ANDREAS BURNIER (1931-): THE DREAM OF REASON

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Andreas Burnier was born on July 3, 1931, in The Hague. Because she was Jewish, she lived separated from her parents from 1942 to 1945, hiding with sixteen different families in as many different places throughout the Netherlands. She briefly studied medicine, then philosophy at the University of Amsterdam (1949-1953); she married in 1952. After her divorce in 1961, she studied first mathematics, then again philosophy and later criminology in Leiden, obtaining her doctorate in 1971. She worked as a teacher (1953-1961), as an advisor at the Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work, as a researcher for the Institute of Criminology in Leiden, and was Professor of Criminology at the University of Nijmegen from 1973 until a few years ago. A prolific writer, she is the author of novels, essays, poetry, numerous articles in newspapers and journals, and of a number of scholarly books and articles under her real name Catharina Irma Dessaur.

Her novels, especially the early ones, are formally and structurally experimental, thematically complex, at once concrete and graphic in descriptions and heavily allegorical and symbolical in meaning. Dominant themes are "sex-fascism" or "masculinism" as a perhaps unavoidable, temporary phase in our thinking beyond which the West is trying to move at the present time; the search for identity and knowledge of self; anguish and existential isolation in an increasingly ego-oriented world; a preoccupation with our essential spirituality and the belief that we are of divine origin and can remember the world of light from which we have come into the world.

Any discussion of Andreas Burnier's work in a collection of essays about "women writers" ought to be prefaced by the observation that the author herself rejects this approach. She has often said that grouping together artists or writers on the basis of their sex alone is not only un-literary but also discriminatory and, in fact, symptomatic of the very masculinist thinking that studies of this kind often purport to combat. Burnier feels that criticism dealing with women writers often puts too much emphasis on themes and content, while, as she states in "De vrouw achter de ezel," "de gewone litteraire stromingen. . . gereserveerd [blijven] voor mensen met een mannelijk lichaam" (*Zwembadmentaliteit* 123-124). Her own novels and stories are on a par with the works of the most prominent Dutch and Flemish authors of the post-war period: Gerard Reve, W.P. Hermans, Harry Mulisch, Hugo Claus, and others. Her perspective may be determined by her gender, but the significance of her texts reaches far beyond the feminist militantism of writers like Anja Meulenbelt or Hannes Meinkema, not least because of her pervasive preoccupation with form. To her, "kunst is voor tachtig procent vorm, en voor twintig procent inhoud" (Roggeman 13). She has a strong awareness of narrative techniques, plays with the reader, uses increasingly ironic first person narrators, and has made writing itself a prominent theme in her novels, seeking refuge in what Willem Brakman has termed "the consolation of form." She sees her writing as a "psychisch ordeningsproces" necessary to triumph over the meaninglessness and chaos of life (Roggeman 11, Bousset 42).

What sets her work apart from that of most Dutch modernists and what constitutes an important contribution to the Dutch novel is, on the one hand, the gender-focussed nature of her quest for identity (the given sex is by definintion problematic) and, on the other hand, her preoccupation with the divine and the spiritual. The vast majority of serious writers in the Netherlands are fiercely non-religious or anti-religious. While highly suspicious of the Church and all forms of organized religion, Burnier has rehabilitated spirituality and mysticism as literary themes.

Most modernist texts are of autobiographical inspiration and written in the first person. A great many of them are *Bildungsromane* or *Künstlerromane*, reflecting the artists' preoccupation with their own development as individuals and as artists. Burnier's work is no exception. Two of her novels can be considered *Bildungsromane*: her debut *Een tevreden lach* (1965), and *Het jongensuur* (1969). The latter is perhaps more accurately described as an anti-*Bildungsroman*, since the girl's sense of self disintegrates as time goes by. *De huilende libertijn* (1970) is a *Künstlerroman*, describing Simone Baling's peripatetic development from an idealistic, creative, activist adolescent to adulthood as a writer and intellectual withdrawn from the world. *De litteraire salon* (1983) is the story of a life told from the perspective of an aging, disillusioned intellectual. Burnier considers that all literary texts are autobiographical, because "je kunt nu eenmaal niet schrijven over iets wat je niet hebt gezien, beleefd, gevoeld, gedacht of bij anderen waargenomen" (Roggeman 13). The autobiographical constant is a female protagonist who feels that she was born with the wrong body and refuses traditionally feminine patterns of behaviour, thinking, feeling. Catharina Irma (Ronnie) Dessaur (Burnier's real name), is both Jewish and homosexual. During the war, to avoid being caught and sent off to a Nazi death camp, she was separated from her parents and lived from the age of eleven to fourteen with sixteen different families of various religious and political persuasions. At the end of the war, not only did she no longer know who she was herself, her mother did not recognize her either. This situation was complicated by the fact that the little girl discovered early on that she should have been a boy and realized later that she loved women, not men.[1] Burnier experienced an identity crisis which lasted for many years.

