

A Country of Bores and Windbags

The Netherlands Seen Through the Lens of *Max Havelaar* and *Turkish Delight*

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[C Y R I L L E O F F E R M A N S]

During the last years of his life Jan Wolkers (1925-2007) resembled nothing as much as a friendly grandfather. With his unstoppable delight in story-telling, his somewhat high-pitched, drawling voice and singsong diction, he was a welcome guest on just about every television show. Apart from his eternal bright red or blue t-shirts with the logos of American universities, there was little to remind one of the one-time provocative scourge of the bourgeoisie. It is true, he could still come out unexpectedly with some candid erotic tomfoolery, but more often than not this now concerned the slugs and froghoppers in his overgrown garden among the dunes of Texel. Only rarely would he still get a rise out of small-town churchgoers. Many young people would not even have known that this man was first and foremost a writer and an artist.

Yet it was Wolkers probably more than anyone else who fixed the image of the Dutch sixties (should one really add: of the twentieth century?), or rather the image that we, the Dutch, love to have of ourselves and which also exists in many foreign countries, especially in America. To many it is a horrifying image, but we are proud of it. Or rather, we *were*. And even at that time, this united front was actually a myth. Now it has definitively been shattered and many no longer wish to be reminded of their former enthusiasm. During the past decade – with the attack on the Twin Towers as the obvious turning point – the sixties have become more and more discredited, even though at the same time the grumbling, dissatisfied populace is increasingly showing an alarming contempt for authority, that has its roots in precisely that period.

The Netherlands was a permissive country. Here all God's prohibitions were trampled underfoot. Even God Himself was made fun of. Only in the Bible Belt – a ribbon of Dutch Reformed villages diagonally connecting the islands of Zeeland with North-Eastern Groningen – did His Word remain sacrosanct. In the eyes of God-fearing America, and not only there, Amsterdam was the Sodom of our time. Promiscuity was the rule there, abortion and euthanasia were generally accepted, prostitutes and heroin were for sale on every street corner, while the police just stood there and looked the other way by order of the authorities.

This image was grossly exaggerated, but not entirely untrue. It brought hordes of curious tourists to the capital, and for that reason alone the administration and other interested parties would have been little inclined to correct it.



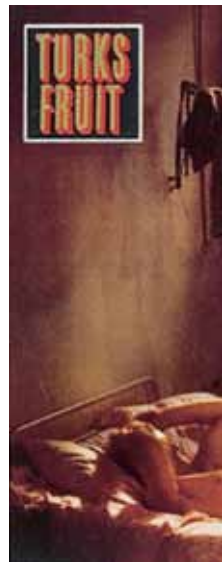
Shameless and contagiously physical

Wolkers was already a well-established author when in November 1969 he published *Turkish Delight* (Turks fruit). Trained and working as a sculptor, his first publication had been the collection of short stories *Serpentina's Petticoat*, after which more short story collections, novels and a play followed in quick succession. His work immediately attracted attention, also and especially among literary critics, and immediately sparked controversy and outrage. He showed himself to be a stylist of great expressiveness, with an original and sharp eye for detail and a leaning towards morbidity. But also, to put it mildly, with little respect for the force of tradition.

In his stories from the early 1960s, which are generally – and rightly – regarded as his best, he subtly pictures the taboos, the shortsightedness and the fears of an orthodox Christian boyhood in pre-war Oegstgeest and, even more,

Jan Wolkers and his wife
Karina. Photo by Stephan
Vanfleteren.

Turkish Delight (1973).
Film by Paul Verhoeven with
Monique van de Ven and
Rutger Hauer.



the sensation of the bound-breaking and sometimes sneaky game played with it. Against the crushing, life-denying sombreness of an orthodox Christian background, his work shows the development of a child with a feeling for language, a mocking and sharply observing child, the like of which Dutch literature hadn't known before.

Wolkers' prose, also in spoken form, testifies to an original, shameless and contagious physical presence, an indomitable, earthly primal force that brutally silences the depressing spirit of lowland Calvinism that is forever saying no. Wolkers is the incarnation of the rejection of all authority, not so much for political reasons, although that too plays a role, but mainly because of an unbridled and unambiguous love of life, including all its dark and ominous aspects. *Turkish Delight*, his ninth novel, is the jewel in the crown of that liberating work, even though it is far from being the highpoint of his literary oeuvre.

Turkish Delight is a love story. Or rather, a novel about a turbulent love affair that is unilaterally brought to an end. The girl, the young, voluptuous Olga, takes up with someone else; the man she has dumped, consumed with impotent rage, is still obsessed with her even when, a few years later, she wastes away before his eyes as a result of a brain tumour. These may seem like the ingredients of a soap opera, a tried and tested recipe, but Wolkers turns them into much more.

