

Writing is Gilding

The Monumental Oeuvre of A.F.Th. van der Heijden

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When A.F.Th. van der Heijden (Geldrop, 1951) debuted under the pseudonym Patrizio Canaponi with a short story in the literary magazine *De Revisor* early in 1978, it was immediately clear that this heralded an extraordinary talent. At the time, however, no one could have suspected what a remarkable writer he would become. Not satisfied with separate novels or stories, he set his work in one great, all-encompassing cycle (*De tandeloze tijd*, 'The toothless time') and, when that proved insufficient, coolly started work on a new cycle (*Homo duplex*) before the first was complete. So van der Heijden, who relinquished his pseudonym after a collection of stories and a novella, is working on two cycles simultaneously. Several parts of each have been published, amounting to thousands of pages in total.

It can be difficult for readers to keep pace and remember which is which. Nevertheless this ambitious body of work also exhibits remarkable coherence, traces of which can already be found in *Een gondel in de Herengracht* ('A Gondola in the Herengracht', 1978) and *De draaideur* ('The Revolving Door', 1979), the two books van der Heijden published as Patrizio Canaponi.

Anyone who has read the published parts of *De tandeloze tijd* will recognise events and anecdotes in the baroque, mannered stories of young Attilio Sandrini, showing that van der Heijden was already drawing on the same autobiographical source. Equally present, both in the stories and in the novel, are the writer's Oedipal obsessions, formally placed centre stage in *Homo duplex*, as the main character Movo (abbreviation of 'Moeilijke Voeten', 'Difficult Feet') is seen as a contemporary reincarnation of Sophocles' Oedipus. There is also an aestheticizing drive, which immediately emerges in the quasi-Italian setting with its southern glory and splendour. However humble reality turns out to be, literature lays a layer of gold on top. Writing is gilding.

Forming an alliance

This is how Attilio's grandmother sets about telling of her late husband in *Een gondel in de Herengracht*: 'His widow took everything that was black about him and sang it into the purest gold.' She spoke of Attilio's grandfather only



in the 'noblest of poetry'. Gold is also the central metaphor in the description of Attilio's discovery of auto-erotica, when he stands in the attic in a 'pillar of sunlight', 'a column of pure gold dust', which completely fits him like a 'long, straight, sparkling dress'. The suggestion is unmistakable: this unification with sunlight, associated with a 'pyramid' that serves to allow Attilio 'to reach the heights', refers not only to the 'small, sweet sin' of masturbation but also to the artistry symbolically awakened within the main character, who brings forth the first product of his imagination in the 'pearl' with which a number of rats' tails are sealed into a 'rat king'.

Van der Heijden himself playfully emphasises the coherence of his oeuvre, by making Patrizio Canaponi a character in the third part of *De tandeloze tijd*. In the reality of the novel he is called Patrick Gossaert, a writer of brilliant style but lacking content, who forms an alliance with Albert Egberts, the main character of the cycle. Albert, who sees his life as a continuous 'experiment', has material for stories in abundance. The result, as suggested by a characteristic baroque mirroring effect, is *De tandeloze tijd*.

This too belongs to a literary game, but it fits well with the shift that has taken place in van der Heijden's work since he began to publish under his own name. Through Albert Egberts, in many respects the writer's alter-ego, he returns to Geldrop in Brabant, the place he really comes from: the departure from the Italian guise appears to be coupled with a generous dose of realism. *De tandeloze tijd* describes the career of Albert Egberts, the son who is the first in his working class family to go to university (studying philosophy in Nijmegen) but who then moves down in the world to become a junkie in Amsterdam. In the later parts we also catch a glimpse of him after he has dried out in prison and made something of a name for himself as a playwright.

A.F.Th. van der Heijden
(1951) © Klaas Koppe

In his first cycle van der Heijden paints a panoramic picture, peopled with many characters besides the central figure, drawing on the great drama in the Netherlands after the Second World War, the transition from a class-based society to mass democracy with all the associated conflict, from workers' emancipation to depillarisation (*ontzuiling*) and from secularisation to urbanisation. In fifty years the Netherlands transformed (before mass-immigration brought new drama) and van der Heijden sketches the universally recognisable traits of this change. In the Canaponi books everything centres on a strictly personal literary mythology, in *De tandeloze tijd* he places his mythologizing tendencies (still clearly evident) in a story that concerns not only himself but his entire generation.

