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Bitter Herbs, Empty Houses, Traps, and False Identities: The (Post)-War World of Marga Minco

Marga Minco (pseudonym for Sara Minco, originally Menco) was born on March 31, 1920, in Ginneken, Noord-Brabant. Her first book, *Het bittere kruid* (1957), was widely acclaimed and translated into a number of languages. Since then she has published three other novels and several volumes of short stories, her latest work (*De glazen brug*) as recently as 1986. She received the Multatuli Prize for "Het adres" in 1957, and the Vijverberg Prize for *Het bittere kruid* in 1958; this book was filmed by Kees van Oostrum in 1985. In 1988 Minco was visiting author at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She lives in Amsterdam.

What can an artist use but materials, such as they are?
What can he light but the short string of his gut, and when that's burnt out, any muck ready to hand? Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm*

Some writers find they cannot let go of certain themes or categories of material and write the same book again and again; others appear to reinvent themselves with each new work. Marga Minco presents an unusual case.

> Ik heb ooit eens gezegd dat ik nooit meer over de oorlog zou schrijven, maar ik had buiten de hardnekkigheid van mijn thema gerekend. Ik kan er niet buiten, ik kan er niet omheen. En waarom zou ik ook? (*De Limburger* 3.7.86; quoted in *Het Parool* 3.19.86).

Her complaint points to a familiar concern of much contemporary literature written by, for, or about survivors of the Holocaust; it is also manifested in Dutch literature of World War II in a general sense. More specifically, it points to the central theme of Minco's own literary career. The level tone and calm resignation with which she recognizes and embraces the inevitable contributes to her unusual literary achievement.

Minco's novels and most of her short stories stand out for their treatment of the problems experienced by war survivors, particularly those of the Jewish population. She considers all the common tropes associated with the concerns normally found in Dutch "war novels." The list of themes begins with difficulties experienced by the Jews even before the Occupation, namely a lack of acceptance of ethnic differences (eg. *Het bittere kruid*, 12). During the War, the Jewish experience as reflected in Minco's fiction includes being forced into hiding, having most of one's family taken to death camps, and loss of property (belongings were often appropriated by those non-Jewish Dutch friends who had offered to take them for "safekeeping"), where the loss of household goods symbolizes the destruction of the family. At the end of the War, Minco causes the reader to confront the meaning of the protagonist's discovery that most of her family

has been killed, that she is (virtually) the only survivor: this emotional burden is brilliantly represented in her theme of "empty houses." Minco also occasionally portrays the War as setting the stage for the refugee's first sexual experience, which may or not be positive, thus illustrating the character's "coming of age." Not surprisingly, the relations between the sexes sometimes function as a source of fear: a recurrent theme is the threat of sexual abuse at the hand of those who claim to be protecting the female main character. Given the strong imbalance in relative power in the relationships between Jew-in-hiding and Dutch resistance worker, the threat of rape is frequently present. The fear of rape becomes the literary device by which the character's loss of personal control over her circumstances is underscored for the reader; the protagonist is essentially helpless, and utterly dependent upon the help of others, often strangers. However, when the protagonist is safe, the War can also be the setting for intensely positive experiences. As Minco shows in the works following *Het bittere kruid*, which ends just after the conclusion of the war, the period most stressful for survivors is most often the period after the War.

Minco's later works emphasize the main character's attempts to be (re)integrated into society: society's implicit or explicit rejection foils the — understandably — already ambivalent desire to "settle down," as does society's requirement that the past be buried without further ado. During the War, her protagonist had the luxury of anticipating better times; this illusion is now taken away. After the War, she slowly begins to realize what has happened to her, and struggles with feelings of unworthiness at being the one member of her family who has survived; various coping mechanisms, some better, some utterly destructive, are used to allow survivors to continue living.

Minco writes about "her" experiences of and after the War without any of the pathos or moral indignation which would be well within her rights. The effect she achieves is intensified by the lack of an obvious political agenda or attempts at emotionally manipulative uses of her highly charged material. Minco's strength lies in her brilliant use of plain language, and her choice of register is a conscious one. Consider her response to an interviewer who had quoted her a passage from *Het bittere kruid* in which the main character's family is hiding in the basement while their neighbors are being arrested. Minco's narrator describes the event as it is seen from a window in the basement, where the family is hiding; the story of the arrest is told by what they see through the window: jackboots, and the too-small boots belonging to the young neighbor girl. Minco's comment is characteristic of her approach:

> Voor mij hebben die kleine dingen zo'n grote betekenis, ze zeggen mij zo ontzettend veel, er zit een hele wereld aan vast. Als je het had over laarzen, zag je al een hele wereld voor je, het was symbolisch. Voorwerpen waren zo zwaar geladen met symboliek, het was genoeg om alleen maar die dingen te noemen. Het woord Duitser noem ik niet. Ik was gewoon bang, dat gevoel herinner ik me nog wel toen ik eraan werkte, bang voor grote woorden (Betlem).

