

## New Roads to Paradise

In Praise of Hans Boland

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[ CHRISTIANE KUBY ]

In search of the most beautiful untranslated book from Dutch literature I am re-reading the novel *De zachte held* (The Tender Hero) by my colleague-translator Hans Boland, published in 2014, favourably reviewed in the newspapers, but subsequently relegated to the background until Boland was heard from again in early 2015 when he refused the renowned Pushkin Prize that had been awarded to him for his translations from the Russian. The prize was welcome, but to receive it from Putin's hands was unthinkable. Boland wouldn't let himself be used as a cultural sop for politics that he abhorred. Luckily he wasn't punished for it but was awarded the Martinus Nijhoff Prize for his complete translation oeuvre shortly afterwards. Because I was receiving the same prize for my translations into German we were interviewed together, on a wintry day, at the Translators' House in Amsterdam, where Boland was temporarily residing, since he had not long ago moved permanently to Indonesia.

Shortly before we met I had read *De zachte held* and I was very impressed by it. This was a book I wanted to translate into German. But what a job! And what a book! Nearly twenty years earlier, by translating the autobiographical novel *Het lied en de waarheid* (1997) by Helga Ruebsamen (translated into English by Paul Vincent as *The Song and the Truth*, Knopf, 2000), I had for the first time come into contact with a side of Dutch culture/society that was unknown to me, a kind of undertow in fact, coming from writers who were born and/or had grown up in Indonesia, which was then still a Dutch colony, the Dutch East Indies, authors to whom that land with its tropical climate, its people and its nature had come to look like a paradise, not in the least perhaps because they had had to leave it at a young age. In her famous debut novel *Oeroeg* (translated into English by Ina Rilke as *The Black Lake*, Portobello Books, 2012) Hella Haasse recreates the atmosphere in which the friendship between a Dutch and a Javanese boy, on the borderline between the colonial era and Indonesia's independence, is in fact doomed to failure; the social differences between the two families and the political tension during the War of Independence are simply too great.

Besides such authors, who are forever thinking back nostalgically to their youth in the Dutch Indies, there are also those who articulate different experiences. Thus Jeroen Brouwers with his *Bezonken Rood* (translated into English



by Adrienne Dixon as *Sunken Red*, Peter Owen, 1995, New Amsterdam Books, 1998) reminds us of a whole different chapter in the colonial history, that of the Japanese occupation of Indonesia during the Second World War and the fate of the Dutch who were interned by the Japanese in 'Jap Camps'.

And this is only a small selection from the great number of novels in which the relationship of the Dutch to their former colony is central. Only a fraction of them have been translated into German. And other than in Germany, where the relationship with its past has been a subject of heated public debate for over thirty years, the crimes committed by the Dutch army during Indonesia's War of Independence are only rarely discussed in the Netherlands. It's unlikely that the German public has developed a feeling for the complexity, range and contradictions of all those memories from that colonial past. Hans Boland's recent book could change this. *De zachte held* is a successful mixture of fiction and travelogue, of a love story and essayistic, critical reflections about the historical development of Indonesia from colony to independent republic.

Boland, in contrast to most others with an Indonesian background, was only born on Java in 1951 and therefore after the Second World War and the War of Independence. His father worked there 'as a missionary' although, according

Vincent Van Gogh,  
*The Novel Reader*, 1888,  
Private Collection



Rogier van der Weyden, *Mary Magdalene reading*,  
fragment from a *Sacra Conversazione*, c. 1445,  
National Gallery, London

to the narrator, he didn't much believe in God and had chosen this route mainly because the Missionary School offered him the chance to receive a higher education and to realize a boyhood dream: to go 'to Insulinde'. But despite the fact that the father sympathized with the 'freedom fighters', the situation became more and more intolerable for Dutch people in the new republic. That's how the narrator, as a nine-year-old boy, landed in the Netherlands, the chilly, damp country where he would always remain an outsider. Only after a whole life, when he is sixty-one, does he follow his childhood dream and travel back to the town where he was born: Jakarta. For three months he explores Java, Sumatra and a small number of the more than seventeen thousand islands of the archipelago, and there he meets the love of his life, the Javanese Teguh, who is thirty years younger than he is.

