

The Dutch landscape in the poetry of Ida Gerhardt

Ida Gerhardt (1905 - 1997) was a Dutch poet and classicist who shared with an older generation of poets – the Movement of Eighty and the symbolists – a love of classical antiquity that inspired her poetry all her life. Her collected works comprise two volumes. Reading through them you will find the waters and plains, the clouds and light of the Dutch landscape, allusions to classical works and reflections on her work as a high school teacher. Her work possesses a stern, marble-like character, her poems are written in a traditional style with care for rhyme and rhythm, her imagery is influenced by the Greek and Latin poets whom she called the 'bread and cup of my youth.' She wrote her dissertation on a partial translation of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*. Later in life she would translate the *Georgica* by Virgil and, with the help of her life-long partner Marie van der Zeyde, the Hebrew Psalms.

In this article I will ask how Ida Gerhardt imagines the Dutch landscape in her poetry. What are the characteristic elements of the Dutch landscape that appear in her poems? And how does the world of antiquity and particularly ancient Greece influence her view of the Dutch landscape? As an introduction to these questions, I will discuss a poem that illustrates the love of Ida Gerhardt for her country. At the end of the article I have included some reproductions of paintings that are referred to in her poetry.

1. *The love for her country*

The collection of poems entitled *Five Firestones* (1974) contains a *Declaration of love* from the poet to the Netherlands.

Declaration of love

Oh country that endlessly fails in your mission,
I stay the child that blindly believed in you:
because of light by which all light pales on earth,
the smell of water around your piers,
a cormorant that perches upon a dolphin.¹²

The poet addresses her country like a lover would speak to her beloved. There is sharp criticism in this address, however, for the country is said to fail endlessly in its mission. The meaning of this

1 The word 'dolphin' here means 'a bollard, pile or buoy for mooring boats' (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

2 Ida Gerhardt, *Verzamelde Gedichten*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Athenaeum, 1997), 491.

line might be glimpsed from a letter Ida Gerhardt sent to Queen Beatrix (r. 1980 - 2013) in 1989. In this letter she asks the monarch to call upon the Dutch people to protect the environment:

The merciless, blunt and greedy violation of the Dutch landscape in the decades after the liberation, the black entry of asphalt and concrete where living green was – with all its fatal consequences – unfortunately cannot be undone. But it *can* be checked in its further advance. However, there is not much time left.³

Included with the letter is a copy of the *Commissioned Quatrains* (1948), a collection of forty-seven quatrains that critically describe the changes to the Dutch landscape in the first half of the twentieth century. Forty years before the present letter Gerhardt had sent these same quatrains to the then reigning Queen Wilhelmina (r. 1898 - 1948) with a similar plea for help. On the flyleaf she wrote a dedication to the Queen in the form of a quatrain:

Behold, Princess, the bitter misery
of the Dutch landscape, that we violate needlessly.
This book – written at God's command – comes to You:
May Your word turn Your people to modesty.⁴

The mission that the poem *Declaration of love* mentions, then, is the responsibility of the Dutch people to care for their natural environment. It is interesting to note that Queen Beatrix also wrote a reply to Ida Gerhardt's letter. In it, she says that she shares the concerns of the poet and will continue to endeavour for the protection of the environment. She also remarks that she sees a growing awareness among the people of Western Europe and America that we live in a fragile world, for which we should take responsibility.⁵

In the same poem Gerhardt says that she stays the child that blindly believes in her country. She mentions three reasons for her belief in the Netherlands. First, the Dutch light that no other light in the world can compare to. Second, the smell of water around the Dutch docks and piers. And finally, the perching of a cormorant upon a dolphin, a sight that is still common today when walking near the waterside.

I will take these elements in the poem as characteristic of the Dutch landscape. In the following paragraphs I will describe the role of **light**, **water** and **birds** in the poetry of Ida Gerhardt. Reading through her poetry one frequently has the experience that the Dutch landscape blends with

³ Ida Gerhardt, "Letter 493", in *Courage! Brieven*, ed. Ben Hosman en Mieke Koenen (Amsterdam: Athenaeum, 2005), 653-657.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 657.

