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Review

Edwin Praat, *Verrek, het is geen kunstenaar. Gerard Reve en het schrijverschap* (Amsterdam: AUP, 2014)

Sander Bax, *De Mulisch Mythe. Harry Mulisch: schrijver, intellectueel, icoon* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 2015)

Daan Rutten, *De ernst van het spel. Willem Frederik Hermans en de ethiek van de persoonlijke mythologie* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2016)

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Every national literary field has its darlings and this is true for Dutch literature as well. After the Second World War, an obsession emerged with three writers that have been referred to as the ‘Great Three’: Harry Mulisch (1927-2010), Gerard Reve (1923-2006) and Willem Frederik Hermans (1921-1995). For decades, Simon Vestdijk (1898-1971) was considered to be the nestor of Dutch literature, yet with his death emerged the need for new grand names.¹ Mulisch, Reve and Hermans were coined as the Great Three in the 1970s, and their reputation has been reiterated time and again and consolidated by critics as well as in literary histories and schoolbooks. A widespread attention for these three post-World War II writers was set, both in- and outside the walls of academia, and the recent publication of three major studies attest to the continued interest for their work. Sander Bax’s *De Mulisch Mythe. Harry Mulisch: schrijver, intellectueel, icoon* (2015), Edwin Praat’s *Verrek, het is geen kunstenaar. Gerard Reve en het schrijverschap* (2014) and Daan Rutten’s *De ernst van het spel. Willem Frederik Hermans en de ethiek van de persoonlijke mythologie* (2016) each form sturdy monographs devoted to one of the ‘Great Three’.

In light of debates on the composition of national literary canons, a review of these three books is somewhat of a caricature. As the focus lies on the most canonized authors of Dutch postwar literature (male, white, deceased), this review unequivocally affirms critical allegations regarding the homogeneity and lack of diversity of literary canons. Moreover, it confirms that literary scholars in fact keep reproducing these canonical mechanisms by writing lengthy books on the most well established and widely appreciated writers of a country, and subsequently by

¹ Praat 2006

writing lengthy reviews about those books – as if there has not been enough attention for Mulisch, Reve and Hermans. Where are the monographs on more peripheral Dutch authors?

It seems pretty evident that the books under discussion here are not solely about these three authors. In each of these monographs, Mulisch, Reve and Hermans primarily function as case studies worth studying in the greater scheme of literary history. Remarkable for the postwar period of Dutch literature are certain transformations regarding the author's place in society. Romantic-modernistic notions of the author as an autonomously operating artist, not susceptible to socio-economic, heteronomous forces, were called into question in a literary landscape of rapid mediatisation and commercialisation. The cases of Mulisch, Reve and Hermans contest deeply rooted ideas regarding literary autonomy that were at play in the second half of the twentieth century in the Netherlands.

De Mulisch Mythe (hereafter DMM) by Bax (Tilburg University) is different in genre than the books of Praat and Rutten, the latter two being edited versions of their authors' dissertations. Bax's book is intended for a broader, not necessarily academic audience and fits best of all three, but not perfectly, in the genre of biography. Although it has characteristics of a biography (containing a complete, chronological overview of the whole of Mulisch work and life), it is more a literary-historical account on the changing role of the literary author in the postwar period than a narrative exclusively about Mulisch. The Great Three became iconic figures in literary history because they, so Bax suggests, 'broke out of the autonomous model of literature, sought contact with political reality, and were in search for an audience' (383-384).² This is the broad literary-historical context that functions as the backbone for DMM as well as for – to a greater or lesser extent – *Verrek, het is geen kunstenaar* (hereafter: VGK) by Praat and *De ernst van het spel* (hereafter: DES) by Rutten. The common denominator is that all three theorize about the dichotomy literary autonomy-heteronomy as well as about literary engagement in the historical context of modern day writers becoming public figures or celebrities.