In the novel there are always two voices; in the first part the perspective jumps back and forth between the boy the narrator once was and the man he is now, between past and present; later in the book there are still two voices, but the voices have changed:

*Until halfway through my ninth year Holland was a myth. It rained there, slanting rains. They ate pears and cherries there [...] Java was my country, the country of kantjils and tigers. A kantjil was the most beautiful animal in creation, I myself was a tiger.*

But what was supposed to be a temporary visit of nine months became a whole lifetime.

*Of course I have to go by sea, in a ship. That's how we left, that's how I want to go back. I have wanted to go back since I left there, fifty-two years ago. I have longed for it for so long that 'going back' has become nearly the same as 'going'. Yet during all that time my decision never wavered, one day I would go back to Java and I would go there by ship.*

Part I contains the journey of the tourist, the nostalgic who visits the house where he was born in Jakarta, his parental home and, in vain, his elementary school in Bandung. Details continuously alternate with the main narration. The description of the landscape, the towns and villages, but also of encounters on the train, the street, in hotels and eating places captures the imagination of the reader. Nor does the narrator hesitate to show his other, contradictory, feelings: his homesickness, the confrontation with the changes the country has undergone since his childhood. The cultural differences, the habit of the Javanese to always laugh, evading problems that way, how they never ask questions, the way they still behave subserviently towards Dutch people, the religion, the poverty and their joy of living, the charm of the children. There is no aspect which does not arouse his curiosity. About the Indonesian language he writes a letter to his old friend Ram: 'I never knew that such an enormous quantity of concepts (an estimated five to ten thousand) had been incorporated from the language of the colonizer [...] Once you know the spelling rules you are always encountering Dutch-nesian', and that sounds, he shows convincingly with quite a few examples, often very comical to Dutch ears.

Every chapter begins with a memory, a reflection or a glance at the past, a reverie, so that gradually a picture emerges of the first nine years of the main character, to reinforce the impressions of a day or a week during the trip. The reader enjoys accompanying him and seeing things with him, experiencing the downpours, swinging in a hammock on a veranda, climbing a volcano, meeting the new inhabitants of his parental home. You understand that the narrator is in search of his own lost youth. Yet critical thoughts are uttered just as easily as nostalgic ones, he does not mince words and also allows the reader to share in his feelings of hurt or poignancy.

The travelogue never becomes boring, new aspects are brought up continually, humour alternates with quiet reflection or a biting analysis of the narrator's experiences. This traveller is an intellectual, curious, nostalgic and critical at the same time, with a feeling for atmosphere, people's character, while in search of, yes of what exactly? Eventually this turns out to be love.



In Part I of the novel we only meet the Javanese Teguh in passing. He is the errand boy who comes with the little apartment in Jakarta where the narrator spends the first and the last days of his stay. He reminds the narrator of his friend at elementary school in Bandung, 'perhaps because of his smile'. His appearance makes him think of a kantjil, a dwarf deer, so perfectly built he seems, while the way he goes after mosquitoes is more reminiscent of a tjitjak, a gecko. And a little bit later we read: 'His smile is the most beautiful I have ever seen.' Still, this would not give a reader pause, as there are more young



W.B. Tholen, *The Arntzenius Sisters*, 1895,  
Photo by Tom Haartsen © Collection Museum Gouda, Gouda

people whose appearance move the narrator or make him enthusiastic. But then, in Part II of the novel, Teguh, whose name means 'steadfast', becomes the centre of his world.

The tone changes from reflective to intimate. The farewell scene at the end of Part I, which already gives the reader a vague though somewhat superficial idea that something is going on between the narrator and his errand boy, is repeated in Part II, now with details that can't be misunderstood.

## **I will, if necessary, force the stars**

Once again the narrator does not mince words. A sixty-year-old intellectual from the Netherlands meets the love of his life: a Javanese who is thirty years younger. The differences couldn't be greater. Is it a holiday fling his Dutch friends ask, concerned, or, as the narrator puts it himself, in his unsparing way: is an older man using a young man from the slums? Is he buying him with his money? Or is the Javanese profiting from him, will he subsequently, once he is totally infatuated, leave him? And if it isn't a holiday fling, isn't it then a post-colonial love relationship?

