The Containment of Chaos

The Work of Gerard Reve

A dalliance with the English language nearly caused the Dutchman Gerard Reve to become an English writer. In 1951 the Dutch government awarded him a travel grant to write his novella *Melancholy* (Melancholia), but when the Minister for Culture got wind of the fact that the book contained a masturbation scene the grant was instantly withdrawn. The indignant writer boldly decided that henceforth he would write only in English, to which end he settled in London and set about mastering his new language. In 1956 Reve published *The Acrobat and Other Stories*, but the difficulties of writing in English proved too much for him and a few years later he went back to his mother tongue. His efforts to learn English, however, were not in vain, for his mastery of the language enabled him to produce excellent translations into Dutch of a number of plays, including *The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Edward Albee.

Reve is a controversial writer whose literary career has been filled with such upsets as the above-mentioned incident. Born Gerard Kornelis van het Reve (the shortened form of his name dates from 1973) in Amsterdam on 14 December 1923, he grew up in a Communist family. His brother, Karel, became a professor of Slavic languages and one of the Netherlands' best post-war essayists. As an adult Gerard would develop into a fierce opponent of the ideology his parents had pinned their hopes on.

His first novel, *The Evenings* (De avonden), published in 1947, provoked a storm of criticism. Some critics reacted positively and others were dismissive, but none was indifferent. The novel describes in ten chapters, corresponding to the last ten days of the year 1946, the attempts made by Frits van Egters, a young man in his early twenties, to get a grip on his life, which he perceives as nothing but a fragmentary collection of meaningless moments. Despite his good intentions ('*Let us make sure our time is well spent*'), he does not succeed in spending his time – and especially his evenings – in a satisfactory way. He's bored, and irritated with his parents, with whom he lives. Frits carries on listless conversations with his friends, and their small talk is interspersed with horror stories and cynical jokes: '*Elephantiasis, that's a good one, you can sit on your own balls as though they were a* pouf.'

The spiritual vacuum to which *The Evenings* testifies was attributed by a number of critics to the enemy occupation of the Netherlands which had ended only a short time before. Reve's novel was said to interpret the mentality of post-war youth, formed during a period when traditional moral principles were being trampled upon. The writer himself was bewildered by all the commotion caused by his first-born and made the following matter-of-fact comment: '*I wrote "The Evenings" because I was convinced I had to write it: that seems to me a good enough reason. I hoped that ten of my friends would accept a free copy, and that twenty people would buy the book out of pity and ten others by mistake. Things turned out differently. It's not my fault it caused such an uproar.*'

The novella *Werther Nieland*, published in 1949, was largely ignored by the critics. It is the story of a younger version of Frits van Egters, who – if such a thing is possible – is even more unable to face up to an incomprehensible and therefore terrifying reality. Despite the scant attention originally paid to the book, it is now regarded as a high point in Reve's oeuvre, also by the author himself.

Letter from Edinburgh

The 1950s were a rather unproductive period for Reve, in which he had very little to show for his efforts. This is evidenced not only by his adventure with the English language, but also by his attempts to make a name for himself as a playwright. The production of his tragedy – *Commissioner Fennedy* (Commissaris Fennedy), written in 1962 – was a complete fiasco.

In the meantime Reve was searching for a form other than the traditional story, the constraints of which he had come to perceive as a straitjacket. The form he was seeking was found by accident, when, as editor of *Tirade*, lack of copy compelled him to contribute a 'travel letter' describing a writers' conference he had attended in Edinburgh. This 'Letter from Edinburgh' was well received, and was followed by other letters, which became more and more personal. In 1963 Reve compiled a selection of them in *En Route for the End* (Op weg naar het einde), which was followed three years later by *Nearer to Thee* (Nader tot U), the latter also containing a section of poems. These books sold by the tens of thousands, and the author fanned the flames of his success by making conspicuous appearances in the media, testifying to his reputation as a master of the provocative and humorous statement.

In *En Route for the End* and *Nearer to Thee* Reve replaced conventional narrative with a looser, epistolary form, in which recollections, outpourings and reflections effortlessly settle into place. Stylistically, too, Reve was able to move about more freely. Whereas the first work is characterised by syntactical soberness and frugality in his use of words, in the 'travel letters' Reve made use of long sentences – often interrupted by parenthetical expressions and exclamations – as well as a frequent change of register. A special effect was achieved through the use of language inspired by the Bible. For example, the famous pronouncement by Paul the Apostle, '*And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity*' (*I Corinthians* 13:13) was profanely varied by Reve to read, '*Sex, Drink, and Death, these three, but the greatest of these is Death.*'

Despite these differences, there is a great deal of thematic continuity in his early work up to and including the 1960s. Such themes as writing, religion and homosexual love are developed to the full. Frits van Egters in *The Evenings* can be viewed as a prospective writer. Admittedly, he doesn't put pen to paper, but he forces himself to observe keenly and to express his observations clearly. It is a way of getting a grip on a world that appears to him to be meaningless and absurd. The same cathartic function is fulfilled by writing, which is now being practised in earnest by the author who is the main character of the collections of letters.

