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### "Stempelen" and "Doppen": Reflections of the economic crisis of the 1930's in two representative novels of Holland and Belgium

In Netherlandic literary scholarship there has been a tendency to concentrate on clearly defined groups or clans, such as the "Tachtigers," the "Vijftigers," the groups around the *Nieuwe Gids*, *Forum*, *Van Nu en Straks*, etc.<sup>1</sup> No wonder then that certain authors who remained on the periphery of these movements were neglected. Such neglect may be merely regrettable, but it becomes a matter of historical distortion if the neglected authors practise a genre not cultivated elsewhere. Such is the case with H.M. van Randwijk in Holland and Marcel Matthijs in Belgium. Both relatively unknown authors wrote novels in which contemporary social and economic problems were discussed; in particular they deal with the fate of the unemployed during the economic crisis of the 1930's.

The infrequent occurrence in the Netherlands of the social novel in general, and in this period in particular, may have a number of reasons, some internal, some external. The social novel in and of itself is fraught with problems, because it cannot and will not simply describe, but also prescribes, argues and accuses. But "tendens" literature cannot rely on good intentions alone; literary merit must be present.<sup>2</sup>

Reasons might be advanced also to explain why particularly so few Dutch and Belgian authors come to grips with socio-economic problems. Herman Gorter, in the 1890's,

claimed that Dutch authors (and presumably their Belgian counterparts) did not have the proper awareness to grasp the socio-economic factors determining the lives of the individual.<sup>3</sup> But this can hardly be maintained about the generation which came to the fore in the 1930's in Holland, in view of the fact that Gerard Knuvelde writes about these authors that they were

uitsluitend gebonden... aan de alledaagse werkelijkheid van malaise, werkeloosheid, crisis, ontbinding der maatschappij en van haar vormen van samenleving, van het opdringen der massa die een bedreiging gaat vormen voor de enkeling.<sup>4</sup>

Knuvelde in fact draws a contrast between the previous generation and that of the 1930's:

De generatie van Marsman stond groots en hoogmoedig in de wereld, doch dit geslacht staat klein in de alledaagse werkelijkheid, en ziet geen kans daar verbetering in te brengen.<sup>5</sup>

But if the social awareness is there, why then are there not more novels expressing this awareness, or more good novels at least, which have stood the test of time?<sup>6</sup> Knuvelde would answer that "min of meer beroepsmatig cynisch realisme" cannot lead to great literature. Indeed, we would be wrong to say that Randwijk's *Burgers in nood* and Marcel Matthijs' *Doppen* (both written in 1935) are great novels, though the fact that both have been reprinted in the 1970's would indicate that they have at least some literary merit.<sup>7</sup>

Other, strictly literary factors may be involved here. The social novel goes largely against the stylistic and formal principles holding sway at the time of the economic crisis. This is the period in which a small avant-garde carries the day. The social novel, with its need to remain realistic, psychological, rooted in the empirical world, often deterministic and didactic, does not fit into the more purely formalistic and irrational streams of Expressionism, Surrealism, Dada, Vitalism and Futurism. On the other hand, where a realistic or naturalistic approach does exist, its focus is on the rural scene, as in the Flemish regional literature of Streuvels, Timmermans and Claes. Hence, if in the Netherlands, despite a growing social awareness and even a boldly socialist tendency in poetry (Henriëtte Roland-Holst), the social novel has few practitioners (or at least few of merit), this is not caused by the intellectual climate as much as by the prevalent concept of literature. It is left to outsiders like Theun de Vries, a communist, or to von Randwijk, a teacher and publisher, to come to terms with the genre.<sup>8</sup>

It remains strange, nevertheless, that contemporary writers so seldom took the opportunity to use the economic crisis as material for their novels, since it so obviously provided them with real-life drama, with heroes and villains, with ready-made conflicts and climaxes, to which need only be added structure and style to create a work of art.

