PIET PAALTJENS: FRANCOIS HAVERSCMIDT'S AMBIVALENT HERO

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'Sobs and grim smiles', subtitled 'Academic poetry of Piet Paaltjens',[1] first published by F. Haverschmidt in 1867, is an artful concoction. It is constructed in such a fashion that we tend to view Haverschmidt as its purported editor, read the biographical sketch of Piet as having a basis in reality, and study the twenty-four poems that are presented in the collection as an actual sample of Piet's poetic output. Perhaps this explains why the history of Dutch Literature **Ik probeer mijn pen**[2] ('**I try my pen**') can refer to Piet Paaltjens as the pseudonym of François Haverschmidt, while in fact Piet owes his existence to his being created by Haverschmidt in the biographical sketch so that afterwards he can play out his poetic persona in the poems. Therefore, in order to understand Piet's raison d'etre, we have to integrate him with the other parts of Haverschmidt's production and view its totality as Haverschmidt's attempt to first embrace and then deflate the many grandiose concepts of Romanticism by allowing them to collide with the petty bourgeois, practical minded thinking that dominated nineteenth century Holland.

Haverschmidt's work is not an example of form engendering meaning but of form being exploited to create a romantic archetype, a poet perennially suffering from unrequited love and 'Weltschmerz', so that these attitudes may be exposed as farcical and be dashed against the plain, analytical, and even harshly modern concerns of the Holland of the period.

Haverschmidt introduces Piet in a biographical sketch containing a lengthy footnote which not only details Piet's last dramatic appearance, but also explains how his poetry was discovered.

The collection of romantic commonplaces that make up Piet's life and character are presented in such a manner that the reader of the sketch is made to oscillate between ironic detachment, emotional involvement, and bourgeois distaste for Piet's poetic excesses.

The discovery of Piet's poetry, left behind when he scurried off in a boat, places it in the hoary category of "found" manuscripts. The accidental discovery of Piet's work is supposed to make us believe more firmly in the authenticity of the claims of their author's existence. The device functions to direct our focus away from Haverschmidt as the sole creator of Piet and his poetry.

The poetry itself is divided into three sections and it is preceded by one poem entitled: "The pale youth", ostensibly an adaptation from the Lithuanian. These sections also have appropriate Romantic titles, such as: "**Immortellen**", "**Tijgerlelies**", and "**Romancen**". The poetry and the biographical sketch have several elements in common. Just as the sketch parodies previous attempts at the writing of factual history and of biography, so the poems parody Romantic poetry by introducing mundane, matter-of-fact elements into the high-flown claims and ideals of the Romantic hero.

Let us turn for a moment to our protagonist's name and the title of his poetic work, to show how even they underline the clash of the grandiose with the platitudinous realities of everyday living. His Christian name, Piet, leads us to expect resoluteness; it is monosyllabic and it harks back to Peter himself: the rock upon whom Christ built his Church. "Piet" 'Pete', whose first name so patently echoes the monosyllabic "**rots**" 'rock' in both languages, has as family name the diminutive "Paaltjens" pegs. Piet is obviously as slender as a pole, a post, but the diminutive imposes on Piet's person a frailty, an inherent weakness, that makes one wonder if this rock can continue to be supported on such wobbly pegs. Unlike the piles on which the city of Amsterdam is built, Piet's superstructure is supported on pegs, mere pickets, and it is always in danger of collapsing. These revelatory and debilitating contradictions are at the core of Haverschmidt's literary production. After all, Piet's grim sobbing hides a smile and is supposed to make us smile, and hence his emotional outbursts may be supposed to be without great substance.

