THE GREAT MELANCHOLY: Notes Toward a History of Dutch Women's Poetry (1)

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1. Introduction

Since its beginnings in the nineteenth century, literary historiography went through enormous changes, affecting both its objects and its methods (Bal 1983: 263-275). However, neither the positivist/biographical approach, nor the work-immanent and structuralist approaches, nor even the reception-approach ever gave up these central presuppositions: that there is such a thing as One Literary History; that this One Literary History can be known and described in its historical periods, classified and divided into categories such as genres, currents and period-codes; that an almost eternal series of Great Works - the Canon - forms the backbone of this One Literary History. These strong presuppositions lead, as we know, to a practice of historiography in which phenomena that do not fit into the previously assumed One Literary History are not mentioned at all, or declared marginal, or, at the very best, called 'sub-literature'. 'Sub-literature', of course, again implies the existence of the One 'Supra-literature'. The Myth of the One Literary History in its turn rests upon the much wider humanistic Myth of the One Culture. Not only the field of literature, but also the history of the visual arts, of architecture, the history of philosophy, and the different branches of history itself are dominated by this hardly questioned belief that the 'great' works of art, the 'great' philosophical systems and the 'decisive' historical events can be described in their historical order: the true expression of 'universal, human' development.

These ideas of historiography have generally shaped the discourse in the handbooks we still use. The stories they contain are not presented as interpretative proposals for ordering a number of chosen facts, but as the facts themselves. The person who describes and selects stays safely
hidden somewhere between the Human and the Universal.

Mr. Universal, however, is getting old. It is a telling fact that
writing leather-bound all-encompassing national literary histories is no
longer very popular. Traditional literary history, though perpetuated in
mass-media and at all levels of education, is increasingly mistrusted
and criticized. Attacks on traditional literary history basically come
from two sides: from insiders and from outsiders. Insiders have noted
the widening gap between the lengthy and sophisticated structural
analyses of individual works and the comparatively superficial treatment
of these works in literary history (Anbeek 1982). Others objected that
traditional literary history cannot claim a scientific status, and needs
a new, firm, empirical basis. Empirical reception-theory is partly an
attempt to give literary history this firm scientific footing (Groeben
1972). Of a totally different and much more interesting nature are the
gap epistemological doubts about the possibility of knowledge outside
language: in radical French philosophy the history-as-events becomes
metaphysical. History-as-story is the only reality we can ever possess
(New Literary History 1985/3: 671-673). Sociologists of literature have
furthermore directed the attention away from the canon itself to
processes of canon-formation thereby putting the Canon in a very
relative perspective.

But what is most important to us, in the debate about literary history,
is the criticism from the (relative) outsiders: black critics and black
feminist critics (Gates 1984; Smith 1977), white feminist critics
(Kolodny 1980; Lemaire 1986; Robinson 1985; Williamson 1984), third-
world writers and critics. They offer the political perspective of those
who have been excluded from literary history. Being marginalized, they
have been in an excellent position to observe the workings of a white
male subject, busy putting up mirrors for itself which reflect the same
white male subject over and over again. In the margin, they have
described non-canonical traditions, they have produced alternative
historical perspectives. Most fundamental in this respect seems the
replacement of a cultural monism by a cultural pluralism (Gilbert and
Gubar 1985). Instead of One Literary History there must be Many, or even
Many.
The fundamental question is on what principles we ourselves—as feminists—will find literary history. At this stage any form of 'general' literary history that would be concerned with the diverse literary cultures of women and of men, seems out of the question. We should not follow those feminist historians who, immediately after discovering the rich field of women's culture, ran back to general history (Scott 1984). 'General' literary history seems an unrealistic perspective, maybe a theoretical goal that is best never attained. A vast part of an eventual new general literary history, the multiple textual expressions of women's cultures, has only just begun to be excavated. What seems to me a realistic option is writing women's literary histories. Some feminist critics will now ask how we shall, in doing so, avoid the traps we blame male literary history for falling into: its one-sidedness, its unified tale, its oversimplifications, its value-judgements unrelated to the interest of the critic who expresses them, its repression of things that do not fit into previously established categories. These questions are both useful and premature. Let us not try to be 'plus royaliste que le roi'. Let us not drown the vast amount of primary work that needs to be done in theoretical skepticism. A historical description of women's literary cultures, presented as an interpretative proposal for the coherence and meaning of groups of chosen and, until now, largely excluded texts will in itself be an earthshaking event for traditional literary history. The new hypothesis that women have 'literatures of their own' has proved to be enormously productive (Bogin 1976; Brügman 1986; Christian 1980; Díaz-Diocaretz 1984; Göttner-Abendroth 1982, Lauter 1984; Lemaire (ed.) 1986; Moers 1976; Showalter 1977). It is a tool, a search-light, through which an incredible number of new discoveries can be made. However divergent the methods, the points of view and the results of these authors may be, they have all separated women writers (temporarily or definitely, partly or totally) from established male traditions, in order to find a new access to their work. I think it is necessary to adopt this hypothesis if we are to gain any access to women's work at all.

