ANNA BIJNS (1493-1575): TROPING THE TEXT

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NEITHER THE WORD "TROPING" nor the word "text" appears in any of Anna Bijns' *Nieuwe Refreynen*, the text whose tropes I propose to analyze in this paper (I quote throughout from W.L . van Helten, ed. *Refreinen van Anna Bijns*. Rotterdam: J.H. Dunk, 1875). The tropes I shall be referring to may best be understood as associative clusters of ideas that make up most of the framework underlying many of the poems collected in Van Helten's edition. The Anna Bijns who wrote these poems, and prepared them for publication, was first and foremost a politically committed poet, even if she developed in other ways in her later work. Politically committed poets are poets who believe they can affect people's lives by writing books. It is therefore of interest to ask how they themselves are affected by the concept of the book, how that concept helps shape their work, the more so since this question has not been asked before in the literature on Anna Bijns, not in Roose's well-known book on her, nor in what has been published since.

Anna Bijns' work as defined above can be said to exist in a power field delimited by a number of books. First of all, life itself is a book, the very book referred to in the "Dies Irae," the "liber scriptus," the "written book" that "proferetur, will be "brought forth," at the Last Judgment., "unde mundus iudicetur," from which the world will be judged.

Anna Bijns herself puts it as follows: "Elck wilt sijns naesten boeck corrigeren, / En niemant en wil tzijne examineren; / En daarom leven wij aldus onstichtelijck" (409). "Examineren" is the operative word. The book of life is the "Doomsday Book" in which everything will be written down and which will be consulted at the end to decide whether the individual whose life has been described will be saved or damned. No wonder that many references to this book are merged with references to another kind of book, most influential during the life of the poetess, namely the merchant's ledger, in which transactions were duly entered. In Anna Bijns' own words: "Mijn schult is groot, mijn goet is cleene / En tegen u en helpt practijke of list. / Eest dat mijn rekeninge int passeren mist" (356). She also suggests, almost in passing, that none of the financial tricks familiar to the merchants of this earth will work when applied to the final reckoning that has to be presented to the "u" of the second line quoted, God himself. Rather, God is represented as the most incorruptible of merchants, "die ons elcken / Stuver sal rekenen totter laatsten mijten" (102).

If life is a book, its ending is known in advance: "Sterven is ons natuerlijcke schult, / Die elck metter lyve sal moeten betalen" (235). We must, therefore, make use of our talents as best we can. Anna Bijns' talent is that of writing poetry in the service of what she perceives as the truth. She brings the two books referred to above together with a third one in the following lines, written as the conclusion of a *refrein* in which, as Roose, among others, has shown, she attacks (and somewhat parodies) an existing pro-Lutheran *refrein*, to which she was unable to refer verbatim, however: "Uut liefden totter waerheyt is dit

volendt vry, / Hoe mijn sinne licht int onthouden gedwaelt hebben, / Hadt ic dluyters refrein ghehadt omtrent my, / ick soude den factuer, licht beter betaelt hebben" (109).

If life is a book at the end of which stands another book, there is a third book that teaches you how to live your life, and that book was perhaps the most influential one in Anna Bijns' lifetime: the Bible or, as she refers to it, "Scriftuere, waer in Gods wijsheyt bijsonderlijc blijct, / Gesproken, gescreven duer den gheest Ons Heeren" (79). Her knowledge of it is quite extensive: not only is she able to quote chapter and verse, as in "In Deuteronomio, daer staet gescreven" (23), she also has chapters and verses printed in the margin of her poems, so that the reader will be able to refer to the relevant passages of Holy Scripture whenever necessary. The Bible is, therefore, as convincingly argued in a recent article by K.P. Aercke, the backcloth to the *Nieuwe Refreynen* as a whole: Anna Bijns refers to it at will, and expects her readers to either be familiar with it, or to familiarize themselves with it, but in a way that is approved of by the Catholic Church. She takes great pains indeed to distance herself from the "Lutherans" — a term she uses indiscriminately for real Lutherans, Anabaptists, and Calvinists who, to her, all belong to the same evil throng, even though "Som laten hen besnijen, dander herdoopen" (135) — who explain the Bible at will. Some of the strongest invective in her poems is reserved for them:

> Timmerlien, metsers, sijn ons doctoren nu,
> Tingieters, pijpers, pinceelleckers
> En schalijdeckers,
> Vettewarvers, blauwververs en lakenreckers,
> Barbiers en tandtreckers, die willen hem moeyen
> Metter scriftueren (30)

But her sharpest attacks are aimed at women who explicate the Bible along with their men. Accordingly, she exclaims: "Wacht u voor de clercken ende clergessen, / Die in doncker holen,/ in bosschen in haghen leeren haer lessen / Twillen al doctoren zijn en doctoressen" (145).

