

---

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING IN EARNEST  
ON THE EVALUATION AND HISTORIOGRAPHY OF DUTCH  
LITERATURE OF THE PERIOD 1940-1945

---

WILLEM HUBERTS<sup>1</sup>

*For the greatest enemy of the truth is very often  
not the lie - deliberate, contrived, and dishonest -  
but the myth - persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic.*

J.F. Kennedy, Yale University, June 11, 1962

The most recent history of Dutch twentieth-century literature, Piet Calis' *Onze literatuur vanaf 1916*, was published in 1988, hardly more than a year ago. Calis included the Second World War period in the section entitled 'From 1930 to 1945'. Leaping from peak to peak, he successively discusses the journal *Forum* and its editors, then turns to F. Bordewijk, Willem Elsschot and Simon Vestdijk, concludes with 'A Few Other Authors', and that's that.

The author himself calls this book 'concise' and states that it is meant for secondary schools. I fully realize that it is not fair to demand of such a book that it meet the highest standards of scholarship. Yet I mention Calis' work here in a negative sense, because I consider it symptomatic of the scant attention Holland in the eighties pays to the literature of the period from 1940-1945 - in this case no attention at all. Let me quote:

Particularly important in this period were the resistance poems distributed in great numbers among the population, which stimulated the spirit of rebellion against the Germans.<sup>2</sup>

Not only is this phrase misleading in several respects, it fails to do justice to wartime publications in the Netherlands.

How then, should the history of Dutch literature in the Second World War be written instead? It is to the answer to this question that I wish to devote the present paper.

It is customary in the Netherlands to have the literature of the twentieth century begin in 1880. For the so-called *Tachtigers*, the authors of the Eighties' Movement, left an indelible mark on Dutch literature. If I

describe in broad outline the history of literature as it is currently viewed, the next break lies around 1910. Here the Tachtigers' ambition to describe reality with the utmost precision, ended in what is often regarded as Neo-Romanticism.

In 1916 there were two events to justify that our situating the beginning of modern twentieth-century literature in that year: the appearance of the journal *Het getij* (The Tide), and the publication of Martinus Nijhoff's volume of poetry *De wandelaar* (The Walker). An international parallel may be found in the rise of Dadaism, together with other -isms such as Futurism, Vorticism, Constructivism and Expressionism.

The next break is often placed fourteen years on, around 1930. The renewal that began in the First World War, ended in the economic crisis of 1929, and from this moment society was never again to relax its grip on literature. It might even be argued that twentieth-century Western literature distinguishes itself from that of earlier times by being heavily dependent on, and exposed to, social developments and problems. As the Netherlands as a whole developed from a socially close-knit society into a collectivity divided into individuals, literature 'individualized' along with it. Whereas prior to 1930 emotion was central to Expressionism, henceforth the emphasis in art is on the problem of man's survival in a society increasingly alienated from him. The cultural pessimism of the late twenties and early thirties was shared by many. In literature it emerged formally in a reflection on external design which became tighter, more sensible and functional - while as regards content, attention focussed on the problematical relation between the individual and the masses.

This mainstream branches out in two directions: one current of a Neo-Romantic nature turning away from society, as in the case of J.J. Slauerhoff, and the other trying to restore the lost feeling of unity and community, an ambition of, among others, the Catholic authors of that period. Thus the thirties draw to an end: not just literature, but society too, and specifically its political developments, force the author to declare where he stands.

Then we arrive at May, 1940. National-Socialist Germany invades the Netherlands. Having reached this point in time, most literary historians observe that at first the German occupying forces do not interfere with Dutch literary life. But once the Kultuurkamer (Chamber of Culture) is introduced, publishing is no longer possible, and literature is forced

underground, its primary aim being the cultivation and stimulation of resistance against the Germans.

When in May, 1945, the German oppressor is driven out of the country, 'renewal' is the catchword. Dutch society is still essentially pre-war, and widely regarded as sectarian. Not only this society needs to be renewed, literature too has to change for the better. Yet in those first years of freedom regained, it seems as if authors do not want to take the lead socially. Prose is more pessimistic and negative than was to be expected in a climate crying out for renewal. Perhaps this is the repercussion of the pressure that social developments brought to bear on the pre-war authors. Thus a line of communication passes over the war, so to speak; prior to 1940 the social context forces the author to declare where he stands, after 1945 he evades his social obligations by retreating into negativism. The relation between society and literature is central in both cases. And in both cases the author's behaviour is dictated by the social context. Not until the fifties does a real movement of renewal arise in Dutch literature: that of the *Vijftigers*, the experimental poets of that decade.

