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# Sybren Polet

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## Brief orientation

The Dutch author Sybren Polet (pseudonym of Sybe Minnema) was born in 1924 and died in 2015. He wrote poetry, prose, and theatrical plays. His prose includes novels, short stories, essays, children's books (e.g. *1957*), and anthologies. In 1952, he became one of the editors of *Podium*, the literary magazine that acted as the mouthpiece of the so-called Fiftiers ('Vijftigers'), an influential group of experimental poets including Hugo Claus, Gerrit Kouwenaar, Lucebert, and Bert Schierbeek.

In the fifties and sixties, Polet became an important player in the Dutch literary field. He reviewed international (avant-garde) literature for the newspaper *The Free People (Het Vrije Volk)*, and in the early sixties he played a central role in the launch of the Dutch Foundation for Literature. He was a member of the Board of Directors of that same foundation between 1975 and 1978. His first play, *The House (Het huis)* was performed in 1960 at the Festival du Théâtre d'Avant Garde in Brussels. His poetry of that period, for instance *Birth-City (Geboorte-stad)*, which was published in 1958, received various awards.

It was Polet's prose, however, that made him one of the most important figures in the Dutch neo-avant-garde scene. Between 1961 and 2007, Polet published a series of eleven volumes, called the Lokien-cycle (Vervaeck 2008). It focuses on a central character, Lokien Perdok, who is continually changing, not just into other people, but also into other life-forms, such as a dog, a stone, or even a free-floating consciousness. As a neo-avant-garde form of *Everyman*, Lokien represents humanity in a continuous process of transformation, embracing the non-human and bridging the gap between subject and object, the inside and the outside. Minds are materialized, people become things, and vice versa. The setting often features the city of Amsterdam, but oscillates between prehistorical and futuristic scenery. Polet is one of the few Dutch literary authors who championed science fiction and combined it with both the historical novel, and contemporary social critique.

In 1978, he published an anthology, *Other Prose (Ander proza 1978a)*, which solidified his role as spokesperson for Dutch neo-avant-garde fiction. In this collection of Dutch and Flemish texts, Polet distinguishes between "total prose", which seeks to include the whole world, for instance by means of collage, and "absolute prose", which strives for the highest autonomy through the exploitation of language. Moreover, Polet explicitly links fifteen post-war, neo-avant-garde writers (including J.F. Vogelaar, Lidy van Marissing, and Ivo Michiels) to currents within the historical avant-garde, such as the Dadaism of Theo van Doesburg and the expressionism of Paul van Ostaïjen. The anthology is regularly described as the tombstone of 'Other Prose', which was soon to be taken over by a fashion for postmodern literature. Polet, however, remained faithful to his neo-avant-garde project. In 2003, he published a historical overview

which embedded 'Other Prose' in a wider (spatiotemporal) tradition, starting with Lucianus and François Rabelais, and leading up to André Breton and James Joyce.

## Developments

The metamorphosis of the human and, or into, the non-human world has always been at the core of Polet's oeuvre. The transformations in his plays, stories and poems are never presented as a one-way street, but always as a multidirectional process that can be reversed or redirected at any time. It comes as no surprise, then, that it is hard to identify a linear evolution in his work. Though there were minor changes, these appear to be matters of degree and focus, rather than fundamental revolutions.

From the very start of his oeuvre, i.e., the volume of poetry *Demiurgasms* (*Demiurgasmen* 1953), an instability in setting (the city is presented a living being, a "gummicity") and character (the 'I' merges with the city and its inhabitants) appears. Setting and character also intertwine, for instance, in personifications of the city and in reifications of the characters. In addition, mental states are exteriorized in things and beings. At the level of content, then, the early works of Polet stress the personal and the mental aspects of these transformations, whereas the later texts (from the seventies onwards) zoom in on their social and political dimensions. On the level of style, Polet's experimental strategies reached their peak in the seventies. During that period, he often used collage, and experimented with the materiality and the lay-out of his texts. The later works show a more restrained use of such techniques. This two-fold evolution suggests that there are three phases in Polet's development: an early period until 1970, an intermediary period, which includes the seventies and eighties, and a late period.

