

The Mystical Body: Frans Kellendonk and the Dutch Literary Response to AIDS

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AIDS has attracted only minor attention in Dutch literature. There is a collection of short stories *Dit verval* (This decay), half of them written originally in Dutch, the other half translated,¹ and there is Frans Kellendonk's novel *Mystiek lichaam* (1986; *The Mystical Body*). Some (auto)biographies of AIDS victims had been published,² and several AIDS-plays, some translated and some written in Dutch, have been staged but not commercially printed.

The major gay writers in the Netherlands, Gerard Reve and Gerrit Komrij, have not mentioned or even alluded to AIDS in their work up to now. Other gay or bisexual writers and poets such as Jaap Harten, A. Moonen, Boudewijn Büch, and Hans Warren remain largely silent on the topic. An explanation for the relative silence of Dutch gay authors on the topic of AIDS could be that the authors mentioned belong to an older generation that has been only marginally influenced by the gay movement of our days or by AIDS itself. Their involvement with the homosexual movement can in most cases be traced back to the sixties when the aim of emancipation was integration into straight society, rather than the development of autonomous gay cultures. This preference for integration above separation is probably the main reason why the older gay writers have not been affected by the blossoming of gay and lesbian cultures in the eighties and have not taken up

the major contemporary gay issues. But the younger gay generation has not yet produced writers of significant literary merit. These appear to be the main reasons why AIDS has not attracted much attention in Dutch literature until now.

The only exception is Frans Kellendonk's *Mystiek lichaam*, a superb novel that caused a major literary debate in the Netherlands. The discussion did not focus on homosexuality or AIDS but on the supposed anti-Semitism of the book. A comparable debate was waged when R. W. Fassbinder's play *Der Müll, die Stadt und der Tod* (1981; The dirt, the city and the death) was to be staged at the end of 1987. After public protests and reluctance of the actors, the play was cancelled at last because of its alleged anti-Semitism. The controversy in Germany, as in the Netherlands, focused on the same issue. Whereas the stereotypical and prejudiced portrayal of a Jew in a work of art was considered discriminatory, a similar portrayal of a gay man did not raise any objection. Both in Germany and in the Netherlands the anti-Fassbinder lobby won the struggle and the play was not staged in either country. The suggestion that Fassbinder's metaphorical figures did not necessarily represent the view of the writer, or could actually be intended to uncover the latent racism and homophobia of Germans (or Dutch people), did not gain any credence.³

In his novel, *Mystiek lichaam*, Kellendonk also provides negative portrayals of both a Jew and a gay, and indeed a discussion started on his supposed anti-Semitism. Again, no one cared about the apparently homophobic content of the book: Kellendonk was generally known to be a gay man. By the time of these discussions Fassbinder had died, so he never had an opportunity to rebut the criticisms brought against his play, but Kellendonk was still alive. (He died in 1990 of AIDS.) He reacted angrily to the accusation of anti-Semitism. In his view, the critics were more interested in scandals than in the content or literary merit of his book, which could certainly not be read as anti-Semitic.⁴ And indeed, the reviewers did create a scandal, repeating each other's opinions several times, yet they never brought forward any factual proof of their allegations. The scandal died slowly. In the end, most readers were left with the strong impression that Kellendonk was indeed a dangerous writer.

Kellendonk was born in 1951, in a Catholic family, in the city of Nijmegen, where he also studied English. He translated English and American literature into Dutch.⁵ He started a literary career of his own in 1977 with a collection of short stories *Bouwwal (Ruins)*. He belonged to a group of writers organized around the literary journal *De Revisor* and described as "academic" because of their reaction against and opposition to the dominant trend of realism in Dutch literature in the sixties and seventies.

In Kellendonk's works the theme of homosexuality becomes gradually more important, culminating with *Mystiek lichaam*. This novel is not only the

major work in his oeuvre but also one of the best Dutch novels of the eighties. Dominant themes in all of Kellendonk's works are truth and illusion. Most of the characters in his novels and stories live in a fantasy world, and they lose control of reality. In his first novel, *De nietsnut* (1979; *The good-for-nothing*), the storyteller, recapitulating his father's life, transforms more and more into his father. In the last story of *Ruins*, "The Truth and Miss Kazinczy," Kellendonk writes about a student who is doing research in London and discovers that the papers he is studying are falsified. In order not to be left without a topic, he decides to falsify the papers that prove the falsification, but without success. At the same time Miss Kazinczy, his landlady, is telling him stories that he does not believe, but that are much more truthful to her than are his true stories of falsifications. In the end, he leaves England, disillusioned, sure of neither truth nor illusion.

The second novel of Kellendonk is *Letter en geest: Een spookverhaal* (1982; *Letter and Spirit: A Ghost Story*). In accordance with the title the novel is completely devoted to the theme of illusion and reality. A young man decides to start working in an archive to gain a greater sense of reality. But after many adventures, life at his workplace seems to be more illusive than his life of languor at home. Kellendonk's second collection of short stories is *Namen en gezichten* (1983; *Names and Faces*). In one of the stories, "Other Destinations," a young man prostitutes himself for his beloved male friend who wants to visit India for "spiritual enlightenment." Again, the end is disillusion, the prostituted boy leaving for another destination.

