

Flanders and Germany – as the underlying theme, a well-thought out design and, above all, an effective slogan.

‘This is what we share’ – read the Dutch-Flemish motto. That referred naturally to the common language, by means of which writers on either side of the border enrich each other through the differences in culture. Right from the opening, when very cleverly the kings of both countries (alias the heads of national marketing) made an appearance, it seemed that everyone adopted the phrase as the essence of what happens in Frankfurt: the handling of translation rights, by means of which everyone all over the world can share each other’s power of ideas and imagination. So the Netherlands and Flanders became the talking point of the fair almost automatically.

Of course the big question is what being Guest of Honour has achieved. That’s not easy to measure. There’s the number of translations that were published in German before the *Buchmesse*: 454, of which over 300 were literary translations. An unprecedentedly high number for a Guest of Honour country. There’s the number of articles, reports and reviews of the translated works in the world media. The number of German-language pieces alone that appeared online topped six thousand, according to the proud press release from the literature foundations afterwards.

But what do these statistics tell us about the impact of being Guest of Honour country? The traffic in Dutch literature can seem to be a huge flash in the pan. The German publishers of all these newly discovered writers may stop after a single translation, on account of poor sales figures or lack of recognition on the part of critics. And publishers in other languages, who have to be tempted by the Guest of Honour status, together with all these *Neuerscheinungen*, to taste what the new generation from Flanders and the Netherlands have to offer, may be disappointed and lose interest. In that case being Guest of Honour has been a failure.

Only time will tell. The first signs are favourable. Immediately after the fair, the literature foundations reported good sales results for a few titles. 8,000 copies of *Boy*, by Wytse Versteeg, had been sold in Germany, 35,000 copies of *Die Eismacher* by Ernest van der Kwast, and Joost Zwagerman’s *Duell* was into a third impression, which meant the



Photo D. Van Assche

publisher wanted to translate his *Gimmick!* as well. New deals had also been struck. Milkweed Editions is bringing out an anthology of Dutch-language poetry in English and the Kalachuvadu publishing house one in Tamil.

Fine. But these are no more than first steps – no more striking than the good news the literature foundations always send out to the world after this sort of fair. So it’s heartening that the Dutch and Flemish organisations have thought about the aftermath of being Guest of Honour. That’s why the campaign ran all through the autumn and there’s now a deliberate translation and presentation policy for the French- and English-language areas.

MAARTEN DESSING

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

An Ingenious ‘Exercice de Style’ *The Evenings* by Gerard Reve

It is astonishing that we have had to wait till 2016 for an English translation of Gerard Reve’s famous 1947 debut novel, *The Evenings*. For not only does it, and very characteristically, mark the beginning of a literary career that blended critical admiration, moral controversy and popularity in about equal, and sometimes fused, proportions, it is itself a work of palpable originality, with a distinctive atmosphere which caught the mood of a whole generation – and spoke to its successors. Its gov-

erning idea is one of impressive, galvanising simplicity. Opening on 22nd December 1946 it follows its protagonist, twenty-three-year-old Frits van Egters, through each day (with its dream-troubled attendant nights) until New Year's Eve gives way to New Year's Day 1947. The back-end of the year is dominated by colourlessness and cold. Businesses (like that which employs Frits as a clerk) are shut more often than open, and people try to cheer themselves up from the fogginess outside by forced sociability indoors – with only partial success: the aging parents with whom Frits lives run their home rather ineptly. These are circumstances to strike chords with most readers and are rendered here with a multitude of convincing details. But the author is also intent on making us perceive the strange, the inexplicable lurking behind drab familiarity.

This Pushkin edition of Reve's now classic work has been given a deserved welcome by an Anglophone public. Sam Garrett's translation flows wonderfully well. Told as the novel mostly is through dialogue (including Frits's many, mostly cynical, asides to himself) he has rendered the speech in spot-on idiom, neither too redolent of the 1940s nor of our twenty-first century. And the book's appearance is handsome, with its cover illustration by Bill Bragg of an appropriately uncompromising urban milieu, and plaudits by such eminent writers as Lydia Davis. Yet how to best read the novel presents some tough challenges. 1946 is history, we should adapt to it. But in addition, there is a problem of hindsight. Most readers with knowledge of Dutch culture will know how Reve (1923-2006) – never averse to limelight – spectacularly developed.

The people we meet, the never-named town they live in and which we get to know through numerous topographical specificities, were living with war and occupation as norms until a mere nineteen months before the novel begins. But they do not discuss this past, and only occasionally is it referred to, and that obliquely, as in the matter of Frits's broken Gymnasium education. In the present Austerity rules; everyone takes that for granted. Frits and his parents have their electricity by courtesy of a metre, and sometimes it goes off and they have to scabble for the redeeming voucher. Heating a house adequately, providing a large or satisfying meal – these are not easy. The texture of



Gerard Reve in 1950 © Hollandse Hoogte

life that Reve's novel weaves would have been one known to all the first readers. If we of today wonder about the absence of reflections on past occurrences or of speculations about a brighter future, then attention to the text puts us in our place. This, we appreciate, is how ordinary people react; they turn imposed circumstances into normality. Reve brings his stranded society to life with infectious vividness. It is only fitting that the Netherlands rewarded him with their gratitude.

