

Harry Mulisch: *The Assault*. Penguin Books, 1985. 204p.

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Harry Mulisch's books are on the "HAVE TO READ" list of all Dutch twelfth graders. Despite the fact, or because one of his early books, *The Stone Bridal Bed*, was highly recommended by our teachers, we detested it. My friends and I could only stand to read a page or two then, but now, having read *The Assault*, I think *The Stone Bridal Bed* deserves another try. Critics point out that the two books deal with the same themes of guilt and innocence, and Mulisch's handling of these subjects in *The Assault* encourages me to go back and reexamine the thirty year old *Stone Bridal Bed*.

During his prolific writing career Mulisch has produced 9 books of poetry, 8 novels, 10 short stories, 7 stage plays and 17 essays. *The Assault* is regarded as his first "readable" novel, as it seems to appeal to all segments of the general reading public. This is no doubt one of the reasons it has been translated into English. Harold Beaver in *The New York Times Book Review* (6-17-85) thought it was readable though sometimes awkward. A comparison between the Dutch and English editions indicates that the problem is the translator's and not the author's. The Penguin edition sometimes fails to grasp subtle nuances and often suffers from awkward constructions which break the essential rhythms of Mulisch's finely crafted work.

Mulisch:

Anton keek naar de heen en weer schietende draad, waardoor de trui uit de wereld verdween, haar vorm, met de plat uitgespreide mouwen, als iemand die iets tegen wil houden, en veranderde in en bol. Toen zijn moeder even tegen hem glimlachte, keek hij weer in zijn boek. (p. 16)

Penguin:

Anton watched the yarn speeding back and forth whereby the sweater vanished from the world, its shape, with the sleeves spread out flat, like somebody who tries to hold up something, and was transformed into a ball. His mother gave him a fleeting smile, and he lowered his eyes to his book. (p. 14)

Claire Nicolas White's British translation of "als

iemand die iets tegen wil houden" as "like somebody who tries to hold up something" instead of "like somebody who tries to stop something" is only one example of the problems which plague this translation. Perhaps Penguin Books would have been better advised to find a North American translator who was more familiar with American English expression and usage. The use of British English has, in this instance, not helped to surmount the already difficult task of translating Dutch into English and will most likely limit its literary impact to Great Britain. In any case, the book's popularity in the Netherlands led to a film adaptation which brought director Fons Rademaker an Oscar in 1987 for the "Best Foreign Film" of the year.

Harry Mulisch was born in the Netherlands in 1927 of mixed parentage. His mother was Dutch and Jewish and his father gentile and Austro-Hungarian. After his parent's divorce in 1936, Harry remained with his father. The elder Mulisch's position as a banker and custodian of Jewish property during the German occupation permitted him to send his ex-wife to safety in the United States but her family perished in the concentration camps. He was imprisoned after the war and visited weekly by his son. Harry Mulisch once said, "The war, that's me."

Mulisch's loss of his mother seems, understandably, to have been a traumatic event which has influenced his life and writing deeply. A critic has noted that Anton, the main character in *The Assault*, has a series of relations with girls whom he then discards. Anton appears to symbolize Mulisch's attempt to deal with the departure of the women figures in his own life.

Mulisch himself has reflected in a contradictory fashion on the nature of his work. He has said that unlike Kafka or Goethe all his books are different. After his death, he claims, it will become much clearer that no one book has precedence over the other but that all are equal. However, Mulisch has also stated:

"I've always said: I don't write books. I write an oeuvre in which everything is related."

Whether or not Mulisch writes individual books or attempts to create a literary oeuvre, *The Assault* is undoubtedly a work which can either be read as five different books or as one multi-layered book with five or more layers, all held together by the symbolic use of stones.

