Fiction Is Always Non-Fiction

The Oeuvre of Jan Brokken

I would rather have kept quiet about this, but anyone who makes *entre nous* statements should not be surprised when such secrets emerge. The only uncertainty is *when* that will happen. So, here goes: in the Literary Criticism classes I was invited to teach at universities as a 'guest critic' in recent decades, the writer Jan Brokken (b. 1949) often served as something of a target for me. It's not because I don't like him or because I think he's a terrible writer – on the contrary. I brought him up solely to illustrate the prosaic aspects of literary criticism and the need for an unprejudiced mind.

How does it usually work? A love for literature makes you jump from mountaintop to mountaintop, and in my flat homeland that comes down to: from Louis Couperus to J.J. Slauerhoff, with a long leap aside to S. Vestdijk, and so on, Mulisch-wards. Those who are given nectar to drink long for more of the stuff. But the reality is that every week lesser gods, at worst little scribblers, land on your desk, which is dominated by the latest ephemera. In the Dutch language, a new masterpiece does not come out every seven days, even though those who have faith in hype would have you believe this is the case.

And that's why, in those classes, I would take pot shots at Brokken, in order to temper the flimsy expectations of the aspiring critics. I used to say, 'No one ever wonders: when's the new Jan Brokken coming out?'

Archetypically 'Dutch'

In order to avoid any misunderstandings: I certainly don't consider Brokken to be a scribbler. In fact, whenever I read one of his books, I am generally pleasantly surprised, by the high quality, the subtle pen, the eye for minute detail. To be fair, though, I don't think I would have read a book by him if I hadn't been writing reviews. At most, I would have remembered him as the journalist who conducted such fine interviews with writers in the late 1970s in the now-defunct weekly *Haagse Post*. I owe the *writer* Brokken to the *hic sunt leones* expedition that is literary criticism – a journey into unknown territory.

I'd be perfectly happy to see a new Brokken come out every year. Nevertheless, I cite him in my survey of the latest literary offerings precisely because

Jan Brokken
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he is not an isolated, stellar talent like Mulisch – which, incidentally, is also true of ninety-five percent of literature written in Dutch. In short, he's lacking in madness. Madness that can result in brilliance – together, the sign of the literary giant. I am sure I am not telling Brokken anything new; I suspect that his role model was first Jean Rhys, then Geert Mak and now Jan Brokken – attainable greats.

Why choose Brokken as an example? Because, to put it euphemistically, he is certainly capable, and yet he seldom features on lists of favourites. Because he has created a respectable oeuvre, but did not make his breakthrough to the general public until his wartime story *De vergelding* (The Reprisal) was published in 2013. Brokken was one of the initiators of the genre of literary non-

fiction in the Netherlands, and can also hold his own in the fields of autobiography and novels. He has twenty-six books to his name and I would recommend six of those to literature lovers who just want to hop from literary mountain to mountain: the novels *De blinde passagiers* (The Stowaways, 1995) and *De Kozakkentuin* (The Cossack Garden, 2015) and the following non-fiction titles: *Jungle Rudy (de Verloren Wereld van Rudy Truffino)* (1999, translated into English by Sam Garrett); *In het huis van de dichter* (In the Poet's House, 2008); *Baltische zielen (lotgevallen in Estland, Letland en Litouwen)* (Baltic Souls, 2010); and *De vergelding (een dorp in tijden van oorlog)* (The Reprisal, 2013).

However, I chose Brokken as an example mainly because it is hard to find Dutcher writers than him. Not the directionless Netherlands of the present day, with its democratized bad taste. But the Netherlands that existed before the era of the overblown ego: respectable, modest, decent to a fault, cursed with a strong work ethic, imbued with the scent of a Calvinist past, and the active awareness of an educational ideal. The Dutch identity exists, as a residue of shared history and collective qualities. As evidence, I point my finger at the prose of Jan Brokken.

