BERT VOETEN'S *DOORTOCHT, EEN OORLOGSDAGBOEK* (THOROUGHFARE, A WAR DIARY)

Alexander Zweers
University of Waterloo

In a curious article published in 1988 in the *NRC-Handelsblad*, Adriaan Venema, who is at present working on a study of the collaboration of Dutch writers and publishers with the Germans during World War II, asserts that at the beginning of the war the Dutch poet and journalist Bert Voeten (b. 1918) worked for the so-called "Kultuurkamer" (Chamber of Culture), an institution that had been established by the occupying forces.

Although the State Commissar for the occupied territory, Arthur Seyss Inquart, had promised not to get involved in Dutch culture, the *Nederlandsche Kultuurkamer* was founded in November 1941. Writers and poets had to become members of a subdivision, the so-called Guild of Letters, and all their publications were scrutinized for their political orientation and needed special permission from the Department of *Boekwezen* (the Book Foundation) to be printed. It goes without saying that Jewish writers were forbidden to join the Guild, and in solidarity with them the majority of Dutch authors refused to register. Under threat of prosecution, some however did (among them A. Roland Holst), but they then simultaneously declared that as long as the German occupation lasted they would not publish.

Voeten's case was different. He himself admits that as a correspondent of the daily newspaper *Het dagblad voor Noord Brabant en Zeeland*, he had drawn up reports on colleagues for the *Kultuurkamer*. "I don't want to try to find excuses. Naturally, instead of keeping it under the carpet for 47 years, I should have made it public long ago, but I was unable to do so. I must have suppressed the facts altogether."[1]

The confession is the more striking since in the entry of 26 November 1941 of Voeten's War Diary, published in 1946 and entitled *Doortocht* (Thoroughfare), we read:

> "Culture Council" and "Culture Chamber" officially founded. Snijder and Goedewaagen [the presidents of the "Kultuurraad" and the "Kultuurkamer" respectively] are in the process of "elevating" us culturally to the level on which in Prussia the masters operate by the dozen. "That is ten meters below Amsterdam watermark," I wrote today to Berend [a friend of Voeten's]. "We have to enter the lock. With the necessary juggling we are taken down to the required depth. We are being detained so that they can have a look at our papers, tamper with them, change the position and put us again on board ship with a hundred pages of regulations and *Mein Kampf*. The doors open and we are going to be attached to a tugboat. The only thing we have to do is once in a while to adjust the course and to learn the hundred pages by heart. ..."[2]

Despite the sardonic tone of this diary entry, Voeten, using a similar kind of metaphor in a recent interview, declared seriously: "Probably I let myself be taken in tow by someone from Brabant. I do know why I stopped shortly afterward. Because what I was doing was objectionable."[3] In the interview he also mentioned that he was definitely not *deutschfreundlich* (pro-German), a claim that is supported by many diary entries. For instance, on 18 April 1943 his friend Berend had argued that only the demagogues and slavedrivers, the poisoners and political sadists were responsible for the consequences of a world war.

> That is all very well but certainly does not hold for Germany, I said. The people were longing for a figure that would give them back the goose-step, the uniforms and the cutting commandos. Hitler gave even more than that. ... Everybody knew about the concentration camps, the pogroms, the vehm murders [i.e. by secret court], the war against the churches and against the intellect. People saw how the master minds, the scientists, the writers and painters went into exile. Nobody protested. Nobody thought of protesting. They stretched their arm and put on their boots and yelled "Deutschland über alles" and listened with open mouth and ecstatically gleaming eyes to the Austrian corporal who proclaimed what so many had done before him: the myth of the "ewiges Deutschtum." No, not only the clique can be made responsible, but also the entire people that helped the clique come into power. (p. 124-125)

It should not be forgotten that these words were uttered a little less than one and a half years after Voeten, at twenty-three, had been persuaded to collaborate with the occupying forces. A discussion of the reception of the book after its appearance in 1946 may be helpful in shedding more light on the discrepancy between what Voeten did in 1941 and what he wrote in 1943.

The fact that *Doortocht* received the literary Van der

Hoogt prize may be viewed as an expression of general appreciation. Furthermore, in 1946, in *Wending*, the monthly magazine for evangelical culture, Professor Minderaa wrote that "such novels and memoirs about the years of our occupation as have appeared up to now are far surpassed by this fascinating diary."[4] Minderaa highly values the book's masterful style and its author's combatant spirit, but wonders why Voeten did not unequivocally point to the living God as the last source for his dream of and faith in the rebirth of a free existence. It is hard to share Minderaa's surprise, because nowhere in his journal does the author testify to any religiosity.