⁵ *Ibid.*

the world of antiquity. For this reason, I will also ask how ancient Greece informs her poetic image of Holland.

2. *The light*

The *Commissioned Quatrains* contain a few references to Dutch painters. One of them is the famous painter Johannes Vermeer (1632 - 1675). He lived during the Dutch Golden Age, a period of Dutch history roughly coinciding with the seventeenth century. The revolt against Philips II of Spain (r. 1556 - 1598) and the following Eighty Years' War (1568 - 1648) eventually saw the independence of the Dutch Republic and a flourishing of the arts, sciences and economy. It was during this period that Dutch painters like Johannes Vermeer and Rembrandt van Rijn (1606 - 1669) lived and worked. The following quatrain refers to a painting by Vermeer:

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Sometimes, when I turn towards my innermost
You return to me the Holland of old.
The colours open chastely, and through tears
I see it in the clearness of Vermeer.⁶

Marie van der Zeyde, the life-long partner of Ida Gerhardt, remarks in her study that the painting *View of Delft* (c. 1660 - 1661) probably inspired this quatrain.⁷ She adds that it would be a mistake to read the poem as an expression of nostalgic longing for the past. For the colours of the painting are said to open chastely only after the poet has turned towards her innermost. The clearness of Vermeer that is then revealed is therefore not an objective quality. It is not a clearness that Delft possessed in the seventeenth century and has lost in the present. The clearness is rather the result of a **way of seeing** that is shared by the artist and the poet.⁸

It is this way of seeing that makes the poet recognise a painting by Jan Voerman (1857 – 1941) in the play of clouds and light above the IJssel river. Voerman was a nineteenth century painter who was famous for his depiction of landscapes and towns around the IJssel, a branch of the Rhine that runs through the eastern provinces of Gelderland and Overijssel. An example of one of his landscape paintings is *IJssel landscape with fishers* (1910 - 1920). Voerman worked from the garden of his house in the city of Hattem, that commanded a view of the river and the meadows

⁶ Gerhardt, *Verzamelde Gedichten*, 1:200.

⁷ Reproductions of the paintings mentioned in the text can be found at the end of the article.

⁸ M.H. van der Zeyde, *De wereld van het vers: Over het werk van Ida Gerhardt* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum, 1985), 102-103.

with grazing cows. The short poem *Recognition* evokes such a landscape:

Recognition

Spring is coming along the IJssel near Veecaten.
Clouds and light, in changing states,
create a Voerman: an opal sky
that is heavenly and of Holland beyond measure.⁹

The changing clouds and light create a landscape that the poet recognises as a painting by Voerman. Gerhardt worked as a teacher of classics at the lyceum of Kampen for many years. The city lies at the mouth of the IJssel river close to the former town of Veecaten. Gerhardt had the habit of giving detailed notes to many of her poems. In a note to this particular poem she remarks that one can still see a Voerman be created at the winding of the river, especially when the clouds are changeable.¹⁰

Another poem inspired by a Dutch painter is *Seghers*. In this poem Gerhardt admires an etching by the seventeenth century painter and printmaker Hercules Seghers (c. 1589 - c. 1638). Seghers is known for his imaginative landscape paintings and original print techniques. For example, he would sometimes use coloured paper and cloth for his etchings. His paintings and etchings show us phantastic lowlands, rivers and mountains. An example of one of his imaginary landscape paintings is *River Valley* (c. 1626 - c. 1630).

Seghers

September light through the clouds,
diaphanous, broken into rays,
as if beatified are
this lowland and its people.
Light of which no stranger can know,
the saturated, freighted with water.
Who was named Hercules,
he was able to etch it.¹¹

The September light in the etching is called diaphanous (*diafaan*). This rare word means translucent and has a Greek origin (διαφανής), where it is used to describe translucent stones and minerals like

9 Gerhardt, *Verzamelde Gedichten*, 2:610.

10 Ibid., 825.

11 Gerhardt, *Verzamelde Gedichten*, 1:417.

alabaster. In this poem the autumn light is shining through the clouds and broken into rays. The Dutch lowland and its people appear beatified in the light. The word beatify (*zalig spreken*) recalls the eight Beatitudes of Jesus recounted in the Sermon on the Mount.¹² The rays of light shining through the clouds are as it were a **divine blessing** given to the Dutch landscape and its inhabitants. No stranger can know of this light because it is unique to the Netherlands - light by which all light pales on earth, as Ida Gerhardt wrote in the *Declaration of love*.

