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The 18th-century Dutch republic in modern Dutch novels

"We are in the year 1745. Times of hunger, plague and cholera, and foreign soldiers. The Spaniards have just come to murder our cities, and the best part of our people fled in haste beyond the Moerdijk. The Austrians came after that. And now, at the moment when our story commences, the soldiers of French king Louis the fifteenth have invaded our country." Thus starts Louis Paul Boon's novel *De Bende van Jan de Lichte* (Jan de Lichte's Gang), first published in 1953. To my knowledge, it is the first historical novel written in the post-war era and set in the Low Countries during the 18th century.

One might come up with Simon Vestdijk's *Puriteinen en Piraten,* published in 1947, but this "novel of the sea" takes place on this side of the Atlantic. Similarly, Vestdijk's *Rum Island* (1940) leads us into the 18th century, but we have to go to Jamaica to find the action of the protagonists, a British dynasty of sugar planters called Beckford. Corruption, intrigues involving a bastard son and the search for the female pirate Anne Bonney, are the main ingredients. This novel, described as an example of "plantocracy', and its pendant about the pirates both deserve a fresh look in further research about Vestdijk's writing style, the more so since Simon Vestdijk's novels have more or less vanished from the Dutch literary scene. The man who could write faster than God could read has fallen from grace. The two novels I mentioned, as well as his *De Filosoof en de Sluipmoordenaar* (The Philosopher and the Assassin, 1961), about Voltaire, are set in the 18th century, but not in the Low Countries. *Rum Island* is dedicated to the memory of Edgar Du Perron, who shared Vestdijk's interest in the 18th century and indeed wrote *Schandaal in Holland* (Scandal in Holland, 1939). This latter work is strictly speaking not an historical novel, for the reason that it is far from fictional, as Du Perron describes the true story of the brothers Willem and Onno Zwier van Haren, Dutch aristocrats, close friends of the royal family of William IV, and both poets of renown. The scandal refers to Onno van Haren who was accused in 1760 by two of his sons-in-law of incest with his daughters. This was quite a *cause célèbre*, created a stir in Holland and led to his dismissal from the Staten-Generaal. To date historians have not completely acquitted him of any wrongdoing, although political backstabbing seems to have played a role also. The postscript of this work explains Du Perron's intentions and advice to the readers: "I have not tried to give an historical reconstruction...but an old piece in a new tone. I accept accusations of plagiarism. To help researchers I mention my sources…etc." In other words: one can hardly call this a novel.

Back therefore to Jan de Lichte, for which researchers would have a hard time finding extensive sources, because I don't think they exist. Boon doesn't mention any. The problem with this work as an historical novel that it is only coincidentally set in the 18th century. A gang of "stand and deliver" highwaymen who steal from the rich to give to the poor, could have been imagined in 1650, or even 1850 for that matter. The four years of Jan de Lichte's life between 1745 and 1749, as described in the novel, show a rough but loving character as he changes into a gang leader, with a favorite woman, a rival turning traitor and the slightly predictable events of being caught, escaping, becoming a reluctant robber and murderer, and eventually being hanged. He turns out to be a mixture of the real life bandit Cartouche, a Frenchman who died in 1721, and the Three Musketeers, whose slogan "One for all, all for one" is repeated several times in this novel. Boon tries to let Jan de Lichte's life represent the story of Flanders' poor, who are tortured and spat upon, and who can lift their faces only in fear. A coach robbery and an attack on the castle of Baron de Creyl are some of the activities, and when Jan de Lichte's gang gets too large, discord, jealousy, treason and fighting among the ranks are its downfall. Jan de Lichte has to take a firm stand, and that turns out to be *his* downfall.

Boon inserts historical background here and there, for instance when he says "While here a woman of the gang kills a soldier of Louis the Fifteenth with a knife, the French people are getting ready to sever Louis the Sixteenth's head from its torso". However, this is stretching time more than a little bit, because that did not happen until 50 years later. History becomes merely a stage set and most of the characters play minor roles. Boon writes resignedly: "The drums are beating ...and he, Jan de Lichte, is not able to give even the smallest of directions to the course of history." This is a typical Boonian submissiveness of the little man fighting against the powerful, the futile battle of the individual, as seen in Ondineke, the main character in his masterpiece *Chapel Road*, or Boon himself in his autobiographical *My Little War*, which ends with the famous lines "Kick the people a conscience" which he later changed to "What's the use of it all." The good guy-bad guy stereotype is treated in a typical Boon style of writing, involving the reader, although not yet addressing him as "gij" but "waarde lezer." The themes from his other works are clearly present: the little man or woman looking for freedom and happiness, perhaps Utopia, through anarchy or banditry. The once cheerful Uilenspiegelesque Jan de Lichte has turned into a common criminal, a victim of society and human selfishness. His last words, however, are defiantly in the language of thieves and robbers: "Voor geen chanterik peu": no fear for the law, for the hangman, for the castle owner or for a foreign soldier.