In this paper I present some Dutch women poets of the decade 1950–1960. We can only see the coherence in their texts by dismissing the currents and categories which male literary historians have set up for this period. When we discard their fixed perceptions, we are immediately
confronted with the necessity to propose an alternative perception, that is to identify and name different groups of texts. Like Showalter (1981) I do not regard this women's poetry as completely free-floating and independent of men's literature. Paradoxically, women poets are part of the literature that excludes them: they are trained in it and participate in its poetic traditions. The question then becomes more complicated: to what extent do they or do they not belong to the dominant culture, and how can we describe the part that does not belong to it?

I shall follow here the model Showalter proposed - she adopted it from the anthropologist E. Ardener - for the analysis of relations between women's and men's culture. In Ardener's view 'women constitute a muted group, the boundaries of whose culture and reality overlap, but are not wholly contained in the dominant (male) group.' In diagram (figure 1):

According to this diagram women find themselves nearly always within two traditions at the same time. 'Women's fiction can be read as a double-voiced discourse, containing a "dominant" and a "muted" story.' (Showalter 1981: 197-205)

First I want to take a look at Dutch literary history and the way it deals with women poets in the fifties. Then I shall compare the changes in men's poetry during the fifties with the changes in women's poetry of that period. Finally I want to give an example of one category, which I have called 'the Great Melancholy'. The Great Melancholy is very typical for a group of women poets, and only for women poets. From an anthropological point of view one could compare this poetry to a rite or custom carried out only by women and not recognized or known among men. In this 'double-voiced' women's discourse of the Great Melancholy I shall try to discern the 'dominant' and the 'muted' story.
2. Dutch Literary History

The most recent general Dutch literary history is still the four-volume work by Gerard Knuveider (1954, last revision 1977), which does not deal with the post-war period. The history of modern poetry we have consists of fragments: retrospective essays which deal with half or whole decades (Brems 1981, Fens 1967 and 1973, Lovelock 1984), studies about single poetic movements (Den Besten 1954, Brems 1976, Fokkema 1979, Rodenko 1977), introductions to new literary journals, poetry-specials of magazines (Maatstaf 1958/59, Maatstaf 1983, De Gids 1962, Raster 1984), chapters in literary dictionaries (Kritisch Lexikon 1980), schoolbooks and of course a mass of articles on individual poets. Male literary history appears faceless and therefore invulnerable to attack.

A closer look reveals that this male literary history, fragmented though it may be, is not elusive at all. These essays and introductions reveal many 'idées reçues' and a clear consensus about what is important in Dutch poetry and what is not. Although the chorus of critics fights over priorities and has different voices, these voices are all singing the same song: they share the presupposition that there is One Literary History. They agree that one succession of poets and schools is the Only Real One. When they mention women poets at all, they do it only as an afterthought, awkwardly fitting them somewhere into a fixed history of male poets.

Consequently we are given diverse, but always rather simple pictures of poetic periods. The fifties form a good example. The decade 1950-1960 is invariably represented as being entirely dominated by male poets, who organized themselves in a movement, de 'Vijftigers' or 'Experimentelen'. They formed a loose, short-lived but rather influential group. The 'Vijftigers' consisted mostly of very young men, who profiled themselves aggressively against the elder poets, the Critierum-generation. They attacked the traditional poetic jargon and its euphemisms and indirectness. They derided classical form and the traditional aesthetics of poetry. They were anti-aestheticists, atheists and anti-rationalists, and again valued intuition, association, dream-consciousness and the body. Many of them were interested in jazz, primitive art and the style of painters like Karel Appel. In their poetry the grammatical and logical order of sentences is broken down. Language is again heard as sound. Some of them developed theories about the 'autonomous poem',
holding that the poem is not a pre-conceived meaning put into form, but a place where language works itself to multiple meanings.

The 'Vijftigers' were the first to introduce Modernism in Dutch literature. They were accepted and recognized very soon after their noisy and sensational appearance. Whatever the importance of its contribution, the Movement of 'Vijftig' has been inflated to mythic proportions in Dutch literary historiography. All literary life apart from the Vijftigers was overlooked, or seen exclusively in relation to them. This is particularly true of the women poets.

3. Women Poets in the Fifties

There were a surprising number of women poets publishing in the 1950's. Among them were M. Vasals, Ida Gerhardt, Sonja Prins, Christine Meiijing, Mies Bouhuys, Ankie Peijpers, Cor Klinkenbijl, Ellen Warmond, Hanny Michaelis, Harriet Laurey, Nel Noordzij, Louise Moor, Inge Lievaart, Elisabeth Cheikaou, Hans van Zijl, Jacoba Eggink, Lydia Dalmeij, Inge Tieiman and Mischa de Vrede. Many of them are either not mentioned at all in male discourse on poetry in the fifties, or are relegated to final sections and footnotes as 'others', 'traditionalists' (together with more traditional men) or isolated phenomena. As a rule, women's work is never described in its own right, but always compared to the Vijftig-poetry.

