DOESCHKA MEIJSING (1947-)
Robinson: A QUESTION OF READING THE WATER

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Doeschka Meijsing was born in Eindhoven and grew up in Haarlem, the setting of many of her stories. After her studies at the University of Amsterdam she joined the staff of *Vrij Nederland*. She was editor of the "Boekenbijlage" in 1978. Her literary debut took place in 1969 in the periodical *Podium*. She was awarded the prestigious Multatuli Prize for the novel *Tijger, tijger!* (1980).

Doeschka Meijsing's work has generally been highly respected and popularly received. A "netherlandist" by profession, her academic interests include comparative literature and theory and her critical contributions in *Vrij Nederland* over the past ten or more years show a remarkable knowledge of, and critical insight into, both national and foreign literatures. But it is Doeschka Meijsing the writer who is of interest to us here.

Although her prose narratives usually have women as the principal characters, they are not representative of feminist literature, such as the work of Hannes Meinkema, Anja Meulenbelt, Renata Dorrestein, and Andreas Burnier. Critics usually refer to Meijsing as an academist or a "*Revisor* writer," along with other writers who regularly contribute to the literary periodical *De revisor*, such as Dirk Ayelt Kooiman, Nicolaas Matsiers, and Frans Kellendonk. Like them, Doeschka Meijsing concerns herself with the formal aspects of literature, in contrast to the so-called "anecdotal" writers like Maarten 't Hart and Mensje van Keulen, for whom writing tends to be a form of self-expression and who view "reality" as both a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem*.

Meijsing tends to shun realistic depictions of reality; consequently, she usually avoids direct emotions, making it difficult for the reader to identify with her characters, at least directly. In her work reality is not depicted so much as imagined, and her characters simultaneously straddle the realm of quotidian life as well as the imaginary associations which it evokes. Such a frictional, yet complementary, relationship between reality and the imagination is strongly reminiscent of the work of Simon Vestdijk, whose influence on Meijsing is unmistakable, especially in the novella *Robinson* (1976). Here and elsewhere the plot of the story is less important than the manner in which it is written; in that respect it is not unlike the narratives of James, Joyce, Nabokov, and Gombrowicz, whose techniques Meijsing and other *Revisor* writers seem to emulate.

The story of Robinson is that of a seventeen-year-old girl whose family has recently moved (again) to a new village where she must attend a new school and make new friends. An only child, Robinson lives alone with her mother while her father is away at sea. She loves her father, the epitome of virility and charm, and dislikes her mother, one of whose aims in life is to be an influential member of school committees. The other characters are her recalcitrant friend Daniël Bierwolf, also a newcomer to the school; van Zanten the rector, an authoritative surveyor of adolescent behaviour; and the unconventional German teacher Johanna Freida, who has an affair with Robinson's father.

Robinson's role is a passive one. Throughout most of the novella she is portrayed as a spectator registering the actions of others, reflecting and fantasizing upon them, and wondering what it all means. More than that, like most of Meijsing's characters, she seems to yearn for something that will help her emerge out of her isolation and become a participant in

life. But the quest is doomed because in the process she draws heavily upon her imagination and comes up with a world that is strictly her very own, causing her to be increasingly more isolated and turning her developing search for her own identity into an exercise in futility.

The question that concerns us here is not the resolution of Robinson's problematical world, any more than Meijsing addresses herself to this. I am primarily concerned with the formal aspects of the novella, how it is constructed, and how the author links the many contradictory elements in this deceptively straightforward work. The principal topic holding the story together is the pervasive water motif that represents the mystery of life which perplexes Robinson, while it simultaneously depicts the formal chain that links the major components of her world. In other words, Meijsing's novel employs the aquatic motif to characterize the two-dimensional world of the heroine while serving as a narrative device through which the author formulates her fable.

In analyzing the water motif I will focus on the principal characters in the novel, who besides Robinson include her friend, her teacher, and especially her father, unquestionably the most important person in Robinson's life. His whole being, particularly through the eyes and imagination of his daughter, is related to the sea. The son of the very last mariner to sail around Cape Horn, he is described as a sailor with the venerable rank of "captain of the sea." To Robinson he is the ultimate seaman, guiding his ships across the oceans without fear of the deep mysteries they conceal. He is in fact portrayed as a consort of the sea, whose very terror gleams in his eyes.