She further describes this light as saturated and freighted with water. Of course it are strictly the clouds themselves that have become filled with water. The figure of speech that applies an adjective proper to one noun to another is called enallage (ἐναλλαγή). By this figure Gerhardt is able to describe the watery character of the Dutch light. As the autumn light shines through the clouds it takes on their quality and becomes saturated and freighted with water itself. The poem ends with a pun on the name of the painter. Only Hercules Seghers was able to etch this light, a feat comparable to those of Hercules in classical mythology.

3. *The water*

It is well-known that water plays an important role in the history of the Netherlands. With large parts of the country lying below sea level the land had to be reclaimed from the sea. Since the eleventh century the Dutch created arable land by draining wetland and enclosing it with dikes. In the seventeenth century the Beemster, a large lake in the province of North-Holland, was dried with the help of windmills. The so-called polder was then settled with towns and villages. Over the centuries the coast has also changed because of flooding. The most recent one was the North Sea flood that claimed almost two thousand lives (1953). An extensive system of dams and barriers has since been created to protect the Dutch people from the sea.

Images of rivers and the sea abound in Dutch poetry. One famous example is the poem *Recollection of Holland* by Hendrik Marsman (1899 - 1940). It starts with the lines: *Thinking of Holland / I see broad rivers / slowly pass through / endless lowland*.¹³ And in another poem entitled *Landscape* the poet sees horses galloping in the *uiterwaarden*, the lands lying between the watercourse of a river and the dikes that hold the excess of water caused by river flooding in the winter.¹⁴ In the poetry of Ida Gerhardt the **sea** becomes a symbol for the place from which she receives her poetry. Sometimes she compares her poetry to a seashell that is washed ashore or to a letter sent from overseas. In the following poem she addresses a person who is said to be the sender of her poetry:

¹² Mat. 5.3-11.

¹³ H. Marsman, *Verzameld Werk* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1972), 106.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

Grey sea

The sea slowly withdraws
in rain and in mist.
My heart slowly withdraws
in grey mist and rain.
There are no ways to you,
to you.¹⁵

The sea slowly withdrawing in rain and mist is mirrored by the heart of the poet that withdraws itself. The conclusion of the poet is that there are no ways to the addressee, who is yet longed-for and therefore mentioned twice. In this poem the sea is a metaphor for the inner barrier between the poet and the addressee. That there are no ways to that other person means that the poet cannot receive her poetry from overseas and is therefore not able to write. In another poem entitled *Among strangers* a child is playing on the beach but never sees its father, who lives overseas in another country. This poem ends with the line *I abide you, Father from overseas*.¹⁶ From lines such as these we might glimpse that Gerhardt viewed her poetry as coming from a divine source.

We now turn to the classical elements in the poetry of Ida Gerhardt. The title of the poem Παρὰ θῆνα θαλάσσης (*Along the shore of the sea*) refers to the beginning of the *Iliad*. Agamemnon has taken the beautiful Chryseis as a war prize. Her father Chryses, the priest of Apollo, is harshly sent away by him when he comes to the Greek ships with a ransom for his daughter. The old priest then *silently went along the shore of the loud-roaring sea* and prayed to Apollo for vengeance.¹⁷ The Dutch poem is written in dactylic hexametres to render the rise and fall of the waves against the shore audible. In a note to the poem, Gerhardt calls the hexametre a mighty sea rhythm that can only be rendered imperfectly in Dutch verse.¹⁸

Παρὰ θῆνα θαλάσσης

Nothing but three words of Homer, -
o hear how it turns, how it murmurs
hiding in it; - like a child
that believing the shell to its ear holds.
Really, have never you heard
that rising and fall, fall and rising?

¹⁵ Gerhardt, *Verzamelde Gedichten*, 1:231.

¹⁶ Gerhardt, *Verzamelde Gedichten*, 2:564.