Van Bork (1983:225) writes about Ellen Warmond: 'Although this poetry joins Vijftig through its language, it has its own, different content.' Does the existence of a poetry with its 'own, different content' complicate the picture of poetry in the 1950's? The question is never asked. Rodenko's characterization of Warmond's poetry is often repeated by other authors: 'A transposition into the experimental of the old Criterium-poetry' (Rodenko 1956: 175). Through this formula Rodenko pushes Warmond somewhere in between the established categories he already knows: Criterium-poetry (with which Warmond has no affinity at all) and Experimenteelen. Rodenko does not take the trouble to try and find a category which could positively describe what Warmond is writing. Although he appreciates Warmond's work (because she shows affinities with Vijftig) he states in the same essay that she cannot really be considered a Vijftiger, because she does not share the belief in the new autonomous poetry. Fashionable, modern male poetry forms the only kind
of spectacles Rodenko will look through; it is his only standard. His compliment in fact boils down to the kind of praise every woman knows so well: 'I really appreciate you, you are almost as good as a man, though you are not a man, of course.' The same questionmarks can be put in Jan van der Vegts essay on Warmond (Van der Vegt 1981). He leans heavily on male existentialism to explain Warmond's work.

But is it necessary to drag out concepts from male culture as the only frameworks for interpretation? Where critics pre-suppose One Literary History, male movements and exploits become the criterion of everything else. Even when these critics and historiographers talk about women, they are still talking about men. In order to see the women poets at all, we will have to drop the Myth of the One Literary History, assume a possible plurality of literary cultures including a women's literary culture, and find categories which actually help to define and understand what women are writing.

In my research I compared poetry by women of the fifties to poetry by women of the thirties and forties, in the same way male critics have compared the 'Vijftigers' poetry to that of their male predecessors. I found enormous changes in women's poetry. Some of these changes seem to reflect the evolution in the poetry of men. At a closer look they are seen to be of a different quality. I will summarize my provisional findings here:

1. The traditional poetic jargon, classical forms and obligatory rhyme broke down. More free and modern kinds of poetry were developed, but grammatical structures were kept largely intact. Women poets seemed to trust language as a means of expression and did not tear it away from meaning.

2. Religion as a subject and as a frame of reference was generally abandoned.

3. Descriptions of the body became more direct. Erotic poems became more explicit and passionate. Lesbianism became a possible theme.

4. Daily life and colloquial speech increasingly entered into poetry.

5. Two new thematic complexes appeared, of which women poets chose either one or the other:
   a. a massive sense of doom and depression. Life is depicted as stale, useless, worthless. This I call 'the great melancholy'.
   b. a pre-feminist consciousness, and an articulation of feelings and
ideas that would be put forward collectively around 1970, at the beginning of the present feminist movement. Dissatisfaction over the sex/gender system in force.

6. The nature/culture opposition acquired a new meaning. Nature as topos in (women's) poetry was no longer the idyllic, restful nature devoid of conflict. For many women poets 'culture' (people, cities, rooms etc.) was associated with a false (feminine) self and associated with the free, true, unsocialized feminine self. In itself, nature can be wild, terrifying, longed for and unattainable.

7. An increasing political involvement pervaded women's poetry.

I can only summarize these developments here. At first sight some of the changes in women's poetry seem to imitate changes in men's poetry. Let us, for example, consider (1), the modernization of the traditional poetic jargon. Women also modernized, but they did not go as far as men. While men started to experiment with the autonomous poem and wrote piles of poems about poetry itself, women developed a modern verse, but hung on to their changed, personal themes. Women undoubtedly entered another poetic paradigm, but they did not destroy the sentence, did not indulge in very farfetched metaphors, did not lose themselves in baroque wordplay, association-games or sound-games, in short, they did not participate in the men's experiments that provoked the old (male) institution of poetry.

Does this mean that women do the same things as men, only to a lesser degree? I do not think so. They only go as far as suits them. Their modernization has a different purpose. They do not want to sacrifice their themes to experiments for experiments' sake. Their new poetic forms are functional for the themes they express. Michæells, for example, develops - out of an initial traditional style - a sober, rather short type of poem. It has no rhyme, and consists of some grammatical sentences, sometimes only one sentence. There are short lines and many enjambments. The poem gives the impression of being a very concentrated outburst of a long-entertained feeling, obsessively worked over in the mind, and written down in this one breathless sentence. This sober, concentrated utterance seems to be all there is to say. Michæells' theme is often depression, emptiness, missing a lover. Her style is very effective there. WARMOND also writes sober, bare verse with long, almost allegorical metaphors. Those extensive intellectual
metaphors suggest a world out of which no escape is possible. Soberness and intellectuality are not at all characteristic of the male 'Vijftigers'.

To summarize: on closer inspection we do not see women imitating a male modernization. We see two different modernizations, parallel in time, certainly not completely independent from one another, but carried out to serve different ends in two different poetic cultures. What we might hear as an echo of the male voice in women's poetry, turns out to be a female voice. The modernization of form is a phenomenon occurring simultaneously in men's and in women's poetry. The new themes in men's and women's poetry show still wider divergences. The 'great melancholy' is an example of this.

