

Love in the Lost Republic of Amsterdam

In Praise of Doeschka Meijsing

72

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The cultural officer (or ambassador, if you will) that I was for many years, and the reader and translator I still am - and hope to remain for some years to come - are struggling with each other to decide which as yet untranslated book, which as yet untranslated author(s) from the Low Countries I should urgently tell the world about, and why.

For the cultural ambassador, the personal preference for one or more individual literary works is irrelevant. He is concerned with how a foreign readership (French-speaking, for example) can be provided with a reliable corpus of translated highlights from Dutch literature over the centuries. There are three requirements for this: a responsible selection of works, a series of reliable translations, and a willing publisher.

But the civil servant does not raise his head above the parapet; he comes up with no more than an outline for yet another project - for which there is no budget yet. This is talking in a vacuum, and the opposite of a true feeling for literature - the feeling that is based on personal, idiosyncratic choices, far removed from any educational considerations. Both voices fight to be heard but, if I listen to my heart, the voice of the reader is the loudest and strongest. This is the voice that I will allow to speak.

In the past twenty years there have been several novels that I have read with intense pleasure, and afterwards regretted that they had not been brought to the attention of a French-language publisher sooner. The fact that they missed their chance is usually due simply to chance, a lack of information, or to bad timing. But if I had to choose just one title from this series of neglected books, then it would certainly have to be *Over de liefde* (About Love) by Doeschka Meijsing (Querido, Amsterdam, 2008). Meijsing was perhaps not entirely unknown to the French-speaking world; two of her works had already been translated into French, the 'fairy tale' *Beer en jager* (Bear and Hunter, as *L'Ours et le Chasseur* by Xavier Hanotte, Doornik, Estuaire, 2005) and the novel *100 % chemie* (100% chemistry, as *100% chimique. Une chronique familiale* by Charles Franken, Bordeaux/Paris, Le Castor Astral, 'Escalaes des Lettres', series 2007), but had not made much of an impact. In her own country too, Meijsing's real breakthrough didn't come until the publication of *Over de liefde* (About Love), for which she received the AKO Prize in 2008. Sadly, she was not able to enjoy her success for



Antoine Wiertz, *The Reader of Novels*, 1853,
Oil on canvas, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

long. Less than four years later, in January 2012, she died from complications following major surgery. This largely put paid to her chances of being translated; a deceased author cannot give interviews, sign books or give readings. In the world of publishing, being dead is a deadly sin for an author - unless you've been dead for centuries, of course.

I did not discover Meijsing's work until relatively late, despite the fact that, back in the 1990s when I was living in Amsterdam, I often encountered her in person. She was a friendly, somewhat reserved local resident, a familiar Amsterdam figure who had a drink problem - one that she made no effort to conceal. Perhaps this was why my expectations were not very high when I picked up her last novel. It turned out to be a revelation.

It is difficult to describe the specific charm of *Over de liefde* (About Love), because everything about this novel is paradoxical. The title gives the impression that it is an essay, but there is little about this book that is essayistic; rather, it is a series of stories, anecdotes and recollections, threaded together by a conspicuously present female narrator. Nevertheless, relatively little happens in the course of the narrative, apart from a serious road accident and a fall into the Prinsengracht canal - with the narrator as the victim in both instances. Yet, despite this simple fact, it is almost impossible to summarise the plot (insofar as it exists). There are various storylines that the author/narrator, with great nonchalance, constantly breaks off and takes up again later.

First story line: dealing with heartbreak. The narrator, Philippa ('Pip') van der Steur, an Amsterdam academic, has been deserted by her younger partner Jula, a successful journalist. After an apparently happy relationship that has lasted many years, Jula suddenly falls for a man and soon becomes pregnant. Not long afterwards, Philippa is seriously injured in an accident (a concrete-mixer truck veers out of control and crashes into a café terrace where she is sitting, and just in time she manages to save the lives of two women). Jula has the opportunity to look after her recovering ex-girlfriend. Jula cares for Philippa for many months, and there is a hesitant reconciliation when Philippa agrees to go to the celebration meal that Jula is giving for her birthday. On that same evening, Philippa falls into the canal and is carried away from her former great love - literally and figuratively.



Johannes Vermeer, *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*,
ca. 1663–64, Oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Second story line: through circumstances that may or may not be coincidental, Philippa is thinking about the first woman she ever loved, her high-school gym teacher, Buri Vermeer, an aloof beauty who grew up in the Dutch East Indies and, while still a teenager, had been interned in a prison camp during the Japanese occupation. Philippa watches a documentary on DVD about this period. In the documentary, Buri returns to the place where she was imprisoned. By an incredible coincidence, Buri is one of the two women that Philippa saved in the accident – but Philippa doesn't recall this for a long time because she was in shock after the accident. Eventually she and her former teacher come into contact with each other again. During two emotional visits, Buri confides in Philippa about her secret love for one of the Japanese officers during her imprisonment. Despite their completely different sexual preferences, Philippa discovers a soul mate in Buri and is even able, albeit in a sort of daydream, to satisfy her past longing for this woman.

