

Revealing the Clear Secret

Harry Mulisch (1927-2010)

158

[ARNOLD HEUMAKERS]

Only when a writer dies does 'irrevocability set in and the reading become serious', writes Harry Mulisch in *Food for Psychologists* (Voer voor psychologen, 1961). Well, that happened on 30 October 2010 and now the Netherlands has to manage without him. For the last few decades Mulisch, more than anyone else, has been *the* symbol of literature, the perfect embodiment of the writer. All over the media whenever literature was involved. This was due not only to his well-groomed appearance, but also to the fact that he was read by an unusually large public. Some of his novels, like *The Assault* (De aanslag, 1982) and *The Discovery of Heaven* (De ontdekking van de hemel, 1992), reached hundreds of thousands of readers – which is exceptional in a small country like the Netherlands.

In both cases they are exciting, accessible novels. That is true, too, of *Two Women* (Twee vrouwen, 1975), which was distributed massively – free – a couple of years ago. Not coincidentally, all three novels have been successfully filmed. They contain everything to appeal to a large public. *Two Women* offers a dramatic love story, in fact, as the title suggests, between two women, typical of the feminist seventies of the last century. In *The Assault* Mulisch summarizes more or less the entire post-war history of the Netherlands in a series of exemplary moments, intertwined with a meditation on fate, coincidence and guilt. In *The Discovery of Heaven*, his biggest and most ambitious novel, the whole of Western modernity is portrayed against the background of the increasing hegemony of technology, the disappearance of religion and the decline of politics.

What do these novels have in common? At first glance that is not so obvious. We find Mulisch's signature, as well as in the supple, almost 'classic' style beneath the surface of the narrative, in the surreptitious references to what he himself once called his 'hermetic underworld'. His whole oeuvre stems from that and bears witness to it. In *Two Women* we find that underworld in the analogy of the story with the Orpheus myth, which is extremely important in Mulisch's 'mythological' view of authorship; in *The Assault*, perhaps his least 'hermetic' novel, the prehistoric lizards, who fatally influence the course of history with their 'eternity', signify it; and in *The Discovery of Heaven* the underworld resides, paradoxically enough, mainly in the gnostic or Neoplatonic guise of the heaven that apparently governs all earthly activity.



Harry Mulisch with
his son Menzo.
Amsterdam, 12/1/1998.
Photo by Klaas Koppe.

Averting death

Mulisch has always claimed that his 'scribbling' (as with characteristic non-chalance he liked to call it) did not come 'from literature'. He never wanted to become a writer, it just turned out at a certain moment that he was one – because he wrote his first story. In that story (*The Room/De kamer*, published in 1947) a man tells of his youthful fascination with a particular room, in which a window was always open; you could see a bookcase and 'hear a piano playing through the open window'. Forty years later the narrator returns to the city of his birth and it turns out that he has rented the very house in which this mysterious room is located. Only later, when he is struck down by a fatal illness, does he understand the reason for his fascination: 'It's my death chamber'.

Mulisch wrote this story when he was only nineteen, but it already contained one important theme that reappears in his later work: the beginning that is only to find its completion in the ending. Later on that becomes the eternal, endless moment of death. Because no one can say of himself 'I am dead', Mulisch concludes that dying has no end and is therefore outside time. Within our rules-and-regulations-bound lives it offers access to another reality, where anything is possible. That other reality is, of course, the world of the imagination, but it is typical of Mulisch's 'mythologizing' way of thinking that he associates freedom of the imagination with dying. Right where man as mortal seems to hit rock bottom, he finds his greatest triumph.



Harry Mulisch and King Albert II at the Royal Palace in Brussels for the award of the *Prijs der Nederlandse Letteren*, 23/11/1995. Photo by Klaas Koppe.

In this way, one might also say, Mulisch tries to avert death – the ambition of poets and writers since time immemorial. In a programmatic text *Foundations of the Mythology of Authorship* (Grondslagen van de mythologie van het schrijverschap, 1987) he argues that literature, as a manifestation of the written word, stops time and therefore conquers death. Because the text that the author writes is there forever. If a sentence is good, 'it's suddenly 1000 years ago that it was written down', Mulisch says in *Food for Psychologists*. The writer is an Orpheus who does succeed in saving his Eurydice. The only thing is that afterwards he no longer knows how he did it – Mulisch's way of incorporating into his own thinking the typically romantic notion of the genius that creates his masterpieces subconsciously.

