

## A Dutch Exotic in His Own Country

On the Writer Maarten 't Hart

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[ A L E I D T R U I J E N S ]



He is coming increasingly to resemble the prolific Simon Vestdijk (1898-1971) from Doorn, author of 52 novels, 23 collections of essays and thousands of poems, whom he greatly admired. Poems aside, the total output of Maarten 't Hart (1944) is getting fairly close: 19 novels, 9 collections of stories and over 20 works of non-fiction, including ethological studies, autobiographical works, books of essays and collected columns. And then there are thousands of uncollected articles, like the reviews he has written for newspapers and magazines. And in the midst of all this activity he has managed to reread and reappraise all 52 of Vestdijk's novels.

Maarten 't Hart, Warmond, 2009. Photo by Klaas Koppe.

Certainly, 't Hart will have to continue writing a little longer to equal his model, who in the words of the poet Adriaan Roland Holst 'wrote faster than God can read'. But 't Hart isn't yet 73 (Vestdijk's age when he died): he reached the retirement age of 65 on 25 November 2009. He is unlikely to make much use of the reduced fares on public transport to which he is now entitled, since he is a fanatical cyclist. Moreover, he seems well-equipped to live to a ripe old age. Whereas Vestdijk sat thumping his typewriter for days on end (making a din that had to be drowned out by the whine of a vacuum cleaner), with a cigarette forever dangling from the corner of his mouth, and often suffered from depression, 't Hart radiates health and good cheer. He spends many hours in his vegetable garden, which provides him with the kind of frugal and unappetising food – turnips and

carrots – that keeps you slim and tough. The writer promoted this pitiful diet in his last-but-one book *The Deaf Ears Diet* (Het Dovemansorendieet, 2007).

The two have other things in common too. Their precise scientific bent, for example. Many Dutch writers are historians, teachers or involved with literature, but not these two. Vestdijk studied medicine, worked as a doctor for a short time and remained fascinated by mental illnesses. As a biologist, 't Hart knows all about the behaviour of rats and aquatic animals: he wrote his doctoral thesis on the behaviour of the male three-spined stickleback, which 'creeps' repeatedly through the empty nest, and worked at Leiden University for a while as a researcher. He still regrets the fact that the university abolished his post as an ethologist and researcher – he could easily have handled that alongside his huge literary output and the work he did at home with plants and animals.

Even a scientifically-minded boy can be an avid reader. Ever since as a toddler in the library corner he opened a book about a dog called Tippeltje and an 'overwhelming feeling of happiness' flowed through him, 't Hart has read everything he could lay hands on – just hoovering it all up. As a reviewer for papers and magazines he seldom demolished books. Week after week he excitedly proclaimed his great loves: Faulkner, Trollope, Fontane, Roth, Conrad, Svevo and Proust.

In Dutch literature too he has his favourites: F.B. Hotz (1922-2000), for instance, the writer from Oegstgeest on whose door 't Hart knocked after Hotz's late début in 1976, to tell him how wonderful he thought his stories were. They became friends and 't Hart published a splendid book of reminiscences of Hotz, *The Man with the Glass* (De man met het glas, 2002).

Although in the 1970s and 1980s he wrote more for the press than many journalists or reviewers, 't Hart has a very low opinion of professional critics: he regularly makes it plain that he finds them a contemptible race, earning their living by demolishing what has been made with someone else's life's blood. They are loathsome pedants who are themselves incapable of writing a novel and take out their frustration at this in the newspaper. Within that despicable guild, in 't Hart's view, those who have studied Dutch make up the lowest caste. Those with a background in Dutch studies are crazy about narrative devices: they have learned nothing else in their stupid courses. They do not approve of a book unless it is 'layered', polyphonic or polyinterpretable; in short, they only like books that seem tailor-made for academic models to be tested out on them. It follows that authors who have studied Dutch write deadly dull books, in 't Hart's opinion.

