

COMING TO TERMS WITH THE PAST AND
SEARCHING FOR AN IDENTITY:
THE TREATMENT OF THE OCCUPIED NETHERLANDS
IN THE FICTION OF HERMANS, MULISCH AND VESTDIJK

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The popularity of Harry Mulisch's *De aanslag*, which was published in September 1982, shows the constant interest that the Dutch have had in literature dealing with the occupation of the Netherlands during World War Two. Simon Vestdijk's *Pastorale 1943*, published in 1946, and Willem Frederik Herman's *De donkere kamer van Damokles* of 1958 also deal with the same period. The three novels are interesting as a picture of the time; they concern themselves in part with the role of the resistance during the occupation and also the relationship between the occupied Dutch and the enemy. Naturally, the question of guilt, both of the Germans and their collaborators the Dutch Nazis, arises in this context. The three novels also present the thesis that groups working against the enemy were composed of bungling dilettantes, working either in isolation or together without much sense of purpose who sometimes succeeded in sabotaging the enemy or liquidating collaborators.

In addition to their value as a portrait of Holland during the occupation, the novels themselves have a more timeless or universal quality. All three concern themselves with the individual's quest for his identity in a time of chaos and uncertainty. Along with this theme they examine the role of chance or coincidence in human destinies. The idea is stressed again and again that if an individual had been somewhere else at a certain time things would have worked out differently. This is especially the case in *De aanslag* and *De donkere kamer*. *Pastorale 1943* concerns itself less with this question, perhaps because it was written during and immediately after the occupation and its author's stay in prison. Vestdijk wished to render a vivid and realistic description of the lives of those who collaborated with the Germans, those who worked for the underground, and those who were hiding from the Germans. Even here, however, chance plays a role in what happens to the characters.

As far as the structure of the novels is concerned, *De aanslag* and *De donkere kamer* are the more complex novels of the three and they are also the richest in symbols. *De aanslag* is divided into five episodes or time periods in the life of the main character, Anton Steenwijk, who is born in 1933, the year that Hitler came to power. The years that are mentioned are not only important in Anton's life, but they are also milestones in Dutch and world history. In the hunger winter of 1945, in Haarlem, the corpse of that city's

assassinated chief of police and Nazi collaborator, Fake Ploeg, is dragged to the front of the house of Anton's family by their neighbours, Karin Korteweg and her father. In retaliation the Germans burn down Anton's house and execute his father, mother and brother along with other hostages. In 1952 Anton, who has been brought up by his aunt and uncle in Amsterdam, is now a student, returns to Haarlem for a party, where the war in Korea is discussed, and he visits the site of his former home. In 1956, the year of rebellions in Poland and Hungary, Castro's rise to power in Cuba, and the scandals surrounding the Dutch royal family, he is again confronted with the past, this time through a chance encounter with the right-wing son of the assassinated Fake Ploeg during demonstrations in Amsterdam. The next episode takes place in 1966, when the war in Vietnam was hotly debated, at the funeral of a friend of his father-in-law, a member of the Dutch resistance. Here Anton meets the man who killed Ploeg. The book closes with a description of the massive demonstration against nuclear weapons that took place in Amsterdam in 1981; here Anton, by chance, meets Karin Korteweg, the woman who helped her father drag the corpse of Ploeg to the front of the Steenwijk's house. From her he discovers that Korteweg did not want the corpse in front of his house because he was afraid that the Germans would destroy his collection of salamanders, and he did not want to move the corpse to the other neighbours' because they were sheltering three Jews. The novel ends with Anton asking himself:

Was everyone guilty and innocent? Was guilt innocent and innocence guilty? The three Jews... Six million had been exterminated, twelve times as many people as were demonstrating here; but by being in mortal danger these three people had saved two other people and themselves, and instead of them his father, mother, and brother Peter had perished, because of the salamanders.¹

Again and again, Anton tries to dissociate himself from the events of that fateful evening, without being successful. He also tries to remain apolitical, and yet now he finds himself demonstrating with many others against nuclear weapons. Just as Anton's father, mother, and brother died by chance, Anton is taking part in this demonstration because of chance: he has a tooth-ache and his dentist has refused to treat him unless he comes to the demonstration.

