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Postmodern Dutch literature: Renewal or tradition?

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This volume has an overall theme of ‘presenting the past’; among other things, the past of Dutch literature. My chapter deals with a rather new-fashioned approach to presenting the very recent past of Dutch fiction (occasionally also of Dutch poetry).\(^1\) I am referring to Dutch prose texts written from the 1950s and the 1960s onwards, which are now generally and comprehensively called ‘postmodern’, whereas until some seven years ago they were not perceived in these terms at all. No contemporary critic ever used the label ‘postmodernism’ for the overtly non-mimetic, even anti-realistic texts of Ivo Michiels for instance, back in the recent past of 1963 (Het boek alfa) or 1971 (Exit, one of the most audaciously abstract texts ever written in Dutch). Michiels was called a master of ‘abstract’ prose up to the late 1980s, but is considered to be a paragon of postmodern writing now. Louis-Paul Boon is said to be a forerunner of postmodern storytelling, and so are Hugo Claus and Harry Mulisch, Cees Nooteboom and Gerrit Krol, Willy Roggeman and Claude C. Krijgelmans.\(^2\)

Dutch contemporary literary history is also catching up with the authors connected with Raster and De Revisor, Frans Kellendonk or Jacq Firmin Vogelaar for instance, but also Willem Brakman, A. F. Th. van der Heijden, Walter van den Broeck, Jeroen Brouwers,\(^3\) and of course Sybren Polet, the spokesman of the ‘other prose’ movement in the sixties. The ‘other prose’, both in the Netherlands and in Flanders, was presented as a linguistic opus, very close to abstract painting and minimal music, deliberately deviating from ‘straightforward naive or mimetic realism’.

Not only does it appear to be fashionable to incorporate the found- ing fathers of the other prose into the postmodern mood: the label proves to be suitable for the newest generation of prose writers – not altogether
surprisingly, you might say. Authors of the more or less reflexive or critical type like Kristien Hemmerechts, Eriek Verpale, Koen Peeters and Patricia de Martelaere are said to exhibit postmodern features beyond any discussion; and there is no doubt about the predominance of postmodern procedures in recent texts of Pol Hoste, Stefan Hertmans, Boris Todorov and Paul Claes. Those postmodern features would be: multiplicity of points of view, intertextual references, allusions to archetypes, destroying the illusion of fiction in order to stress the plurality of reality and the difficulty of gaining a grip on reality by literary means. The obnubilating of the borderline between reality and fiction, the predominance of scepticism, eclecticism and relativism characterize the underlying poetical presupposition. All this is said to be postmodern, just like ‘the empty narrative’, or ‘the decentred narrative’ and ‘the labyrinth of various types’. In summary, the fragmentation of great ideological frameworks would be the key element of postmodern writing. ‘Petites histoires’, ‘petits-récits’ – those are the stories that could still be told nowadays.

In 1981 Mark Insingel gave the following comment on the title of his opus-text Woorden zijn oorden:

My ‘territory’ consists of words, of linguistic configurations and constructions. As such it can be thought of as ‘not belonging to this world’. It is not realistic – some blind people will say. As a matter of fact [my territory] cannot be found on a map, it does not create the illusion of being completed and measurable, it exists in continuous new constellations made of the driftwood of reality.

A more programmatic deviation from straightforward mimesis can hardly be found in recent Dutch prose writing. Texts like Woorden zijn oorden or Mijn territorium could be submitted to a new screening by means of postmodern poetics. There was undoubtedly a tradition of non-mimetic writing back in the 1950s. Such texts, then, are some twenty-five years older than the more recently invented label ‘postmodern’. Even metafiction, parafiction, eclecticism, relativism and the labyrinthine mixture of various types and modes of writing could be traced back to the late 1950s.

Another important characteristic of postmodern writing is the ironic inclusion of pulp texts in so-called ‘serious’ literature, and one example of this can be seen in my discussion of Robberechts’ Praag schrijven – a text that could be considered to be postmodern avant la lettre. On the other hand, the outspoken engagement of the late sixties and the seventies is being abandoned in postmodern writing. This aspect
can also be seen below in the section on Praag schrijven, which exhibits the ideological and political commitment of May 68, something which has by now almost completely disappeared.

As far as the concept of postmodernism in literature is concerned, the term ‘postmodernismo’ had already been introduced in the 1930s in connection with some reactions against modernist trends in Spanish and South-American poetry. But with regard to American literature Leslie Fiedler’s survey of contemporary postmodern literature since 1960 was published no earlier than 1970; the title of his essay contains two slogans of postmodern culture: ‘Cross the border. Close the gap’. Dutch compatriots like Fokkema, Bertens and D’Haen introduced the term around 1983, preceding our historians of Dutch literature by some four or five years with their publications in English and Dutch. As far as I know, Ton Anbeek was the very first Dutch critic to use the label ‘postmodern’ back in 1984 with regard to the Revisor prose which he connected with postmodern tendencies in his review of the book Houdbare illusies by Carel Peeters. From 1988 on there is widespread use of the term with regard to contemporary Dutch fiction, including – as I said in my introduction – the ‘other prose’ of the sixties, despite the fierce campaigning of a prominent Dutch critic like Carel Peeters against the use of the term. Peeters’s essay was full of praise for the Revisor group, but he refused to call them postmodernists. In the meantime the terms ‘pre-postmodern’ and even ‘post-postmodern’ no longer come as a surprise.