Events proceed with a grandeur and largesse that could only be called baroque. Mannerism may have retreated into the background as realism takes its toll – as a writer van der Heijden has in no way conformed to Dutch thrift. In a country where verbal reticence ('not a word too many') is often seen as a valuable quality, van der Heijden defines himself by wealth and abundance. His eloquence is a cornucopia, his descriptions impress with their expressive power, his words awaken a suggestion of overflowing reality, continually gilding it, however humble, ignominious and even outrageous it may be. Van der Heijden has not forgotten the lesson of Attilio's grandmother.

Turning mud into gold

This emerges almost programmatically in *Asbestemming* ('Ash Destination', 1994), the 'requiem' in the margin of *De tandeloze tijd*, which van der Heijden dedicates to his father, who died at the age of 67. We recognise the father from *De tandeloze tijd* again, an alcoholic domestic tyrant, someone who frequents the pub and lands his moped in the ditch blind drunk on more than one occasion. The portrait his son paints of him is humiliating, albeit not on a literary level; there the bond between father and son is confirmed. 'I was constantly making poetry of even the shabbiest aspects of him, worship without end,' says Albert of his father in *Vallende ouders* ('Falling Parents'). The same is true of *Asbestemming*. The more shameful and scandalous the father's behaviour, the greater the triumph of the son when he succeeds in making it something beautiful, even 'holy', revealing the personal need behind this poetry.

In *Vallende ouders* Albert Egberts speaks to his friend Flix of 'reforging, melting down into something beautiful which at the same time – intensifying – buries the memory of the horror inside'. This theme returns repeatedly. Like a second Baudelaire, van der Heijden continues to transform mud into gold. This is part of his own history, but changed into the material of his novels it symbolises the entire reality. Van der Heijden's aestheticism rests on a rather pessimistic view of humanity and the world, in which only literature with its 'alchemistic' magic power can offer a counterweight.

Behold the inherent ambition of van der Heijden's writing, continually haunted by a longing to write a 'humanly impossible' book that is all-encompassing, one which makes all books superfluous, to chime in with Gerard Reve. Van der Heijden emulates earlier examples such as Mallarmé's dream of *Le Livre*, or Jean Genet's cycle *La Mort*, which he never accomplished. The cyclic form of his own oeuvre, in which the One Impossible Book is effectively cut into pieces,

should be seen as a cunning final attempt at that Impossible Book, a series which eventually turns out to be endless.

Life in breadth

In *De tandeloze tijd* this ambition finds its counterpart in Albert Egbert's ideal of 'life in breadth'. In the prologue of *De slag om de Blauwbrug* ('The Battle at the Blauwbrug') this notion of life in breadth is placed in contrast to life in length, as he writes of 'breadth, where everything happened faster, there was more movement, no earthly time was lost: where all events happened simultaneously, instead of following one another, robbing one another of time'. The ideal exhibits a striking resemblance to what Jung called 'synchronicity' and the modernists of the early twentieth century term 'simultaneity'; it amounts to an attempt to capture as much reality as possible in its entirety and is therefore a good match for what van der Heijden hoped to achieve with his Impossible Book.

Within the cycle of the novel Albert Egberts does not achieve his ideal, except in the glow of his heroin addiction, a caricature of his original intention. But as a writer van der Heijden comes close to his aim, continually increasing the scale and narrative density of his novels. In the fourth part of *De tandeloze tijd*, *Advocaat van de hanen* ('Punk Lawyer'), the 'binge drinker' and lawyer Ernst Quispel joins Albert Egberts as a second lead character whose murky history runs in parallel to Albert's. In the third part, published shortly afterwards and consisting of two substantial halves, *Hof van barmhartigheid* ('Court of Mercy') and *Onder het plaveisel het moeras* ('Under the Pavement the Swamp'), that account turns into an overloaded 'polyphony' of voices and stories, from which van der Heijden cunningly cut and pasted to make a separate novel, *Doodverf* ('Death Paint'). Even before that, alongside the cycle, *De sandwich*, *Weerborstels* ('Rebels'), and *Het leven uit een dag* ('Life in One Day') were published as 'satellite books', showing how difficult it is, if not impossible, to encapsulate everything in a single unit.