Magnifying the enigma

Literature is a game for Mulisch, albeit a serious game. There is always something at stake; his writing has nothing to do with *l'art pour l'art*, art for its own sake. That is immediately clear from his debut novel *Archibald Strohalp* (1952), in which the main character is destroyed by the madness the writer has transferred to him. 'You've taken up my cross, my little saviour. I shall succeed where you must fail', writes the author, intervening in his own story. The saviour is sacrificed so that the writer can save himself. From what? From the madness, or the 'broken dikes' that had overcome him, Mulisch claims, in 1949. In *Food for Psychologists* he writes: 'I had ended up in a shower of meteors. Fireworks were going off in my head, brick red, Prussian blue, white as the sun, some as black as birds; there were sparks from my hands if I touched anything; where I trod the earth was scorched. [...] I knew everything. I understood everything. From early morning till late at night my time was filled with a feverish jotting down of insights, visions, enlightenment, euphorization, all with the intensity and certainty that I tried to portray later in *Archibald Strohalp*'.

Here we see the method that Mulisch often used against the dark, the occult, the evil threatening him: he tried to overpower it, to 'colonise' it, to tame it in a literary fashion, without it losing its mysterious lustre. 'Art reveals the

clear secret', says Mulisch. How? By 'magnifying the enigma'. Mulisch's most systematic attempt at this would result, in 1979, in *The Composition of the World* (De compositie van de wereld): an explanation of almost everything based on the enigma of the musical octave, which functions in this philosophical colossus as a 'tough fundamental paradox'; the octave, in which the second note is 'not identical to the first, but not not-identical either'.

Using this method of colonisation Mulisch even dared confront the phenomenon of war crimes in 1959. Already in *Archibald Strohalms* we read: 'If I didn't write, perhaps I would be a mass murderer, a citizen gone wild, a fascist, who makes lampshades with leather from women's breasts, the nipple exactly on the top, with a push-button switch in it'. The war criminal in *The Stone Bridal Bed* (Het stenen Bruidsbed) is an American pilot who took part in the senseless bombing of Dresden. Mulisch puts himself in his shoes, the 'ruins man', without any noticeable distance between them. But that is only possible thanks to literature and its 'timeless' presence beyond history. The bombing of Dresden, like Hitler, Attila the Hun, Tamerlane and other mass murderers, is located there also, in an 'anti-history' that is at odds with what Mulisch, with a nod to Hegel, calls the 'history of the mind', history that brings progress.

Between literature and progress, then, there is a fundamental difference. It is from that difference that literature gets its freedom: in principle it can tackle anything. Only in literature can man indulge his most murky fascinations. In Mulisch's case that includes his fascination with Hitler, who continued to prey on his mind right up till his last novel, *Siegfried*, from 2002. Only in *Siegfried* does he manage to conquer that fascination, by catching Hitler in a 'net of fiction' and eliminating him as the incarnation of 'Nothingness'. But, as in *Archibald Strohalms*, this is at the expense of the main character, who does the dirty work in the story. Mulisch's alter ego, Rudolf Herter, is destroyed by the spiritual struggle with Hitler, whereas the writer, Mulisch, continued to live, victorious, nine more years after the completion of his novel.

The reader completes the book

Mulisch did not always succeed in averting terror with the aid of literature. A crucial year in his life and oeuvre was 1961, when he reported from Jerusalem for a Dutch weekly on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the organiser of the Final Solution. To his surprise he had to acknowledge, like Hannah Arendt, that there was nothing devilish or demonic about the accused; instead Eichmann seemed more like an unimaginative, over-conscientious civil servant. With this insight his surprise turned to horror. Because this Eichmann could no longer be parked in 'anti-history', on the contrary, he became 'the symbol of progress' as it is called in *Criminal Case 40/61* (De zaak 40/61, 1962), the embodiment of technology in its most disturbing form. This must have unleashed a sort of moral panic in Mulisch: would man's future be like Eichmann perhaps? Man turned machine, pure functionality without a will. This spectre had already appeared in the story *The Embellished Man* (De versierde mens, 1955): man at risk of losing his humanity because he becomes completely merged with his technical resources. In *The Composition of the World* that is the sombre prediction for the future: humanity will make way for what Mulisch calls the '*corpus corporum*'. The total union of man and technology, the great futuristic dream now turned into a nightmare.



Funeral of Harry Mulisch. Amsterdam, 6/11/2010. Photo by Klaas Koppe.

In the seventies and eighties technology as a threat assumed a more direct and specific form: the nuclear weapons against which Mulisch actively protested outside the context of his novels. And sometimes, too, in his novels, as at the end of *The Assault*. Usually he was able to keep commitment and literature carefully separate. In the turbulent sixties, when Mulisch thought he had found a salutary alternative to a future full of little Eichmanns in the 'playful' resistance of the Amsterdam Provos (*Message to the Rat King/Bericht aan de rattenkoning*, 1966) and the 'new man' in Castro's Cuba (*The Word and the Deed/Het woord bij de daad*, 1968), he hardly wrote any novels, except for his most experimental novel, *The Narrator* (*De verteller*), published in 1970.

