

James Holmes

## Dankwoord en voordracht bij de aanvaarding van de Martinus Nijhoffprijs 1956

*James Stratton Holmes (1924-1986) was dichter en vertaler, geboren in de VS en in 1950 voor zijn grote liefde Hans van Marle voorgoed naar Nederland verhuisd. Hij publiceerde als James S Holmes en ook onder de pseudoniemen Jim Holmes en Jacob Lowland. Hij was aanvankelijk docent aan het Instituut voor Algemene Literatuurwetenschap van de Universiteit van Amsterdam en later aan de afdeling theoretische vertaalwetenschap. Hij was opsteller van leerprogramma's voor het Instituut voor de Opleiding tot Vertaler en Tolk, later als Instituut voor Vertaalkunde en nog weer later als Instituut voor Vertaalwetenschap geïntegreerd in de Universiteit van Amsterdam. Mede door zijn toedoen werd de vertaalwetenschap een volwaardige afstudeerrichting. Zijn gezaghebbende artikelen over de theorie van het vertalen verwierven internationale bekendheid en zijn nog altijd te vinden in bronvermeldingen van buitenlandse studies op dit terrein. Samen met Hans van Marle was hij poëziedirecteur van het legendarische Engelstalige tijdschrift Delta, geheel gewijd aan Nederlandse en Vlaamse cultuur, waarin hij met grote regelmaat moderne Nederlandse poëzie vertaalde, met name van de 'Vijftigers' en de 'na-Vijftigers'. Een van zijn grote wapenfeiten was zijn vertaling van Nijhoffs lange gedicht Awater, die ook in het buitenland indruk maakte. Volgens T.S. Eliot zou Nijhoff wereldberoemd zijn geweest als hij niet in het Nederlands maar in het Engels had geschreven en Joseph Brodsky roemde Awater als een van de beste gedichten die hij ooit had gelezen. In 1984 werd Holmes, net als bij de Nijhoffprijs als eerste buitenlander, bekroond met de Vertaalprijs van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap. Zijn onschatbare verdienste als bezorger van Nederlandse poëzie in het Engelse taalgebied werd treffend bekroond toen het Translation Center van Columbia University zijn naam verbond aan een nieuwe prijs voor vertalingen uit het Nederlands: de James S Holmes Award. Holmes was zo goed in Nederland ingeburgerd – ondanks zijn Amerikaanse accent en de zonden die hij tot het einde toe bleef begaan tegen het correcte gebruik*

*van de Nederlandse lidwoorden – dat hij probleemloos zitting nam in allerlei besturen en commissies, zelfs toetrad tot de redactie van het Nederlands-Vlaamse jongerentijdschrift Gard Sivik en meewerkte aan literaire tijdschriften als Litterair Paspoort, De Gids, De Nieuwe Stem, Maatstaf en De Revisor. Vermaard is de ‘workshop poëzievertalen’ die hij jarenlang gaf bij hem thuis aan de Amsterdamse Weteringschans en waarmee hij velen stimuleerde om te gaan vertalen. Ook was hij actief lid van de Nederlandse en Internationale PEN, de Vereniging van Letterkundigen, de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde en de Nationale Unesco Commissie, en daarnaast bestuurslid van de Stichting ter Bevordering van de Vertaling van Nederlands Letterkundig Werk in het Buitenland, het Nederlands Genootschap van Vertalers en de organisatie Schrijvers, School, Samenleving, en erelid van de Vereniging van Vlaamse Letterkundigen. Holmes behoorde tot de vroege aidsdoden in Nederland. VertaalVerhaal dankt Peter van Haasen voor de toestemming dit dankwoord en de ‘toelichting op en voordracht uit eigen werk’ hier te mogen publiceren.*

## Dankwoord

Ik heb niet veel te zeggen, en wat ik wel te zeggen heb is niet in de allerbeste Nederlandse woorden. In de eerste plaats zou ik niet durven in uitgebreide traditionele Nederlandse retorische volzinnen te spreken, omdat net in het midden van zo'n zin zeker een *de*-woord in plaats van een *het*-woord zou komen, en het hele effect zou dan verloren gaan. Ik zal dus alleen in mijn vrij eenvoudig Nederlands zeggen: bedankt, hartelijk bedankt, uit het diepst van mijn hart bedankt – dank aan de Nederlandse dichters, die mij de stof hebben gegeven om mee te werken, dank aan het Prins Bernhard Fonds, dank aan zoveel andere mensen die me hebben geholpen, zoals vooral mijn medevertaler Hans van Marle, met tientallen, misschien honderdtallen fouten, in mijn vertalingen te voorkomen en te verbeteren. Ik zou trouwens helemaal terug kunnen gaan tot ongeveer mijn tiende jaar, en zeggen: dank aan mijn onderwijzeressen, die me mijn eerste belangstelling in poëzie hebben weten te geven, die me ongeweten uiteindelijk tot deze zaal in Den Haag heeft gevoerd. En dank aan u allemaal voor uw morele steun aan mijn kleine bijdrage tot de belangrijke taak van het overbrengen van Nederlandse letterkunde, Nederlandse cultuur aan de rest van de wereld.

