

Deeper and Deeper into the Forest

On the Work of Oek de Jong

194

[JEROEN VULLINGS]

Before the publication of *Pier en oceaan* (Pier and Ocean, 2012), I asked myself once or twice whether it would be more accurate to refer to the work of Oek de Jong's 'pens' rather than the work of his 'pen'. After all, each new book bearing his name seemed to have been written by a different author also called Oek de Jong. *De wonderen van de heilbot* (The Wonders of the Halibut, 2006), the diary that he kept while writing *Hokwerda's kind* (Hokwerda's Child, 2002), contains an illuminating remark in this respect: 'I need to reinvent myself as a novelist.'

And this is just what he has done: his first novel, *Opwaaierende zomerjurken* (Billowing Summer Frocks, 1979), is a sensitive bildungsroman; *Cirkel in het gras* (Circle in the Grass, 1985) is an intellectual novel of ideas; *De inktvis* (The Octopus, 1993), a pair of novellas, is in its turn mystical; and the 444-page novel *Hokwerda's Child* is very earthy, and with it cruel and sensual. I have not included de Jong's debut, *De hemelvaart van Massimo* (The Ascension of Massimo, 1977) and his essayistic prose in this summary, this shard portrait, as it is not uncommon for these genres to deviate from the rest of a writer's oeuvre.

De Jong's magnum opus, *Pier and Ocean*, marks the culmination of his earlier creative prose spanning many years: all the shards fall into their natural place, so to speak. Is there an explanation for this? Indeed, there are several.

Firstly, in this semi-autobiographical family saga, with its protagonist Abel Roorda, de Jong (re-)uses the narrative material of his life and the lives of his parents. Several of the features contained in his body of work are taken from the same source. No wonder: *Pier and Ocean* ends with the birth of Abel's (adolescent) career as a writer. Hence too the similarity to *Billowing Summer Frocks* (in particular), so much so that the respective protagonists Edo and Abel seem to have a strong spiritual connection.

Secondly, over the course of his lapidary oeuvre, de Jong gradually develops into a pureblood novelist – the novel is his form. In *Billowing Summer Frocks*, he still seems to be working intuitively, but from *Hokwerda's Child* onward, he is more aware of his craft. Bearing in mind that the novel, as Milan Kundera might put it, is a ladder that leads down into the human mind, deeper and deeper.

Thirdly, he has learnt to control this mind. Yes, control, not restrain. One book that, mistakenly, seldom gets a mention in reviews and discussions is *Een man die in de toekomst springt* (A Man Leaping into the Future, 1997), but in this book de Jong thinks himself out of the personal crisis into which his descent into the

Oek de Jong (1952)

© Klaas Koppe



human mind has led him. He stared into the abyss and the abyss stared back. The decade between 1985 and 1995, when he walked through a deep valley, was in his own words 'a dark time'. During this period, he only published the vulnerable mythical-magical pair of novellas *The Octopus*, which was met with general derision and incomprehension by literary critics.

Whistling bullets

Very few authors have broken with their earlier work like this, have put their hard-earned status on the line in the same way as de Jong. *The Octopus* led to a complete reversal of esteem. In an article about the state of affairs in Dutch literature (*Maatstaf* 8/9, 1991), the literary critics Arnold Heumakers and Willem Kuipers came to the conclusion that A.F.Th. van der Heijden, Oek de Jong and Frans Kellendonk were the successors to W.F. Hermans, Harry Mulisch and Gerard Reve ('the Big Three'). This selection seemed to me at the time very premature: Kellendonk died in 1990, before his writing had fully matured. And hardly anything had been heard from de Jong, literarily speaking, since *Circle in the Grass*. Heumakers in particular must have deeply regretted his public statement of faith in de Jong. In his subsequent, negative discussion of *The Octopus*, he even declared de Jong's writing career 'dead and buried'. This was probably the harshest judgment at the time, although most of the other reactions did not beat about the bush either: 'woolly nonsense', 'mumbo jumbo', 'a mystical lucky dip', 'curiosities'. All at once, de Jong found himself in a Wild West scene, the sound of clarion calls replaced by whistling bullets.