However, this evolution needs to be put into perspective. While it may be true that his works from the seventies and, to a minor extent, of the eighties, display an explicit concern with political matters and overtly exploit neo-avant-garde techniques, these themes and techniques are present in all of Polet's texts, in more or less implicit ways. In Polet's poetry, for example, experiments with page lay-out are still extreme in some sections of *Language Figures 3 and 4* (*Taalfiguren 3 en 4*), which dates back to 1995 and is thus a late collection. With regards to his prose, the two Lokien-novels, *The Birth of a Mind* (*De geboorte van een geest* 1974) and *Xpertise or The Experts of the Red Light* (*Xpertise of de experts van het rode lampje* 1978), appear to be the most explicitly political and experimental novels of the entire Lokien-cycle. However, *The High Hat of History* (*De hoge hoed der historie* 1999) recycles and transforms a lot of the same themes and techniques. Moreover, the final volume of the cycle, *Time for Reflection* (*Bedenktijd* 2007) incorporates mental and personal themes (Lokien is dying and we get a view of his final thoughts and experiences) into historical and political ones. Admittedly, the visual experiments are less foregrounded, but this merely establishes a continuity with the first volumes, thus underscoring, once more, a spiraling and circular movement rather than any form of linearity.

Polet was in the habit of rewriting and re-using material from earlier works, even across genres. The novel *Forbidden Time* (*Verboden tijd* 1964), explicitly refers to early poems, and some of the "Notes" from the novel *Xpertise* are elaborated on in the essay *Literature as Reality. But Which One?* (*Literatuur als werkelijkheid. Maar welke?* 1972). This procedure, too, goes against any unidirectional development in his oeuvre. When Polet reworked *Xpertise* for a new edition of the Lokien-cycle, he deleted some of the stories. That, however, did not reduce its experimental nature. Moreover, he recycled some of the deleted passages for other works, including the essay, *Crito I Owe a Rooster to Literature* (*Crito, ik ben de literatuur nog een haan schuldig* 1986), and the novel, *The High Hat of History*.

## Avant-Garde Strategies

To Polet, literature is a materialization of the creative mind. As such, he sets great store by the materiality of language: wordplay, sound associations, streams of consciousness, lists of formally similar (but semantically dissimilar) words, and so on. This is most obvious in his poetry, for instance, in the volume *Language Figures 1 and 2* (*Taalfiguren 1 en 2* 1983). However, language in its material form also plays an important role in Polet's prose. The main character in the Lokien-cycle, Lokien Perdok, is represented in many different forms, times and places, each of which is suggested by means of word play. In *The High Hat of History*, Lokien Perdok appears as the thirteenth-century Christ-imitator Lode Perlijn, the sixteenth-century Comte de Loquin, the eighteenth-century Nikolaus P, the present-day punk girl Likwina and the futuristic "psychodetective", Prel Nidok. Anagrams and puns are deployed as material reifications of transformations in time, place and personality.

A second aspect of Polet's style is his use of open forms, "fill in forms", as he himself calls them (Polet 1972: 37). His characters are moulds, prototypes that need to be filled out by the reader. This goes hand in hand with the aforementioned use of puns. Many books of Polet contain characters that are referred to as 'X' or 'iks'. 'Ik' means 'I' in Dutch, whereas 's' indicates a plural: so identity is seen as an open-ended plurality. Lokien Perdok is said to "perdre son iks" (1978b: 25) or "perdre son x" (1994: 212), suggesting that identity is, in fact, a form of losing oneself and becoming someone else, an unknown figure. Literature and life ("Xistence") are described as "Xperiments", that is, as a game with the unknown and transgressions of the known, of the boundaries that separate the I from the other, the subject from the object, the animate from the inanimate.

Closely related to these open forms, is the ellipsis. Polet often deletes parts of a scene or a sentence, and draws attention to what is missing by means of three dots, hyphens, indentations, and so on. Once again, the reader is asked to fill in what is not explicitly stated.

