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.

John Michielsen
Brock University, St. Catharines

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

an attack by nuclear weapons. Some of the suggestions seem ludicrous today, such as fortifying one's house with bags of sand.

*The Danger* has a curious construction in that it contains a prologue, the main story, and an epilogue. Molenaar, Dupont, and Benting are three workers who have been exposed to the radiation leak in the plant where they work. Molenaar, who receives the highest dose of radiation, dies within a few days of the accident in the isolation ward where they are kept, but Dupont and Benting survive longer, and manage to escape from the hospital, only to die shortly after their re-entry into the civilized world. These events are related in the main part of the story. In the prologue, Benting, the last survivor, who is trying to escape from his death, dies on a train, as we later learn in the epilogue. Benting hallucinates in the prologue that a fellow passenger plucks out one of his eyes and leaves it staring at Benting when he gets off the train. In the epilogue, when Benting is taken to the mortuary of a hospital, it becomes clear that the surrealist passenger who plucks out his eye in the prologue is a personification of Death.

Between the prologue and the epilogue lies the real tale of three men who are slowly dying. Aside from Molenaar, who quickly realizes that he is doomed in spite of the medical team's efforts to keep him alive, the other two hope that they will be healed and be allowed to return to a normal life. Molenaar, who reports to Benting and Dupont that he overheard the doctors' prognosis that he does not have a chance and that the others will only live a little longer, appears to be resigned to his fate. Benting also appears to be resigned to his imminent death, but is persuaded by the vital Dupont to escape from the isolation hospital in which they are kept. Essentially then, the men are simply waiting for their death; Dupont, and, to a lesser extent, Benting resent this waiting. The theme of waiting is already introduced on the first page, where the reader is introduced to Benting as he enters the train on which he will die. Benting looks at the station platform and observes a "little old woman ...waiting for someone who did not come" (p.1). And when Benting is examined after his accident he has to wait between various tests. He reflects: "Waiting. Society is really only a large waiting room. People spend their lives waiting for one another" (p.13). With his spare prose Vandeloo manages, like Kafka and Camus, whose influence can be observed in his work, to summarize the human condition as one in which we wait for our death.

At the same time, the question of human responsibility for this disaster is raised. It is hinted that the young inexperienced Molenaar may have caused the accident through carelessness, but the author questions this in the face of the impersonal reactor, which is described in the following manner:

> The reactor always obeys like a slave. Its servility is suspiciously docile. It stands like a dinosaur in the hall. It has round brown spots on its body. These are the channels running through the graphite shell. It is a large, servile animal. Small people peep at it day and night. If it has some evil in mind, the pilots and the wardens are immediately warned. The safety measures are so perfect and extensive that, theoretically, almost nothing can happen. When the dinosaur in the hall sees someone take his eyes away, if only for a moment, or grow absent-minded, he becomes dangerous. His intestines start to glow. He will burst his meters-thick hide of suppressed fury and untamed energy. If he spies a small outlet, a channel that by an incomprehensible misunderstanding remains open. (p.13.)

Essentially *The Danger* deals with two themes: the lack of power of a human being and his loneliness. With his stark, unemotional narrative of his characters facing their certain death, Vandeloo has created a gripping description of the human condition.

*The Enemy* is a more loosely constructed work. Again, the theme is one of isolation and the certainty of death, but since the work narrates the experiences of a fifteen year old boy in an isolated village in Belgium during World War II, the hopelessness that pervades *The Danger* is not quite as intense. To be sure, the narrator's father's murder by the Germans and the gruesome, slow death of a German soldier are horrible events, but the work as a whole shows more hope than *The Danger* does. This is partly due to the way in which the narrative unfolds. The plot is not related in a chronological manner: it starts out after this particular region of Belgium is liberated by the Americans, and it ends with a description of the death of the narrator's father, who along with the other men of his village is shot by the Germans for supposedly killing one of their soldiers. There is the same meticulous and clinical description of the German soldier's horrible death as there is of the main characters' deaths in *The Danger*, but this time the events are filtered in that the narrator does not actually witness this death directly, but hears about it from his father and the other men in the village who try to relieve the suffering of the wounded German. The Belgians' assassination by the Germans is all the more poignant since the narrator

does not dwell on it. He states: "My father went first. He held his head straight up, pale, and I could see how his mouth trembled nervously. He looked at us, he looked us over, one at a time, my mother, my brothers, my sister, and me. At this one moment, now that he was so vulnerable, I loved him more than ever" (p. 118).

