

**On the Absence of Nature:
Writing on Nature and Ecocriticism in the Netherlands**

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Dutch literature is a literature of city dwellers.¹ No wonder, some say: there is hardly any nature left. All that remains, sighs the poet, is “A little wood, the size of a postage stamp/ A hill, residences stuck onto it.” Who cares? “Leave nature to those empty or contented.”² Indeed: the Romantic awe for nature has never really rooted in the nation, and the notion of the sublime is absurdly inappropriate to the region’s flat, muddy meadows. Nowadays, the dominant discourse in the Netherlands insists on understanding the country as an urban area. The Dutch sense of nature springs from a culture that sees itself first and foremost as sober and moderate, a self-made land of pragmatic morality and commerce. As such, it tends to shy away from great political or religious gestures.

And yet, in the Dutch cultural imagination, nature emerges in a rather absolutist guise: it either appears as emptiness, or as absolute otherness. Ecocritically-minded writers point at this remarkable paradox: a country that prides itself of having created itself through inventive, exhausting feats of engineering appears to be hardly interested in its own natural landscape as the historical witness of centuries of interaction between men and nature. Instead, it tends to see the landscape as the sign of the *absence* of a meaningful history, and of the absence of nature itself. Nature conservation consists in the creation of a (supposed) primeval wilderness in designated nature parks, reviving a decidedly un-Dutch romantic myth of wilderness (Schouten, van Toorn).

Up to now, these paradoxes have hardly been explored from an ecocritical point of view. The first conference dedicated to the field of ecocriticism in the Netherlands, in January 2010, counted (almost) *no* presentations on the literary imagination of the Dutch natural

¹ A statement in 1986 by the prolific writer and biologist Maarten 't Hart (1944), who can count as one of the very few Dutch nature writers. For reasons of conciseness, I will not discuss the (relevant) field of Dutch nature poetry in this brief overview of Dutch writing on nature, or Flemish nature poetry and prose, even though that forces me to neglect great nature poets such as Ida Gerhardt (1905-1997) and Guido Gezelle (1830-1899).

² Translation by Sakaama and Atmo of a classic poem by J.C. Bloem (1887–1966), “De Dapperstraat”: Natuur is voor tevreden en legen./En dan: wat is natuur nog in dit land?/Een stukje bos, ter grootte van een krant/Een heuvel met wat villaatjes ertegen”. For translation and comments in English, see <http://www.xs4all.nl/~driek/dapperstraat.html>

environment. I want to argue that it is nevertheless possible to speak of a Dutch ecocritical approach, even if its advocates do not describe their own work in these terms. Dutch ecocriticism can be found in a variety of literary studies, but also, more recently, in a great many “minor” texts (columns in papers, magazines and journals, essays, local history) that are dedicated to the Dutch natural and rural landscapes, plants, and especially animals (for example by Koos van Zomeren, Willem van Toorn, Rudy Kousbroek, biologists and writers Dick Hillenius, Midas Dekkers, and historical writer Geert Mak).

Let me begin my sketch of the field by tracing the origins of the bleak view of Dutch nature as non-existent. It can be seen as springing from a much broader cultural critique, that in many western nations first manifested itself in Romanticism. Apart from those who found the sublime in colonial nature (Beekman), however, Dutch writers were attracted by the idyllic, rather than the sublime; and the only small movement that could be called Romanticist in the Byronesque sense of the term was short-lived (1830 to 1840).³ One of the reasons is that industrialization occurred relatively late, only in the last quarter of the 19th century. In this less excessive social and political climate, the need for a cultural critique, and for escape, was less urgent. Thus, the respectable Dutch bourgeois elite frowned upon their fellow countrymen’s early nineteenth-century Romantic passion for nature, as they associated it with the misplaced *French* inclination towards revolutions (van Zonneveld). When, towards the end of the nineteenth century, a late form of Romanticism came into its own in the Dutch literary movement of the “Tachtigers” (around 1880), these young writers sought in nature an individualist retreat from oppressive morality. But their imagination of nature was not unambivalently positive: it was complicated by the new evolutionary approach that theorized life as subject to the harsh laws of the struggle for life, natural selection, heredity, and possibly degeneration. Though in the Netherlands Darwinism was widely accepted as a moral discourse, one that could well be reconciled with Christian norms and values, its reception also led to a widely shared cultural pessimism (Kemperink 43-44). That the utopian promises of a return to nature were hard to realize without facing the problems inherent in human nature became clear in a social experiment by Frederik van Eeden, the least individualistic, and the most outspoken environmentalist advocate of the “Tachtigers” movement. Inspired by the American Henry David Thoreau to create his own Dutch

