

A Longing for Reconciliation

The Significance of Erwin Mortier's Prose

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[CYRILLE OFFERMANS]

Marcel (1999), the prose debut of Erwin Mortier (1965-), was striking for a number of reasons. The most important of these was that it made no concessions at all to popular views on the novel. *Marcel* made a rather old-fashioned impression, since it did not attempt to render the world in all its complexity, contained no vertiginous experiments in form, took no political position and did not even seem to be concerned with current affairs. There was no trace of 'street noise', a word beloved of Dutch critics at the time; in *Marcel* an almost prehistoric peace and quiet reigned. But despite that, critical reception in the Netherlands was unanimously positive.

One thing is certain: the book could never have been written by a Dutchman. In the first place because of the language – Mortier writes a refined, sensual Dutch unmarred by fashionable clichés, a language that in comparison with the often careless, hard-edged, media-savvy and trendy Dutch of the Northern Netherlands has rapidly assumed archaic features. But also because of the world it evokes, which is still conventional and Catholic to the core. A few cursory pointers to the date place the book at the beginning of the 1970s, but it feels much longer ago. The authority and status of the primary schoolteacher and the priest have a pre-war feel, as do the axiomatic class distinctions, the contrasts between town and country and the traditional family authority structures. In the Catholic South of the Netherlands, too, the world looked very different then.

The great wealth of images in *Marcel*, despite all the admiration, was also felt to be too much of a good thing, particularly in the Netherlands. This is not all that surprising, since Dutch prose is generally sparer, more direct, more rational, more academic than Flemish. That distinction derives from a deep-seated historical rift, which is closely connected with the age-old dominance in the North of Calvinism, with its hatred of images and exclusive focus on the Word and nothing but the Word, contrasting with the visual and decorative lavishness of the Catholic South. But Mortier's images are not in the least extravagant, they force the reader to open his eyes, to activate his senses, to imagine a world; they interrupt his unthinking everyday language consumption, and in so doing they achieve a certain indirectness, which has a disruptive and hence retarding effect.

Erwin Mortier (1965-).
Photo by David Samyn.



Marcel begins with the description of a house. Not a special house, since according to the first sentence 'it looked like all the others in the street'. But the description itself most certainly is special. The house has become 'slightly lop-sided', and this is expanded on: 'Above the hedge a crooked spine of tiles ran between two chimneys. The windows were set in the wall at a rather tipsy angle and next to the door jamb hung a pair of clogs with petunias in them.'

The house is thus personified, becoming an old man or woman. This is the perception of someone for whom the boundaries between the organic and inorganic worlds, between living nature and dead things are not yet fixed, so that they can still easily merge with each other. Here this is connected with the narrative perspective: for most of the book the narrator chooses to stay as close as possible to the world he describes and identifies totally with the child he once was, who absorbed that world with all its senses. For that child, which does not yet view the world on the basis of accepted abstractions, of generalised geographical, cultural or architectural knowledge, everything ordinary is still special.

Mortier has never totally silenced his naive, bewildered inner child. He indicates this in countless places: in *My Second Skin* (Mijn tweede huid, 2000), which begins with the lines: 'It was during the time before I could really talk. Almost nothing had a name, everything was body.' In *Shutter Speed* (Sluitertijd, 2002): 'All I do there is see, hear, taste, smell.' The young observer occasionally makes way for his older alter ego, but does not disappear without trace – his sensory sensitivity has remained intact. In this way the familiar becomes unfamiliar in his work, the ordinary unusual and the finite infinite. But the most important motif, whether conscious or unconscious, and in any case the most important effect of that rescue of the childlike perspective is that it preserves the possibility of contact with the past in general and the dead in particular.

Let me quote a number of telling sentences from the beginning of *Marcel*. They describe how the grandmother of the first-person narrator tends the graves of her relatives: 'She was the reverse midwife of her line. She would not allow her dead to just disappear. Once they were buried the earth became their body. She combed a parting in their locks with the rake and pruned the hedges around their gravestones as if she were clipping their nails. The wedding rings had already

moved from their cold fingers to the warmth of those left behind. She had folded their glasses and put them in a drawer upstairs in the attic, where so many other pairs with long locust's legs had become chaotically entangled.'

The narrator's grandmother maintains intensive contact with 'her' dead. She goes 'almost daily' to the 'nearby cemetery' in order to do so. Sometimes the narrator is allowed to accompany her. He also sees her carefully dusting the photos of the deceased in the display cabinet, and hears her talking to them. That may be irrational and naive, from the viewpoint of an adult, modern consciousness –that talking is pointless, after all, and no one but she can hear. But for the grandmother that ritualised care is obviously a necessity. And we can also assume that her behaviour had a lasting impact on the young first-person narrator.

For what he does as a writer is the 'adult' or, perhaps better, the conscious variant of his grandmother's rituals. That is why it was such a felicitous choice of the author's to begin with these scenes. With each image he revitalises the language, bringing dead everyday phrases back to life, just the grandmother brings 'her dead' back to life. This is, literally, an enriching experience. It opens up time and blurs the contours of what appears final.