¹⁷ Homer, *Iliad* I.34.

¹⁸ Gerhardt, *Verzamelde Gedichten*, 2:827.

Really, have never you heard
the sea in the verses of Homer?¹⁹

The central image of the poem is the child that holds a shell to its ear in order to hear the sea in it. The verses of Homer are compared to such a seashell. If you listen carefully to them you can hear the rise and fall of the Aegean Sea in their metre. In this poem we also encounter the image of the child playing on the beach. The comparison between poetry and the **seashell** is here given another dimension. Both are not only alike in that they are a gift from overseas, but also because one can hear the sea in the metre of the poem.

The poem *Ebb* describes the ebb tide at the Dutch Wadden Islands. This archipelago of five small islands along the North Sea coast shields an intertidal zone known as the Wadden Sea. The archipelago is part of a larger group called the Frisian Islands that stretch from the Netherlands and Germany to the west of Denmark. The working of ebb and tide in this region creates an ever-changing landscape with shallow waters and tidal flats that are home to various species of migratory birds and seals.

Ebb

Greyish flocks of sheep move
along the shallows. - a hecatomb
of cows stands half in the water.
The steam rises from the seaweeds.
Further inland approach while grazing,
swishing their tails the large horses,
so slowly that perfectly archaic
this sluggish clay no-land becomes.²⁰

The poet sees a flock of sheep moving along the shallows. A herd of cows is standing half in the water. Gerhardt calls the cows a hecatomb, a word used by Homer for a sacrifice of cattle. For example, when Agamemnon is forced to return Chryseis to her father, he sends her away on a ship with a hecatomb on board, so that by this sacrifice Apollo might be appeased.²¹ By using this word Gerhardt connects the Wadden Islands to ancient Greece.

The slowness of the approaching horses in particular makes the shallows appear archaic. The use of this word calls to mind the archaic period in Greece. Taken literally it also means that the

19 Ibid., 650.

20 Gerhardt, *Verzamelde Gedichten*, 1:310.

21 Homer, *Iliad*, I.142.

shallows belong to a very old age. They stand at the beginning of history, as if time was only commencing in this region. That is why in the last line the shallows are called a sluggish clay no-land. As they fall dry with ebb and become flooded with the tide the shallows are alternately land and sea. The word no-land (*onland*) in Dutch also carries the connotation of barren and uncultivated.

In an article on the classical elements in the poetry of Ida Gerhardt, the classicist F. Verbrugge remarks that one of the hallmarks of the **archaic** in the poetry of Ida Gerhardt is the past working through in the present.²² The poem *Ebb* makes the Wadden Islands appear in the dim light of archaic Greece. The world of the past becomes a part of the present and for a moment lives again in it. Verbrugge further remarks that the words 'homeric' and 'archaic' are closely related. The homeric poems date back to the beginning of the archaic period in Greece and tell stories of a heroic age of centuries before. The lyrical poetry of Alcman from the seventh century and that of Sappho and Alcaeus from the sixth belong to this period. By the choice of words and imagery the archaic world of Greece becomes part of the modern Dutch landscape.²³

4. *The birds*

The Netherlands is home to a variety of bird species. In the cities water birds like ducks, coots and grebes are a common sight. Near the sea oystercatchers and gulls may be observed, while in forested areas blackbirds, robins and woodpeckers can be found. Migratory birds like the swallow and godwit appear in the spring, while geese and swans pass the winter here.

Birds appear many times in the poetry of Ida Gerhardt. The great birds of prey like the eagle and the falcon are praised for their strength and freedom. A singing-bird like the blackbird sings its beautiful melody at dawn and consoles the poet. And the arrival of the swallow is a sign that the summer is coming. The following poem describes the arrival of a flock of migratory birds at sunset.