No doubt this concise summary of the history of Dutch literature from 1880 to 1950 fails to do justice to all aspects of reality. But it will have to do for now. Next I want to show you that this picture requires correction - in particular where the period 1940-1945 is concerned.

Steven Barends, Martien Beversluis, Henri Bruning, Rob Delsing, Jan Eekhout, Chris de Graaff, Nico de Haas, J.R. Hommes, George Kettmann, Jan van der Made, Johan Ponteyne, Jan van Rheenen, George de Sévooy, Johan Theunisz, and Gerard Wijdeveld. Fifteen names, in alphabetical order. How many of these does the average Dutchman know? Perhaps those of Bruning, Beversluis and Eekhout mean something to him. There might even be someone to whom the names of Kettmann or Wijdeveld are not unknown, but I should hardly think so. And I daresay there is no chance at all of anyone these days spotting that Johan Ponteyne and George de Sévooy are two pseudonyms of one and the same author. Yet it is these fourteen writers who set the tone in Dutch literature during the Second World War - and not authors such as Jan Campert, Simon Vestdijk, Victor E. van Vriesland, Anthonie Donker and Adriaan Roland Holst, who are so much better known. Among the fourteen just mentioned, some continued the developments initiated in Dutch literature during the twenties and thirties, while others tried to modernize literature - which in

their view had become fouled up, and was lagging behind. Anyhow, these fourteen authors were among those who determined the appearance of Dutch literature during the war. Why then is there such a remarkably unanimous consensus in claiming that after 1941 Dutch literature went underground and subsequently thwarted the Germans with its illegal and clandestine publications? I offer three possible answers.

First of all, ideologically these authors were on the wrong side, that of the German invader. Hence after the war they were among the losers, and we all know the human mechanism that sees to it that after the struggle all rights accrue to the victor, leaving the loser his just deserts: indignity and oblivion.

Secondly, most of the authors who took the floor again after May 1945 had been forced to hold their literary tongues for three or four years. Only in clandestine publications had they been able to express their opinions. Of course these authors, who had not consorted with the National-Socialist oppressors, felt no need whatsoever to pay attention to the literary expression of their political opponents.

A final cause has to do with the nature of the struggle. The Second World War was unlike other wars. Naturally, from a humanitarian point of view, not one single war can be plausibly accounted for, yet throughout history wars have been fought. Perhaps man is incapable of solving conflicts without (armed) aggression... The Second World War differed from all previous wars in that one of the belligerents aimed to destroy systematically, inhumanly and ruthlessly all Jews in his territory. Hitler's ideas were known before and during the war, and hence one could have known how the wind blew, and what fate awaited one's Jewish fellow citizens. But this is easily said in retrospect. Only after the German capitulation did people begin to realize the dimensions of the disaster unleashed on the continent by the inhuman rule of the Nazis. Against this background it is understandable that anyone who had associated with the Germans during the War, was disowned. Men of letters also suffered this fate. That this entailed an artificial rift between pre- and postwar literature was apparently taken into the bargain. Now, over forty years after the war, this break is indeed felt to be artificial.

Three years ago, Ton Anbeek published a history of the postwar novel, covering the period 1945-1960.<sup>3</sup> One of his most remarkable findings was the parallelism between pre- and postwar literature. But he reaches this

conclusion without having researched National-Socialist literature in the Netherlands. In my opinion, the developments in Dutch literature are also discernible in the literary expression of the Dutch National-Socialists. Hence the historiography of twentieth-century Dutch literature cannot afford to ignore what they produced.

The following statement is quoted from someone's letter to a friend in 1944:

Though you probably lack the time for literary orientation, like us you will have long observed that both in Germany and here a soldierly rhetoric has arisen, and one of ideas. A rhetoric that is disgusting and senseless, utterly 'external', and teeming with platitudes and abstractions. But it is no different in the 'bourgeois' poems, that thrive on quasi-humanism gone soft.