In the *Groene Amsterdammer* of 26 October 1946, C.J. Kelk discusses the merits of *Doortocht* together with those of Clare Lennart's *Ter herinnering aan Rotterdam* (Remembering Rotterdam) and praises both Voeten and Lennart for their allegedly primitive form. Kelk also asserts that in his diary Voeten succeeded in depicting the gigantic events of the human life-and-death struggle of that time within the framework of individual inner experiences, with the result that the great events shine through the small everyday ones.[5]

It is true that at the beginning of his diary Voeten stipulates that it is his intention to note down only the naked facts. However, since the reader is continuously bombarded with verbal ornament, flowery language and rhetoric, the fact must be acknowledged that the author did not carry out these good intentions.

With thousands of other people, Voeten was evacuated from Breda across the southern border into Belgium. He noted on 24 May 1940:

> When I look from the broken window of my bedroom I feel his words [a Belgian soldier had said "La guerre est une maladie infectieuse"] as a stinging truth. I am also infected. Suddenly. Infected with hatred, with bitterness, with a longing for rancour. I know that I must fight it. But I can't. It burns. It tears me apart and my mind to shreds. Only with letters I can vaguely indicate the cause of this infection and thus perhaps liberate myself for a minimal part. (p.17)

And on the same date, in connection with a direct hit as a result of which a young English officer lost his right leg under the knee:

> I was standing there in the midst of the street surrounded by corpses, under the sparkling rain of burning trucks, and was unable to do anything. I could see and hear, but it seemed to me that the impressions being caught by my senses only reached my organs, that my retina reflected the images like a mirror. At the same moment I felt myself change. My consciousness opened up. Something in me broke down. It was as if I was internally wounded by the pieces. I was infected. (p.18)

Voeten manages to tie off the Englishman's leg and to carry him into the house:

> I cannot get rid of the image of this young chalk-white face with its trembling jaw muscles and the writhing mouth. I remain calm. My hand does not tremble while writing down this line. But I know that this calm is only a cover, a thin glass shade over the fury raging within. The fury of helplessness. (p.18)

Although at times the reader is taken aback, even irritated by Voeten's exalted language, his style perhaps does not deserve our outright dismissal. For instance, when he is standing amidst the corpses and burning trucks in our last quotation but one , it is obviously the author's intention not to render emotions but to give an exact analysis of the pre-emotional and pre-verbal state he finds himself in, and he succeeds in providing that close analysis. However, because of the loftiness of the style, the reader may wonder whether the character of the events resulted in the choice of literary means, or vice versa. Contrary to Kelk's opinion, *Doortocht* contains no gigantic events and depictions of individual inner emotions, only gigantic events and gigantic depictions of those events. It is therefore mainly because of the style of the book that the reader is more inclined to agree with the critics who were hard on it.

The writer W.F. Hermans entitled his article of December 1946 in *Criterium* "Confession of Clandestinity," because he believed that the war conditions had enabled Voeten to become a poet - something his limited talents would have prevented him from being in peaceful times. He also castigates Voeten because of the latter's alleged lack of erudition and because of his own persomal style. "From super-poeticality he falls back into provincial journalism; compare, for instance, the following sentences: On the street the rumours dance like children. On the street the nervous movement of the soldiers of the occupation is seen" [Voeten uses here the strange sounding "beweeg der soldaten."] Hermans comments: "It has to be added that on September 4, 1944 [i.e. on the day preceding "Crazy Tuesday"] neither the one nor the other activity could be seen, because the Germans were just a bit less nervous than we in our nervousness thought."[6]

Although it is true that the abundance of metaphors found in *Doortocht* become ineffective in the end, consistently maintained simplicity of style, as exemplified in *Het bittere kruid* (The bitter herb) by Voeten's

wife Marga Minco, does not satisfy the reader either, if he is conscious of the horrors of the time.

It must have been in the first year of the war, when Marga was twenty or twenty one years old, that her father returned home with a parcel containing the obligatory stars of David. In a childlike impulse the narrator meets her father at the front door, eager as she is to learn what is in the parcel:

> "Father is coming with a parcel."
> "What is in it?" I asked at the front door.
> "In what?" my father asked and quietly hung up his coat and hat. He had put the parcel on the hall-stand.
> "I mean," I said impatiently, "in the parcel you brought home."
> "You'll find out soon enough," he said. "Come with me."[7]

The dialogue does not sound like a conversation between adults. But neither does the story as a whole give the impression that the author was striving to render the narrated events from a childlike point of view. The result is that the dialogue seems to have taken place between ageless people. It is naturally acceptable to rejuvenate the narrator and make her incapable of grasping the seriousness of the situation, but one would have expected at least one member of the family to understand. Yet the degrading experience of being forced to wear a Jewish star is treated by all concerned as a kind of game. It is possible that the author considered the humiliation so unspeakable that she deliberately depersonalized the experience.