4. The 'Great Melancholy'

One characteristic complex of themes in women's poetry that has no parallel in men's poetry is the 'great melancholy'. I use the term as a category of classification which stands, I think, apart from male standards, terms and fashions. The 'great melancholy' can account for hundreds of women's poems that until now did not fit in any category, all describing deep depression. Life is seen as useless. There is no interest in the outside world, nor in other people. The persona is not able to achieve anything. She despises and blames herself. There is not a grain of self-love. In their thematic aspect the poems correspond largely with Freud's description of melancholy:

'Die Melancholie ist seelisch ausgezeichnet durch eine tiefgeschmerzliche Verstimmung, eine Aufhebung des Interesses für die Aussenwelt, durch den Verlust der Liebestätig, durch die Hemmung jeder Leistung und die Herabsetzung des Selbstgefühls, die sich in Selbstvorwürfen und Selbstbeschimpfungen äussert und bis zur wahnhaften Erwartung von Strafe steigert.' (Freud, 'Trauer und Melancholie' 1917. Geciteerd in Selmenraad 1985: 4)

Alice Miller's theory of depression is also very helpful (modern psychoanalysts often use the term depression instead of melancholy, but mean exactly the same). Miller describes depression as the fundamental loss of contact with the true feelings. Psychologically the depressive
person is imprisoned: she lives out the wishes and projections of others (such as parents) and can not live her own life (Miller 1982).
The work of Ellen Warmond and Hanny Michaelis is completely dominated by
this theme, and Lizzy Sara May and Mischa de Vreede are also touched by
this dark mood. I see the great melancholy and the pre-feminist
consciousness as the two sides of the same coin. The poets Ankie
Peijpers, Nel Noordzij and Vasalisc go beyond melancholy: their initial
depression evolves into (pre)feminist discomfort or even mutinousness. I
will return to this connection later. First I want to explore the great
melancholy in the poetry.

4.1 Ellen Warmond
The densest images of emptiness are those of Ellen Warmond. I quote two
poems that belong together:
WOONHUIS
\[
\text{De klok heeft geen geheugen meer een ongewone}
\text{verbijstering kruip zwijgend uit een hinderlaag}
\text{een overdub se gespletten kogel draag}
\text{ik tussen schouders die me vreemd voorkomen}
\text{de muren tonen hun verwarring profiel}
\text{behang pels van herinnering die zich een uitweg wroeten}
\text{een klokslag die een uur geleden viel}
\text{rolt als een trage damsteen voor mijn voeten}
\text{twee dodelijk verschrikte handen liggen}
\text{als wezenloze vissen naast mijn bord}
\text{waar is het huis en wat is deze kamer}
\text{waarin ik langzaamaan een ander word?}
\]

Dwelling-House
\[
\text{The clock has no memory anymore an unusual}
\text{confusion silently crawls from where it lays in ambush}
\text{I carry a crosswise split cone}
\text{between shoulders that look strange to me}
\text{the walls show their confounding profile}
\text{wallpaper of memories, routing a way out}
\text{last hour's clock chime}
\text{rolls before my feet like a slow checker}
\text{two deadly terrified hands lie}
\text{like wooden fishes next to my plate}
\text{where is the house and what is this room}
\text{in which I slowly become another?}
\]

\[
\text{Dit noent men huiz deze kubus}
\text{oordovende leegte met ramen}
\]
die iets verbergen en stoeien
die samenweren

de vuurmond van een lamp die op
de schietkijker van de open
wijdopen pupil staat gericht
dat noemt men licht

deur die gesloten blijft
bel die niet overgaat
eenzaamheid
onraad.

II
This they call house this cube
of deafening emptiness with windows
hiding something and chairs
conspiring

the muzzle of a lamp pointed
at the target of the open
wide-open pupil
that they call light

door that stays closed
bell that doesn’t ring
loneliness
danger.

(Warmond 1953, in 1979: 16)

In both poems the lyrical ‘I’ describes itself as confined within a house. The title ‘Woonhuis’/‘Dwelling-house’ is ironic, since living in it is a dreadful experience. In the first poem the clock is personified: it has lost its memory. This life is no longer structured by time. ‘Verbijstering’/‘Confusion’ is personified as an aggressive animal, waiting to trap ‘I’. There is utter estrangement from the ‘I’s own body: it is described as an unknown object, as a mere geometrical form, a split cone. It is wounded, disconnected, cut loose. Strong estrangement is also expressed in ‘schouders die me vreemd voorkomen/ ‘shoulders that look strange to me’ – where the intellect, the observing subject is separated from its body. The dualism is extreme. This comes back in the last stanza ‘twee dodelijk verschrikte handen liggen/als wezenloze vissen naast mijn bord’/‘two deadly terrified hands lie/like wooden fishes next to my plate’. The possessive ‘mine’ is used for a mere plate, while the hands, so much closer and belonging to the own physical self, are impersonal, only ‘the hands’.

All the inner processes seem to be projected here on to objects in the immediate environment. What is inside is so strong, that it seems to
come to the person from the outside. The persona has lost the sense of
time, it is experienced as the last, long-past hourly chime of the clock
that comes rolling to the feet. The persona's own memories struggle to
find a way out, but that is presented as the fruitless, helpless routing
of the patterns on the wallpaper, never able to wrench themselves away
from the wall and jerking endlessly around in the same pattern. The poem
ends in complete desoration: an alien reality has taken over.

In the second poem the house is described as a form ('kubus/ cube') as
if 'I' comes from another planet and has no contextual knowledge.
Windows and chairs are again personified as enemies, who want to trap
'I'. The persona is being hunted, but the reader never knows why. The
paranoia becomes even more explicit in stanza 2, where a lamp is
perceived as a gun, threatening to shoot right into the eye. That
metaphor extends over three lines and assumes allegorical dimensions,
which helps to create this closed universe of terror. The isolated words
at the end of the poem support the feeling of total isolation that is
 evoked here.

