

## Remco Campert and the Dubious Lightness of Being

If ever a writer in Dutch literature was blessed with eternal youth, that writer was Remco Campert. For decades his books bore witness to an almost provocative insouciance, which was perfectly expressed by the boyish, slightly mocking laugh in most of his portraits. His own preferred image of himself was as he appeared on the jacket of the collection of short stories *How I Celebrated my Birthday* (Hoe ik mijn verjaardag vierde, 1969): with a grin on his face, surrounded by five scantily clad, flirtatious-looking blondes in graceful poses.

Campert – poet, short-story writer, later also a columnist – seemed to be immune to the serious side of life, to brooding introspection, to the regrets and cynicism of the ageing writer. No greyness, no Calvinist gloom; in Campert's universe every day was a party. Until in 2004 he came out with a short novel, *A Love in Paris* (Een liefde in Parijs), followed in 2006 by *The Satin Heart* (Het satijnen hart): books which are not only about Campert's escape from the 'dreadful joylessness of life in the Netherlands', but also about the implications and consequences of that escape. Both books lend themselves to being read as a commentary on the ode to frivolity, the lack of concern, and the irresponsibility of the early short stories and novels.

### Un-Dutch levity

Remco Campert – born in 1929 – made his debut as a poet in 1951 with the anthology *But Birds do Fly* (Vogels vliegen toch). He was one of the 'Vijftigers', a group of young, rebellious poets who demanded greater personal, cultural and artistic freedom in the post-war climate of reconstruction. But of them all – Lucebert, Gerrit Kouwenaar and Jan Elburg are the best known – Campert was not only the youngest but also the least experimental. Influenced more by the matter-of-fact approach of William Carlos Williams than by the inimitable, ground-breaking excursions of the surrealists and Dadaists, Campert's grammar remains intact.

Although his earliest poetry contains references to 'charred and rusted fragments/of bombers that have been shot down', of 'bird-sounds shot to ribbons' and 'seriously wounded syllables', these marks of violence seem to be mainly rhe-

torical in nature, an obligatory bow to the critical *esprit de corps* of the young generation of poets, not the expression of a strictly personal pain experienced by the poet. In my opinion the poetry written in the spirit of jazz, of 'the drunkenness that there is no stopping', of the 'world that is swinging like crazy' is closer to that personal voice. That is the world, as sparkling and pleasure-loving as it is blasé, that Campert would also describe in his early prose, from the inside, not as a detached witness.

These were the books with which he broke through to a wider public: *Party Every Day* (Alle dagen feest, 1954), *The Boy with the Knife* (De jongen met het mes, 1959), *A Miserable Good-for-Nothing* (Een ellendige nietsnut, 1960) and above all the novels *Life is Luverly* (Het leven is verrukkuluk, 1961) and *Love's Pretences* (Liefdes schijnbewegingen, 1963). The last two of these have been reprinted countless times down to the present day. *Life is Luverly* anticipates the eruption of hedonism, spirit of freedom, craziness and 'creativity' that would become so characteristic of the Dutch version of the Sixties. The book sets itself apart from all Dutch prose of that period by its un-Dutch light-heartedness. That is partly due to the absence of history, both in the book as a whole and in the lives of the characters. They live in the here and now, improvising, not held back by or burdened with any past, not focused on any future. Also, there is no storyteller to set their lives in any kind of historical or social context. Where more serious-minded authors look back on the war or their wretched childhood, in a quasi-naïve manner Campert celebrates the lightness of being that in him is far from unbearable.

Far more than 'great' Dutch writers such as Harry Mulisch, W.F. Hermans and Gerard Reve, and far more self-evidently than Jan Wolkers a little later, Campert provides an initial foretaste of the massive emancipation that awaited us, especially in the field of sexuality, but he does so without any preaching, philosophical ponderousness or political pretensions. What is so delightful is that Campert immediately ridicules all ideological claims to that emancipation, including those of the avant-garde artist filled with missionary zeal on issues of liberty and morality. Though he does not name them specifically, those of his friends who professed their artistic calling with the fervour of a new religion are also taken to task. The artist is no visionary, and when he presumes to adopt that role Campert takes him down a peg. Campert's ode to liberty, to unfettered, irresponsible existence is in no sense a programme, nor is it in any way elitist or exclusive.

The book is witty not only because of its ironic debunking of all sorts of portentousness in favour of a frivolous existence without ties or obligations, but also because of its playing with language – inspired by Raymond Queneau and also practised in a similar way by Campert's friend Rudy Kousbroek. He writes 'difficult' loanwords or compounds in a quasi-naïve phonetic or analytical fashion, so that 'chewing gum' is transformed into a Chinaman called 'Tsjoe-win-k'um' (Chuwinkum) and marijuana into 'Marry-you-Anna'. Sometimes that play on words crystallises concepts in an unexpected way: 'seksuele verkeer' (sexual intercourse) becomes 'sexjuwelen verkeer' (sex jewel intercourse) and 'fysiek plezier' (physical pleasure) 'viesziek plezier' (literally 'filthy sick pleasure'). This last transformation is all the more effective as it occurs in the context of an indignant petty bourgeois tirade about the amoral and dissolute youth of today.