A third and crucial characteristic of Polet's style is his exploitation of imagery. The metamorphosis that is so central to his work is linguistically achieved through metaphors, which allow for a merging of different worlds. Imagery is essential to the realization of the imaginative adventure that lies at the heart of literature as Polet sees it. In *The Creative Factor* (*De creatieve factor* 1993), his essay on literary creativity, Polet claims that creativity resides in the transformation and merging of things, and that this is best done through metaphors. "The word", he says, "was a metaphor from the very start" (1993: 122). He does not develop metaphors logically, but simply offers them to readers, often in the form of juxtapositions. His debut novel *Breakwater* (*Breekwater* 1961b), contains the following description: "Murmuring voices (wind in dry leaves) or sharp shrieking (sirens, drunken trees, a radio play), laughter (multifarious flowers, the breaking of glasswork)" (1961b: 161). Many of Polet's metaphors have to do with electric energy, as a way of suggesting the artist's creativity.

Besides metaphorical imagery, Polet also makes use of metonyms and lists. People, things and settings are often broken down into their composite parts. For instance, a walk through the city is described as "Breasts, backs, shoulders" (1968: 45), while a man is referred to via the pars pro toto "a wrinkled suit" (1961b: 41). Here, Polet's writing resembles that of a structuralist, in search of 'minimal units' which are enumerated in the guise of descriptions. Polet also creates neologisms to refer to these units, such as "the psychon" ("het psychoon") for the "smallest psychic entity" (1974: 319).

This structuralist stance is in line with Polet's tendency to combine fiction and science, narrative and essay. "Truly adventurous science", he claims in *The Creative Factor* (1993: 8), "is always situated at the borders of fiction". He occasionally incorporates figures, scientific or journalistic articles, graphs, and other *objets trouvés* in his work. These aim to bridge the gap between fact and fiction, reality and language. At times, they turn Polet's texts into collages reminiscent of dada. At the same time, his objectifying style and use of statistics are evocative of texts from the *Neue Sachlichkeit* or the New Objectivity, such as the novel

*8.100.000 m<sup>3</sup> of Sand* (*8.100.000 m<sup>3</sup> zand*; 1932) by M. Revis. Explorations of the experiences of generic, almost anonymous, characters and lengthy descriptions of objects seen by those characters bring to mind the French *nouveau roman*.

Polet uses terms taken from physical science, sociology and psychology to describe the process of metamorphosis typical of his story worlds. He himself talks of “litenature” (1978b: 169), indicating, firstly, that literary language is performative, in that it creates a new world (a ‘nature’), and, secondly, that fiction can go hand in hand with (natural) sciences (see also Heite et al., 1980).

This, then, links Polet’s literature to science fiction. He published collections of international SF-stories by writers such as Ray Bradbury and Isaac Asimov (Polet 1957a; 1957b) and claimed that his discovery of SF in the fifties was “a mind broadening experience of the highest magnitude on the Richter scale” (2004: 258). His experiments with different temporalities, combining the past with the future, also tie into this genre, as does the intertwining of man and machine that is found in all of Polet’s work. In *Metaconcrete Poetry* (*Metakonkrete poëzie* 1977, a reworking of the 1962 volume *Concrete Poetry; Konkrete poëzie*), the poet echoes Walt Whitman and “sings the Synthetic Man;/ the man of polyester fibre” (1977: 9). Through the metaphorical mixture of imagination and reality, mind and matter, his work also recalls that of the surrealists. Indeed, it is no coincidence that his first volume of poems, *Demiurgasms*, contains a motto by Henri Michaux.

When referring to his literary forefathers and allies, Polet most often points to experimental modernists such as James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, as well as to the early postmodernist Vladimir Nabokov. In the second volume of his tripartite autobiography, *A Written Life* (*Een geschreven leven* 2004-2005), he calls Arno Schmidt “the greatest living writer of fiction” (2004: 267). With Schmidt he shares a predilection for elaborate explorations of the imagination and the creative mind. However, Polet does not go as far as Schmidt in his linguistic experiments.