He will presumably go down in Dutch literary history as a writer of literary non-fiction, mentioned in the same breath as Geert Mak, Frank Westerman and Annejet van der Zijl. Within that genre, he has written travel books, interviews, articles, portraits, essays, autobiographical prose, and works of popular history. That sounds clear enough, but such genre divisions are imprecise and therefore arbitrary: his autobiographical 'novel of a friendship', *In het huis van de dichter* (In the Poet's House, about Youri Egorov), forms a diptych with the non-fictional portrait gallery *Baltische zielen* (Baltic Souls) – a superb standard work of cultural history. His recent title *De vergelding* (The Reprisal) is a novel-like reconstruction of the hidden history of the village of Rhoon, involving the murder of a German soldier during the Occupation. Brokken, born in Leiden, grew up as the son of a minister in Rhoon; the village is a setting that his readers already knew well, with a certain amount of duplication, from his debut novel *De provincie* (The Province, 1984) and his autobiography *Mijn kleine waanzin* (My Little Madness, 2004).

No one escapes their origins

Fiction is always non-fiction in Brokken; reality cannot be denied. Take his novel *De droevige kampioen* (The Sad Champion, 1997). The two quotes at the beginning of the book relate to the place where the story is set: the island of Curaçao. Brokken quotes Cola Debrot, who, after the violent riots in 1969, wrote 'Droevig eiland droevig volk / droevig eiland in de kolk / van de maalstroom van de maalstroom / droevig eiland zonder tolk' (literally: Sad island sad people / sad island in the vortex / of the maelstrom of the maelstrom / sad island with no interpreter). The first two of the seventy-five chapters show us Riki Marchena at the height of his fame, acclaimed by the entire population of Curaçao as a table-tennis champion, and then later becoming a ragged and dirty 'choller' (junkie), washing cars to fund his crack addiction. So both Marchena and his island are sad champions.

There is a warning at the beginning of *De droevige kampioen*: 'Most of the facts in this book are based on reality, but *De droevige kampioen* is a novel, and all the characters are depicted so as to have no similarity to existing people, with the exception of the politicians Papa Godett and Miguel Pourier, who appear under their own names.' Presumably Brokken intends that the backdrop against which the story takes place – the Antilles of the past forty years – should not be dismissed as fictional. Not because that would be a waste of his thorough documentation, but because harsh words of social criticism are spoken about the island. Words that, in his opinion, need to be heard.

The idea, accepted and lauded in progressive circles, of the island's demographic composition as a friendly racial melting pot is shown to be an illusion. Within all strata of society, it matters whether someone is a shade lighter or darker; great importance is also attached to people's ancestry: 'On Curaçao, no one escapes their origins.' The postcolonial joy at independence is in retrospect tempered by the facts: 'We believed everything would be better and we set our own city on fire. We turned our backs on the colonial past and created such a favourable fiscal climate that the whites came in droves. We said we should finally become independent and yet held out our hands wherever we

could.' The mentality in particular is no good in this Antillean society, where corruption is part of the amoral order of the day. The writer, speaking through his mouthpiece, Riki: 'Everything was permitted here, as long as it paid; the centuries of piracy, robbery and plundering had corrupted the mentality to such an extent that everyone was merely out for a quick profit.'

Brokken also makes use of informative footnotes, which serve to reinforce the suggestion of truth. A note referring to one character, for instance, informs us that 'Grandfather: Doctor Capriles, Diane d'Oliveira's grandfather, was the first doctor in the West Indies to treat the mentally ill.' So it seems Brokken's story is less fictional than he indicated. His own protagonist also gets it in the neck: 'Riki Marchena is confusing two events here.' The historic accuracy of the facts – about his actual protagonist: Curaçao – clearly takes precedence over the imagination for Brokken. After finishing the book, then, it is not so much Riki's parable-like experiences that linger with the reader. Rather, *De droevige kampioen* – like a report delivered from the inside – draws attention to the tragic situation in a society in which everyone since time immemorial has just tried to get whatever they can for themselves and 'dirty hands don't matter'. So this is a novel à la Jan Brokken.

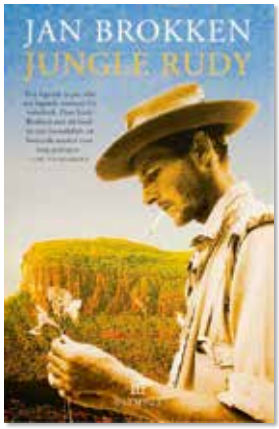
An old-fashioned storyteller

I will now search his oeuvre for variation, for cracks, because such dissection offers ways in. But, in his case, this seems rather unnatural. Because what actually lends his work its unforced unity is its unobtrusive personal tone. Whatever he writes, whether it is his inimitable portraits of writers and artists, an indictment in the form of a novel, such as *De droevige kampioen*, or a neo-romantic novel like *De blinde passagiers*, it stems from his own concerns. He clearly does what he wants to do, goes where his wide-ranging interests take him, and that is evident in his unfashionable oeuvre.