That an economic crisis did exist in Holland and Belgium, and that it did provide human drama, of this there can be no doubt. Holland, which had not participated in the First World War, and which was economically not as badly hit in the immediate post-war period as many other countries, after 1926 became increasingly involved in the speculation wave led by the United States. Moreover, there was economic trouble in the Dutch Indies and a

growing malaise in the shipbuilding industry and in agriculture. Even before 1929 there had been a large number of bankruptcies, and when in 1929 the crash occurred, Holland was inevitably dragged into the crisis. There had been financial disasters before, since the war, but these had been short-lived; now the catastrophe could not be stopped, and the search for solutions and measures to be taken proved fruitless. By 1932 production was a mere fifty percent of 1929 values. Already in 1931 the end of free trade was declared, the Crisis Laws restricted imports, farm products became subsidized, cutbacks and restrictions became the order of the day.<sup>9</sup>

Of all the disasters, however, the rising unemployment was the greatest. It was aggravated in Holland by a still growing population. Whereas unemployment in 1930 stood at 73,600, by 1935/36 it had reached 630,000, which represents 1/3 of the working population. In 1931 a Ministry of Social Welfare had been established, and payments were made to the unemployed, but as one historian writes:

het bleef een ramp voor de betrokkenen uit het werkproces te zijn uitgeschakeld en dagelijks aan deze vernederende positie te worden herinnerd door de verplichting bij het arbeidsbureau te komen stempelen.<sup>10</sup>

Not surprisingly, there were disturbances in the Jordaan, the working class district in Amsterdam (they found their way into van Randwijk's novel). Job creation programs met only with partial success, and schemes to renovate and to institute public works were hardly carried out by a less and less stable government.

Dwindling authority of the central government became indeed one of the major problems of the period, with a polarization of left and right-wing parties. Political disturbances and attacks on democratic principles spread as a

result of the power vacuum. On the left, the CPN's support grew dramatically, especially in Amsterdam. Its militant, even aggressive tone, and its attacks on religion, made it the party of the malcontent. At the outbreak of the Second World War its membership stood at 11,000. Other socialist parties, some under street types like Suurbier, others like the independent party under Jacques de Kadt, also grew. On the right, meanwhile, the Nationale Unie (1924) and the Association for National Recovery (VNH) swung toward militaristic and fascist principles, with the result that moderate parties lost much territory. In 1933 the founding of the NSB under Mussert, with its newspaper *Volk en Vaderland*, mirrored the triumph of fascism in Germany.

Like Holland, Belgium, after some post-war problems, had a period of prosperity after 1921, interrupted only briefly by a financial crisis in 1924. After 1926 stabilization of the currency made a resumption of prosperity possible. The devalued Belgian franc led to euphoria in trade, with dramatic expansion in the stock market index and in absolute value of production. Even the crash of 1929 could at first be cushioned through artificial means of stimulation. But by 1931 the crisis had taken hold.<sup>11</sup> Unemployment in Belgium, as in Holland, rose sharply. In 1930 payments stood at 40 million francs; in 1934 this had increased to one billion francs. A radical deflation policy resulted, with reductions in pensions and benefits, increases in taxes and customs duties, but after strikes broke out in the coal mining region of the Borinage in 1932 the deflation policy was abandoned. At the time of writing of Matthijs' novel, in the winter of 1934/35, there were 223,000 unemployed, gold reserves shrank to 2 billion francs in 1934, and in the beginning of 1935 the franc was devalued by 28%. These latter measures finally brought some relief, so that by November 1936 the number of unemployed stood at 113,000.

Clearly then, both Holland and Belgium went through a severe financial crisis. Since much of it has found its way into the novels by van Randwijk and Matthijs, they are relevant even today as social documents. Faith in the economic system itself was shaken, and human relationships were ruptured, modified and redefined. Although the latter human aspect of the world economic crisis concerns the authors of the two novels under discussion above all, at the same time the exact configuration of individual and society remains one of the key elements in both. There is at times an almost documentary quality to the novels, as illustrated by their very first lines. We read in *Burgers in nood*:

Willem Verdoorn is tweeëndertig jaar oud en werkt acht jaar bij de heer Banders als hij op een zaterdag ontslag krijgt. Hij is chauffeur en zijn baas is meelfabrikant, samen twee doodgewone mensen.(7)

In *Doppen*, Matthijs writes:

Ik ben zeventwintig jaren oud, acht jaren gehuwd en vader van twee kinderen, twee jongens. Beroep: Mijnwerker. (5)

Already in the opening chapters of both novels the characters face dismissal, and the problem of being unemployed is clearly stated. The documentary quality is maintained by slightly different means, to be sure. In the case of *Doppen* the fictional autobiographical focus allows us to participate directly in the discovery of the meaning of being unemployed; in *Burgers in nood* the third person narration creates a more composite and complex picture. Both books, however, illustrate with intensity and penetration the sense of humiliation, of outrage, of being betrayed not only by people but by the system itself.