'Revism'

Religion plays a comparable role in Reve's work. In *Becoming a Writer* (Zelf schrijver worden,1986) – four treatises that in no way offer the instruction manual promised by the title, but contain instead Reve's poetics – he calls art and religion '*twin sisters*' with the task of '*interpreting reality*'. At the end of *The Evenings* the protagonist turns to God in a heart-rending monologue, in which he sums up his parents' exasperating idiosyncrasies, nonetheless begging God to have mercy on them. God has seen everything, just like the budding writer Frits van Egters. The same interpretive function is given to religion in the travel letters.

When Reve's characters turn to God, they do so in a tone suggesting equality between God and man. In the letters in particular, God appears as a figure with human traits. Just as man needs God, so God cannot do without man. The poem 'Epilogue' from *Nearer to Thee* ends with the lines, '*But sometimes, when I think that You do truly live, / I think that You are Love, and lonely, / and that, in selfsame desperation, You seek me / as I seek You.*'

Despite the frankness found in *The Evenings*, the near absence of sexuality is striking, as contemporary critics also pointed out. There are only a few passages from which one may gather that the protagonist's feelings of lust are closely connected with torture or at least fantasies thereof. A story dating from Reve's English period but published only in 1968, *A Prison Song in Prose*, displays a similar connection, this theme finally unfolding completely in the prose written by Reve in the 1960s. Sexual love is directed at members of the same sex and is strongly aroused by pictures of torture, usually not of the lover, but of boys offered to him as a sacrifice. Satisfying one's own desires is subordinated to the pleasure of the beloved. Uninhibited by modesty, the writer has labelled this seemingly religious constellation 'Revism'.

The interweaving of the various themes, already visible in the writings discussed so far, is nowhere so apparent as in a passage from the 'Letter from the house called The Grass', which supplements this article. Here the main character thinks about the book he himself is going to write, which will be the deliverance of man and nature. Literature serves to realise a religious goal: salvation. In accordance with Christian messianism, God returns to earth. On this day of the parousia, the glorious Advent at the end of time, God assumes the shape of a '*one-year-old, mouse-grey donkey*', who submits a full three times to the sexual advances of the protagonist, the love of God thus receiving sexual confirmation.

Reve himself is very attached to this passage, but representatives of the Dutch Reformed Church objected to the representation of God as a donkey (in the author's opinion, '*the dearest, most innocent creature I can think of*'), who, to make matters worse, has sexual relations with a person. In 1966 Reve found himself faced with a charge of blasphemy in a court case that became known as the 'donkey trial'. The writer defended himself in a brilliant address to the court, in which he showed as little respect for the bench as his characters did for the Supreme Being. He expounded his image of an immanent God, based on the quintessential identity of God and man: '*God has just as much need of our love and comfort as we do of His, and is just as dependent on our saving Him as we are on His saving us.*' He contrasted this picture with the God of his opponents, '*a wrathful, unfathomable petty tyrant, but one who cannot possibly be duped...*'. The author, who converted to Catholicism that same year, was acquitted.

His conversion, which meant supporting a conservative institution, did not make Reve popular among the progressive intelligentsia in the Netherlands. His political views became more conservative. He supported the United States intervention in Vietnam and was also able to discern the positive side of South African apartheid policies.

Reve could count on more sympathy, though, when defending the rights of homosexuals to their own sexual proclivities. He openly declared his homosexuality and was for a short time the editor of *Dialoog, tijdschrift voor homofilie en maatschappij* (Dialogue, a Magazine for Homosexuality and Society), thereby making his own contribution to the emancipation of homosexuals.