Unfashionable, yes. As a novelist, he is an old-fashioned, realistic storyteller. In the Netherlands, this description is often wrongly perceived as an insult; obviously, people have forgotten that Guy de Maupassant was also a storyteller and that three-quarters of British literature is 'litertainment'. The maritime novel *De blinde passagiers* could not have been written without great admiration for storytellers such as Johan Fabricius and Jan de Hartog. Yet, in that novel, I also hear the breath of F.C. Terborgh, that slow Slauerhoff. The novel as homage, then. And that makes it closely related to his travel story *Goedenavond, mrs. Rhys* (Good Evening, Mrs. Rhys, 1992) and the empathetic and admiring portraits of artists and writers in his collection *Spiegels* (Mirrors, 1993).

The hermit of his own dreams

In the space allocated to me here, I would like to speak up for a Brokken title that I am fond of, but which is largely unknown to the wider public: the biographical sketch *Jungle Rudy*. It is 1975 and the prince consort Bernhard is at the controls of a plane. His destination – and that of his extensive retinue – is the Venezuelan jungle encampment built by expatriate Dutchman Rudy Truf-



fino, the director of an enormous nature reserve. It's a legendary encounter. Bernhard was immediately impressed by Truffino. 'What that man has achieved in the jungle,' he declared two days later to *Telegraaf* journalist Stan Huygens, 'verges on the implausible.' Truffino, however, had soon had enough of His Royal Highness. 'He kept going on about how he looked so young for his age and I looked so old. Eventually I got fed up with it. So I said to him, "Hey, hang on a moment, man, that Holland of yours is a shitty little country and how many people have you got to manage it? And this park here is thirty thousand square kilometres and I run it on my own." Bernhard looked a bit taken aback for a moment, then he took his pipe out of his mouth and, with a hiccupping laugh, admitted defeat.'

It's a typical anecdote, dished up by Brokken with gusto. Not only does it say something about Bernhard's machismo and the adventurer 'Jungle Rudy'. It also reveals Truffino's feudal attitude to the world and shows how that inspired respect in Bernhard – two aristocrats, above the law and man to man. It should be noted that Truffino could boast of some illegitimate royal Oranje blood in his ancestry.

And yet Truffino had to travel to the other side of the world and detach himself from everything that bound him to his fatherland, the education he had enjoyed and his family background before he was able to become 'Jungle Rudy'. 'He was uncompromising, in many respects extreme, and could only get along with unconventional types,' writes the romantic realist Brokken in his account of his search for Truffino. But Jungle Rudy was also an expert on the local fauna and flora, and an explorer in territory that was previously unknown to Westerners – in these areas he was an undisputed authority.

He was an authority, for he is no more. His fate was tragic. He died of a tumour, in complete isolation in his beloved jungle. He had become 'the hermit of his own dreams', alienating almost everyone. His Dutch family lived too far away to support him and, Brokken reports soberly, his three daughters from his marriage to the Austrian Gerti, who were brought up in the jungle among the local tribespeople, lacked a certain trait: tenderness. Truffino's life and particularly its end would not have been out of place in a novel – King Lear in the jungle.

Brokken saw good material in Truffino's life – his keen nose for subject matter is also a talent. It is naturally all too good to be true: Truffino emerged from the pre-war upper class of the Netherlands and was ejected from this milieu as a result of his father's profligacy and financial failings. Thrown out of schools, unwilling to learn, after the war he left for Tunisia, where he almost died. Then he started work as a zookeeper for the dictator of the Dominican Republic, subsequently being arrested during a coup and coming close to execution by firing squad. Venezuela followed next, where he was first a homeless street vendor and

later the manager of a successful business. Crashed in the jungle, bitten by a venomous snake, saved just in time by members of the Pemón tribe... The rest of his life story is jungle: 'For Truffino, the real jungle was far from the tropical forest and, as night fell, he would read about Nostradamus or nightmarish murders in San Francisco and Los Angeles.' Safe in the jungle, classical music and books within reach, as far as possible from the masses.