For the time being I shall not reveal the correspondents' identities. The text itself provides information on its author's literary aversions and preferences. Apparently he rejects rhetoric and thinks that the external appearance of a literary work is not its most important aspect, he does not appreciate platitudes and abstractions, and he dismisses the humanitarian aspect of bourgeois poetry. If I had not mentioned the year 1944, we might have had reason to believe that its author belonged to the *Forum* circle of the thirties. *Forum* too, opposed 'verlitteratuurde esthetiek', rarefied literary aestheticism, and the cultivation of form at the expense of content. Yet the 1944 author does not belong to the *Forum* generation at all. For his name was Nico de Haas, and the friend he was addressing was Henk Feldmeyer. To some extent, De Haas was known as the editor-in-chief of *Storm*, the Dutch SS weekly. Feldmeyer was his military superior, commander of the Dutch SS. On this occasion I do not wish to go into the problems of similarity of opinions and ideas between the *Forum* generation and the leadership of the Dutch SS. But I do want to take a closer look at the poetry of Nico de Haas.

In July 1943, his poem 'Moeder' was published in the Nazi literary journal *Groot Nederland*.<sup>4</sup> I quote:

Sommige mannen zien hun moeder in gedachten  
heel rustig achter hoge vensters zitten met een boek  
of in den milden glans van vroege voorjaarsgrachten  
bij het borduurraam toeven. Maar als ik eens zoek,

- in stille uren - naar 't lichten van zoo'n teeder beeld  
en snel den filmband van mijn jonge jaren af laat loopen,  
zie ik haar noeste handen, doorkloofd en hard van eelt,  
zich rythmisch en gestadig in het zeepsop doopen.

Ik zie den keukenwand en de uitgesleten ril  
door scherpen tobberand in 't muurvlak uitgebeukt,  
hoe zij te zwoegen staat met ongebroken wil,  
de lende pijn bedwingt, die haar zoo vroeg verkreukt.

Door den wasem van heet sop zie ik dan weer haar mond,  
waarom een glimlach breekt en hoor ik haar bevelen  
- als zij met doorgestooten knoken aan de waschtob stond -  
'Schiets op, je kunt het nu nog doen, ga buiten spelen!'

In this poem we find nothing of the romantic penchant for an abstract mother image. De Haas does not picture his mother at the 'embroidery frame', nor wiht a book in her hands - symbols of a bourgeois-intellectual lifestyle - but at the washing-tub, toiling in the kitchen. Her hands are 'chapped', her 'bones show', and her back aches. It could hardly be more down-to-earth. Yet this coarse corporality does not render the mother image repulsive. On the contrary, filled with compassion, De Haas looks back at his mother who for her child's happiness manages to set aside her own misfortune: 'go and play outside!'. Now does this poem by De Haas really differ so much from a similar poem by the Flemish author Willem Elsschot - a *Forum* writer *par excellence*? He too, wrote a poem entitled 'Mother',<sup>5</sup> and compassion is central to his case as well:

Mijn moederken, ik kan het niet verkroppen  
dat gij gekromd, verdroogd zijt en versleten  
[...]

Ik zie uw knoken door uw kaken steken  
en diep uw ogen in het hoofd gedrongen.  
En ik ben gans ontroerd en kan niet spreken,  
wanneer gij zegt 'kom zit aan tafel jongen'.  
[...]

Tot weerziens dan. Ik kom vannacht of morgen.  
Gij kunt gerust een onze-vader lezen,  
en zet uw muts wat recht. Hij zal wel zorgen  
dat gij geen kou vat en tevreë zult wezen.

Yet Nico de Haas did not merely embroider on a theme from the *Parlando*-style *Forum* poetry. He took it a step further. For instance, in his poem we find a reference to cinematography, while his graphic quality reminds one of Vestdijk's: 'the groove worn into the wall by the tub's sharp edge'. It is not without reason that I place De Haas amongst the *Forum* generation. In the early thirties he was engaged in 'workers' photography', which - quite apart from the political approach taken - sought to transfer emotion as directly as possible, functionally and effectively. He moved in artists' circles around the filmmaker Joris Ivens and the photographer Cas Oorthuys, so that probably his artistic inspiration may be said to lie in the renewal movement where - in the field of literature - *Forum* too, originated. In this he differed from other National-Socialist artists, who felt more at home in nineteenth-century Romanticism. Though the poem quoted above does not convince me at every level - I find 'verkreukt' unfortunate; I assume it is there for the sake of rhyme - as a whole it ably demonstrates that as a representative of Dutch National-Socialist poetry, De Haas was not devoid of talent.