³ See publications by Lemaire, Kemperink and van Zonneveld.

experimental Walden (1898-1907), he bitterly failed in his effort to use nature as a space of social reform (van Loon).

This pessimism was reinforced by a tenacious tradition in environmental thinking in the Netherlands, systems ecology. This organicist approach understands nature as a self-regulating, closed, balanced system, which will inevitably be threatened by human intrusion. Shaped since the early twentieth century in interdisciplinary debates (in which Frederik van Eeden participated), the Dutch version of systems ecology is still dominant today, in spite of the fact that it has been convincingly falsified as a scientific theory. Its pastoralism, however, is seductive to a general audience, and its message that *nature is best left alone* offers policy makers a welcome strategy for environmental protection (De Jong, Keulartz).

When in the second half of the twentieth century the pace of industrialization and urbanization increased rapidly, the sentiment intensified. Natural environment and human society were seen as at odds with each other, and Dutch literature lingered on the ugliness of its destroyed landscapes. The editor of a collection of (very rare!) Dutch garden writing remarks that after 1945, everything remotely idyllic has been banished from literature – and her collection of bitter, gothic, and somber narratives stands as proof (Engelen). Thus, nature was generally seen as an organic, timeless realm outside society – a realm that in the Netherlands was virtually destroyed.

I will discuss three different literary and ecocritical responses to this bleak imagination. In the first place, we find social and political ecological fictional and non-fictional efforts to re-inscribe historical and cultural meanings into the modern landscape. Several writers engage with the cultural critique that modernization has robbed the landscape of its cultural significance, and thus left it empty (most famously articulated by philosopher and anthropologist Ton Lemaire in 1970). In response, some philosophers (Hans Achterhuis) and writers (Willem van Toorn, Koos van Zomeren) insist that the Dutch natural landscape still retains its cultural and historical value; as van Toorn argues, its value lies in its very *readability* as a historical space that is shaped by the people who lived in it. This social ecological view opposes the dominant Dutch environmental policy of recreating an “authentic,” primordial nature. This “new nature” is seen as the artificial result of the neo-capitalist drive to produce a commercially interesting nature. In this policy, van Toorn argues, *nature* is disengaged from *landscape*, to the detriment of both (42). In Greg Garrard’s ecocritical terms, van Toorn protests against the fact that an aesthetic of *dwelling* (as a responsible interaction with the landscape one inhabits) is replaced by a commercialized version of the aesthetics of *tourism* (such as the pastoral and the sublime). However, these

critics, who insist on seeing nature as an historical dimension of the landscape, find themselves in an impossible position. Willem van Toorn sighs, sarcastically, that it is no wonder that very few writers in the Netherlands choose to write on the landscape. “For that will easily result into in something political, and as an artist, you will by no means want to burn your fingers” (41).⁴ Apparently, in the present-day polarized Dutch climate, even remarks on the natural landscape will be understood as a (presumedly leftist) party political, self-interested interference with a pastoral dream. The Dutch tradition of pillarization has resulted in a greater ability to *identify* and *essentialize* (cultural, political) differences, than to acknowledge their *historical* nature, their nuances and interdependences, and to work through conflicts (Koenis 74; Gowricharn 103). Any attempt to *historicize* something that is seen as an essence will therefore easily be defined as political. As nature is understood as absolute, ahistorical, spiritual/religious goodness and authenticity, valuable only if it is untainted, any critique of that view is seen as “political.” The more nuanced historical approach that is now tentatively being articulated goes against the grain.⁵

