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Boudewijn Büch's *Het Dolhuis*: Religion and the struggle for survival

From his literary works, Boudewijn Büch[1] appears to be a man torn by love and hatred, tenderness and violence, irresistible attraction and inevitable repugnance, all-embracing acceptance and compulsive rejection. When *Weerzien* (Return) of 1984, *De kleine blonde dood* (The Small Blond Death) of 1985, and *Het dolhuis* (The Madhouse) of 1988 are read in succession, one cannot fail to realize that all three works are variations on one major theme: the description of a tormented youth. At least in part, its noting down must have been an attempt on the part of the author to liberate himself from memories that continue to haunt him in adulthood. On the basis of a statement preceding the text, it is not difficult to establish that *Weerzien* is autobiographical in nature. An integral part of *De kleine blonde dood* depicts the youth experience of the main hero, significantly called Boudewijn. Thus the reader is led to believe that this work is autobiographical as well. The statement "any resemblance of characters in this book to existing persons must be considered a fortunate or unfortunate coincidence"[2] says only that as far as the authenticity of his novel is concerned, the author does not feel inclined to commit himself. In addition to the hero's name, obvious parallels in terms of conduct with *Weerzien* leave no doubt about the essentially autobiographical nature of this work as well.

Het dolhuis, whose major subject matter is referred to in *De kleine blonde dood*, is called a novel and consequently lacks any information about the origin of the narrated events. The main hero, recognizably a fictitious Boudewijn, bears the curious name of Winkler Brockhaus and his brothers are called Brit (presumably after the Encyclopedia Britannica), Meyer (Meyer's Lexikon) and Laroux (Larousse). The striking nomenclature must have been chosen by the author in an attempt to urge the reader to understand the hero's extraordinary life experiences against the background of a specific scientific definition of human behaviour. A quotation in the novel, taken from the Winkler Prins Encyclopedia (Rotterdam, 1886, ninth vol., p. 593), gives a hint in this direction.

> *Madness* is an illness because of which the activities of mind and heart, usually without fever, are impaired to the point that the sufferer, being deprived to a greater or lesser degree of the free usage of his reason and will, speaks incorrectly and acts incorrectly.[3]

Only upon finishing the novel can the reader be expected to grasp the meaning and function of this statement. In it the author seems to allude to the fact that in the knowledge of being supported by this outdated encyclopedia definition, Winkler's parents, in collusion with medical specialists, felt justified in sending their child to an asylum, where he definitely did not belong, their real motive being personal convenience. In hindsight the quotation can furthermore be seen as an additional means used by the author to press the deep tragedy in his hero's life upon the reader's consciousness.

Although religion cannot be called a principal theme, it is certainly an important auxiliary one in the story, whose major strand is the tragedy in young Winkler's life: how he is sent to the *gekkenhuis* in Brabant, to all appearances because of his sensitiveness and nervousness, which hopefully will be corrected by subjecting him to the strict discipline of that establishment. The house (no doubt called by the Flemish term *dolhuis* because Brabant borders on Belgium) also has the unmistakably ironic name of "Huize Kindervrede" (Children's Peace House), and the official title of "Roman Catholic Psychiatric Hospital for Youth."

Only towards the end of the novel is the real reason for Winkler's stay in the madhouse disclosed by Mrs. Sprong, a former lover of his father and subsequent boarder in the family's house. She reveals that on doctor's and police advice, Winkler had to be removed from the parental home because of his father's incestuous inclinations. The grown-up Winkler rebels against such an accusation, arguing that his father had always

loved him. Mrs. Sprong continues her explanation as follows:

Your father could only be happy when he succeeded in making someone else unhappy with his happiness. When he no longer could punish your mother with me, he selected you. As far as that is concerned it could equally well have been one of your brothers, but you were the most receptive to his disposition. This is clear to me: he dropped me for your mother and later your mother for you. He would have preferred to make love to all three of us but he could not handle an empire and therefore turned it into a hell. A horrible hell. And for that reason you had to go to that institution (172).

