose picked for 'your nearest and dearest' 'from your devoted hand'. An anonymous Russian epigram which serves as a motto for this chapter runs: 'Tanya picked blackberries in the wood. / A land-mine there did her no good - / The dream vision still remains with me: / Two pale blue eyes high in a tree.'

Charlotte Mutsaers is not one of those writers whose goal is a revolutionary new form at all costs, nor is her aim that of Italo Calvino, to write a totally different book that bears no relation to previous books each time. On the contrary, each new book lends more structure to her work and develops her subject matter further. The 'skachok' principle is also behind *Rachel's Skirt* (Rachels rokje, 1994), Mutsaers' longest and most ambitious book so far.

The term is not only the title of the chapter connecting the two parts of the book, from literally the very first line it is the guiding principle behind the impassioned, often also aggressively defensive tone and the jumpy, fragmentary, high-contrast form of the book. The first line, taken from the poem 'Youth' by Marina Tsvetaeva reads: 'Soon sorceress and no longer swallow!' When at the end of *Rachel's Skirt* the main character, Rachel Stottermaus (an anagram for Charlotte Mutsaers), looks into a mirror in a lift she does indeed see herself momentarily as a sorceress. The three hun-

Charlotte Mutsaers, *If All Ravens Were Masters and All Foxes Were Dogs, All Cheeses Would Fly in the Right Mouths* (© Charlotte Mutsaers).



dred pages in between offer an intriguing demonstration of 'skachok': a series of violent attacks on her youth which she parries passionately and with all her might. What she is actually undertaking is a *Defence of Poetry* in practice, which seems to me to be the motive behind all her work.

Mutsaers was born in Utrecht in 1942, and before she published her first book in 1983 she had already gained a reputation in the visual arts. She painted and drew, designed postage stamps and book jackets, and illustrated books by others. She also taught painting for over ten years at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam. In some of her early publications: *The Circus of the Spirit* (Het circus van de geest, 1983), *Mr Donselaer Seeks a Wife* (Mijnheer Donselaer zoekt een vrouw, 1986), *Cock-crow* (Hane-geschrei, 1989) illustration and hand-written text carry the same weight, as if she is examining the possibilities of a synthesis of the two disciplines. *Jugged Hare* (Hazepeper, 1985) may perhaps be called her first real literary work, even if it is still richly illustrated, this time also by others.

Structured chaos

At the end of the eighties she gave up painting, not from any lack of success but because she wanted to devote herself entirely to her writing. She had in the meantime discovered that 'by means of shifts in time, smells, feelings, puzzles and metaphor' language offered possibilities that 'no brush or draughtsman's pen' could achieve. She still, however, writes essays about the visual arts, about artists such as Bonnard, the only painter who has reduced her to tears.

Since the publication of *The Marchioness*, the collection of essays *Cherry Blood* (Kersebloed, 1990) and *Rachel's Skirt* her quirky talent has been generally recognised. The isolated position of *Rachel's Skirt* in particular in the landscape of Dutch literature may be illustrated by a critic writing in *Die Zeit* on the publication of the German translation. Compared with the in-

tense and sparkling prose in *Rachel's Skirt*, she found previous German translations of Dutch novels – by Springer and Haasse, 't Hart and De Winter, and even by big names like Mulisch and Nootboom – ‘innocuous’ and ‘unadventurous’: ‘*For here, at last, the narration has been aroused, disturbed, dislocated. A childlike eye leads into the element of literary fantasy itself, into structured chaos, into light-hearted mystery, into deadly serious play.*’

There is nothing pamphleteering about Mutsaers’ defence of the stormy, unpolished world of the child, it is a question of style and composition. You recognise her work immediately by the lively colloquial language, the imperious way she addresses the reader, the rhetorical questions, the mysterious images, the unexpected turns of phrase. Hesitations, qualifications, ambiguities, everything the adult brain brings to bear to avoid huge collisions and to be accommodating is foreign to Mutsaers. She is uncompromising, it is always this or that, all or nothing. She is in pursuit of ‘*the finest, the most intense, the most beautiful, and the best*’, and will not settle for less.

‘*If someone arrives a few minutes too late for an appointment,*’ Rachel Stottermaus says, ‘*I drop them.*’ Or: ‘*If a Queen has thick legs, she’s not a Queen for me.*’ Or: ‘*If there is not a single chanterelle in the mushroom harvest, you might as well throw the rest away.*’ And when, after a long list of things that have been sacrificed to progress, she is asked whether there isn’t anything that is an improvement, she at first says stubbornly: ‘*No, absolutely nothing. Everything has been spoilt or plundered, including the sea, the air, the mountains and the forests.*’ Then, after some insistence, she thinks of ‘*two assets of our age*’ namely ‘*fake fur and the transplantable Christmas tree.*’

Charlotte Mutsaers (1942-).