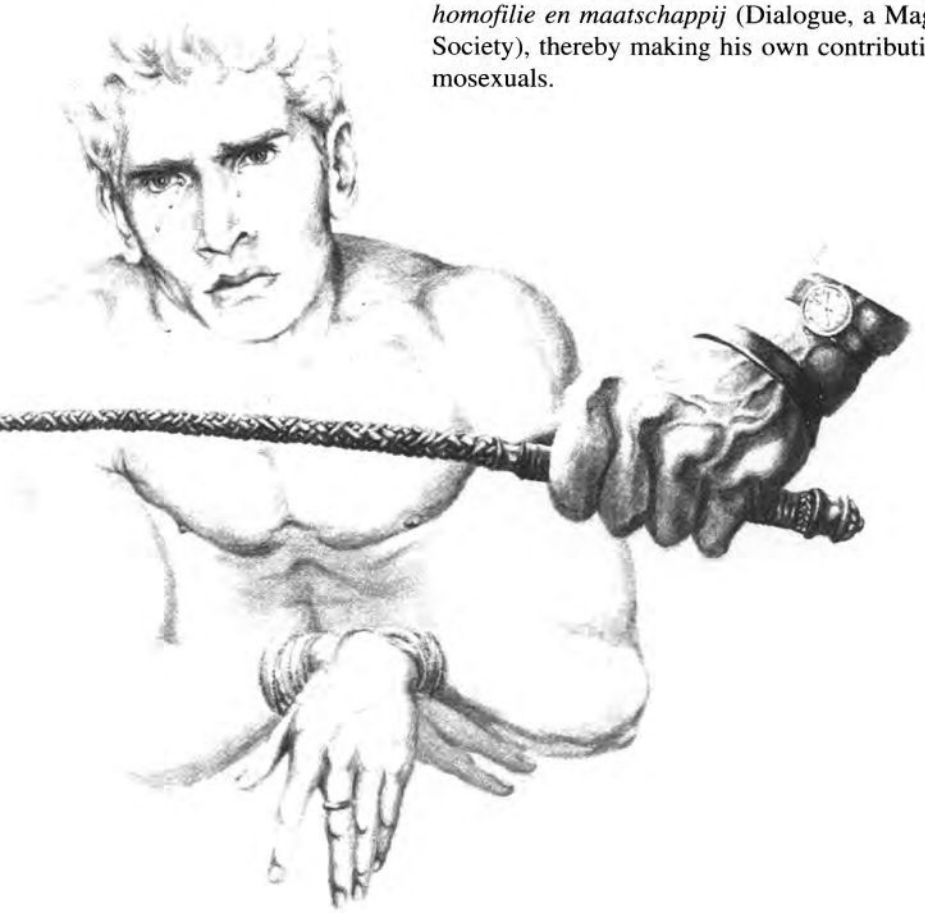

Illustration from *A Prison Song in Prose* (1968).

Gerard Reve cheers the Pope in Brussels on 4 June 1995. Photo by Klaas Koppe.

My Mother, the Church

The travel letters written in the 1960s were not the end of the line in Reve's development. Although his work has since been characterised by a loose structure, the actual letter form disappeared into the background and the story came into its own again. Reve demonstrated a predilection for the frame narrative, which guaranteed him optimum freedom of movement. His return to the story was compensated for by the publication of a long series of authentic letters, such as *Letters to Wimie 1959-1963* (Brieven aan Wimie 1959-1963, 1980), *Letters to Skilled Workers* (Brieven aan geschoolde arbeiders, 1985) and *Letters to my Personal Physician 1963-1980* (Brieven aan mijn lijfarts 1963-1980, 1991).

This development may create the impression of a neat division into fiction and non-fiction, but nothing could be further from the truth. Reve is an elusive author, who takes pleasure in causing confusion, as emerged from the biography he invented for himself in the late 1960s. This hoax maintained that he was descended from Baltic-Russian parents, and – destined for a career in the military – served as an officer in the Indies, or present-day Indonesia. His career was supposedly cut short when he entered into an illicit relationship with a Javan prince. This so-called biography has nothing whatsoever to do with the facts of Reve's life.

Reve became increasingly aware both of his subject matter and of his stylistic capabilities. The dark side of this realisation caused him in a number of works, such as *The Silent Friend* (De stille vriend, 1984), to cling unabashedly to his old routine. A new dimension was added to his work, however: starting in the mid-1970s, Reve produced a number of writings pro-

viding explication of his subject matter. The essence and technique of the arts, and literature in particular, was treated in the above-mentioned book *Becoming a Writer*. His religious development is the subject of *Mother and Son* (Moeder en zoon, 1980). The title already reveals that Mary, introduced as a traditional mother figure, has by now supplanted God in Reve's religious universe. At the same time the title suggests that a craving for religious security may be traced back to one's relationship with one's parents: '*If I dared to be very honest, then one thing was extremely clear: I was searching for my mother, whom I had lost for good, and a Church now presented itself to me which called itself our mother and which, moreover – not* de jure *according to the statutes but de facto according to the house rules – was run by a Mother.*'

