

Awater in the UK Martinus Nijhoff's First English volume

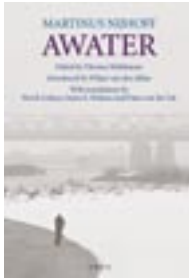
Two gentlemen in a restaurant in Nijmegen. During dinner one of them says with a sigh what a shame it is to write poetry in a language that reaches so few people as Dutch does. This means that his readership remains somewhat limited, and that weighs on his heart. Eventually the other man promises to go home and not rest until he has translated one of his friend's major works into English. According to his own account, that is how poet and translator Daan van der Vat (better known as Daan Zonderland) embarked on the first English translation of Martinus Nijhoff's 'Awater' in 1939. Van der Vat completed a first version in three days, and then spent the next ten years honing the translation. During this time face-to-face contact was hampered by, among other things, the German occupation and Van der Vat's emigration to London, but nonetheless poet and translator discussed the progress and finer points of the translation from time to time by letter.

The long poem 'Awater', which appeared in 1934 as part of the volume *New Poems* (Nieuwe gedichten), is indisputably one of Nijhoff's most important works, which immediately makes it also one of the most important works in twentieth-century Dutch poetry. The modern and startling atmosphere, the stylistic refinement, the network of allusions and references, the concrete meanings and their various possible interpretations: whole books have been written about these features in the Netherlands, literary reputations built on them, readers bewitched by them and poets inspired by them to this very day. Of course this does not relate to 'Awater' alone: it relates to Nijhoff's poetry and his views on poetry in general. It is precisely for this reason that Nijhoff's lament at the limited reach of Dutch is still so understandable. Apparently the British literary heavyweight T.S. Eliot, whom Nijhoff admired, said after reading 'Awater' that if he only had written it in English rather than Dutch Nijhoff would have been world-famous. And another Nobel Prize winner, Joseph Brodsky, referred to 'Awater' as *'one of the grandest works of poetry in this century'*, and added: *'It's a com-*

pletely different thing. This is the future of poetry, I think, or it at least paves the way for a very interesting future.'

Meanwhile, Nijhoff's work has been translated into about fifteen languages, and in some countries – such as Slovenia, Germany and Russia – not just in a general anthology or periodical: what came on the market was a fully-fledged anthology. But still: our greatest twentieth-century poet is not yet really world-famous. And when in recent years contemporary Dutch language poets have been able to enjoy increasing attention and appreciation abroad, it would be good if the world beyond our borders could also be given a fuller picture of the work of their most important fore-runners, such as Martinus Nijhoff. As regards 'Awater' in England, Van der Vat's first step, the initial translation initiative, was followed by a second: in 1949 he finally published his translation in the London periodical *Adem*. A good ten years later a second translator, this time a native English speaker, ventured to tackle Nijhoff's masterpiece: the Netherlands-based American James S Holmes. (A salient detail: in 1956 this same Holmes had been the first non-Dutch citizen to receive the prestigious Martinus Nijhoff Prize for literary translations.) The new translation, published in 1961 in the periodical *Delta*, was highly praised and seemed so to impress everyone that for a long time not a single other translator attempted to surpass him. It has taken until the twenty-first century for the Australian author and translator David Colmer to take up the challenge – at the request of the Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature. His approach is not only fresh and contemporary, it is also ambitious. His aim is to achieve something that both previous translators had failed to do: not only to be semantically and metrically (at least reasonably) faithful, but also to reflect the rich assonances of the original verse in a better way in the translation. In this way Colmer has possibly come a bit closer still to what is the ideal for many translators of poetry: to create a translation that is as much a poem in its own right in the target language as the original poem is in the source language.

In the course of 2009 the English public will be able to compare the existing 'Awater' translations for itself,



when all three are included in a special publication from Anvil Press Poetry. Fifteen years ago, under the title *Against the Forgetting*, this London poetry publisher published poems by another great twentieth-century Dutch figure: Hans Faverey (translated by Francis R. Jones). In this projected publication, *Martinus Nijhoff: Awater*, the three translations will follow each other in chronological order: from 1949 to 1961 to 2009, preceded by the Dutch original and an introduction by the Dutch Nijhoff expert Wiljan van den Akker. The letters written by Nijhoff to Van der Vat between April 1939 and June 1949 are also included in the collection, as is a short 'Note by the Translator' by Holmes and a fuller account by Colmer entitled 'Retranslating Awater'. The whole volume concludes with an English translation of Nijhoff's famous 'Enschede lecture' given to the Enschede People's University in 1935, a year after the completion of 'Awater'. In this lecture he explains how 'Awater' came about, and sets the poem and his poetic genius against the background of his times. The title of the lecture alone, 'Poetry in a Period of Crisis' indicates that Nijhoff's poetry, and also his thinking *about* poetry, have still lost little of their topicality.

Exactly sixty years after 'Awater' could first be read in England in a periodical, with the Anvil publication Martinus Nijhoff will finally get what he has always deserved: his first UK volume. Hopefully, and probably, it will not be another sixty years before somebody takes the next step and publishes a more comprehensive Nijhoff anthology in English.

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