In the thirties F. Bordewijk was perhaps the best-known representative of the New Realism and functionalism in Dutch prose. The German invasion no more put an end to the influence of Elsschot's poetry than it did to Bordewijk's New Realism. In 1944, the National-Socialist author Jan van Rheenen had his novel *Helpers weg!* (Seconds Out!)<sup>6</sup> published. This book about the world of boxing combines the attainments of the style of New Realism with the National-Socialist ideas of literature.

*Helpers weg!* deals with the decline of boxing due to the managers' pursuit of profit and their internationalism. The book's backdrop is the big city, its style is that of New Realism. This is how Van Rheenen describes the face of a sleeping boxer:

Asleep, more than ever his face was a large surface roughly hewn in granite. Through his nostrils, invariably flared, he calmly puffed the processed air. His mouth was shut tight, a slit, a crack in the granite.<sup>7</sup> For the sake of comparison, I offer you a personal description taken at random from Bordewijk's *Binr*.<sup>8</sup>

Ten Hompel in turn, was something else. While at work, he snapped at an insect. He had a black mastiff's mug, though for a mastiff he was too lively. While working, this one looked up at De Bree a hundred times, quick as lightning. His little eyes were more Alsatian than mastiff, and more wolf than Alsatian.<sup>9</sup>

It is no coincidence that I quoted from Bordewijk's *Bint*. For there are further similarities between these two novels. Whereas Bordewijk describes a secondary school, Van Rheeën deals with a boxing school. This is how each author introduces his school. First, Bordewijk:

Through the eddies of the blowholes he reached the square without slackening his pace. [...] Three high banks of houses [...] The fourth bank was the block of the building, merely a distempered yellowish green, with the mouldered roof tower and the pale gold clockwork.<sup>10</sup>

Now Van Rheeën:

Along three sides of a spacious square the skeleton of unfinished new construction rose between scaffolding and heaps of bricks. On the fourth side the school rose. [...] The city had eaten into the land.<sup>11</sup>

The similarity in location, linked to an atmosphere of decay and decline, is striking.

Bordewijk is known for his preference for bizarre names. In particular the students' names in *Bint* are unusual: Whimpysinger, De Moraatz, Surdie Finnis, Kiekertak and Taas Daamde - to mention a few. And as it turns out, Van Rheeën too, has given his novel's characters special names: Brakke, Den Hengst, De Wianny, Wurf, Haai Hooite and Hamer are a few examples.

More similarities between Van Rheeën's novel and Bordewijk's work could be pointed out. But that does not concern me here. It is important to point out that Van Rheeën gave New Realism in Dutch literature an extra dimension. He achieved this renewal by linking the stylistics of functionalism to the ideology of National-Socialism.

Not only movements such as the *Parlando*-style poetry of *Forum* or the prose of New Realism extended their influence to Second World War literature. During the war, National-Socialists also practised Neo-Romantic poetry of a more classical hue. A prominent representative of this kind of literature was George Kettmann. He joined the Dutch National-Socialist Movement (NSB) in August 1932, barely six months after it was established in the Netherlands. For years he was editor-in-chief of the Movement's weekly, *Volk en Vaderland*, and between 1932 and 1945 he emerged as the most prominent National-Socialist man of letters. During the war, two volumes of his poetry were published: *Jong groen om den helm* in 1942, and *Bloed in de sneeuw* in 1943. Both volumes show strong

feelings of solidarity with his native land and a violent aversion to the overcautious petty bourgeois. A parallel with Marsman and Slauerhoff would seem to impose itself. From the poem 'Het vaderhuis' in *Jong groen om den helm*<sup>12</sup> I quote three stanzas:

Vertrouwd verinnigd huis, waar wij geboren,  
gevoed, gegroeid en onderwezen zijn -  
onmerkbaar haast zooals wij toebehooren

aan 't blond' en grijze van den zonneschijn  
en 't groen en grijze van de poldervloeren  
en 't violet en grijze wolkgordijn -

aan heel dit huis, waarvan de wegen voeren  
met de rivieren mee naar open zee  
- o vaderhuis van visschers en van boeren.

Of course the most striking National-Socialist aspect of this poem is the one-sided relationship between the Fatherland idea and the occupational groups of fishermen and farmers. The poem is reminiscent of Marsman's verses on the Dutch landscape - how great it is, and how grandiose. It is also worth noting that here the term 'grijze' (grey) twice repeated, does not emphasize how dull and colourless it is, qualities for which as a rule poetry uses this non-colour. On the contrary, in combination with the three other colours it actually has a positive, unifying function.