If we calmly reconsider *The Octopus*, with which de Jong tried to take his hitherto more classically imbued writing in a different direction after eight years of silence, the author appears to be trying to find a clearer way of expressing the prevalent, archaic language of imagery rooted in the unconscious – and therefore a clearer way of expressing meaning too. Compared with his previous work, he sets off on an expressly apsychological path, and in so doing pulls the rug from under the reader's feet.

De Jong's *A Man Leaping into the Future*, a volume of essays written between 1983 and 1997, provides the necessary background to his creative quest. In these essays, he confronts things from the past that he finds fascinating, from Caravaggio's

The Raising of Lazarus to Frans Kellendonk's *Mystiek lichaam* (Mystical Body). He takes the reader along on a journey through time, from ancient Egypt to the chaos of postmodernity. The unspoken starting point for this self-examination is the question: which elements from human history shall I take with me into the twenty-first century? By revealing which influences from his predecessors he will keep and which he will discard, de Jong defines and legitimises his own writing. And after detailed essayistic examination of the differences between their ideas – or world views – and his, he presents the reader with a self-portrait at the end of the volume. A portrait in which all the mystical features accumulated over the course of centuries by like-minded artists have been combined and made into a one-off entity by the name of Oek de Jong.

The title *A Man Leaping into the Future* is taken from an essay on the poet Paul van Ostaïjen, whose work de Jong appreciates in particular for its vitality. 'Van Ostaïjen is a man who leaps into the future.' In an informative essay on mysticism, defined by him as 'the selflessness that is the essence of any creative activity, that which gives itself 'for nothing', the concept of 'leap' comes under closer discussion. In the language of the mystics, paradox is the ultimate trope, as this forces one to leap 'from one logic to the next, from acting to non-acting, from knowing to non-knowing, from self to non-self.' Van Ostaïjen made this leap and for this reason he serves as a shining example.

But after shaking off the old world views and world forms, Oek de Jong can just as easily be considered a man leaping into the future. He says in his volume of essays that he is ready for the postmodern turmoil in which anything can serve as material. One sentence in particular reads as a credo: 'He must do his job, he must write well, and not be afraid to sink deeper and deeper into his art.' With this, the writer Oek de Jong announces his return.

Inching creeper

Yet his third novel, *Hokwerda's Child*, did not appear until 2002. A completely different de Jong than many foresaw. Many, because the frenzied de Jong-watchers never sleep. Shortly after the publication of *A Man Leaping into the Future*, I came across a story by him in an Amsterdam street newspaper. A short, threatening fragment that left me wanting more, about a young girl who goes home with a grubby man. Dark eroticism and leather, very unlike de Jong. Refreshingly concrete.

This adolescent girl – she is called Lin – turns out to be the key figure in *Hokwerda's Child*. Her relationships steeped in eroticism are central to the novel. With Henri, a rough-and-ready welder about ten years her senior, 'who fucked her, forced her open, left and came back'. And with the civilised lawyer Jelmer – a couple of years older – who, well-bred or not, respects her in bed. In the broad narrative of *Hokwerda's Child*, de Jong allocates a remarkable amount of space to sex – more than in his earlier prose. They are at it constantly: 'She felt his prick swell in her hand, she pulled the skin back and then turned her hand over, so that it lay on the inside of her wrist, on the throbbing vein. "You're going to do it with me aren't you, eh... horny bastard... hard-sweller... inching creeper."' De Jong's characters do not engage in foreplay; they penetrate, thrust and pound away quite merrily and free from inhibitions from one day to the next. The missionary position reigns, and corporality is the order of the day, whether it is the

mechanical licking of an armpit, the mindless fingering of a sweat patch above the buttocks, or the noisy sucking of an Adam's apple.