The narrative starts out with a description of conditions after the Americans have pushed the Germans back. The narrator is obviously impressed by the four American liberators he gets to know, and tries to imagine their lives in the States. They serve as a substitute for the father he has lost In the war. At the same time he tries to come to terms with his own sexuality. He matter of factly describes how the girl Bea, of whom he has grown fond during the many nights that he and she along with the other villagers spent in the shelter, beds down with one of the American soldiers. At the same the author skilfully evokes the warmth and kindness of the village people, who are forced to take shelter in the pit that they have dug to protect themselves from the constant shelling of their houses. He suggests that in times of danger human beings do comfort one another, and can live together as one family in spite of the petty annoyances that this promiscuity enforces on them.

As in *The Danger*, Vandeloo's narrative style is extremely spare. The language is always precise, never flowery. Both stories have been skilfully translated and make gripping reading.

## MOSAIC STONES FOR THE HOLOCAUST: Etty Hillesum: *Letters from Westerbork* and Jona Oberski: *Childhood.*

Hermina Joldersma
University of Calgary

"One ought to write a chronicle of Westerbork," commented Etty Hillesum, almost in passing, while eating red cabbage at the edge of the yellow lupin field in the summer of 1942. A nameless man sitting beside her answered: "Yes, but to do that you'd have to be a great poet." Etty recorded this conversation in a letter of December of that same year, and continued:

> He is right, it would take a great poet. Little journalistic pieces won't do. The whole of Europe is gradually being turned into one great prison camp. The whole of Europe will undergo this same bitter experience. To simply record the bare facts of families torn apart, of possessions plundered and liberties forfeited, would soon become monotonous.... I am no poet (23-24).

Despite these reservations, she did record her experiences at the camp during her stay there from November 23, 1942 to September 7, 1943, "noting it all down like a dutiful secretary" (66), writing with the knowledge "of being the ears and eyes of a piece of Jewish history..., contributing... (a) little piece of stone to the great mosaic that will take shape once the war is over" (124).

The facts of the history of the 140,000 Jews living in Holland on May 10, 1940 (the beginning of five years of German occupation) have been well documented (Hilberg, 365-381; Presser). The fate of Dutch Jews parallels that of all European Jews: following a gradual but systematic exclusion from Dutch society, most (about 100,000) were rounded up into Dutch camps like Westerbork, deported weekly on freight trains, and murdered in the killing centres at Auschwitz and Sobibor or other concentration camps. A few (4,000) were able to emigrate or flee, a few survived in hiding (7,000) or because of mixed marriages (8,000), and a few returned from the camps (5,450). These are the facts, the abstractions; in the mind's eye they form a stream of suffering and destruction so vast that the mind itself loses its ability to comprehend.

In the face of this vastness, Holocaust literature "has as its unifying purpose the translation of the abstract into the particular," the transformation of numbers "into the story of the living, suffering and dying of each soul" (Idinopulos, 186). Etty Hillesum's *Letters from Westerbork* and Jona Oberski's *Childhood* are two such works: into the outline sketched by historical facts they draw the detail of individual experience and emotion. They are part of the larger body of European Holocaust literature; in Holland they stand together with, among other works, Anne Frank's diary, Marga Minco's *Bitter Herbs*, Clara Asscher-Pinkhof's *Star Children*, Johanna Reiss' *The Upstairs Room*, Philip Mechanicus' *Waiting for Death: a Diary*, and Hillesum's own *An Interrupted Life*. Hillesum's letters, written from November, 1942 to September, 1943, sketch a human face and heart for ten months of Jewish suffering in Westerbork, while Oberski's small-child memories of passing through Westerbork to Bergen-Belsen and returning to Amsterdam capture the baffled helplessness of individuals confronted with an incomprehensible system for the destruction of a people.

Etty Hillesum was born in Amsterdam on January 15, 1914; she died in Auschwitz on November 30,