

## Promoting Dutch Poetry in San Francisco Hanny Michaelis in English

In December of 1987, after a lengthy delay, my small Berkeley publisher, Twowindows Press, finally brought out *Against the Wind*, a volume of Hanny Michaelis' poems that I co-translated with Paul Vincent of University College, London. My attempts at promoting the book may illustrate the challenges Dutch literature in the United States - especially Dutch poetry - faces in order to get a hearing.

The book came out with little fanfare, one of those small press offerings that is in danger of instant oblivion. Interest in Dutch poetry may be slight, but even slighter is interest in the locally produced poetry put out by thousands of small presses. So often these presses are perceived as mere showcases for certain vain but not necessarily gifted friends of the publishers. Any small literary bookstore has dozens of such titles on display, and they are rarely sold.

How then to promote these English translations of Hanny Michaelis? How to keep them from falling into a deep well of indifference? I sent out review copies - and was soon promised a notice in *Women's Review of Books* - but no other critical attention seemed forthcoming. Besides, I wanted to take an active part in the process. What could I do?

My first effort was to have a wine-and-cheese book-signing party at a local bookstore. I invited friends, colleagues, acquaintances in the local Dutch community, and on a warm Sunday afternoon over a hundred people stood half-in, half-out of the little store in the California sunshine. It was a good party. My publisher was there and reported that close to 70 copies were sold. So far, so good.

But I knew that these sales were, so to speak, for me, and not for Michaelis or things Dutch. I longed to do something to promote the book, its contents as well as the larger literature it represented. So it occurred to me to go to a bookstore in my neighborhood which featured monthly "open-microphone" readings. I had watched open-microphone comedians in this comedy-happy city, but I had never gone to hear any impromptu readings

by writers.

I promptly went to the next such event at The Sunset Bookstore. A few minutes after starting time, I was in the presence of 10 people with manuscripts and none without. We were each other's only audience. This did not bode well for the cause of Dutch letters.

The first person to read was a grey-haired, grey-suited man with a narrow 1950's tie and a faraway look in his horn-rimmed glasses, who had written a novel that he delivered piecemeal in this bookstore at each reading. He must have memorized his work, because he never looked at his pages. To say what this chapter was about would be to distort it into coherence - suffice it that the FBI, the CIA, and other well-known persecutors of literary sensibilities like his own, figured very heavily in it. The moderator, a somewhat vacant-looking woman in faded jeans, signaled to him after 15 minutes that his time was up, and a collective, relieved shuffling and coughing ensued from the rest of us.

The next reader was a youngish man, shy, concerned with the environment, unsurprisingly hostile to real-estate developers, indignant in the sweetest tones possible. In the dusky, after-hours store, all of us sitting stiffly on crates of unpacked books, the reader standing mildly behind the cash register, I listened somewhat sleepily to the soft phrases occasionally lightly punctuated by the glimmer of an image.

The time for Michaelis had come at last. I said a few words about who she was and about Dutch writing and intoned her aphoristic work:

Pronouncements  
can be swept aside,  
dismissed, smothered  
in reassuring embraces.  
Still, they have  
the longest life and  
the last word.

It is impossible to say that the other writers heard me

any better than I heard them. They were polite, they applauded. No one asked where the book could be bought, but I told them anyway. One came over afterwards and asked if I thought my publisher would care to publish her manuscript.

My next outing was to go to the notorious Café Babar, on the edge of San Francisco's Mission district, a predominantly Hispanic area. I had heard that some very talented poets read their work weekly in this seedy bar, with the heavy drinkers in the front and the artists in a small smoky room in the back. When I came in, a squat, compact woman in stubbly cords was just winding up her reading by shouting, "...and most of all /I hate to spread my legs..."

Some applause, some whistles, some catcalls - the audience was a mass of moving, squirming bodies, barely visible in the haze of the black-walled room. A burly truck-driver type now read a neo-Beatnik poem in a loud, hortatory voice; someone whispered that he had been a disciple of Allen Ginsberg. Half-way through he started glaring at two women in the front row who, with their arms around each other, were having a fit of speed-freak giggles.