In the three books Warmond published during the fifties (Warmond 1953,
1955, 1957) images of imprisonment in a house or a room, and being
attacked by existential fear and despair recur again and again. In
Warmond's poetry there is no antithesis between the unbearable 'Inside'
and an 'outside' world, or the world of nature. The outside world is
only a continuation of meaninglessness. While life inside desintegrates,
the whole city and even the cosmic order fall apart too. Streets lead
nowhere, 'stars fall deadly pale out of their orbits' as one poem has
it. Metaphors taken from nature bring in winter nights and polar seas,
as frames of reference that suggest only more coldness and vaster
universal emptiness. Nowhere does Warmond provide a clue of any cause or
background of this paranoia. There are no references to any concrete
personal trauma, any past, to war, to lost love. This poetic world has
fallen out of time. It is even empty of other people: it is a
motherless, fatherless, sister- and brotherless, nature - and loverless
poetry. Finally, it is a genderless poetry: the lyrical 'I' never
identifies itself as male or female. 'I' is a stranger to itself, alone
in its 'deafening silence'.

One level of interpretation of this poetry can certainly be a psycho-
critical one, with psychoanalytical theories of melancholy as a frame of reference, i.e. the theories of Melanie Klein, Freud (Laplanche/Pontalis 1973: 114-116; 485-86), Alice Miller (1982) and others (Sellenraad 1985). Another, more sociologically inspired level of interpretation connects this melancholy to the general crisis of values and the cultural void after the war, and, more specifically, to the collective situation of women in the fifties. On the sociological level I shall make some comments later. First I will explore the great melancholy — very briefly — in Michaelis, de Vreede and May, and relate it to its counterpart: (pre)feminist dissatisfaction.

4.2 Hanny Michaelis

Michaelis published her first book of (traditional) poetry in 1949. Her second book, Water uit de rots (1957) is the result of a modernization as analysed in paragraph 3. From 1957 onwards her poems are about melancholy, incapability to enjoy life, about despair and (lost) love. In Michaelis' poetry it is important to discriminate carefully between melancholy and grief. Grief is true feeling, real pain. In grief, selfrespect is intact. Melancholy or depression is rather the absence of feeling, even the incapability to feel, for which one blames oneself endlessly. One has a massive sense of failure. According to Freud: 'Bei der Trauer ist die Welt arm und leer geworden, bei der Melancholie das Ich selbst.' (Sellenraad 1985) I quote two poems from Water uit de rots:

Weggaan heeft geen zin,
Alle muren zweten verdriet.
In alle kamers hangt
de geur van ontbinding.
En overal zijn spiegels:
In stilstand water drijft
altijd hetzelfde lijk.

Leaving is useless
All the walls sweat sorrow.
In all rooms hang
The smell of decay
hangs in every room.
And mirrors everywhere:
It's always the same corpse
that floats in stagnant water.

(Michaelis 1957: 17)

Luisterend naar de muziek
die wij vroeger samen hoorden,
ruk ik aan mijn verdriet
als een hond aan de ketting.

Listening to the music
that we used to hear together,
I jerk on my sorrow
Like a dog on its chain.

Violinen en fluiten weven
een zilveren rag
over de afgrond
totdat de stilte mij
weer insluit.

Violins and flutes weave
a silver web
over the abyss
till silence closes me
in again.
Onder haar matglazen stolp
ontbrandt opnieuw
het geluidloze gevecht
tussen verwachting en wanhoop
om het niemandsland
van mijn bestaan.

Under its dull bell jar
the soundless fight
between expectation and despair
ignites anew
for the no man's land
of my existence.

(Michaelis 1957:29)
The first poem is one of many about depression. It is associated with death. In the first poem there is no concrete grief. The massive and fatalistic depression makes any real, differentiated feelings impossible. The second poem initially points to lost love as a possible source of grief, but this grief is not admitted. It sinks away into depression again. I think this is because the memory of the beloved (stanza 1) does not lead to a really experienced pain, but to illusion. The music that stirs the memories only "weaves a silver web over the abyss." A 'web' is of course treacherous: one can fall through into the abyss of melancholy. The memory does lead to a consciousness of grief, but it is only experienced from the outside, as a burden that cannot be touched or moved. A dog, tugging at its chain, only thinks of getting rid of it. The persona does not accept grief, but only wants to discard it. To accept and experience the pain is not seen as a real possibility. But the 'chain of grief' will only fall off if the grief is accepted and experienced (Miller 1982, passim). Here the persona chooses (though not consciously) depression rather than pain. In the second half of the poem melancholy reigns again in all its horror. It is striking that Michaelis uses here the image of the bell jar which was to become Sylvia Plath's symbol for being caught in melancholy, shut off from reality and from oneself (Plath 1963). The 'soundless flight between expectation and despair' repeats the poles between which the persona moves. There is no mourning as a middle term, through which liberation could be effected. I think the depression is projected onto the loss of a lover, and that this loss serves as a rationalization for a more basic feeling of deadness. The actual loss re-activates an older, more fundamental loss, the loss of what Miller calls 'the true self'. People who have no contact with their true feelings because as children they always had to repress them endlessly repeat this repression. Everything one touches dies. 'The smell of decay/hangs in every room' and 'it's always the same corpse' indeed. One is unable to experience grief, mourning or happiness, since the contact with the real feelings is cut off. Still, the presence of an absent lover implies that somebody has been admitted into the emotional prison. There are references to a very cold and lonely childhood:

'(....) platte grijsse kiezelstenen,
daar heb ik vroeger mee gespeeld
op winderige maandagmiddagen,
uren aaneen, gevangen in de ban
van een bedwelmende verveling
en vage, onbegrenzen droefenis'
'(...), flat grey pebbles
that I used to play with as a child
on windy Monday afternoons,
hours on end, caught in the spell
of an intoxicating boredom
and a vague, uncomprehended grief.'