When Voeten is in search of the right word, he will not lower himself to the use of a simplified phrase; in his elevated language, he reports on his efforts to find it. On 9 October 1944 he jotted down:

> The poet in me scans the dark for words, for *the* word, the liberating, renewing word. Like a drunkard, he roams the deserted streets of my mind, restless and grimly looking and listening. But I am soundless. (p.190)

The elevation even reaches the point where the man Voeten objectifies within himself the poet in search of the right word. Hermans adds contemptuously that "in the meantime the word came and disappeared for lack of sound." [8]

Fokke Siersma's review in *Podium*, "A Journalist's Journal", is the most virulent: "Voeten is a journalist who now and then had bad times during the war and always wrote them down badly [Voeten is een journalist die het zo nu en dan beroerd heeft gehad in die tijd en het altijd beroerd heeft opgeschreven]. ... Voeten is a Dutch citizen who because of the war ended up in a pulp of mixed sentiments, as we all did. He remained lying in that pulp, and did not get up to try his utmost to extract the meaning of the situation with the help of his intellect."[9] Sierksma also poses the very pertinent question whether perhaps once in a while during the war Voeten was thinking or doing something dumb, trivial and unsophisticated, whether he perhaps laughed at others or himself, or had a party.

While still in Belgium, Voeten enjoys the hospitality of farmer Snauwaert and is surprised by the latter's fear of the Germans. "Awel, menier, olle kent den Duts nie," zegt hij, "maar wij hebben er vier jaar onder gezeten. *Wij* weten wat het is: 'ne sloeber!" [Well, Sir, you don't know the Germans, but we were occupied by them for four years. We know what he is: a skunk!] (p.19) By quoting the farmer's Flemish, the narrator could have used the opportunity to lighten the tone of his tale a bit. Not Voeten. The story marches on in its dead seriousness.

The author's relationship with Sonja, alias Marga who will become Voeten's wife, is the only persistent thread that runs through the otherwise loosely knit diary. She is mentioned for the first time in the entry of October 11, 1940, when Voeten learns that she lost her job as a journalist in Amsterdam. A fragment of her letter is quoted.

> "The thing is that I am only a Jew. This must be something terrible. Nowadays at least, we are told so everywhere. There are here already several places where the door is closed for us. But, then, what does it matter? It seems our fate." Now that I copy her words after I reread them ten times, they overwhelm me like madness. Her fatalism, her quiet resignation are becoming unbearable. But what do I want? I don't know. I feel rotten. The time for the barricades is still far off. (p.36)

Sonja's fatalism is indeed striking if not shocking. "Maar, och, wat doet het ertoe?" Perhaps it can serve as an additional explanation of what was called earlier the depersonalized style of *Het bittere kruid*. For his part Voeten, not surprisingly, counterbalances Marga's unaffectedness with: "Nu ik haar woorden overschrijf [...] overvallen ze me als een waanzin."

It takes another three years for the two of them to make contact again. On October 13, 1943, Voeten jots down: "I am unable to put my emotion into words in this journal. I have to limit myself to the fact of noting down: today, after almost three years I suddenly heard the voice of Sonja on the telephone. She quietly and restrainedly asked for my help. It was unbelievable. I fancied her dead already long ago or in the Polish hell." (pp. 153-154) In the entry of October 5, Voeten returns to the telephone conversation:

> I knew, I knew to whom the voice belonged. But it was impossible. It was. ... Had she really continued fighting? Feverishly my pencil went over the blotter covering it with doodles. I desperately groped for words. Everything seemed trite to me at the moment.
> 'I am the only survivor.' she said slowly [Ik ben alleen overgebleven, zei ze langzaam]. (p. 154)

Again the same dichotomy in styles: whereas Sonja/Marga dares to express a horrendous truth in a simple sentence, Voeten seems incapable of doing so and breaks down for want of the right words: "Wanhopig zocht ik naar woorden."

On October 19 he notes down in the diary that "at the exit of the station in H. I saw her standing. I immediately recognized her although she had undergone a complete metamorphosis. The most surprising thing was her reddish-blond hair. Was it indeed ever deep black? I thought." (p.156)

In *Het bittere kruid* the reader learns that upon leaving the peasant family in the countryside in order to live at a new hiding place in Heemstede, Sonja/Marga is zealously bleaching her hair.

> "It is better to be blond to start with," the woman said.
> "But she isn't," the man said."If she were, she wouldn't be here."[10]

The uncomplicated exchange of thought between husband and wife may make us smile, but at the same time the quintessence of Sonja's problematic existence is expressed in a nutshell.