Again the cause of Dutch poetry had to be served. I tried to make my voice hard and loud, and unbuttoned my shirt - this was not the place for a wimpy academic approach:

Not rosy  
the color of my facts;  
a handful of dead sparrows  
and not a bird in sight.  
Still, I hear it sing,  
the thrush, herald of  
yet another spring,  
and promptly  
hope  
raises yet another head.

The audience was quiet but restive. A well-known poet in the audience who often sells her poetry for a dollar per volume in the neighborhood, her head in a formidable babushka, shouted suddenly, "Right on, sister!" A bombed-out looking man in the garb of Dissenting Vietnam Veteran gave a Yahoo whistle. All in all, a qualified success.

Next came Herman, a small, mild, sixtyish man, whose poems were all about the bus system. There was an ode to the No. 2, a sonnet to the M-trolley, and an elegy for the sadly discontinued Line 10. Herman had the crowd's heart, no question about it; they called out requests for the No. 7, the 28, the 43. He obliged one

and all.

Herman was followed by an aging punkish figure who read witty poems about his time in the (financial) rat race. Another man read a moving homage to Bob Kauffman, one of the lesser known but most revered Beat poets. His hair stood up in weird spikes and he had a magnificent voice, so it was hard to say what was the voice and what the poetry. While a marijuana cigarette was passed around 60's style, a young blonde surfer in a pair of expensive designer jeans spoke of "poetry therapy" in a Southern California accent and read some stunning lines. The evening was neatly rounded off by the woman who read at the beginning and now apostrophized her "clit".

The time had clearly come to go on the more academic rounds. The audience in the Comparative Literature lounge at the University of California in Berkeley bore little resemblance to the humanoids at Café Babar. Every hair in place, the graduate students of the 80's are a far cry from the unkempt of the 60's or the frumpy of the 50's. And this was serious business: questions about translatability abounded - we discussed "source" and "target" languages, Dutch syntax and American idioms, the feminism of non-feminist poets; in short, no academic stone was left unturned. Much as I enjoy these discussions, they have a way of swallowing up a reading and the poems with it. As the poet J.V. Cunningham once wrote, "Time to bury / Margin and page / In commentary." I attempted to indicate where the book was available, but clearly the students' thoughts were still with what Walter Benjamin or Vladimir Nabokov had said about translation.

Rather insistently, and identifying somewhat with the sentiment of the poem, I read:

Tonight I heard  
that the moon is not round  
but pear-shaped  
with at least two  
protuberances, perhaps  
even three. When later  
I looked outside  
a round white-glowing  
disk climbed out  
over the roofs  
and I detected in myself  
the same stubbornness  
with which I  
honor other  
dented illusions.

Meanwhile, my publisher phoned to ask if I had been

promoting the book. This was the only book he had published in the last three years, having fallen on hard times after a period of over-expansion, when for a brief time it seemed he had found success by printing fine editions of some of his offerings, and selling these beautifully executed volumes at substantial prices to collectors. He is a high-school teacher who has run the Press on the side, and he still has many of the hippieish ways of the Sixties. I had pressed him hard for three years to fulfill his promise to me to bring out the Michaelis, and he had often told me that "everything's cool, man" or that he "had one more job to finish" or that "he was waiting for some money" before he could finish my book. Once we were both leaning over the fence of his vegetable garden, like two farmers, and he said significantly that he was growing vegetables to save money. Suddenly, a robin flew down from a tree and started eating his seeds; he flew into a rage at the bird, and I didn't dare to bring up the book that day. Later he became evasive and elusive. Had it not been for my responsibilities to a hard-working co-translator, and for the help I got from the Stichting voor Vertalingen to get the firm of Van Oorschot's permission, and for the patient support of the poet, I doubt that I would have persisted.