He himself calls himself quite unconcernedly a storyteller. His main concern is the story he wants to tell, not so much the plot – which in his case is seldom ingenious – but the atmosphere, the dialogues and the characters' feelings.

## **Spectacular theatre with flowing robes**

A great love of classical music also links 't Hart and Vestdijk. 't Hart enjoys playing the piano and the church organ, and Vestdijk also relaxed by playing the piano. Both are great aficionados of Bach and have written extensively on him and other composers, but Vestdijk liked Mahler while 't Hart loathes that composer's pathos. He prefers to listen to psalms.

Both of them took an anti-religious stance, although 't Hart's antipathy is more

deep-seated and could also be called a love that has gone off the rails. In a series of columns for the daily *NRC Handelsblad*, collected as *Those who Abandon God Have Nothing to Fear* (Wie God verlaat heeft niets te vrezen, 1997) and *Through God's Eyes* (De bril van God, 2002), he attacks the many inconsistencies and contradictions in the Bible with the weapon of a close textual knowledge of the Scriptures; because 't Hart knows his Bible: at home, in a strictly Calvinist gravedigger's family in Maassluis, it was the only book. Yet for him Catholicism is still a degree or two worse than the faith of his forefathers: it is mainly the 'ritual mumbo-jumbo' of Rome that horrifies 't Hart: symbolic acts such as confirmation, confession and extreme unction. All 'accursed idolatry', in the view of the lapsed Calvinist, with as absolute low point 'the spectacular theatre of flowing robes' that the Roman Catholics call the Last Supper. The writer Gerard Reve, a Catholic convert, described such people, who are insensitive to the universal power of rituals and think that true believers feel that the Bible must be accepted as true, as suffering from 'symbol blindness'.

In 1947, when he published his collection of essays *The Future of Religion* (De toekomst der religie), Vestdijk felt that Christianity's great days were behind it: the future belonged to non-denominational, enlightened Christians in a just society. But for the anti-Bible campaigner 't Hart it is a great struggle just to cast off the literalness of faith. In 2000, in the older peoples' magazine *Plus*: 'I don't believe in Jesus as the son of God or in that old man with the beard; but I do believe in a supreme being, a shaping force behind the huge universe. My view comes quite close to that of the God of the Old Testament: a rather rancorous and tyrannical God, exalted above everything.'

Not completely free then. Only an ex-Calvinist can react to believers in such a fanatical, almost fundamentalist way. That was apparent in 2007, when 't Hart furiously demanded the resignation of Marianne Thieme, a Member of Parliament for the Animals' Party. 't Hart's was the final name on the party's list of candidates, because he feels strongly about animal suffering. Until he discovered that Thieme is a practising Seventh-Day Adventist. That Christian group expect the 'speedy Second Coming of Christ' at the End of Days. Hence Thieme was not fit to head an animals' party, he felt. Animals do not believe in the Second Coming or in the End of Days. Apart from which, why in that case should anyone get worked up about the future?

In 2010 't Hart's direct, principled way of reasoning produced a most satisfying result. The nurse Lucia de Berk, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment for the supposed murder of seven young patients in the hospital where she worked, was acquitted by the Supreme Court after serving almost seven years in prison. 't Hart had always believed in her innocence and found the evidence for her guilt, which was based on probabilities, utterly unconvincing. He, together with a number of other people, argued that there was insufficient proof that the children had died as a result of human intervention, and their perseverance led eventually to the conviction being overturned. 'After this judicial error I have lost all confidence in the rule of law in this country,' said 't Hart at the time.