Bax & Mulisch

With DMM, Sander Bax wrote an extensive overview of how the images of Mulisch' authorship, his work and his life functioned in the public domain. The aim of the book is to shed light on the emergence of 'the monumental image that we have of him today' (15), in other words: how 'the Mulisch Myth' was created. The creation of this myth by Mulisch as well as by others is examined through a posture-analytical approach, mainly by focusing on three self images that Mulisch created and operationalized through his work, life and media performances: (1) the writer as celebrity, (2) the writer as a public intellectual, and (3) the autonomous, absent writer. Posture analysis as a method has gained attention by more sociologically oriented literary scholars, at least since Jérôme Meizoz' *Postures littéraires. Mises en scène modernes de l'auteur* (2007).³ Two great merits of this approach, as opposed to more ergo-centric approaches, become evident when reading DMM. The most obvious one is that it enables Bax to

² All of the references to Bax 2015, Praat 2014 and Rutten 2015 have been translated from Dutch by me.

³ *Door Prometheus geboeid* (2015), the dissertation of Laurens Ham is a recent example from Dutch literary scholarship in which the concept of *posture* is used to study auto-representation and hetero-representation of modern literary authors. Related, similar concepts of *posture* are 'ethos' (Viala 1985) and 'self-fashioning' (Greenblatt 1980).

go beyond the borders of Mulisch' written, textual oeuvre, which results in a more comprehensive and encompassing account of *all* of Mulisch, including his media appearances, his attitudes, and his self-presentation in general. The other one is that it provides Bax' claims with more concrete support, without solely having to rely on close readings of Mulisch' textual sources. Whereas close reading interpretations of literary works run the risk of coming through as particularistic because of their subjective-introspective nature, a sociological, posture analytic approach at least yields an image of how Mulisch *functions* within certain literary-historical and socio-economic contexts. That makes the story of Mulisch come alive; it makes DDM more vivid than when it only would have contained close readings of written sources.

Prizeworthy is that Bax knows how to theorize about complex matters as literary autonomy without being overtly academic or unnecessarily using jargon from literary theory. Underlying an analysis of Mulisch' television performances, for instance, is the tension between Bourdieu's concepts of symbolic versus economic capital (121-126), without those concepts being operationalized or mentioned explicitly. Bax observes that 'it was not common for writers [of the sixties, RS] to grasp the many chances the age of television offered' (123), because the premise of literary autonomy prescribes 'that an author is socio-economically independent and should not strive for direct economic gains' (idem). He shows how these television performances helped literary authors to gain economic independence, but at the same time jeopardized their 'credibility' (124). Who needs Bourdieuan jargon when we have Bax?

Equally illustrative of Bax' non-specialistic clearness and eloquence is that he analyses the self-representations of Mulisch without making explicit the literary methodological framework of posture analysis. Throughout DMM, when he describes the self-images Mulisch created for himself and the images of him created by others, he just *does* a posture analysis, without the reader knowing it. The same goes for the way Bax embeds his narrative in relevant cultural historical developments of the second half of the twentieth century. One of those relevant developments is the emergence of the 'age of celebrity'. Clearly and succinctly he outlines the problems that arise in a celebrity culture for the modernistic-autonomous writer who finds himself stuck in 'a schizophrenic position' (121), having all of a sudden to relate to the laws of the market. All of this results in an accessible book that never gets dense, but nevertheless gives a thorough account of literary authorship in the second half of the twentieth century.

Praat & Reve

As one might expect from an academic dissertation, VGK by Edwin Praat (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences) has a more theoretical focus. Just as Bax does with Mulisch, Praat analyses Reve's role in the literary field from both a text-internal as a text-external point of view, taking into account Reve's presence in the public domain. Next to traditional close readings, a similar literary sociological, posture analytical approach is operationalized in order to get a hold of how Reve presented himself as comedian, catholic, conservative racist, pervert or a genius, as well as to examine how others helped shaping those types of images around him. From a literary-historical point of view, this is particularly interesting for the same reasons that Bax' book is interesting. It shows what it takes for a Dutch literary author after WWII to have (commercial) success, both in terms of symbolic capital as in terms of economic capital.