Sunset

The birds I have seen coming
beyond the eye of the sun.
I have seen them stream down;
the whole earth was moving
with feathers white and black,

22 F.J.P. Verbrugge, "Volmaakt Archaïsch", *Hermeneus* 52, no. 1 (1980): 20-31.

23 Marie van der Zeyde adds that archaic poetry strongly calls upon the creativity of the reader, who must choose between rejecting the poem or be confronted with its strangeness. The archaic poem is like the torso of Apollo in Rilke's *Archaischer torso Apollos*. It says to the reader: 'Du mußt dein Leben ändern.' (Van der Zeyde, *De wereld van het vers*, 216-217).

with cries wild and confused.
Until the sun had set.
Then I saw them stand up.
Thousand of wings, beaten,
were as one bird, - carried,
black, along the path of the night.²⁴

The coming of the birds coincides with the setting of the sun. The first part of the poem follows a downward movement. As the sun sets the birds stream down from the sky. Their landing on earth is chaotic, as is emphasised by the clapping of wings and confused cries of the birds. But when the sun has set the movement is reversed. In the second part of the poem the birds stand up and take to the sky. They now act in harmony, beating their wings like a single bird. The poet sees the black flock in the distance, carried along the path of the night.

In the following poem the poet is standing on the river bank near the town of Moerdijk in the province of North Brabant. The town is known for the Moerdijk Bridges that cross the river Hollands Diep. This wide river is the natural border between the provinces North Brabant and South Holland. Standing on the river bank at Moerdijk one would see the medieval city of Dordrecht - colloquially known as Dordt - lying on the other side of the river.

Moerdijk

Cormorants broke through the clouds.
And flying they formed a constellation
Cassiopeia. It stayed undivided
together, until it disappeared above Dordt.²⁵

Cormorants are aquatic birds that are found near rivers and seas. They live on fish and dive underwater to catch them. Here the poet sees them breaking through the clouds. In their flight they seem to form the constellation of Cassiopeia. The use of enjambment at the end of the second line emphasises the constellation itself. The five brightest stars of Cassiopeia are shaped like the letter W and resemble the formation of a flight of birds. The poet sees the cormorants flying over the river in this formation until they disappear above the city of Dordrecht.

The poem *Anamnesis* describes the arrival of a redshank, a migratory bird that passes the winter along the coasts of the Mediterranean and comes to the Netherlands in the spring. The redshank is a wading bird with striking red feet that can be found along shorelines. As indicated by

²⁴ Gerhardt, *Verzamelde Gedichten*, 1:234.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 410.

the title, the theme of this poem is the platonic theory of **recollection**. In the dialogue entitled *Meno* Plato tries to demonstrate that the soul carries a remembrance of her experiences of past lives. In the dialogue a slave boy remembers how to solve a geometrical problem without ever having learnt mathematics. Socrates concludes that the boy must have learned geometry in a previous life and that what we call learning is in fact remembering.²⁶

Anamnesis

Returned sooner than expected,
over the mountains, from the south land
of field strips and rippling Nile:
the bird with the red feet, redshank.
There, when from the reed bed rose
the wheeling call, in his round boat
of willow ribs and hides the Nile fisher
perceived the turning tide and has known
and not known, of colours of a land
he never saw: a green foreland,
the plants on a blue basalt groyne,
the light breaking through the rain clouds.²⁷

The poem begins with a redshank who has returned to the Netherlands after passing the winter in Egypt, the south land of fields strips and rippling Nile. The poem then continues to describe the experience of a Nile fisher on hearing the wheeling call of the redshank from the reed bed. While standing in his round boat of willow ribs and hides the fisher has a recollection of a land he has never seen. He perceives the turning tide and sees a green foreland (*uiterwaard*), the land lying between a river and the dikes, with plants growing on a basalt groyne - a stone structure built into the river to prevent sedimentation - and light breaking through the clouds after a shower of rain.

Marie van der Zeyde remarks that the poem consists of three parts of four lines each. The first part describes the return of the redshank, the second the experience of the Nile fisher, and the third a Dutch landscape with a river and clouds.²⁸ The redshank is said to return sooner than expected. It is early spring, then, and the sighting of the bird makes the poet think about the southern lands where it has wintered. The south land (*zuiderland*) is a biblical expression that refers to the Negev desert in the south of Israel.²⁹ Here it is a metonymy that stands for neighbouring

²⁶ Plato, *Meno*, 81c-86c.

²⁷ Gerhardt, *Verzamelde Gedichten*, 1:383.