This period, filled with social and sexual experiments, is reflected especially in the first novels which seem more preoccupied with social and sexual roles and stereotypes. In the later novels, Burnier focusses her attention on a more cosmic, spiritual conception of identity inspired by Jung and certain ancient oriental thinkers. In her academic study *De droom der rede* the author admits that around the age of forty she found herself completely "vastgelopen in het academisch labyrinth," run aground intellectually, and that reading Jung had enabled her to find her way back out of this maze (261-266). The novels written after that time are increasingly preoccupied with philosophy, mysticism, and spirituality.

Een tevreden lach, written during Burnier's years in Leiden, describes the adolescence and early adulthood of the student Simone Baling, who seeks to shake off her assumed female identity in the hope of finding her true self. But breaking barriers is easier than forging a new identity. She discovers that to become pure possibility is also to lack definition. Having shed all her masks, she finds herself faced with nothingness, a complete absence of meaning and direction. But this is necessary before the true self can emerge. Simone's search for an authentic self is presented as parallel to the process of writing a work of literature:

> Elk boek is een gevaar dat de ziel in wil, dat niet de buitenwereld nog eens in woorden overdoet (met een verbitterde verpleegstersvinger langs de rafelige wonden) noch een abstract idee brengt. Wie de ziel in wil moet door het niets heen, dat betekent door de angst (6).

At first, Simone equates identity with external signs. She goes around nocturnal Amsterdam dressed like a man, smoking a pipe, but is accepted only by the underworld scene of Het Leidseplein. She revels in this role and leads for a while a wild life of excessive drinking and myriad affairs with men and women. A mysterious epileptic attack causes memory loss and Simone's incapacity to read anything but numbers; she becomes like a machine devoid of feelings and hence incapable of understanding herself or the world. A

heterosexual marriage, associated in the novel with Faust's pact with the devil (one is reminded of C. I. Dessaur's own marriage), and a short stint of political activism with a Zionist organization, turn out to be so many more roles that conflict with Simone's true essence. Reduced to nothingness and complete incomprehension, in a section appropriately called "IJs," possibly an echo of Dante's *Inferno*, Simone realizes that she must not seek an identity in the imitation of others but accept herself as good and unique. Now she can be resurrected or reborn. She spends some time hiding in the "underworld," among prostitutes and pimps, who accept her as she is and with whom she can communicate freely for the first time in her life. They force her to acknowledge that she is an intellectual and must learn to be herself in her own world. After a trip to Greece, the cradle of Western civiliation, she returns to the university and Dutch society, hoping that beyond all that there will be "a new horizon, and a new human being," and that she will be able to live "as a man, a human being" (154). The last section of the novel, "De blik van de ander," indicates the extent of Simone's transformation. She is now a doctor and lives with her friend Anne, a psychotherapist, in the posh town of Doorn, known as a bastion of conventionality. When asked their professional opinion about a friend's homosexual son, the two women answer evasively and do not admit their own homosexuality. This passage is followed by what seems to be a dream of Simone's about her tough but happy life as a worker in a mine. The last words: "Ik keek naar mijn grote, sterke handen, voelde mijn spieren onder mijn mijnwerkerspak, en lachte tevreden," express self-acceptance and contentment, be it only in a dream. Simone is still limited socially by the opinions of others, but they do not affect her sense of self. She has achieved inner freedom even while living in as conservative a place as Doorn. As in many other instances of female *Bildung* in literature, the formation process becomes a "voyage within" (see Abel, Hirsch, and Langland). The classical example is the story of *Die schöne Seele* in Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister*, whom Burnier greatly admires. Yet one wonders how real, and especially how enduring, the newly found freedom and sense of self in this young protagonist can be. Burnier leaves it up to the reader to answer such questions. To maintain an ironic distance between Simone and herself, she uses a collage technique, inserting scraps of poetry, of pseudo-scientific discourse, alternative styles, shifts from first to third person narrative and back, thus mocking all conventions of traditional, "realist" fiction.

