Ward Ruyslinck: *Golden Ophelia*.Translated by David Smith. London: Peter Gwen Limited, 1975.

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Ward Ruyslinck (pseudonym for R. de Belser) is one of the most prolific and widely read Flemish writers, who has received many prestigious literary prizes. Some of his works have been dramatized, some have been adapted for film, and they have been translated into many languages. This 1975 translation by Peter Smith into English, for example, was followed by another English translation by R. O. Powell that appeared in 1970 as Volume 10 in the Twayne Series of *The Library of Netherlandic Literature*.

The author, who was born in 1929 in Antwerp into a bourgeois Catholic family, attended high school and dropped out of German studies at the University of Ghent after one year. After his military service, he worked for a while in Antwerp and made his debut as a poet in 1951. He published several stories in the mid-fifties, and his *De ontaarde slapers* of 1959 established his literary reputation. He also travelled extensively to such diverse countries as Poland, East Germany, the U.S.S.R., Canada and Argentina. His travels are reflected in such novels as *De heksenkring* and *Het ganzenbord* among others.

The typical main character in Ruyslinck's oeuvre is an outsider, a person who tries to make sense out of the indifferent world around him, from which he feels completely alienated. The protagonist of *Golden Ophelia*, Stefan Pielek, is no exception. He is a Polish immigrant, who, when we first meet him, has gone to the police station in a recognizable yet Orwellian country to apply for official permission to commit suicide, after he has been picked up by the police after his first abortive attempt at killing himself. He learns that it is a crime to commit suicide without a permit. When the kind, yet typically bureaucratic, superintendent has filled in pertinent information on the forms that the State requires such as Stefan's name, address, age (29), place of birth and occupation, he needs to fill in an acceptable reason for Stefan's desire to commit suicide. Stefan, who owns a flower shop, replies:

> I don't know. I often feel very unhappy. Fits of depression, I suppose you'd say. I'm not married, you see, and I don't have any friends. It's so terribly difficult to make friends, people just couldn't care less nowadays, they're so selfish. My flowers are the only things that brighten up my life a little bit. It's true, my flowers. Living flowers, cut flowers. They're what I'm married to. But they're slowly becoming more scarce as well; the market is flooded with artificial flowers! You can't do anything about it, there's a bigger demand for that plastic stuff than for living flowers. People can't smell any more, and they don't want to smell any more either, superintendent. The only smell their noses can still detect is that of money. Each day they grow more and more remote from nature, they live and think artificially... (p.9.)

The inspector is, of course, not interested in Stefan's state of mind, since in this impersonal world from which Stefan feels alienated, a short reason such as "weary of life" is all that is wanted by the State. He goes on to discuss methods of suicide that are officially sanctioned; chemicals, narcotics, firearms, asphyxiation by gas, electrocution, and hanging are possible choices. Methods such as jumping out of windows would cause disturbances and dirt on public roads.

All of this is related in a matter-of-fact tone, as are the other examples of man's inhumanity to others in the course of the novel, to underline Ruyslinck's thesis that we no longer live in a caring society. Ruyslinck is a master of the art of the narrative. Never does the reader find any pomposity in this novel; the narrator relates his events and treats his characters with humour and irony, with undertones of the grotesque and melancholy, which makes his criticism of society all the stronger. He does not polemize; he does not have to. He feels that society has become inhuman, and that all of us need to improve our inter-personal relationships.

In a later passage in the novel, when Stefan has hitched a ride to the village in which the girl with whom he is to fall in love lives, he sees a car turned over at the side of the road with smoke pouring out of it, and a man lying motionless a short distance from the wreck. When Stefan asks his driver why he is not stopping, the latter replies that there are accidents like this all the time, and if he were to stop for every one he would miss his appointments. Queried by Stefan if he has ever thought about the possibility that he might be the man lying by the roadside sometime, the driver answers:

> No, I simply don't think about that. You see, that is exactly what I mean by the word sentiment. Most people consider themselves so tremendously humane whenever they involve themselves in the misery of others. They delude themselves that sympathy is what fires their interest, but naturally that is not true. The real cause is simply false sentiment, egoism, that's the

truth. (p.90.)