However, it would be a serious misunderstanding to think that stylistic perfection automatically implies unworldly prose poetry. While Mortier's characters may like to seek out solitude and silence, their creator is very far from socially naïve or disinterested. *Marcel*, for example, deals subtly and indirectly with the dubious war records of two main characters, a taboo that is spoken about in code or more commonly, cloaked in painful silence. Social and political motifs also appear, covertly and never unambiguously, in the subsequent novels, in *My Second Skin* (Mijn tweede huid) and *Shutter Speed*, and in the novella *All the Days Together* (Alle dagen samen, 2004). A definite involvement, intensely personal and at odds with any facile fashionable pose, is apparent in the essay collection *In Defence of Sin* (Pleidooi voor de zonde, 2002).

Dislike of disaster voyeurism

A high point in Mortier's oeuvre is the bulky novel with which he surprised his readers in 2008, *Sleep of the Gods* (Godenslaap). At last, a book that deserves to be mentioned in the same breath as *The Sorrow of Belgium* (Het verdriet van België), Hugo Claus's multi-faceted masterpiece of 1983, although the differences between them are just as great as the similarities. *Sleep of the Gods* does not elaborate further on *The Sorrow of Belgium*, which is set mainly in the years before and during the Second World War. Nor is it an up-dated version of the earlier book, nor an attempt to penetrate the subsequent decades of incest scandals, political division and right-wing populist Islamophobia. History, in the recording and organising sense of the word, is in any case no more Mortier's concern than it is Claus's. And although the stylistic differences with Claus are considerable, *Sleep of the Gods* is, for the period on which Mortier exercises his unique plastic talent, a comparable highpoint, and just as hard to surpass as was Claus's work on his own period.

That period is the First World War, in the Netherlands a forgotten era, since it was scarcely experienced, in Belgium still *la grande guerre*. But it is not only in that respect that Mortier goes back further than Claus; he does the same in his

writing too. His reference points are not so much the rebellious avant-gardistes of the first half of the twentieth century, but rather such reclusive writers as Flaubert and especially Proust, the one-and-only author to whom he expressly refers in this book. Proust's meandering, endlessly bifurcating sentences almost made Mortier's narrator, an old woman around a hundred years old, ill; for a long time afterwards she could not write another word.

As a writer the woman, Helena, is an anachronism. She has none of the star mentality, the pushiness or the vain egomania of so many contemporary authors. On the contrary, she dreams of the untitled, nameless book, freed from its writer and the whole institution of literature. She trusts only in the power of language, which both ruptures and intensifies reality and which erupts unexpectedly and forcefully into the would-be peaceful mood of the reader. She doesn't want to conform with the world, like her hated mother, who expresses her fatalistic attitude in tautologies of the 'war is war' variety. Helena says that she has filled all her notebooks for no other reason than '*by my writing to squeeze my foot into the door of finality*', of all that is complete and rounded off. And that is an aim comparable with that of Claus – an aim that has produced a book of a quality found only once in every so many years.

Sleep of the Gods, then, is not a novel in the traditional sense of the word. Anyone looking for a sturdy, unambiguously reconstructable plot or a clearly defined theme, preferably one that can be straightforwardly related to one's own life at the reading club, is in for a disappointment. Mortier can't help thinking with his senses. As a result the book consists of nothing but image-filled fragments, usually about a page in length, which quite logically also deal with vanished, concealed and suppressed fragments of life. Helena herself speaks of '*the book of shards*' and a little further on of '*the book of mud*'; both formulations, as later becomes clear, can be taken literally. Mortier makes those shards glitter in the mud. The effect is ravishingly beautiful and mercilessly gruesome in equal measure.

But of course, at the interface of all those delicate miniatures in the best '*Flemish Primitive*' tradition, one nevertheless discerns the contours of a series of interwoven stories. Those stories are set in what is at least a threefold border area: in period, the transition from the long nineteenth to the brief twentieth century; in social background, a middle class squeezed between a refined aristocracy and the coarse proletariat; and geographically, in Artesia, otherwise Artois, the region where the Germanic and Latin culture meet head on, the borderlands near Diksmuide and Ypres where the war raged most fiercely.

Helena was on holiday with her parents at the house of an uncle on the French side of the border when hostilities broke out. Unable to return home, they are forced to spend approximately three years in the uncle's summerhouse. At first Helena finds the war more fascinating than anything. The pounding and rumbling of the guns in the distance is exciting, she loves the dust-clouds above the fields that give away the whereabouts of the soldiers on their way to the fronts. But little of that fascination remains when she is confronted with the victims, the dead and especially the countless maimed bodies.