The ambivalent qualities that Robinson associates with her father while he is at sea, and which almost turn him into a legendary figure, are similarly in force whenever he comes back to shore. Feelings of longing and trepidation, of terror and wonder overcome her upon his return. With the storm of the open sea emanating from his clothes, she worries, justifiably, that he might disturb the precarious equilibrium that exists between her home (her mother), the school (Daniël and Miss Freida), and herself. Often her worries have sexual overtones. The adolescent Robinson is quite aware of her father's boyish good looks, finds him quite seductive in his officer's uniform, and seems to accept the fact that he frequents brothels in their town. She describes his tanned face as a "boeventronie," and imagines all the young women in exotic ports to be attracted to him, even as they are at home. And indeed, the very two people to whom Robinson feels closest, Daniël and Miss Freida, are hopelessly drawn to this irresistable man of the sea.

While the image of the sea for Meijsing has clear metaphoric dimensions as a Dionysian representation of life with all its allure and danger, as well as some obvious Freudian applications--especially for a teenage heroine during her sexual awakening--it is the way the writer develops the image that makes the story compelling. One way in which she cultivates it is by conjuring up a world in which the imagination is a component equal to the senses. This is not only true of the heroine who spends her time thinking, observing, wishing, dreaming, and interpreting, but of the other characters as well. Again, take the figure of the father. According to Robinson's account, he used to communicate with his daughter by means of stories, oral transmissions from father to son that had been a family tradition for generations.[1] The stories were all sea-tales, of course, both benign and terrifying, like the eyes of the storyteller. They included glorious if bloody sea battles like the destruction of the Armada as well as more tragic accounts, like the sinking of the "Lusitania" and the "Titanic" and what she refers to as the "little brothers of the Titanic"(59).[2] She recalls the fate of the "Mohegan" that in 1898 ran aground through mysterious causes, and whose

captain was washed ashore without his head; and even more gruesomely, the demise of the "Bay of Panama" that was slammed on the rocks in 1891 in the worst snow storm of the century. Sailors froze to death, while those who survived were completely covered with ice. Robinson could not get enough of these "enchanting stories," even if her reaction was ambivalent. On the one hand, she experienced a panic when she thought about the screaming frozen boatswain in the rigging of the "Bay of Panama." On the other hand, however, she was at peace with the just fate of the "Titanic" at the mercy of a sea that forgives hybris and covers evil in her bosom.

When Robinson is alone she reflects upon the sea-centered tales of her father and she improvises on them. Pirate fantasies are especially fascinating to her, perhaps because of the controversial role of the father in most of them, or the conspicuous presence of a son or a daughter. The story of Hamlet (Amleth) intrigues her because he became a notorious pirate after avenging his father's death. Another prominent fantasy has more personal elements that fan her sense of wonder. It depicts the historical figure of Jan Jansz, the villainous pirate who was born in the same town where Robinson lives. After one of his victorious foreign adventures, Jan Jansz declared himself a Moslem king. His daughter decided to visit him and was so aghast at what she witnessed that she promptly returned home, where she immediately joined a cloister. But Robinson's favorite fantasy is the recurring figure of Simon the Dancer of Dordrecht, known by many names, including Captain Diable.[3] A pirate captain who vacillated between Christianity and Islam, Simon was a master seafarer who was afraid of no one. The pirates in her imagination have one thing in common: the face of Robinson's father, the pirate king *par excellence.* It is no wonder that by extension she also pictures herself as a pirate, imagining her attic to be a crow's nest, from which vantage point she would peruse the horizon for booty for hours on end.

Meijsing extends Robinson's daily maritime musings into sea-filled nocturnal dreams and nightmares that continue to draw her into their plots. In the story of the ship the "Gorch Fock," for instance, with its bow in the shape of a "strange head with burning hollow eyes," the ship becomes an assailant, aiming its ugly bow directly at Robinson. Similarly, after the recollection of the icy "Bay of Panama" disaster, Robinson dreams of icebergs that peak larger than life from the treacherous water. She recognizes her own clothes and towel flying from the tops in the wind like the flag of a ship, while she is helplessly swimming somewhere in the vast sea. As in her daytime fantasies, Robinson's dreams are filled with ships whose swaying white sails mark a sharp contrast to the undulating gray sea which she scrutinizes incessantly.