Het jongensuur was written four years later but deals with Simone's life prior to the period described in *Een tevreden lach*. Here Burnier shows how, during the war years, the young girl's sense of identity disintegrates so that at the liberation in 1945 she no longer knows who she is nor has the freedom she enjoyed as a child. The novel's inverted chronology and structure--the chapters cover the years 1945 to 1940--show a gradually widening perspective to a time when the little Simone could still dream of becoming a boy and doing whatever she wanted to do in life. At the end of the war, however, she menstruates and must accept the inevitability of her budding female body. The final section of the novel, entitled "Voorwoord" in keeping with the inverted order, expresses acceptance on a spiritual, cosmic level through a poetic voice far removed from the actual experiences of the young protagonist.

De huilende libertijn, perhaps Burnier's most interesting and no doubt her funniest novel, describes the failure of a superficial feminism that limits itself to exterior changes. The novel consists of four parts of unequal length (60, 27, 14, 17 pages) which cover increasingly longer periods of time: time goes faster as one gets older. Part I introduces us to the philosophy student Jean Brookman. Jean is a woman, but the unsuspecting reader will not notice this until much later in the book. The language of this first part is baroque, excessive,

outrageous, possibly a reflection of Jean's immaturity. Her attention is directed to the beautiful feminist scholar Lais (representing perhaps her spiritual side), she has a short affair with the sensual Kiki, and interacts with a variety of characters from the university world in Amsterdam. This gives Burnier the opportunity to vent her anger against all of western philosophy after Plato, against current intellectual fashions, against Freud and Marx (in her view the great villains of modern thinking), against psychotherapy, and especially against sexism. Upon Lais' request Jean leaves for Spain to find Lais' lover Stephanie, a diplomat in the Dutch foreign service. In Part II Jean discovers that Stephanie works for an anti-fascist movement under the leadership of the aristocrat Paola. She becomes a member of this group, receives guerilla training, and is given a secret mission. Her initiation into this group and a sexual experience with Paola make of Jean a real "man." Henceforth she behaves like one, beating up people left and right. This whole episode is extremely humorous, almost slap-stick. The narrator, the author, the publisher, and the wife of the publisher (!) comment on the descriptions, while the author also poses as the editor and translator of the text, adding parentheses and footnotes. The section ends with another stereotypical male act, Jean's declaration of love to Stephanie, and the promise that they will marry "as soon as the war is over." Burnier makes fun of both stereotypical male behaviour and of a certain kind of feminist like Jean, who tries to imitate men. The war to which Jean and Stephanie commit themselves is the war against sexism. They found a secret academy where gifted girls are taught to separate themselves from their traditional roles and to excel intellectually. Burnier's detailed description of this institution, which promotes a complete role reversal--the girls all have handsome young men to serve them; the older women go to male brothels--points to the absurdity of sexual role patterns. The school is a success, its graduates occupying key positions around the world. Nevertheless, since the women fail to control the bastions of male dominance, namely the army and the police, Jean concludes that her efforts have been futile. She leaves to travel around, alone, and write a book, *Beyond Reductionism*. Several times she witnesses violent police actions against feminist demonstrations in Turkey and Greece. Though their very occurrence proves that the movement is spreading, Jean avoids them. This social and political indifference at the end of the novel has angered some critics, particularly feminists, who expect Burnier to be on their side (eg. Pinkster 840-841). But as the title of Jean's planned *magnum opus* indicates, the author seeks the path to freedom and equality for both men and women no longer in revolution or social reform but in a new way of thinking, beyond limiting categories, "beyond reductionism." Disillusioned with the social world, Jean turns inward, to meditate. She has mystical experiences and a vision of God, the "Daughter," and at times approaches a state of pure spirit reminiscent of the golden world from which she has come.

This golden world is referred to in all the novels. Already in *Een tevreden lach* there is mention of an infant looking straight at the sky, and the narrator wonders: "misschien verlangde hij terug naar de wereld van licht waaruit hij zojuist was afgedaald" (10). In *De litteraire salon* (1983), there is a child playing the piano, hoping to bring back "het goddelijke gouden licht dat in strepen en flarden door de onpeilbare, donkere ruimten gaat." And Radha Altman, the protagonist, repeatedly has memories of a lost world of light that seems to recede further and further into the distance (40-41). As in *Een tevreden lach* and *Het jongensuur* the protagonist of *De huilende libertijn* has, at the crucial moment of her conversion from the active to the contemplative life, an epileptic fit, symbolic of a moment of communion with the divine. This happens near the ruins of Milete, the birth-place of Greek philosophy and Plato. Like Plato, and for example Wordsworth, Burnier believes that we are of divine origin,

temporarily locked in a material body of passing importance. She also believes in reincarnation. Having explored the social world and found its myriad possibilities unsatisfactory, Burnier's characters turn inward, to study, write, or meditate. Jean Brookman sometimes sings, to dispel her loneliness, to order the chaos and allay her anguish, but she is not alone, for "korrelig stof verzadigt . . . de lucht en sneeuwt via de zeven lichaamsopeningen tot in het hart" (138). This last sentence lifts *De huilende libertijn* into a mystical sphere of cosmic unity where social and sexual identity have lost all relevance.

