

Prometheus Unbound

Essays as an Orphic Counterforce

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[C Y R I L L E O F F E R M A N S]

The Dutch – or rather Hollanders, Frisians and Zeelanders – are coastal dwellers, and traditionally their eyes were focused more on the sea than on dry land. As long ago as the early and high Middle Ages, long before the rise of the Hanseatic towns in the East of the country, they earned their living from fishing and trade. By the end of the sixteenth century, thanks to the nautical knowledge and know-how it had acquired over the centuries, the Republic of the Seven Provinces, tiny as it was in surface area, became the richest and most powerful nation on earth – a fact which astonishes historians to this day.

The Dutch had by far the largest fleet among the seafaring nations, discovered in every remote corner of the world opportunities for conducting trade – often not distinguishable from plunder and piracy – and at an early date, in 1600, founded the first multinational, the United East India Company, known as the VOC for short after its Dutch initials. That left a decisive mark on the Dutch national character. Roughly until the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century – in literary terms, until Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* (which makes particular fun of the allegedly adventurous modern, organised travel) – navigation was a highly risky undertaking. Crews were decimated by disease, privation and violence, and the lucky ones who survived all that were away from home for years.

Conditions at sea and abroad were unpredictable and often required immediate and spontaneous action. Besides physical strength and courage, seamen needed a good deal of improvisational ability. Relying on rigid command structures and rehearsed routines was often undesirable, and potentially fatal. However much discipline prevailed on board, without a certain degree of anarchy (*an-archè* = without ground), survival, both individual and collective, was impossible.

That made many seafaring Dutchmen unsuitable for life in strongly hierarchical structures and also explains their constitutional predisposition towards the Reformation, which championed individual responsibility of the believer towards God, as well as their eventually successful resistance to the feudal Catholic Church, which had become one with the Spanish empire. From the outset they showed little attachment to their own soil and history, indeed, to anything that is understood today by a national or otherwise geographically de-



financed identity, including language. The other side of this lack of interest is also typical of Dutch power, for that matter. Unlike the Spanish and Portuguese, French and British colonialists, the Dutch were scarcely if at all interested in territorial expansion, or in exporting their culture or language. Cultural imperialism was alien to them, all that mattered was trade, yield, profit.

America

All this also explains why Dutch culture, especially after the Second World War, is so strongly Anglo-Saxon in orientation. English, after all, is the lingua franca of international capitalism and hence also of scholarship, cosmopolitanism and

the associated culture. 'Everyone' speaks English, or something that passes for it. English is the common language at Dutch universities. No language has as many modish English loanwords and expressions as Dutch. The literary supplements keep the reader closely in touch with new British and American publications, which have long set the norm for the bulk of reviewers. No less than seventy percent of all literary translations relate to English-language books. Many authors, particularly younger ones, are consequently influenced by Anglo-Saxon writers.

The Americanisation – read also commercialisation – of Dutch literature seems more dramatic than in other European countries. True, plenty of good books still appear. Perhaps more than ever, but for fewer and fewer readers. The Republic of Letters is a seriously ageing and contracting area.

Symptomatic of the almost axiomatic Anglo-Saxon dominance is the reception of the translation of a book by the British historian Michael Pye, *The Edge of the World* (2014), the subtitle of which, *How the North Sea Made Us Who We Are*, must have particularly caught the attention of Dutch readers. Pye tries to show that the Middle Ages were by no means a patch of darkness between Antiquity and the Renaissance but, at least for the peoples on the coasts of the North Sea, a time of lively navigation, trade and still relevant discoveries in a variety of different areas. Unfortunately he gets no farther than mainly disjointed, often unproven stories. The book is, in all respects, messy, incoherent and unconvincing. Yet it was virtually unanimously enthusiastically praised by Dutch critics and was on the bestseller lists for months.