Literature as exorcism

In *Old and Lonely* (Oud en eenzaam, 1978) the first-person narrator declares his particular sexual inclinations, in which lust and cruelty are inextricably linked, from the vantage point of what he calls '*Communistic pornography*': the detailed description of the torture inflicted on youthful Communists by capitalist bullies during training sessions. (An early example of this is to be found in 'The Foreign Boy' in *The Acrobat and Other Stories*.) The narrator of *Old and Lonely* expresses it as follows: '*Communistic pornography instilled in me a preoccupation with cruelty, which pushed all other feelings and thoughts into the background. In my imagination, sadistic scenes of dungeons and interrogations would henceforth accompany every feeling of sexual lust, and only by summoning up these scenes or permitting them to appear could my desires be satisfied.*'

Despite this tendency to offer rational explanations, Reve's view of the world remains essentially irrational. In *Becoming a Writer* he expounds the notion that the part of writing which he finds most important – the Conception ('*the light in which the writer sees the world and existence*') – does not bear close scrutiny. Another example of the limited role that reason plays in Reve's thinking is the fact, revealed in *Mother and Son*, that his decision to become a member of the Catholic church was an impulsive one, taken as an expression of gratitude for being reunited with a lover.

The Revian hero is invariably confronted with a reality whose incomprehensibility harbours all manner of danger. In order to exorcise this reality and the fears it inspires, Reve seeks refuge in literature, which fulfils the same function as religion. Whether this involves seeking careful formulations, as Frits van Egters trains himself to do in *The Evenings*, or indulging in compulsive narration, such as the first-person narrator in *The Book of Violet and Death* (Het boek van violet en dood, 1996), the stakes are always what Reve himself regards as the essence of all art: '*overcoming and containing chaos*'.

G.F.H. RAAT
Translated by Diane L. Webb.

The Acrobat and Other Stories. Amsterdam / London, 1956 (Original in English).
'A Circus in Miniature' (Tr. James S Holmes and Hans van Marle). In: *Delta*, VII, 1964, 2, pp. 52-63.
'The Decline and Fall of the Boslowits Family' (Tr. James S Holmes and Hans van Marle). In: *Modern Stories from Holland and Flanders* (ed. Egbert Krispyn). New York, 1973, pp. 126-154.
'Gerard Reve: an English Sampler' (Tr. Paul Vincent). In: *Dutch Crossing*, 12, December 1980, pp. 55-57.
Parents Worry (Tr. Richard Huijing). London, 1990.
'Werther Nieland' (Tr. Richard Huijing). In: *The Dedalus Book of Dutch Fantasy* (ed. Richard Huijing). Sawtry (Cambs.), 1993.

Four Extracts

by Gerard Reve

'Almighty and everlasting God,' he said softly, 'cast your eyes upon my parents. See them in their hour of need. Do not avert your gaze.' 'Listen,' he said, 'my father is as deaf as a post. He hears so little it's not worth mentioning. Fire a cannon next to his ear as a joke and he'll ask if the doorbell is ringing. He slurps when he drinks. He uses his dessert spoon for the sugar. He eats meat with his fingers. He farts when it's not called for. He has pieces of food stuck in his dentures. He never knows where to insert the coin. When he peels an egg, he never knows what to do with the shell. He asks in English if there's any news. He mixes all his food up on his plate. Almighty God, to whom all things are known, I know these transgressions have not gone unseen.'

He was passed by six girls with their arms slung around each other, alternately racing forward and then checking their pace. 'He makes a mess knocking the ashes out of his pipe,' he whispered, when they were past him. 'He loses stamps. Not on purpose, but he loses them all the same. You can't find them any more, that's the point. He wipes his fingers on his clothes. He turns off the radio. If I strike a G with the fork, he thinks I'm crazy. And he pokes around in the serving plates. That's uncleanly. And often he doesn't wear a tie. But great is his goodness.' He stopped and stared out across the water. 'Look at my mother,' he said softly. 'She says I should be sociable and go on living at home. She tells me to wear my white sleeveless pullover. She makes apple fritters with the wrong kind of apple. I'll tell you about it sometime when I have the chance. She makes lots of smoke when she lights the stove. And she let the attic keys burn up. Almighty and everlasting God, she thought she was buying wine, but it was fruit juice. Dear soul. Blackcurrant-apple. She moves her head back and forth when she reads. She's my mother. See her infinite goodness.' He wiped a tear from the corner of his right eye with his sleeve and walked on.

'A thousand years are nothing in Thy sight,' he continued. 'Behold the days of my parents. Old age is approaching, they are racked with disease, there is no hope. Death is near, and a gaping grave. Not a grave, actually, because they're going to be put in an urn: we make a weekly payment on it.' He shook his head.

