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The Second World War in two novels by Maarten 'tHart

Maarten 't Hart, one of the best-known authors and public intellectuals in the Netherlands today, was a war baby. This has had a significant influence on his work. As he was born in the fall of 1944, he has no personal recollections of the Second World War. However, he grew up at a time when memories of the war were fresh, when many Netherlanders were still concerned with the issues of who had done what during the war, who had worked for the resistance, who had helped *onderduikers*, mostly Jews hiding from the authorities, and, perhaps most importantly, who had been *fout*, that is, who had collaborated with the Germans. Clearly the boy Maarten paid attention to what his elders were saying, whether it was hard information or gossip, and much of what he heard eventually has found its way into his novels.

A major reason for 't Hart's popularity as a writer – his books, both fiction and nonfiction, sell in the tens of thousands in the Netherlands, and translations of his work enjoy an excellent sale in Germany – is his rootedness in milieu and physical location. Raised in a Calvinist working-class family in Maassluis, a fishing town west of Rotterdam, he did well in school and attended an elite secondary school in Vlaardingen. He then studied zoology at the University of Leiden, where he subsequently taught, and carried out ethological research with rats and sticklebacks. For the last twenty years-plus he has been a full-time author, living in considerable comfort in the village of Warmond just outside Leiden.

Maarten 't Hart scored early successes with his collection of short stories, *Het vrome volk* (1974), and his breakthrough novel, *Een vlucht regenwulpen* (1979), translated into English as *A Flight of Curlews*. In these works he found his voice and introduced the subjects that continue to inform much of his work. Among them are the stultifying influence of orthodox Calvinism and the need to free oneself of it. It is ironic, however, that 't Hart's imagery and references are frequently drawn from Protestantism. He knows the Reformed Church and the Bible inside out. This is evident in the novels I wish to discuss here, two works from a writer at the height of his powers.

The first, *Het woeden der gehele wereld* (1993) is an extraordinarily effective combination of Bildungsroman, holocaust story, and murder mystery¹ that may well be the author's best work of fiction. Why it has not yet appeared in an English translation is a question that I touched on in a paper presented at the CAANS meeting last year,² one that continues to mystify me. The success of *Het woeden* led 't Hart to write *De nakomer* (1996), focusing on a character who made an appearance in *Het woeden*, the pharmacist Simon Minderhout.³ In the first novel, the Second World War serves as a plot device as well as a symbol: the raging of the whole world, to translate the title literally, the global war that engulfed the Netherlands from the invasion in May 1940 to the liberation five years later. In the second novel, the war is central.

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Except for a prologue, *Het woeden* is told by the composer Alexander Goudveyl in his middle age. He is registering memories going back to his ninth year, that he is finally able to connect and give meaning to. The prologue centres on an event that takes place on May 14, 1940, when a small fishing boat, the *Majuba 2*, sets out from Maassluis to fish for herring and, not coincidentally, to ferry three Jewish couples and an Englishwoman to safety in England. The organizer of the escape attempt is Minderhout, although he himself stays in Maassluis. Alas, not far off the Dutch coast the *Majuba 2* is intercepted by a German submarine. The crew and passengers are forced into the lifeboats, watch as their boat is sunk, and have to row back to Hook of Holland.

As he gets older, Goudveyl, the only child of a miserly scrap dealer and his equally miserly wife, hears more and more about the *Majuba 2*. One of the boat's crew is a neighbour; another is a local policeman, Arend Vroombout (the skipper's younger brother), to whose murder in 1956 the twelve-year-old Goudveyl is an ear-though not an eye witness. The Englishwoman, Alice, becomes his piano teacher; her two sons Herman and William, both born during the war, become his friends. He is allowed to practice on Minderhout's Bösendorfer grand piano. When Goudveyl goes to study pharmacy in Leiden, he meets Professor Bram Edersheim and his wife, one of the couples who were seeking to escape to England and who later spent three years in hiding. He already knows that one of the other two couples committed suicide together soon after their return to Maassluis. From the Edersheims he learns that the husband of the third couple, the German-born

violinist and conductor Aaron Oberstein, went into hiding and survived the war, but that his wife Ruth was apprehended late in 1944 in Rotterdam and perished.