There are two reasons why Anna Bijns is so angry with the "doctoressen" who learn their lessons at the "hagepreken" that non-Catholics were forced to conduct in secret. As an apologist for Catholicism, she upholds the Church's teachings that prohibit women from explicating the Bible. The fact that she was to become a cultural icon for Dutch feminist writers, who founded the Anna Bijns Stichting four centuries later, cannot by any stretch of the imagination be construed to change her position when she actually wrote the poems referred to here. The second reason, as basic as the first, is that these women represented her most immediate competition: here are "learned" women of another kind, who also try to influence the people she tries to keep in the Catholic fold, albeit in a diametrically opposite way.

There is one major difference, though, between the Bible and the Doomsday Book. The latter mortals have to take on trust: nobody has come back to either prove or disprove it. Yet the worse the situation of the Catholic Church becomes in the Antwerp of her time, the more tempting it must have been to start doubting at least parts of Holy Scripture as

interpreted by that Church. And this is precisely the central aporia of Anna Bijns' "engaged" poetry: the books in which she puts her trust and the world in which she lives do not tally. Rather, the world increasingly contradicts the books, not just the Bible, but other books as well, as I hope to show below. Rising to this challenge, Anna Bijns does that which, presumably, any other bookish person would do: she sticks to her books, ignoring or dismissing the world. In the face of adversity she insists: "Uut scrifturen neme ic mijn fundatie" (72). At first sight this could be interpreted as merely an expression of strong faith, which it no doubt also is, witness the following lines, in which the adversities of the time are made to fit into a divine plan. God, we are told,

> gehingt [allows] uut minlijcker adere
> Dat valsche propheten so lang so quadere
> Ter werelt verwecken twist en turbatie
> Opdat de goed eduer hare temptatie
> Hier werden beproeft en namaels verheven (72).

But there is more to this than faith alone. Lines like "Die victorie moet comen, Machabeus spraect, / Alleene van Godt" (245) are, to my mind, situated in the medieval tradition of Platonic Realism, which had become associated with religious orthodoxy. At its most extreme, Platonic Realism can be said to doubt, or at least ignore, the existence of material things. In the poems analyzed here, Platonic Realism allows Anna Bijns to "resolve" all the contradictions she is faced with by denying if not the existence, then at least the relevance of one of their terms. Here the word, literally, stands against the world; here Anna Bijns truly assumes the role of the prophetess, the voice crying in the wilderness, or, seen from another angle, the woman increasingly overcome by circumstances, deluding herself to the very end. Prophet or fool, it does not really matter: the two are routinely mistaken for each other. Both can put Platonic Realism to good use for their purposes by reviving the incantatory, magic power of the poetic word: everything will be for the best in the end not only because the Bible says so, but also because Anna Bijns says so, upholding (her version of) that same Bible against all its detractors.

This Platonic Realism is reinforced by Anna Bijns' reliance on a tested and true concept of Catholic, and indeed general Christian biblical exegesis: that of the *figura*. Lines like "Doude testament alleene to spreken plach / Door figueren" (315) attest to the fact that the concept was indeed well known to her. To combat her increasing isolation in the world of her day, she sees herself in the company of the heroines of the faith in days past, all isolated figures who prevailed against overwhelming odds: Judith, Esther, Susannah, Ruth, Abigail and, of course, the Virgin Mary herself. What Anna Bijns writes about the Virgin Mary in the following lines could just as easily be applied to herself: "Lof neerstich Bieken, dat om hoonich vlooch / Opte bloemkens der schriftueren en daer uut sooch / Tot onser baten dalder costelyckste morch" (273). Like her illustrious predecessor in the history of salvation, the poet, too, in her lowly way, gathers "marrow" from the flowers of Holy Scripture for the benefit of her fellow men.