On a theoretical level, VGK delivers an impressive critique of Bourdieu, the scholar who apparently is still inspiring recent generations of sociologically oriented literary scholars. Praat

shows the ‘blind spot’ in Bourdieu’s philosophy on the laws of the literary field. The flaws in Bourdieu’s theory are demonstrated by ‘reading Bourdieu against Bourdieu’, for which Reve appears to be the perfect case. Praat’s main insight is that authors cannot only play *according*, but also *with* the rules of the literary game as described by Bourdieu. Perhaps, the laws of the literary fields are not that rigid as Bourdieu’s theory suggests, VGK shows that there is at least plenty of room for some play with those laws, as the case of Reve perfectly illustrates. Reve has, for instance, been presenting himself throughout the years both as the stereotypical romantic genius devoid of societal concerns (244), thereby conforming to Bourdieu’s ideas on literary autonomy. At the same time, he has been thoroughly distancing himself from that image, and has been presenting himself as a ‘craftman’ who creates commodities for the economic market (123) – with famous one liners as ‘I own a store’ (‘Ik heb een winkel’) and ‘Hurray for capitalism’ (‘Leve het kapitalisme’). Distinctive of Reve’s authorship is the way he plays with the image of artist and the world of art as outlined by Bourdieu’s idea of the ‘cultural subfield of limited production’ (71): Reve consciously addresses and conforms to that particular image and world, but also deviates from it without completely abandoning it.

Not so often are academic books judged by their writing style, which suggests that style is not a criterion for scholarly success. However, in the case of VGK, Praat’s style is so distinctive that it cannot be overlooked. Not only is Praat able to express complex theoretical matters in a clear and subsequently convincing way, just as Bax does, VGK is written with such stylistical virtuoso that it gives the impression as if the scholar is truly inscribing himself in the literary discourse under discussion. For instance: in his paraphrase of Bourdieu’s theory of the cultural field, Praat remarks about Bourdieu’s frequent references to forms of concealment (e.g. of *illusio*) that it feels as if Bourdieu ‘sheds light on an issue that has been covered up’ (30; in Dutch: ‘het deksel van een doofpot licht’). By framing Bourdieu’s vision on culture as a ‘doofpot’ (Dutch), Praat does not just sum up Bourdieu’s insights, but puts in a particular frame, *adds* his own touch to it. Through such typical formulations he enters into a personal dialogue with the thinker who functions as his theoretical framework.

Something similar holds true for Praat’s (close reading and posture) analyses and interpretations of Reve. A key text in Reve’s oeuvre is the fictional self-interview ‘Gesprek met Van Het Reve’, the first text in which his poetical ideals are expressed, as well as the first narrative text in which the character ‘Reve’ is staged. A paradox in this text is observed by Praat, described by him as ‘the rupture with the tradition of rupture’ (85). Reve breaks with the romantic-artistic obsession with renewal (e.g. ‘De Vijftigers’) by breaking with it, which Praat describes as ‘being original by not wanting to be original’ (85). Praat has not only a good sense of where the paradoxes in Reve’s oeuvre are located, he also frames those paradoxes in a language that his research object could have written himself. Because of this deep commitment to its topic, both academically as artistically-stylistically, VGK has undeniably become an important part of the thinking about Reve and the literary period he was distinctive of, as well as of the Reve-discourse as such.

Rutten & Hermans

The dissertation of Daan Rutten (Tilburg University) was part of the larger NWO project entitled ‘[The power of autonomous literature: Willem Frederik Hermans](#)’, which focused on Hermans in order to untangle complexities regarding ideas about the autonomy of literature.

The choice for Hermans is self-evident. In Hermans' reception, the main image that has been created is that of a modernistic, autonomous writer, but at the same time he has had an undeniable impact on (Dutch) culture and society. That apparent contradiction is the theoretical starting point of the project, and also one of the main pillars of Rutten's book. In DES, it is argued how the image of Hermans as an autonomous modernist has its flaws when taking into account the context of Hermans' political and ethical modes of cultural criticism.

This new perspective on Hermans results from the psychoanalytic frame in which the analyses of Hermans' oeuvre are embedded. Drawing upon insights from game theory (Lacan, Žižek), Rutten argues that Hermans is traditionally viewed as 'game breaker' ('spelbreker'), but in fact should be viewed as 'game player' ('speler'). According to him, Hermans' work contains a so called 'ethics of play' through which he positively engages with society (40). By taking up this position, Rutten distances himself from two of his promotores, Wilbert Smulders and Frans de Ruiter, who do frame Hermans as 'game breaker' (39). It is not usual and it takes courage to explicitly take a stand that conflicts with that of your supervisors.