In short, the characters in Hokwerda's *Child* are everyday run-of-the-mill men and women. No more tormented intellectuals or ethereal *NRC Handelsblad* correspondents in Rome. Meet instead twenty-four-year-old Lin Hokwerda, who has huge breasts and a jubilant libido. Lin spent her early childhood in the Frisian countryside, before her mother left her punch-throwing father, taking Lin and her sister Emma with her. Lin has lived in Amsterdam ever since, and at the start of the book we find her working in a shop that sells leather clothing. She has already been in one relationship, with the drug addict Marcus. Quick as a flash, she falls head over heels for the muscly Henri, who works as a welder on an oil rig. Their first date ends in rape, but that does not stand in the way of a passionate relationship. At one point, Henri goes too far even by Lin's standards. The fact that he beats her, even 'sells' her to an African sailor like a pimp, is apparently acceptable. But the frequent cheating does not have Lin's blessing. There follows her meeting and then relationship with Jelmer. Then an adulterous encounter with Henri. Then an argument with Jelmer. Then a relationship with Henri. Then murder and manslaughter.

In Hokwerda's *Child*, de Jong seeks to represent the psychology of the irrational, which he does in two ways. Firstly by showing the course of Lin's love life: she feels 'chained' to Henri, although Jelmer is undeniably a better choice for her. Secondly by allowing her tumultuous life, which we share for a few years, to end in an act of social self-ruin: murder. A crime of passion as an illustration of what the human being, like a keg of gunpowder waiting to explode, is capable of.

Anyone reading this description of Lin might think, 'What an irrational cow'. But however self-destructive her behaviour might be, once the reader has empathised with her for hundreds of pages, it just becomes an absurdity of life to be accepted rather than a mystery to be solved. The reader has little choice but to submit to the story, for reasons of willing suspension of disbelief and de Jong's seductive ability as a writer.

Hokwerda's *Child* is a naturalistic novel pure and simple. Lin's fate seems determined by her heredity, her upbringing and the concrete circumstances in which she finds herself. Take the title of the novel alone. In keeping with the old-fashioned genre that spotlights the pathology of the weak, *The Unfortunate* might have been an option – after all, this designation is used twice in the text. It is true that Lin's experiences have something of a symbolic story of suffering, just like several of the contributions in the street newspaper. But the title, *Hokwerda's Child*, retains the provincial smell of the regional novel, which de Jong's book is too in part.

Another curious leap forward, around one hundred years back in time to naturalism – but understandable given de Jong's previous history as a writer. One can certainly see in retrospect how, time after time, he struggles to gain control – of his material in the first instance. Hence the constant attempts to 'invent' a different genre for each new book, the jumps from floe to floe, always asking the same question about meaning. *Circle in the Grass* is too ambitious, dealing as it does with love, politics, art and cultural criticism all at once. De Jong is left intellectually stranded after this book, before being literarily stranded by the spiritual *The Octopus*. With the obvious consequence that he goes a long way to reinvent himself as a storyteller, witness *Hokwerda's Child*. And what better way than in such a traditional realistic form as the late nineteenth century novel?

A glimpse behind the front door

From Hokwerda's *Child* onwards, de Jong's ambition lies in (sensory) storytelling. His expression is never formulaic. He is a careful and effective writer with a sharp eye and a feeling for detail. Although he appears to shun metaphor, his great scene-setting abilities completely suck us into the story; indeed, from Hokwerda's *Child* on, de Jong is fully immersed in scene-setting in his art. He has a rare ability to create life-like characters that still seem real even after you have finished reading. Scene after scene is imprinted on your memory. Sometimes it just takes a simple sentence: 'Dina walked deeper and deeper into the forest.' He proves himself a master at evoking those feelings that often spring from relationships, such as desperation, melancholy and euphoria; those quick shifts between experiencing happiness and a solar eclipse brought on by sexual jealousy; darkness – something de Jong can penetrate like no other. Just as in Hokwerda's *Child* he sought to fathom the psychology of a murderess, *Pier and Ocean* is about providing a glimpse behind the front door, to show what really happens in families. Often this turns out to be hidden violence.

De Jong said in an interview that he was inspired to write Hokwerda's *Child* after reading Tolstoy. *Pier and Ocean* is noticeably Proustian in its conception. For around 800 pages, the reader is drawn into the story of Abel Roorda, his religious parents and even more religious grandparents. De Jong uses them to depict the changing Netherlands, from the Hunger Winter to the prosperous 1970s. He brings this history to life by focusing on the life choices of ordinary people down through the generations – we empathise with his characters as contemporaries. De Jong manages to achieve the constant and high intensity of the prose by bringing to life the facts of Abel's life through Abel's experience of events. This experience, in turn, consists of a meticulous evocation of both Abel's sensory perceptions and of what is taking place in his consciousness.