Ruyslinck's criticism of man's inhumanity to others is, perhaps, best illustrated in a passage that is central to the novel. Stefan, who is on his way from the police station, where he has been told that his suicide application has not been processed yet, gets caught in a crowd that is watching a bicycle race in the centre of the city. His innate kindness moves him to help an old lady who has escaped from an old people's home, where she is kept against her will because her daughter does not want to relinquish her freedom at home to look after her. In a horribly prophetic manner, if one thinks of recent disasters at soccer matches in Belgium and Great Britain, Ruyslinck describes the fans trampling the old woman to death, and at the same time with his sense of black humour he evokes his compatriots' fanaticism for bicycle racing. When Stefan tries to report the woman's death to the police superintendent, he is told that the site of the woman's death is not within that precinct's jurisdiction - a fitting comment indeed on our modern, institutionalized, bureaucratic society.

And yet, it is through his contact with the old woman and his willingness to help her, that Stefan regains his desire to live. He decides to report her death to her grand-daughter, Emmy, since the old woman spoke kindly of her and was escaping to live with her. Stefan visits Emmy, the Golden Ophelia of the title, at her home in a small village that is some distance away from the city. (All of Ruyslinck's description of man's inhumanity to his fellow-man in this novel is set in the anonymity of the city.) When Stefan first encounters Emmy at her home, an old mill similar to one that he knew in his childhood in his native Poland, surrounded by fields of flowers with greenhouses filled with flowers at the back of the mill, he decides that at last he has found a soul-mate, a beautiful girl who loves flowers as much as he does. In this paradisal setting he proclaims his love for her and asks her to marry him. This idyllic scene, which could have been turned into kitsch by another author, is described with Ruyslinck's usual sense of humour. Stefan, upon having his proposal of marriage accepted, tries to have his suicide application revoked, but discovers that it has already been granted. He does bribe the superintendent to have it revoked, but finds out that in the time that it has taken him to do so, Emmy has been unfaithful to him. In spite of Emmy's pleas that Stefan is the only one she loves or has ever loved, "he went on running, panting, and didn't look back; it was the voice of a girl he didn't know, his name wasn't Stefan and no one had ever loved him." (p.133.)

Stefan Pielek is typical of many of Ruyslinck's characters in the sense that he is an alienated outsider looking for a sense of identity in a world that has become inhuman. His case is tragic, but, on the whole, Ruysllnck is an idealist who believes that the individual should strive to change the world for the better. With his light-hearted treatment of his subject that is underscored by melancholy the writer touches on the doubts and hopes of his public, and has written a very readable novel.

Jos Vandeloo: *The Danger* and *The Enemy*. Translated by Dirk. H. van Nouhuys and Dirk P. van Nouhuys. Old Chatham, New York: Sachem Press, 1986.

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Jos Vandeloo, a Flemish writer born in 1925, published some poetry and short stories from 1943 to 1955, but only gained recognition with his first short novel *Het gevaar* in 1960. This novel appeared in this particular edition in English translation along with a novella entitled *De vijand*, which consists of the narration of the experiences of a fifteen year old boy in a small Belgian village caught in the crossfire of the German and American troops during World War II.

*The Danger*, which Vandeloo himself described as a "verhaal", in other words a novella, deals with the effects of excessive radiation on three workers in a nuclear plant. Vandeloo researched this work by visiting the atomic centre at Mol. He was granted permission to inspect the site as long as he did not mention it by name in his novella. Despite constant assurances from the authorities that there were sufficient precautions taken to prevent any accidents in such an atomic plant, Vandeloo was not convinced. He felt that wherever people work, something could go wrong, no matter what safety measures were followed. To the present day reader, in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster, Vandeloo's novel is prophetic and relevant.

Not only is *The Danger* topical today, but the reader of 1960 could also relate to the problems that are raised in the novel. In the fifties there was a real fear of atomic weapons and their dangers to mankind in Europe. In fact, in the Netherlands, the agency called the "Beschermning Burgerbevolking" (The protection of the civilian population) distributed folders to the citizens of the country on how they could defend themselves against