Polet’s writing contains a number of postmodernist elements: characters are aware that they are fictional figures; the story world is shown to be a linguistic and fictional construct, a theatrical setting; identity is replaced by alterity (ego becomes alter); the past is as unsure as the future; endless processes replace fixed products; play and irony are central to a good understanding of the texts. However, Polet still looks for the ‘essence’ of humanity, and he still has a message to convey. He therefore rejects the panfictionality often associated with postmodernism.

## Contents

Polet’s literary universe is a “chaosmos”, a term he uses in *The Creative Factor* (1993: 131) to denote the ever-changing and creative ‘multiverse’ of literature, as opposed to the fixed and sterile universe people tend to favor. In his literary work, cosmos consists of chaos. Order is only acceptable if it is temporary and on the brink of becoming disorder again. ‘Being’ is only acceptable as a form of ‘becoming’. On the thematic level, then, this flux translates into the many metamorphoses that populate the author’s texts.

The aforementioned ‘chaosmos’ is visible, for example, in the setting of his texts. Labyrinthine spaces become outer realities which reflect inner worlds. In *The Other City*, subtitled “A Labyrinth” (*De andere stad. Een labyrint* 1994), one of the character says: “The real labyrinth is the one of our brain, the gyros” (1994: 132). The ‘right’ thing to do is to keep on wandering through the maze and to lose one’s way, rather than to search for an exit or for order. Small wonder, then, that travels – real and imaginary – are one of the most prevalent plot structures in Polet’s prose.

Many of his journeys are time travels. Like space, time is malleable in the Polet universe. Time travelers often try to change the past in order to re-arrange the present and future, and to keep them open-ended. In this process, different times collide. In *Xpertise*, Polet defines “literary time” as “future history” (1978b: 355). In several other essays, he develops the notion of synchronicity - where past, present and future merge - as a central aspect of ‘literary time’.

Moreover, Polet’s characters are as flexible as his spatiotemporal settings. Babies and children can be geniuses, old men can become young again. Indeed, they are all continually changing, bridging the gap between people and things, inside and outside, mind and matter. *Adam X* (1973), one of Polet’s best-known plays, showcases different reincarnations of Elckerlyc: in a prenatal state, in old age, or even living through colonial eras. Next to the (time) traveler, the detective also functions as a stock character of Polet’s universe. He represents the never-ending quest for identity and knowledge. The message here is similar to the one conveyed by the labyrinth and the traveler: it is vital to keep searching; however, it is wrong to think it is possible to find something final and revealing. Under the pseudonym, Henk Noriet, Polet published a detective novel, *A Tough Nut to Crack (Een harde noot om te kraken)* (1982), which features Amsterdam squatters and integrates many of his experimental traits in a light and easily digestible version. The detective and the traveler are vital to the quest-narrative, and one could say that all of Polet’s works are, in fact, quests without a final answer or destination.

This continuous flux, however, is not only positive. At times, Polet’s characters dread transience and crave stability. There is often an air of melancholy about his work. People change in ways that set them apart from their environment. They may change faster or slower than their loved ones or their surroundings, which leads to a sense of estrangement – a very poignant theme in Polet’s literature. Alienation, then, has a positive side, since it frees people from the suffocating routines of everyday life. However, it also produces negative effects, by throwing people into loneliness and despair. The state of flux is a continuous battle, which, in history, has too often taken the form of war, exploitation, rape, torture, and so on. Many pages of Polet’s work are devoted to these atrocities.

The ambiguity of the flux reflects a tension between utopia and dystopia which runs through Polet’s entire oeuvre. On the one hand, the new Everyman represents a utopian ideal of constant change. On the other hand, this ideal itself is at risk of becoming a new, violently imposed norm. Moreover, the history of mankind (the old Everyman) reads as one long list of horrors and wars, so there is little chance that the new Adam will ever come into existence.