Leo, the protagonist of *Doppen*, initially even ignores orders not to show up for work, until

he is removed bodily from his work place. He joins the ranks of the "doppers", but cannot resign himself to the loss of work, and attempts to distance himself from those who have already found an attitude towards their fate, like Anatole Vanhulle, an "intellectual" who is transformed into an hysterical, noisy boaster with a fretful laugh, and Arthur Blaise, a "stranger" from Brussels who embraces the evangelical message of the Salvation Army.

For Leo the loss of work is made more complex because of his previous faith in socialism. "Het kapitalisme bevecht ik," he claims, "daarom ben ik socialist." (5/6) His explanation of strikes and dismissals is, predictably, a simple one: "Ze (the capitalists) willen ons weer onder de knie krijgen." But it does not take long for Leo to ask the question what good the decline of capitalism does him, if it entails the loss of his livelihood. (28) Nor is he allowed to maintain his illusions about the solidarity of the workers themselves. They ought to have gone on strike to protest layoffs, he feels.

It is equally frustrating to cope with the attitudes of the middle classes, who find it easy enough to defend the budget for military purposes, but resent the three hundred million francs for benefits to the unemployed. Yet those who do express pity with the workers are no more acceptable to him. (27) Not resigned to the loss of his dignity, Leo deplores the submissive attitude of the unemployed: a march on the king, suggested by Anatole, would at least have the merit of letting off steam. But the demonstrations which do take place show the weaknesses of the left, splintered badly by the "propaganda" of the communists. It is a measure of the radicalization of the left that to the communists Leo himself appears bourgeois. (35)

Leo's loss of faith in the economic system is

paralleled by a disruption in his relations with wife and family. His wife Bertha's efforts to maintain a minimum standard of living meet with increasing frustration, until Leo discovers that she has been using up their savings to rescue the household. His reaction is violent; he goes out drinking and now seems to give up all pretense of normalcy, while severing almost completely all sexual relations with his wife. Yet it is not so much the latter disruption which brings him to the brink of disaster, but the suicide of his friend Anatole. Leo's reaction is one of horror and fear. If Anatole, the intellectual, the brave scoffer, can admit defeat, how can he, Leo, stand up? The situation has become even more hopeless, meanwhile, because in the elections the socialist majority in parliament, so fervently hoped for, has not materialized, with the immediate result that benefits are even further reduced. Capitalism, it seems, will continue a little longer. In fact, it flourishes in a blatant and aggressive fashion within his own sphere, as Leo discovers, since Bertha, out of sheer desperation, allows her landlord, "de akeligste aller venten," to court her.

Leo is at first tempted to answer these successive crises by following Anatole in his suicide. However, after he falls ill with a high fever, he abandons such thoughts and resigns himself, with cynicism, to his fate. Humiliated, a broken man, he is clearly incapable of further action. "De politiek laat ik voor liefhebbers," he declares, and scoffs at Arthur Blaise's evangelical fervour and his brother in law's belief in fascism. No, the solution is simple for Leo: "Een vrij en onafhankelijk man ben ik. Ik denk er niet aan ooit nog naar mijn werk terug te keren ... De zogenaamde bedrijfscrisis mag voor mij nog lang duren." (71/2). He goes fishing.

Like Leo, Willem Verdoorn, the hero of *Burgers in nood*, at first cannot grasp his true situation. It is brought home to him

eventually, however, that his case is by no means unique. His neighbour, Hakman, has been unemployed for four years, and the latter's wife Jaans almost gleefully describes to Verdoorn what is in store for him. Moreover, his co-worker Arie Bresler feels that he also will be dismissed shortly. Verdoorn's situation is aggravated by the fact that his wife Heiltje has just given birth. It is a blow to his pride not to live up to his pledge to take care of her.