Steel plate

This much will be clear, Mutsaers is often irresistibly funny. But it would be wrong to conclude from these playful and provocative subtleties that Mutsaers’ work lacks subtlety. The opposite is true: her prose is a continual demonstration of eccentric erudition, refinement and subtlety. She is a stylist *pur sang* who conceals the plot of her stories in an intricate pattern of ambiguities, allusions and references. When Rachel says she is afraid of revealing herself (she scarcely dares to go to the sauna and believes that nude beaches should be against the law), it says something about Mutsaers too.

The sensible writer, she says in one of the essays in *Cherry Blood*, encloses his intentions in steel plate; he does not parade his ‘*secret feelings*’. But: ‘*Not everyone likes steel plate. That doesn’t matter, this writer doesn’t like everyone. He is aiming only at safebreakers, and if he is doing his utmost to safeguard his words, he can demand something of the reader also.*’

A striking example of such a hidden meaning is the chapter (or ‘pleat’ as it is called) in *Rachel's Skirt* where Frau Bormann and her two children pay a visit to Himmler’s house, although he himself has just left ‘*for work*’. The chapter is like a bolt from the blue, up until now there has been no mention of war or Nazis; and of course Mutsaers explains nothing. So at first many readers and critics did not know what to make of this chapter. But on closer consideration numerous details show that it draws a parallel with one of the

principal themes of the book: the primacy of love above politics.

One word, used some forty pages earlier, might have made the Dutch reader suspicious. The last word of Rachel's father's will is '*houzee*' and that is one of the very few indications that he was a collaborator during the war. ('*Houzee*' was a National-Socialist salute in the Second World War). This is also the reason why one Christmas Eve, when Rachel is ten and looking forward expectantly to the presents she will get, he is murdered, apparently with the approval of '*the public*', for '*he was after all a Stottermaus (Stuttermouse) and their squeak is no good*'. For Rachel, who loved her father dearly, right and wrong have been turned upside down since that day. '*That love is not held to be anywhere near as important as politics*' she calls '*the miserable failure of our civilisation*'. She believes it is far worse '*to err in love*' than to err in politics, and here the reader may think of Rachel's mother, or of '*the mother*' in general, as she is continually called in *The Marchioness*, for appreciation and deprecation, sympathies and antipathies are not subject to change in Mutsaers' work.

But '*the public*' does not agree. In the eyes of others '*the good old days*' later suddenly turn out to have been '*the bad old days of the new order*'! Those others connect the original innocent happiness of a child with matters that the child knew nothing of and thus make that happiness retrospectively suspect. Stottermaus / Mutsaers refuses to accept this: she chooses the child's perception, total abandon, enthusiasm and exhilaration, however '*irrational*' and '*wrong*' this may seem in the eyes of others.

'A sparrow's beak-full'

'Chooses' is actually not the right word: she has no choice. There is in Mutsaers' aristocratically tinted universe a tragic, existential inevitability that is incompatible with notions such as politics, freedom, autonomy. After the death of her father Rachel is robbed of all enthusiasm for three years; then, nearly thirteen, she is struck as if by lightning – here too nothing she can do about it, the lightning has chosen her – when her teacher Distelvink enters the classroom. It is of course inappropriate and unwise, this burning passion (obviously her love is '*impossible*'), but she rejects that sort of rational consideration out of hand. This is a matter of high voltage and '*danger de mort*', not of anything so childish as '*butterflies in her stomach*'. In contrast to feminism and '*today's liberated woman*', Mutsaers unashamedly defends '*irrational fidelity*', even '*dog-like devotion*' – and along with that the all-consuming ecstasy. When Rachel's mother ventures to dismiss her lovesickness as calf-love, Rachel wants '*to follow her father. To die.*' The chapter about the visit of the Bormann family to Himmler's house comes directly after this and it ends with the statement that almost forty years had passed before Martin Bormann's son dared to say in public for the first time that he had loved his father, to the displeasure and annoyance of those present.

Mutsaers' books have little in common with the realistic tradition of the long, comprehensive story. She feels herself akin to and has written brilliantly about Jules Renard (whose *Poil de carotte* must have provoked a shock of recognition) Kafka, Francis Ponge, Henri Michaux, Julio Cortázar,

Charlotte Mutsaers, *Making Music Is Facing the Music*
(© Charlotte Mutsaers).