In the sequel *De Zoon van Jan de Lichte* (Jan de Lichte's Son, 1961), subtitled "a pious and cheerful book," Boon picks up where he left off. It begins: "It was the fall of 1748. We all, who, closely or from a distance had been connected to Jan de Lichte's gang, were still locked up in dirty dungeons." The novel has a more definitive form, as we see and reflect on De Lichte's son coming of age and being used by the crooks, criminals and ideologues who appeal to his feelings for his father's memory. The last chapter gets an 18th-century style introduction: "In which Louis de Lichte decides that nothing can ever be called perfect, even not the perfect itself - and that one has to make something of this world oneself, as good or bad as possible." Louis eventually becomes a landowner who helps the poor occasionally, when the need arises. It is a typical Boon ending of submission, with echoes of Voltaire's *Candide*: "we must cultivate our garden."

The historical aspect of these De Lichte novels is the weakest part, and nowhere does a believable picture of 18th-century Flanders in any shape or form comes through. It's a pity that Boon had not yet applied his capacity for extensive research to these works on the 18th century. The readers had to wait for his *Pieter Daens* of 1971 and his *Geuzenboek* of 1979, for a more memorable and monumental manifestation of history.

"Whoever welds historical facts together into a chronicle of a period, must have some compositional and creative capacities. Also the other way around: whoever wants to write a novel situated in the past, needs to have a thorough knowledge of the historical facts." I am quoting Jaap Goedegebuure in *Nederlandse Literatuur, een Geschiedenis* in his article on the historical novel, in which he pays homage to Hella Haasse. Strangely enough, he completely ignores Louis Paul Boon, as well as Du Perron's *Schandaal in Holland*. He quotes Vestdijk , who wrote 14 historical novels and had an opinion on the matter: "the typical character of the historical novel is the attention to the ordinary and marginal, which has received no attention from the historians who concentrate on the main characters and the foreground players. The historical novel could provide a surprising indirect light on official history."Although Hella Haasse is a great admirer of Vestdijk, she did not follow his advice and shy away from important people of the noble classes with her three voluminous works. I mainly refer to her reconstruction of the life of Charlotte Sophie Bentinck in two works called *Mevrouw Bentinck* (Mrs. Bentinck, 1978) and *De Groten der Aarde of Bentinck tegen Bentinck* (The Great ones of the world or Bentinck vs. Bentinck, 1981). They both form a history from the original papers, as Haasse shows the results of her relentless research. Marriage, adultery, divorce and emancipation are described as found in the unpublished letters and diaries, relating to the main

characters Charlotte and Willem Bentinck, owners of rural estates in Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands. Sex and money problems among two members of Holland's famous nobility are the main ingredients. I am not going to summarize these works, but I will mention the distinct subtitles that Haasse gives to her works: "a true history" and "a story in history." "How does one start a true history without it immediately being challenged in credibility, yes, without facts changing into fiction?" This first sentence of *Mevrouw Bentinck* poses the direct question whether to translate "een ware geschiedenis" with "a true story" or "a true history". The second volume of the Bentinck novels is called "een geschiedverhaal": "a story in history" or "a tale of history." The difference lies in the fact that in the latter book Haasse is the omniscient storyteller who has put together elements from the documents. She tells how Willem Bentinck fares after Charlotte has left him, and how she pulls herself together and survives. The interesting aspect of these novels is the fading boundary between fact and fiction. One could say that the protagonist lived like a character of a novel. Haasse has not invented him, she has interpreted him, although a veil of neutrality is certainly present in the first novel, which she calls "a montage of authentic documents." Because of the choices she made, it is actually more than that.

