

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

tries to define what makes all these different stories so very 'Dutch': 'the proto-typical Dutch writer creates protagonists that are [...] contemplative arch-romantics, reserved iconoclasts'. That may be the case for Nescio's protagonist Koekebakker in *Young Titans*, who makes explicit what many other male protagonists in this collection could have said: 'The truth is we did nothing but talk, smoke, drink and read books.' But it definitely is not true for Mensje van Keulen's (b. 1946) male character in *Sand* who is raped and abused on a deserted beach, or for the female lead in Maria Dermoût's (1888-1962) story *The Sirens* who magically turns her shipmate from submissive, young man into a splendid golden tiger.

The strength of Zwagerman's choice indeed is in its variation: Manon Uphoff's story *Poop*, for instance, with its brilliant focus on social class and human cruelty, is incomparable to Remco Campert's (b. 1929) boyish display of 'party-time' in *The Kid with the Knife*.

Zwagerman's attempts to define a particular 'Dutch-ness' that would underpin all these stories contradict with his own efforts to place them in a global context. He sounds on the defence when saying, 'contrary to the old misconception that Dutch literature is inward-looking and set within our national borders, many of these stories unfold outside the Netherlands.' Ironically, he refers to Albert Alberts's (1911-1995) story *Green* as an example, which strictly speaking took place *within* national borders. *Green* is set in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), at the time a Dutch colony. Alberts's insightful story is a critique of Dutch colonial administration. The suicide of colonial employee Peereboom shows the violence, futility and absurdity of trying to govern people on the other side of the globe.

Green finds an interesting pendant in Frans Kellendonk's (1951-1990) *Foreign Service*, written more than thirty years later and set *within* the national borders. Kellendonk's unemployed Dutch narrator hires an illegal Egyptian cleaner. His feelings of natural entitlement towards the migrant show hierarchical power relations *post* Dutch colonialism: a very current topic.

According to Zwagerman, the Dutch language is quite different from English: 'for a child in Manchester [...] Shakespeare's writing is not nearly as



impenetrable as a book written in Hebrew'. But to Dutch readers 'eighteenth-century Dutch [...] seems almost like a foreign tongue, as exotic and indecipherable as Hindi.' This seems a far-fetched reason to explain the minor fame of Dutch literary writing. Dutch simply never was a *lingua franca*, as English is nowadays. Good stories simply need to be translated to find a global audience.

These are wonderful stories and they have been chosen well by a known name in the Dutch literary field. *The Penguin Book of Dutch Short Stories* does not necessarily need an introduction; the stories just had to be translated and put into context. And that has been done very well too.

STEFANIE VAN GEMERT

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