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‘Huge, Indomitable’
Elisabeth Eybers

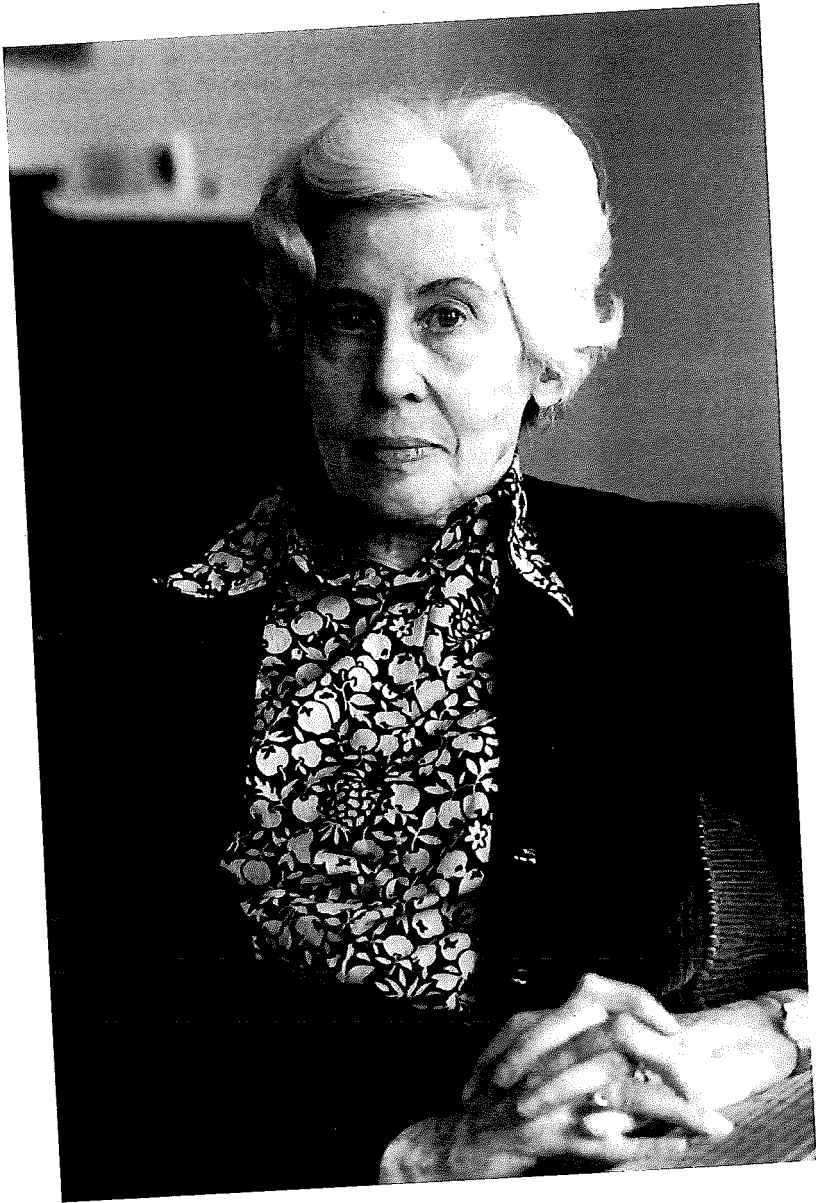
1915-2007

ENA JANSEN

ON 11 JULY 1957, the idiosyncratic and respected Amsterdam publisher G.A. van Oorschot sent a telegram to Elisabeth Eybers in Johannesburg: “Your collection just appeared”. At his request she had made a selection from her previous book in November 1956. *Versamelde gedigte* (Collected Poems) was to become one of the bestsellers in his list and moreover was to radically alter the life of the South African poet. Eybers was forty-two at the time and had already published six very successful volumes of poetry in Afrikaans. She was, in fact, the first woman ever to have published a collection of poetry in the young African language, *Belydenis in die skemering* (Confession in the Dusk, 1936). She was also the first female poet to win the prestigious Hertzog Prize. In May 1961, less than four years after the publication of Van Oorschot’s anthology and her next book, *Neerslag* (Sediment), Eybers moved to Amsterdam after her divorce.

Almost thirty years later, in 1990, Eybers said in an interview with Tomas Lieske and Willem Jan Otten: “Looking back, leaving South Africa was crazy. (*short silence*) If I hadn’t written the poems, I don’t know if I would have gone to the Netherlands.” She was to spend the second half of her life in Amsterdam, publish a further fourteen books of poetry and receive both the Constantijn Huygens Prize (1978) and the P.C. Hooft Prize (1991). The poems she wrote in Amsterdam never alienated her from her South African readers. On the contrary, her collections always appeared simultaneously in Cape Town and Amsterdam. She was read and praised in South Africa, too. In today’s jargon she easily qualifies as a ‘transnational’ writer.

On the appearance of *Versamelde gedigte* in 1957, it was immediately striking how naturally Eybers’ work was incorporated by reviewers into the corpus of Dutch poetry. The omnibus was received exceptionally favourably by all regular poetry critics in influential newspapers and magazines. They had no particular difficulties with the Afrikaans, and everyone was at pains to put the linguistic affinity with Dutch in as positive a light as possible. The accessibility of Eybers’ themes was also constantly stressed. An extra encouragement for Dutch readers was the praise lavished on her as one of the greatest poets in the Dutch language-area – “still largely undiscovered by the Dutch”. C. Bittremieux (*NRC*, 7 September 1957) compared her to M. Vasalis, with whom in his view she shared the “sense of the magic and danger of everyday life”. He appreciated the fact that she



“preferred to write about a number of facts at once ordinary and overpowering: birth and death, sex, motherhood, the divine, hope, fear, memory”. Thanks to “increasing formal mastery” she was able, he felt, to root the emotion more and more deeply in experience.