Using more than a montage and filling in the gaps with larger pieces of imagination is obvious in Haasse's novel with a larger Dutch touch, called *Schaduwbeeld of het geheim van Appeltern* (Shadow image or the secret of Appeltern*,* 1989). "Chronicle of a life" is the subtitle of this biography of a Gelderland gentleman called Johan Derk Baron van der Capellen tot de Pol. He was an important man in the times leading up to the so called Velvet Revolution, the Dutch precursor to the French Revolution. He turned out to be the author of the now famous anonymous pamphlet *Aan het Volk van Nederland* (To the People of the Netherlands) of 1781, a patriotic call to rise up in arms against William V and the oligarchy, not unlike the people of colonial America. Indeed, the patriot Van der Capellen became one of the strongest supporters of the American cause in the Low Countries. Haasse describes in archival detail the life of the baron of Appeltern, but the man himself lacks sharp contours: we have, not a mirror reflection, but only a shadow, half the face. She admits and regrets that much of his correspondence has disappeared or has been destroyed. An important side of him remains therefore unknown and that is "the secret of Appeltern."

This biography is regularly interspersed with portraits of contemporaries, who knew him directly or through correspondence: Belle van Zuylen, James Boswell, John Adams, John Wilkes (an English politician) and Van der Kemp (an aristocrat and patriot). Van der Capellen is sometimes referred to as "the alarm clock of the Dutch nation" and was also an inspiration to that modern gadfly of Dutch politics, Pim Fortuyn. One gets the feeling that only the footnotes are missing to make this a work of important historical research. However, Haasse states in a postscript that *Schaduwbeeld of het geheim van Appeltern* "is not a novel, although some of the blanks in Johan Derck van der Capellen's biography have been filled in from the imagination. However, the book is not a biography in the strict scientific sense of the word. Although I quoted from verifiable historical material, I abbreviated and sometimes combined together letters and official documents."

It is both the strength and the shortcoming of the book that the reader feels a certain distance from the main character, because Haasse only occasionally departs from her documents to bring in the personal touch, or words of sympathy. She remains an acquaintance of Van der Capellen and Mrs. Bentinck, not a personal friend. She is a facilitator of documents, the librarian of a life, not an involved raconteur with personal opinions. This is unmistakable when she almost reluctantly describes Johan Derck's cold relation to his father, or the details of his intestinal problems.

It is exactly these last two elements that form an important part of the historical novel which many describe as the masterpiece of the nineties: Thomas Rosenboom's *Gewassen Vlees* (Washed Meat, 1993). The title refers

to meat that is used to tame birds of prey: meat that is fully cooked and without nutritional value. The protagonist Willem Augustijn van Donck, 38 years old, writes to his father, a Frisian aristocrat, the mayor of Workum: "I was such a bird, yearning for your bait, but it was always impotent, empty, washed meat." Anal fixation, described in detail, becomes the metaphor for his inability to control himself, to relate to others, to behave, to suppress his first instincts to laugh, to control his bladder or his genitals. Willem Augustijn is a real asshole in more than one sense: he can't control his anus and he behaves abominably towards his servants, his only friend from childhood and his prospective fiancée. His two attempts at helping poor people fail miserably also. As a reader you try to feel sympathy for him, but he does not make it easy.

The story takes place in 1748-49 with retrospective glances at his childhood in Friesland. Into this Rosenboom intersperses chapters like political panoramas called "repertoria" to give an historical perspective, or letters to his fiancée and his father, which resemble the 18th century epistolary novel, notably by their flamboyant style. Here he describes Amsterdam: "Father! walked so much! The Jordaan area with its colorful industry, the money-weighing Jews in their little houses, the carnival people in the Elephant Inn. Nieuwmarkt with its sailors looking for a commission, the smoked herring woman next to the Stock Exchange, houses leaning over obscure alleys, the warehouses of the VOC, where I took servant Perk, all wrapped in a sickly air of whale-oil and tropics, the sudden posters everywhere that the world famous rhinoceros Clara is to be seen at Amstel Field - the city is a field of flowers, every impression an overwhelming smell, its light lyrical...Where am I? Everywhere and nowhere... on a journey!"

The journey he is talking about is his attempt to go to Hulst in Zeeland to take up his duties as Bailiff, an inherited position as a Frisian aristocrat. However, there is always an obstacle and he never gets there. Hulst is occupied by the French. He is held up in Bergen op Zoom, which the French have destroyed, and where he tries to be part of a renovation project by giving out shares in a sugar refining operation. He has an agreement with an alchemist to refine sugar, which he hopes to turn into a profitable enterprise. The sugar becomes a drug, an alchemist's concoction, which gives him hallucinations, and the combination of his wildest fantasies and his accident-prone appearance lands him in bizarre situations.