(Michaelis 1957: 13)

There are references to the war, to Jewish history, and this persona is
not genderless, but now and then identified as female.

Like Warmond, Michaelis often enshrines her persona in a house, a room,
a city. But whereas with Warmond nature and the outside world are only
extensions of inner death, with Michaelis we find some recognition that
there must be, somewhere, another world, although the persona cannot
reach it and is excluded from it. (Michaelis 1957: 15)

Michaelis stopped publishing after 1971. Her last book of poetry is
Nagdraven naar een nieuw Utopia (1971). Like Warmond, she remained true
to her own poetic process. I see her poetry as a quest for the lost
capacity for feeling. It is a description of the stone prison in which
depressive women have to live, and also of rattling at the bolts of that
prison. Her last book shows glimpses of a solution and of relief.

4.3 Great melancholy and (pre)feminist dissatisfaction

Not only in the work of Warmond and Michaelis, but also in that of
Mischa de Vreede and Lizzy Sara May do we find the great melancholy.

Mischa de Vreede had her first book Wet huid en hand (1959) published at
the end of the period under discussion. The first part of the book
contains, for that time, rather frank love-poems, followed by poems
about lost love. Here I have, as with Michaelis, the impression that
this feeling about the lost lover covers a much deeper and more
existential lack: 'Och ik was arm en leer geworden' as Freud would
say. There is no real grief, but depression, loss of self and death-
wish:

'o moeder neem mij bij u
in uw dichte schoot
o vader kom mij halen
in uw dood en donker bloed
o god mask mij weer
woest en iedig.'

'o mother take me to you
into your closed womb
o father come and get me
into your dead dark blood
o god make me
without form and void again.

(De Vreede 1959: 13)
Suddenly the book blooms again with new love. This could be read as love temporarily warding off an always present depression. When some poems later the lover has left, the real pain immediately sinks down into the deepest depression. The later part of *Het huid en hand* contains many poems full of melancholy and self-hatred. In the *fifties* Lizzy Sara May's *Blues voor voetstappen* (1955) and *Neerzien op een plastic huid* (1957) were published. The first book contains many poems that refer, in their titles or elsewhere, to the blues, the genre in jazzmusic especially suited to the expression of melancholy. In Holland blues are associated with female singers, through those singers who became known here. The *fifties* saw a general jazzrevival, many male poets also referred to jazz, but it seems significant that a woman poet should pick on the blues. May's poetry is often sad, but her sadness is not a hermetically closed melancholy. Later she became politically involved, identified with her Jewish background and became a (pre-)feminist.

Like Lizzy Sara May, several other women poets passed from the great melancholy to other themes. It must be emphasized that the great melancholy is only one of the thematic complexes in women's poetry of the *fifties*. It is only one part of the whole picture. Equally important is what I call the pre-feminist dissatisfaction, a thematic complex which evolved together with the great melancholy, and which can be seen as its counterpart. This pre-feminist consciousness is most evident in the poetry of Ankie Peijpers. Peijpers' first book, *October*, was published in 1951, when she was only seventeen. Like Michaels she changed her early traditional, rimed verse into a more modern verse. *October* has this remarkable poem:

**Huwelijk**

*Mijn echtgenoot loopt zwervend door de kamer.*

*Het is er klein. Wij trachten ook niet langer het ander lichaam te ontwijken.*

*Maar ieder aanraken is als een hamerslag zo kort en fel — steeds banger, hoe ik mijn plicht op hem te lijken.*

**Marriage**

*My husband roams the room,<br>it is small. We no longer try<br>to avoid the other body.*

*But every touch is like a hammer-blow so short and fierce — more and more afraid<br>I do my duty to resemble him.*

*(Peijpers 1951 in 1976: 12)*
A couple, seen from the woman's point of view, is pictured in a room. The husband's roaming suggests restlessness, claustrophobia and/or impatience. The room is so small that it is difficult or tiring to keep avoiding the collision with the partner's body. The whole scene suggests a space like a prisoncell. In stanza 1 touching might still be interpreted as loving or neutral, but through the contrasting 'But' and the comparison 'like a hammerblow' the touching of the bodies is presented as violent and painful. This is a restless, tired, irritated couple unable to prevent bumping into one another, hurting one another. 'More and more afraid' suggests that being in this room together is a lasting situation. As they stay there longer, her fear is growing all the time. In 'I do my duty to resemble him' the way in which she has to resemble him is not explicitly stated. It seems clear, however, that this 'duty to resemble him' implies that the woman must stop being herself. She must become like him. Out of fear she will annihilate her own person, her individuality. This scene can be read as symbolizing the institution of marriage. It is not 'a marriage' or 'this (particular) marriage', but marriage tout court. This poem presents marriage as totally devoid of conventional romanticism. Instead of love there is violence. Instead of being together in freedom there is solitary confinement a deux. Wives are — in the patriarchal view of marriage — supposed to fulfill their duties willingly, but this duty is fulfilled compulsorily out of increasing fear. The next step can only be a refusal to participate in this 'marriage' any longer. Feminism lies around the corner in this poem. Peijpers is doing here exactly what Irigaray (1981: 31) means by mimesis: she deliberately takes on a role, and carries it on to its extreme consequences, thereby revealing the true nature of the role. She imitates in order to subvert. Although there is no joy in this poem, it is certainly not melancholic. It is cynical, it is full of anguish which could turn into revolt any moment, but it is not with real feeling.