²⁸ Van der Zeyde, *De wereld van het vers*, 198-201.

²⁹ Cf. Gen. 24.62.

Egypt, the land of field strips and rippling Nile.

The round boat of the Nile fisher is made of willow ribs and hides. Van der Zeyde further remarks that Gerhardt might have found this detailed description in the *Histories* of Herodotus, who relates how the Babylonians constructed their boats in this fashion.³⁰ Although it would be logical to assume that the redshank has traveled from modern Egypt, the traditional fishing boat recalls the life of the ancient Egyptians. The use of archaic imagery in the poem makes the past of ancient Egypt work through in the present, much like the choice of words in the poem *Ebb*.

The last part of the poems describes the recollection of the Nile fisher. On hearing the wheeling call of the redshank the fisher *has known / and not known* the land from which the bird has traveled. Like the slave boy in the *Meno*, the fisher could not have known the Dutch landscape from his present life and therefore must have known it from a previous one. His knowledge of the Netherlands is therefore a recollection and proves the immortality of the soul. But why did Ida Gerhardt choose to develop this theme around the migration of the redshank? For the answer we need again to turn to Herodotus, who tells us that:

The Egyptians were the first who maintained the following doctrine, too, that the human soul is immortal, and at the death of the body enters into some other living thing then coming to birth; and after passing through all creatures of land, sea, and air, it enters once more into a human body at birth, a cycle which it completes in three thousand years.³¹

As the soul in Egyptian mythology was symbolised by a bird, we could see the redshank as symbolic of the soul of the Nile fisher. The migration of the redshank from Egypt would then illustrate the Platonic doctrine of the **transmigration** of souls, the origin of which Herodotus ascribes to the ancient Egyptians.

5. Conclusion

In this article I have asked how Ida Gerhardt imagines the Dutch landscape in her poetry. The Dutch **light** shining through the clouds appears in many of her poems. In the *Declaration of Love* she calls it a light by which all light pales on earth. One of the *Commissioned Quatrains* introduces an inward way of seeing by which the poet is able to see the Netherlands of the past in the clearness of a painting by Johannes Vermeer. In the poem *Recognition* she sees the clouds and light in the opal sky along the IJssel river and is reminded of a painting of Jan Voerman. And in the poem *Seghers* the autumn light breaking through the clouds in an etching by Hercules Seghers becomes a divine

³⁰ Herodotus, *Histories*, 1.194.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2.123.

blessing given to the Dutch landscape and its inhabitants,

The **sea** becomes a symbol for the place from which Ida Gerhardt receives her poetry. In the poem *Grey sea* the sea withdrawing itself in mist and rain is analogous to the heart of the poet drawing inward and preventing her from reaching an addressee who is said to live overseas. The poem *Among strangers* introduces the image of the child playing on the beach and further specifies the addressee as a divine Father who is seen as the source of her poetry. The poem Παρὰ θῆνα θαλάσσης adds a classical element by comparing the poetry of Homer to a seashell. Poems and seashells are alike in that both are a gift from overseas and because one can still hear the sea in a poem while listening to its metre. The poem *Ebb* introduces the archaic as the past working through in the present. A hecatomb of cows standing in the water near one of the Dutch Wadden Islands makes the world of archaic Greece come alive in the Dutch landscape.

Birds are praised for their strength and freedom or because their song at dawn consoles the poet. The arrival of migratory birds is a theme developed in many poems. In the poem *Sunset* a flock of birds streams down with the setting of the sun and takes flight again as a single bird after darkness has fallen. In the poem *Moerdijk* the poet is standing on the edge of a river bank and sees a group of cormorants breaking through the clouds. Their formation resembles the five bright stars of the constellation Cassiopeia until they disappear above the city of Dordrecht on the other side of the river. The poem *Anamnesis* describes the arrival of a redshank from Egypt. The recollection of a Nile fisher on the river in a willow boat, who remembers the Dutch landscape at the call of the bird, illustrates the Platonic doctrine of the transmigration of souls. One can truly say that the world of antiquity lives on in the poetry of Ida Gerhardt and has become a part of the Dutch landscape that she loved so dearly.

Sebastiaan den Uijl

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