Never before have I read such suffocating descriptions of the years spent in trenches with literally no prospect, of the way in which countless young men from all corners of the world were engulfed by the West Flemish mud. But even those who survived were unable to escape the war for the rest of their lives. Like the taciturn farmworker Etienne Leboeuf, who '*passive as a calf in a thun-*



Ypres, april 28, 1915:
Refugees leaving the city
Photo by Antony.

derstorm sat out the tempest crouched in his hole in the ground, and did not move, simply closing his eyes tight against the seething earth or the lumps of intestine from the man (...) whom he saw literally blown apart beside him.'

And who survived after the war only thanks to the succession of women who brought him a brief oblivion. Helena would like to build a monument not only to Etienne but to all his motherly mistresses, to all the whores and lovers who were a last consolation and refuge for the men without arms or legs. Helena doesn't call that obscene. What she finds obscene is the indifference to all the horrors, and also the way in which after the war they seemed to be denied. What is obscene is the neatly swept market squares, the manicured cemeteries, the orderly rows of soldiers' helmets that she sees lying on a dike somewhere as a stupid ode to a deadly discipline.

During the war Helena herself met an English soldier, Matthew Herbert, who initiated her into the mysteries of sexuality. It is also thanks to him that she is able to give concrete form to her picture of the war, which is based largely on other people's accounts and her own imagination. Herbert is a photographer and after the war they travel together through the ravaged countryside. In the summer of 1919 this takes them to Alsace, where they witness hundreds of people swarming about the churned-up ground at the bottom of a hill in search of old foxholes, stranded tanks and abandoned weaponry. This whole open-air carnival fills her with revulsion, but she also realises, and certainly when her husband photographs these scenes, that she too is part of the carnival. In a later fragment, in which she looks at the photographs as an old woman in an unspecified '*present*' this eager consumption of other people's suffering is labelled with the - then unknown - word '*disaster voyeurism*'.

Helena's stream of narrative is, understandably, often triggered by photographs, and I think the same applies to Mortier. Yet it is no exaggeration to see his whole book as an attempt to subvert the dubious curiosity of disaster voyeurism and to revive some of the original dismay and astonishment of the war in his language. The impact of the war is perhaps most starkly apparent in the hardness of Helena herself. She cuts deep into her own flesh. Just as time has

not retouched the most painful details from her memory into more acceptable images for the family album, so she has not grown any gentler or more qualified in her judgment of herself and others.

She wastes few words on the post-war period – actually nothing more has happened that is worth recording. The fire of love burned fiercely only in the heat of war, in secret, and afterwards her passion for her husband turned to dull passivity. When he dies her only comment is: *'It was about time.'* She speaks of their daughter with revulsion. She wonders how something like that could have emerged from inside her: *'I didn't bear a child, but a rusty nail.'* On an annual joint excursion, mother and daughter are as silent *'as the grave'*. And when Helena hears that her daughter is dying she says: *'The nun said I should hurry [...], but I didn't even say goodbye to her corpse.'*

It should be stressed, perhaps unnecessarily, that there is no trace of misogyny in either Helena or Mortier. The book contains wonderful passages on female desire, female concerns and types of physical and psychological discomfort such as migraine. Helena does have a soft spot for some women. With the Moroccan nurse Rachida, who looks after her in her old age, she feels a *'tacit sense of sisterhood'*, which is reinforced by Mortier with this image: *'I should like to steer the pen in my fingers over the paper as smoothly as she moves her mop over the tiles – the gentle swish calms me and irons out my sentences.'* Rachida is also given the final word, which is as poignant as it is conciliatory. She tells Helena that her great-grandfather, Said with the lovely eyes, joined the army out of poverty, was sent to fight on the northern front and died in the trenches leaving no trace behind. Later Rachida's father became a miner in Belgium and searched in vain for his grandfather's remains underground.

The Work of Memory

Sleep of the Gods occupies a unique place in Dutch literature, and not just for purely literary reasons. It is also the first great prose work to take *the Great War, la grande guerre* as its theme. In view of the huge interest in the war in other countries, this is in itself a strange and not easily explicable fact.

Mortier himself acknowledges that he owes a great deal to a number of those, mostly older, books. In 2009 he translated the novel *The Backwash of War. The Human Wreckage of the Battlefield* by the American nurse Ellen Newbold la Motte, which was banned immediately on its publication in 1916. In his introduction Mortier, himself a qualified psychiatric nurse who has made an academic study of the history of psychiatry, describes the way in which this book influenced his own novel. In addition he holds out the prospect of two further translations of books on the First World War, *The Forbidden Zone* by Mary Borden and *A Diary without Dates* by Enid Bagnold, so that by 2014, a hundred years after the outbreak of the war, we will have a triptych of 'forgotten female voices'.

'It is my deep conviction,' says Mortier, *'that our age, in the face of the incomprehensible disaster that these nations brought upon themselves, their society and not least their citizens, must keep alive a 'work of memory' that is as polyvalent and diverse as the stories with and in which the generations who experienced the First World War tried to express their dismay, suffering and irremediable loss – undoubtedly in order to be able to lay them to rest.'* ■