Mystiek lichaam is Kellendonk's major and last literary work. Irony permeates the novel from beginning to end. It is the saga of the Dutch family Gijsselhart (meaning, more or less, "heart in hostage"). The father, living near a city resembling Nijmegen, resides by himself in a large house. This mansion and its garden are described as icy, revolting, dark, barren and inhospitable until Gijsselhart's pregnant daughter Magda returns home. In the book, she is mostly called "Prul" (trash, dud), a name symbolizing her stupidity. Her return to the family home changes the house and its garden completely: The house becomes alive, bright, warm, and hospitable, and the garden bears fruits and vegetables again, because a child will be born. Prul has become pregnant out of wedlock by the Swiss-Jewish Dr. Pechman (man of bad luck). Subsequent to her return and the birth of her child Victor, her gay brother Leendert also comes back to the family home. He had been an art critic in New York, successful in creating and destroying reputations and making a lot of money in doing so. In the novel, New York stands for homosexuality, and for culture and artificiality, in short for the unnatural and death. In New York, "brother" had a lover, "the riper boy," who died of a terrible disease, clearly AIDS, but the name of this deadly disease is not mentioned at all in the book. Also the names of the characters are rarely used in the novel; instead, the characters are referred to by their familial

relationships. This is probably a conscious strategy on the part of the novelist to make the narrative less particular and more universal.

The centerpiece of the novel is a flashback to the times when the brother met his lover. The brother had traveled to Brussels together with his sister to celebrate the marriage of a girlfriend who had betrothed herself to a rich American pedophile. After the party the brother and sister stay in Brussels and join the newlywed couple in bed, together with a friend of the husband, the ripper boy, whom the brother has already met at the reception. The boy is a male prostitute, a pedophile, and also a procurer of boys for the American husband. Straight sex does not succeed in the marriage bed, and the meeting is a rather embarrassing end to the party.

The only one who does not bother about the difficult situation is sister Prul: she is depicted as a gosling, rather stupid, but also very direct. She comments on the impotence of the males and of (male) culture: "Male delusions, thin male delusions. Their history of fights, their culture of dead things, only envy of the womb. Which male has ever been able to create something so absolute and so irrefutable and so beyond criticism as a child out of himself?"⁶ Her language may be sloppy, but she represents the female voice of truth. Earlier in the novel, Leendert states about his sister, "The truth came from the womb . . . hysteria was a form of clairvoyance" (*ML*, 77).

The meeting in the bed of wedlock leads to intimacy between the brother and the boy, while the sister is observing them. She criticizes their rapprochement: "The fools, they waste their love on each other, see them. They said goodbye to mother earth, they have gone on a sexual space race. Fancied and stupid they are and lonely they will die, that is where their male delusion will bring them. That I have to see my bloody own brother behave so unnaturally" (*ML*, 97). The brother does not feel content with his situation, and he remembers the first kiss he exchanged with the boy in this bed as follows: "Brother realized that this kiss which was incredibly earnest, from the inside, and should be the kiss of his life, was considered from the outside as a droll counterfeit kiss. . . . For the first time brother knew that they were a parody, the ripper boy and he, if they liked it or not, an antiphony in the biological tragedy" (*ML*, 97-98). It is noteworthy that the crucial message on homosexuality in this novel is delivered by the sister, this unintelligent girl. As Diotima is the mouthpiece on male eros in the all-male society of Plato's *Symposium*, the female in this novel takes the position of truth, from which males are excluded, according to Kellendonk.

But there is also the story of the brother's attitude toward his homosexuality. He had not consciously defined his sexuality before meeting the ripper boy. He shied away from marriage in order to avoid the messiness of domestic life. He liked sex for the pleasure, not for the costs. Kellendonk seems to suggest that the brother paid dearly for his pleasures in the end, contracting AIDS instead of producing children. He continues, "Their love had never had a future. It could not procreate anything. It had to be turned

inward, maintained in an atmosphere of sublime folly. Therefore, it had to become an obsession. In bed they managed best to conjure the lack of prospect" (*ML*, 123). Brother explained to the riper boy "that there should exist in a supernatural world beyond time an eternal vase, fallen from a celestial balustrade into the here and now, and they were two temporary potsherds of that vase. Most human beings had no idea of that vase, but both of them had sharp edges which fitted exactly in each other, partaking in it together. They lived down here already a little bit in heaven, so to say" (*ML*, 107). The riper boy did not like the metaphor of the vase, and suggested, "A vase . . . You have to be a precious queen to invent such a story. When we should live in heaven, why not call us two angels? There have been fallen angels, isn't it?" (*ML*, 107). The boy seems to reverse the story of the brother, substituting the temporary exclusion of the fallen potsherds for the eternally excluded fallen angels. The boy, like the sister, is not very clever, yet he seems to be nearer to the truth than the brother.