The theme of the novel is the main character's attempt to make some sense out of life. He finally comes to the understanding that everyone's actions involve the lives of others. Life still does not make sense to Anton at the end, but he understands that one must be conscious of what is going on and participate in life. We are all responsible for others, and Anton finally awakens from what one critic has called a "Versteinerung des Bewusstseins"--a petrification or atrophy of one's consciousness.² It is not just coincidence that Anton becomes an anaesthetist. His choice of profession suggests that

he wants to anaesthetize himself and forget about the past and not get involved in combatting atrocities in the world.

A couple of images that express the theme of the novel neatly should be examined more closely. The novel starts out with a description of the twelve-year-old Anton, who is watching a man pushing a boat through the water with a pole. The man walks back to the stern of the boat to push it forward and the boat moves forward. "This Anton liked best: a man who walked back to push something forward and at the same time remained in the same place." (p.10) In the other image at the beginning of the novel Anton watches the waves in the wake of a boat. He tries to decipher the pattern that they make, but he has no overview of it. At the end of the novel the narrator wonders if it matters at all. The waves have died down. One other symbol that has a central function in the novel is that of the Sungod, Phoebus Apollo or Ra. After his parents have been taken away by the Germans, Anton is to move in with his aunt and uncle in the Apollolaan in Amsterdam. When the Ortskommandant arranges for Anton to be taken there, he comments: "Phoebus Apollo. Der Gott des Lichtes und der Schönheit!" (p.63) When Anton hears Karin's explanation of why Ploeg's corpse was deposited in front of their house instead of the other neighbours', a solution to a clue in a cryptic crossword puzzle that he has been thinking about since that morning suddenly occurs to him. The clue is: "Heeft de zonnegod geen duidelijker omschrijving voor deze puinhoop?" And the answer to the clue is "ravage" (destruction). (p.252)

Henri Osewoudt, the main character of Hermans' *De donkere kamer van Damokles*, is just as affected by the occupation of Holland as is Anton Steenwijk. In the former's case, however, it gives him a purpose in life and an identity. Hermans also deals with the absurdity of life and man's attempt to make some kind of sense out of it. Whereas Steenwijk continues to live in the face of this absurdity, Osewoudt only has recourse to death at the end.

As does *De aanslag*, *De donkere kamer* also starts out with a revelatory image. "A man had been drifting on a raft for days, without drinking. He was dying of thirst because the seawater was salty. But when lightning struck his raft and the raft caught fire, he scooped some of that water up with his hands in order to attempt to extinguish the fire."³ As in the former novel, the book consists of the narration of several episodes with many years between them. There are also a few similarities in the lives of the main characters. Henri Osewoudt, who comes from Voorschoten, is brought up from the age of twelve by his uncle in Amsterdam, after his mother is taken to an insane asylum for killing her husband in a fit of madness. Henri marries his cousin Ria at the age of eighteen and returns to Voorschoten to run his father's cigar store and care for his insane mother.

In 1939, after the German invasion, a certain Dorbeck, whose likeness to Osewoudt is as that of a print of a photograph is to its negative, asks him to develop a film. From then Osewoudt has a purpose in life as a member of the underground. His first act is to help execute some collaborators in Haarlem. The next date mentioned is 1944, when Osewoudt hears from Dorbeck again. On the latter's instructions he kills a collaborator and his wife and he kidnaps their child. He goes into hiding, is imprisoned by the Germans, escapes to the liberated South, and spends the rest of his life trying to convince the Dutch that he was not a Nazi collaborator. Unfortunately, Dorbeck cannot be found to corroborate Osewoudt's insistence that he is innocent. He spends the last days of his life thinking about the meaninglessness of life and finally he is shot to death while trying to escape from prison.