De Jong is still a writer who reinvents himself with each new book. Only now he does so within the context of the novel tradition: he strives for renewal within the novel genre. With *Pier and Ocean*, he measures up to his idols Simon Vestdijk and Proust. While these writers use alter egos in their semi-autobiographical *romans-fleuves*, *Pier and Ocean* focuses on four characters from three generations, thereby reserving a lot of past history for his protagonist Abel Roorda. The first one hundred pages – magisterial pages – of the polyphonic novel *Pier and Ocean* describe a day in the life of the pregnant Dina, Abel's mother-to-be. She lives in with a landlady in Breda while her husband is quartered as a soldier in a nearby barracks, and she cannot stand it anymore. Back she goes to her hometown of Amsterdam. And as she sets out on this undefined quest, her unfortunate past history passes before her eyes: the enforced choices, the missed opportunities, the pressures to conform. This as a prelude to Abel's existence, to explain how he came to be formed and deformed. So, alongside Abel's history, de Jong also depicts the marriages of his parents and grandparents, and shows how various characteristics and circumstances affect the generations.

De Jong uses details rather than historical events to bring to life the lost Netherlands of Abel's youth and his parents' and grandparents' generations. He describes the Netherlands of the forties, fifties and sixties, during which time profound changes occurred, from on the ground, from the everyday perspective of the citizens of the time. A woman with healthy teeth who is talked into having

false teeth fitted by her dentist, a man who decides to stop wearing a hat, the sexual freedom afforded by the advent of the contraceptive pill – such signs of the times. This realism is de Jong's tool for boring deeper into reality – the reality of his character(s).

All the same, *Pier and Ocean* has an extremely symbolic title, in spite of this realism-as-device. It refers to a series of paintings with the same name by the symbolist Mondrian. Sitting on the dunes at Domburg and observing how the rows of groynes seemed to 'walk into' the sea, Mondrian identified the groynes as male and the sea as female. However, this is just one of the meanings of 'pier and ocean' in de Jong's novel.

Birth as a writer

The constant motion is that Abel is always seeking out extreme points, whether it is a beacon on the dike at Het Sas, the last groyne on the beach, the very tip of the bow of a tanker, or the outermost point of a rocky promontory in Finistère. This tendency is linked to Abel's birth as a writer, with which the novel ends. He has been brought up listening to Old Testament stories, and the story of Samuel has led him to believe that there is another, divine reality outside this one, one from which someone is talking to him. He expects (as in the story) to hear the voice of God, to have a vision. Filled with this desire, he keeps going to extreme points of the land. He senses that this is where it will happen. But no. In vain.

At the end of the novel, Abel realises that there is no 'other world'. *Pier and Ocean* is not least a novel about the loss of faith – in Abel's life and in the changed post-war Netherlands. Although to begin with Abel is still under the spell of the (faith-determined) notion of 'eternity', in the fifth part of the novel this is exchanged for the concept of 'concentration', which is discussed in several passages. Abel comes to realise that the other world he has been seeking has already been discovered. This world is inside him. It is the world of the subconscious, which uses images, not divine inspiration. The discovery of this wealth that he can draw on marks the birth of his life as a writer; he can set to work.

This marks the end of this semi-autobiographical novel. But we can be quite certain about what will happen to Abel, we only have to look at Oek de Jong's self-aware, authentic, active and above all vital writing. ■

www.oekdejong.nl

Oek de Jong's work is published by Uitgeverij Augustus and has been translated into several languages, although not yet into English.

Pier en oceaan (*Pier and Ocean*), novel, 2012.

De wonderen van de heilbot. Dagboek 1997-2002 (*The Wonders of Halibut. Diary 1997-2002*), 2006

Hokwerda's kind (*Hokwerda's Child*), novel, 2002

Een man die in de toekomst springt (*A Man Leaping into the Future*), essays, 1997

De inktvis (*The Octopus*), short story, 1993

Cirkel in het gras (*Circle in the Grass*), novel, 1985

Opwaaiende zomerjurken (*Billowing Summer Frocks*), novel, 1979

An Extract from *Pier and Ocean*

By Oek de Jong

Two days after his confession they had zipped their sleeping bags back together in the tent and made love. The first time fast and fierce, then again, this time quiet and slow. Abel didn't know if it had helped. Neither did Digna. She'd turned on her side, her back to him, felt for her insect repellent and rubbed some on, then fallen asleep.

