

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 *Bonawal (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