What makes Osewoudt's life so pathetic is the fact that he really has no identity until he meets Dorbeck. As he says when he is nineteen years old, he has the feeling that he has done everything that needs to be done. All obstacles that ought to have held him back, that other people spend their whole lives overcoming, have been overcome by him: his father and aunt are dead, Ria is a woman with whom he has done everything he can imagine doing, including marrying her. At this point Dorbeck, the man who resembles him physically and yet is totally unlike him, enters his life. Physically, Dorbeck looks like a successful edition of Osewoudt, but whereas the latter's life is meaningless, Dorbeck has a definite purpose in that he feels that it is his duty to liberate Holland from the Germans. He shot some German soldiers at the beginning of the invasion, and he intends to keep on working for the underground. He recruits Osewoudt to help the movement and the latter then attempts to become as much like Dorbeck as possible. Osewoudt achieves an identity in this manner, but later this leads to his death when Dorbeck cannot be found. Osewoudt spends the last part of his life hoping that a picture of himself and Dorbeck can be found to prove his innocence. What a grotesque irony, then, that when the camera with which he took it is finally found and the film is developed it only reveals a picture of Osewoudt and the enemy, Obersturmfuehrer Ebernuss.

There are many similarities in the themes of the two novels. The lives of both of the main characters are altered by the occupation and they try to come to terms with this. The occupation is described as chaos and a total destruction of the life that they have lived until then. Anton does not understand the chaos that he sees as a child, but at the end of the novel he is resigned to this apparent lack of order. In the case of Osewoudt, however, this is the only period of his life when he has some sense of identity; when order is restored, in the sense that the war is over, he cannot justify himself to the rest of the world and he meets his death.

Chance plays an important role in both novels, as has been mentioned. At some point in *De donkere kamer van Damokles*, Osewoudt ponders:

How would your life have turned out if your mother hadn't been sick, if you hadn't had to look after her? Would you have married Ria? Would you have been standing behind the counter in a cigar store like a retired sailor or a crippled racing cyclist? But if I hadn't done it, I would have been completely dependent on uncle Bart. In any case I would never have met Dorbeck! What would I be without Dorbeck?(p.123)

At the end of the novel, when he is visited by a priest who wants to console him, he states that he does not need consolation. He feels that what happened to him occurred only by chance; he does not hate the people who keep him imprisoned. The only reality for him is that Dorbeck existed and that he has to prove this to the rest of the world.

Cor Takes has similar ideas on the role of chance in human lives in *De aanslag* when he explains to Anton that he does not regret his actions. He says that it is true that Anton's family would still be alive if Ploeg had not been killed, but nothing more. If the family had lived in another house when he was killed then that would also be true. But Ploeg could also have lived in another house and then it might still have happened. According to Takes, those are the truths that are useless to us. The only truth that is of any use to us is that a person is killed by the person who killed him and not by someone else--Ploeg by Takes and Anton's family by the Germans. If Anton believes that they should have killed someone else, he should also accept as a fact that it would have been better if the human race had not existed, given its history. Then all love and happiness and goodness in the world cannot make up for the loss of even one child. His own, for instance. Takes feels that in spite of the consequences, man has to act and fight the enemy, in this case the Germans, rather than to sit by passively, as Anton's father did. (p.155) Dorbeck has similar motives for continuing to sabotage the Germans' actions.

In Vestdijk's *Pastorale 43* the main character, Johann Schults, has various reasons for joining the resistance. Born in Holland, he is the son of a German father and a Dutch mother and he has a brother, August, who is an Obersturmfuehrer in the German army. He has changed his name from Schultz to Schults (with an s). He is a teacher of German, who refers to that language as a "rottaal" because of the atrocities perpetrated by its speakers. By fighting against the German presence in Holland he hopes to prove himself worthy of his Dutch nationality. In a sense, then, he is similar to Henri Osewoudt in that he hopes to establish his identity by working for the underground. On his release from prison, although he is warned both by his brother and by Obersturmfuehrer Wernicke to

refrain from further anti-German activities, he decides to ignore their warnings. According to him there are still thousands of Germans too many in the Netherlands. He intends to keep working for his local resistance group "Maathuis" and continue to kill if that is necessary. As the narrator comments:

