HET BITTERE KRUID
by
Marga Minco

PARADISE LOST: PARADISE REGAINED

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It is a standard literary procedure to narrate a novel dealing with great historical events from the perspective of one or more ordinary people as protagonists. Thus, to take two recent examples, Harry Mulisch's *De aanslag (The Assault)* concentrates on the flashbacks of a man numbed by the violence of his time, and the Czech author Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* views events in Prague through the prism of its characters' private lives, notably their sexual dalliances. What distinguishes Marga Minco's novel *Het bittere kruid* from such works as these is that it presents the horrible events of the second world war through the eyes of a child.

In itself there is nothing unique about the adoption of such a point of view. Literature for children and adolescents derives its strength from the imposition of a young person's vision on an adult world. It permits the immature reader to identify with the protagonist and in that manner to accept the adult world more easily. That, however, is not the purpose of that strategy here. *Het bittere kruid* deliberately exploits the child's perspective: horrible events are incorporated into a child's naive vision to make us more painfully aware of the gross brutality of the Nazis. Moreover, since the novel was published in 1957 and by then the author had long since outgrown her childhood and developed a thorough understanding of what the Nazis had perpetrated, not just in Holland but wherever they had been, *Het bittere kruid* represents also an act of defiance. The very simplicity of the narration tells us that, even though nothing seems to have happened, because life seemingly goes on in a normal fashion, the past is not obliterated, it can be relived exactly as it was lived at the time the events occurred.

Yet the postwar revelations of the Nazi atrocities should have made these kinds of narrations impossible. Theodor Adorno insisted at one time that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (*Prisms: Cultural Criticism and Society*, tr. Samuel and Sherry Weber, London, 1967, p. 34). George Steiner may have been thinking of Adorno's remark when he made the less sweeping assertion that "the Nazi holocaust can neither be adequately grasped nor described in words - what is there to *say* about Bergen-Belsen?" (*After Babel*, London: Oxford University Press, 1975, p.185). Now, *Het bittere kruid* is a novel, and as Marga Minco herself states in her introduction, "after all a writer's works are products of the imagination" (*Het bittere kruid, Verhalen, Een leeg huis*, Den Haag: Bert Bakker, 1972, p.7). Prose or poetry, then, literary creation has to be justified in the post-Holocaust world. But I think we can readily do so. So far from being an obscenely insensitive activity, it

is more vital than ever; it creates a bulwark against all who wish to annihilate what is most human in the world: our desire to live our lives as a concrete universal and our insistence that it be remembered exactly for what it was.

In the case of *Het bittere kruid*, this means a painstaking and careful reconstruction of the war years as they were lived by a child. It also means excluding all that the author could have included in retrospect, given what she had discovered about the Nazis since the war. For this reason Marga Minco has deliberately allowed her protagonist to maintain an uninformed and naïve perspective.

But such a vantage point does more than suit the character. The latter, being a child, embodies the particular ignorance from which everyone suffered in the Netherlands in 1940. This is what makes of the novel the story of a paradise lost. The Dutch, and specifically Dutch Jewry, had become insulated from the Nazi menace, indeed inured to danger in general by 125 years of neutrality.

The inhabitants of paradises tend to be naïve. Adam and Eve failed to understand what Satan intended; likewise, when the Nazis marched in, few Dutch people believed that any of them would receive the treatment already meted out to Germans, Austrians, Czechs or Poles who were of the "wrong race" or the "wrong" political persuasion. This is what makes some of the remarks in the novel so poignant and so pathetic: these characters not only fall victim to politics, they become equally victims of Holland's lack of involvement in international affairs.

Thus, when the father remarks: "This will never happen here... here things are different" (p.21), he is only partly right. The Dutch had not maltreated each other like that since the Reformation, but not all their behaviour in the colonies would have stood scrutiny at home, and accordingly it had largely been kept quiet.

The scenes of domestic activity serve a similar ironic purpose. The narrator describes in considerable detail how the family goes about sewing on the Star of David which they are now compelled to wear:

> Mother asked: "Could you have that many?"
> "Oh, yes," said my father, "as many as I wanted."
> (p.27)

Clearly, even in times of scarcity, the Germans are generous when it serves their destructive purposes. At the same time, the family becomes pathetic in its subservient attempts to respect the law. When word comes that the Jews have to "emigrate", the following conversation ensues:

> "We have to inform them of our whereabouts," said Dave.
>
> "I don't really feel like it," said Lotte."
> Everything was still so new in their house.