'Look at them,' he whispered. 'There is no hope for them. They live in loneli-

ness. Wherever they reach out all is emptiness. Their bodies are deteriorating. He still has hair on his head, a whole head of hair. No, he's not bald. But that will come too.'

From *The Evenings* (De avonden. Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 1967[15], pp. 194-195).
Translated by Diane L. Webb.

My interest in death and undertaking was acquired at a very early age. Long before I reached adulthood I founded the *Club of Tombs*, whose purpose was to provide a decent burial for dead birds and other small animals. The graves were earthen pyramids or conical elevations designed to have passageways and an air shaft. They've all disappeared because everything was dug up, and houses were built everywhere that are now ready to be demolished. Everything gets knocked down sooner or later.

My early youth has not yet been the subject of sufficient study. I myself have no recollection of the first five years of my life. From my sixth year I have vague memories of a corridor, a view of a playground, and from the balconies a view of a row of houses in which people lived who didn't exist, because the walls were made of yellow bricks. And that's all. Décor, therefore, but without actors or sounds. Did anything terrible happen during those first five years? It wouldn't surprise me if it had, but I don't remember anything: it defies historical observation. All in all I've had a strange life, when I think about it. Not special, but unusual, that's probably the right word. Something providential seems to inform that life, not anything that guides or advises me, but a providence that always ensures that I escape, without knowing what I'm escaping from. These acts of providence have not made my life any happier, though perhaps they've given it direction. Nevertheless, we are faced with a mystery: we look in the mirror of a dark reason, and I think it has to be like that.

From *The Book of Violet and Death* (Het boek van violet en dood. Amsterdam / Antwerpen, Van Oorschot, 1996, pp. 71-72).
Translated by Diane L. Webb.

Turning back at the intersection in front of W.'s cafe, I actually took the way home. Drank too much again, God, God damn. 'I'll kick the habit, I have to, I swear I will. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, I'm going to stop drinking, I swear it in the sight of God. But I don't know when exactly.'

I had to fight – with God and people I would struggle, and I would overcome, this I now saw. No, oh no, never would I give up the hope of writing what had to be written but which no one had ever put into words before: the book, once again, that would make all other books unnecessary; the book, which, when finished, no other writer would have to worry about writing ever again, for all of humankind, yes, even the whole of nature, still fettered by hate and fear, would be redeemed. Then the children of man would see a sunrise such as was never

seen before, and music would sound, sighing as though from a distance, which I had never heard yet nonetheless recognised. And God Himself would come to me in the shape of a one-year-old, mouse-grey donkey and stand in front of the door and ring the bell and say, 'Gerard, that book of yours – did you know that parts of it made me cry?'

'My Lord and my God! I will praise Thy name for ever and ever. I love you so very much,' I would try to say, but halfway through I would burst into tears, and start to kiss Him and pull him inside, and after a lot of grabbing and clutching on the way up the stairs to the bedroom, I would take Him, protractedly, three times in a row in his Secret Opening, and afterwards give him a complimentary copy, not cloth-bound, but hard cover – none of that petty stinginess – with the dedication: *For the Everlasting. Without words.*

From *Nearer to Thee* (Nader tot U. Utrecht / Antwerpen: Van Oorschot, 1990[20], pp. 117-118)
Translated by Diane L. Webb.

'So you're the new member,' Larry said. 'What's your name?'

'Yes, I'm the new member,' Darger answered. 'I'm Willem's brother.'

'So you're a brother of Willem,' Larry said, putting his hand on Darger's shoulder. 'Is that so? Well, I don't have to tell you much about the struggle we're waging. Because Willem knows everything a boy of his age should know about it, and I'm sure he's told you a lot about it.'

'Yes, yes,' Darger answered. He would have liked to take a few steps backward, but he was already standing against the wall.

'So I suppose you know what they do to comrades of ours in other countries,' Larry said. His shirt was open at the top, and some hairs on his chest stuck out.

'I. Yes, yes,' Darger said hastily.

Larry put his tongue between his lips and closed his left eye.

'For instance, did you know that they beat them with iron rods?' he asked. 'So that they die with the blows, and that their backbones are broken? You know that, do you?'

'Yes, yes,' Darger said quickly. Larry's hand was still on his shoulder.

'But we'll make them pay for it,' Larry went on. 'Don't you think we'll avenge our martyrs? We will, and we'll do a lot worse than they did, believe that.'

From *The Acrobat and other Stories*. Amsterdam / London, 1956, pp. 123-124.
Written by the author in English.