Abel lay awake. He heard the waves breaking at the foot of the cliff, the water splashing up and cascading down onto the rocks, the sea withdrawing with a rattling of pebbles on the beach, the next wave breaking with the same dull drone. After his confession, Digna hadn't wanted to touch him for two days, even preferring not to look at him. The turning point had come this evening. Perhaps you needed it, with a girl like that, she'd said. A while later, after she'd put on her jumper, pulling her hair roughly out of the neck hole: and perhaps it's good for us in the end too. Her rage had flared up again as they made love.

He listened to the breaking of the waves, the rattling of the pebbles. Slowly the sweat dried on his body. Slowly the emotions ebbed away. He felt even more miserable, more guilty, now that he'd seen Digna's helpless love, now he'd felt her arms and legs around him again, now he'd heard her come. Digna.

Enraged and in love at the same time. He closed his eyes and saw Denise. She was still there. He pushed the memories away. But then – when Digna seemed fast asleep – he let her back in. Denise with her sorrowful eyes. His body had yearned for her. He could still feel that yearning. Come on, come on, oh Jesus and Mary, come on. Her husky voice. Twice he'd driven to the station to take the train to Vlissingen without actually going. The day before departure he'd gone home after dinner at the Maelcotes' and driven past the station again. The train from Vlissingen had just arrived, as if it was meant to be. It was just after a storm. Steam rose from the street, a damp warmth hung under the trees on the station square. He saw Denise emerge from the station, a baggy nylon jacket over her miniskirt, a shoulder bag, a shopping bag. An unknown girl he knew. She stopped a man and asked him for a light. The man gave her a light and made himself scarce, as if frightened by her. He saw her cross the empty, steaming station square and disappear slowly but surely under the trees of the avenue into town. He'd wanted to follow her, speak to her. But it was impossible.

Abel listened to the waves at the foot of the cliff. The dull drone. The water splash-



ing up and crashing down. He drifted further, thinking of his father and mother, his brothers and sisters in the bungalow far away, the boat he wasn't sailing, the white hull in the dark reeds. The new moon he'd seen rise this evening had risen there too... Toni, as he'd last seen him: lying on his stomach in the saloon of the sloop, a fat black fly on the blond hair at the back of his head. He'd heard nothing more from him... Dave, upper body naked, jeans sliding down. Mrs. Anja, strands of hair over a blanket, a piece of her harem trousers, two solid bare feet. Denise's warm body under the sleeping bag in the forecabin. It seemed long ago... Still the fear was there as he thought back to his journey over the dark shallows. Having just clambered on board, as he removed his muddy shoes, he'd seen the rising water flow around the ship, dead calm, glistening... Stop thinking about it... Stop thinking about it... Watse and Lena, at a campsite somewhere, lying around in their tent playing cards half the day... Job practised the cello eight hours a day... Danker was now helping his father on the land... He and Digna in a tent on a cliff in Finistère... Everyone far away, alone. Even Digna, lying just beside

him. Images of the sea drifted through his head: swirling between the rocks, splashing high in the glare of the evening sun. An unknown coast, but immediately familiar. A place where he wanted to be, and Digna too... Long strands of seaweed, washed up on the beach, stretching metres long. That's the ocean... A long train of seaweed wound around my body, a bunch of it on my head. That'd make me feel cheerful... Might it cure me? But what of? A bunch of seaweed on my head, my whole body wound up in it... A beautiful stone, found on the beach. That raises expectations, vaguely, for a second, less than a second. Especially when it's a stone she's found and given you... Despite her rage she still gave me a stone... Pubic hair spreads the scent of her excitement... You'd hoped your life would be different in another country, but it's the same... It'll be the same everywhere.

From *Pier en oceaan*,
Uitgeverij Augustus, Amsterdam, 2012

Translated by Anna Asbury