In the course of the novel, relations between Verdoorn and his wife become as problematic as those described in *Doppen*. The loss of employment entails for Verdoorn a loss of face, and this interferes even with his sex life. Heiltje's fear of pregnancy under the deteriorating circumstances leads to her insistence on sexual abstention, which for Verdoorn symbolizes the loss of the final vestiges of his male pride. Sexual relations are also problematic for Arie Bresler, who, because of the insecurity of his job, cannot marry his fiancée of seven years, Anna, who works as a maid in the household of the notary Bakker. When Anna becomes pregnant, the revelation of this fact to her horrified employers coincides, as we shall see, with the most dramatic episode in the novel.

Unlike Leo, for whom the economic crisis is merely a capitalist conspiracy, Verdoorn struggles with the problem. A whole series of conventional explanations is suggested by himself and his fellow workers: overproduction, capitalist greed, union demands, red conspiracies. But for Verdoorn the multitude of questions finally crystallizes into the one: How could God let it happen? Verdoorn's loss of faith is not so much in the economic system, as in the world order, and in God as the directing force of that world order.<sup>12</sup>

But van Randwijk's novel is much too complex to allow us to stop simply at this. It is far richer and more diverse than *Doppen*. This is partially a question of length. But it is also connected with the structure of the novel. Van Randwijk sets out deliberately to create a panorama of Dutch society, even a global framework. In this, *Burgers in nood* echoes such novels as Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) and Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (1925). A good example of this style occurs during the mention of the context in which Verdoorn's advertisement for employment in the paper appears:

Het ontslag van een chauffeur is niet alles wat er op de wereld gebeurt. Dezelfde dag dat Willem Verdoorn om werk vraagt houdt Hitler een vredelievende redevoering en wint Pijnenburg de zesdaagse... In Frankrijk worden de oplichterijen steeds geraffineerder; het roze papier van de "Voix du Peuple" is een bos van schaamte. Rond de Stille Oceaan stijgt de spanning. In Holland wordt ergens een chauffeur ontslagen... Nu steken zwartogige communisten de kerken van Sevilla in brand en de torenspitsen in Holland schijnen te trillen van de hitte... Tussen de Japanse kruisers en de skyscrapers van New York waaie de twee smekende armen van Willem Verdoorn als grassprietjes. (49/50)

Three main groups gradually become discernible in the novel: the working class environment of Verdoorn, the farmers represented by Willem's parents, and the middle classes, the inhabitants of Vreedorp, an oasis of trees and gardens in the large industrial city of Amsterdam. Each of these groups is made to indicate the reaction of a particular social level to the crisis; in their totality they give a view of all of Dutch society. Whereas the countryside remains largely on the periphery of the action, a kind of "green world", though clearly beset by problems, the bourgeois and working class

spheres touch on several occasions, and are involved in the very dramatic and highly artistic climax van Randwijk achieves in this novel.

That the focus of the novel is not as narrow as in *Doppen* is caused above all by the fact that two representatives of the middle class reach out to the workers: the civil servant Masborg, who works in an unemployment office, and the recently ordained young minister Herman Braans. Both these figures are socially aware, idealistic individuals, though with different backgrounds and purposes. Masborg is suspected of being "red" (48), but he is not doctrinaire; his humaneness is inspired by the desire to alleviate suffering, and though he proclaims the necessity of a new world order, he certainly does not seek this order in the totalitarian temptations of left and right.

Braans, on the other hand, though also considered dangerously radical because of his attempts to show a degree of solidarity with the workers, clearly seeks to remain within the framework of Christianity, and its principles of charity and responsibility for our fellow man. In Braans' thinking there slowly emerges the concept of "community" (*gemeenschap*), as opposed to "society" (*samenleving*) or "the masses." For Braans the solution to the class struggle lies in an almost mystical community of blood-brothers. He uses the word "schare", which originates in Christ's idea of a shepherd's flock, but is used by Braans to indicate not only a religious but also a social and economic organization. It is in the dialogues between the disillusioned Verdoorn and the idealistic, somewhat "schwärmerische" Braans, and in the latter's conversations with Masborg that the opposition between the radical authoritarian alternatives of left and right, which played so

crucial a role in *Doppen*, are circumvented. The territory occupied by communists and fascists leaves little space for moderation, but in Masborg and Braans the moderate viewpoint is well represented.