That is all the more remarkable because a thematically somewhat related book by a Dutch author went completely unnoticed: *Water, een geofilosofische geschiedenis* (Water, a geophilosophical history, 2014) by René ten Bos. Like Pye, but in a considerably more structured, clearer and more convincing way, Ten Bos ventures the thesis that there is a link between general forms of consciousness and the geographical environment in which they arise. He concentrates on the Greek archipelago, where eyes were focused almost automatically on the sea – like centuries later on the Dutch coast, as I have just argued. But Plato hated the harbour, sailors and the sea. They had no clearly circumscribed identity, no stalwart character, no firm backbone. His whole philosophy was opposed to the ominous power of the intangible – with immeasurable consequences for European culture.

Europe

This example immediately indicates the downside of Anglo-Saxon dominance: it often goes hand in hand with a rapidly growing blind spot for continental European culture. Ten Bos's book draws philosophically not only on Greek sources, but also on Dante, Grotius, Kant, Carl Schmitt (critically of course), Peter Sloterdijk, Michel Serres and, of course, on *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville's encyclopaedic novel. And these are names, perhaps apart from the last-mentioned, which, like all other 'historical' names, are becoming blurred in the collective consciousness of Dutch literature until they become just names. The orientation towards America goes hand in hand with a lack of interest in what is not topical or potentially useful. Hence also – for example – the demolishing of



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YOUR BOOK TO ME?"



"MAKE YOUR MAIN CHARACTERS DO SOMETHING
ONCE IN A WHILE, HERBERT."

historical humanities departments, which is being conducted with considerably fewer scruples in the Netherlands than in other European countries.

All of this applies mainly to 'Holland', or the North Sea agglomeration. In the rest of the Netherlands and in Flanders the dominance of Anglo-Saxon culture seems less great and the isolation with regard to the various continental cultures is consequently less serious. Unlike in the Netherlands, where the knowledge of French and German is crumbling, Flemish essayists and prose writers like Paul de Wispelaere (1928), Paul Claes (1943), Stefan Hertmans (1951) and Luc Devoldere (1956) have never lost touch with France and French culture in particular. It is not improbable that for that reason literary experiment has always enjoyed more enthusiasm in Flanders than in the sober Netherlands.

Whatever the case, quality essay-writing resists the advance of the one-sided, American-orientated, memory-less culture. That motive unites all the authors discussed here, even Jacq Vogelaar and Kees Fens, though at first sight they seem very divergent. The former became famous – or rather infamous – mainly as an experimental author in the tradition of Kafka, Joyce and Beckett, while the latter, coming from a conservative Catholic background, was interested above all in early Christian culture, medieval monastic life, St Augustine and Dante.

But both were readers with an open mind and a strong sense of what in a more general sense is at stake, a culture of reading and practice as the basis of civilisation. Both focused with unbridled energy on the revitalisation of unknown or forgotten but interesting authors and traditions; Fens, the post-Catholic, mainly on the rapid disappearance of Christian culture.

Accomplice

Vogelaar (1944-2013) is the most important literary essayist of his generation. After, as a very young critic, he had wiped the floor very harshly and, it should be said, not always in a nuanced way, with 'Dutch realism', he switched his interest abroad, in particular to modernist, experimental, critical authors like Robert Musil, Virginia Woolf, Andrey Platonov, Unica Zürn, Carl Einstein, Claude Simon, Julio Cortázar, Thomas Bernhard, Maurice Blanchot, Wolfgang



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WRITER FOR THE LAST TWENTY FIVE YEARS "

Koeppen and Danilo Kis. With the meticulous commitment of an 'accomplice' he introduced them into Dutch literature in long, well-crafted essays.

Vogelaar's most important essay is perhaps that on concentration camp literature, *Over kampliteratuur* (2006), a colossal book in all respects, not comparable with anything in Dutch or any other language, and probably partly for that reason scarcely noticed by the critics. In 700 closely-printed pages he assembles everything written in whatever corner of the world in a primary and secondary sense on the German and Soviet-Russian concentration and extermination camps, by well-known but also completely unknown authors, all genres mixed up.

Somewhat related in intention is the work of the Flemish historian Gie van den Berghe (1945), especially his monumental *De mens voorbij* (Beyond Man, 2008), an ambitious, wide-ranging study of the theory and practice of the perfectable, 'transhuman' human being. The book begins with Malthus and his

fight against the poor laws and utopian Enlightenment optimism and then concentrates on Darwin, Gobineau, Houston Chamberlain and Nazi eugenics. In the topical concluding section Van den Berghe argues that eugenics, popular since the late-nineteenth century, especially in America, after the War has quietly merged with genetics. There is still a drive to 'perfect' man, now via molecular biology.