The Steenwijk (in Dutch: from the stone district) of Haarlem, like the cobbles that are laid in a herring-bone pattern, are a close knit family. They try to get along as best they can in difficult conditions, and with

great effort they manage to have a little heat and light in their living room. Anton, the younger son, tries to forget about his hunger as the family plays a board game. The dice bounce across the board as the sound of shots is heard. Peter, the older son, looks out the window to see Ploeg, the infamous collaborator, lying beside his bicycle in front of the neighbor's house. Then he watches in horror as the neighbor drags the body in front of their house. Realizing the danger from the Germans, he runs out of the house to try to do something about this critical situation.

Following the inevitable arrival of the Germans, all the Steenwijks with the exception of Anton are executed, the house is destroyed and he is taken away to spend the night in a police cell. Lodged in the same cell is a young woman who talks to him about light and darkness. She also tells him that the people she is involved with have had to become somewhat like the Germans in order to fight them. A lot more is said but it is only later that Anton will remember it and understand what it meant.

Mulisch comments:

The rest is sequel. The cloud of ash from the volcano rises to the stratosphere, circles around the earth and years later will rain on all of the continents.

Anton grows up in his uncle's house in Amsterdam. He doesn't permit himself to have a second thought about what has happened. Only when he's a student and invited to a party in Haarlem, does he return to the place where he once lived with his parents and his brother. He then meets a former neighbor who describes the butchering of his family and tells him that their names are carved in stone on a monument; something he has completely repressed.

During a student revolt Anton meets the son of the executed collaborator. As they exchange stories it becomes evident that Fake Ploeg is extremely bitter. Life had been hard for him after the war. The meeting ends with Fake throwing a stone at Anton's mirror and breaking it.

While Anton is in England visiting Westminster Abbey and looking at the Stone of Scone, he meets Saskia, his first love and future wife. Years later, while he, Saskia and their daughter Sandra visit her family, he attends the funeral of an old resistance worker and overhears a conversation about the shooting of a collaborator. One of the participants (Takes) takes him aside and, seated on a stone bench, describes the execution which inadvertently brought about the death

of Anton's family. Now compelled to find out more, Anton later visits Takes and discovers that the woman he met in the police cell was the love of Takes' life and that while she also loved Takes, the feelings were never shared.

Anton starts to grow apart from Saskia and the marriage begins to fail. He now realizes that he fell in love with her because she vaguely reminded him of the woman in the police cell. Increasingly, he finds himself unable to share his thoughts and views with Saskia. He finds it more and more difficult to accept her attitudes: she has been brought up to ignore everything unpleasant; the war is not a proper topic of conversation; children should not be taken to funerals; table manners and social conventions are essential.

As the story advances, Anton's health begins to deteriorate. He is dogged by migraines and anxiety. He divorces Saskia in 1967 and marries Liesbeth in 1968. The following year sees the birth of his second child, Peter. By 1981, he is seriously depressed and goes to his summer home in Tuscany. When he sees a dice-shaped cigarette lighter on a table he visualizes a grisly mountain sweeping over him like a tidal wave. Liesbeth finds a doctor who helps Anton regain control of himself, and life goes on.

In 1983, a friend coaxes him to participate in what turns out to be the biggest peace march that Europe has seen up to that time. Alienated from the marchers around him, he thinks about a newspaper cryptogram which turns out to be symbolic of what has puzzled him in his life. At the march, he unexpectedly meets Karin, the daughter of the neighbor who had dragged Ploeg's body in front of the Steenwijks' house. He learns from her the real reason why that was done. He accepts the fact that the decision had both serious and ludicrous components and that the man he considered responsible for the tragedy that had haunted his life, was innocent and blameless.

The Assault is an engaging and perceptive novel. Divided into five time periods, it offers the reader at least five different literary genres in one story: detective, psychological, introspection, war novel, moral examination and romance. Little wonder that the book has been immensely popular in the Netherlands and that it has had a good reception in the English speaking world. Mulisch's multi-layered style; the use of the unifying symbol of the stone; the insightful examination of the psychological trauma which wars produce and the painful ambiguousness of human guilt and innocence, all set this novel above what most readers, Dutch or otherwise, have come to expect from writers dealing with the Second World War.