The narrator of Burnier's next novel, *De reis naar Kithira*, is a voice, a consciousness, rather than a socially or even psychologically defined character. Shula Sundial, one of three of the author's alter-egos in this book (note the symbolic implications of the last name) seeks to show, in what turn out to be several abortive narrative attempts, what has gone wrong with Western civilization. First, there is the story of a shipwreck, representing Shula's own failure to stay on course emotionally and spiritually. Then there is the allegory of the ancient earth god Trophonios whose mission it is to save the world by helping it move beyond the two antagonistic forces of western thinking represented by Goddess A (Aristotelian, abstract, reductive reasoning responsible, in Burnier's view, for the technical genius and high standard of living in the West but also for the stifling bureaucratic systems which deny individuals their uniqueness and creativity), and Goddess I (Platonic, mystical, emotional, creative, but also impractical and potentially as destructive as A). When the two goddesses are together, there is an explosion of hatred and confusion. Trophonios travels from East to West through China, Russia, Germany (Hades!) to Kennedy Airport in New York City. He finds nothing but deception, lies, hypocrisy, and massification of feelings and values on all levels. Needless to say, he cannot change anything and fails in his mission.

The third narrative strand tells the story of the Dutch toy-manufacturer Frank Beerenburg, a highly successful businessman and intellectual with a passion for the classics, who however does not know himself. A performance of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* and his love for the handicapped scholar Audrey change his life, forcing the realization that one can only really know something about oneself. This Frank Beerenburg receives instruction along the way from the philosopher Natanya Wildbol. The creative, emotional narrator Sundial, the practical and intelligent Beerenburg, and Wildbol, as the teacher interested in the mystical origins of Greek tragedy, represent various aspects of Andreas Burnier. The exploration ends with an English translation of Homer's description of Achilles' shield and the author's own interpretation of its images and symbols as representing several layers of civilization and several stages in the development of human consciousness. The narrator realizes that she understands our present masculinist culture so well because she herself is permeated with the same spirit, and this is precisely why she cannot say anything about the future. As she explained in *De droom der rede* (1982), we human beings are "caught," or imprisoned, in a certain phase of consciousness, but civilization moves from one stage to the next and there is an evolution. She believes that "spiritual development does not so much consist in the solution of our problems, as in the growing beyond them."[2] There is nothing one can do except try to expand one's own knowledge of oneself and fulfill one's potential:

> Het hoort nu juist bij de komende culturele transformatie, een van de zeer grote in de wereldgeschiedenis, dat niemand meer zinvol zal kunnen praten over wat zij niet zelf is. Het abstracte mannengewauwel, het herengeleuter waarbij iedere persoonlijke betrokkenheid overbodig is, of zelfs ongewenst wordt geacht, is voorbij. Dat weet ik, en dus kan ik niet anders doen dan

zwijgen (156).

Only through symbolic, allegorical representations can the author hope to express her thoughts adequately. The novel has somewhat of a circular structure, with the table of contents provided almost at the end and sections of the different narrative strands placed alongside one another to widen the perspective into several layers of meaning just like Homer did in his description of Achilles' shield. It is possible that these layers also correspond to the different levels of consciousness that constitute the human being according to early Buddhism, to Plato, to Jung.

De droom der rede is a study demonstrating what the author calls "de verschraling van het mensbeeld" as a result of the dominance of Aristotelianism in western thinking. In Burnier's view, Aristotelianism is responsible for the technological perfection of the West but also for the spiritual emptiness and anguish characteristic of our time. The title was inspired by a Goya painting labeled "El sueno de la razon produce monstruos" (the dream of reason produces monsters); western thinking has consistently valued the unconscious and the subconscious negatively as harboring destructive (sex, agression etc.) rather than creative forces, but we are paying a heavy price for our positivistic, "scientific" way of thinking. If we are to be saved, she says, scientists must re-examine their own position and think critically about the positivist axioms that are accepted as articles of faith by the vast majority of them. The "Church of Reason" has replaced the dogmatism of the Catholic Church, but Reason is no more rational or scientific than intuition or the imagination. Certain oriental philosophers integrate the individual in the All of the universe and emphasize the different stages of consciousness we can reach individually as well as collectively as a culture. Burnier relates these philosophies to modern psychology and, in a few small chapters at the end, to criminology, her designated field of academic inquiry. Her true love as a scholar, however, is philosophy, even though as far as she is concerned no genuine creative thinking has taken place after Plato and Aristotle: "The entire philosophy of the last 2500 years is a necessary phase in the evolution of human consciousness. But thank God its existence is almost over. The very latest philosophy, the linguistic analysis, is subhuman, a thoroughly decadent, post-mortem phenomenon."[3] Central to her conception of the human being are the notions of individuality, creativity, responsibility for one's actions, and the ability to discern and create meaning. *De droom der rede* is Burnier's scholarly justification of this view, a clear exposition of her thinking that provides a key to understanding her creative work.