Charlotte Mutsaers, *Beauty & the Beast* (© Charlotte Mutsaers).



Daniil Charms, Maurice Gilliams, Jan Hanlo and Dora Carrington. But snatches of doggerel or nursery rhymes are just as at home in her work as quotations from the avant-garde. Mutsaers can use everything, preferably what is most trivial, most unpopular, precisely because she has an outspoken aversion to the grand – and hence excluding – gesture. In her work the whole is born of the parts: ‘I’ll stand up for the bits, the slivers, the splinters, the crumbs, the chips,’ not forgetting ‘the slices, the cuts, the chunks, the words, the letters! A sparrow’s beak-full is worth no less than New York.’

Even so, the safe-cracking reader will discover that all the bits and pieces hang together miraculously. Mutsaers fills them with unsuspected meanings with the same talent for concrete magic that Rachel displays when she explores her neighbourhood in search of hidden signs of the man she is so in love with. He accuses her of ‘delusions of love’ and ‘ridiculous female logic’ when she interprets a piece of plaid blanket fluttering from his car as a protestation of love for her. But Stottermaus / Mutsaers won’t hear of that. She says, life may be mysterious but it is by no means chaos. ‘What makes life so incomprehensible is that everything is connected. The surprising, diabolical, ineluctable cohesion of the orbiting world and everything in it and on it, and I mean “everything”: from a feather to a screw, from a Christmas wreath to a funeral wreath.’ Yet she knows all too well that this magical cohesion simply does not exist for someone who is level-headed or only slightly in love (an impossibility for her): ‘I realise that my irregular heartbeat, my own galloping brain, are what perceive the cohesion, but however much you try to twist things, “perceiving” is still not the same as “imagining”.’

In that perception there is something inevitable and something in-

eluctable, an inability to do otherwise, which restricts the freedom of art in a paradoxical way. In *The Marchioness* Mutsaers writes about the ‘*NO MATTER HOW*’ of an art for art’s sake, in other words an art such as hers, that vigorously denies both any impression of lacking commitment and of artistic heteronomy. The passage concludes thus: ‘*So if Michelangelo had lived for example on Spitsbergen he’d have made the whole shebang of ice, because he would not have been able to stop himself, and then David would have melted long ago. But fortunately you rarely run into Italians at the North Pole, as they are not keen on the climate, so Michelangelo was thank God obliged to work in marble and that has survived, so that we can still look at it, but one thing is certain: if he had been at the North Pole and with precisely the same attitude, he would have made everything of ice and he would have got the same kick out of it, despite the ice cold puddle of water into which his entire oeuvre would finally have been transformed.*’

CYRILLE OFFERMANS

Translated by Elizabeth Mollison.

Extract from *Rachel's Skirt*

by Charlotte Mutsaers

Pleat Number One

in which skirts and poles turn up, a tail is chopped off just as easily as a branch and it becomes clear that the misdeeds of the father are not on par with those of the mother

Clothes make the man.

And the skirt, the skirt, the fall of the pleats makes the woman.

Your father teaches you the song of the clothes.

But your mother teaches you the song of the skirt.

Some mothers, to revenge the ruination of their tummy, teach you a song that is false. False, because it lumbars you with a sense of loss. At first you don't tumble to it. Your brains are still far too small and the tune sounds so pretty. With your shrill, cocksure child's voice you keep on singing at it happily for years.

Until the day you receive an unmistakable sign.

Then you draw your conclusions. Melody and text, you want to shed them instantly. But that's not on, it is not like a snake's skin! They have attached themselves to you like a barnacle. You are in a stranglehold forever. There is no way out of it. And you shouldn't be surprised if you are still humming that selfsame song on your deathbed. That happens. Especially if there is no longer anyone lying snoring against your back.

Support from a sense of loss, it may sound crazy but in cases like this it can happen. Ask any bedroom suite at any auction. The wind is not the only one to tell stories.

‘Come and sit on my lap, precious, and I'll do your hair and teach you a song.’

Don't let anyone ever think that Rachel's mother does not mean well by her child. She is much too much of a mother for that. Moreover a woman to the core. And what's more, a woman to the core. She really did want her heart-jerker. Even so, a kid can sometimes give you the pip. Certainly if it is not as cute and cuddly as it might be, and particularly if you are unable to understand it. On top of that, your best years can suddenly have passed. And three guesses, who did that, whose fault that is. Wouldn't you like to... Wouldn't you like to pull out every hair on their beautiful young heads? And what is so infuriating about this hair is that it spreads such a provocative red glow, whereas you, a mature woman who is still quite a looker, are told that you are decked out like a spotted dog. To be honest: it fags you out. Why on earth should you raise your little girl, doll her up and fit her out for kisses which you would rather see landing on your own mouth. Is not that the ultimate in feminine self-effacement and is there no way of offsetting a thing or two and getting one's own back in advance.