Another of Peijpers' early poems, 'Opdracht' (1957) presents a persona who is sculpting stones, while her lover lies lazily in the sun. She works strenuously, feverishly, because in one of the many stones there is her 'demon' calling for her. The lover is indifferent, he is not interested in her project. The persona feels 'sick of thirst and
unfree'. The last lines establish a firm connection between the lyrical
subject and the demon by applying these same words to him: 'But my
demon, unfree, sick of thirst/is in stone and waits for me.' (Peijpers
1976: 30). The demon can be interpreted as an unrealized aspect of the
persona herself. He—whatever he may be—lives somewhere in one of a
thousand stones. Releasing him will be a Sisyphian task. Although this
project is not realized within the poem, there is this passionate
longing for a lost, or not yet attained aspect of the persona’s own
soul.
‘Een jonger vrouw’ (1957) again presents an image of an imprisoned other
self, less abstract now, and much closer: she is human, a woman like the
persona herself, enclosed within her body. The contact is less
desperate:
Een jonger vrouw

In mij is een jonger vrouw dan ik
met lichter ogen en smalle handen.
Zij staat op kleine gespitste voeten
door mijn ogen naar buiten te zien.
Zij kijkt naar de dagen, naar licht en naar kleuren,
ziet alles verwonderd, ziet alles heel schoon.
Beiden verlangen we, dat zij kon spreken,
dat zij kon bewegen en leven en breken
de donkere, die om haar woont.

A younger woman

In me lives one younger than I
with lighter eyes and finer hands.
She stands on small and pointed feet
she looks out through my eyes,
looks at the days, at light, at colours,
sees everything in wonder, sees everything so clean.
We both wish that she could speak,
that she could move and live and break
the dark one that surrounds her.

(Peijpers 1957, in 1976: 38)

Strong images of imprisonment and the desire to break free are also to
be found in the poetry of M. Vasalis. In the fifties Vasalis already
belonged to an older generation. Young male poets even considered her a
symbol of the ‘old poetry’ which they execrated. Vasalis is indeed out
of place among her male contemporaries, but she definitely belongs with
her female contemporaries. There are striking thematic relations with
Peijpers, who is twenty-five years younger. The images of women bound or
imprisoned, passionately longing for freedom, present an interesting
case of intertextuality. I quote a poem from Vasalis' intriguing cycle 'Fragments' (1964). The cycle consists of five poems that can be interpreted as a quest for inner change, out of a situation of (i) stagnation, loss, speechlessness. (ii) The paradise of sweet female loveliness is corrupted and therefore destroyed. Good and evil are mixed up. (iii) On the beach lies a woman 'big as the statue of a goddess'. She is a living statue, unable to move. She can only whisper upwards that she wants to be released, which does not happen. In parts IV and V of the cycle something very strange and miraculous happens through which deadness, stagnation, confusion and speechlessness are resolved.
O laat mij vrij, fluisterde zij naar boven
o laat mij vrij, desnoods om kwaad te doen.
Laat mij luid spreken, ook al zou ik liegen.
geef mij te eten, drinken, ook al zou ik spugen,
liefhebben, zelfs al zou ik ontrouw zijn.
Ik vast te lang en haat de geur der heiligheid,
Ik ben op slot en haat de veiligheid.
Ik lig als Gulliver gebonden
door duizend levende, niet zichtbare en thalere draden.
Maar mogen deze grote voeten niet meer waden
en mijn plat uitgestrekte, open handen
nooit weer iets grijpen, strelen? Gods landen.
Laat mij weer vrij. Ik wil weer rechtstijl staan
en ga opzij. Dan doe ik minder kwad,
dan als ik lig gebonden, met de diens haat
der machtelozen, die alleen maar ogen zijn,
pijn, onschuld, op held canniibalen.

O let me free, she whispered upwards,
o let me free, if need be to do evil.
Let me speak out loud, even if I would lie,
give me to eat and drink, even if I would spit,
to love, even if I were untrue.
I fast too long, and hate the smell of holiness,
I am locked up and hate the safety.
I lie tied up like Gulliver
by a thousand living, invisible and tenacious threads.
But are those big feet never again allowed to wade,
and my flat outstretched open hands
never to grab, caress something? Dead lands.
Let me free again. Then I do less evil
than when I lie tied up, with the deep hatred
of the powerless, who are only eyes,
silent, slippery, opal cannibals.