By contrast, Verdoorn's parents symbolize the older, immovable social strata in Dutch society. Verdoorn's father sees the economic crisis as a form of punishment from God for having left the straight road (125). In the cities he sees a source of corruption, and in his son's angry outbursts a sin against God's will. He accepts governments as God-given, adopts a completely passive attitude and frequently berates his son's "opstandigheid."

Old Verdoorn's philosophy turns out to be not so very different from that of the bourgeoisie, who have in the main an equally immovable opinion about the ways of God, and of the role of church and state as guarantors of the rights of the propertied classes, and of law and order. In the circle around Mrs. Bakker, the wife of the notary, Randwijk gives us a microcosm of bourgeois opinions and values. Though some, like Annie Bakker herself, toy with theories of equality, theirs is an armchair socialism which is abandoned as soon as there is the possibility of its being realized in a violent form. Hence the ambivalent feelings of the middle classes, which oscillate between fear and guilt, with attendant attempts at charity on the one hand and brutal affirmation of rights and privileges, with oppression as its companion, on the other.

One of the most crucial problems dealt with in this novel is the question to what extent the churches are merely there to perpetuate the status quo, to provide justification for the distribution of wealth as it exists, and to what extent the churches have abandoned their role

as a force to create a more equitable and just society. For Verdoorn, the justification of religion to a certain extent hinges on its social role rather than its metaphysics. The crisis tests his religion the way it tested Leo's faith in socialism. For Braans, as indicated, the definition of mankind as a religious as well as social and economic community is central.

In other ways, too, the idea of community surfaces as a central theme of the novel. Once Willem Verdoorn has resigned himself to "stempelen" he becomes aware that his status has changed, that he is "sinking." Paradoxically, the fall from grace opens his eyes to the value of solidarity, which also played such an important role in *Doppen*. Verdoorn in fact gradually accepts the necessity of violence, since it entails collective protest rather than individual despair and ineffective rebellion, which is merely selfish. Thus he is gradually drawn into a kind of political vortex, his former preoccupation with "fatsoen" now appears hypocritical and misguided, and he becomes more and more involved with his neighbour Hakman and his wife Jaans, and with the desperate Frans Lemmens, whose fate and career parallel Verdoorn's. At the same time, this social "sinking" sours even more his relations with his wife, who cannot abandon her concepts of dignity, and for whom the radical minister Braans is also totally unacceptable.

The climax of the novel comes in an episode in which van Randwijk brings almost all of his protagonists together. It is a scene of violence and disruption, the logical conclusion of Verdoorn's development, and that of his fellow victims. To counter the mood of despondency which the economic hardships of winter have created in the city, and to offset the ever faster decline in commerce, the

merchant Riegel proposes a publicity week, with discount shopping, a prize draw and fireworks. The reactions of the unemployed to this scheme are mixed, and at the end of the week, during the final festivities, disturbances break out, later blamed on communist infiltration, and there are street fights, during which Verdoorn throws a brick which narrowly misses an old woman. The army is called in to restore order and Verdoorn, sobered by his irrational act, repents, and like the protagonist in *Doppen*, comes to realize the limitations of this kind of political action. His neighbour Hakman, on the other hand, shoots back from his window at the police, and is arrested. Hakman's wife dies during the riots, and Verdoorn, who has assisted in calling a doctor as well as defending Hakman to the police, is left, like Leo in *Doppen*, to contemplate the ruins of his previous life.

Almost all the characters in the novel are touched by the disturbances. Masborg is wounded and breaks in upon the scene in Annie Bakker's house in which Anna's pregnancy is announced. The masses have made the political discussions in this polite society irrelevant; action has replaced words, violence is now destroying any feelings of sympathy between the social classes. Braans, too, has experienced a learning process. He now realizes that he had revelled in his superior attitude. His charity towards the workers had been a form of *hubris*, and he must start his efforts anew, and with a great degree of humility.