This novel also attests to Mulisch's own assertion that the war was *the* event which shaped him and his work. His conviction that the tragic results of catastrophic events affect people and their countries for years to come, is echoed in the final line of the novel. Anton, now possessing the answer to the riddle of his life, shuffles his shoes as he walks across the cobblestones and it is

as if each step raised clouds of ashes, although there are
no ashes in sight.

Rutger Kopland: *The Prospect and the River*. Translated by James Brockway. Hull, England: Jackson's Arm Press, 1987.

Hendrika Ruger
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Rutger Kopland was born in Door, the Netherlands in 1934. The name is a pseudonym for Rutger H. van den Hoofdakker, one of the most popular writers of the Netherlands and Dutch-speaking Belgium. He is a psychiatrist affiliated with the psychiatric clinic of the University of Groningen as a scientific researcher.

In 1986 he received the Paul Snoek Prize, a Belgian literary prize issued for the first time that year. Last year Kopland was honoured in the Netherlands for his literary work by receiving the P. C Hooft Prize.

There is no doubt about the popularity of the poet, which is evident in the number of times his poetry collections have been reprinted. His first collection, *Onder het vee* (1966), is now in its seventh edition; *Het orgeltje van Yesterday* (1968) followed and is now in its 13th edition; *Alles op de fiets* (1969) was reprinted 11 times; *Wie wat vindt heeft slecht gezocht* (1973) is now in its seventh edition; *Een lege plek om te blijven* (1975) is in its sixth edition; *Al die mooie beloften* (1978) was reprinted five times; *Dit uitzicht* (1982) and *Voor het verdwijnt en daarna* (1985) are now both in third editions.¹ From this record it is clear that Kopland is indeed a very popular and much-read poet.

Kopland's books have been reviewed in many newspapers and literary journals both in the Netherlands and abroad. In general, the critics have received his work with praise. However, some reviewers have been puzzled by his books' tremendous popularity. These critics suspect that the poet's success is a result of the misunderstanding of his work by the greatest part of his readership. They think that the majority of these readers are not aware of the real meaning of these

poems, that they miss the complexity and the "double bottom" of his work. They argue that the average reader is misled by the use of a simple choice of words and colloquial language, and that the average reader takes his poems at face value only. Other critics, for instance Hugo Brems, think that the popularity of the poet lies not only in his simple language but also in the fact that the reader can recognize his or her own feelings in the emotions described by Kopland, and that his popularity may therefore be ascribed to the reader's self-recognition. As good poetry is usually thought to be good because the reader can identify with the situations and emotions described by the poet, it is likely that critics such as Hugo Brems have identified the real reason for Kopland's success: he is so popular because he writes so well.

Kopland made his debut as a writer in 1964, in the literary journal *Tirade*. Later, from 1969 to 1971, his work was published in *Hollands Maandblad*. In 1974 he contributed to the then newly-founded literary journal *De Revisor*. Since 1980 his work has been appearing in *Raster*.

In the Netherlands literary journals represent certain tendencies and characteristics. Each journal represents a certain "stream", a style in writing. For this reason the critic immediately associates a work which appears in a literary journal with a certain group of writers. While work published in *Tirade* is considered to be "anecdotal", *Raster* would tend to represent an abstract style. It has been noted that Kopland's work has gone through an evolution from his early anecdotal publications in *Tirade* towards his latest work, associated with the "Raster-style".

As has been mentioned, Kopland expresses himself in simple colloquial language. His style is that of ironic understatement, and his subjects are romantic themes such as death and decay. He shows emotion in his work, perhaps exclaiming at the sight of something beautiful, or describing the memory of something that has made an indelible impression. This can best be illustrated by considering his well-known poem "Young Lettuce":

I can bear it all,
the withering of beans,
flowers dying, I can watch
the small patch of potatoes being dug up
without shedding a tear, I'm really hard
when it comes to that.
But young lettuce in September,
just planted, still limp,
in little moist beds, no.²