

ARTHUR VAN SCHENDEL'S "HET FREGATSCHIP JOHANNA
MARIA"

A. van den Hoven
University of Windsor

According to Peter Haidu, "Meaning (does not) pre-exist the text (because if that were the case the text) would become a mere rehearsal of truths located elsewhere, *rather than* the locus of a production of meaning".¹

If that is so, our function as critics is to "focus on the literal, on the concrete... on the true materiality" of van Schendel's narrative, in order to make the novella re-emerge, to quote F. Jameson in *Marxism and Literary Form*, "into that place of the concrete (which is) the mediation between private and public, between individual and socio-economic realities, between the existential and history itself".²

In order to complete that task, let us focus on van Schendel's novella and see how the various aspects of the story, as these elements are concretely manifested by the text, exemplify Haidu's and Jameson's dicta. First of all, it should be noted that this is the tale of a man-made object, a ship, and that the story opens with its construction and ends with its slow demise. This kind of framing stresses the preeminence of matter over man; the ship stands literally at the beginning and the end of his existence. But *Het Fregatschip Johanna Maria*, generically speaking only a means of transportation, changes gender in the text and is normally referred to as *De Johanna Maria*. The change from neuter to the sexualized (feminine) gender, although a minor factor, is important because to Jacob Brouwer, the sailmaker and protagonist of the novella, the ship becomes a substitute for his dead mother and especially for his dead sister, whose name was also Johanna.³ His family had been abused by his alcoholic father, and the only moments of tenderness Jacob Brouwer has ever known were those in the arms of his elder sister who raised him:

Jacob sensed relief. In the cemetery there stood a stone with a name on it. Now that his mother could no longer be abused, he left behind only a younger sister, to whom he could give enough money to live on after every voyage. He knew that he had no other home than the sea but that he would return to the city on a regular basis (p.11)⁴.

From this moment on, *De Johanna Maria* becomes mother, sister and home to him, and in Jameson's terms it also becomes exemplary of that place of the concrete (which is) the mediation between private and public. Jacob Brouwer's affective relationship with matter permits him to live in harmony with nature (with wood, sail, water, and wind), but in order to do so, he must also "be ready to serve the ship entirely" (p.73).

This remark of Brouwer's deserves further elucidation, because in the opening pages of the text the narrator has identified him as a person who also has a specific and particular right of ownership to the ship.

The narrator distinguishes three types of sailors. The first group sees the ship as but "a temporary abode":

And when after a long voyage he has given away the handful of silver, there remains suspicion of what has been but also desire for the new. Then he looks for another ship. These are the sailors who end up on shore prematurely (p.2).

The handful of silver identifies this kind of sailor symbolically with Judas, the archetypal traitor.

Captain Jan Wilkins is the second type of sailor. He entertains an ambiguous relationship with the three-master. He remains divided in his loyalties between his sickly wife and children ashore and the duties of a captain. Because his heart and mind are elsewhere, he intuitively develops a dislike for Brouwer, the sailor of the third kind, whose entire existence is dedicated to *De Johanna Maria*. After all, the very presence of Brouwer suffices to show up his own lack of complete dedication.

As the narrator explains, the three-master has two sets of owners: those who have a legal right to it and to whom the ship possesses a purely exchange value; and the second set, which is made up of those sailors

who belong to the sea and who inhabit the ship... They look to the shore as to a foreign and unknown country... It is not only duty that drives them but attachment to a possession and, according to another kind of law, they own the ship as much as does the proprietor (p.2).

Obviously, then, this novella is also very much about man's relationship to matter, to society, and to the world. Ultimately Jacob Brouwer the sailmaker becomes the owner of *De Johanna Maria*, but in the interval he has also redefined the notion of ownership. His relationship "to the last of the three-masters to fly a Dutch flag" (p.75) is not just that of the legal proprietor who has a financial interest in the ship. The ship has come to embody him, and therefore he attempts to preserve it as if it were his own body. In this manner the text compels us to make a leap from the commercial world of exchange values to that universe in which an organic unity prevails, and since Jacob Brouwer is the type of person who lives in harmony with matter, he is a person who can get the most out of the ship. In romantic terms, the narrator imputes an *anima* to the ship; it can sense intuitively how it is treated:

but now Brouwer made sure that *De Johanna Maria* was looked after properly as she had been used to earlier: he insisted that orders be given in the appropriate manner... and it seemed as if she understood those well-known sounds... and as if she obeyed eagerly (p.72).

Clearly this novella is intended to be more than the story of the last great Dutch sailing ship. It is meant to serve as the exemplar of a philosophy of nature according to which man lives to serve his creations and to cooperate with nature in a harmonious fashion. As a matter of fact, the text permits us to go farther and see this sailor's relationship to *De Johanna Maria* as symbolising the relationship the Dutch should have to their entire country. It seems to me that this is implicit in the narrator's remark about how the ship behaves:

The ship had in the meantime begun its task. It behaved itself as it was built and as was expected of it, in a manner that was decent and quiet, respectful and steadfast, like the ships that had for centuries created Holland's wealth, ships that had had no other history than that of their masters and their crew, work, care, wages, and fidelity (p.6).

If *De Johanna Maria* functions to express traditional Dutch virtues, Jacob Brouwer's devotion and servitude are undoubtedly meant to express the virtues of the ideal Dutch citizen. Of course, it is not difficult to criticize such a stance, because it represents a romanticized form of a somewhat pessimistic materialism.