From age eight, when some schoolboys nearly drown him in a public swimming pool, Goudveyl has been obsessed with the thought that God is seeking to kill him – the reference is to Exodus 4:24 – and he comes to believe that the person who killed Vroombout may become God's agent and kill *him* too. It is therefore important to him to know who murdered Vroombout, so that he may know whom to guard against. If he were to know *why* the policeman was murdered, moreover, it might help him identify the murderer, so this becomes a matter of great interest to him. Over time he decides that there must have been a connection between the murder in 1956 and the attempted escape in 1940.

Vroombout was a blackmailer and a pedophile. Furthermore, Goudveyl hears from Minderhout that Vroombout, who had become a policeman in Rotterdam during the war, collaborated and, in Minderhout's opinion, should have gone to prison for it. Later Goudveyl learns from Vroombout's mother that her son was seeking to recover the cost of the *Majuba 2* from the four surviving would-be refugees and annually sent them dunning letters. Did one or more of them decide to silence him? His mother believes so. In any case, there are several possible motives for the murder.

Circumstantial evidence leads Goudveyl to the conclusion that Oberstein was the murderer. The conductor, who emigrated to Australia in the early 1950s, does not seem to have been in the Netherlands

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since leading the Rotterdam Philharmonic the day before Vroombout's murder late in 1956. Still, in part to make it less likely that Oberstein will seek to kill him, Goudveyl rather naively marries his older daughter Joanna (by his second wife), who has come to study voice at the Conservatory in The Hague. Goudveyl himself, having inherited a small fortune from his parents, abandons the study of pharmacy for that of music.

In the early 1990s Goudveyl finally meets his father-in-law, who did not come to his daughter's wedding and has never returned to the Netherlands since. (Goudveyl, who hates to travel, has made no effort to go abroad to meet Oberstein.) During a dinner party for the conductor also attended by Minderhout, the Edersheims, and Alice, Goudveyl accuses Oberstein of having murdered Vroombout, and the others of being his accomplices. Oberstein denies it; so do the others, although less convincingly. After dinner Oberstein and Goudveyl go for a long walk, during which the conductor tells *his* story.

As he listens, Goudveyl starts to make sense of his scattered memories of events and conversations. Ultimately he has to face two devastating possibilities and one unacceptable certainty. The first possibility is that one of his parents may have been Vroombout's murderer; the second is that they may, with Vroombout's connivance, have betrayed Ruth Oberstein in 1944 in order to steal her child. The certainty is that he is not the person he has always thought himself to be.

I thought: "This is too crazy for words, this is complete, absolute, total madness, things like this happen in opera, in *The Marriage of Figaro*, but not in real life, do they? All

right, God seeks to kill us, but surely His taste can't be *this* bad? ... God almighty," I thought, "God almighty." And I also thought: "As long as I remain silent, it isn't true, it hasn't happened, nobody needs to know about it."⁴

Dealing with the shattering issue that Oberstein's tale has raised is too difficult for Goudveyl, and although one senses that both men have realized the truth, their decision not to confront it makes psychological sense. Their conversation shifts to Oberstein's proposal that Goudveyl compose an opera, and then to astronomy and the possibility that Sirius may become a supernova, which will mean the end of the earth.

"When Sirius explodes," he said, "we'll still have rather more than eight-and-a-half years to go. That's how many light-years we are from Sirius, so that's how long it'll take before the heavenly fire vaporizes us."

"For all we know, Sirius may have exploded four, five years ago," I said.

"Let's hope so," he said, "the best thing for this earth with its memories of gas chambers would be to disappear without a trace."

Life must go on, however. As they rejoin the others, Joanna comes towards them and looks up at them anxiously. The final line is vintage 't Hart. "*Don't worry*," said her father, giving her an affectionate little tap on the upper arm, "your husband and I have agreed that he's going to compose an opera, I'm going to conduct it, and you're going to sing the leading role."⁵

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In *Het Woeden* the war is like a dark cloud hanging over Goudveyl. In *De nakomer*, the war is a far more dominating presence. It is, in fact, central to Minderhout's life. In his mid-twenties when the Germans invade the Netherlands, he is an outsider in Maassluis, where he has recently taken over his uncle's pharmacy. As a consequence, but also because of his association with the failed escape attempt, he is not included in a resistance group that takes form at an early stage. This is just as well: discretion is in short supply among the men who do join it, and they come to a bad end. Minderhout makes no attempt to join another resistance group, however, and, as he confesses to his friend Oberstein half a century later, he doesn't even shelter Jews or other *onderduikers*. Since his pharmacy, above which he lives, is very close to the police station, this decision is prudent but he knows it is also far from courageous.

