



Arjan Peters – In defiance of forgetting Maarten Maartens

There is one great advantage to forgetfulness: you can keep on rediscovering things. And if your forgetfulness has taken on really serious proportions, you can even mistake them for actual discoveries. A similar phenomenon has occurred in recent years in the Dutch literary world. One after another, publishers allow us to rediscover old masters, reprinting books that were once successful but which nobody knows anymore, and pointing us in the direction of forgotten gems. Publishers who are prepared to reanimate a lapsed title even receive subsidies. Just to take my own situation: when Meulenhoff publishers asked me – as curator of their ‘Schatkamer’ (treasure house) – to have some titles from the fund reprinted last year, I could never have expected that this additional job would take me to fashionable literature festivals and prompt a book journal to come and interview me.

Although the rediscovery trend is a harmless phenomenon, we should note that there are a great many works that we can no longer presume to be known. In September, I will be conjuring up a book by Jan Wolkers that happens to be called ‘Terug naar Oegstgeest’. His widow Karina is happy that the book will soon be available again. As am I, of course, but in my case this happiness goes with a shake of the head. If the famous, avidly read Jan Wolkers must be regarded as forgotten and a suitable candidate for rediscovery only ten years after his death, it says something about the poor memory of the Dutch reader.

Looking further back – a whole century ago – then it is more a question of how a couple of authors have managed to survive (Couperus, and for literature students the ‘Tachtigers’), rather than why authors have disappeared (as seems to be customary). The Dutch do not like to look back and do not look after their classics. It is similar to how we deal with our dead, preferring to cremate them and scatter their ashes, or bury them but clear away the grave after a few years – as in all honesty we no longer visited it anyway.

Good afternoon, and welcome to this day devoted to Maarten Maartens, who has now been dead for a hundred years. Yes, he is forgotten, we do not read him anymore and you never see his name crop up in a column or lecture. Much has been written about him as the forgotten writer who created a furore abroad, and partly because of that and partly because he sometimes wrote critical stories about the Netherlands and the Dutch, was never given a warm reception over here. This shifts the blame from our own shoulders, as it were. He was personally responsible for not belonging. But I would like to start by arguing that we should search for the explanation first of all in the mentality outlined above; not so much that of his contemporaries, but rather that of the later generations. We do not usually take the initiative of rediscovering a good old writer ourselves. We prefer to buy one of today’s bestsellers, however awful it might be. It may possibly be true that most of us are rather indifferent to literature and the conservation of this treasure. We are not so eager for surprises. Zonheuvel forms a wonderful exception to this.

To some extent, we resemble ‘The Hollanders at Home’ from the title of one of Maarten Maartens’ articles, which was written in 1908 for an American audience. Maartens sketches an affluent, contented

people. The woman is a housewife, and ‘the average Dutchman, or Dutchwoman is not consumed by any passion to rise, socially’. In the Netherlands, we are not familiar with gossip magazines, as nobody needs to know what someone from a higher class is getting up to. We are cosmopolitan, but we also read and argue too much. And we all skate, which cheers up all the Protestants for a while. ‘A thaw comes; and we all look solemn again. For the Dutch are not a joyful people.’

It is a quiet sketch, with a lot of truth in it. Although Maartens is not judgmental, neither is he full of praise. He appears only to record, as if he stands outside everything, yet you sense that he feels part of it. The Hollanders are contented, even if there is reason for discontent. They keep on arguing and discussing, and forget to enjoy things. And when they do glide around on their skates, it is only for a little while, as life is actually no fun at all, of course, and has to be taken seriously.

Jovial with a sinister undertone. That is Maarten Maartens’ style. ‘Jan Kees, the Dutch farmer’ also opens in that almost journalistic, informative tone. The Dutch farmer’s introspection and religious disputes, and the nature that surrounds him, suggest that he is made for Protestantism, or in Maartens’ words, ‘For only excitement the constant fear of the possible “dyke-break” and the certain hell’. Note that here hell is described as excitement, which clearly indicates a certain degree of sarcasm.