The humour in the work is the result of this constant oscillation between the deadly serious and the obtruding impertinent and seemingly irrelevant detail. In this manner, Haverschmidt highlights more precisely the exact nature of Romantic clichés: the protagonist's obscure background, his dramatic disappearances, his melancholy, his distaste for the mediocrity of reality, his blue eyes, his impossible loves, his obsession with death. A second device used by Haverschmidt is the use of superlatives and exaggeration so that what may initially have seemed believable is extended into becoming an absurd joke. The description of Piet's blue eyes provides an appropriate example:

> Those eyes – nobody, not even Prof. Donders, ever saw such expressive eyes. They were blue, not as a consequence of fisticuffs, but naturally so – yet, what a blueness! To state that they were of a faded blue is to state nothing. They were more than lack

> -lustre blue, infinitely more. Their blueness was apoplectic and it was still more. As long as the new dictionary is not yet out, we won't have a word for it. But – take a haddock, place it on a fairly warm stove, leave it there for three days, preferably in the sun, and if you can still remain in its presence, stare it firmly in the eyes, then you will have a vague notion of the genial blue of the boy's supernatural stare. And– now imagine nature's subsequent stroke of genius – this blue–eyed youth was cross–eyed so that, while one eye stared into the measureless depths of the waters, the other one gazed towards the horizon. (Our translation, p.7-8).[3]

The attempt to define as precisely as possible the exact hue of Piet's eyes by means of an accumulation of naturalistic detail results in sensory overload which overwhelms one's potential concern with the blueness of his eyes.

The introductory poem: "The pale youth" (he is suffering from unrequited love and he dies literally of a broken heart) derives its humour from the author's juggling of grammatical categories. Poetic licence and tradition permit the substitution of "'t" for "het" with such impersonal verbal syntagms as "het regent"; however, the poet also substitutes nouns for verbs thereby creating such (impossible) segments as: It mornings, it evenings...('t **Morgent**, 't **Avondt**).

The poems of the first section, entitled "Immortellen", treat of the absence and/or of the fleeting nature of friendship and love. They possess two additional characteristics. They are exceedingly vague about the exact cause of the poet's suffering and they mix the effusion of sentiment with realistic detail. The vagueness, in turn, has two explanations: the poet does not wish to let the world know who or what is at the heart of his suffering and, anyway, he is not quite sure himself. In order to create these deliberate ambiguities the poet exploits the polysemous nature of language. When he states that his suffering is nobody's (no creature's) business, he is referring simultaneously to the moon and to us (see poem I, p. 20). When he asks: 'but do my tears spring from a source?' (poem III, p.21) he plays with the fact that the word "spring" allows one, perhaps unjustly, to view tears as a current. Which raises the question whether their flow can ever be stopped and, as well, whether his crying has a real cause. The realistic detail, which would seemingly aid in making the poems more believable, has the opposite effect because they distract from "the high purpose" and force us to focus on details, on facts as well as on the importance of what happened. Therefore it becomes as important that he broke his promise as that he broke it 'half way between De Vink and the Haagsche Schouw' (poem IX, p. 22). The author plays with the hierarchy of values and by interposing insignificant details in his lyrics, he makes the obsession with friendship and love seem laughable. Since it matters that his friend buys his cigars at 'Blaauws's' (poem VI, p. 23) and that he plays 'The Turkish drum' (poem IX, p. 22), these details must be pertinent to the poem, just as it is important that it is 'the milkman who often says to the maid: "The steps are wet again".' (poem XLIX, p. 26) But while we may go along with R. Barthes' dictum that: "Dans l'ordre du discours, ce qui est noté est, par définition, notable",[4] it will make us conclude that beyond the details and the Romantic pose little or nothing is significant in F. Haverschmidt's work.

The poet seems to concur with this opinion, because in the last poem of section one he professes boredom with his emotional posturing. And we translate:

> Finally I became bored with hating, perpetually singing and lamenting. I fell silent, and no one on earth has ever been as silent as I am now.
> (Poem C, p. 32)

The poet's ultimate posture is one of total non-communication, and the Romantic stance of the individual's unutterable uniqueness is dissolved by boredom into nothingness.

The second section, "Tijgerlelies", differs from the first one in that each poem is dedicated to a young lady, and additionally in the poem dedicated to Rika a modern or even futurist element plays an essential role. It also harks back to Pascal's awareness of the "disproportion de l'homme".[5] The grandiose love of the poet is born in the flash of an instant, even while he wishes that it may be demolished underneath the wheels of a thundering locomotive. It subsumes therefore Pascal's concerns with nothingness, man's insignificance within the vastness of the universe and, as well, Pascal's agonizing awareness of the frailty of man's consciousness. It also parodies the notions of eternal love and of love at first sight by having the poet fall in love with a girl of whom he catches a glimpse while their trains are passing each other at full speed. Again, the realistic elements are used by the poet to dissolve and destroy his lofty ideals. He stresses that they only met once, and that their encounter could not have been more brief. It is the truth of these statements that make one call into question the profundity of his love. But then the poet piles absurdity upon hollow agony by asking Rita 'why she did not pull the emergency brake so that they could have

embraced and their lips have met.' (Aan Rika", p.36) To compound the Romantic desire for blood and thunder, he concludes the poem by wishing for a train disaster in which both would be squashed amidst the 'hellish rattling and stomping' by one train. (**Idem**)