Third story line: to help her lift her out of her depression, Philippa's three brothers take her on a nostalgic trip to the place where they used to spend their holidays when they were children, a slightly dilapidated house in a village on the border between the Swiss canton of Ticino and Italy. The purpose of the trip is to find a centuries-old painting that is possibly from the studio of Mantegna and has supposedly lain hidden there for years. This somewhat surreal episode, which would not be out of place among the adventures of Enid Blyton's *Famous Five*, appears to be separate from the rest of the book. It is indeed an intermezzo, intended to introduce a note of Mediterranean levity into an otherwise fairly sombre story. But it also has another, more symbolic function: predictably, the search for the alleged Mantegna proves fruitless. The narrator seems to be warning us that the great quest for love and intimacy is doomed to failure too.

So why do readers swallow this rambling story? In the first place, because of the incredible rhetorical talent of the author, whose writing (in the words of critic Jeroen Vullings in *de Volkskrant* newspaper, 12/2/2008) is 'at times beautiful and outrageously witty'. Doeschka Meijsing herself said, half-jokingly, in an interview: 'I'm just really good at writing beautiful sentences'. There are countless passages that could illustrate this, but I will confine myself to a single example. After her accident, Philippa lands in hospital with a fractured skull. When she comes out of the coma, a doctor tells her that she has to have an operation 'and then, he adds, there is a good chance that you'll be back to your old self again.' The text continues:

For some reason, being back to my old self didn't seem a very attractive prospect, and much of what the man said remained gibberish to me, but I knew that when you're in hospital it's best to go along with them, without resisting or wanting to be smarter than the doctors, so I agreed to everything and soon after, wearing nothing but a short green gown, I was pushed through the corridors of the hospital, and left and right the bags and tubes went too, we moved at a fair pace through a complicated maze, with doors swinging open and shut and people flattening themselves against the wall as we passed, and it was really fun, a bit like being at the fair. And all those lights. Above my head the big wheel started turning and something was put on my face and they forgot to take it off, and then - nothing again.



Michael Sweerts, *Portrait of a Young Man*,
ca. 1656, Oil on canvas, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg

Meijsing is also a master of symbolic detail. A dark patch on the parquet floor of Philippa's new home functions as a tangle of motives developed elsewhere in the novel. By comparing the patch to a Rorschach inkblot test, the author elevates it to a symbol of Philippa's subconscious and the repository of the memory that she has temporarily lost. Yet the book has much more to offer than this sort of sophisticated literary *divertissement*. A sense of tragedy underlies the irony of the narrative. Philippa struggles with the realisation that her love life has been one long failure, and that her desire for happiness may be a mistake. These mostly sombre musings are foreshadowed by death. In a beautifully written night-time scene, Philippa recalls all her past friends from the local bar as she walks home after a birthday gathering. And the fall and swim at the end of the novel, although recounted in optimistic tones, could be interpreted as a veiled, half-hearted suicide attempt.

But there is another aspect to *Over de liefde* (About Love) that moves me on a personal level. It is a brilliant snapshot of a particular place at a particular time: Amsterdam at the *fin de siècle* of the twentieth century. And by Amsterdam I mean, specifically, what Harry Mulisch refers to in *The Discovery of Heaven* (*De ontdekking van de hemel*) as 'the Republic of Amsterdam', as opposed to the 'Kingdom' – the rest of the Netherlands. It may be that the further one is from the setting, the more sensitive one is to this aspect of the book. The most striking intellectual aspect of this novel is that it makes statements 'about love' – the concept of love in general, that is – based on the protagonist's experiences in a fairly narrow circle of gay women. Apparently this requires no explanation, since it is not mentioned anywhere. There was not a single Dutch reviewer in 2008 who drew attention to this aspect. Despite a few caustic comments by the narrator about gay marriage, the moral equivalence of homosexual and heterosexual love is assumed throughout the book. There are many places in the world – France, for a start – where this equivalence would be highly controversial. For this reason alone, *Over de liefde* (About Love), complete with its Stendhalian title, should be translated into French.

In almost all her novels – for example *Geheel de uwe* (Sincerely Yours) and *Lucifer* – Connie Palmen carefully paints a picture of the world that is sardonically labelled 'the canal belt'. In *Over de liefde* (About Love), this picture emerges in passing. Nowhere is it an explicit theme, merely a secondary effect of the intellectual, aesthetic and emotional milieu in which the narrator and the protagonists live their lives. The book resonates with the libertine spirit of a social group and era in which everything seemed possible, everything was regarded and discussed without prejudice, and everything was considered interesting (or not). Doeschka Meijsing embodied this culture, which has already ceased to exist. It is what gives this idiosyncratic novel a patina of melancholia and nostalgia that touches my heart. ■