There are also striking thematic parallels in the work of Vestdijk and 't Hart. Again and again the theme is love, which promises the fulfilment of every desire, but invariably ends in disillusion. Vestdijk wrote a great deal about his childhood in the small town of Lahringen, an anagram of his native Harlingen in Friesland. Here his literary alter ego Anton Wachter grew up, became an odd-man-out, a lonely boy, pampered by his mother and rejected by his first great love. Much

of what 't Hart has written can also be traced back to the primal spring, the post-war poverty in a pious Calvinist family in Maassluis near Rotterdam. This beautiful town is the backdrop for novels set in the last century, especially the 1950s, such as *Stones for a Long-Eared Owl* (Stenen voor een ransuil), *Bearers of Bad Tidings* (De aansprekers), and *The Steep Slope* (De steile helling). But in the splendid historical novel *The Psalm Riot* (Het psalmenoproer, 2006) we are also in Maassluis, though now at the end of the eighteenth century. 't Hart describes the huge commotion caused when in 1773 a new rhyming version of the Psalms was introduced. The common people, the impoverished fishermen coping with falling herring catches, revolt. 't Hart identifies wholeheartedly with his main characters, and even puts eighteenth-century Dutch into their mouths.

## On Tuesdays barley stew

Maassluis was also where his own revolt began. Although he was a quiet, well-behaved boy – albeit one who was very good at school – he was to free himself from rigid faith at an early age, and by wide reading, listening and studying develop into what he eventually became: an erudite writer and biologist, with a vast knowledge of music and literature.

The young Maarten, we read in essays, columns and autobiographical pieces – and the characters of his novels are made in his likeness – grew up in his Calvinist family with no toys, no books, no music, and in fact no money, but in the constant fear of the Lord. On Monday the family of five – see *The Deaf Ears Diet* – ate bread and milk, on Tuesdays barley stew and on Wednesday, traditionally the day for minced meat, there were gooey endives without mince. Thursday was the high point: brown beans with syrup! Father, the gravedigger, was inclined to hand out the occasional wallop, but his mother was very sweet. She let her son play with a doll from her own childhood and taught him to knit and embroider: 'With the same eagerness with which I now read, I clumsily knitted vests that sometimes constricted me like straitjackets, and sometimes came down far below my knees like dresses,' writes 't Hart in *The Sum of Misunderstandings* (De som van misverstanden). Is it really that odd, then, that in 1991 he came out of the closet with an aberration that had troubled him for years: the need to dress up in women's clothes? At that year's Dutch Literary Ball the writer appeared proudly, but with a charming diffidence, in a dress, with a curly wig and painted nails. Not that 't Hart had suddenly become a transvestite, and definitely not a homosexual. The need to disguise himself as a woman, he explained, issued from the desire to identify completely with the object of his love, the girls he adored. His highly polemical anti-feminist book *There's no Such Thing as Woman* (De vrouw bestaat niet), he told astonished interviewers, had been written in 1982 out of pure jealousy: didn't women, beautiful and unattainable, already have complete power over those puny men: why did they have to go and become feminists on top of that?

In 't Hart's *A Flight of Whimbrels* (Een vlucht regenwulpen) there is a description of an experience with one such unattainable girl. At a birthday party Maarten, a biologist of about thirty, still unmarried, meets someone with whom he makes a date. She turns out to be none other than the sister of his great childhood love Martha – to whom he was never able to declare his love; when he makes a last clumsy attempt the girl runs away in alarm. The rejection makes



him doubt the existence of a heaven: 'What good was it to be saved by Christ and go to heaven after your death if she was just scared of you and ran away from you. You'd be in heaven for all eternity, or rather for all eternity feel the pain of her who was unattainable.' Maarten sees the girl he adores once more, at a primary school reunion. He studies her face intently – and is completely happy. That is all a lonely lover needs. He cherishes his loneliness, in which he can keep his desire intact. 'A person should be a cell,' the biologist thinks, 'a lump that divides into two, then there'd be no problem.'