Her fellow men, though, are reading the wrong books,written by "duytsce doctoren," not necessarily Luther and other German reformers, but simply people who do not write in Latin, and produce books full of pernicious errors. Unfortunately, though, unlike the fairly illiterate new "doctoren" mentioned above, these people who have had an education (usually sponsored by the Catholic Church) and can therefore not simply be dismissed as "dronken sottoren" (95) who study in taverns, "In deen hant devanglie, in dander den pot" (95). Accordingly, the ambiguity mentioned above also surfaces in Anna Bijns' treatment of these "doctoren." We find lines like: "Tsijn nu al propheten. / Dees duytsce doctoren hebben den snatere, / Sy stroyen erroren to lande, te watere" (41), but we are also assured that this is part of God's plan, even though Anna Bijns has to equate her time with the "end of time" to make this more or less plausible, evoking "Antechrist persecutie eerst bysonderlyck, / Die sorchlijc sal zijn, quaet te wederstane" (229), and reminding her readers that "Daer sullen opstaen veel valsche Propheten" (230). As always, though, the conflict is not resolved, but cut off. Against the mounting evidence of the success of the "Lutherans," Anna Bijns finally establishes little more than her own conviction, her own "word," in lines like:"Sinte Peeters sceepken mach wel wat hincken, / Tis gepropheteert, maer ten sal niet verdrincken" (88).

As is well known, the Reformation spread so quickly through the Low Countries because it could make use of yet another kind of book: the pamphlets, or "vlugschriften," passed on and read in secret, and read so often that they disintegrated in the end, only to be replaced by new pamphlets. Small wonder that Anna Bijns should regard these books as the sum of all evil. She is convinced that they are an instrument Satan himself has put at the disposal of the heretics: "De boose geest seit: salu leere beclijven, / Ghy moet de scriftuere recken en lueren / Hiermede suly donnosele besueren. / Ropet evangelie, maer tfutselboec studeert" 71).

The counterpart to "Scriftuere" on earth is not the Dies Irae's "liber scriptus," but rather "tfutselboec," defined in the *Middelnederlandsch Woordenboek* as "uitvluchten boek." No wonder Anna Bijns regards a "futselboec" not as just a book written by "heretics" and "perverting" the "true" meaning of the"Scriftuere." Rather, she also uses the word to refer to the bookkeeping done by dishonest merchants and moneylenders. The two meanings come together in the line "Tvolc gaet gheerne, daermen goeden coop gheeft" (174). "Goeden coop" refers not only to "cheap, not expensive," which would cover the more mercantile side of the"futselboec," but also to the cheapening of the moral tenets of the Catholic Church which, from Anna Bijns' point of view, greatly contributed to the success of the Reformation, witness one of her references to Luther: "geen predicant en staet hen [the people] ane, / Dan eenen verloopen munc, die de cappe is quijte. Die dwoort Gods verkeeren tharen appetyte / Dien heeten sy gheleert, verlicht en vroet" (82). The same "rabble" — Anna Bijns' word for it is "Rapiamus" — that cheapens God's word is also eager to deceive in financial matters: "Tis meest al Rapiamus, wilt opten hoop sien, / Die tegen Gods woort als Turken en Hunen bassen, / Futselaers, bedrieghers en loose cooplien" (158).

The link between heresy and financial wrongdoing, or at least the (almost irresistible) temptation of making a quick fortune (by robbing churches, convents and monasteries, for

instance) is further established by means of a recurrent — though to my mind not very felicitous — pun: "Theethen broerkens in Christo, maer ic seg dmijne. / Tsijn bruerkens in Kisto, diet wel besiet" (144), in which "Kisto" stands for "(geld)kist."

Part of the power of the pamphlets, or reformatory "futselboecken," is based on the fact that they, too, have a tradition to go back to. Just as "Scriftuere" can be assisted by "doude historien, gheesten, cronijken" (334), so too Luther "heeft sijn venijn nu uute ghespooghen, / Dat hij over veel jaren hadde ghesoghen / Uut oude verdoemde ketterlijcke boecken" (73). Elsewhere Anna Bijns states, "Luther heeft den gheest vanden wicclefisten, / Die de simpele verleyt met subtijle listen" (168). If the people read these "boeken suspect van heresijen" (411) which booksellers "openbaerlijc vercoopen" in the streets of Antwerp (411), then these books will, sooner or later, supersede other books associated with the Catholic faith: "So behoefde men wel eenen nieuwen brevier" (140) and "Soe machmen wel schueren den ouden calengier" (140).