(VertaalVerhaal plaatst in beginsel alleen Nederlandstalige bijdragen, maar maakt graag een uitzondering voor de navolgende toelichting en voordracht van de eerste niet-Nederlandstalige winnaar van de Martinus Nijhoffprijs.)

# Toelichting op en voordracht uit eigen werk door de heer James S Holmes Encounters with Three Poets

I should like to begin, before I read any of these translations – I should like to begin with a story. I've been thinking of this story several times in the last weeks. It happened I think in 1945, so about ten years ago.

I was then in college, and taking one of those strange American courses that are so incomprehensible to Europeans – a course in world literature, in which we surveyed everything except English and American literature in two semesters.

Along toward the end of the second semester each of us was expected to write a fairly long paper on one of the minor literatures that hadn't been touched on, or had been touched on only lightly, in the course. A friend of mine in the class, a boy of Dutch ancestry, decided for the sake of his forefathers that he would write on Dutch literature. My question to him at the time was – Dutch literature! Does it exist? Has anything been written there since Erasmus? Such a question of itself is rather a sorry comment on the knowledge of Dutch literature in at least the Middle West of America. Even more sorry was the answer he arrived at after several weeks of trying to find out. He decided, too, that it didn't exist.

When I came to Holland four years after that, one of the things that I rather thought I would like to do was to solve this question that I had raised in '45 – Is there a Dutch literature? Does something exist in Holland after Erasmus? Well, I found a rather amazing answer, enough to keep me absorbed for the six years since then, and I think for quite many a year more.

I shan't be able to read from all the modern Dutch poets that interest me greatly. Instead, I should like to center down to three poets with whom I've had what I'd like to call a special poetic 'encounter' in Holland.

One of the first poets whose work I came across after I arrived here was the poet Gerrit Achterberg. Surprisingly enough for most of you, I suppose, his poetry spoke to me much more immediately than most of the other poems that I read at that time, in that first year. Not because they were easy – I think we all are agreed on that point – but because in many ways they have much in common with some of the finest poetry being written in England and America today: they are closer, then, to the Anglo-Saxon stream of poetry than many another poem being written in Holland. But I think even aside from that, because of the mere fact that Gerrit Achterberg is a great poet, one of modern Holland's greatest poets.

I should like to read translations of four poems by Achterberg. The first one is 'Density':

Hermetic house.  
Through tooth and time's resistance  
I bore toward you

a tube  
of under-zero happenings:  
feeling's refrigerance  
into the crystal of the word  
– the same old aim, –  
but now congealed  
in so much song  
it has no wings:  
the melody  
lies all coiled up.

The second poem is 'De glazenwasser', or 'The Window Washer':

He lets himself lean in the light.  
His body holds the universal all.  
Around him every fall  
is balanced by ascension.

Footfall and hand-  
fall act a sparse  
pantomime in the air, a farce  
that he alone must understand;  
the mene tekel and the numeral  
of reckless supramundane aspiration.

The third poem is 'Thief':

The chamber creaks with outcries in the wood.  
Slow feet go shuffling past the chairs, and then  
my stream of thought, that was about the rime  
the word familiar, alters all its plans.

Its earlier intentions age away,  
for I hear hands that feel along the table.  
Out of the images that wash together  
this one arises, hard and hot and cold:

a robber in the room. – I do not move.  
What the following moment may transpire  
I'll have to leave to *ars poetica*;

a thief alone's no good to anyone;  
captured in verse he can't do any harm,  
and is the fright of beauty, that doth pale.

To conclude this selection from Achterberg I'd like to read a longer poem of his, 'Ballade van de winkelbediende', 'Ballad of the Store Clerk':

I

A young man's lying in the sky, stretched out,  
flat on his back. He holds his arms up tight  
against his body, as if it would break.  
The moon-barge floats and rolls above his eyes.

The evening's peace reverberates from him  
the way he drifts there in the Sunday suit  
he was supplied with by a clothing store.  
He doesn't move one yard, ahead or back.

We, far beneath him, cycle on towards home;  
we switch the light on and sit down and read.  
Somehow I feel he'll still be there: alone,

ethereal, exalted, dead and pure.  
He was a clerk in a Terneuzen store,  
at P. de Gruyter's or at Albert Heijn's.

