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**Trapped in glass: an examination of the aquariums in
"House of Refuge" and the terrariums in *The Assault***

There is a bizarre commonality between Willem Frederik Hermans' novella "House of Refuge" ("Het behouden huis") and Harry Mulisch's novel *The Assault* (*De aanslag*). Both works feature secondary characters who are obsessed with the preservation of small animals. The main goal in the lives of each of these characters, the old man in "House of Refuge" and Mr. Korteweg in *The Assault*, is to ensure the survival of the creatures they keep in aquariums and terrariums.

In "House of Refuge" the old man in the locked room is a piscophile who has dedicated his life to the rearing of unique fish. He has bred them for 80 years, producing 26 pairs of fish from one original pair. He takes great pride in his accomplishment, since "no one else in Europe has been able to do that" (Hermans, 55). It is more than his dearest hobby, it is his life's devotion and only concern. In his old age he is nearly oblivious to the realities of the world around him, instead preferring to immerse himself in the care of his fish. "I cannot live without my fish," he proclaims to the narrator (Hermans, 56).

Similarly in *the Assault*, Mr. Korteweg has an

infatuation with lizards, which he keeps in terrariums. Anton, the main character, remembers seeing them as a young boy: "Upstairs in the back room, ten or fifteen terrariums with lizards in them stood about on small tables. Weirdly silent, their bodies S-shaped, their small hands holding onto tree bark, the creatures stared at him" (Mulisch, 69). Years later, Anton meets Karen Korteweg at a protest rally against nuclear arms, and she reveals the extent of her father's obsession. She believes that the reason her father insisted on moving Fake Ploeg's body away from their house and towards Anton's house was to protect his lizard collection.¹ Karen tells Anton: "When we heard those shots and he saw Ploeg lying in front of the house, what he said was, 'My God, the lizards!'" (Mulisch, 181). If the police had found Ploeg's body in front of the Korteweg's house, they would have killed Korteweg's most prized possessions. "I've never understood what they meant to him... It was almost the only thing he still cared about... They had become his only reason for living," Karen says (*ibid.*)

This strong devotion to animal rearing deserves to be explored. Why do both stories contain characters with such unusual, yet

identical hobbies? Surely it is more than a mere coincidence. The similarities between aquariums and terrariums are too strong to overlook, and both stories are set in World War II. Not only are aquariums and terrariums the same size and shape, but humans can observe the life inside them, and both captive fish and lizards depend on humans for food for survival. These similar characteristics, I will argue, allow the old man and Mr. Korteweg to combat the psychological effects of war.

The animals are not merely incidental parts of the stories. The authors call attention to the creatures often, and they indirectly affect the plots. In "House of Refuge" the old man's love for his fish prevents him from vacating his house and obstructs his ability to understand that the Germans have lost the war. Both of these factors eventually lead to his grotesque death. In *The Assault* Mr. Korteweg's concern for his lizards contributes to the death of Anton's older brother Peter and their mother and father.

It is quite odd, even fanatical, to sustain animals (especially cold-blooded ones that do not provide traditional companionship like cats or dogs) in a time of scarce resources. Yet the old man and Mr. Korteweg ignore their own hunger to feed their creatures. In "House of Refuge" the old man says, "I have not eaten, but I have food for the little animals with me, here in this sack!" (Hermans, 56). Likewise, when describing her father's fixation, Karen says, "You should have seen how much trouble he took to keep them alive through that winter of hunger" ² (Mulisch, 181). Why do Hermans and Mulisch introduce into the plot a bizarre devotion to these animals? What is their significance?

There are several aspects to the answer. Firstly, looking after small animals gives the characters a sense of control in the chaotic atmosphere of World War II. With their countries falling apart and destruction all around them, feeling helpless, both men exert a sort of power or control over these creatures. They guarantee the animals' survival at a time when no one can guarantee their own. In addition, they long to instill order within chaos, and can do so by regulating the creatures' meals and providing a safe habitat for them. These routines provide predictability in an unpredictable world. The old man in "House of Refuge" cannot comprehend the disordered craziness that exists outside his room of aquariums. When the narrator attempts to explain that the Germans have lost the war (the story is set somewhere in German-occupied eastern Europe), the old man cannot accept this change because it opposes his set routines, so that as the narrator says, "There was nothing to do but let him stay there" (Hermans, 57).

Aquariums and terrariums symbolize ideal, sage environments for the old man and Mr. Korteweg. Both men subconsciously long to live in protected secure realms like the fish and lizards.³ When the narrator in "House of Refuge" looks at the aquariums, he sees fish floating "through the green as though on another planet" (Hermans, 60). The fish and lizards live in a separate world, far away from the horrors of war. The creatures' whole existence is contained within little glass rectangles, and they do not have to worry about bad things that occur on the other side of the glass. In *The Assault*, Anton recalls that they "seemed to be grinning broadly, [but] their eyes spoke a different language, of a gravity so immovable and undisturbed..." (Mulisch, 69). Certainly these lizards seem

much more satisfied and peaceful than the humans living and dying through the second world war.