(Vaallis 1954 (1954/1): 49)

Pre-feminist consciousness pervades women's poetry of the fifties. It is
diverse. The poems belonging to the thematic complex of the imprisoned
self or double reflect it. The provocative poems of Nel Noordzij and
Christine Meijling—both ostentatiously claiming social and sexual
autonomy—reflect it. I see this pre-feminist dissatisfaction as the
counterpart of the great melancholy. On a sociological level both can be
seen as ways of dealing with the reality of women's lives in the
fifties. On this level of interpretation I shall make some comments now
on the great melancholy.
5. Comments on the Great Melancholy

It is possible to see a connection between the great melancholy on the one hand, and the cultural void and general crisis of values after the war on the other. The war had destroyed ideals, illusions about human nature, religious values and also, for that matter, people, families, houses and careers (Fokkema 1979: 7-12). But men who had been subjected to the same conditions, seemed to react differently to the crisis of values than women did. Men wrote aggressive, vitalistic, provocative, daringly experimental poems, not depressive ones. Men's nihilism and despair, which was certainly present, always had an aggressive component: they raged against rotten old morals and rotten old esthetics, against their fossilized predecessors and against the dead institution of poetry, but not against themselves. They seem to have directed their despair outward, in the form of aggression, whereas women directed it inward, in the form of depression. (Feminist) psychology often points out that men and women deal with frustration in different ways.

In postwar prose men are sometimes deeply melancholic (De avonden, G.K. van het Reve; Ik heb altijd gelijk, W.F. Hermans) but a good deal of the despair is also blamed on parents, the church, the state, women.

There is yet another side to it. Young male poets had something to gain from the postwar cultural crisis. Simon Vinkenoog wrote in the introduction to one of his anthologies of experimental poetry: 'wij leven in het niets, wij weten niets en teren op een culturele erfenis die reeds lang op en verdeeld is.' (We live in the void, we know nothing and live on a cultural heritage that was used up and parcelled out long ago) (Vinkenoog 1956: 9-10). Young male poets felt they had been forgotten at the parceling out of cultural heritage. But if the old authorities no longer reigned, they themselves could of course become the new ones. The 'Vijfigers' formed an exclusively male movement. They in fact became the new authorities. For women this perspective did not exist. Parcelled out, indeed.

The general situation of women of the fifties should also be taken into account. The fifties was a time of restoration, not only of bombed cities, but also of the family and the traditional role of women.
Motherhood was heavily promoted. Very few women had jobs. (Working women have always been a small minority in Holland, but in the fifties only two percent of the married women had jobs (Ribberink 1986).) The cultural representation of women was minimal. What was left of feminism had gone underground.

I wonder if there are not some elements in the 'great melancholy' that could be seen as a counter-movement against the false optimism and the sexism of this restoration. Women poets state bluntly that life is unlivable and empty to them. Cities are rebuilt and they describe them as prisons. Women are commended as home-makers but they say the four walls of the room close in on them. Women are supposed to be warm and feeling, and they assert they do not feel at all. Women are supposed to find their destination in love, and they show how powerless lovers are to stop the flood of depression. It could all be read as the refusal of that restoration. It could also be read as an effort to discover the trauma that caused the loss of self. As long as depression is warded off (by work, success, love, youth) it can, according to Miller, not be cured. 'Depression leads to the wound.' (Miller 1982: 49) This is true on a personal level, but also on a collective level. Under patriarchal conditions women suffer a fundamental and collective loss of self. Consciousness of this can be averted - by playing the cute little roles we are supposed to play - but hiding the problem does not help. That is why I see the 'great melancholy' and the (pre)feminist dissatisfaction as connected with each other in women's poetry. They oppose the same feminine condition. Especially in the poetry of Ankie Peijpers the turning points are obvious, where threatening melancholy turns round and becomes explicit resistance. This rebellious feminist voice is one of the new phenomena of women's poetry in the fifties, and it is corroborated by other examples of that period.

6. Conclusion

In the 'great melancholy' I have tried to find a category that will cover an aspect of women's poetry in the fifties. Through this category I was able to establish a connection between Warmond, Michaelis, de Vreede and Lizzy Sara May. I also tried to connect this theme in poetry to the world of women outside literature. Having seen it this way, it seems absurd not to relate Warmond and
Michaelis: the connection seems obvious. Male literary historians never see these connections. Sometimes they even place Michaelis ('Tirade-poet') and Warmond (between Cristerum and Vijftig) in two totally different literary generations and age-groups. Women poets are not in their picture: in the first place because they do not read them very well; secondly because they only see women in so far as they display the same characteristics as men. Thus, male literary historians, blinded by the Myth of the One Literary History, can only give a very shallow description of women's work.

I think that a new literary history must radically dispose of the Myth of the One Literary History, and adopt the hypothesis of a plurality of overlapping and intersecting literatures. The question I raised at the beginning of this paper: to what extent do women belong to the dominant culture, to what extent do they not? - is not answered yet. I found that women shared in the modernization of style and form, but only in part and only for own ends. The 'great melancholy' is completely absent from men's work, or has a very different form there. Looking back at Arden's diagram adopted by Showalter, I would say that the great melancholy which I described here as a pattern in women's poetry, belongs fully to the 'muted' world that is kept out of sight by the dominant culture. I have tried to re-tell that muted story here. And I have tried to stay as close as I could - if a critic can ever do so - to the way the poets themselves tell that story.

Note

1. English translations of all poems in this paper by Maelke Meljer and Mary Winge.

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