In the second place, I discern a phenomenologically inclined literary interest in nature as life’s very materiality, especially through opposing mystification (van Zomeren, Kessels). The insistence on the importance of scientifically correct biological details that can be found in the work by prolific writer/biologist Maarten ‘t Hart may serve as one example from the 1970s-80s. Recently, a comparable, more outspoken strategy has been presented by nature writer Koos van Zomeren. Firmly opposed to all efforts to mystify the world, he criticizes people who seek logical, causal meanings where reality has none to offer (van Eeden 93; Soeting 74). He understands human beings as *embodied*, shaped by their surroundings. Men consist of their memory, he says, and memory is spatial; therefore, landscape and the human beings who inhabit the landscape are one (van Zomeren 67). His commitment to the basic vital “stupidity” of nature (van Eeden 104) is a means to reconnect to the world’s materiality. This “materialist turn” is a highly significant move. It ties in with a larger project of moving away from the duality between, on the one hand, a discursive understanding of nature (religious, political, moral), and, on the other hand, a scientific approach, towards a

⁴ In the original: “.. wie houdt zich in schrijvend Nederland nu bezig met zoiets als het landschap. Dat krijgt al gauw bijna iets politieks, en daar moet je als kunstenaar vooral je vingers niet aan branden.”

⁵ A wonderful example of a historical approach to landscape can be found in the work by Dutch visual artist, musician and writer Armando, who experiences the landscape around the transit camp Amersfoort (in World War 2) as guilty, because the trees had been silent, passive witnesses of evil (see van Alphen for an excellent analysis).

recognition of the inevitable intertwining of the aesthetic, cultural, social, phenomenological, and ecological significations of nature (Keulartz, Kockelkoren). We could well relate this debate on nature to the recent predicament of Dutch literature, which, after 1980, begins to lose its earlier cultural and social significance. In response, writers “in their own terms, individually, but nevertheless in large numbers, appear to search for the same thing, that is: a new interaction with the world outside the domain of literature [...] Their problem was something like the unreality of the real” (Goedkoop 268-69). Among other reactions, some writers evade the dualism of real/unreal altogether, focus on their daily experiences of their immediate environment, and thus create a sharpened sense of being alive (Goedkoop 269). An example is a recent novel by Marie Kessels, *Ruw* (2009), describing the breathtakingly sensual (tactile, auditory, olfactory) exploration of her urban environment by a woman who has lost her eyesight by an accident. Writing from a radical dwelling perspective, Kessels refuses to differentiate between destroyed nature and alienating urban surroundings. Thus, she restores her readers’ sense of the materiality of their environment. Another example may be found in a short novel by painter/writer Anton Valens, *Vis* (2009), which continues the Dutch literary tradition of depicting the struggle with the sea, graphically evoking the modern experience of professional sea fishing.

Thirdly (but not finally), some daring work revives Romantic and non-western sensibilities, evoking nature as an indomitable site of vitality and sexuality that breaks through all oppressive discursive and institutional efforts to control and divide humanity. An outstanding Dutch writer with a Moroccan background, Hafid Bouazza, passionately opposes the notion of the Dutch environment as empty, vulnerable, and exhausted. His novels often focus on the multicultural urban landscape (including its parks), presenting it as an intense, exuberant space of vitality and boundless transformation that, through sheer sexual force, brings out the plant and animal energies in its inhabitants (*Salomon* 2001, *Paravion* 2003). Without adopting ecocritical terms, an excellent critical essay on one of his stories has brought out the great productivity of his nature metaphors as a means of subverting the discourses of Dutch multiculturalism (De Graef and Louwerse).⁶

Through these pathbreaking columns, essays, interviews and other critical work, the field of Dutch ecocriticism is beginning to take shape.

⁶ On the imagination of the Dutch landscape in Bouazza and other migrant writers, see also Hoving.

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