Unlimited

Although I count Kees Fens (1929-2008) among our best and most productive literary essayists – his bibliography contains over forty titles – he did not write a single book in the strict sense of the word. The vast majority of his books are collections of columns, a genre that is particularly popular in the Netherlands. That may be connected with an obviously highly developed language talent for irony, cynicism, absurdism, playfulness or awkwardness, for which there is little use elsewhere outside the newspaper, but also with the circumstance that many writers, given the relatively small language area, can only live by their pen by writing for the papers. In the case of Fens it must also be connected with a sharp ideal in terms of style and his unlimited, capricious interest – he writes just as easily about the spaces in a complex modernist poem as about vanished smells, the letters of Erasmus, a winter painting by Hendrick Avercamp or the bend in Regent Street.

Fens is one of the exceptional generation of columnists born in the 1920s and 1930s, of whom only the poet Remco Campert (1929) and the versatile journalist Henk Hofland (1927) are still alive and active. Campert is striking for his almost weightless, melancholic reflections, Hofland for sharp political and cultural analyses. The most original, polemical and high-profile columnists of this generation are Rudy Kousbroek (1929-2010) and Hugo Brandt Corstius (1935-2014), who published under countless pseudonyms. The influence exercised by this generation of newspaper article writers over many decades on Dutch public opinion is difficult to overestimate.

Originating as they did from the world of literature in a narrow sense, a highly developed sense of style and form was axiomatic for all these authors. That made it possible for the emancipation of political and cultural commentary in the newspaper to become a difficult to define but fully-fledged literary genre – a sub-genre of the essay – comparable with the way in which German-language commentators in the pre- and early-Fascist era (Kraus, Tucholsky, Walser, Kracauer, Benjamin) gave the short prose piece literary respectability and at the same time political relevance.

Guardians

Brandt Corstius, trained as a linguist and a mathematician, with a special interest in translation machines, was for a long time the fiercest and hence the most controversial columnist in the Netherlands. His philippics – his favourite genre along with satire and pastiche – were feared. His favourite stylistic device was hyperbole; he liked to compare politicians to high-ranking Nazis

like Eichmann or Mengele. The unique power of his columns lies in his refusal to spare anything or anybody, a mercilessness reminiscent of Kraus, and an inexhaustible formal-literary wealth of ideas. Brandt Corstius even turned the tiny columns that he published daily on the front page of *de Volkskrant* into stylistically surprising, hilarious, mysterious miniature works of art requiring decoding.

In addition, under the pseudonym Battus he wrote countless pieces on the potential of language where the primacy of form is absolute. Since meaning, use or usage, in short everything that binds language to obligations and hence limitations, no longer matters, he speaks in his magnum opus *Oppertans! Taalen letterkunde* (2002) of 'Dutch on holiday'. This unpagged and very long book offers a marathon programme of superior language acrobatics, inventory description and amazing demonstration, and is as (un)translatable as, say, *Finnegans wake*.

Rudy Kousbroek began as a poet in the experimental group the *Vijftigers*, or Men of the Fifties, but from the 1960s developed into a critic, as feared as he was witty, of all dogmatism, modishness, secret language and humbug in spiritual philosophy, including religion, and in academic, philosophical, literary and pedagogical discourse. At an early stage he raised the question of where the lack of manners of Dutch children came from. His answer: it must be connected with 'a broken continuity, a vanished interest in what we were yesterday, in how we thought and felt then.' The Dutch have 'a lack of resistance to short-lived fashions and unrealisable figments of the imagination; hence the attempts at renewal without retaining the good, that constant throwing out of the baby with the bathwater.'