But Brokken was also fascinated by him because Truffino dared to venture where he feared to go. He did not belong anywhere – not in any country, not in any time. *Jungle Rudy* is both an adventurous travel story and a psychological portrait. But the true protagonist is the jungle itself, a place where nature is stronger than man. Where snakes have their eyes on you, an ant bite can prove fatal, 'vampires' are out for your blood, dinosaur-like creatures hop around, former members of the SS make their home, and the locals enjoy being drunk. Photographs corroborate the facts in Brokken's masterful report: Truffino degenerated from an attractive man into an emaciated corpse. The jungle won.

In terms of genre, *Jungle Rudy* is indisputably non-fiction – the arch-Calvinist Brokken's preferred path. And behold, now that he no longer has to battle against the frivolous fortitude of the novel overwhelming his beloved facts, he loosens up and paradoxically writes with the panache of a gifted novelist – which, having taken this route, he is. In this case, the truth is strange enough for this champion of literary non-fiction.

Away from the fanfare

His most recent novel, *De Kozakkentuin* (The Cossack Garden) is a perfect testament to this. Brokken climbs inside the head of the nineteenth-century German-Baltic baron Alexander von Wrangel, equipped with his unpublished memoirs. Through Fyodor Dostoyevsky's friendship with this young public prosecutor, whom he met during his exile in Siberia, Brokken succeeds not only in casting light on the fascinating subject of gender roles in Russia, but also on Dostoyevsky's literary development. It was Von Wrangel who urged this genius to write his most important books: *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot* and *The House of the Dead*. Another homage then, this time to a man who, away from the fanfare of great fiction, modestly performed his own essential part. Like Jan Brokken himself. ■

www.janbrokken.nl

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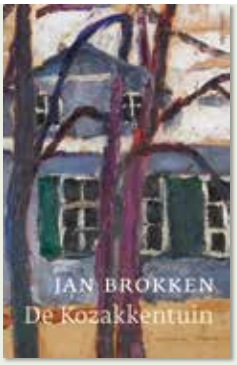
Translated by Laura Watkinson



An Extract from *De Kozakkentuin* (The Cossack Garden)

by Jan Brokken

The conspiracy

The first time I saw him he was standing in front of the firing squad, wearing a white shroud. He: a man approaching thirty preparing himself for death and kissing a silver cross that the priest held out before him. I: an inquisitive youth looking from a safe distance at what injustice was.

There was no school that day. 1849 was the year of the cholera; masses of people died in Saint Petersburg. Because of the danger of infection, our grammar school had closed before the start of September. I was living in the house of an uncle and for months I'd been simply mooching about.

In December the school advised us to go back to our families for the holiday season. Outside the city fewer people were falling victim to the disease and I contemplated travelling to Terpilitsy. The estate was only seventy versts from Petersburg and could be reached within a day. We hadn't yet had any heavy falls of snow, so the roads would be passable, it could be done, but instead I stuck around with my uncle, Baron Nicolai Korf,[1] who lived in a small wooden house on the corner of the Liteyny Prospekt and Kirochnaya Street. At seventeen you're not interested in your family and the city is many times more exciting than the countryside, especially in winter. In actual fact there were three months to go before my seventeenth birthday,[2] but I felt a real young man already and I was remarkably tall for my age. Still, I would have wanted to be home for Christmas alright, had I not known for certain that my father would hurl an endless series of reproaches at me. He felt very strongly about order and discipline and believed 'people like us' needed to set an example to others in all things.

The execution

Uncle Vladimir asked me to go with him to the exercise yard. I initially put on my unlined summer coat, then realized it was cold and exchanged it for my uniform jacket[3] and donned a cocked hat. I didn't have a winter overcoat because my father thought it was a luxury and a lad shouldn't be spoilt but instead toughened up.

We took a hired coach, a 'crock'. It was an overcast day, a real grey Petersburg morning, around four or six degrees, damp cold. From time to time a little snow fell. Dostoevsky would remember that it was 'icy cold', especially at the moment when they made him put on the shroud.

The exercise yard was a huge field where the snow had mixed with slush. When we got out of the coach we saw a group of people in the distance, soldiers in square formation, and what at first sight looked like a rather rickety structure, a platform of planks on long wooden poles with steps at the front. Was that a scaffold? We thought the men were to die facing the firing squad, yet it did indeed look like a scaffold. We tried to get closer but police and gendarmes held us back.