The relative pessimism of van Schendel is brought out in several ways. First of all, it is seen in the double temporal perspective which stresses the limited function of each man and object in the world. In the opening sentence the narrator states that the three-master was launched in February 1865. After many years of devoted service, including a long period during which it suffers great abuse, Brouwer finally manages to purchase the ship. Now that he and the ship have grown old together, he returns it to Amsterdam. There he suffers a bad fall and is taken to the hospital; *De Johanna Maria* remains in the harbour without a crew. This is how the novella concludes:

De Johanna Maria was alone; at night no lights burned. On the dock the hammers banged all day long to a steady beat, and farther on the steamships came and went. In the clear summer under white clouds, in the winter under a grey sky, in the foggy autumn, in the windy spring, the ship remained still, with its rump and its masts reflected in the water, in the rain and wind and sun (p.76).

There will be no more great sailing ships; they are being replaced by steamships. However, since the story was published in 1930, the author must have been very much aware that the steam engine would also soon be replaced by the diesel engine. Therefore it is not surprising to see that the concluding paragraph strikes an elegiac note; after all, it signals the absolute finality of a passing way of life. If this novella is also a sentimental one, it is because it stresses the temporal nature of man's enterprises and of his emotional attachments. His obsessions and concerns are purely generational. They do not just come and go; they disappear forever just like the steamship, which replaced the sailing ship, and which has now also disappeared.

Van Schendel's vision is not completely somber, however, because his story is also about mastery and control, and from the outset it stresses the need to fight against despair. Not insignificantly, the owners of the ship are called Ten Hope, which explains why the ship's bow is adorned with a gilded statue representing the goddess of Hope. Her body is, in turn, decorated with a copper strip to which are affixed fourteen copper letters that spell out the motto *Nil desperandum*. It is in that context that the narrator remarks:

The strip and the letters were made of copper so that, even if the gilded surface disappeared, the motto would remain affixed to the ship (p.1).

It is this phrase which becomes the expression of Brouwer's philosophy. Regardless of the way he and his ship are treated, when finally he brings it back to home port, he expresses no bitterness at the decay, death and oblivion that must necessarily be his as well as his ship's fate. Surely such singular dedication is admirable, but it is also somewhat *outré*. Sentimentally speaking Brouwer may well be the hero of the novella, and in symbolic terms he undoubtedly expresses perfectly van Schendel's ideal: the organic unity of man, machine and matter. This modernized form of romanticism envisions *homo technicus* not just as a solitary exploiter and explorer of the universe; it also sees man, machine, and nature interacting in a harmonious and beneficial manner, until man and machine fall into decay and disuse and are re-absorbed by nature.

An altogether different type of relationship to the world is expressed by Brouwer's antagonist, Captain Wilkins. It is quite conceivable that as intertext for Wilkins and Brouwer's instant conflict, van Schendel used Melville's *Billy Budd*. But in *Billy Budd*, Claggart's hatred goes beyond the visceral and reaches into the homosexual realm, because Billy incarnates male beauty. Their conflict explodes into violence, and consequently Billy's life is sacrificed in the name of law and order.

Captain Wilkins' life assumes a pathetic dimension because he is consumed by divided loyalties. His mind and heart are on shore with his sickly wife and children. When he loses his children to death and his wife to madness, he takes to the bottle and eventually jumps overboard. He has always disliked Brouwer because "the latter carried in his soul the will to possess the ship, and from the start his look had made it impossible for him to be a good skipper" (p.31). Before Wilkins disappears, he apologizes to Brouwer. The sailmaker explains that "if luck is against one, one seeks to blame another person... hence neither one is to blame for the misunderstanding... if the captain is willing to shake hands, any other word will be superfluous" (p.32-33).

The Wilkins-Brouwer conflict never assumes tragic or cosmic dimensions, because their lives are meant to be seen as purely symbolic of different approaches to the world. On the one hand, Wilkin's story is part of the naturalistic tradition: he is regularly assaulted by disaster and family woes, which affect him initially only on a psychic level, but finally also on a physical level through the demon alcohol. The romantic tradition personified by Brouwer momentarily meets this naturalistic tradition in an encounter of Gothic dimensions. Wilkins and Brouwer accidentally encounter one another in the same graveyard, and that meeting leaves the captain with "horrible fantasies". Brouwer's distant "movements seem to him to be those of a ghost, and he becomes cold with fear" (p.31).

In conclusion, the captain's solitary suicide, and the sailmaker's and the ship's endless but eventful meanderings around the globe and their ultimate decay, indicate that van Schendel's novella is not meant to portray the consequences of a psychosexual drama, as was the case with Melville's *Billy Budd*. Van Schendel's story is meant to be illustrative of a stoic pessimism which is tinged with sentimental optimism. Certainly nature will devour the flesh, but in the interval we must dedicate our spirit and our energies solely to the objects of our love. There is no doubt that Wilkins' love for his family is destructive of others, but let us not forget that in the end even Brouwer's singular dedication saves neither him nor his beloved *Johanna Maria*. For van Schendel the value of a life begins but also ends with a singular obsessive devotion to one's fellow men or to one's environment. In positive terms, it can be said that for this writer duty translates into love and singular devotion. In negative terms, on the other hand, this philosophy can also result in servitude and even blind subservience. Nevertheless, since ultimately we are all consumed by weakness, disease, and old age and must all return to matter, our obsessions with matter can also be seen as possibly the most faithful reflection and expression of our own physical nature.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ "Idealism vs. Dialectics in Some Contemporary Theory". *Can. Rev. of Comp. Lit./Revue Can. de Lit. Comp.*, Sept. 1986, p.431.
- ² Princeton U.P., 1974, p.406.
- ³ Arthur van Schendel, *Het Fregatschip Johanna Maria*, Amsterdam, Muelenhoff Educatief, "Cahiers voor Letterkunde", 1968, p.9.
- ⁴ All translations are mine. All references to van Schendel's novella refer to the pagination of the Dutch edition. Page numbers are included at the end of the quotation.