In his melancholy reflections on (old) photos, collected in *Opgespoorde wonderen* (Unearthed Wonders, 2010), he vies with Roland Barthes. Using well-chosen examples, he once again expresses his contempt for our 'world', in which everything that is beautiful, precious and vulnerable is strangled by commerce. It stands to reason then that Kousbroek is very unimpressed by such an ahistorical and moreover so religious and prudish country as America. The only city he praises unreservedly is New Orleans, 'but, after all, that is a Southern French provincial town in which not very much has changed since the eighteenth century.'

Nicolaas Matsier (1945) is not a columnist, but his work, even the novel *Gesloten Huis* (Closed House, 1994) and his autobiographical *Compositieportret* (Composite Portrait, 2015), has the features of column writing. It seems like a single large, loosely linked collection of short prose, in which the author shows himself above all as the careful guardian of simple, everyday things and the corresponding words, which are rapidly disappearing from life and hence from the collective memory. From his pen come no helpless jeremiads but unvarnished, precise, loving and witty observations, in the hope perhaps that at least something of that *attitude* will survive.

In this way Matsier also contributes to a theme that implicitly or explicitly runs right through contemporary Dutch literature in the broadest sense of the word, the marginalisation of a humanist culture of patience, attention and responsibility for what is close to hand by a post-human, commercial, mass culture focused on immediate profit, to which it no longer means anything.

Travellers

The popular books of Geert Mak link thematically to this, although they are nothing like collections of columns. They are rather detailed, sometimes even long-winded stories about what has changed in the Netherlands, Europe and America since the nineteenth century. His first popular success was *Jorwerd: The Death of the Village in Late 20th Century Europe* (2000, *Hoe God verdween uit Jorwerd*, 1996), on the changes in traditional village life as a result of industrialisation, the move to the towns and the decline in church culture. Later there followed, among others, *De eeuw van mijn vader* (My Father's Century, 1999), a personally tinged history of the twentieth century; *In Europe: Travels through the Twentieth Century* (2007, *In Europa*, 2004), a monumental, two-fold travelogue, about Europe and the history of the continent, which was also successful in several foreign countries; and *In America: Travels with John Steinbeck* (2014, *Reizen zonder John*, 2012) a similar travelogue about a trip through the US in the footsteps of John Steinbeck, which paints a shocking picture of the once so promising New World.

Of the many excellent travel writers one should mention at any rate Lieve Joris, Chris de Stoop, Jan Brokken, Adriaan van Dis, Frank Westerman and the extremely productive Cees Nooteboom, who is particularly popular in Germany. Westerman, like Mak, began as an engaged journalist, and was one of the first to write about the Battle of Srebrenica (*De slag om Srebrenica*, of which an expanded version appeared in 2015). He also impressed with *De graanrepubliek* (The Republic of Grain, 2003), on the vagaries of Groningen farmers, and with *Engineers of the Soul* (2011, *Ingenieurs van de ziel*, 2002), in which guided by the brave anti-Stalinist Konstantin Paustovsky he shows how Soviet writers celebrate the forcible industrialisation of agrarian Russia.

Nooteboom also writes on important political events, such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, but is mainly interested in cultural-historical and philosophical matters. He must be the most widely travelled Dutchman. There is probably no corner of the world where he has not searched for transient traces of an intransient poetry. I must limit myself to mentioning a few titles: *De roeiers van Port Dauphin. Alle Afrikaanse reizen* (2011), about his African journeys; *Eilanden, rif en regenwoud. Alle Australische reizen* (2013), about his Australian trips; and *Continent in beweging. Alle Zuid- en Midden-Amerikaanse reizen* (2013), about his South and Central American journeys.

Resistance

One finds a philosophical dimension in practically all the above-mentioned books, yet philosophical and anthropological essays are not widely developed in the Low Countries. Exceptions to this are Hans Achterhuis (1942), Ton Lemaire (1941) and David van Reybrouck (1971).

In his most recent book, *De utopie van de vrije markt* (The Utopia of the Free Market, 2013), Achterhuis tries to fathom neo-Liberalism as the ideology of global capitalism and in particular its excrescences, the much-decried grab and bonus culture. To this end he looks extensively, not always with equal stylistic refinement, at the reactionary kitsch novels of Ayn Rand, which had a



considerable influence in the US on important free-market ideologues. In this context the successful book of Joris Luyendijk (1971), *Swimming with Sharks: My Journey into the World of the Bankers* (2015, *Dit kan niet waar zijn*, 2015), in snatches a shattering anthropological investigation into the life, work and ideas of bankers in the City of London, must not go unmentioned.