Another uncle came over to us, Uncle Alexander Mandershern. He bragged with a barely concealed appetite for sensation that he had wanted to be present at the execution along with his Chasseur Company. When he caught sight of me he was astonished.

'For God's sake boy, get away from here. God forbid your headmaster finds out you've been to the execution. Soon they'll suspect you of being a political and expel you from the grammar school.'

When he'd finished scolding, Uncle Alexander leaned over towards us, as he had major news he couldn't keep to himself.

'In the strictest confidence,' he whispered, 'I can tell you that there's not going to be an execution.'

'Not?' asked Uncle Vladimir, who suspected he had misunderstood.

Uncle Alexander shook his head categorically. All lives would be spared, but the condemned men did not know that. The tsar wanted the firing squad procedure to be carried out in its entirety and then, at the last moment, when it was time to give the command 'Fire!' the adjutant would come galloping up with orders from the most high: execution to be halted.

I didn't believe him, and neither did Uncle Vladimir. At least, so I deduced from the dazed look in his eyes; he didn't think the tsar was capable of such a cruel charade.

'Come on, we're going,' he said to Mandershern, almost angrily.

My uncles went to their units. I mingled with the grey masses. The distance between me and the men in square formation was hard to estimate, but at any rate I was a fairly long way from them. The exercise yard had by now filled with inquisitive people who happened to be passing by. The date and time of executions was kept secret; the bloodthirsty crowd, which attends such performances as if they're a fairground attraction, could not possibly have been informed in advance. The mood among them was serious. Everyone felt sympathy for the 'unfortunates', although hardly anyone knew of what crimes they had been convicted.

It seemed as if the condemned men felt freedom for a brief moment when they stepped out of the coaches. They looked at the early light above the city – the sun had just risen – and then at each other. During their imprisonment they had been kept separate and for eight months they had heard nothing about the other members of the group. It had something of the reunion about it: they walked up to each other, greeted and embraced, until a general called them to order in a thundering voice and demanded silence. I heard that voice, but because of the distance the prisoners remained indistinct.

Another voice called out the names of the condemned men and asked them to take their places in line promptly, one by one. It didn't surprise me that Petrashevsky and Speshnev were at the top of the list; the other names were lost on the wind.

Several figures climbed the scaffold, following a priest with a cross. A little while later they came down the wooden steps again and walked slowly past the formations of soldiers and my uncles' units. The officers among the condemned had to demonstrate to their garrisons that they had been reduced to the ranks. Everything was aimed at humiliation and at inspiring mortal fear.

Close to the scaffold the prisoners were split into two groups. Again a voice rang out. It seemed a functionary was reciting a specific verdict to each condemned man, but he spoke quickly and stumbled over his words. Nevertheless, the reading of verdicts took up a good deal of time. The final sentence alone came out clearly: 'The court martial has condemned you all to death by firing squad and on 19 December His Imperial Majesty personally wrote below that verdict: "Upheld".'

Dostoevsky told me later that, dumbfounded, he turned to Sergey Durov (who was closest to him) and cried out indignantly 'It's not possible that we'll be executed.' To himself he murmured, 'It can't be true. It can't possibly be. It's impossible that I, in the midst of all these thousands who are alive, will no longer exist in five or six minutes from now.'

He believed it only when all the condemned men were ordered to put on long white shrouds.

From *De Kozakkentuin* (The Cossack Garden), Uitgeverij Atlas/Contact, Amsterdam, 2015

Translated by Liz Waters

NOTES

1 The uncle was actually called Baron Nicolai von Korff. German Baltic barons who held public office in Russia often adopted more Russian-looking names. The Von Wrangels dropped the 'von' and sometimes spelt their name 'Vrangel'. Baron von Korff likewise abandoned the 'von'. Baron Nicolai von Korff was married to a sister of Alexander's father. The Von Korffs owned the Raskulitsy estate, close to the Terpilitsy estate owned by the Von Wrangels.

2 Alexander Egorovich was born on 23 March 1833 according to the Julian calendar and on 4 April 1833 according to the Gregorian calendar.

3 Pupils of the Imperial Alexander Lyceum wore a school uniform that had a military look.