However, that does not mean that there is a complete absence of resistance in the literature. On the contrary. But the resistance lies in the literature as such rather than a protest or a subversive message being delivered in the novels and stories (or in the poetry he suddenly started writing in the seventies). Moral or political messages do not belong in literature. Mulisch says it already in *Food for psychologists*, the autobiographical and poetic book that could be considered the secret machine room of Mulisch's oeuvre. It contains a look back at the path already trodden and announces what is still to come. 'Books that prod one to do good', he writes categorically, are like 'moral pornography'. They have nothing to do with literature.

Literature can be a 'counterweight to technology', even, according to Mulisch, the 'only' counterweight that still exists because literature (and art in general) is an artefact that, unlike the technological artefacts, is psychologically enriching rather than impoverishing. Literature appeals to readers' power of imagination, and their power of imagination is at least as important as that of the writer. Only the reader completes the book, by bringing the story and the characters to life in his own head. The writer provides the material for this exercise, in which people must call on all the capacities latent in them. In the past this role was fulfilled in a slightly different way by religion, but since secularisation only art and literature are left to resist man's impending end.

Own inalienable universe

In his novels Mulisch manages to stimulate the reader's imagination in a masterly way, partly because, as mentioned above, his prose has various layers. Beneath the narrative surface there is always a glimmer of the depths of

the hermetic underworld, where it teems with references, suggestions and conjectures. There modern man can connect with disciplines that have disappeared such as alchemy, Neo-Platonism and esotericism, not forgetting mythology which, like literature, knows only an eternal present. There the neglected gods and heroes still live and are sometimes willing to grant man a glimpse of their wonderful existence. Therein lies the romantic game Mulisch plays with his readers.

Sometimes it is done with great show, as in *The Discovery of Heaven*, where science, religion, mythology and politics are combined into one fantastic whole. But Mulisch also does it in a more restrained, more intimate way, as in his sublime story *Old Air* (*Oude lucht*) from the collection of the same title, from 1977, or in *The Elements* (*De elementen*), from 1988, a short novel thematically related to it.

In both Mulisch describes a couple in a dead-end marriage, and in both it is the man who does actually die, finding the ultimate fulfilment of his life in death, following Mulisch's now well-known recipe. In *Old Air* the man, called Arnold, recounts how in his youth he thought he was on his way 'to one event, one very particular, awesome event that would occur on a particular day'. Surprised, his wife Merel asks what he is thinking of and Arnold answers: 'Something like a total orgasm of the whole world rolling over me'. According to Merel, Arnold is talking about his death, and of course she is proved right when Arnold dies in an accident in the final scene and feels, posthumously, on his way to the mysterious 'inferred garden' (a symbol of Mulisch's underworld and perhaps also of Freud's subconscious), that he is being 'lifted into a secret'.

In *The Elements* (in which the reader and main character are addressed in the second person singular) the impressionable advertising man Dick Bender recalls the 'small ecstasy' that came over him as a boy, when he pulled the blankets over his head at night to look at the fluorescent face of his new wristwatch: 'You couldn't stop, even though you had to get up early for school the next morning – it was as if, in that light, which had nothing to do with anyone else, you first realised that you existed, in a big world full of secrets...'. In the novel he visits Crete with his family, the mythical island where a feather from Icarus's wings still floats down to earth when Dick and his children are visiting the Palace of Knossos. The apotheosis is just such an 'eternal' moment as is Arnold's lot in *Old Air*. Plucked from the sea by a fire-fighting plane, Dick is dropped above the burning forest, as the four elements (water, fire, earth and air) are united and Dick, in dying rapture, ascends a 'light' that cannot be expressed in words and which is therefore printed with a cross struck through it by Mulisch.

These works repeat the theme of Mulisch's first story, *The Room*, in an infinitely richer way. This underlines, once again, the cohesion of his oeuvre, despite the considerable – mainly stylistic – differences to be found in it: wild and experimental to start with, balanced and classical later on. That oeuvre offers a view of an inalienable individual universe which, wherever you look, is immediately recognisable as Harry Mulisch's universe. I cannot imagine a better proof of literary greatness. Since 30 October 2010 Mulisch's universe has been irrevocably complete, apart from a couple of additional posthumous publications that will appear in the next few years.

The serious reading can begin. ■