Since literature appears incapable of creating a utopia for mankind, it may be more effective in drawing attention to the dystopian aspects of society, man, and history. Literature needs to be critical, not just of its own traditions but also of social reality. The first aspect links Polet’s literature to the Russian Formalist idea of *ostranenie* or defamiliarization. In *Literature as Reality*, Polet states that good literature is “de-propagandization” (1972: 32) and frees us from “rigid language mechanisms, associative-thought-image-automatisms” (1972: 60). Literature offers “lessons in disobedience” (1972: 62). He adds, however, that this disorienting function should not be overdone, because then the reader pulls out. His second point of critique cannot be overstated either: literature should not align itself with existing political or critical traditions, such as Marxism, because these are fixed and ordered worldviews and, as such, oppose the flux. Instead, literature should criticize all of these traditions by questioning their assumptions and presuppositions in a humorous way. In *The Circle Inhabitants (De sirkelbewoners)* (1970), for example, Polet criticizes both liberal and Marxist ideologies in a hilarious parody of the Bildungsroman.

Humor implies some form of distance and that is precisely what (literary) creativity is all about: it enables one to free oneself of the ‘given’ (everyday reality, melancholy, dystopia) and to reach for the (im)possible (the flux, vitality, utopia). This is a never-ending process, which depends upon variables of all sorts: mental and individual, social and political. Literature is a “mental adventure” (Polet 1972: 13), but it is also embedded in society. The link between these two realities is language, which materializes the mental

adventure and is always linked to the context in which it is used. Language is never neutral or free.

Creativity, like the flux it implies, is ambiguous too. It may have destructive and anti-social effects. The villains in Polet's universe are quite often creative geniuses, and the child prodigy Guido, the central character of his most popular novel *Mannequino* (*Mannekino* 1968), is a ruthless capitalist in the bud. 'Biological creators', such as parents, are often problematic as well, and their relationship with their offspring tends to be one of tension, or even war and battle.

## Conclusion

In the sixties and seventies, when the literary neo-avant-garde was at its height in Flanders and the Netherlands, Polet gradually became the icon of 'Other Prose'. This complex, critical and imagination-driven (almost surrealist) form of experimental fiction was perceived as the opposite of another form of neo-avant-garde fiction at the time, namely, the neo-realism of the *Barbarber* magazine, which was considered accessible, non-critical (it celebrated the 'wonders of everyday life') and hyperrealistic. After the publication of his anthology, *Other Prose*, the iconic status of Polet was confirmed, but most often in a negative way. Even other authors such as J.F. Vogelaar and critics such as Cyrille Offermans, associated with Other Prose, turned against him. In their view, Polet had tried to turn the multifaceted and unpredictable experiments which were characteristic of that time into a rigid program, comparable to the manifestoes of the historical avant-garde. Offermans denounced Polet's introduction to the anthology: "It shows how ludicrous it is to take a stand in 1978 which derives directly from the most garish avant-garde manifestoes" (1986: 147-148).

Polet's poetry (which was first collected in 2001, followed by six more volumes during his lifetime and one posthumously published collection in 2018) may initially have been affiliated with the Fiftiers, but was later on, and rightfully so, primarily considered in view of his own essays on literature as a mental adventure. Indeed, Polet's dry and objectifying, almost scientific, tone contrasts with the lyricism still associated with the Fiftiers at that time.

He tried to familiarize the Dutch audience with international experimental literature, not only with prose (Polet 2003), but also with avant-garde poetry from Europe, Australia, Indochina, Latin America, the US, and so on (Polet 1961a). As such, he was one of the propagators, facilitators, and intermediaries of the experimental tradition described in Robert Alter's *Partial Magic* (1975), and of the historical avant-garde. In his 2003 essay volume, he gave a warm welcome and a knowledgeable introduction to the works of avant-gardists such as Andrei Bely, André Breton, and Carl Einstein. The post-war avant-garde (e.g., Arno Schmidt, William Gaddis) received only a brief mention in the volume's introductory notes. On the whole, we can say that Polet was more focused on the historical ancestors of his so-called "Other Prose", than on its contemporary, international innovators.

As mentioned before, Polet also introduced science fiction into Dutch highbrow fiction. Some of his works have been translated into German and Swedish. Partial translations, for instance of *Breakwater* (1976), and of selections of his poetry (1979), have appeared in English.

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