Already in *De kleine blonde dood*, there are two long passages about the period spent in the madhouse. The first is found in the beginning of chapter eight:

For almost a year I stayed in a madhouse in Brabant. Not because I was insane, but because my parents thought it strange that their marital life was driving me to insanity. When my father pitched into my mother with a chair or a poker, I started to scream. Because of that curious behaviour I was first taken to a children's psychiatrist, then to our general practitioner, and finally, to the school doctor. [...] In the end it was decided that I was to go to an institution.[4]

In Chapter 19 we are told how the boys of the asylum attended a church service during which a spitz ran through the aisle up to the altar, where it sat down and started to bark. Boudewijn and the other boys, occupying the pews especially reserved for the mad children, laughed their heads off. The sisters became panicky, and from the altar the priest roared: "Remove the imbeciles from God's House!" For weeks on end, when they were supposed to be asleep, the boys would burst out laughing at the mere thought of the silly dog. But time and time again a sister would appear and drag Boudewijn to the shower where, all night long, he had to stand naked and at attention.

In *Het dolhuis* the incident is rendered as follows. During a religious service at the "Children's Peace House," Winkler becomes absentminded. He is reprimanded by the dreaded sister Makela and dares to raise his voice in church. Upon the boys' return to their building he is sent to the kitchen for this trespass. He is ordered to help "patientje" - as the pupils are constantly called - Tommie with the cleaning of potatoes, i.e. rubbing them clean with a steel brush and removing the stones. There little Tommie has to climb a step-ladder in order to drop each pailful of potatoes into a kettle of boiling water to be cooked.

Tommie lifted the twenty-first pail onto the step-ladder [Winkler kept count: he did not know why; everything in "Children's Peace House" led to regularity and pressure] and suddenly Tommie screamed: "Mr. Cook, I dropped the stone-knife into the boiling water. I am sorry but I must have left it in the pail, what must I do?"
"Get it out!"
"Don't you have a stick or a long spoon?"
"What do you have hands for?"
"But that water is boiling."
"That's not our problem, young man," the cook said (72)

The fragment is closed off with the ghastly description of Tommie falling into the boiling water. Later on the text reads:

Tommie was dead. Burned to death. When he had been placed on a bier in the chapel and the boys were standing around him, his whole body was covered with white blisters. Winkler Brockhaus stood there and looked, just looked. (77)

It is then insinuated by the mean sister Makela that, if "patientje" Brockhaus had paid closer attention to what his comrade was doing, he would have been able to avoid the accident. In response to this totally undeserved accusation, Winkler blows his top: "But I didn't push him into the kettle." (79) For this and other signs of rebellion he is severely punished by being dragged to the shower, where he has to stand stark naked and motionless for almost twenty-four hours. The sisters succeed in breaking his spirit, but "hatred and revenge had taken hold of him. Winkler Brockhaus could not do anything with these feelings in Brabant, but later on they would show outwardly. But it was too late then. Winkler would look for his satisfaction in the wrong places. He would become a tragic figure in an operetta." (81-82)

A comparison of the discrepancies in the reporting of these essential events is revealing. The reasons for sending the boy to an asylum, given in *De kleine blonde dood*, which we have characterized as an autobiographical account, and in the novel *Het dolhuis*, are equally repellent. It seems very unjust to victimize a small boy because of the pandemonium at home caused by his parents. The novel's version, namely that the boy had to suffer in an institution where he did not belong, because of his father's sexual aberrations, is more repugnant yet.

There is a similar parallel with reference to the description of the punishment for a relatively minor breach of rules. In both cases, the boy is sent to the shower to spend a night in the humiliating position of

nakedness and motionlessness. It cannot be established whether the account in *De kleine blonde dood* is more or less the actual truth and whether Tommie's horrifying accident, as told in *Het dolhuis*, is purely fictitious. But we can tell that the work called a novel comprises an entire episode that is missing in the autobiographical version, and that this episode, whatever the cause of Tommie's horrid death may have been, is unbelievable.

As an adult Winkler pays regular visits to the fields and roads of Brabant in whose vicinity the asylum had been located. On one of these trips he is suddenly determined to find the graveyard where Tommie was buried. He is unsuccessful, but meets an elderly man who turns out to be well informed about the history of Kindervrede. After refreshing his memory, he recalls Tommie's predicament and adds that the boy had not been the first victim of the kitchen, which was later condemned.

If indeed there had been a previous death, it is almost unthinkable that after that first accident the kitchen was left in its dilapidated state. It must therefore be assumed that after Tommie's fatal fall a thorough police investigation took place, during which the criminally negligent cook was subjected to a detailed interrogation. It is naturally the author's prerogative to write the tale as he pleases, but in the way it is presented here, it is simply unreal. On the other hand, the narrator's one-sided perception is not without motivation.