One finds an example of Kettmann's anti-bourgeois attitude in the first stanza of the poem 'Straks' (Soon), included in the 1943 volume *Bloed in de sneeuw*.<sup>13</sup>

Dat wat ons - zonder wrok - ontsloeg  
van het begrensd, bezadigd burgerleven -  
wat ons, bevrijd, naar voren joeg,  
waar een de vlam van 't vaandel droeg -  
dat heeft ons, mannen, onvoorzien gegeven  
wat onze jeugd aan ruimte vroeg.

In their poetry, both Marsman and Slauerhoff united love for their native land with an aversion to the petty bourgeois. In this respect Kettmann's work is readily comparable to theirs.

As regards the poetry of both Kettmann and De Haas, one may well ask whether it was related to the lyricism that under the influence of the New Order had arisen in Germany. An answer to this question would require research into the contacts between Dutch and German poets, into references in the poems themselves, etc. In general I think it would be a good idea to have further research into National-Socialist literature carried out at European level.

So far I have discussed primary literary work by National-Socialist authors. I did so in order to make the point that the historiography of Dutch literature should not stop at the ideas of those whose political or moral stance we reject. Parallels to the pre-war situation can be pointed out in National-Socialist literary criticism as well. I shall restrict myself to Simon Vestdijk. He was one of the most prominent authors of the late thirties, and I should like to show a remarkable parallel to the ideological criticism he had to endure before and during the war.

After the publication in 1935 of his novel *Else Böhler, Deutsch dienstmeisje* (*Else Böhler, German Maid*), Vestdijk was criticized for his treatment of sexuality, which - at least for that era - was liberal. Nor did people like the attention often paid in his prose to the individual's position in a society growing ever more complex. Only his *Forum* friends appreciated his interest in, and penchant for, individualism. From both Roman-Catholic and Protestant sides he was accused of harming 'the national community' (*Volksgemeenschap*) by his excessive interest in what was individual. Politically this objection was linked to the antithesis between the individual and the national community - an antithesis that had become fashionable, certainly since the rise of National-Socialism in the early thirties. A factor cutting across all divisions was that this attention for the individual was equated with a Freudian interest in that individual's innermost feelings. Apparently the amalgam of sexuality, individualism and Freudianism was unpopular. Thus in 1936, on the occasion of Vestdijk's novel *Meneer Visser's hellevaart*, the National-Socialist George Kettmann<sup>14</sup> wrote that he found it necessary "to combat this pitiful putrefaction, this unthinking release of decay". His objection to this novel results from Vestdijk's psychologizing art of analysis, for he introduces him as a "man of letters, twentieth-century stylist, psychologist, psychiatrist [...] balancing behind Freud's shadow".

The novel was also attacked from a Protestant angle. In *Opwaartsche wegen*,<sup>15</sup> Roel Houwink made it known he was not blinded by "Vestdijk's psychological refinement". As regards the author's intellectual working method, Houwink observes that it "looks more like a worm-eaten fruit than a flawless one". The prominent Catholic critic Anton van Duinkerken had similar objections to Vestdijk's literary work. In 1935 he expressed his opinion on *Else Böhler*: indeed an original piece of work, but "in originally bad taste!". However, his objections are largely moral: "This new style responds to a new consciousness of life that can best be characterized as the philosophy of morally bad taste on principle."<sup>16</sup> Finally, the opinion of a prominent literary critic of liberal hue, Dr. P.H. Ritter Jr. He opens his review of *Meneer Visser's hellevaart* as follows:

In the presence of the novelist Vestdijk we must take precautions against the feelings of horror that seize us as we expose ourselves to the foul fumes rising from this cesspit of the soul.<sup>17</sup>

These four instances are by no means the only ones. There are dozens of contemporary reviews of Vestdijk's work that take him to task. In the Catholic daily *Maasbode*, Father Van Heugten mentioned Vestdijk's "abnormal and unhealthy art of analysis" and his "sexual obsessions and small-town anxieties".<sup>18</sup> In the daily *De Telegraaf*, Werumeus Buning wrote that in *De nadagen van Pilatus* Vestdijk had, "with talent, written a disgusting book".<sup>19</sup> In the *Java-Bode*, Herman de Man gets exceedingly angry about the same novel, maliciously adding there is "something foolishly unreasonable in allowing the author to express himself in a perfidious way". And here the critic referred to "Mr. Visser's tainted blob".<sup>20</sup> Though anonymous, the critic in *De Rijkseenheid* was even more frank when he asked the reader:

Essentially we are a Christian nation. Can we not summon the strength to put an end to the production of such "novels" as *De nadagen van Pilatus*?<sup>21</sup>

As it happened, the call for censorship was to be met after the German invasion.