Pascal's obsession with the finite and infinite was provoked by the invention of the microscope and the telescope; in Haverschmidt's case it is the industrial revolution and the introduction of the steam-powered locomotive which shatters the Romantic dream. His fascination with its noise and speed also projects us into the twentieth century and provokes associations with the poems and paintings of the Futurists.

In the third section, entitled "Romancen", the author provides yet another reason for his denigration of the Romantic ideals. In the ballad "Love's revenge", he explains that the lover can sing of his feelings in French and in German but that he cannot do so in Dutch. And we translate:

> The youth does not sing in Dutch/That language is not suitable;/In the ears of the loved one/It sounds so rough and rude. ("Liefdewraak", p. 44)

Dutch is not mellifluous as is French, nor does it possess the melancholy tones of German; in addition, unlike Goethe's Italy, Holland as a country is completely mundane and uninspiring. In the lyrical "The singer's love", the country is identified as 'the land where they grow potatoes and raise cattle.' ("Des zangers min", p.50).

The poem, "The Self-murderer", provides yet more answers as to the nature of Haverschmidt's parodic and satiric attitude towards love, life, and death. He is no longer a youth as Werther was, and this gentleman's death is unlikely to inspire a wave of suicides as did Werther's. What makes the poem remarkable is its combination of lofty themes with mundane details, so that we are focussed as much on the former as on the Dutch obsession with cleanliness and matters of fact. We are reminded that 'the mud dirties his collars' and that 'one lens of his glasses is broken and that the other one is fogged up' ("De Zelf-moordenaar", p. 52, p. 53). The poem's focus is descriptive, and as a result the obsession with detail begins to take precedence and ends up trivializing the tragic nature of the event. The conclusion confirms his view of man as being insignificant. By attempting to define as precisely as possible the reaction of the lovers who discover the skeleton, we move into the realm of scientific concerns and we edge away from the realm of the emotive and affective. The completeness of the description leaves little or no room for moral or emotional concerns. We translate:

> In a flash the desire/To tryst was extinguished/In this pair. They did not dare speak even one word/ And their faces from the shock turned as white/As a sheet, when it/Has already lain out to bleach for a whole day. ("De Zelfmoordenaar", p. 54)

Detail distracts; the Dutch obsession with it, with smallness, with the diminutive, with facts and ultimately with the finite is destructive of the grandiose aspirations of the European Romantics. When the locomotive, a machine made up of man-made, identical parts but which is inspired by the extra-human energy released by coal and steam, is invited to demolish the poet and his love, we receive a glimpse of a new universe where the powers of the unknown, the infinite and the immeasurable are replaced by the potent but finite energies produced by human calculations.

Haverschmidt's work continues to fascinate us because his hero with his wobbly underpinnings harks impotently back to a more "glorious" past, and because he cannot fend off the encroaching signs of modernity.

NOTES

[1]Our study is based on **Snikken en grimlachjes. Akademische Poesie van Piet Paaltjens.** Amsterdam: van Holkem & Warendorf N.V., 2956, pp. 79.

[2]H.J.M.F. Lodewick, W.A.M. de Moor, K. Nieuwenhuizen, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 1979, p. 71.

[3]All further references to **Snikken en grimlachjes** will be incorporated into the text.

[4]**Communications**, 8, Paris. Seuil, "Points 129" 1981, p. I3.

[5]Vide: **Pensées**, Bordas, "ULB" 444, 1966, p. 44, 45, 46. "Car enfin qu'est-ce que l'homme dans la nature? Un néant à l'égard de l'infini, un tout à l'égard du néant, un milieu entre rien et tout".