Which is fortunate, as this lends a special overtone to Maartens’ stories. On the second page, Maartens writes a conversation between a typical farmer’s family. Father and mother are drinking tea and reading the Bible, and still remember well their one moment of amusement long, long ago, at the golden wedding anniversary of the man’s parents!

Yes, their son has left home and gone to America. America is like death itself. There, everything is big, and in Holland everything is small. All sorts of products come here from America, edible ones too, in large quantities and even cheaper than we can produce in Holland.

And then, on page three, Maartens draws the harsh conclusion: the farmers are being ground down and the young men are leaving for the city and voting for demagogues who promise things that the scorned capital cannot pay for. And the women scoff at their hardened parents in the countryside, all becoming what their parents could never have been: vulgar.



Besides these genre pieces, Maartens also writes some nice scenes in his short stories where the reader is gripped by a similar mix of amusement and harshness. In ‘Five Minutes’ Conversation’, from 1904, a man waltzes with his young cousin Margaret in a ballroom. Her father is thinking of moving from London to Inverness-shire, and she is afraid of the move. A moment later, she is excited, as she has received a proposal of marriage from a millionaire, Mr. Maxwell. Well that is nice, says her cousin. ‘You can either accept him, if you feel like it, or refuse him and have done with it’. ‘No, there is more to it than that’, she cries.

He wants an explanation. She feels she cannot disappoint her poor father, as the match would please him and benefit him financially as well.

But that is a good reason, says Guy. And he explains that three years ago he married Nellie. He liked her well enough, but mainly because she had money.

‘And is the marriage a happy one?’ asks Margaret, suspiciously. ‘Yes. The great thing is to avoid all discussions. And so you rub on. That is marriage’.

And then, in the middle of the ballroom, comes Guy’s revelation: ‘Everyone who is married wears a mask; the mask of marriage’.

Then Guy rips off his own mask. ‘Just marry the man, Margaret. It is a great match. Then you will have money and your future will be secured. I did the same. Whereas it is you, Margaret, you that I always loved best!’

‘Oh Guy’, she cries – not from emotion, but in fright because Guy’s wife has suddenly appeared and on hearing his declaration of love says, ‘The masks are off’.

It would seem to be a farcical ending. But then Maartens adds another twist. Feigning cheerfulness, Guy says to his wife, ‘Unless I am very much mistaken Margaret is going to marry Mr. Maxwell’.

‘If she does I will forgive you’, says his wife.

What takes place here in a couple of pages is a huge drama, which is covered up by social conventions. Raw reality peeps out from under the courtesy for a brief moment and is immediately repressed again.

That is Maartens all over. In ‘The Facts’, a man says that he has seen a ghost, a vague presence, when he was sitting outside on a bench after lunch. He cannot tell his servant, as he would not take him seriously. ‘With all his good practical qualities he is uneducated, ignorant, prejudiced, like his class. He “doesn’t believe in ghosts”, thereby considering himself superior to “them as does”, without the faintest conception what is, or might be, meant by the word.’

He is in danger of going mad. When he sits down, he feels a hand on his left knee and the breath of the invisible creature on his face. It is a fantasy, but one from which he cannot escape.

The only one room where he is safe is that of his deceased wife. He has changed nothing in the room. This is where he wants to stay, to have a good sleep for a while. ‘Yes, I am going on a long journey.’

This apparently peaceful ending is ruthlessly denied us by the final remark that this story was discovered in the aforementioned room after the writer’s suicide.

Gradually, we start to recognise the Maartens pattern. Old conventions and unshakeable truths are deadly, both for society and for the individual. As they are for the narrator. He can sketch a very good picture of a fine and peaceful life, but sooner or later he manages to stir up the emotions and desires that are brewing underneath. They may cause misery or happiness, but anything is better than mediocrity. Because that is something Maarten Maartens disliked, and this is what makes him a modern and inspiring author.

Completely ready for rediscovery.

Arjan Peters