But now the publisher clearly enjoyed sticking the needle into me. Our calls, heretofore initiated by me, had always been terse. Now *he* started calling, and a certain expansiveness set in; they grew more elaborate. He called me to say that since my book-signing four months ago, he had sold three - *zegge drie* - copies. He explained patiently that a small publisher can only rely on the author's contacts, and that surely I must know a number of academics who taught Dutch. I countered feebly that I thought that he should find a distributor instead of relying on his own non-existent advertising and promotion. He asked if I had given any readings and lectures. My answer that I had written to every academic in the U.S. who had anything to do with Dutch, and that I had indeed given readings, was met with a long, slightly reproachful silence. He was enjoying this.

So once more into the breach. My most recent attempt at promoting the book came at a full dress lecture I gave in Berkeley to the Dutch-American University League on a Saturday night. About 35 people came: students of Dutch at the University, retired Dutch people who live in the San Francisco area, and a number of Americans of Dutch descent. I spoke about the difficulties and pleasures of translation; I discussed the sticky problem of sound in poetry; I went into the question of modern poetry's obscurity.

To an attentive audience, I read such poems as:

A silence in which more  
than just time passes -  
eyes of lead - an arm  
which falls back half-way  
against its body: these  
are the signs that everything comes to pass  
as it should not.

In the middle of the lecture, a Berkeley street person wandered in and staggered to the podium and announced loudly that poetry was important, did I know that? His burned-out, LSD-ravaged look contrasted nightmarishly with the well-scrubbed, comfortable, attentive, eager-for-chat-at-the-reception-afterward faces. When he insisted on reading his own poetry, Prof. Snapper of Berkeley and I eased him toward the door, and he looked back surprisingly sweetly. Later, my audience flocked around me. (Was Prince Friso, then a student at Berkeley, in the audience? I never knew.) I got compliments, another invitation to speak. One man wanted some advice about *his* translations. A woman asked if Guido Gezelle was available in English. Some asked about the Stichting voor Vertalingen. One person took me on about my remark that a writer who has gone through the Holocaust may have good psychological reasons for *not* writing about the Holocaust. It was all incredibly satisfying, but, dear publisher, no orders! Three days after the lecture I got a call from him: "Someone with a Dutch accent telephoned to ask the price of *Against the Wind*, and when I told her it was eight dollars, she wanted to know if it would be available in *libraries* soon."

But this story's ending offers some sweet along with the bitter, for "The ways of low-pressure areas / are unfathomable / as those of fate," as Hanny Michaelis has written. Here in the high-pressure lands, reviews of the book suddenly started appearing. Not only was Joan Hawkins in *Women's Review of Books* full of praise for *Against the Wind*, but the noted poet and novelist Tom Clark wrote glowingly of Michaelis' "stirring power and depth" in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. A long, searching review-essay by Yann Lovelock in *Dutch Crossing* contained a section on the volume. And just recently, fine reviews in *Poetry Flash* and the American Association for Netherlandic Studies *Newsletter* have come out.

Some of this good news came to me on my return from summer vacation. Armed with it, I called the publisher to find out if these notices had stimulated any new orders. I couldn't reach him. There was no answer either to my written inquiries. I had known of his penchant for going off to the mountains, sometimes on

muleback. After almost two months, I finally reached him. He had clearly lost interest either in pursuing me or in his publishing ventures. He was back to being his old withholding self, and I had to squeeze all information out of him. Yes, he was moving "into the hills." How about the book? Were there more orders now that these good reviews had appeared? Well, yes. How many? "Oh, about fifty." How many copies are left, then?" "Oh, hard for me to say. Besides, Manfred, I'm disbanding the Press."

So after 21 years, Twowindows Press is no more. Lest the reader get the wrong impression, it was not the Michaelis volume that was the undoing of the Press. Of the 33 titles Twowindows had published, far too many were acts of love. *My Change of Scene: Contemporary Dutch and Flemish Poems in English Translation* (1969) remained one of his all-time best sellers, with around 900 copies sold. He had tired of the whole thing, he said. And he had found a new girl friend. And in his new house, he would be able to cultivate his vegetable garden instead of hassling with printers and paper and unpaid bills. And, after all is said and done, who can blame him?

Against the Wind: Selected Poems of Hanny Michaelis.  
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