For Meijsing the duality that characterizes a life composed of reality and the imagination even extends to the dream world, where one must distinguish between "true" and "mere" dreams. True dreams, like truth itself, combine the senses, the intuition, and a creative contemplation of the two. In this novella it is again the water metaphor that exemplifies the maxim, as is evident in the pervasive aquatic imagery of the episode where Robinson decides to sleep in on the first day of the vacation. Sound asleep, she is awakened by her mother, who greets her with a cup of coffee, interrupting her daughter's dreams:

> Robinson swam to the surface of her sleep ["naar de oppervlakte van de slaap"] and looked at her mother as if she were seeing her for the first time. Within thirty seconds all the white sailboats in her thoughts were cast into the realm of dreams and she realized that her mother was standing in front of her bed. . . (47).[4]

The quotidian world which Robinson's mother represents and which sharply contrasts with the romantic world of her

father does not have the open sea as its venue, but the stifling school. Where one depicts freedom, license, and horror with all their expansive allure, the other represents a restrictive routine run on rules and regulations that bankrupt young minds. This world is governed by the ever-vigilant rector and, as an influential member of the parents' committee, by Robinson's mother. In spite of the antithetical nature that contrasts the school and its helmsmen with the ocean and its supreme captain, Meijsing nevertheless portrays also this area of Robinson's life in marine terms, usually because the reader sees nearly everything through the mind's eye of the girl. Throughout the novella the school with its glass walls is referred to as the labyrinthine aquarium[5] of the rector, with the students being no more than isolated little fish. Yet, the protective environment of the aquarium is not foolproof. Early in the novella Robinson observes that it may have "seemed unbreakable, but that this was not the case" (34). We see her observation confirmed by the various (aquatic) characterizations of the rector. On the one hand Robinson calls him the largest fish in the aquarium--larger even than her mother--whose principal mission is to "watch over the other fish to make sure no Moby Dick would suddenly appear and spread chaos and despair" (27). But, while there may have been ample cause for the omniscient rector's caveat, much of the very unrest which he wished to prevent is due to himself, as the following characterization suggests. In what is an interesting metaphoric switch in the imagery of Robinson's sea fantasy, she refers to the hated head of the school as being "dangerous as a rock under water on which a fast clipper would certainly be smashed to pieces at night" (34), a portentous description indeed.

The implied prophecy in Robinson's description of the rector is realized by the only two people with whom she has--or wished she had--an intimate relationship, her fellow student Daniël and the teacher Johanna Freida. Like Robinson, Daniël is also related to one of the biggest fish in the aquarium, in his case the rector. Daniël turns out to be the Moby Dick that his uncle fears most. A perennial disciplinary problem, he has been kicked out of several schools before, and he will also be unable to return here the following year. He, too, has but two friends, Miss Freida and Robinson. With the latter he studies and discusses his ideas, mainly about demons; he also goes to bed with Robinson. Afraid of no one, he disregards his uncle's admonitions and manages to stir up the aquarium by his very presence.

Meijsing's allusion to Daniël--always through Robinson's eyes, of course--as a Moby Dick thrashing his mighty tail fin to test the very limits of the glass that encases him, coincides with her portrayal of him as a pirate, thereby further drawing the imagery of Robinson's private fantasies into the realistic realm of the school. The introduction of the pirate portrayal also prepares for a prophetic relationship between Daniël and Robinson's father. The occasion is the traditional, much heralded "cultural evening" on the day before the Christmas vacation. This year promises to be different from previous years, if for no other reason than that Daniël is on the program, representing his class with two solos. In his first appearance he screeches a text by Georg Kaiser about an unbearable relationship to an aunt and uncle. But the *pièce de résistance* is his rendition of Brecht's "Seeräuber Jenny," in which he, dressed as a pirate woman,[6] causes such a storm in the aquarium that the students, wholly out of control, turn into mutineers, causing total chaos or, as Robinson--who wanted to see Daniël after the program--articulates it with the apt aquatic idiom that only the original Dutch expresses so well: "tenslotte was de hele avond daardoor in het water gevallen" (49).