Everything for his fatherland--that's the way it was, one could not express it more succinctly and precisely: everything for the fatherland; and because he was half German, it truly was his fatherland and he could not even stray an inch from the course that every Dutchman had to take.⁴

His patriotic sentiments, therefore, and at the same time his strong opposition to the Germans' treatment of the Jews, determine his actions. He argues with his fellow prisoners about their anti-Semitic prejudices, and he arranges a hiding-place on a farm for his friend Cohen. After Cohen and the others hiding on the farm of Bovenkamp are betrayed and taken by the Germans, he takes part in the execution of the Dutch Nazi druggist Poerstamper, who he believes is responsible for the betrayal.

The members of the underground in *Pastorale 1943* are depicted as rather funny, bungling amateurs. The members of "Maathuis" spend a lot of time talking about the need for action before they decide that Poerstamper must be killed. When they do reach their decision they squabble about how it must be done. Much humour is derived from the description of the disguises, involving moustaches and badly fitting uniforms that are worn by members of the execution party. Their first attempt to kill the druggist fails because they waste time talking to him, and not one of them has any experience at killing a man. In *De donkere kamer* Hermans also depicts the underground as a group of bungling amateurs. There appears to be no central organization; for instance, spies sent from England have badly forged documents and money that has not been used for years.

Another feature that both Vestdijk's and Hermans' novel share is the description of the petty annoyances suffered by those in prison and in hiding. Osewoudt and Schults in prison and those in hiding at Bovenkamp's farm may be in danger of death, but, especially in Vestdijk's novel, the daily annoyances of being confined in a small space with other men without their liberty are described in great detail. With this Kafkaesque treatment the authors suggest that it is precisely these little concerns of everyday life, such as worrying what there will be to eat, whether or not one will catch a cold, that prevent one from facing the more fundamental questions--in the words of Mulisch and Hermans, the ultimate reality that is one's death.

In summary, we can say firstly that all three novels, different as they are, deal with the individual's reaction to the occupation of the Netherlands by the Germans and its consequences. Anton Steenwijk is marked for life by the killing of his parents and brother. As a result of their execution he questions the need for action. In *De aanslag*, Mulisch also examines the role that chance plays in human destinies. Henri Osewoudt in *De donkere kamer* finds a purpose in life and an identity by working for the resistance, but at the end of the novel he discovers that no one will believe him. The only reality that is left to him in the end is his death. In his depiction of Osewoudt Hermans paints a bleak picture of the human condition, relieved at times by black humour. Life is ruled by forces over which the individual has little or no control. Vestdijk's description of life during the occupation is gentler and more ironic than that of the other two. There is a war going on, but people continue to live their life with all of its petty concerns. One main theme that his novel shares with the others is that man's actions often fail or succeed because of the actions of others or because of chance. Poerstamper, the collaborator, is killed, but he is killed for the wrong reasons. He did not betray those hiding on Bovenkamp's farm, but Jan in't Veldt, one of those hiding there, did. Schults is not jailed for his anti-German activities, but rather as revenge by the Nazi collaborator Mies Evertse, whose sexual advances he rejected. Thus we see--and it is our second conclusion--that behind the human interest lies the view that humanity is the plaything of chance and can look forward to death as the only certainty.

NOTES

¹Harry Mulisch, *De aanslag* (Amsterdam, 1982), p.252. All translations are mine.

²Herbert van Uffelen, "De aanslag, ein Anschlag auf die Zukunft von gestern", *Tijdschrift voor Nederlands en Afrikaans* I (1983), 148.

³Willem Frederik Hermans, *De donkere kamer van Damokles* (Amsterdam, 1971), p.5.

⁴Simon Vestdijk, *Pastorale 1943* (Amsterdam, 1966), p.280.