Lemaire was already the author of *Filosofie van het landschap* (Philosophy of Landscape, 1970) and various other books on the downside of progress when, in 1991, he gave up his lectureship at the University of Nijmegen to settle in the Dordogne, where he combined his cultural-anthropological and natural philosophical insights with a better life, not fatally harming the planet as a part-time eco farmer and writer. In seclusion his committed and multifaceted oeuvre grew steadily. In 2007, for example, he excelled with a book on the traces birds have left in the human imagination of myths and legends. That Lemaire, as far as I know, was the only Dutchman to honour Claude-Lévi-Strauss with a book on the occasion of the latter's hundredth birthday, in 2008, came as no surprise.

In 2013 followed *De val van Prometheus* (The Fall of Prometheus), in which he reminds us that, for the Greeks, Prometheus was not only a symbol of the greatness, ingenuity and cunning of mankind, but also of the overconfidence,

the hubris, which was punished by the gods. That aspect retreated into the background for Europeans from the eighteenth century onwards. No hubris could restrain him, 'modernity recognises itself only in an unchained Prometheus.' An interesting aspect is Lemaire's reappraisal of Herbert Marcuse who, particularly in *Eros and Civilisation* (1955) shows himself to be an anti-Promethean thinker. With Marcuse he sees more in Orpheus, as a singer and poet, the symbol of the reconciliation of man and nature, and in countless, mostly small-scale 'Orphic' counter-practices.

David van Reybrouck, finally, is a cultural historian, archaeologist and philosopher. In 2010 he published one of the best books of the last decade, *Congo*, about the vast African country that was regarded by Leopold II as his private domain, after which, until 1960, it was colonised by Belgium and subsequently disintegrated dramatically over a long period of dictatorship in an endless series of bloody civil wars. The book is a perfect synthesis of travelogue, cultural anthropology and political history, written in a supple, graphic style.

It is also literally polyphonic: during his journeys Van Reybrouck spoke to people from all layers of society and smoothly blended the stories he obtained with the chronology of the great events. In this way knowledge acquired in the library was, as it were, verified and personally coloured by the experiences of those directly involved. A hopeful sign is the improbable number of copies (approximately 200,000) sold of just the Dutch version of what is, after all, a highly ambitious and voluminous book.

Finally, a handful of important names and titles that would have found a place in a longer version of this article, without commentary or context: the work of Benno Barnard, Patricia de Martelaere, Piet Meeuse and Willem Jan Otten. Douwe Draaisma, *Why Life Speeds Up As You Get Older. How Memory Shapes Our Past* (2004); Trudy Dehue, *De depressie-epidemie: over de plicht het lot in eigen handen te nemen* (The Depression Epidemic: On the Duty to Take One's Fate in One's Own Hands, 2008); Luuk van Middelaar, *The Passage to Europe. History of a Beginning* (2009); Siep Stuurman, *De uitvinding van de mensheid. Korte wereldgeschiedenis van het denken over gelijkheid en cultuurverschil* (The Invention of Humanity. A Short World History of Thinking about Equality and Cultural Difference, 2009); Rens Bod, *A New History of the Humanities* (2013, *De vergeten wetenschappen*, 2010); Paul Verhaeghe, *What About Me? The Struggle for Identity in a Market-Based Society* (2014, *Identiteit*, 2012); Wouter Kusters, *Filosofie van de waanzin* (Philosophy of Madness, 2014).

These books also testify to mental resistance. The fact that they are there at all is nothing short of a miracle. They embody an ambition which runs counter to the cynical neo-Liberalism that has the world in its devastating grip. Promethean forces, which were constrained in the decades after the Second World War, have over the last quarter of a century been given free rein once again even in old Europe, which follows the US like a faithful dog – with disastrous results for the welfare state and the "state of the Culture". The essays discussed here form – in the sense of Lemaire – part of a pluriform Orphic counterforce. ■