The character of Johanna Freida is a principal player in Robinson's marine world. Having gained the girl's admiration when she first defied the rector's authority--

transforming her into an anarchist in Robinson's eyes--she grows in importance when she turns out to be the director of the cultural program that fatal evening, and an enthusiastic supporter of Daniël's debut. But it is her name that most captures Robinson's imagination. To her "Johanna Freida" denotes the name of a ship, more specifically the name of a white sailboat, such as the one that regularly appears in Robinson's dreams. There is something mysterious about this vessel. She "led her own unfathomable life," and when one tries to catch her, as Daniël and Robinson attempted one morning, "she set out to sea [koos het ruime sop]" (39), leaving her new fans far behind ashore. But when they do manage to overtake her at her home, their entry is described in nautical terms that also encompass the images of Robinson's private fantasies: "They climbed . . . up like sailors in the rigging, like pirates full of tense anticipation on the rope ladders of a newly captured ship, the Johanna Freida, a fast clipper with undiscovered secrets on board" (51). And thus Meijsing reintroduces the image of the fast clipper that would be smashed by the dangerous submerged rock of the rector.[7] This is precisely what happens at the end of the story. The mother, who has just found out about Freida's liaison with her husband, urges the rector not to renew her appointment. Meijsing continues the marine idiom in this situation as well, applying it--ironically no doubt--even to the mother: ". . . for a member of the parents' committee this ship sailed much too smoothly [ging wat al te veel voor de wind], and with her sails hoisted she entered the office of the rector van Zanten, who liked only calm seas" (111).[8]

In Robinson's "real" world the plot of the story absorbs the imagery of her make-believe world with the inevitable union of the three fellow "pirates" in her life--encounters, unwittingly orchestrated by Robinson herself, that are replete with psychological significance. Their first meeting takes place on the ice of the polder,[9] where father and daughter are skating. On this occasion, which is also the beginning of the friendship between father and teacher, the competitive Daniël stumbles in a race with the captain. Yet on the larger scale of Meijsing's world, it is not important whether Freida wins or Daniël loses, but that Robinson is once again assigned to the sideline as an observer.

Meijsing develops the problematic four-way alliance in a subsequent scene on the water, that in some ways represents the culmination of the story. Robinson and Daniël join the father and teacher for a day of sailing on the IJsselmeer. At one point the garrulous and envious Daniël insults his teacher, who in turn slaps him so hard that he falls overboard. With Robinson at the rudder (!), the vessel gybes so severely that the captain takes over the control himself, before entrusting it to his dependable sailing partner Freida. The episode is emblematic of the paradoxical dual way in which Robinson experiences life. In her imagination, moments before her father takes control, she envisioned sailing an even larger and faster ship that would take her far away, and she saw her whole imaginary universe reflected in her mariner's compass. In reality, however, her naval instruments register only storm clouds and fire:[10]

> In the north the clouds gathered larger than life, while the sky in the west had in no time become fiery red. . . . It seemed as if a huge fire dominated the land in the west, a merciless fire. . . . While she looked she felt a sadness come toward her, and she knew that she would never get rid of it again, and which she could not name, and which had to do with everything for which she would never again find a human language (99-100).

Robinson's pervasive sadness results from a highly polarized world-and-life view that divides the universe into three separate realms, consisting of a continent, an island, and the sea. The land ("vasteland") is inhabited by a people who "spits [it] full" of excrement and saliva. The mighty sea on the other hand "washes everything clean." And somewhere between the two lies a

peaceful island. Robinson's tripartite division of the world is intricately related to the vexing question of her identity, which has two dimensions, one of gender and one of definition. Meijsing turns the individual predicament of the teenager into a literary puzzle without minimizing her personal anguish.[11] Her distress is one of legitimacy, knowing that she is supposed to be a boy and that her father compensates for his loss by treating her as a son with a real boy's name, Robinson. Although Meijsing does not mention it, the name is a poignant allusion to the hero in *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe--who also wrote a *History of the Pirates*.[12] Shipwrecked on an island, the original Robinson, too, had to create his own world amid danger, doubt and utter loneliness. But while the correspondence between the two Robinsons seems obvious, it is the vulnerable island that best defines Meijsing's Robinson: "Her mother called the name a whim of her father's. But in reality that name signified an island in the ocean, . . . where a calm prevailed, as if a storm was threatening" (20). Or, as she puts it later: "a daughter instead of a son, a name instead of a reality, an island instead of a continent. In one fell swoop all her memories surfaced in unstoppable waves, and she would somehow have to figure it all out" (54).