The grown-up hero, who, despite all the misfortunes that befell him in early life, turns out to be a successful and respected geographer, remains broken in spirit and soul. However, as an adult Brockhaus writes not only learned geographical articles but also, following his first long train trip, a book describing his experiences. It obviously contains a narrative of his stay at Kindervrede. The manuscript was refused by a publishing house, according to a friend of Winkler's, Emile, because it was not literature. The latter is actually surprised: "Why do you want so badly to tell more than you already do in those geographical papers?" Winkler replies "Because, goddamn it, I must get rid of my story!" (161-162).

Thus, Boudewijn Büch wrote his tale in the form of his hero's attempt to avenge his past. It resulted in a totally negative depiction of the Roman Catholic institution in Brabant, its entire staff, and the faith itself. It manifests itself already during the train trip to Kindervrede on which the boy, accompanied by Mrs. Sprong, gets frightened by the thought that he will not be allowed to buy anything. He asks: "Will they starve me to death?" and Mrs. Sprong answers: "There is a good chance of that with those Catholic nuns." (26) Once at the institution, Winkler has to pay regular visits to the female psychiatrist, whose name, characteristically, is Ten Vreze (At Fear). On reflection the reader must come to the lugubrious conclusion that what the psychiatrist was doing during the sessions was trying to lead her "patientje" in a direction opposite to mental recovery. In the text it is expressed as follows: "[...] after a few months in Children's Peace House [that madness] had been pressed upon him and drummed into his head." (97)

There is one passage where the totally negative approach, to all appearances inspired by the hero's desire for revenge, is relativized. As an already established geographer, Winkler meets a former member of the psychiatric staff at Kindervrede in the train. They get engaged in a conversation and as a matter of fact the doctor, van Barten, is apologetic about the treatment of the children at the institution, but tries to defend it by stating that at that time there were no adequate medications available for young neuropaths. Winkler's immediate reaction is: "And for that reason you naturally resorted to mere brutal force!" Van Barten replies: "Aren't you exaggerating a bit? It's true that here and there a boy's ears were boxed or a rebellious "patientje" put under a cold shower, but ..." (137)

Thus the reader is led to believe that the depiction of the staff's behaviour at the institution is, generally speaking, disproportionately negative. It simply doesn't seem true to life. On the other hand, during the unfolding of the story line it becomes more and more apparent that Winkler has never won the desperate struggle for spiritual survival started in the religious establishment. Although this deep-felt defeat may explain the aggressiveness with which the past is recalled and provide its psychological motivation, the rendition of the life in the asylum, because of its onesidedness and therefore unreality, remains artistically unconvincing.

But *Het dolhuis* was a great success with the public, witness the seven printings the book went through in only eight months after its first appearance. This warm reception should be ascribed to the skillful structuring of events and the effective juxtaposition of scenes, alternately taken from the remote past, when Winkler was a youth, and the recent past, when he was already an adult. For instance, within the same chapter, the fragment about Tommie's shocking accident is followed by a new episode whose first sentence reads: "When Winkler Brockhaus was in the third grade of high school, he couldn't sleep any more at night, fell off his bike a few times for no obvious reason, and was incapable of enjoying parties with friends." (73) Two pages later we read: "From the age of fifteen, Winkler

would be lying at least once and frequently four times a week on psychiatrists' couches [...]" (75). And then: "In a well-furnished room, filled with sun, the green light of trees, the fragrance of incense and jasmin tea, Winkler Brockhaus, a second-year Geography student, was sitting tailor-fashion on a pillow." (75) He is in a real mess and says to Evelien, his girlfriend of the time, that a trip to Kindervrede may be therapeutic. "Ten years after Winkler Brockhaus had left the establishment, he and Evelien were on their way south." (77) Just before reaching their destination, Winkler screams: "Jesus Christ, Eef, I can't hold back my tears any longer. I am just an old crone." (77) Because of the skillful juxtaposition of the above-quoted fragments, the impression is created that it took Winkler 10 years to be able to cry over Tommie's cruel death.

The next section, however, picks up the thread of the remote past again by relating the moment when the boys were standing around Tommie's bier and Winkler stood there and just looked. But it is not only the little boy who stands and looks. The sequence of scenes causes the reader to assume that the grown-up Winkler, after experiencing a moment of relief during which his tears started to flow, returns to his state of petrification, which is obviously the major reason why he cannot cope with adult life either.