## Writing in a good humour

Finally, there is one further striking similarity between Simon Vestdijk and Maarten 't Hart: both are in some way underrated writers. With Vestdijk that did not seem to be the case during his lifetime. For years he was regarded as the obvious Dutch candidate for the Nobel Prize; according to Gerard Reve he had already written his acceptance speech. He gained many laurels and honours and was awarded all the great literary prizes: the P.C. Hooft Prize (1950), the Constantijn Huygens Prize (1955) and the State Prize for Dutch Literature (1971). But only ten years after his death he seemed to have been forgotten. School pupils no longer put his books on their exam reading lists and his books soon went out of print. Despite the immense amount her husband had written, in the 1990s Vestdijk's widow was unable to make ends meet from the royalties. Literary textbooks pay dutiful attention to Vestdijk. His versatility, erudition and productivity are praised, but his style, especially, comes in for severe criticism: his protracted descriptions lacking in sensuality, his meandering sentences endlessly weighing the pros and cons. The critics laid Vestdijk to rest: historically important, but very dated.

In 't Hart's case the underestimation takes a different form. His non-fiction works, on the Bible, on music, gardening and eating, are hugely popular. His novels have a fixed constituency of readers, who pay no attention to negative reviews. Secondary school pupils are still wild about the 'puberty book' *A Flight of Whimbrels*, but they also enjoy the thriller *Star Witness* (De kroongetuige).

But he has not often been pampered with laudatory reviews. For years Dutch critics have said the same thing about almost every book: 't Hart's style is supposedly sloppy and garrulous, typical work of a prolific writer. It was felt that 't Hart repeated himself too often: we're back in oppressive Maassluis yet again.

Oddly enough, in the last forty years there has been little recognition of his great narrative gifts, but 't Hart certainly has the ability to evoke a past or alien world by identifying with it body and soul – like the Calvinist world of the 1950s or eighteenth-century Maastricht. This is an ability he shares with the much-admired F.B. Hotz. Apart from that, 't Hart is someone with a unique brand of humour: a mixture of exaggeration, self-irony and pseudo-logic and sometimes rage. Few Dutch writers are as witty as 't Hart. His humour is never sour or malevolent. 'I only write when I'm in a good mood,' he said once, and the reader senses that. In his latest book, *Engagement* (Verlovingtijd, 2009), that special humour is tangible on every page. It is the story of a remarkable friendship between Joeri and the first-person narrator. They are the sharpest boys in the class, and for half a lifetime Joeri manages to pinch every girlfriend from the narrator. The latter takes this serial theft calmly: his friend just is brilliant. This



is also a novel about the bare, austere parental home, but the tone is more distanced and ironic than in *A Flight of Whimbrels*. The dialogues in this book are masterly, especially those between mother and son, in which they trump each other with appropriate commonplaces from the Bible, such as 'Golgotha is round the corner' and 'We bravely chew our bread of tears.' The novel was greeted with shrugs of the shoulders by the press: funny and entertaining, but oh dear, that Calvinist childhood again, again that gaucheness with girls.

As a result 't Hart has not been exactly deluged with literary prizes in his own country. He has received some modest awards but has never yet won a major commercial prize: his novels have not even made the shortlist.

Abroad, on the other hand, his work is appreciated and his prose has been translated into English, French, German, Swedish, Italian, Polish, Bulgarian, Hungarian and Russian and appears in quite large print runs. In Germany and Sweden particularly – countries with a rich Protestant heritage – he is very popular.

Perhaps it is because Dutch people know this writer so well from television: still with an enthusiastic or excited boyish voice, even at the age of 65: 't Hart says loudly and unashamedly what he thinks about the mistreatment of animals, about law and order in the Netherlands, about pious blockheads, about the great advantage of inferior wine (you don't get drunk quickly). Always benevolent, always good for an attention-grabbing quote. If a photographer calls for a portrait to accompany an interview and he happens to have his women's clothes on, he doesn't mind being photographed in them. 't Hart is so authentically and imperturbably himself, that one is inclined to see him as a 'type'. Something of an exotic in his own country, since these days you don't often see anyone so typically Dutch, so Christian through and through, so sober and openly thrifty. ■

*Translated by Paul Vincent*

Maarten 't Hart in drag at the Literary Ball, Amsterdam, 1991. Photo by Klaas Koppe.