On the surface, Minco's writing is deceptively simple, but never simplistic. The ingenuity of her approach is most easily illustrated when one views her fiction chronologically. Minco studies her protagonists at each of several historical stages, and exhibits a good deal more restraint than many who memorialize the difficulties experienced by "ordinary" Dutch

citizens, whose suffering was in most cases less horrible. She has stated that she considers a neutral tone, and a conscious refusal to entertain a suspicious attitude, essential to survival: "Het leven is zelfs het tegendeel van wantrouwen..." (Betlem).

Four of Marga Minco's longer works may serve to illustrate the repeated innovations she has devised in her treatment of the theme of the War and its societal consequences (her shorter fiction generally presents themes similar to those discussed here). *Het bittere kruid* (1957), Minco's first novel, is probably the most closely autobiographical. The protagonist's siblings and sister-in-law bear the same names as Minco's actual relatives did; the reader is aware of this fact because the book is dedicated to them. In masterly neutral language it tells the first-person story of an unnamed young female narrator whose family is deported to concentration camps. The narrator escapes by leaving through the garden when her father suggests that she go and fetch their coats. Calm, but simultaneously incredulous that she is allowed to survive, she seems to be acting instinctively; the reader, however, is aware of the fact that her father had planted the idea of escape in her head at some previous time. Yet as soon as she arrives safely at her brother's hiding place, she has second thoughts, feeling guilty at having abandoned her parents. (Her brother and sister-in-law are arrested later, while the main character escapes again.) She survives the War by hiding at first, and later by taking on a new identity and bleaching her hair. After the end of the War, at the end of the novel, she gradually discovers that, apart from one great-uncle, she is the sole survivor of her entire extended family. Minco invested a good deal of time in writing *Het bittere kruid* but even at its publication twelve years after the end of the war, the plight of a bereaved woman faced with the task of rebuilding her life from scratch was thematically an appropriate and a timely moment at which to end the novel.

Een leeg huis (1966) adapts essentially some of the same thematic material by drawing the tale forward in time. Rather than ending just after the War, it portrays its characters on three days: Thursday, June 28, 1945 (just after the War's end), Tuesday, March 25, 1947, and Friday, April 21, 1950. The first section shows Sepha, the main character, hitchhiking from Friesland, where she had lived at the end of the War, back to her boyfriend Mark in Amsterdam. One brilliant innovation on *Het bittere kruid* in *Een leeg huis* is the introduction of an alter ego to the main character. Sepha and Yona, who meet while hitchhiking, represent two kinds of responses by survivors and two sides of the same personality. One of them seemingly copes (though with difficulty) by apparently repressing her negative emotions and memories, whereas the Other appears unable or unwilling to do so: Yona survives a mysterious drowning "accident" which appears to be a (subconsciously motivated) suicide attempt. Sepha is relieved when Yona unconvincingly denies that the act was intentional. Yona's description of her family's house illustrates the emotional cost of surviving: one may have survived, but what remains of one's life is a mere sham. The ramshackle state of the house mocks her desire to return:

> Hoe kan een gevel overeind blijven als er niets meer achter is, dacht ik. Het is een soort bedrog. Of iemand je het gevoel heeft willen geven dat ze nog ergens met hun poten afgebleven zijn. Kijk dan: daar staat je huis. Maar een klap van de sloper, en het zakt in elkaar (47).

Sepha attempts to comfort the Other, but is painfully aware that her own protestations ring

hollow:

> Hetzelfde gevoel van machteloosheid. Ik zeg de verkeerde dingen. Ik toon geen begrip. Ik zet mijn stekels op, omdat ze een en al herinnering is aan iets waar ik niet aan herinnerd wil worden. Ik moet iets voor haar doen. Ze verwacht iets van me (125).

Since the survivor's questions cannot be answered, the only alternative Sepha sees is to repress them. As in Minco's first book, the language is deceptively simple and emotionally neutral; complexity of character and an indication of the social and ethical issues involved is achieved by frequent flashbacks from the "present" to Sepha's bittersweet memories of her family.

Part two of the book describes Sepha's sojourn in southern France, an attempt to gain perspective on her life in Amsterdam, where her repression of the past troubles her and affects her relationship with her husband Mark. The cause of the friction between them appears to be twofold: their relationship began under duress during the War when they first slept together because only one bed was available, and now Mark is finding that space is available to him in other beds. In addition, Mark has no patience with her inability to forget what the War has cost her. "'Wat wil je eigenlijk,' vraagt hij op een dag geïrriteerd. 'Beklaagd worden? Verpleegd?'" (71). He does not understand her inability to join in the revelry celebrating the end of the War. It should be noted, however, that Sepha inhabits a thoroughly ambivalent position — she is as intolerant of Yona's need to remember as Mark is of her own needs.

However, Mark travels to France in an attempt at reconciliation, and accompanies her back to Amsterdam. In part three, Sepha is faced with the fact that she is not happy with the new home Mark has found for them in an attempt to create a new life for the two of them:

> [Yona] zou plotseling te voorschijn komen en zeggen: zie je wel, Sepha, dit huis is het ook niet. Het heeft geen zin ergens anders te gaan wonen zolang je al je bagage met je mee blijft dragen, bagage waar geen enkele kast voor is. Of had ze dat al eens gezegd? Zoiets pathetisch kon alleen van haar komen (137).

