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Summary

Between 1980 and 2000 Gertrude Starink (1947-2002) published in serial order five collections of poems entitled DE WEG NAAR EGYPTE (THE WAY TO EGYPT). She called her poems and groups of poems “passages”. Starting point for this thesis was the ambivalent attitude of professional readers towards Starink’s works. They were either captivated, showed expressions of incomprehension expressed their misunderstanding or were simply irritated. This diversity in response provided me with my research questions: what are the (complicating) characteristics of Starink’s poetry that can account for these reactions; what is the connection between the strategy of reading of the reviewers and their predominantly negative judgment; is there a possible reading strategy that is not being frustrated, but is instead more productive?

An answer to the first question may be found in the tension between the highly symmetrical precision of the formal structure of the five volumes as a whole and the confusing elusiveness of its content. Following a conventional reading strategy, one would expect this formal symmetry to be mirrored in a corresponding symmetrical content. On first sight, the poetry of Starink does not display a meaningful and surveyable world. The passages are to be regarded as fragments, which implies that the reader seeking for unity will find black holes, which he has to accept.

I studied an array of reading strategies, applied by several critics, the results of which showed that most of them read the poems linear and realistically, only a few of them considered another approach. The question I asked myself was therefore: which mode of reading prevents this frustration?

Double Exposures by Mieke Bal (1996) describes specifically the similarities between viewing an exhibition of paintings and the reading of literature. Following her line of thoughts, I propose a spatial way of reading, comparable to a tour along an exhibition of paintings, in which the reader goes back and forth from painting to painting, making connections that he or she would probably miss when going in a linear direction only. This alternative directionality, alongside the conventional linear mode of reading, might result in a different, more prolific production of meaning. Another source of inspiration for my research is the reading of narrative texts like novels, suggested by Ernst van Alphen (1988): “the linear sequence of the signs becomes a connection in which every sign might be connected to each and every other sign.” For my research I compared the results of a linear reading and the realistic approach, with the anti-linear, “spatial” mode of reading narrative.

My method consisted of the following steps: first I analyzed the poems separately, in the order of the numbered pages of the volumes. My starting point was Wimsatt’s “internal evidence” (1954). Next, I analyzed the poems of the third volume in pairs, those which are presented on a left and adjacent right page. Finally, all symmetrically placed poems and pairs of poems were compared. I answered the following questions: is it possible to distinguish a coherent pattern, or are there several patterns, in whatever form, in every separate volume and in the series of five volumes? What kind of relationships consist between the poems that form pairs? Is the small symme-
try of the third volume and the large symmetry of the series, more than just a superficial similarity of formal qualities? To analyze the separate poems I followed the example of Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1977) analyzing ‘Les chats’, but my purpose was different. They considered each poem to be autonomous; I studied the way the poems interrelate.

In the second chapter I analyzed the first collection, which lead to conclusions about: a realistic reading of the volume; the indeterminacy of the texts; possibilities to read the poems in other ways and the advantages and disadvantages of my method. A realistic reading of the first volume is supported by its narrative qualities and by answering the questions: who, what and where. The reader is supposed to assume that characters remain the same throughout the volume. However, this is problematic: that is not easy to demonstrate. Nor the geographical setting of the poems is clear, nor is the temporal setting of the occurrences clear in comparison to the conventional temporal order.

A remarkable feature of the passages is that of “indeterminacy” (Perloff 1981): the reader is unaware of certain things, the world that is evoked is missing a definable referent, the poems resist all attempts of integrating them into a coherent pattern. With Starink, the nature of “indeterminacy” is diverse. It is necessary to expand the idea of “internal evidence” to the scope of the entire series. But even then, many questions remain unanswered. The readability of the text is enlarged by different methods of reading, by interpreting elements as symbolic, mythological, surrealistic, or religious or within the framework of a fairytale or dream. The responsibility of interpretative choices demonstrates the role of the reader in producing meaning.

In interpreting Starink’s poems, one has to produce meaning by following alternative patterns, simultaneously with the conventional linear way of reading. The tour around an exhibition of paintings respects both the singularity of the poem or passage and goes back and forth. In passage XVIII the linear way of reading is explicitly problematized and this is why I consider this passage to be a mise en abyme for the entire volume. The exhibition model shows networks of connected passages, poems and fragments.

The next chapter focuses on form and content of the third collection. The small symmetry shows itself mainly within the span of four poems, more seldom within two. The axis of symmetry has been left out. This absence may be regarded to be iconic: what in a tangible centre might have produced a definitive meaning, is missing. The symmetry counts only partly for the “form of content” (Compagnon 1998): there are meaningful relations between the quartettes and pairs, but the “rizoom”-structure, which provides structure to the whole volume and even the whole series in open networks of words, clauses and themes, results in more productive patterns.

The alternation in use of tenses creates a continuous suggestion of narrativity. The poems seem to be epic and seem to refer to a reality outside themselves. That suggestion is nevertheless treacherous, because the tenses are of the same value: the stories in the poems are “timeless” and lyrical, even when they suggest linear progress. A striking motive in the third collection is the changeability of dream and reality, of the image and the object of imagination. More frequent
elements are fairytale motifs. In many of Starink’s poems the eye has an important role besides the ear.