These thoughts and many more flash incessantly through the brains beneath Mother's water-wave. And this is why Rachel's hotly envied, slender body is ordered for the umpteenth time to seat itself on the drab checks of the Gor-ray skirt.

'Do come and sit on my lap, precious. I said I was going to do your hair, and then teach you a song.'

Rachel looks up crossly from her animal-colouring book, raises herself from her chair and manages despite her meagre length to look down on her mother. But come she does. Hello, here I am. In a smarmy little voice that is quite uncalled for. Children are sometimes just like superglue. What they would like best would be to stick themselves to you forevermore. But as a mother you must not give them the chance to do that. The world is gooey and gluey enough, and what good does it do you. Fortunately Rachel knows how to behave. Just look at her, patience on a monument. The unruly head of hair is parted down the middle with a bone comb and reduced to two too tightly braided plaits with rubber bands wound around the tips. It hurts. Of course it does, says Mother, no pleasure without pain. And for someone who never will be beautiful the price is double. There's no such thing as a free lunch. You have to pay for everything in life. Sometimes even with your life. That's logical, so absolutely super-logical that little Rachel will now also be paid, because she sat so very still.

Not with money, the pottery piggy is fat enough by now, but with a song for life.

Rachel, who has now been set down on the floor again – much to her relief as nothing but strange vapours rise from mother's lap and a sensitive child's thigh cannot endure a suspender button for very long – opens her mouth at the prospect. Excellent, now the song can fly in like a roasted bird. Without her realising that that bird was the spitting image of the indigestible ortolan that Poe put before the Duc D'Omelette. ('At this moment the door gently opens to the sound of soft music, and lo! the most delicate of birds is before the most enamored of men! But what inexpressible dismay now overshadows the countenance of the Duc? – *"Horreur! – chien! – Baptiste! – l'oiseau, ah, bon Dieu! Cet oiseau modeste que tu as déshabillé de ses plumes, et que tu as servi sans papier!"* It is superfluous to say more: – the Duc expired in a paroxysm of disgust.')

At that moment the mother's mouth opens softly and Rachel learns what it means to get up to monkey tricks.

A monkey sat on a little pole
Behind mother's kitchen door;
He wore a skirt with a little hole –
He pushed his tail through with his paw.

After hearing it twice Rachel knows both words and tune by heart. Pure empathy!

By nature monkeys belong on rocks or in trees. But sometimes a hand reaches out and brutally snatches one away: the hand of the yearning mother beast. She's just dying for a cute little baby monkey all to herself. To cuddle and play with and dress up in pretty clothes. Unfortunately, they remain creatures of the wild. Like father, like son. Nothing to do about it. Absolutely no way of bashing it out of them. That is a bit distressing for someone who would love to be wild herself and with that end in view sprinkles herself daily with Farouche. Without the desired result. And giving your all with the cream of your maternal instinct and getting stink all in return.

Stink, you can say that again, for under the delicately embroidered monkey skirt hides the wild monkey tail. The way it can thrash about! It lashes continually from left to right and flicks up straight. That most of all. Sometimes it seems as if all wildness has been squeezed into that one tail. Against her. So if that tail does not soon come to rest, not even after a few smart blows, then it is asking for it! And she has the answer. Off with it. Bastacanasta!

On hearing this magic word Rachel dives under the divan in a flash.

It doesn't help any more. The scissors already have her green skirt in their grasp and they deftly cut a hole in it. The wagtail is pulled out through the hole like a live eel. It is still carrying on like a maniac, to be sure, but there is at least now a handle to the child, handy when it comes to lifting. After that it only has to be glued to a stick and *kaltgestellt* in the dark shadow behind the kitchen door. And you, Pontia Pilata, you keep your hands nice and clean.

Then she put her hands on her hips and gave the order.

The obedient door did not hesitate a second and swung open with a bang.

What a stroke of luck that the tail was just on the pivot.

What a fluke that there was so little fat on it.

It's harder to pinch off a finger in a door.

Hi! Hi! Now the tail is on the lino in the passage.

Ha! Ha! The crisp skirt is full of blood.

But at least your hair is in shape. Until Christmas in a few years time for sure. Unless a storm breaks out in the meanwhile.

From *Rachel's Skirt* (Rachels Rokje. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1994, pp. 17-21)

Translated by Elizabeth Mollison.