> "We will see something of the world, it strikes me as adventuresome," said Dave.
>
> "It will be an enormous trip," I said. "I have never been farther than Belgium."
>
> (p.38)

It is not possible to determine from the discussion whether or not the characters are fooling themselves. Perhaps one has no choice but to opt for an unreal universe if one is threatened from all sides.

Soon thereafter, our protagonist decides to visit her parents who have been forced to move to Amsterdam. With them she watches her first police roundup from a basement window.

> Through it we could only see the feet of the passers-by. The first moments no one passed. But after a couple of minutes we saw big black boots which made a harsh clicking noise. They came out of the house to the right of us and they crossed diagonally by our window to the edge of the sidewalk where a car was standing. We also saw normal shoes walk next to the boots. Brown men's shoes, a pair of pumps worn on one side and sport shoes. Two pairs of black boots stepped slowly, as if they had to carry something heavy, to the car.
>
> (p.51)

From a literary point of view it is not difficult to recognize Margo Minco's technique. The use of a perspective limited by a specific situation and consciousness is typical of, for example, Faulkner, a writer whom she mentions in her Introduction (p.7). For example, in the first section of *The Sound and The Fury*, we participate in the action through the limited consciousness of Benjy, the idiot, and in the next section it is Quentin's obsessions which are the exclusive focus of the text. The child's ignorance, and her low-to-the-ground perspective through a narrow window, mean that her view is both mentally limited, as in Faulkner, and physically restricted; indeed, the latter symbolizes the former.

But Minco's intentions are not necessarily the same. Her awareness of the function of literary techniques may be equally acute, but this literal eye-witness report exists first of all in order to preserve a particular reality as it was lived by a particular person at a particular moment. These bits of reality, retained by her memory and relived imaginatively through this bird's eye view technique, are proof positive that the Nazis did not succeed in eradicating even the most mundane experiences of this young girl. Recasting them in the most appropriate artistic manner turns these moments, which seemed lost and which the Nazis would have loved to obliterate forever, into small monuments of victory against those who were intent on total annihilation. The survival

of the author is temporary, but that of the account, like that of Anne Frank's diary, is permanent. Whereas the thousand-year Reich proved very temporary.

The epilogue describes the last days of the protagonist's uncle. He survived the war because he was married to a gentile. Now he spends his time waiting at the streetcar stop for his brother to return. Her uncle has grown old and tired "as if he had nothing to expect from life anymore" (p.91) and "Even though he had always looked a great deal like my father, I could no longer detect any resemblance" (p.91). Her uncle has convinced himself that his brother is coming back; he has kept a suit for him. When he dies he leaves the suit to his niece, but she tells her aunt that "she has no use for it and to give it to someone who may be able to use it" (p.93).

The protagonist concludes the novel as follows:

> I stayed to look at the people who came out of the streetcar as if I was waiting for someone. Someone with a familiar face, close to mine. But I lacked the faith of my uncle. They would never come back, neither my father, nor my mother, nor Bettie, nor Dave and Lotte. (p.94)

Of course the narrator is right, yet this novel has resuscitated them in all their simple humanness, just as the narrator has recreated the universe of her childhood. Sartre claimed that a novel can never be worth a child's life. One certainly knows what he means, but novels such as this, in a sense, prove him wrong.

This carefully reconstructed imaginary universe, which resembles the lived reality of a young Jewish girl during the second world war, attests to a power superior to that of all the destructive forces unleashed by the Nazis. In fact, the novel's vision of the world only *seems* naïve. First of all, it contains enough clues to the horrifying realities that lurked just below the often so peaceful surface, and secondly we also know that the re-creation of this world required a deliberate act of the will, a decision not to forget any detail, however minuscule or mundane.

In the vein of Camus' *L'Étranger*, whose protagonist (admittedly an adult) strikes a similar pseudo-casual tone, we are made aware that all of it mattered and was worth preserving. In a similar vein, she can claim for this protagonist and herself what Meursault had claimed for himself. Specifically that she has been right, is right, and will always be right.

In retrospect we can say that about all who fought the Nazis, just as Margo Minco insisted on saying in retrospect that her way of life and her family's way were worth preserving in print. All the bloodshed and destruction notwithstanding, the Nazis lost. They and their movement have been buried by history and there are no monuments glorifying their achievements. On the other hand, all those who fought against the Nazis, or who died at their hands for whatever reason, are buried but not

forgotten. They live on in those who do not wish the past to repeat itself and who are therefore prepared to work for a freer future for all. Others, such as Minco's characters, also live on in other ways. In works of art, for example. These are proof positive that the annihilating forces of this world do not prevail and that a child's vision can outlast the destructive might of millions.