In this book, then, Campert already shows he has an aptitude for satire, although that talent is not fully developed until later. In that connection one must

Remco Campert (1929-).  
Photo by Klaas Koppe.



make particular mention of the extremely witty and subtle *Crikey!* (Tjeempie!, 1969). The author has never made a secret of the fact that this book is in a certain sense an imitation of *Candy* (1958), the sensational success by the Americans Southern and Hoffenburg, who rewrote Voltaire's *Candide* for the sexual revolution. Like Candy, Campert's principal character Liesje, fifteen years old, naive and uninhibited, goes in search of the meaning of sex; with this difference, that Liesje actually only wanted to interview modern writers as part of an Easter holiday project. The quality of the book resides mainly in the way it imitates the various styles. Campert's satire is fed not by rancour or aggression but by delight in nailing the behavioural and linguistic characteristics of well-known writers, including some who were his friends. That makes *Crikey!* a *roman à clef*. To appreciate the controlled hilarity of these portraits to the full one needs to know the original models. Among them are Jan Wolkers and Jan Cremer, authors who were well known in the early Sixties, and in conservative circles were regarded as downright notorious for their violent breaking of sexual taboos in literature. No less powerful are the portraits of Harry Mulisch, 'the best-dressed writer in the Netherlands', and Gerard van het Reve, 'laborious toiler in the Lord's vineyard', whose philosophical mumbo-jumbo and tawdry religiosity respectively come under attack. But in every case the concern is first and foremost with Liesje's naively stoical inauguration into the world of sexuality.

## A sense of failure

In the Seventies, by which time his name had long been firmly established in the Netherlands (although his lack of seriousness was probably responsible for the fact that he was never reckoned among the truly great), Campert must have undergone a creative crisis, at least if such a diagnosis does not clash too badly with his casual approach to life. The fact remains that during that period he published virtually nothing of significance. None the less, in 1979 he was honoured with the P.C. Hooft Prize for Poetry, the most prestigious non-commercial literary distinction in the Dutch language area. After that, and possibly inspired by it, new work began to appear again, both prose and poetry.

In 1980 *After the Speech from the Throne* (Na de troonrede) was published, a slim volume of four short stories that still show traces of creative block. The first story is about a writer who never gets around to writing and passes his time with short-lived erotic adventures, while the final story features the old, failed writer Max Brood (an allusion of course to Kafka's publisher Max Brod), who is quite unable to get his memoirs down on paper, since he cannot find any line whatsoever in his life. It is obvious that in these rather shaky stories Campert was trying to probe or document his own feelings of failure. In an interview from that period he said, among other things: *'I think every artist must surely feel he's failed to some extent. Because he himself knows what he set out to achieve.'*

It is possible that with *After the Speech from the Throne* Campert wanted to usher in a new phase in his career as an author. His style is still light and transparent, but the tone has become somewhat brooding. Also, he seems to have bidden farewell to a number of the very stylistic features that make his earlier prose work so attractive today: the understatement, the euphemism, the irony (directed at himself), the play on words, I say 'seems' because his next prose book, *The Harm and Miepje Kurk Story* (De Harm en Miepje Kurk Story, 1983), once more depends largely on these playful elements.

This book, *'a sketch on the morals of the eighties'* consists of short fragments with a strong satirical streak. The main character, the writer Rompe Terkamp (an anagram of Remco Campert, of course), is only interested in brief encounters, not in loving relationships. And with that we are back on familiar, all too familiar, territory. Although the book contains the compulsory hilarious fragments and Campert again shows himself a meticulous observer of fashions and clichés, as a whole it is too much of an exercise in repeating the past, in which this time the author fails to reach the level of *Life is Luverly*.

## Delayed pain

The poetry from the late Seventies on also varies in quality. Anthologies such as *Theatre* (Theater, 1979) and *Scènes in Hotel Morandi* (1983) contain as many weak, sometimes downright sentimental verses as they do powerful and profound ones. In one fairly well-known poem, '1975', from the first of these anthologies, he speaks of *'weird years, these years,/ nothing funny, many failures'*. And a little further on he confesses to the social failure of the poetry of the 'Vijftigers': *'But we too, when we aimed at the highest/ had nothing to offer anyone/ that would provide shelter/ food in the belly/ shears to cut through barbed wire.'* These verses are not unproblematic. Unlike some of his poet friends (Lucebert,

Bert Schierbeek], Campert has always been appropriately sceptical about that 'aiming at the highest'. Moreover, this enumeration of effects that failed to materialise sounds rather pathetic, particularly from this poet.