Moving to a new house only reminds Sepha of that other house which will always remain empty, and this void is one which she takes with her wherever she goes. The passage quoted above clearly illustrates the complicity between Yona and Sepha: the latter attributes the skeptical statement to the former, who is absent, and may or may not have said such a thing in the past, but the crucial fact is that Sepha thinks it now. Before the end of the novel, Sepha's memories will have healed to such an extent that Yona succeeds in committing suicide, and her Other walks away with Mark, as the streetlights turn on.

The main character in *De val* (1983) is a woman who has decided to celebrate her eighty-fifth birthday, the first one in forty years to be acknowledged, by treating the other residents in her retirement home to pastries, and who is killed in a freak accident. Like the characters described so far, Mevrouw Hijmans is a lone survivor of the War. Her family was arrested by the Nazis during an attempt by an inexperienced member of the resistance to take them to safety. It looks as if they might have been betrayed by the person to whom they had entrusted their lives. Mevrouw Hijmans does not know why she alone was spared, and the actual course of events is not discovered until after her death. Her coping mechanisms include an attempt to keep the family present for the rest of her life by her intentional acts of remembering them: photographs of her loved ones accompany her wherever she goes. As she feels she must do this secretly, her ritual carrying around of photographs adds an aspect of furtiveness to her life: even now that she is supposedly safe, in the act of keeping (the

memory of) her husband and children alive, she has to hide them from the people who are supposedly caring for her. Thus, this aspect of her story neatly parodies the hiding of Jews during the War. Mevrouw Hijmans finds her acts of memory to be an inadequate justification for her continued life, and takes refuge in arithmetic. Unlike her painful memories, mathematical figures are cut and dried and do not require the application of either emotions or ethical judgments; the acts of adding, subtracting, dividing, and multiplying require enough concentration to distract her from thoughts she cannot bear and allow her to maintain the illusion that she can exercise some control over her world:

> Haar ijver werd fanatisme, ze vond voldoening in de moeilijkste calculaties, wilde zich op niets anders meer concentreren. Cijfers waren neutraal, koel, onbeladen; ze boden haar houvast en schermden de beelden voor haar af die ze nog niet aan kon (29).

Note the past tense, which Minco uses consistently in this novel to describe Mevrouw Hijmans's experiences in what the reader will think of as the "present," i.e. the period of time approximately forty years after the disappearance of her family. Minco contrasts this by using the present tense to report Mevrouw Hijmans's flashbacks to the time before she lost her family. Thus, with brilliant simplicity, Minco underscores the importance her protagonist attaches to her work of memory as a way to keep her family alive, and also reinforces the fact that the survivor may deem life after the War as being of more dubious value than that in the past.

As late as the mid 1980s, Marga Minco published her "Boekenweekgeschenk" *De glazen brug* (1986), using essentially the same materials that form the basis of most of her *oeuvre*, and yet once again offering structural innovations and new insights. Published more than forty years after the conclusion of World War II, and dedicated to her husband and children, this brief novel continues Minco's tradition of investigating the implications of the experience of War in light of the passage of time. Although this work raises many of the issues familiar from Minco's other works, it does so from the new perspective of its later setting. Again, the protagonist is female and Jewish. Again, she has escaped death at the hand of the Nazis while her family perished, and suffers the guilt common to such survivors. As in *Een leeg huis*, the novel's protagonist Stella comes of age during the Occupation and has her first sexual experiences at this time. In this case, however, these events fall into both extremes: early on, she is threatened by sexual assault when a member of the Resistance who is supposed to protect her attempts to take advantage of her powerlessness. Then, toward the end of the War, she has an idyllic affair with Carlos, her new contact, who provides her with a new identity, naming her Maria Roselier, and who subsequently dies at the hands of the Nazis. Also as in *Een leeg huis,* the protagonist responds to her grief by having a number of casual affairs after her marriage, but in this case her intentions are not so much of an exploratory nature as an attempt to prove to herself that she will never be as happy as she was during her affair with Carlos.

Minco invests the person of Maria Roselier with the key to Stella's ability to begin to come to terms with her grief: Stella did not just lose her entire family during the War, but Maria, a woman whom she did not know, had to die before Stella could receive the alias which would ensure her survival. Thus, having faithfully molded and remolded the material of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust for over four decades, Minco now draws a subtle parallel between her Jewish survivor and the gentile who died of causes unrelated to the Holocaust. We may read this structural device as an effective and a timely literary reminder

that the Holocaust did not occur in a social or historical vacuum. As usual, Minco achieves her effects with subtlety and finesse. Her greatest strength resides in her talent for repeated innovation, in her ability to repeatedly offer her reader new perspectives on essentially the same material. Hers is a rare talent indeed.

WORKS BY MARGA MINCO

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