De litteraire salon is written from the perspective of a solitary, older woman, intellectual and homosexual like Burnier. Radha Altman (her last name suggests that she is an aging "Everyman," and perhaps also that sexual identity is irrelevant) has been successful professionally, but her personal life has been disappointing: two long-term relationships, "homo-marriages" in which she was the exploited provider (an ironic comment on traditional "hetero-marriages"?), have both ended. As she ages, she feels that she is moving ever further away from that golden world remembered from before. Life, she realizes, is but

> een intermezzo in de litteraire salon, waar mensen elkaar verhaaltjes vertellen en met hun conversatie onderhouden. De toon en stijl worden bepaald door de gastvrouw en voor ieder mens op aarde geldt dat zij die gastvrouw is van wie afhangt wat er gebeurt en wat men haar vertelt (48).

Everything is a question of style and form, the nature of which we determine ourselves, and for which we are responsible. Radha's personal despair and solitude, however, are accompanied by increasingly intense mystical experiences: "Vanuit de toekomst werd ik benaderd en

opgenomen in een kosmisch plan waarin ik, op een hoger niveau dan in dit leven, aan de mensheidsontwikkeling van mijzelf en anderen zou bijdragen" (83). The novel ends in a complex symbolic vision of the narrator's entrance into an ideal world, the Sunland of Apollo, a tropical paradise fertile and opulent in vegetation, just as it is described in books, and where the narrator achieves peace and happiness (127). Radha Altman does not know how to surround herself with love and cannot keep loneliness and despair at bay. Not her homosexuality or her sex, but this inability to nurture herself and others is the source of her emotional predicament. Burnier has moved far beyond the issues of her earlier novels.

Although she is widely known as a staunch feminist, Burnier does not like to be regarded as a feminist author. She rejects the notion of *littérature engageé* and once said that she finds "het produceren van litteratuur ten dienste van sociaal-politieke overtuiging . . . dom" ("Sappho" 79). But, clearly, her views on women and sexism are reflected in her work, thematically, technically, and linguistically. Her protagonists are what one might call androgynous, combining traditionally male and female characteristics. Like the French feminist Monique Wittig, she uses the feminine personal pronoun "zij" when referring to the human being, "de mens," in general.[4] She also uses masculine forms to denote the function or profession of female characters: "directeur" instead of "directrice," etc. Thus she tries to restore the balance by doing away with old distinctions and presenting women as individuals rather than females.

Yet Burnier's main concern is to write good literature, and art is a question of form and structure. As she reminds the reader in her usual caustic voice:

> Alle Hollandse lezers die denken dat boeken in de ik-vorm geschreven echt zijn gebeurd, alle sompige moerasdwergen en aardappeleters die menen dat litteraire creatie een kwestie is van bevlogen hijgen in de trant van de Tachtigers, weest gewaarschuwd . . . Wij zijn op een punt aangekomen waar de bewust structurerende schrijver (zeg: alle schrijvers behalve 98% van de Nederlandse) voor een martelende keuze staat . . . Nee, de litteratuur stroomt niet vanzelf, gelijk het water uit de neus van een door hooikoorts getroffen maaier. Zij dient gemaakt te worden: de taal getemd als een wilde, hoogmoedige maagd, de vorm bevochten als de liefde van een weerbarstige geliefde (*De huilende libertijn* 73).

ENDNOTES

[1] Burnier keeps the details of her private life hidden from the public. Some biographical information can be found in the first chapter of Vos and Bakker.

[2] Burnier is quoting from A.B. Govinda, *The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy* (1969).

[3] *De reis naar Kithira* 15. The translation here and elsewhere is mine.

[4] See for example the poem "Wat is een mens?" in *Na de laatste keer* (33): "Wat is een mens? / Een stip op een stip voorbij de zon, / die zelf is zoekgeraakt in het heelal / van melkwegstelsels achter melkwegstelsels. / De mens: waar praat zij van in al die tijd, / aeonen ruimte, zevenmijlen licht / en zeventig maal zeven mijlen niks."

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