Let me return to my point of departure. Does the criticism heaped on Vestdijk prior to May 1940 essentially differ - both in content and form - from wartime (i.e. exclusively Nazi) literary criticism? First, an example from November 1940. Nico de Haas, already quoted above, had this to say on Vestdijk's work:

The keywords of the democratic degeneration of the novel were: death - fear - sexuality - melancholy - decay. These phenomena were most forcefully expressed in the depraved works of Simon Vestdijk

who also wrote a mud-slinging novel against Germany ("Else Böhler").<sup>22</sup>

Slightly less subtle, but quite as threatening, were Jef Popelier's words in February 1941. He reiterated the objections against Vestdijk's psychoanalyzing, his analysis of human feelings and his treatment of sexuality. His article concludes with the ominous lines:

As a phenomenon, such art is a bad spot in our society, and ... bad spots are cut out!<sup>23</sup>

In the first three months of 1942 a polemic about Vestdijk raged in the Nazi press. The main participants were Henri Bruning, George Kettmann and Jan van der Made. I do not wish to go into the various arguments advanced for and against Vestdijk - though this would be interesting enough, the more so because it is very rare for Nazi authors to disagree in writing. I merely want to outline their objections against his work. Kettmann regarded him as

representative of a certain direction in literature that came 'into fashion' prior to 1940, because it displayed the individual's split personality [...]<sup>24</sup>

In addition, he reproached Vestdijk for "his inveterate preference for the pathological". Henri Bruning in turn condemned his involvement with man's spiritual decay.<sup>25</sup> In Bruning's view this explicit negativism did not fit in with building a "New Order". Jan van der Made, the most prominent Nazi literary critic, considered his "impotent picking" of other people's brains reprehensible. Here Van der Made was actually referring to Vestdijk's intellectualizing tendency; at a time when attempts were being made to purify "the deepest essence of our people" of pre-war blemishes, he regarded this was of writing as fundamentally wrong.<sup>26</sup>

What we have then, is a continuous line of development, unbroken by the events of May 1940 and their aftermath. The same line we found in discussing Nazi poetry and prose, reappears in the literary criticism of Vestdijk's work.

National-Socialist literature did not appear out of the blue. It did not stand apart from its age. Just as one can draw lines of communication to pre-war literature in the Netherlands, one can point out links with the post-war literary world. I cannot dwell on this now, but I do mention the Belgian journal *De tafelronde* for instance, that opened its columns to the Dutchmen George Kettmann and Steven Barends, among others. Certainly in its poetic points of departure, during its first years this journal was clearly akin to the wartime poetry of Belgium and the Netherlands. In the

work of Belgian poets such as Ferdinand Vernecke and Bert Peleman, we can also distinguish lines running directly from the Second World War to the present day. As regards the relation between Nazi and postwar literature, I shall leave it at that. As yet, the field is too untrodden to allow further comment.

Other evidence of Nazi literature being less isolated than is sometimes claimed, is provided by the contacts its authors had with their colleagues in the opposite camp, before, during and after the war. Here I merely refer to the contacts Jan van der Made had with Adriaan Roland and Bertus Aafjes.<sup>27</sup> For instance, the latter told us that he and Van der Made influenced each other,<sup>28</sup> while Roland Holst exchanged ideas with him, both during the war and afterwards. Further research into these 'literary-political connections' is much needed.

Finally, I wish to comment on the literary level of Dutch pro-Nazi literature. In the past - on the rare occasions when this literature was discussed - its level was said to be poor. This opinion was supported by obligatory quotations from war, Eastern-Front and Führer poetry, which indeed is pretty awful. But isn't this rather inherent in all war poetry, whether from the political left or right? Not that I would claim there is a Louis-Ferdinand Céline or an Ezra Pound hidden among the Dutch authors on their side. But I do maintain that the quality of Dutch Nazi literature is much higher than others - and even I myself - used to assume. I think the reason for this misconception lies in the fact that we are relatively unfamiliar with this work. Hence the failure so far, to observe how its quality rose after 1940. Paradoxically - at least in the Netherlands - the more so as the fortunes of war increasingly turned against the Germans.