Such stark conditions beget mental attitudes, private hopes and fears. The spiritual climate of *The Evenings* is as engulfing as the physical. Frits and his friends – and his brother Joop – are infused by the kind of jocular irony, the rejection of sensitivity and seriousness, the refusal to appear defeated but, instead, the wish to greet the world with mocking faces and words (jokes, taunts, shocking stories), to which, we feel, a majority of young males might have recourse in any like situation. Frits is stuck in a dead-end job, of which we hear no memorable particulars; not for nothing is the novel named *The Evenings* since this is when he and his mates come to anything at all resembling life, however much the eponymous hours drag, however much their attempts to override the prevalent dullness is offset by disturbing dreams which don't spare victims horrible examples of *memento mori*.

Our historical sense tells us that during the recent war these young men (for the two young women do not leaven the book's dominance by males) must have heard of and even seen cruelties greater than those that fill their talk. For if Frits is the usual instigator of the many lurid anecdotes of sad-

ism and suffering that fill this otherwise eventless book, he unfailingly finds an apt audience and lively conversational returns. Surely these exchanges are essentially a form of accommodating – in-surreally humorous forms – unbearable experiences only lately endured by known real people? But hindsight makes us balk at this explanation.

To give one example among many. Frits amuses his friend Louis by telling him of a father who tosses his eighteen-month-old child in the air, and accidentally lets it drop to its death while the mother in the bathroom inadvertently lets their other child drown. “Didn’t you tell me that one before?” “No,” Frits replied, “you’re confusing it with the one about the father who picked up his children by the head....” “Yes, yes,” Louis said, “but this one is also very good. Wonderful stuff.”

And then one remembers how in life and in letters Reve was addicted to the sadomasochistic, how his triumphant ascent into fame was accomplished by relentless provocative self-advertisement, and one begins to suspect that Frits – forever teasing all his friends about their (incipient) baldness, and deriding his parents as they boringly stumble about their limitedly resourced home – is not so much a sympathetic representative of a bemused, deprived generation as an analogue for the author’s own compulsive exhibitionism. This realisation makes us relate the novel to its times differently. Frits’s impatience with ordinary movements through time and space and with the passing of the hours takes us to the newly fashionable French Existentialists’ insistence on the absurdity of life. Soon it will lead to such exposures of the banalities of bourgeois quotidian living as Ionesco’s Absurdist play *The Bald Prima Donna* (1949/1950).

Approached in this way *The Evenings*, for all its glimpses of an actual past, becomes above all an ingenious ‘exercice de style’. For it to be hailed by the Society of Dutch Literature as ‘the best Dutch novel of all time’ is quite inappropriate. Have the judges forgotten Couperus’s *Eline Vere*, Hella Haasse’s *The Tea Lords...*? The list is long.

PAUL BINDING

Gerard Reve, *The Evenings*, translated from the Dutch by Sam Garrett, Pushkin Press, London, 2016, 317 pp.

‘Writing with Such Freshness and Agility’

A Well-Chosen Selection of Dutch Short Stories

The Penguin Book of Dutch Short Stories has a beautiful cover photo: the picture by photographer Hendrik Kerstens is an undeniably Dutch image with its references to the seventeenth-century paintings by Johannes Vermeer and Rembrandt’s portraits of stately women. Kerstens’s daughter Paula looks out at us with a confident stare, her pale face and white headdress contrast with the black background. What first looks like a seventeenth-century white bonnet turns out to be a plain linen napkin on her head.

I can only assume that the art-loving writer and essayist Joost Zwagerman (1963-2015) chose this image. He was the editor of this (posthumously printed) collection of beautiful short stories (Zwagerman tragically committed suicide in September 2015). In his foreword, Zwagerman discusses Dutch art versus Dutch literature. How can it be, he wonders, that Dutch art, with Rembrandt and Vermeer, ‘is [so] integral to Western art history[?] Our literature likewise merits recognition as an integral part of world literary history!’

Zwagerman’s selection is well chosen; the stories give a good, varied overview of Dutch literary history over, say, the last hundred years. Zwagerman’s introduction, however, loses appeal because it is somewhat apologetic – as if the author himself is not so convinced the stories are worth reading. Zwagerman turns to American literary critic Harold Bloom for help, saying ‘the miraculous thing about many Dutch short stories is that they combine the best of both (Chekovian and Borgesian) stories’ (a genre distinction Bloom came up with). And he turns to the American editor of Dutch writer Nescio (1882-1961), explaining it often ‘takes an outsider to explain to us here in the Netherlands why a particular work of art deserves its place in our national canon’. Zwagerman likes to prove his point further by quoting at length from an article in German newspaper *Die Welt*, praising the Dutch for ‘writing with such freshness and agility’. I would have rather heard in Zwagerman’s own words why he made the selection of short stories he has made.

There is even a tinge of *Blut und Boden* theory to the introduction, especially when Zwagerman