Furthermore, caring for the animals gives the two men an opportunity to sustain life in a world of death. As people kill each other around them, the old man and Mr. Korteweg try to create life by breeding animals that will not kill each other. The supposedly primitive fish and lizards seem to understand a crucial law of survival that humans do not: one should not kill another of one's own kind, indeed, two of a kind should take pleasure in their likeness and help their species survive. In a time when unfortunately humans have lost sight of this fact, the old man and Mr. Korteweg compensate by embarking on a project of creation and positivity in a world of destruction. Since humans may not survive, the characters dedicate themselves to doing their best to see that these organisms will. In "House of Refuge" the old man tells the narrator: "They are hungry, but they are not yet dead" (Hermans, 55). He also says "My fish cannot live without me. When I am not here, this unique collection will die" (Hermans, 56). Clearly, the old man has a deep longing to keep his fish alive. Likewise, Mr. Korteweg will do anything to save his creatures. He moves Fake Ploeg's body in front of Anton's house to prevent the police from killing his lizards. In this absurd moment, the lizards' lives become more valuable than people's; Mr. Korteweg would rather sacrifice human lives than experience the extinction of his lizard culture.

The notion of the animals as a unique culture also provides information about why these men desire to keep them alive. War not only consumes lives, it also consumes the culture

that these lives have created. To counteract this loss of culture, the old man and Mr. Korteweg originate their own self-contained cultures, that will not be desecrated by human aggression. Indeed, in "House of Refuge," Hermans describes the fish as symbolizing "a unique article of culture hidden" (Hermans, 56). The old man yearns to preserve this culture, especially as the rich European culture around him is crumbling. "He thought only of culture," says the narrator (Hermans, 60). The author is saying that war is a threat not only to humans but also to all that they have produced.

The last reason that Hermans and Mulisch include fish and lizards in their works is to send a message about the so-called animal nature of war. War brings out the basest, most barbaric characteristics of people, and perhaps the authors are comparing the caged creatures to its human victims. However, the irony arises when one realizes that while the more sophisticated humans attempt to destroy each other, the animals live in peace. One cannot escape the authors' caustic suggestion that maybe humans should be kept in glass cases to avoid annihilating their entire race.

Another striking similarity between the two works is that all the creatures die, despite the efforts to ensure their survival. In "House of Refuge" the Soviet soldiers "gobble up [the] fish" (Hermans, 61). They demolish not only the exotic fish culture that the old man tries to preserve, but also desecrate the culture of the house, which the narrator has come to view as a safe haven, much as the old man views the aquariums. When the narrator observes the soldiers holding wine glasses "filled to the brim with suffocating tropical fish," he feels compassion for the old man and the loss of his

life's work. (Hermans, 64). Mr. Korteweg's lizards also die, but unlike the old man, he is the one who murders them. "He trampled them all to death. I heard him stamping up there like a madman," Karen recalls (Mulisch, 82). Mr. Korteweg eventually feels remorse when he realizes his love of lizards contributed to the death of Anton's family. Suddenly "they seemed to turn back into lizards for him again, just ordinary animals" (ibid.).

In the end, the actions taken by the old man and Mr. Korteweg are futile. No matter how hard they try to preserve life, the animals die. Perhaps the authors chose this route to illustrate that the inevitable outcome of war is total annihilation of what is meaningful and important. In war, safety disappears, control is lost, culture is demolished, life dies. In "House of Refuge" the soldiers destroy the creatures, and in *The Assault* Mr. Korteweg kills them himself, but both works end with the same result: the destruction of something precious.

We may conclude that the presence of confined creatures in the two works is not coincidental. The authors introduce animals into their stories to convey important messages about war and its emotional effects on humans. The old man and Mr. Korteweg turn to these animals to assert control in a world of chaos, to live vicariously through their creatures in a safe place, to sustain life amid destruction, and to preserve culture. These subconscious needs motivate the characters to obsess over fish and lizards, sacrificing their own lives or the lives of others in an attempt to save them. Little does

either character know that they will all - the fish, the lizards, the old man and Mr. Korteweg - end up dead.

NOTES

¹ Fake Ploeg was a policeman who collaborated with the occupying German (Nazi) powers and tortured captured resistance fighters. In retaliation for his murder by the resistance, the Germans killed Anton's family and destroyed their house.

² The winter of 1944-45, the last of the war, when the Germans blockaded the movement of food supplies. The Dutch were reduced to eating such things as tulip bulbs.

³ In the context of the war it is significant that, as I have said, the animals they choose to preserve are cold-blooded and not companion animals that can offer affection. The implication is that in such times it is too much to hope for love.

WORKS CITED

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