One could give a paper on Rosenboom's writing style. The narrator says of the report of the alchemist Dorrius, who explains his sugar refining technique : "Combustion, calcination, cementation, putrefaction, naturation, digestion, stratification, fixation, sublimation, filtration, expulsion, gradation, amalgamation and coagulation: all the terms of his arts came down like rain in Dorrius' account." Rosenboom excels in rich word play and exploration of the Dutch language. No holds seem barred when he writes about a little Negro that is kept as a pet on a leash, who may play on his little drum, and who is stuffed by his disheartened owner when he dies. This is disgusting, but close to a realistic 18th century world view, as is the fascination with excrement: one smells the room full of people at the stadholder's reception, where some of the ladies carry oranges with cloves to ward off body odors. The 17th- and 18th-century paintings of Jan Steen and Cornelis Troost, as well as songs and joke books, are witnesses to this fascination, to which Rosenboom adds his own character's flaws, as when Willem Van Donck breaks out in tears when confronted with the stadholder and becomes the center of laughter and derision. In another scene he ridicules others as he baptizes a farmer's son with the contents of a nightstand.

The novel is a work of overstatement, exaggeration and extremes, stretching the limits of fantasy. Embarrassment and pity dance an uneasy minuet as Willem's relationship with his father gradually reaches a breaking point. The reason for his father's coldness towards him turns out to be the fact that he has never forgiven his son for being the cause of his mother's death at his birth. An illegitimate son, Willem's stepbrother, is eventually

his downfall. He meets him after the denouement of the stock and shares debacle and, in a drunken stupor, rapes and kills him. Reviews of this novel in newspapers had titles like "Opera has become paper - the flesh has become word - masterly" to indicate a liking by most reviewers, who praised its style and its inventiveness.

This is a far cry from Hella Haasse's works, who said about them: "I have not invented the people, the only thing that is mine is the interpretation". And this can also be said of F. Thomése's *Zuidland* (Southland), one of three short stories, published in 1991. Again we encounter a troubled father-son relationship, with tensions caused by theological questions and the son's failure to complete his university degree. A surprising element of the story is the fact that it ends when the hero Jacob leaves Holland to start on his journey, the fulfillment of his father's dreams: to discover the unknown Southland. He doesn't want to go but it is his fate, and he has to redeem himself in his father's eyes. He does leave and eventually will find Easter Island, because he is Jacob Roggeveen, the first westerner to see that place, in 1722. However, it happens after our story has finished.

Since Drop's study "Imagination and history" (1958) about the Dutch historical novel in the 19th century, there has been little research. [1] Drop mentions only one novel placed in the 18th century: Jacob Van Lennep's *Ferdinand Huyck* (1840), one of the few novels that could compete with the likes of Walter Scott or Wilkie Collins in historical description or mystery-type suspense. *Ferdinand Huyck* is in fact not very historical because it doesn't make a clear distinction between the time of the action and the time when it was written. In that sense it is comparable to the novels of Sir Walter Scott, who writes about conditions that were still apparent in his time. The action here is not placed in a historical situation or conflict, and no historical persons are present. In fact, the action in the novel is limited to some highway robberies, a fight in a tavern, and a shipwreck; the rest is a search for the right lover, matchmaking going awry and the disgrace of a brute. Van Lennep succeeds in avoiding grandiose calamitous commotions by describing cozy Dutch scenes. A funny example is the chapter title about some shipwrecked ladies who had taken sheets for protection: "in which is mentioned how the ladies were mistaken for ghosts and what our shipwrecked victims did to prevent a cold." As an example of good historical, humorous and accurate writing, this is a novel worth rereading. But as a representation of the 18th century it does not give us much to paint a picture, in the absence of known historical figures.