The story is told by the (nameless) man, retrospectively and in a raw and hurried style, for he has landed in 'quite a mess' after Olga's departure. This does not lead to melancholy memories of moonlit nights, nor to a well-considered, introspective search for the reasons for their parting; this book's power lies precisely in the primarily physical, and therefore vehement, reactions of the narrator.

Unable to distance himself, the man is driven by an almost uncontrollable, regularly exploding mixture of rage, frustration and vindictiveness. The book may be divided into chapters, but these follow, jerkily, the emotions of the narrator rather than any chronological sequence. Likewise there is no division in paragraphs, with reason, for there is no quiet and space in the man's head



for any detailed descriptions, dialogues or meditations – as if in delirium he rushes, pursuing associations, through the archive of his anguished memories.

In doing so he displays an unprecedented spontaneous inventiveness as regards pejoratives, invectives and gutter language. The course language is certainly one of the reasons why the book became so popular. Consistently and as a matter of course the narrator uses street jargon; he avoids discreet alternatives with verve and abhors undergraduate vocabulary. This wasn't exactly unique; *Turkish Delight* was not the first book in modern Dutch literature with so much undisguised, not to say exhibitionist and voluptuous sex in it. That honour goes to the 'runaway bestseller' *I Jan Cremer* (Ik Jan Cremer, part 1, 1964). But in that book the rough language is used to support the tall stories of a working-class boy with a taste for provocation – later on the term 'picaresque novel' came into fashion for stories like this. Wolkers too was working-class, his father had a run-down grocery store, but he undoubtedly had more talent and ambition than Cremer. *Turkish Delight* was also a great success commercially. Reprint followed reprint at breathtaking speed: in four years three hundred thousand copies of the book were sold. The sales were given a new boost in 1973, when the film based on the book, directed by Paul Verhoeven, was released. The film's success was proportionally if possible even greater. Three and a half million people bought tickets to see it, a multiple of all earlier and later box office hits.

On an artistic level, too, the film was a great success. Film buffs see *Turkish Delight* as the beginning of modern Dutch cinema; everything before it is regarded as prehistory, while all later work was and still is measured against Verhoeven's film. Apart from Wolkers' taboo-shattering story this is due to the beautiful cinematography, especially during the sex scenes (the cinematographer fell madly in love with the young actress Monique van de Ven, who right at the beginning of her career was playing the role of her life) and the 'American' style of shooting and editing, based on the new television conventions. Verhoeven told the story in the same rushed tempo as Wolkers, with the then unheard-of average of six seconds per shot.

'Every day a party'?

It's impossible to say how far *Turkish Delight* was responsible for the cultural upheaval that Holland experienced around that time. What is certain, though, is that both book and film were perfect expressions of that upheaval. Europe was, in Nietzsche's eyes, 'an ascetic star' and The Netherlands, until the beginning of the sixties, were no exception. But then, within a very short time, all caution was thrown to the winds, as if people had suddenly and painfully realized that all those self-imposed restrictions and standards no longer served any reasonable purpose. Suddenly, to use a title by Remco Campert, it was 'every day a party'.

The Netherlands – or at least an urban, intellectual vanguard in the Netherlands – was transformed into a hedonistic paradise. Everything was allowed. And what wasn't allowed, was tolerated. An unprecedented wave of informality blurred the traditional divisions and undermined hierarchies of every kind. The difference between 'u' en 'jij', the polite and familiar forms of address, disappeared, and with it the invulnerability of the authorities that was largely based on this division. Thresholds were abolished, and with them the inaccessibility of persons and institutions.

But this society without thresholds also fostered a catastrophic egalitarianism. Along with each hierarchy the sensitivity to contextual differences in attitude, behaviour and language also disappeared, even the very notion of standards and differences in quality as such. That thus the seeds were sown for an anti-intellectualism that at first proliferated mainly underground but would soon manifest itself in all its brutality, seemed to worry hardly anyone. For the time being only the liberating aspect of the change was being celebrated.

Seen from a broader historical perspective, though, this development may seem surprising. For hadn't the Netherlands always been an egalitarian society, flat and boring and everywhere the same, just like its reclaimed land? Hadn't the Netherlands been a country in which for centuries meritocratic principles had won out over class privilege? The country in which it was not the irresponsible aristocracy but a proud bourgeoisie – see our seventeenth century art, headed by Rembrandt and Frans Hals – that called the shots? A country in which openness went so far that, much to the astonishment of foreign visitors, people didn't even deem it necessary to screen their private life from the curious glances of passers-by with curtains?