Pierre H. Dubois was one of the few critics to ask himself what exactly it was about Eybers’ work that made it so acceptable in the Netherlands. He considered the publishing history of her collections to be very significant: the introduction of her work by Van Oorschoot and the fact that the publishers, Em. Querido’s Uitgeverij in Amsterdam, invariably put her all her books from *Balans* onwards directly on the Dutch market in its ‘luxury’ series. The fact that they were in Afrikaans was no obstacle, since they were recognizably Dutch words, with only minor spelling differences, such as in *Dryfsand* (Quicksand), *Teësprak* (Contradiction), *Nuweling* (Novice) or *Respyt* (Respite). But the main reason was surely the “recognizability of her poetry”, as Dubois said when Eybers was awarded the P.C. Hooft Prize in 1991: “This recognizability, of form, tone and general human content, was what first established her reputation with the Dutch poetry-loving public; paradoxically enough more because it sounded familiar than because it sounded new. (...) Her strong sense of form was so compatible with the Dutch poetic tradition that the reader almost lost sight of the fact that he was reading a different, foreign idiom, as unusual and not always easily comprehensible words reminded him from time to time.” In its report, the P.C. Hooft Prize jury also pointed out that Eybers belonged in the Dutch literary tradition. Jury member Remco Ekkers summarized it – in a highly simplified form – as follows: “She is actually very Dutch. Her work is rooted in our poetry. Poets here point to her influence, and she has pointed to the influences of Dutch poets on her work. Our conclusion was: she’s one of us.”

While many critics have stressed the *ease* with which Dutch readers can penetrate her work, in 1991 Kees Fens emphasized the *effort* readers have to make to grasp the meaning of her poems: “For thirty years a poet has been concerned to both affirm and deny her alien status [...] in poetry in a language that is not our own. That process of alienness which has become a true identity without denying oneself, is unique. And it cannot have happened very frequently before that we have found ourselves and our country described and recognized ourselves in what for us is mirror writing.”

Remarkably enough, Eybers became increasingly well-known and popular, even after the Netherlands rescinded its Cultural Accord with South Africa. That accord, concluded in 1951, had been frozen in 1977 by the Den Uyl cabinet in response to the Soweto uprising (1976), the death of Steve Biko (12 September 1977), and the banning of organizations actively opposed to apartheid, and in 1981, under pressure from numerous Dutch activist organizations, was unilaterally and officially terminated. Despite increasingly negative public attitudes to white Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, Eybers continued to write in Afrikaans, the language prized by Adriaan van Dis and later by Tom Lanoye and Gerrit Komrij. The simultaneous presence of both Africa and Europe, there and here, had become a feature of her work. Her “mighty fatherland” as opposed to a neatly tended “land of tables” represents in particular space versus restriction, the indomitable versus the regulated, the past versus the present. In ‘Opgawe’ (‘Mission’) from uit *Noodluik* (Escape Hatch, 1989) these contrasts are expressed as follows:

*The space, the mystery, the tragedy, commotion
of a huge, indomitable continent
were in my every fiber, how could I shrink,
display environmentally correct emotion.*

After the release of Nelson Mandela and the first democratic elections in 1994, South Africa returned to favor with a vengeance. In his anthology *De Afrikaanse poëzie in 1000 en enige gedichten* (Afrikaans Poetry in a Thousand and One Poems, 1998) Komrij praised “that ethereal, monosyllabic quality, that poignancy of Afrikaans”, as he had once heard his mother sing the song ‘Sarie Marais’, and he had recognized that in Eybers. “That sparseness yet suppleness, that cross between fear and sarcasm, it seems a language made for poetry.”

For half a century Elisabeth Eybers was the Afrikaans poetic voice par excellence in the Low Countries. For years, it was the only Afrikaans poetic voice - joined later by that of Breyten Breytenbach - in the Dutch domain, a domain where other poets like Wilma Stockenström, Antjie Krog, Henning Pieterse, Charl-Pierre Naudé and Gert Vlok Nel were only welcome after 1990. Now South Africans regularly appear at Poetry International, Winternachten and other events in the Netherlands. Even though Eybers never performed in public, she kept a place open for them.

A striking feature of her last four collections is that they are bilingual: all the Afrikaans poems have English versions. As a young girl she had written in English, her mother’s language, but the fact that she also started to do this at the end of her life was all about the language game with which the old poet whiled away the time (see the title *Tydverdryf/ Pastime* from 1996). On 1 December 2007, Elisabeth Eybers died in her house on Stadionkade in Amsterdam. She had lived exactly half her ninety-two years in South Africa and the other half in Amsterdam: an exceptionally well-balanced life. Her last collection was *Valreep/ Stirrup-cup*, published in February 2005 when she turned 90. She wrote her last poem a year later; it was printed in her obituary:

*Theology may claim
the soul survives through grace
but personally I wish
to vanish without trace.*