Minderhout does render occasional assistance to a young woman whom he knows only as Hillegonda, and whom he understands to be a courier for a resistance group. He falls in love with her and wants to see more of her. His efforts to discover where she lives take him to Schiedam, a town just west of Rotterdam. There, in the summer of 1944, he becomes aware of the doctrinal struggle that split the Reformed Church during the war.⁶ He already knows that the courier is associated with a group of young men who presumably belong to the resistance; he now learns that all of them are also involved in the church struggle. Hoping to use them to find out where Hillegonda lives turns out badly. Quite possibly taking him to be an informer or in any case someone who is taking an unwanted interest in them, they lead him into a trap and give

him a near-fatal beating. It goes almost without saying that he does not get to see Hillegonda any more.

At age eighty Minderhout suddenly and unexpectedly has cause to relive those events. To his complete surprise he finds himself accused in the media of having betrayed those young men back in 1944, with the result that all eight of them were executed. Although his name is ultimately more or less cleared, Minderhout does have to confront his own pusillanimity during the war. He also learns that the source of the rumour is none other than Hillegonda herself, now a widow nearing eighty years of age. The final chapter of the book describes their meeting, and their attempt to square two very different interpretations of the same events. Like life itself, the book's ending does not tie everything up nicely, let alone happily. Generally speaking, 't Hart does not do happy endings. Philosophical, yes: happy, no.

In *De nakomer* the war is something experienced directly rather than heard about, a thunderstorm lived through rather than a dark cloud. And, having experienced it, Minderhout's view of it is ambivalent. At age eighty he thinks of his father, who did not reach that age, and he is reminded of Psalm 90, verse 10: "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away." This in turn reminds him of verse 15 of the same psalm: "Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil." He then wonders whether it is possible to see the war years in that way:

Were years like that the best years in a person's life? This much was certain: those five years seemed like five centuries compared with, say, the years from 1945 to 1950. He remembered almost nothing about those years, whereas the five that preceded it were engraved in his brain, even though in his own life almost nothing spectacular had happened. Sad, miserable, terrible, but also glorious years, years crammed with *real* events, years in which people failed or conquered, or failed *and* conquered.⁷

Is it only when people are faced with death that they feel truly alive? Is it true that, when faced with genuine threats, people see life more clearly and focus on the essentials? Was the Second World War necessary to learn what one was really made of? In the person of Minderhout, 't Hart raises these questions but does not really answer them. Minderhout believes he failed the test of character posed by the war, but he has grown old enough to accept his failure.

At the very end he quotes the opening verse of Psalm 131: "Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me." This strikes a note of realism as well as resignation. Minderhout is aware of larger issues, but he decides not to confront them or to try to solve the mysteries of life. Like Goudveyl, he shies away from the truth when it threatens to overwhelm him. Both novels are, in different ways "about" the Second World War and its effects on human behaviour. Both end in a certain rueful acceptance.

Notes

¹ Maarten 't Hart, *Het woeden der gehele wereld*, Amsterdam, Uitgeverij De Arbeiderspers, 1993.

² Michiel Horn, "The Trials of Literary Translation: Dutch to English." CAANS Conference, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Sask., May 2007.

³ Maarten 't Hart, *De nakomer*, Amsterdam, Uitgeverij De Arbeiderspers, 1996.

⁴ *Het woeden der gehele wereld*, 278. My translation.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 282. My translation.

⁶ Reina Wiskerke, "De onvermijdelijke én onnodige Vrijmaking," *Nederlands Dagblad*, 18 December 2004. <http://www.nd.nl/htm/dossier/vrijmaki/artikelen/041218b.htm>

⁷ *De nakomer*, 177. My translation.