So the first point I want to make in this chapter concerning the theme ‘presenting the past’ is this: many contemporary historians of our recent literature tend to present the past of the last quarter of a century as ‘postmodern’, which represents a new view of those texts or at least the use of a new label rapidly growing increasingly familiar. It is even expanding beyond expectations, or perhaps even far beyond justifications. We are presenting that past of some twenty-five years as a thoroughly contemporary episode. We are bringing that recent past closer to us; or we are detecting contemporary attitudes, with which we are so familiar now, in a very recent past.

Let me now briefly present my second look at ‘presenting the past’ referring to only one example, the novel Praag schrijven written by Daniël Robberechts in 1967–71 and published in 1975. The novel itself must be approached in two ways. First, the author himself appears to present a past with a rather narrow time gap of at the most three years; in relation to the history dealt with in the book there is a small distance of four years again between the writing and the publishing of the book. Contemporary readers in 1975 were already looking back on the events of 1968–71.
narrated and commented upon in the book. Second, from my point of view as a critic and as a historiographer of contemporary Dutch literature I shall attempt in turn to read that book twenty-five years later as a ‘postmodern’ text. Or at least I shall endeavour to attach the label ‘postmodern’ to that book.

_Praag schrijven_, a book of 275 pages, was published in the _Raster_ series edited by H. C. ten Berge, Lidy van Marissing, Pieter de Meijer and Jacq Firmin Vogelaar. The journal _Raster_ cherished the heritage of the ‘new prose’, promoting a modernist type of storytelling, which undermines the clichés of the traditional narrative: i.e. unquestioned ‘realism’, non-problematic relations between language and reality, the illusion of veraciously depicted characters, straightforward chronology, the naive psychological and epistemological veracity of a world on paper. The poetics of _Raster_ can be seen as a symptom of an international trend that moved away from traditional poetics in the direction of a thoroughly problematic narratology. The _Raster_ series contains only one sample of a Flemish author, Daniël Robberechts, who had in 1970 already produced a similar project, called _Aankomen in Avignon_. Also, through a number of poetological essays Robberechts had gained the status of an anti-traditional writer par excellence.

Robberechts was a believer. He published the one-man reviews _tijdSCHRIFT_ and _tSCHRIFT_, journals and essays displaying his modernist view. _Praag schrijven_ also is a kind of manifesto, a testimony or a credo concerning the very nature of storytelling, but also concerning the act of writing as such. Such a book invites the reader or, better, forces him or her to reflect upon various metafictional problems, such as those mentioned above. At the heart of the project _Praag schrijven_, there is the poetological doubt, like a worm in an apple.

The book contains no chapters, but rather long fragments named after the month and the year in which they were written: sometime between November 1967 and November 1970, with a closing statement written in 1971. On one particular day the moment of writing is noted very precisely: ‘Wednesday 21 August 1968’ – the day the armies of the Warsaw Pact invaded Prague. We may assume that the book was written between 1967 and 1970, in other words that the period of writing coincides with the historical events referred to, i.e. the Prague Spring, the 1968 Revolt, the murder of Robert Kennedy, the Vietnam War and other events that surrounded Dubcek’s resistance to the Soviet regime. As a matter of fact, the greatest number of pages can be read as a historical report of the political revolution in Prague and elsewhere in Europe around 1970. Let us trust the author with regard to what he says about
the historical setting of his writing. At the end of the book there are fourteen pages with 128 notes (mostly Dutch translations of French and German quotations) and ten more pages containing a list of names.

These two types of supplementary information may already indicate the nature of Praag schrijven as a project. That writing such a text can be seen as a project is already suggested by the title Praag schrijven, with the infinitive pointing to a certain task to be accomplished, a mission to be fulfilled, a deliberately self-imposed job. The writer wants to cover the object ‘Prague’ with words. The object turns out to be a project, or better: a problem. Considering it was already so difficult, not to say impossible, to enter Avignon, how could one possibly write so complex a thing as ‘Prague’?