Yet the Reformers are not the only ones to blame. The double nature of the "futselboeck" is partly responsible for their rise. Since the people are not exactly opposed to a moral code that is more lax than the one preached by the Catholic Church, they can also be said to have "called forth" their own preachers, who give them exactly what they want: "Want sy hen selven leeraers verwecken, / Die haer ooren kietelen naer haer behaghen" (135). Finally, Catholics also deserve their part of the blame, because "Wy roepen al Gods woort, maar wie leefter nae?" (283).

The religious and the pecuniary side of the "futselboecken" come together in the fate that befalls the pamphlets and treatises, and their authors. "Dat voortyds verbrant is wert weder geprent" (73) writes Anna Bijns, implying that these books could be burned again, if only those in authority would see to it. The problem, however, is that "Christen heeren vergeten het Christen bloet. / Ghiericheyt, hooverdije dees overdaet doet, / Sy schatten, sy schrapen, thaect a na rapen" (465). Those who should combat the heretical side of the Reformation fail to do so because they are seduced by the pecuniary profits they can derive from it. In fact, Anna Bijns is almost forced to admit that the world is ruled not so much by books, but by those who have the power to have books printed and burned, and that power rests squarely on wealth. She realizes, "Om den penninck doet elck diligentie" (407), and this leads to gross social injustice: "Cleyn diefkens crygen een scherpe sententie, / Voor de grote sietmen stuypen en nijgen" (408). For this there is almost no redress, since nobody will even listen to the poor: "Thof is alomme open voor den rijcken, / Maer die niet en heeft en mach daer niet kijcken / Al heeft hy recht, wie geeft hem audientie?" (407). But Anna Bijns cuts off the debate once more: there are bad princes now, but there have been good princes in the past (*figura*) and there will be good princes again (Platonic Realism). Similarly, there are bad merchants and bankers now, but there have been good merchants and bankers in the past, and there will be again. In both cases, the poet's Platonic Realism is reinforced by reference to the most important *figura* of all, the arch-*figura* of Christ. For Anna Bijn's Christ is not only the epitome of the good prince — "Doorluchtich Prince, alder Princen heere, / In u is dopperste goet gheleghen. / Eest dat wijt elders soecken wy dolen seere" (253) — but also the epitome of the good merchant: "O onbegrijpelijc woort, wyste coopman, / Die so dier gecocht hebt dmenschelyc geslacht" (379). He can therefore

be relied on to reinforce her Platonic Realism, and this conviction can even be expressed in terms (suggested by no less a line than the "Dies Irae's "tantus labor non sit cassus" [let such great work not be lost]: "En wilt niet verliesen, dat so diere gecocht is" (380).

Anna Bijns also uses the fate of the (smaller) merchants to plead for peace: "De Coopman en mach vrij varen oft vlieten / By fouten van peyse; dwelc theel landt is bloot / Van neringen, dwelc dambachtslien ooc genieten" (282), and the argument is further constructed to reach the princes and others in authority. If the merchant cannot trade, the craftsman cannot sell his work and use the money he gets that way to buy his food. In other words, the natural chain of trade is interrupted, and this leads to the kind of unrest in which heresies can thrive. If the princes secured peace, social unrest would subside and heretics would find it much more difficult to get their doctrines accepted by the people.

The princes, however, are not keen on establishing peace, "Omdat de Princen naer eyghen profijt waken / Om datter weynich God soecken oft gheene" (151). Even worse, the princes of Anna Bijns' time reverse the *figurae* of the good princes, such as Constantine and Charlemagne; these "hebben met haer goet Gods dienst vermeert" (100) in the past. Hence the poet's lament, which picks up the line just quoted from Book II of the *Nieuwe Refreynen* in almost identical form in Book III: "Waer wert nu vanden Princen Gods dienst vermeert? / Sy nement eer af, dat haer ouders gaven. / Och devotie is doot en lange begraven! / Karolus viericheyt war quaet om vinden" (410).

If those in authority behave in such a way, they will encourage heresy rather than stamp it out. The same goes for the Pope, the cardinals, and the bishops: "Omdat ghy de scapen niet wel en hoet, / Comen de wolven; omdat ghy dit doet, / Hierom groeyt de dwalinge alle daghe" (60). No wonder the people lose their respect for abbots who "brassen, sy busen / Sy rijden peerden, sy verkeren, sy flusen [play cards]" (39). Paradoxically, though, Anna Bijns tries to use this very fact as an argument with the princes: lack of respect is dangerous and can lead to the kind of rebellion that will try to sweep away all authority. She claims to have found an objection to Luther's doctrine in the various peasant rebellions of her time and the bloody repression thereof by the princes, for once united. Blaming all rebellion on Luther's stance against the authority of the Church, she relishes the sight of that same Luther and his disciples trying to escape the blame for it:

> Hy [Luther] wilder ooc uut trecken synen poot,
> Doen de boeren teghen de heeren staken,
> En hy leerde hen eerst, men behoefde geen hoot;
> Dit dede den boeren naer vrijheit haken,
> Dit willen syn discipulen al missaken,
> Om datse hem tfeyts te schamen beginnen (142-143).

