

Versindaba

~ 'n Kollektiewe weblog vir die Afrikaanse digkuns

Louis Esterhuizen. Tot lof van effektiewe vaagheid  
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In navolging van die onlangse gesprek oor hermetiese digkuns, lees ek 'n interessante stuk op Poetry International Web oor die Amerikaanse digter John Ashbery raak; 'n digter wat allerweë gereken word as nie net een van die vernaamste hermete vandag nie, maar ook as een van die mees gewaardeerde en geliefde digters in die Amerikaanse lettere beskou word.

By wyse van oriëntering, eers die volgende kommentare wat op Poem Hunter gevind kan word: "John Lawrence Ashbery is an American poet. He has published more than twenty volumes of poetry and won nearly every major American award for poetry, including a Pulitzer Prize in 1976 for his collection *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. But Ashbery's work still proves controversial. In an article on Elizabeth Bishop in his *Selected Prose*, he characterizes himself as having been described as 'a harebrained, homegrown surrealist whose poetry defies even the rules and logic of Surrealism.' Although renowned for the postmodern complexity and opacity of his work, Ashbery has stated that he wishes it to be accessible to as many people as possible, not a private dialogue. "

En – "No figure looms so large in American poetry over the past 50 years as John Ashbery," Langdon Hammer, chairman of the English Department at Yale University, wrote in 2008. "[N]o American poet has had a larger, more diverse vocabulary, not Whitman, not Pound." Stephen Burt, a poet and Harvard professor of English, has compared Ashbery to T. S. Eliot, the "last figure whom half the English-language poets alive thought a great model, and the other half thought incomprehensible".

Die essay op Poetry International Web waarna ek hierbo verwys het, is deur Ton van't Hof geskryf en handel oor die gedigte van John Ashbery wat hy vertaal het en wat nou as Ergens in Amerika gaan verskyn. Van't Hof tipeer Ashbery se digkuns soos volg: "Over the years Ashbery has used a familiar technique: effective vagueness. Ashbery's phrasing sounds concrete, but is in fact so general and ambiguous, that each time it smoothly fits in with the reader's experiences, tuning his or her thinking to the poem. I rarely feel uncomfortable near an Ashbery poem. This effective vagueness is an important criterion for finding the proper words: whenever I have a choice, I always opt for the Dutch word that enlarges the meaning of the text in its entirety, even if it creates new connotations in comparison with Ashbery's original work. Although I've never asked him, I believe that that is what he would want me to do [...] Another effect of this vagueness is that every reader reads his or her very own John Ashbery poem."

Alfred Schaffer

Hoekom hierdie van belang is? Wel, hierdie opmerkings oor Ashbery se kenmerkende digstyl kan myns insiens net so van toepassing gemaak word op Alfred Schaffer se digkuns; selfs die verwysing na "surrealisme" en Ashbery se versugting dat hy "toeganklike" verse wil skryf is van toepassing ... Maar hoe gemaak met die vertaling van diesulke verse? Volgens sy eie verklaring het Van't Hof homself die vryheid vergun om bepaalde woorde wat hy as "effektief vaag" beskryf in die Nederlands te "verruim". Hierteenoor het Daniel Hugo weer met sy vertaling van Alfred Schaffer se gedigte (Kom in, dit vries daar buite, 2013: Protea Boekhuis) die oorspronklike teks met uiterste integriteit hanteer; ten spyte van die assosiatiewe (surrealistiese?) spronge wat die hermetiese vers so dikwels maak.

Myns insiens strek dit Daniel Hugo as vertaler tot eer.

Maar, 'n laaste beskouing. In sy onderhoud met Danie Marais het Alfred Schaffer soos volg reageer op Marais se vraag oor die hermetiese aard van sy digkuns: "Watter soort poësie ek skryf, hang tot 'n mate ook af van die leser. 'Hermeties' sou ek my gedigte nie wil noem nie. 'n Gedig wat verwys na 'n musiekstuk of kunswerk of geografiese plek wat ek persoonlik nie ken nie, kan vir my meer hermeties voorkom. Die mate van verstaanbaarheid hang tot 'n mate saam met die soort van assosiatiewe denke van die leser. Wat wil jy as 'n leser van 'n gedig? Elke leeshouding is geldig, maar elke opvatting sorg weer vir 'n ander tipe leser. Moeilik of maklik, tradisioneel of eksperimenteel, poësie speel tot 'n mate altyd met die onsegbare."

Inderdaad.

Op Poem Hunter is daar verskeie van John Ashbery se gedigte wat gelees kan word. Aangesien die meeste van hulle betreklik lank is, plaas ek as lusmaker hieronder net die laaste strofe van die gedig "Syringa". En vir jou leesplezier, 'n gedig van Alfred Scahffer soos dit deur Daniel Hugo vertaal is.

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#### Droombegin

Die nagte is die ergste. Verderaan die laaste plase  
maar alles is al onherkenbaar selfs my eie stem niks  
niks maak meer sin nie – wat bestaan lyk skielik  
supernaby en gedokumenteer, die water in die slootjies  
die wind deur die kniehoë gras, die suigende grond  
en daardie perd daar ek dink dit is 'n perd. Om tyd te wen  
strik ek my vetters. In my rugsak water kos droë klere  
'n handvol los koeëls my selfoon het gewoonweg 'n sein.  
Ek dink skaars, ek haal skaars asem, presies of ek dood is  
maar ek is springlewendig. Is ek dors dan drink ek, is ek moeg  
dan sing ek 'n liedjie wat my ma altyd vir my gesing het.  
Van bo af sou dit miskien kon lyk of ek vlug maar  
van bo af is alles duister. Hoogstens nog 'n paar kilometer skat ek  
dan kom die son op, skitterend en helder lig oor alles.

© Alfred Schaffer (Vertaling deur Daniel Hugo)

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#### Syringa

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But how late to be regretting all this, even  
Bearing in mind that regrets are always late, too late!  
To which Orpheus, a bluish cloud with white contours,  
Replies that these are of course not regrets at all,  
Merely a careful, scholarly setting down of  
Unquestioned facts, a record of pebbles along the way.  
And no matter how all this disappeared,  
Or got where it was going, it is no longer  
Material for a poem. Its subject  
Matters too much, and not enough, standing there helplessly  
While the poem streaked by, its tail afire, a bad  
Comet screaming hate and disaster, but so turned inward  
That the meaning, good or other, can never  
Become known. The singer thinks  
Constructively, builds up his chant in progressive stages  
Like a skyscraper, but at the last minute turns away.  
The song is engulfed in an instant in blackness  
Which must in turn flood the whole continent  
With blackness, for it cannot see. The singer  
Must then pass out of sight, not even relieved  
Of the evil burthen of the words. Stellification  
Is for the few, and comes about much later  
When all record of these people and their lives  
Has disappeared into libraries, onto microfilm.  
A few are still interested in them. "But what about  
So-and-so?" is still asked on occasion. But they lie

Frozen and out of touch until an arbitrary chorus  
Speaks of a totally different incident with a similar name  
In whose tale are hidden syllables  
Of what happened so long before that  
In some small town, one different summer.

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