Far more convincing, and justly famous, is the poem 'januari 1943' from *Scènes in Hotel Morandi*, which is dedicated to his mother, the actress Joeki Broedelet. This poem contains a double reminiscence on the death of his father, Jan Campert, author of the most famous and popular Dutch Resistance poem of the Second World War, 'The Eighteen Dead Men' ('De achttien doden').

This poem is a reaction to the first death sentence to be carried out on the Waalsdorpervlakte in Schevening, when eighteen resistance fighters were executed. Jan Campert, who died on the 12 January 1943 in Neuengamme concentration camp, in circumstances that have never been fully explained, attempts to think himself into the minds of the condemned during the night before the execution. Many years later Remco Campert realised that when as a child he had learned of his father's death he had felt nothing, although he 'knew that he ought to feel something.' The pain only came later, and never went away.

## Cutting your own flesh

Of the later prose books the first we should mention is *A Love in Paris* (2004). It came as something of a surprise, considering that Campert had published no prose of any substance for fourteen years. It is true that from 1996 he was more than ever in the public eye (including that of the non-literary reader) on account of the much talked-about columns he published every other day on the bottom left of the front page of the *Volkskrant*. Since he published hardly any poetry in this period, the column, two hundred and fifty words of poetical meditation on daily existence and Dutch idiosyncrasies, became his pre-eminent genre. It is certainly a fact that Campert raised the genre of the column, used by other people mainly to air their opinions, to great heights. It can hardly be mere chance that in 2006, shortly after giving up his niche in the newspaper – to the disappointment of countless readers – that for the first time in a long while he once more published an anthology of poetry.

*A Love in Paris* is a prose sketch, with virtually no plot, in which an ageing writer, unmistakably an alter ego of Campert, revisits memories of earlier phases of his wild life as an artist in Amsterdam, Antwerp, and above all in Paris. He is impelled to do this when he is greeted in the last-named city by a 'well dressed, elegant woman', whom, to his irritation, he cannot place. Later she turns out to be the mother of a son, whose father he, the old writer, must be. That comes as a shock, at least to the writer, who had always avoided responsibilities like the plague and kept asking himself how he could get this attractive woman, with her husky voice and the 'expectation-arousing breasts beneath her blouse', between the sheets. No shock to the reader, though, for whom the key point revealed in the last sentence is little more than a, for Campert, painful cliché.

I find *The Satin Heart* (2006), another slim novel, much more powerful. Where apart from nostalgia the memories in *A Love in Paris* are dominated mainly by the youthful bravado of long ago, and not by its problematic aspects, in this book Campert cuts considerably deeper into his own flesh. The chief character is again an old and infirm artist who is dependent on his half-sister, in this case

not a writer but a visual artist. This elimination of the autobiographical character creates distance, and with it the possibility of personal reflection and self-criticism. This possibility is further strengthened by the presence of a second artist, a friend, with whom he nonetheless differs on fundamental matters of opinion. That leads to a great deal of dialogue and disagreement, to doubt and self-knowledge.

The artist friend seems to be based on Harry Mulisch, although naturally that name is not mentioned. He is *'committed'*, chases after every banner and is exceptionally egocentric. The narrator detests every kind of fashionable art, focused solely on creating an effect, and will have nothing to do with political art either. He is rich and famous, has exhibited all over the world, but now finds himself – a familiar theme, this – in a creative impasse. On top of which he is compelled by his friend to reflect on what his overwhelming passion for art has meant for his personal life. And then of course it is primarily a matter of his frivolous behaviour towards women. His rule was to drop them after one night, fearful of being tied down. For him art came before anything else, even love.

Yet slowly but surely cracks begin to appear in his armour-plated devotion to art. Memories of the childhood of his much younger half-sister, especially, cause him to realise that he has *'neglected'* a lot in life. *'The harm's done, it's too late now to get sentimental about it, but I still feel the regret searing in me like a jet of flame. I curse art, the idea that it could be more important than everything that was closer, the vanity of it, the internal bragging, the egocentricity that prevented me from begetting children and being like a father to them (...) Art is one great sham, a house of cards, self-delusion.'*

And then after all he makes one last desperate attempt to set his artistic house in order also. He realises that his current work is no good, that he is has got in too much of a rut. After ripping up an unsuccessful gouache, he is left – knowingly – empty-handed, he wants to put an end to all the self-deception, all the tricks, all the earlier *'successes'*. He asks himself what he still expects of himself, *'I'm burning with the desire to discover that.'* In the final sentence of the book he has reached that point; he finds himself in his studio, *'alone in a murmuring silence, the sound of art. My eyes explore the empty canvas.'* What is going to appear on that canvas will be of no less harrowing authenticity than what Campert has just confided to the reader in this book. ■