All this is certainly true, but at the same time it is only a part of the truth. For the Netherlands was not just a proud and self-confident bourgeois country; during large periods of history it was also and especially a parody of itself: a country of small-minded, stingy money-grubbers (something that already struck foreigners during the glory days of our history), timid moralists, hypocritical self-appointed moral censors, unimaginative, joyless drudges, ascetics who despised all pleasure from fear of the wrath of God – in short, the types our literature teems with..

In *Turkish Delight* we have Olga's parents, her sad-sack, hen-pecked father and 'that lousy sly bitch', also described as 'that pale, sickly witch of a mother of hers'. But we should especially consider a book that is twenty years older, the novel *The Evenings* (De avond, 1949) by Gerard Reve, which paints an incomparable picture of the darkest and most depressing narrow-mindedness of the post-war period, the same narrow parochialism savaged by Wolkers and many of his generation.





It should be added that *The Evenings* is typically Dutch in a more exclusive way than *Turkish Delight*. Reve's book, which in the Netherlands is generally more highly esteemed than Wolkers', may have been a cult book for decades in our country, but even for Flemings it is virtually incomprehensible. That, unlike *Turkish Delight*, it has been little translated is therefore not surprising. It can hardly have contributed anything to the image that foreigners have of our country.

Multatuli, Amsterdam.

The ultimate petty bourgeois

The literary prototype of the Dutch bourgeois, however, comes from a much earlier time. It dates from the nineteenth century: a personage named Bata-vus Droogstoppel. Until recently nearly every Dutch person with a secondary school education could add to the name: 'I am a coffee broker, and I live at No. 37 Lauriergracht'. Droogstoppel – as one of the narrators of *Max Havelaar* (1860), Multatuli's phenomenal novel – was so universally known that his name became generic and needed no explanation.

Van Dale's Comprehensive Dictionary of the Dutch Language still gives a euphemistic definition: a 'boring, tiresome person', or 'someone without higher aspirations or idealistic tendency, a dry, prosaic person'. But when we consider who gave him his name, this is much too positive. Droogstoppel – which means 'Dry stubble' – is the ultimate petty bourgeois. He is narrow-minded, egocentric, sexist, and above all a hypocrite and a liar, as gradually becomes apparent to the reader. For Multatuli has Droogstoppel introduce himself, right at the beginning of the book, and he does this with total immodesty. He boasts of his healthy outlook and his principled love of truth, in which he makes an exception only for 'Holy Scripture'. But he soon gets entangled in his contradictions and thus shows himself to be a liar. This boastful self-portrait is at the same time a very clever satirical portrait of a braggart.

Robert Voûte, coffee broker
(1810-1871), model for
Droogstoppel/Drystubble.



*Hidden bevel van een' Zoon J. M. H. Buys, Echtgenoot
van
R. Voûte.
Amsterdam, 1 Sept. 1842.
Eenige Kennisgeving.*

For his thoroughly corrupt love of truth Droogstoppel relies on his ideological spokesman, the Reverend Wawelaar, whose name probably did not become a prototype in Dutch because it was already based on an existing verb, 'wauwelen', to blather or drivel. But the name also has an echo of Havelaar, his opposite in matters of mentality and truth.

In his sermon about 'the love of God apparent in His wrath towards unbelievers' Wawelaar does not present colonial policy in the Dutch East Indies as the institutionalised trampling on human rights, maltreatment and exploitation, as Havelaar does, but as altruistic beneficence towards the native population. Holland has been chosen to bring those wretched 'Javanese and other heathens'



Multatuli.

‘civilisation, religion and Christianity’ and thus save them from eternal damnation. Consequently it is our Christian duty – and this explains the enthusiasm of Droogstoppel, coffee broker and thus dependent for his income on colonial profits – ‘to require that the Javanese shall be brought to God through his *labour*.’

Among lovers and scholars of literature *Max Havelaar* is considered to be an absolute masterpiece, even the most important book in the history of Dutch literature. This is true for purely literary reasons, as far as those exist, although Multatuli certainly wasn’t interested in literary praise – as regards literature and especially poetry, he wasn’t without his Droogstoppel-like traits – what counted for him was the political effect of his work.

But with its repeated changes of perspective and register, its countless references to literature and current events, its complex play with reality and fiction, it is also a distinctly difficult book, too difficult for many readers in 1860 and much too difficult for the barely cultured or completely uncultured reader of today. Until a few decades ago the book was on the reading list of every secondary school student; in today’s education literature starts, if it starts at all, at best with *Turkish Delight*.