On the basis of the second and fourth collection, the next chapter demonstrates that a metaphorical or a mythological reading can partly solve the problems the text evokes. Both collections show that the problem of the characters is more complicated than some have suggested. There are probably three male antagonists and a female protagonist. The question is whether these antagonists are separate characters, or manifestations of a multiple personality.

The final collection is the subject of the fifth chapter. Thematically, the completion of the large symmetry is emphasized by motifs related to "completion" and "goodbye". Reality and dream relate in some of the passages to each other in such a way that it is not possible to indicate a clear hierarchy. These passages can be regarded as examples of a direct confrontation between the world of the living with the world of the dead. In the representation of these confrontations Starink uses mythological models, like the travel of the dead, the ferryman poem and the Egyptian ritual of weighing the heart. Some passages of the fifth collection can be seen as poetical poems. They are not exclusively poetical, they also fit in thematic networks. A poetic credo is formulated, in which the role of the reader gets special emphasis in the selection of his personal composition of the collection or the entire work.

Interdiscursivity as a framework of interpretation is the subject of the sixth chapter. For my research I have restricted myself to two groups of discourse: the first group I call "mythologies", the second, I summarize under the term "language". Within the first group motifs from ancient Egypt and the motif of the locus amoenus play an important role. Given the collective title of the five volumes, it is obvious to start with an Egyptian reading of the passages. "Egypt", however, forms not the only relevant mythological discourse: elements from Greek and ancient European mythology are also important.

The second discursive group includes motifs like "scratches and marks" and the opposition between two ways of seeing: ordinary looking and the visionary look as forms of knowledge. The specific effect of these elements in an interdiscursive reading of Starink’s work is that they indicate the fundamental multiplicity and elusiveness of the meanings of her poems. Starink always uses an eclectic approach: she varies at random in her approach and creates her own mythology. As a result of the many points of contact with other discursive fields, the effect of "confusion" becomes a fundamental characteristic of her poetry. Full appropriation is impossible. Tunnel vision can be a serious danger for productive, relevant interpretation.

In the next chapter, I discuss trends and constants regarding space, time and characters. At first sight space, in the form of landscape seems to form a consistent background to the described events, but it is not. The landscape is constantly characterized by oppositions; in a realistic reading of the passages these oppositions appear irreconcilable.

Concerning time, there are five constant data: omissions which suggest that "earlier" something has happened that is relevant; references to the future, which suggests that questions will be answered over time; references to a past before the beginning of the plot in the story; repe-
tions within the text, and references to traceable events within the timeframe of the story. The suggestion of temporal coherence is strong, but it doesn’t provide clear consistency. The temporal development remains characterized by "lack" of temporal information.

Often the spokesperson is a woman characterized by flexibility and resistance against a vague assignment she received from an unnamed antagonist. It is inherent to the contract that she is willing to move constantly. As a consequence, not “being” but “becoming” is important in her nomadic existence. “Becoming” is represented in the physical or mental movements and the change of occupations, of which writing and metaphors for writing form an essential part.

An accurate distinction between the other characters is not possible due to a "lack" of data, enhanced by confusing use of personal and possessive pronouns. Realistic reading doesn’t solve the problem of the individual characters. A striving for unity results in a denial of their diversity and complexity.

The final chapter contains the conclusions of my research. The difficulties facing the reader of Starink’s poetry, are partly the kind of problems one has with most modern poetry. The collision between the strict symmetry of the form and the elusiveness of the content is typical for Starink. The formal, predictable regularity raises expectations regarding the possible symmetry of the content and these expectations are usually not met. Again and again it seems that essential information is omitted. I summarize the "indeterminacy" in which this results with the key notion of "lack". This is not only a defective key word (Vendler 1997) that marks the "open spaces" in content and form, but it also indicates a poetical statement relating to the attitude and activity required of the reader of Starink’s poetry.

Besides the linear and realistic mode of reading, I practiced the strategy of the exhibition model combined with a reading of the poems as narrative. My starting point was the individual passage and the individual poem, but this resulted in the conclusion that Starink problematizes the autonomy of the individual poem, the passage and even the collection. The proposed reading strategy provides insight into many intertwined networks and patterns of meaning production, distinct from the formal symmetry, without a common centre.

The regularity of the formal symmetry suggests a reading advice: in this order you can read the passages. The concept of "order" however, is relative. In the fifth collection the advice is weakened by the lyrical subject. She is the character that emphatically points at her occupation as a writer of her own story. The term “poioumenon” Alastair Fowler (1982) uses for a “work-in-progress novel” suits equally well for defining a striking aspect of the five books of poetry by Starink. But characterizing the five books as a whole as a meta text denies other aspects of THE WAY TO EGYPT.

Interdiscursivity as a mode of reading turned out to be productive, especially in combination with the exhibition model. The fundamental elusiveness of a final, conclusive interpretation of Starink’s poems is illuminated by this way of reading. The eclectic and instrumental use of, amongst others, the Egyptian mythology frustrates appropriation by the reader. The confusing mixture of more or less well known motifs into a self made discourse prevents the reader from a
full understanding of the world of Starink’s poetry. The reader may actively produce meaning in reading this “writerly text” (Barthes), but s/he should realize that modesty fits her / him, since new meaningful patterns will come about again and again.