Should the historical novel include recognizable persons or conflicts, as Drop seems to suggest? I think it is up to the author, not the reader, although the latter decides whether he or she thinks the story is believable and convincing. Hella Haasse has asserted that the writer of historical novels should know what he is talking about by convincing his readers and by having a feel for the period. This sounds pretty vague. Thomas Rosenboom described in clearer terms, in a lecture in Amsterdam (published in *De Revisor*) in December 1995, the conditions for a main character: "The first condition for a protagonist is the fact that he has a problem; the second is that he does something about it, and the third is that in doing so, after an initial success, he unleashes something that he had not foreseen and does not control anymore, preferably with his own demise as a consequence (as is the case of the country doctor Charles Bovary)." This describes Willem Augustyn van Donck's trials and tribulations, and is exactly what is missing in my last example of the 18th century in the modern Dutch novel: Daphne Meijer's *Het Plezier van de Duivel* (The Devil's pleasure, 1995). The title refers to the Calvinist description of the theater. Mrs. Anna Barnard, daughter of a well known family of actors and theater owners in Leiden, is watching behind the scene on May 11, 1772, when the Amsterdam theater burns down. She is a middle aged hunchbacked lady, unhappily married, who has saved some money from the proceeds of the theater and her mother's inheritance. She has come to Amsterdam to meet a Flemish director of an actor's group, also to propose an investment in his theater in Mechelen. However, after she finds out that he is quite heartless to his players - one of them dies in the fire - she decides to go back to her ailing and complaining husband. In flashbacks through her mind or stories

told to a friend, we hear the story of her life, her mother and aunt's acting career, and especially her grandmother, whom she adores. The author uses the afterword to explain that this woman really existed, and that only her trip to Amsterdam was invented for dramatic effect. Although Meijer uses the contemporary documents very skillfully, it is the drama that is missing. The theater descriptions and the quotations from pamphlets and weeklies are historically correct, but they remain stilted and the language is at times contrived, because of the much too obvious attempt to sound like an 18th-century character.

Looking back at these examples of historical literature, one is tempted to see a development not unlike that of the novel itself. From travelogues, true or imaginary, criminal biographies, and love stories to a psychologically more advanced treatment of character, the novel established itself firmly in the late 18th century. However, it is a stretch of the imagination to see the parallels with the Dutch historical novel dealing with this period of time. The writers are too diverse and individual to speak of a clear development in a certain direction.

I have no pretense of completeness and have left out a few titles which, as the Dutch say, "didn't stand the tooth of time," like *Dangerous Men* by S. Greup-Roldanus (1965), Mrs. de Beaufort's novel on Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp, or Alberts' *De Huzaren van Castricum* (1974). Maarten 't Hart's *Het Psalmenoproer* (2006) deserves closer reading. Margriet de Moor's *De Virtuoos* (the Virtuoso) of 1993 is also a title worth mentioning, but takes place in Italy. Likewise Arthur Japin's novel *Een schitterend gebrek (*A Sparkling Handicap, 2003), in which Casanova describes one of his early loves as she gets pockmarked and shunned, takes place in Italy. Only in the last chapter do we meet her again, in a bordello in Amsterdam.

Historical novels give a definite idea of a writer's style, perhaps his or her personality, and subject matter: Jan de Lichte is a Boon-character, Van der Capellen is a Haasse kind of guy. They also show the reader the time in which it was written: adventures on Rum Island or pirate stories made Dutch readers forget the Nazi occupation in the forties, social problems and anti-establishment feelings of the sixties can be recognized in Jan de Lichte. Renewed historical interest with a social awareness, and a feminist touch, are provided by Mrs. Bentinck. Of late the historical novel puts on a more personal face, with the grim characteristics of Jacob Roggeveen or Willem van Donck, and combines fact and fiction in our hunchbacked theater owner.

Of course historical novels cannot change history, nor does one writer have a "better history" than another. However, all these authors deserve credit for stretching the imagination, advancing the development of the Dutch novel and choosing a less popular age in the process. Historical novelists have long neglected the Dutch Enlightenment, because the Dutch themselves were not interested or spoke disapprovingly of this Period of Whigs[2]. Perhaps the rise in historical curiosity about the Low Countries, as shown in several novels and studies in English of late, might also increase the interest in the Enlightenment shown in the Low Countries. In the meantime, Rosenboom and Japin have moved on to the 19th century with *Publieke Werken* (Public Works) and *De Zwarte met het Witte Hart* (The Two Hearts of Quasi Boachi).

NOTES

[1] I know of only one study about the historical novel, and the 18th century gets scant treatment in it: Aad Blok, Gerard Steen, Lies Wesseling: *De historische roman*, Utrecht, Stichting Grafiet, 1988.

[2] A striking example is Godfried Bomans, who writes in his *Wandelingen door Rome* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1962, p. 173) about Van der Capellen: "hij was, so geen groot man, in elk geval een man te noemen, in een tijd die tot de kinderachtigste behoort uit onze vaderlandse historie."

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