The poet tries to both convince and threaten the princes and others in authority. Exhortations like "Den stryt des Heeren grijpt met vlijte aen" (343) are found side by side with threats like: "In d'Oordeel Gods salt u te verwijte staen, / Laet ghij u schapen in quade seden sneven; / Door u edelheyt en sult ghij niet quijte gaen' (343). Once more we witness the familiar retreat: from the world that does not conform to the Book it is supposed to

follow, to a Book, the "liber scriptus," that belongs by definition to another world, to, finally, the word of the poet herself, both defiant and desperate: "Tsal noch eens beteren, alst God sal gelieven" (41).

The "Dies Irae's" "liber scriptus" is, obviously, not really written down anywhere in this world. The poet turns to another book that does not really exist for the basis of her art: the poetics of her time, the rules that regulate the composition of the *refrein* she writes and publishes. She know the rules, she has mastered the art, and she is justifiably proud of this fact, witness the conclusion of a long *refrein* in which one stanza is devoted to each letter of the alphabet: "Desen *ab*, slecht van sinnen wier om kijven mach, / Was deur ionste, diet begonste, doen volent" (54). The operative word is "ionste," joy. She enjoys what she is doing, and she has a right to do what she is doing, which is shown in the fact that she denies, at the end of Book I, those who do not know the rules any right to criticize her work: "Maer die geen besceet daer af en weet ... / Latet soot staet, duncket u quaet, latet dryven" (88).

Revelling in her craftsmanship, Anna Bijns exploits whatever rule can further her message, as any "rederijker" would. The best known of those rules is that the last stanza of a *refrein* is supposed to be dedicated to the head of the "Kamer van Retorika" of which the writer was a member. Since the head of the Chamber was addressed as "Prince," the last stanza also begins with that word. No wonder Anna Bijns uses the resulting ambiguity for her purposes: The "Prince" can be a relatively little-known addressee, but he can also be a real prince, to be exhorted and castigated, or even Christ, or God himself, just as the Virgin Mary can easily become a "Princesse."

Anna Bijns knows how to write in the traditional style of the *refrein*, with its many rhymes on the same sound, and she exhibits a knowledge of the various *topoi* that can be used in this genre. But all of this is made subservient to the supreme task of life: "Looft den Heere met woorden van rhetorijcken" (438), an aim more important than the usual "conste hanteren om drucx vermijen / Van Rhetorijcken" (534). Anna Bijns will therefore write her own poetry in direct contest with other poems, written by heretics to further their cause. She will, in other words, pit her books, that find their "fundatie" in her interpretation of "Scriftuere," against books that try to propagate another interpretation of that "Scriftuere" in a world increasingly dominated by "futselboecken." She concludes one of her *refreinen* with: "Tegen een Luters Refreyn was dit ghemaect / Ter eeren Gods, uut rechter charitaten, / Daer den stock af was, den sin wel smaect: / Dit syn de ghene die Martinum Luter haten" (157). The "stock" of a *refrein* is the actual refrain, the line that comes back at the end of each stanza. The stock of Anna Bijns' own"anti-refrein" is the heavily ironic: "Dit syn deghene die Martinum Luter minnen" (157).

More could be said about the way in which Anna Bijns adapts her style to her threefold audience of clerics, *rederijkers*, and the common people, about the way she sees herself as a woman poet in an age dominated by male poets, and about her Platonic Realism. I shall merely quote, in conclusion, the line that in my mind best sums up Anna Bijns, the woman caught between books: "Hoort doch na dwoort dat van mij wert ghespelt" (20). As a poet and a prophet she wants and needs to be heard. The word is both hers and not hers. It is God's word that she "spells" from the Bible, the most important

book in her life. It is also the word that *she* spells out in accordance with the unwritten book of poetics that regulates her art. It is aimed against the "futselboecken" of her time, and in the end it turns back on the "mij," the speaker who speaks her own reality and, by doing so, creates it, denying most others.

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