In *Doortocht* one would look in vain for an understatement like this. Nor is Voeten the writer who, while concentrating on the essential features of an emotional experience, communicates his findings without verbal frills as, for instance, Loden Vogel does in *Het dagboek uit een kamp* (Diary from a Camp) which was also published in 1946. Vogel was transported in April 1944 to Bergen-Belsen and a little over a year later liberated by the Russians in Troebitz on the frontier of Brandenburg and Saxony. This diary is the opposite of literary, and for that reason the opposite of Voeten's. Vogel practises what could be called simple introspection:

> The following can illustrate how I lost my feeling of sympathy: one of the women from Theresienstadt [the holding camp for Auschwitz] was beleaguered by curious prisoners. One woman pushed forward: "Did you know my son, Dr. H., by any chance?" My thought: "Good Heavens, stop bothering her" ran simultaneously with the answer: was also sent on. Exit unhappy woman. My compassion does not function anymore. Mom almost fainted after she had to stand at roll-call twice today for as long as four hours altogether. [11]

Another marked difference between Voeten and Vogel is the latter's often original, although sometimes sinister sense of humor. Shortly before his evacuation from Bergen-Belsen he noted down: "Chaim, my bed-fellow, suspected of typhus fever, was taken away from here. So you can see: the greatest risk I ran in bed. There is no need ever to give up anything because of the danger. A lesson I learned too late."[12]

When comparing the styles of these two authors, the reader grows even more aware of the difficulties he has in digesting the verbosity and hyperbole of Voeten's *Doortocht*. And yet despite this, he will feel incapable of breaking away entirely from the tension and poetical power of this prose. Since language has a different function for him, Voeten is obviously not in search of the proper literary means to express individual emotions. For him verse, connected with the eternal, does not die and consequently exists outside our reality, in a second world.In the poem of 1947 *Twee werelden* (Two Worlds) that second world is defined as follows: "I was convinced that there is a land, a second world where every word still possesses its original glow; where living signs grow from the sand."

> [Ik wierf de zekerheid dat er een land,
> een tweede wereld is waar ieder woord
> nog zijn oorspronkelijken gloed bezit;
> waar tekens levend wassen uit het zand.][13]

The dichotomy between real and poetic world can also serve as an additional explanation of the split between Voeten, the collaborator with the Germans, and Voeten, the poet of the diary.

The reports on colleagues drawn up for the "Kultuurkamer" presumably consisted of writings exclusively referring to events pertaining to the surrounding world, or in the author's idiom, the first world. In the diary, however, a different set of references was created. Love, hatred, rancour, faith, perseverance are not depicted as individual reactions to current war events. The poet liberates these words from their common connotations, and by positioning them in a second world and thus returning their original glow to them, attempts to enlarge their impact upon the reader. By operating in this manner Voeten reversed the poetic process: words are not meant to express personal emotions; strung into a verbal necklace that is shown from an elevated plateau, they are being chosen in an attempt to startle the reader by their glitter.

On September 6, 1943 Voeten wrote: "When I glance at the beautiful Indian summer I have to force myself to

realize that any moment death can take its leap from under the sun. [Wanneer ik den schoonen nazomer schouw, moet ik mij geweld aandoen te beseffen dat ieder oogenblik de dood zijn sprong kan doen onder de zon vandaan]"(p. 150)

The reader is at a loss when trying to fathom what Voeten felt when looking at that beautiful Indian summer but cannot fail to be impressed by the metaphor of death jumping from the other world.

NOTES

[1]"Voeten werkte voor Kultuurkamer," *NRC-Handelsblad* 21 January 1988.

[2]B. Voeten, *Doortocht. Een oorlogsdagboek 1940-1945*, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam, n.d.), p. 74. Subsequent quotations from the book will be indicated by the number of the page in brackets following the text. All translations from Dutch are mine.

[3]*NRC-Handelsblad* 21 January 1988.

[4]P. Minderaa, "Letterkundige kroniek. Proza," *Groene Amsterdammer* 26 October 1946.

[5]C.J. Kelk, "Toch goed oorlogsproza," *Groene Amsterdammer* 26 October 1946.

[6]W. F. Hermans, "Belijders der clandestiniteit," *Criterium* (15, 1946), p. 840.

[7]M. Minco, *Het bittere kruid. Een kleine kroniek*, Amsterdam, 1985, p.16.

[8]W.F. Hermans, p. 842.

[9]F. Sierksma, "Journaal van een journalist," *Podium* III, 5 (1947), pp.129-130.

[10]M. Minco, p. 82.

[11]L. Vogel, *Dagboek uit een kamp*, The Hague, 1946, p. 27.

[12]*Ibid.*, p. 84.

[13]B. Voeten, *Twee werelden*, Amsterdam, 1947, p. 7.