In the last few chapters entitled "Willem Verdoorn stempelt nog," the conflicts of opinion, the contradictions between right and left, are still unresolved. Braans is now living in a working class district, and has taken Hakman as his sexton. The crisis continues

unabated. The closing scene, at the beach, where the unemployed gather to amuse themselves with a mixture of resignation and humour, reminds us of the ending of *Doppen*. Yet there appears a glimmer of hope in the expression of Braans' vision of a world to come.

In assessing van Randwijk's novel, the critic Victor van Vriesland made the comment that van Randwijk had made it difficult for himself because he had dealt with a topic that was still very close to the readers.<sup>13</sup> For the present day reader a slightly different problem poses itself. The perspective on the events narrated in the novel, as in the novel by Matthijs, has necessarily shifted. We are by no means convinced that economic crises can be avoided, and we know that what was to follow was infinitely more dramatic and disturbing than the crisis itself. Nevertheless, we may feel that the novels achieve to a high degree what they set out to do: the awareness of the reader is raised, and not merely by the documentary value of these books, but because of the artistic manner in which the events and the reactions of the characters to them have been presented. To be sure, both novels show a disturbing degree of naivety about their subject, and van Randwijk's book suffers from a certain amount of didacticism that is not well integrated into the flow of the novel. Matthijs was able to avoid this by the sheer brevity and the interesting "hortende stijl," the staccato rhythm of his writing which was typical for the renewal of Flemish letters at this time. Both novels, however, deserve to be reread as interesting and generally successful renderings of a period all too easily forgotten.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Most literary histories of the Netherlands are

organized with such movements and groups in mind, and then usually go on to discuss individual authors and their works. Extra-literary events, politics, social and economic changes are given scant treatment by most literary historians.

<sup>2</sup> To this problem the German poet Heinrich Heine addressed himself already in the beginning of the 19th century, in his criticism of the socialist-democratic literary movement *Das Junge Deutschland*.

<sup>3</sup> See Gorter's series of articles in *De nieuwe tijd* of the 1990's.

<sup>4</sup> Gerard Knuvelde, *Inleiding tot de Nederlandse Letterkunde: Schets van de Geschiedenis*, 's Hertogenbosch, <sup>21</sup>1959, p. 220.

<sup>5</sup> Knuvelde, p. 220.

<sup>6</sup> An exception could be made for du Perron's *Land van Herkomst*, though it is the intellectual climate rather than the socioeconomic which predominates. Later there are of course the novels of Ina Boudier-Bakker. In Belgium one could point to Lode Zielens: *Het duistere bloed* (1930) and *Moeder, waarom leven wij?* (1932).

<sup>7</sup> H.M. van Randwijk, *Burgers in nood* (1936) was reprinted in 1976 by Callenbach, Nijkerk. References in the text are to the latter edition.

Marcel Matthijs, *Doppen* (1935) was reprinted by A. Manteau, Brussels, in 1973. References in the text are to the modern edition.

<sup>8</sup> Randwijk, who was a teacher, later head of a publishing firm in Amsterdam, first belonged to the group around the Protestant journal *Opwaartse wegen*, but later, because of his strong social concerns, came to believe in socialism. To a certain extent *Burgers in nood* already anticipates this development. Theun de Vries' *Moeder aarde* (though dealing with 19th century Friesland) is a classic example of a socialist-realist novel such as Gorter might have endorsed.

<sup>9</sup> For the historic background I am indebted to: Gerlof Verwey, *Geschiedenis van Nederland: Levensverhaal van zijn bevolking*, Amsterdam, 2, 1983; L.G.J. Verberne (ed.), *Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, Nijmegen, 1955, vol. 4 *Het Zuiden na 1648*; Adrian de Meeüs, *History of the Belgians*, New York, 1962.

<sup>10</sup> Verwey, p. 895.

<sup>11</sup> Meeüs, p. 278 sees as reasons for the crisis overproduction and the setting up of tariffs.

<sup>12</sup> Victor van Vriesland (in *Onderzoek en Vertoog: Verzameld critisch en essayistisch proza*, Amsterdam,

1958) argues that religion is the central theme of the novel, "het eigenlijke kernconflict voor den hoofdpersoon" (vol. II, p. 226).

<sup>13</sup> Van Vriesland, p. 224.