The undertaking looks mainly scriptural or metapoetic in the beginning, but after four months (that means after forty pages) the task is suddenly complicated with the outburst of the Prague Spring. Another four months later the Dubcek affair has been fully integrated in the project. The author behaves like a journalist and writes the chronicle of the events in Prague, hour by hour, day by day, far away from the Golden City. All the news he collects from newspapers is incorporated in the project. This journalistic type of writing constitutes a new level in the book. After eight months, Prague has become Prague in the making. In the middle of the book the author says: ‘Prague now is Prague what Prague becomes together with what Prague was.’ As a matter of fact, a true Raster project that makes one dizzy. The conclusion, which could already be drawn right from the beginning, must be: Prague cannot be written.

The book contains some experiments, however, in gaining a firmer grip on Prague by means of words on paper, but those attempts are immediately put aside as offering no way out. My father Jan-Emmanuel, the author says, visited Prague as a young man in 1922; perhaps I could use his postcards in order to give a description of the city? Or I could outline other pictures linguistically, like in a book of Jules Verne’s. Or I could use a photograph of Doctor K. (Franz Kafka), looking like my father, or a biography of Jan Hus, or a city map. All those attempts prove to be completely treacherous and useless. Praag schrijven is nothing less than a question of trial and error, of starting and abandoning, of failure and endurance, lasting three years up to the final recapitulation or capitulation in 1971, when the author admits that he has been defeated by his self-imposed task.

The ideal text turns out to be the text that cannot be written. The book becomes a sort of ‘mediamix’, an assemblage of various types of texts: news, comments, testimonies, addresses, quotations, which in
their variety show how the project has become a desperately complicated matter in the course of three years. The author even writes a letter to Rilke – one more type of text to be integrated in the ‘mediamix’. Or he quotes eight pages out of the theoretical works of the Russian formalists and Prague structuralists. He even adds quotations from judgements of a court of justice concerning his father. Or he turns to Kafka once more for several pages … Prague cannot be written, not even from a journalistic point of view. The author demonstrates the falsification of the information in the newspapers by means of a confrontation of a version of an article written by the Czech Ilia X and published in the review *Soma*, with his own translation. Thus the poetics of the impossible is reinforced with the demonstration of public lying.

In a text like this the degree of self-reflection is inevitably prominent. Self-reflection and self-criticism emphasize the problematic status of the relation between writing and reality. He even examines the efficiency of his writing so thoroughly that he decides to rewrite a piece of text. Such procedures as metafiction and rewriting come very close to postmodern techniques – as can be seen in my conclusion.

This would not be a book from around 1970 if it did not combine a very outspoken political commitment with all those poetological problems and with the hazardous mixing of various types. The Prague-writer professes his ideological views overtly. Writing is a vital necessity or the utmost refuge for a man who uses the text as a tool of self-improvement and self-examination, in the philosophical, aesthetic, ideological and political senses of the word. To write is a compromise with the commitment on the streets and the barricades. Instead of shouting slogans on the streets he withdrew to his study, however committed he may have been to the same objectives of fundamental social change. This commitment is part and parcel of the Robberechts profile around 1970 – a sort of extra value he introduced into the poetics of the *Raster* group.

Let me conclude my presentation of a very recent past by drawing your attention to so-called ‘postmodern’ features of *Praag schrijven*. From this point of view the book might turn out to be even more ‘modern’ than it was thought to be before or, if you like, even ‘prepostmodern’ or something like that.

Self-reflection is one of the main characteristics of postmodern storytelling and of *Praag schrijven* as well. The ‘indeterminacy’ of postmodern discourse can be found everywhere in Robberechts’s book. Indeterminacy in fluctuating fragmented points of view and idealizations: the I of the author, his father Jan-Emmanuel, Doctor K., Rilke, and so on. Frame-breaking (or metalepsis) is produced by the mixture
of levels and trials. There is also frame-breaking in the fading away of the borderline between fiction and reality or between the fictional and journalistic levels. I have already mentioned the procedure of rewriting, but such a necessity permeates the undertaking as a whole, since every month the author is forced to sit down in front of a sheet of white paper, facing his ‘mission impossible’. Furthermore, the postmodern project intends to close the gap between various types of texts, which is what happens with the mixture of postcards, letters, biographies and – above all – journalism. In that mixture high culture (Kafka, Rilke, the Russian and Czech structuralists) encounters low culture (the postcard messages). Praag schrijven is especially a book on the writing of Praag schrijven and as such it presents itself to the reader in the shape of a huge question mark that raises other questions over and over again, not questions about what happened in Prague exactly or what Prague looks like for a tourist, but metafictional questions about the very nature of such a text. As if the mixture of the texts I mentioned was not sufficient in order to articulate the complexity of the undertaking, the author also adds many quotations taken from essays on the Prague Spring to his reports based on the daily news in the media. Such a promiscuity of texts could be called postmodern.

It was not my intention to enhance the intrinsic artistic relevance of Praag schrijven by calling it postmodern. I wanted to show how modern Daniel Robberechts was in 1967–71. The strategy of Praag schrijven was undoubtedly up-to-date in those years; updating the evaluation of the book in postmodern terms might not be such a bad idea for us now.