The answer is in the story itself and can't be summarized in a few sentences. While all those questions whirl continuously through your head, you are swept along into a love between two people who are, for very different reasons, each other's last chance. It's make or break, for both of them. The difference in age and socio-cultural background leads to many nearly intolerable situations and regularly drives the narrator (and most likely his lover as well, but that we can only guess) to despair. Whether it is about dealing with money – Teguh lives from hand to mouth and, for example, spends 450 euros from the communal kitty in one go on pills from a 'quack' – or about the handling of time or appointments. On top of that 'the boy' often disappears for days on end, without giving any sign of life and just stops speaking when there is something he doesn't like – those are only a few examples that seem to make it obvious that any relationship between these two is a complete illusion. And that's exactly why it is both fascinating and moving to follow them on the trajectory they travel together. The narrator, overly conscious of the unevenness in the relationship, does his utmost to learn the 'language' of his beloved: 'He sees images, I see words.' He makes every effort to adjust and to put himself in the world of the other and so you breathlessly read how time after time a reconciliation becomes possible that is also a real coming together, how the 'rich Westerner' lets go of his ideas about relationships, lets go of his 'norms and values', yes, even of his pride, his anger, his fear to become the victim of his own yearning for love. While we read, we partake in a struggle that demands unconditional surrender, a struggle of life and death, no more and no less. And at the end both lovers have grown and the road to a common future seems to lie open. Even the turn the novel takes on the last pages doesn't alter that: while the narrator flies back for, as he believes, a last visit to the Netherlands before he settles permanently in Indonesia, Teguh dies of the disease he has had for many years, a disease that can't be named in Indonesia. Yes that – but more importantly: he is able to accept it.

## **A gift from heaven**

The intimate tone is ushered in by the story about his cat Roes. This cat, that had been his inseparable companion and had sweetened the preceding four lonely years in Amsterdam, disappears shortly before the narrator leaves for Jakarta, just as unexpectedly as she had once appeared. 'From now on it will always be like this. Roes won't be there to greet me.' The love that he is experiencing now is just as mysterious as the one for Roes. 'Roes belonged to

me and I belonged to her' - this tenderness and attachment from both sides is moving and recognizable. Thinking about Roes crosses over into thinking about his love for the Javanese Teguh, for where does all this tenderness come from after thirty years of 'living like a monk'?

'I am trying to answer the question whether I fell for this boy because of who he is, or because he happened to be the first Javanese I met.' And just as Roes appears and disappears, to return again one day, Teguh, in his behaviour, is also more like a wild cat than a person. And while the narrator looks back on his life, which during his youth had been rich in sex but had been lacking in love during the last decades, his amazement grows about what is now happening to him: 'Unexpectedly love has once more taken root'. And although the encounter has also on the sexual level reached unknown heights, he concludes: 'And still it isn't the sex that excites me'.

*His breath is spicy. Sweet and spicy. The smell of sun on privet leaf. A trace of cow parsley that you smell but can't see when you are cycling through the polder, it's so far away. The smell of dry flowers at dawn.*

These words call up associations with the Song of Songs. They form poetic images the narrator uses to bring across something of the intoxicating love that has turned his life upside down. In Part II they introduce each chapter and create the atmosphere that lets you be carried along on a wave of blissful, passionate and tender encounters.

'The infatuation will pass', the narrator muses, 'taking care of the boy can still be done after that.' It is that inner step, long before it has to be taken, that will enable him to endure the tribulations that await him.

'Only now I'm starting to realize what I have missed the most since I no longer have Roes: a living, breathing creature that needs me. "My boy, Guh, you are a gift from heaven", I write to the boy I have automatically started to call Guh. Guh, a sound like a breath in the dark.'

It is the road to this insight, as deep as it is simple, into the secret of love that the author lets the reader traverse in *De zachte held*, and in order to do that you have to be a damn good writer.

Hans Boland, *De zachte held*, Athenaeum-Polak & Van Genneep 2014. ■