Methodologically, Rutten combines a cultural studies approach (taking into account the contexts with which literature is connected), as well as an esthetics approach (focusing on the specific literary-esthetical experience). Although this means that Hermans' work is put in several extra-literary contexts, in a concrete analytical sense DES is more traditional than V GK and DMM. It is traditional in the sense that the analyses are for the most part ergo-centric, not stretching beyond the textual oeuvre. One of the results of this is that – close reading wise – Rutten digs deeper in the written sources, not having to take into account all the (non-textual) manifestations of Hermans. Exemplary is Rutten's detailed and lengthy (almost 40 pages) close reading of Hermans' notorious novel *Ik heb altijd gelijk* (1951), which in the reception has been used to frame Hermans as a 'game breaker' (170). Rutten describes how this novel unfairly has been reduced to certain passages that are illustrative of a certain conformism, and which have been used as an argument for the absence of social criticism in the novel (197). Against that, Rutten argues how 'the continuous play against the counterparts of perversion and conformism' results in an ideological and ethical criticism which has been overlooked by others.

On a theoretical, cultural-philosophical level, DES is very well-wrought. Rutten clearly outlines cultural-philosophical standpoints and critically positions his own ideas against that framework. Illustrative is his analysis of different views on the concept of the 'game'. Rutten frames Huizinga and Hermans as taking up conflicting positions. Those two conflicting positions are used by Rutten to take up his own position in the middle of the spectrum, because 'Huizinga and Hermans mirror each other in a shared fallacy' (36). According to Rutten, both 'fail to appreciate in their criticism the totality of the game' (36). Sharp observations like these, pointing at, for example, 'shared fallacies' in modes of thinking, are typical for DES and make it a vibrant reading experience.

Essentialism

In a review of Rutten's book in *Journal of Dutch Linguistics and Literature*, Praat reproaches DES of being essentialist.⁴ In *Diggitt Magazine*, Rutten responds to that review with the claim

⁴ Praat 2017

that literary scholarship should not wallow in subjectivism.⁵ The alleged reproach of essentialism is an interesting criterion against which to measure not only DES, but also VGK and DMM. How essentialist are these three books?

A possible answer to that question lies in a critical examination of the methodologies used. As I have pointed out above, DES differs from VGK and DMM in that the latter two transcend the boundaries of textual interpretation and take into account the way Mulisch and Reve present themselves in certain socio-cultural contexts. One of the reasons that DES is liable to essentialism might be that the focus primarily lies on what Hermans has written and thought as an artist and not necessarily on how he *presented* himself as such. Analytically staying within the boundaries of Hermans' textual oeuvre contains the risk of relying too heavily on introspection. Subsequently, the developed argument might become a self-fulfilling prophecy, 'proving' what you want to prove, seeing what you want see. However, that equally goes for analyses that explicitly go beyond the textual domain, as VGK and DMM. An inherent characteristic of all, not necessarily literary, forms of analysis is that it only provides a lense on the research object, a frame in which an argument can be developed that holds true within that frame.

Possibly, the question of how essentialist the books are might better be answered by looking at representativeness. A legitimate objection that might be raised is that DES, VGK and DMM all focus on one writer. At the same time, however, the books provide literary-historical or literary-theoretical accounts that are assumed to stretch beyond those writers, being characteristic of e.g. the age of celebrity, or the complexities of literary autonomy. Why not take multiple authors as case studies? Why not build up a broader and more diverse corpus to answer specific literary-historical and theoretical questions? Why just pick one?

Of course, this ties in with mechanisms of canonicity mentioned at the beginning of this review. Mulisch, Reve and Hermans are the icons of Dutch postwar literature. And icons are worth studying. Still, icons are not necessarily representative for the whole of a period in literary history. In the epilogue of DMM, Bax remarks that since the death of the Great Three (Mulisch died in 2010), 'the public image of Dutch literature is in crisis' (381). Attempts of the media to appoint successors have been futile, because present day writers 'floated to the surface in a literary era in which the conventions of autonomy were still at play, but following those conventions were not representative for getting literary success anymore' (382). Today, there is no 'literary elite' that is able to decide what makes a Great author. Moreover, 'alternative stories about the canon of Dutch literature' are being told nowadays (383). The Dutch literary canon of the future does not need a Great Three. It will be broad, diverse, inclusive. As a consequence, the books on the authors of the future might not, in absence of icons, have to be compelled by iconicity.

⁵ Rutten 2017