Nor must we forget in this context that the war did not last long enough for the Nazi authors to achieve their aim of building an entirely new literature. Not until the summer of 1943 did they get their own literary platform, the journal *Groot Nederland*. They had to contend with formidable opposition from the established pre-war literary order. Then there was the paper shortage. In the summer of 1944, precisely when a leading literary group had been formed, the German empire in Western Europe began to crumble. It is perhaps a bold claim, but I do not exclude the possibility that if the war had lasted longer, Nazi literature would have grown up. And possibly in that case the resistance of most Dutch authors against their colleagues on the wrong side would have finally been broken. It would seem to me that in this respect Simon Vestdijk wrote not merely on paper. Before I

offer you a few instances of his writing on the wall, let me make it perfectly clear that he had no affinity at all with National-Socialism. Yet in 1941 he translated a German Nazi novel into Dutch, in 1942 he wrote a novel with anti-English aspects, in 1943 he offered the occupying forces to write a novel about the Thirty Years' War, and in 1944 he had his latest novel first published in Germany. Writing was Vestdijk's life, all he wanted to do. But his attitude towards the Dutch Kultuurkamer (Chamber of Culture) entailed a self-imposed ban on publication, something he was very unhappy about. An author of his mental constitution, to whom living and writing are one and the same thing, and who is hence compelled to write, even despite himself, such an author ultimately has no alternative but to take up his pen. Had the war lasted longer, this would no doubt have benefitted Nazi literature. The historiographer, of course, has no use for idle speculation. Yet in some cases an experiment in thinking may have a clarifying effect, especially when it concerns a field that until recently lay shrouded in darkness.

#### NOTES

1. Translated from the Dutch by Jeff van Exel.
2. Calis, Piet, *Onze literatuur vanaf 1916*. Amsterdam, 1988, p. 65.
3. Anbeek, Ton. *Na de oorlog: de Nederlandse roman 1945-1960*. Amsterdam, 1986.
4. *Groot Nederland* 41 (1943) 7 (July), p. 8.
5. In: *Verzen*. 10th ed. Amsterdam, 1969, p. 11.
6. The Hague, 1944.
7. Op. cit., p. 15.
8. It was Frank van den Bogaard who drew my attention to the similarity between Bordewijk's work and Van Rheeën's, in his study *Een stoottroep in de letteren: 'Groot Nederland', de SS en de Nederlandse literatuur 1942-1944*. The Hague, 1987, p. 152.

9. Bordewijk, F. Blokken, *Knorrende beesten, Bint: drie romans*. 8th ed. The Hague [etc., s.a.], p. 84.
10. Op. cit., p. 71.
11. Op. cit., p. 24.
12. *Jong groen om den helm: oorlogsgedichten*. Amsterdam, [1942], p. 47.
13. *Bloed in de sneeuw*. Amsterdam, 1943, p. 30.
14. *Volk en vaderland*, 26 November, 1936.
15. *Opwaartsche weegen*, January, 1937, pp. 390-392.
16. *De tijd*, 16 July, 1935.
17. *Utrechts dagblad*, 17 October, 1936.
18. *Maasbode*, 21 January, 1939.
19. *De Telegraaf*, 21 December, 1938.
20. *Java-Bode*, 11 November, 1939. Also in: Herman de Man, *De erotiek in onze letteren: over pornografie en Vestdijk*, Utrecht [etc.], 1986.
21. *De Rijkseenheid*, 15 March, 1939.
22. *Die Weltliteratur*, November, 1940, p. 208.
23. *Het nationale dagblad*, 5 February, 1941.
24. 'Vestdijk voor de toekomst: de vernieuwing der letteren'. In: *De waag*, 30 January, 1942.
25. 'Nogmaals Vestdijk'. In: *De waag*, 20 February, 1942.
26. 'Waar liggen de normen?'. In: *De waag*, 24 April, 1942.

27. See: Bogaard, Frank van den. *Een stoottroep in de letteren: 'Groot Nederland', de SS en de Nederlandse literatuur (1942-1944)*. The Hague, 1987, p. 157-161.

28. In an interview with Hans van de Waarsenburg, *Bzzlletin* 122 (January, 1985), p. 8.