II

'You shouldn't spoil him,' said my wife. 'That he's  
clerk in a store is more than you can say.  
That, let alone De Gruyter's. They can lodge  
a court complaint against you for bad faith.'

To prove my case I pointed out his wife,  
searching in desperation whether he  
might still turn up. They have already dredged,  
and called out the whole civilian defense.

'Well then,' she said, 'I want him to be found;  
you bring him slowly back where he belongs,  
gently and walking in his sleep and well.

Then when his wife comes back she'll hurriedly  
set the alarm clock and from that hour forth  
the old good life will go on as before.'

III

She wanted, the impossible. You can't  
embroider on an image as you like.

There's more already than it well can bear  
in the associations it begets.

Just now he came within a single hair  
of being back there, growing bitterer  
year after year amidst the figs and jams  
meted and measured out in countless pounds.

We looked outside. He lay decaying in  
the sweetness of the myriads of stars.  
The nebulae gave him a leprous look.

Milky ways washed through him, and at the last  
we could no longer make him out of all:  
quivering toward us came the firmament.

.....

They bring his clothing back from the police,  
covered with ants and eaten out by moulds.  
He was buried at once, as black as soot.

.....

'He's standing shaving in the looking-glass.  
His wife is hurrying to pack his lunch,  
since Monday is an early day for him.'

It was about a year after I made my first acquaintance with the poetry of Achterberg that a friend of mine (who was later to win the Reina Prinsen Geerligs Prize) brought me a very thin volume one of the *Vrije Bladen* – the *Innerlijk behang* of Hans Lodeizen. I would next like to read a small selection from his poems in translation. First, 'they were always together':

they were always together

when they had done wrong  
in the fall

when they lay in the spring  
when they went cycling  
because the summer passes by  
and the winter is not lonely  
when he was ill and the other

hand lay in his like a gift

when they lay ill in bed  
and the bed was the covered wagon  
of their fear

when the bed was the valley of their  
jubilation and the body rested

when the days grew long

they were always together.

The second poem is 'far off in the distance i hear...':

far off in the distance i hear  
the tooting of cars and  
i think about you between  
the houses and talking or  
walking along past the people.

if you were only on this ship  
where i am alone and  
feel unhappy.

i see you walking in your white  
trousers with your shirt slopping  
out; i see you somewhere in front of  
a counter drinking coffee

why aren't you with me  
with me on a dark ship  
and why do you walk alone  
in the night, in the blinded city

i should like to say: look out  
for the cars, watch out crossing streets  
but i drown in anxiety  
why did you let me go after all  
now i'm alone.  
and look at the night at  
the wind in the waves at the  
white moon and the sailors.

The third poem – I hope that you skilled Dutch will excuse my French – is ‘La voix du peuple’:

we want to be amused,  
to be divinely amused  
by the night wind and its elegant  
odors (invisible princesses),  
by the piccolo of the bats and the  
violin of the ugly black beetles,  
we want to be amused

we want to laugh amid the dying  
blue on the sky, and my aunt  
the nightingale sings from a droning throat  
we want to spread out our chairs  
on the terrace, the wine tinkling  
in the glasses, the girls and their high  
thin voices, we want to laugh.

we want to have fun in white  
icebergs of sheets and bowl away  
the stealthy eyes from the sky and  
be drunk on bare feet on the contact  
between hands and the buzz  
of the voice between the dried lips  
in the night, we want to have fun.

Further, in contrast to that last poem, the final Lodeizen – ‘if i go now’:

if i go now it will be  
softer, in the wind, in the houses,  
the heart will taste the sunflowers  
and the long voice trailing  
out of the room in the garden  
full of nightingale song more softly

if i go now it will bite  
less cruelly in your shoulder and  
it will lay pleasure on your body  
like much fruit on a bowl if  
i go now it will rain the  
wind will weave fairy tales in  
the evening if i go now it  
will be summer for the taking

but i still lie in your arms  
anchored in the port of the  
city but i am still with you  
but my voice is still gliding over  
you like a violin bow but i  
love you after all you know that  
but i am still asleep on your breast

i have not gone away yet  
the trains have all left  
i have not gone away yet  
the tickets have been sold  
the suitcases have got on  
i have stayed

if i go now it will be  
softer, in the wind, in the houses.