In those circumstances the question of the Dutch self-image in *Max Havelaar* becomes purely hypothetical, even though the rather unflattering picture Multatuli paints of his fellow Dutchmen has lost hardly any of its truth

and sharpness. It's not hard to recognise the spiritual heirs of this ultra-Dutch duo of Droogstoppel and Wawelaar, the merchant and the minister, in the contemporary public and not-so-public life of the Netherlands. The hypocrisy, the self-importance, the lack of imagination, the self-interest, hidden by idealistic talk, the paradoxical combination of pedantry and lack of backbone, all those traits, denounced by Multatuli, seem more than ever to characterise the average Dutchman of today. And what is worse: people who do not resemble this average Dutchman, people like the brave, upright civil servant Max Havelaar and his alter ego, the penniless non-conformist writer Sjaalman, are becoming harder and harder to find. Unconventional behaviour is not appreciated, willfulness is discouraged.

Of course Holland is still a superbly organised and equipped country; according to *Newsweek* (August 16, 2010) it is the eighth most pleasant country to live in – captured Somali pirates recently declared happily that their lives had never been as good as in their Dutch prison and that they wished they could stay there for the rest of their lives. Even in times of economic crisis the standard of living is still high and unemployment low. Social contrasts are a lot less harrowing here than in almost any other country and in the cities there are still large enclaves of enlightened sophistication where the old Dutch democratic traditions are cultivated.

But since 2001 increasing strain and hardening of attitudes can clearly be felt in broad sections of the population. Foreigners are surprised at how unrecognisable the Netherlands has become in such a short time, how fearful, small-minded, rude and introverted the once so open, progressive, tolerant and freedom-loving public atmosphere has become. But perhaps this surprise is indicative of a certain historical shortsightedness – the influential journalist, columnist and historian Jan Blokker (1927-2010) was convinced of it – perhaps the sixties were only an intermezzo, an oasis of frivolity in an endless desert of joyless conformity. In his own time Multatuli didn't exactly have a lot of support either.

That rapacious sweaty animal

To prevent possible misunderstandings: Jan Wolkers is certainly not to blame for this existential change in the climate. He may have garnered the sympathy of a largish television audience during the last years of his life, but in no way did he ever conform to the new morality, the revival of the 'standards and values' of the Droogstoppels and Wawelaars.

Even when his hair was thinning, he still provided the convincing proof that one could brilliantly withstand daily indoctrination with the Holy Book. He was still the man who had resolutely turned his fascination with the biblical miracles of his childhood into an uncensored fascination with the wonders of life. He would still, when the spirit moved him, deliver a baroque hymn to the magnificent buttocks of his wife Karina, or fulminate in no less impressive imagery against those rogues of politicians, especially the ones with a Christian background, who almost by definition were screwing everyone to their own advantage.

Swipes of this kind are also regularly found in Wolkers' books, although he lacked the messianic drive of Multatuli. Still, there is one book that does seem to have been written in the dark shadow of *Max Havelaar: The Dodo* (De walgvo-

gel), his most substantial novel, from 1974. Its subject is the 'police actions' as the war against the Indonesian anti-colonial independence struggle in the late 1940s is still euphemistically referred to in the Netherlands – a black page in the political history of our country, stripped by Wolkers of all false pretence and heroism.

Multatuli's *Ideas* (Ideën) is on the bookshelf of Uncle Hendrik, the non-conformist model of the protagonist in *The Dodo*. Wolkers doesn't leave his readers guessing where his sympathies lie. Already on the first page 'out of the ghostly greyness of the depression of the Thirties' – beautifully described in, especially, *Back to Oegstgeest* (Terug naar Oegstgeest, 1965) – appears 'the election poster of the Anti-Revolutionary Party.' On it Colijn, the government leader at the time, who had become immensely rich from oil and was making eyes at Hitler, is depicted 'in a southwester at the helm of the ship of state. But' – Wolkers' style soon takes on its familiar hyperbolic character - 'My God, those aren't waves of unsullied sea-water breaking against the bow. It's pure petroleum. Stolen from under the feet of the brown peoples who languish in illness and hunger under the suction caps of that rapacious sweaty animal in tails and a three-cornered hat.'

I don't find it hard to read into these explosive words, the beginning of a much longer tirade, a tribute to Wolkers' great nineteenth-century colleague as well. Nor to see in this 'rapacious sweaty animal' an angry and prophetic pointing ahead to the power-hungry Dutch right-wing Liberals and Christian Democrats, ideological heirs of Droogstoppel and Wawelaar, who have, without embarrassment, forged a pact with the Devil with an extremist, anti-democratic, crypto-racist movement. ■