Stopping time

We should not, therefore, be surprised that around the turn of the millennium van der Heijden started a second cycle alongside *De tandeloze tijd*. It shows that his ambition has only grown with time; in his essay about the novel *Kruis en kraai* ('Cross and Crow', 2008) he himself speaks openly of 'megalomania', even if its ultimate goal comprises nothing other than a 'monumental failure'. How could it be otherwise, when both 'life in breadth' and the Impossible Book are attempts to stop time, to escape from its teeth, one of the meanings of the title of van der Heijden's first cycle? This is where we should look for the real motivation behind his writing.

Of the eight to nine parts originally announced for the new cycle *Homo duplex*, four have now been published: an enormous 0th part, *De Movo Tapes*, and the even more voluminous *Het schervengericht* ('The Ostracism') not even mentioned in the original plan, as well as *Drijfzand koloniseren* ('Colonising Quick-sand') and *Mim*, which are considerably more restrained in volume. It remains

uncertain how the cycle will look in the end. Perhaps part of the reason van der Heijden began this new cycle was to go beyond the autobiographical framework of *De tandeloze tijd*. In *Homo duplex* Brabant seems remote; the narrator appears as the Greek god of light Apollo, although he can no longer bear this name, having 'sold out' to NASA. His task is to entertain the gods of Olympus by causing as much tragedy and misery on earth as possible.

In *De Movo Tapes* this results in a real war between Amsterdam and Rotterdam football hooligans, in *Het schervengericht* the action moves to California, where we witness a confrontation in prison between the French-Polish director Roman Polanski and Charles Manson, the leader of the sect that murdered Polanski's pregnant wife. It is worth noting that this confrontation is also mentioned in *Advocaat van de hanen*, as the subject of a play Albert Egberts has decided to write, so the two cycles are not entirely separate.

Homo duplex only began to take shape with the newly published parts. So far we know that at a certain point there must be a 'World Strike', a 'war of All against One', which must bring an end to human futility and the pointlessness of existence. In some sense this is a counterpart to what we find in Harry Mulisch's novel *De ontdekking van de hemel* (*The Discovery of Heaven*): instead of heaven withdrawing its hands from humanity, humanity tries to elicit a sign of life from heaven. 'I aspire to raise the need so high that even if no God ever existed, at that moment one *comes into* existence...', says the main character Tibbolt Satink, who, transformed into Movo, must proclaim the World Strike.

Death of a son

It all sounds quite bizarre, even over the top. We might wonder whether van der Heijden will ever succeed in making a convincing tragedy of these curious facts, worthy of Sophocles, if that is his aim at least. For the time being fate has thrown a spanner in the works, as in 2010 on the night of Whitsun, van der Heijden and his wife Mirjam Rotenstreich's only son Tonio died in a traffic accident. In an attempt to express his grief van der Heijden wrote the only 'requiem' he had probably expected never to have to write, *Tonio*. The 'monumental failure' that had always been his aim now became a real failure. Literature can keep the memory of the dead alive, but cannot bring the dead back to life. Van der Heijden needs the many pages of *Tonio*, full of shame and guilt because he was unable to prevent his son's death, the flipside of his megalomania, to distance himself as long as possible from this realisation. At the same time it comes ever closer as he tries to reconstruct the hours before the fatal accident in as much detail as possible. In van der Heijden's view Tonio's death throws a black shadow over everything he has written, and inevitably on what he has yet to write.

Has the writing lost its shine?