Homosexual love is sterile, and heterosexual love is creative. Because it is primarily women who continue nature and history by bearing children, for Kellendonk, the male is rather irrelevant to procreation. Men will never know whether they are really the biological fathers of their children. In *Bouwval* he states his idea thus: "It was the woman who continued the human race. The daughters of women and their daughters. Man is only a paltry being in comparison to them."⁷ And gays, such as the brother, stand primarily for artificial and sterile culture. Thus Kellendonk reverses the classical defense of homosexuality. Whereas gays formerly boasted of their contribution to culture to counter the argument of their sexual sterility, Kellendonk trivializes this creativity in cultural matters. For him it is completely irrelevant.

Kellendonk even goes further in his criticism. In his novel gays not only fail to procreate, but also when the boy induces the brother to drink his lymphatic fluids, he impregnates him with "that new disease" (*ML*, 100). And after the brother's return to the paternal home, there is the one and only idyllic gay scene depicted in the novel, the seduction of a young, innocent boy, which results in another transmission of the disease.

After the publication of *Mystiek lichaam* Kellendonk stated in an interview, "I discuss the dynasty of life and the dynasty of death. The homosexual has long since been oriented toward death, death is a homosexual obsession, which is only emphasized by the outbreak of this disease."⁸ (AIDS, this time, is indeed mentioned.) Kellendonk asserts this dichotomy between straight and gay, and even more so the dichotomy of mother and queer.

There is an ample body of literature that discusses the relative merits of homo- and heterosexuality, and it seems that Kellendonk, himself a gay man, favors heterosexual love and female procreativity. But for how long? After the sister's child Victor is born, the father of the child joins the paternal home to look after his child. First, Dr. Pechman is considered a dangerous outsider to the family, especially by the brother, but eventually the doctor is accepted and

also wins the favors of father Gijselhart. Pechman lives in the main house; whereas the gay brother is put away in one of the sheds behind it. And Pechman gains power over the child, which is acknowledged as his child. At the end, he takes Victor out of the paternal home to his relatives, renaming him Jacob. The sister again becomes childless and disappears, leaving her father and brother in a house that is again haunted by death. Father Gijselhart will die of old age, and the brother of AIDS. In a last effort, the brother sings the Song of Songs, imagining his death as a celestial marriage to the riper boy. It seems to be a barren song, or is this the victory, given by Kellendonk to gay loves in the end?

To be sure, Kellendonk leaves us with the possibility of different interpretations, but it is easy to conclude from his novel and from what he has said in interviews and debates that his view of gay love is not very favorable. He seems to have come to believe the traditional Catholic views with which he was reared, but only after a detour. He was familiar with the postmodern critique of enlightenment and clearly intended to go beyond modernist belief in reality and truth; and he was also a gay man, partaking of Amsterdam's gay subculture daily. But instead of opting for differentiation, he returned to the mysteries guarded by the Catholic Church. Although embracing Catholic beliefs is rather popular among Dutch gay artists, the extent to which Kellendonk succumbed ideologically to these beliefs is amazing to Dutch gay sensibilities. But for him, there is something very personal about Catholicism: "Brain-washing? I rather think that I, an unbeliever, yet do God's work, that I am his blind tool and through my works create myself after His image and resemblance, as He creates Himself through me."⁹ God is as man-made as man is God-made.

In a remarkable article for the weekly *Haagse Post* Kellendonk reported on a famous trial in Utrecht in which gay and lesbian groups accused the Cardinal of Utrecht of homophobic statements. Although he did not support the clergy, Kellendonk strongly criticized the gay and lesbian movement's use of the judicial apparatus of the state for ethical debates. His article is in the first place an attack on the enlightened philosophy of nature that negates the existence of evil and leaves it to the state to implement the good in society. But as we know, he declares rhetorically, this belief in the state and good society has resulted time and again in terrible crimes. The philosophy of the Enlightenment, Kellendonk argues, is bankrupt, but nevertheless the gay and lesbian movement is erroneously grounded in it. In his criticism of rationalism and the ideals of progress, Kellendonk is very much a postmodern writer. But when he uses postmodern thinking to revalidate Catholicism, he is substituting one repressive system for another, and he is well aware of this. In the same article he uses the occurrence of AIDS to suggest that the promises of the sexual revolution were false and resulted in disaster.¹⁰

The novel *Mystiek lichaam* of Kellendonk is not at all typical of the social or political reaction to AIDS in the Netherlands. It is the work of a writer

who did not feel comfortable with contemporary Catholic doctrines but who resisted even more the language of the gay and lesbian movement. His answer was a return to the sources of Catholic tradition, and a rejection of what he perceived as the self-victimization of gays and lesbians and their superficial faith in a utopian society without discrimination and other evils. How could a gay man who was a regular participant in Amsterdam's gay nightlife and knew all liberal and libertarian theories feel so negative about this world and its inhabitants? Kellendonk's views indicate that free space to live and think for gays and lesbians is more difficult to attain, even in the Netherlands, than is generally assumed. Forging and maintaining a wholesome sense of self is certainly a strenuous and lifelong battle. The often flat polemics of the gay and lesbian movement with its utopian hopes and its outright denial of evil makes this struggle more hazardous. It has been the accomplishment of Kellendonk to pose this problem, among others. Now others have to find the answers.