Although Robinson does not solve the mystery of (her) existence, it is not for lack of trying. Her quest for answers is not limited to conjuring up all the captains-of-the-sea she remembers, but she scientifically studies all the data related to the very symbol and substance of life: water, not unlike the approach of a literary critic. From the many isolated facts about water which she learns at school she seeks to form one cohesive whole and apply it to the marine world of her life and fantasy. She discovers that most water on earth is contained in the oceans, and that human beings, consisting of sixty-five percent water, are not created out of dust after all. She studies the molecular structure of water, seeing it as a triangle with its two hydrogen atoms at the base and its oxygen atom all alone at the top. Later she applies her findings to the triangular relationship between her father and Johanna Freida on the one hand and herself on the other. She comes to the conclusion that the other two "fit into each other. . . like molecules in a fixed structure and that the only one that did not belong was she herself" (84).

Robinson's return from the traumatic ice-skating encounter with her father, Daniël, and Johanna Freida (she still has the teacher's hat which was left behind) also adds a pressing relevance to her interest in ice, the solid state of water. Here again Robinson is looking for an underlying principle which will help her understand the rest of life. She explains to Daniël that ten percent of the world's surface is covered with ice, that most of it has a crystal structure, but that ice originating at 160° below zero is formless ice "overgeleverd aan de chaos" (76). At such low temperatures, she tells Daniël, it is impossible to differentiate between ice and fire--yet another example of the contradictory interaction of the elements that pervade the story. In general Robinson marvels how most ice can be magically transformed into an open crystal structure drawn with white chalk on a blackboard, which in turn can be captured in a formula that reappears in the students' homework.

But as with the liquid state of water, so the application of Robinson's study of ice to people has a similarly perplexing effect on her, indicating that certain natural processes reveal some surprises when assigned to the human condition. We see this in the episode where Robinson returns Freida's skating hat. When the teacher tries to tell her all about love and intimacy between two people--obviously referring to the captain and herself--Robinson will have none of it, with interesting physical results: "it seemed as if ice crystal after ice crystal were heaped one upon another, as if something were laid around her heart that could not be thawed out" (84). Similar, but even more paradoxical, is the description of

Robinson's reaction to her sexual experience with Daniël, a depiction that rivals the mysterious formation of the coldest ice: "she felt it gradually getting hard in her, as if the water in her body congealed into ice molecule by molecule, not only in the form of the most brilliant crystals, but also hard and cold like fire" (81).

Robinson is vintage Meijsing. It is a story in which content and form are enlisted in the fascinating analysis of structure and relationship both in life and in fiction, with water as their common denominator. In this venture the heroine approaches life as a (Defoe- or Melvillesque) text to be explicated, analogous to the task of the discerning reader of her story, together with whom she revels in the wonder of it all.

ENDNOTES

[1] The fact that this male-oriented generational rite turns Robinson into an outsider is hardly lost on her.

[2] Interesting here is the masculine gender that Robinson ascribes to these ships, instead of the traditional feminine designation, obviously because of their link to her own father, with whom she associates all of these stories.

[3] Time does not permit a discussion of the fascinating "devil" motif in the story, also in connection with her schoolfriend Daniël, who was obsessed with devil lore and the question of good and evil.

[4] All translations are my own.

[5] The image of the school as aquarium, which also appears in the novel *De kat achterna* (1977), finds its genesis in Meijsing's characterization of her own school in Haarlem as "het meisjesaquarium" (Brokken 229).

[6] Here again, the switch in gender is significant and is related to one of the principal motifs in the story, namely Robinson's own sex, as we shall see below.

[7] Ironically, as Robinson later portrays Johanna as the treacherous rocks on which her father, as captain of the "Mohegan," would be shipwrecked.

[8] In another ironic employment of the sea imagery, the mother's satisfaction at having saved Robinson from almost certain failure is expressed in the following characterization: "een moeder die haar dochter toch veilig op het droge had gekregen" (103).

[9] The ice motif, already in evidence in the stories and dreams, is an increasingly important part of the overall water imagery for Meijsing. The polder is one of the many images that she employs to draw land and water together, especially through the (frozen) ditches that traverse it.

[10] Clouds and fire are the final complementary images in Robinson's elemental world. The latter is especially prominent in the opening and closing scenes of the story, where it denotes the oppressive heat of the sun enveloping the city square. The influence of Simon Vestdijk's *The Garden Where the Brass Band Played* is unmistakable here.

[11] In the caption preceding the story, for instance, Meijsing quotes Herman Melville ("Ah, the world! Oh, the world!"), thereby subtly evoking the image of Moby Dick--so important in the story--while simultaneously alluding to the thematic wonder and fear with which Robinson views her world.

[12] Both the treatise on the pirates and the author's use of the name Daniël further underscore an obvious reference to Defoe.

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