Since the death of his son the author has been showered with prizes, including the P.C. Hooftprijs in 2013, the Netherlands' most important literary prize. A new book also appeared for that occasion, a relatively short novel by van der Heijden's standards, *De helleveeg* ('The Shrew'), part of *De tandeloze tijd*, surprisingly, rather than *Homo duplex*, a sign that the first cycle still cannot be

seen as complete. In the bibliography at the back of *De helleveeg* van der Heijden mentions two titles 'in preparation': a new part of *Homo duplex* and a historical novel. If we are to believe his expression of thanks for the P.C. Hooftprijs, however, he has yet to return to business as usual. The veil of guilt and shame which has covered everything since the death of his son (a feeling he describes with the neologism 'beshaming'), also determines the flavour of his new work. This is already clear in *De helleveeg*.

The aestheticizing force which previously characterised van der Heijden's writing is absent from this novel about a woman who goes through life embittered and full of venom. The literature no longer gilds, but grotesquely exaggerates the horror. *De helleveeg* is about child abuse, abortion and hypocrisy, pulled together to form a pitiless attack on the world of Catholic Brabant from which the writer comes. Although the novel is certainly no less well written than his earlier work, the transformation to a higher aesthetic plan still eludes him. Pessimism must stand alone, without its glittering counterweight. The writing has lost its shine. The extent to which the same is true of the parts of *De tandeloze tijd* and *Homo duplex* still to come is something we can only await in fear and trembling – and suspense. ■

Extract from *Falling Parents*

By A.F.Th. van der Heijden

Sometimes, when after a period of careless living and casual fasting I felt myself losing weight, I imagined that I had the fragile and languid quality of Thjum himself.

I was wrong. I was too broad-shouldered. My sturdy frame got in my way. Nothing seemed more ridiculous than someone with my shoulders in the role of a sickly youth. Thjum's build might have been able to make me the poet for which I was sometimes taken. My ribcage was too big for poetry...

Oh yes, I wanted to penetrate the world passionately, to *partake* of it instead of just being part of it. But at the same time I wished to remain the little angel, the immaculate boy, mummy's darling, in whose chops no character at all must be carved...

I wanted to penetrate the world, but not to be affected or eroded by it. Time should preferably pass me by toothlessly. And if there were really no alternative, I should be sucked like an acid drop, so that painlessly and imperceptibly slowly I gradually became less and less... and finally at the age of eighty or ninety disintegrated in blissful ignorance...

From *Falling Parents*

(*Vallende ouders, De tandeloze tijd 1*, Amsterdam, Querido, 1983)

Extract from *Movo Tapes*

By A.F.Th. van der Heijden

On the corner of Exilstraat two men were rummaging in full rubbish bags. Not fly-by-nights, they were working too systematically for that with their full-length kitchen gloves. Rubbish that had been put out a day too soon. They were mainly interested in the paperwork. Sometimes they studied an envelope and took it to a doorway to check the house number and nameplate. I cast a glance into the very heart of Western civilisation. Rooting around in people's rubbish on Sunday morning in order to retrieve the address of the woman who has put out her far from rat-proof bag at the wrong time.

Civilisation is... having a Secret Garbage Service brave the throwaway needles of diabetic patients, a comb caked with cradle cap, dog vomit in a newspaper, the toothbrush with shoe polish on it, the two-month miscarriage in a Tupperware lunchbox and the apple peel curled round cat poo, in order to make the local residents aware of their civilised obligations.

Civilisation is... enclosing the address wrapper sent to one of the neighbours with the rubbish before putting the rubbish bag out in the street two days too early.

The Dutch nose-picking monopoly. The ability to convince yourself that you are the only one who sneakily throws away a ball of paper or a piece of chewing gum in the street. Others more or less keep to the rules, nobody sees me anyway, and on a world scale it doesn't matter, no more than peeing in the swimming pool matters or a ball of snot under the kitchen table. A waste peel and box logic that is also strictly adhered to with regard to environmental legislation. Dumping used heating oil, or laboratory poison in all the colours of the rainbow, is rather like masturbating in secret. No one sees it, and what you get rid of you're done with. It was all taught us tacitly. By our educators, who every so often thought they were invisible, and still didn't know where to keep their hands.

Traces? 'It could just as well have been someone else.' That is how the murderer dumps his body, like a hard lump of snot that you stick to the bottom of the chair with its own slime.

From *Movo Tapes*

(*De Movo Tapes, Homo Duplex o*, Amsterdam, Querido, 2003)

Translated by Paul Vincent