and yet, although  
the wind has died down.  
now, and the woods wave  
and nod  
now that sleep is sounding  
like a harp and  
the children sing  
i lay my elbow on the  
dark afternoon and cry

music falling through the woods  
like autumn leaves a song  
sung by the soprano of the oaks  
catch the long loot

but to go away  
before the hour is a moth  
that flies up and disappears

The third poet I should like to read from, I ‘encountered’ much later than the other two. It was a rather singular ‘encounter’, that between the poetry of Nijhoff and myself, for although I had read various poems of Nijhoff’s, in 1952, 1953, I had then always felt that he was highly overrated by the Dutch literary world. This fact may be rather interesting for you Dutch in considering your own ratings of Nijhoff as the simple poet who says things directly and Achterberg as the difficult poet working by ‘indirections’ – that for me Achterberg was immediately accessible in what he was

aiming at, while to come to an appreciation of what Nijhoff does in his poetry took me a good four years. That means that my interest in Nijhoff's work came only after his death. My first 'encounter' with a Nijhoff poem that intrigued me strongly was, interestingly enough, another case in intercultural relations. I ran across a version of 'De nieuwe sterren' in – of all places – the Indonesian Dutch-language newspaper *Nieuwsgier*, and this version – which is not the one printed in *Verzameld Werk* – intrigued me so much that it led me on not only to a translation of it, but also to a number of other Nijhoff translations. I shall read this poem in closing; first I should like to turn to a few other translations from Nijhoff's work. To begin with, 'The Third Land':

Singing and sans remembering  
I came away out of the first land,  
Singing and sans remembering

I entered into the second land,  
O God, I knew not whither I was going  
When I entered into this land.

O God, I knew not whither I was going  
But let me come away out of this land,  
O let me sans remembering

And singing enter the third land.

The second poem of Nijhoff's I should like to read has not yet been printed anywhere. I'm not sure that I am completely satisfied with it: I'd like to try it out on you. 'De twee nablijvers', 'The Two Stay-Behinds':

– O old tree in the backyard there,  
how ugly is your crown, how bare;  
I wonder if you're still alive,  
as little shadow as you give.

– O scribbler in the window-bay,  
your wife and child have gone away;  
I wonder if your writing so  
is all there is that's left for you.

– Listen! The nightingale re-sounds  
its song within the heart of town.  
– They have built dwellings there of good  
new building-brick and gleaming wood.

The third poem is ‘The Song of the Foolish Bees’:

A scent of higher honey  
embittered all the flowers,  
a scent of higher honey  
drove us out of the dwelling.

The scent, and a soft droning  
frozen in the clear heavens,  
the scent and a soft droning  
over and over, nameless,

called us, audacious creatures,  
to come forsake the gardens,  
called us, audacious creatures,  
to enigmatic roses.

Far from our kind and kindred  
we have been driven onward  
far from our kind and kindred,  
jubilant, on adventure.

No one's by nature able  
to interrupt his passion,  
no one's by nature able  
to suffer death incarnate.

Constantly yielding further,  
constantly more translucent,  
constantly yielding further  
to the eluding symbol,

we climbed aloft and vanished,  
disbanded, disembodied,  
we climbed aloft and vanished  
away like things asparkle.

It's snowing, we are dying,  
fluttering worldwards, homewards;  
it's snowing, we are dying,  
snowing between the beehives.

I should like to close with two of those unrimed sonnet translations Mr. Straat has spoken about. I'm afraid I don't have with me Nijhoff's ‘De moeder de vrouw’, which

both he and Mr. Coolen have referred to. Instead I have chosen two other translations. 'Her Last Letter' is the first of them.

Do not reproach me saying I have been  
frivolous that I loved but was not true,  
and left without a tear, A woman can  
never recover from the wound, unless  
it's healed beforehand, of affection that  
has found its focal point in future life.  
I had to take myself back for a task  
that I had been prepared for unperceived.

Say my name softly, and I'm in the room;  
there are the flowers on the window sill,  
the plates in the white kitchen rack again.

For there is more of me embodied in  
that sound than in the youth you love me for,  
my almost-boyish breast, my golden hair.

And finally, a poem of Martinus Nijhoff's which first moved me, and which remains for me something of a standard of fine poetry, 'The New Stars':

No bear goes hunting in those regions now,  
no eagle takes the risk of drifting past,  
since blood, clinging upon the implements,  
scintillates there like new stars in the night.

There the Scourge shines; there softly drip  
Ladder, Sponge, Crown of Thorns; and there, ringed in  
by Nails, the Hammer quivers quietly;  
there Dice, and there the Spear with its long shaft.

Through the whirling darkness the milky way  
obliterates the trail of the pierced feet.

Who plays the Passion unremittingly,  
in new magnificence, by Pilate's door?

Peter, the Serving Maid, freed Barabas.  
No cock crows. No dog barks. There is no sun.

Thank you.