Effective juxtaposition is a recurrent literary device in the novel. By using it, the author is in a position to comment on how the recent past in his hero's life was influenced by, or rather grew inevitably out of, the remote past. The link may not always be so obvious, though, as in the fragments discussed above.

Upon his arrival in Children's Peace House, little Winkler is taken into a spacious room where he is told to undress totally except for his underwear. Hereafter he will go to the dormitory. Winkler is naturally surprised to be taken there at midday. When he finds the courage to voice his amazement, he is smacked in the face so hard it stings. After a five-minute stay at the institution, he should already have known that he is not supposed to ask superfluous questions. The following paragraph reads:

> Winkler Brockhaus thought constantly of death. He collected books about cemeteries, got off his bike in order to study gravestones, and bought German handbooks on cemetery plantation. He attended a post-mortem, saw how a dead leg was removed from a torso with a Black and Decker circular saw [at home he had to flick the bone sawdust off his jacket], and almost put his nose into a crematorium furnace on a nice Saturday afternoon. (47)

The linkage between these two passages is not obvious, but it may have been the author's intention to suggest that immediately after Winkler's arrival at the institution, the sisters started aiming at his spiritual death. Winkler was not supposed to think and feel independently. He was only to act mechanically, and that was a regime his vivid mind could not endure. And therefore it started to view the termination of his existence as the only possible exit from this tormenting impasse. This may explain how Winkler's excessive involvement with death was born.

The totally negative account of the hero's stay at the Roman Catholic psychiatric hospital is also motivated by his relationship with his father, whose abnormality was the main reason why Winkler was sent there. From his early childhood, he was forced to live with a father who was at once a source of irresistible attraction and a continuous threat. Struggling for survival had become Winkler's second nature.

By giving his hero an encyclopedic name, apart from being able to make use of a huge reference work, the author may have intended to lift his horror story from an individual to a more general plane and thus comment on man's cruelty towards his fellow men. The matter-of-fact style maintained throughout the novel, even in ghastly descriptions such as Tommie's fall into the boiling water, contributes to that impression. Without exception, the narrator refers to his main character as Winkler or Winkler Brockhaus. When he was little Mrs. Sprong called him sometimes "Winkje," and later on his different girlfriends "Wink" or "Winkie," in an obvious attempt to make the outside world seem less threatening to him. But when sister Makela, telling him "Walk upright, Brockhausje" (157), uses a diminutive, then that form has the same denigrating undertone as "patientje."

No doubt in an attempt to increase the effectiveness of the juxtaposition of the recent and remote past, in a number of instances the author does not change his hero's lexicon. During their conversation in the train (and it should be kept in mind that at that moment Winkler had not seen Dr. van Barten for almost 30 years), the latter says he was an assistant psychiatrist at Kindervrede when Winkler was admitted there. Winkler replies:

> "We did not have any male psychiatrists there, only females."
> "Then you didn't pay attention."
> "I did so, goddamn it. I want to write a book about the whole thing."
> "Suppression," Joop van Barten said quietly.
> "Suppression. That is the kind of bull psychiatrists come up

with [psychiatersgelul] and I have had enough of it."
"If you would rather I went back to my former seat ..." (137)

Even if we take into consideration that the hero is continuously haunted by an immensely disturbing past, this language still does not sound like that of a 40-year old, successful and well-established geographer. In summary, it can be said that despite the unconvincing one-sided depiction of the boy's treatment at the institution, the novel does not fail to make a lasting impression upon the reader, because of the skillful and original juxtaposition of scenes that determined the course of Winkler's painful remote past and of those that are representative of his equally tormented recent past.

NOTES

1 / Büch was born in 1948 and is of German-Jewish descent. I have heard that, while maintaining the German *ü*, he insists on the pronunciation of the *ch* in the Dutch fashion (/x/) and not the German one (/ç/).
2 / B. Büch, *De kleine blonde dood* (Amsterdam, 1986), 4th ed., p. 4.
3 / B. Büch, *Het dolhuis* (Amsterdam, 1988), 8th ed., p. 5. Subsequent quotations from this edition will be indicated by the page number in brackets, following the text. All translations are mine.
4 / *De kleine blonde dood*, p. 81.
5 / *Ibid.*, p. 187.