

## For People and Country

Let me start by apologising for reading my text in Dutch. I don't mean that as a nationalist statement. Far from it. I just don't want to inflict my lousy English on anyone. However, an English translation is available.

I start my lecture with the National Book Week, which was held earlier this year. And especially with the playful theme devised to raise the festive mood (and the turnover): madness. That theme – and especially its interpretation – conjures up the prototypical ideal Dutch writer: a clown, a charlatan, an idiot, a Punch-and-Judy character we should certainly not take seriously. And it's important he always remains in character. (Which is exactly what needy writers do, fearful as they are of displeasing anyone.)

(We make other demands on foreign writers, it should be noted. They should be engaged, committed to a cause, daring knights of free speech who battle injustice on horseback, armed with a sword. Writers at a safe distance in a dangerous country, Romanticism of that kind, but more on that later.)

The book promoters not only came up with the theme but also presented a number of authors who addressed this theme. And so it came to pass that Jan Arends, after an absence of decades, was once again displayed in bookstore windows. Not as an inspired writer but as a moron. Bookstores readily embraced the stigma for publicity reasons, and the media instructed the more enthusiastic cartoonists to exaggerate Arends' manic gaze – and the cartoonists were only too willing to oblige, flexible as they are.

In Jan Arends' story *The Newspaper Eater*, a man is invited for a meal with a family of friends. Seated at the table, he is served an old newspaper. 'Here! Eat that!' While the family feast themselves on food, the man starts to eat the paper, for he doesn't want to appear ungrateful. He's glad to do what others want of him. He eats the newspaper for the sake of his friends.

In this story I read a metaphor for the life of Jan Arends. People saw him as a lunatic, so he behaved as one. You demand, we deliver. The newspaper symbolises the unanimous world outside, the view of 'normal' people. The man eats the newspaper offered to him in the hope of fitting in. He tries to become one with the hostile world around by literally absorbing all opinions. And to make it even more tragic: it was the Saturday edition.

He eats the last piece of newspaper in the garden, because he isn't feeling too good and needs some fresh air. Acting on a sense of duty, he continues eating outside on the lawn. As soon as he's finished, he walks back to the house, but the curtains are drawn and he hears no voices. He rings the door but nobody opens. He feels ashamed that he apparently got it wrong again and walks down the garden path and into solitude...

Jan Arends wrote poems, stories, novels and drama. He also translated the work of Simenon. And yet, Jan Arends was mad: that was the prevailing view. That

bothered Arends and he started to make a fool of himself more and more. So he sometimes ended up in a psychiatric institution. Like the protagonist in *The Newspaper Eater*, he did what others wanted of him. And that contingency had the necessary consequences and in the end, Arends committed suicide.

Madness manifests itself not in the individual, not in the writer. Rather, it is the howling masses, the collective, that defines madness, accelerates it, and then tries to eradicate it again out of some sense of decadence.

In the psychiatric handbook DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), nonconformism and free spirit are included as mental illness – and I'm not making that up unfortunately. The illness even has a name: ODD, Oppositional Defiant Disorder. Symptoms are: challenging authority, negativity, defiance and quarrelling.

The number of psychological disorders has tripled over the past fifty years. Life must be objectified – treatments are available.

And what's so creepy is that these constructions are then the massively obeyed. In this country too, policy-makers, insurers and, sure enough, psychiatrists set the new standards. Nonconformism and free spirit are undesirable disorders, and non-conformists and freethinkers are increasingly placed outside society. They are labelled as controversial and can then be threatened and dismissed without any great commotion. As I said, it is the collective that represents the madness.

Back to the psychiatric handbook and to the psychiatrists who comply with these populist guidelines. Orders are orders. No, those words aren't out of place in this context. Psychiatry allows itself to be used, no misused, to eliminate people. People who do not comply with prevailing social conventions must go, because the majority think that's correct. And the majority decides.

In the distant past, 'jesters' were still seen as people who possessed a certain wisdom, people who could show us another truth, dissidents who could enrich life. In order words, not as psychiatric patients who have to be kept as far away as possible from 'normal' people.

And there's always a psychiatrist available somewhere who's willing to put his signature on the soul-destroying documents. Soul-destroying can be taken literally: the soul must be destroyed, the defiant soul. Science frequently does the dirty work on behalf of social wishes. Negroes used to be studied in detail by anthropologists and deemed eminently suitable for slavery. Some scientists provided the Jewish Question with the required theoretical and, especially, logistical basis, and then successfully implemented it. We know the results. Homosexuals were seen as an obstacle in the 1950s, and before you knew it, after a couple of scientific studies for moral justification, they had them castrated. Writer Jan Hanlo was one of the unfortunate ones. You can imagine what they did back then with paedophiles – yes, most of you present here will agree wholeheartedly. As I already said: madness lurks in the collective.

One of the first Dutch writers not only to signal this but also to criticise it, was Carry van Bruggen, born in 1881. Right at the start of the twentieth century she raised her voice in protest against the rising tide of nationalism and anti-Semitism. In her novels and philosophical work she implicitly pointed to the danger latent in the collective.

By the turn of the century the secularisation of society had gathered momentum. People everywhere were searching for a new sense of meaning to fill the metaphysical void, thus setting the stage was set for the emergence of new ideologies. Van Bruggen recognised that the nationalism, patriotism and anti-Semitism propagated in some quarters could generate widespread appeal, and she warned of the orders and prohibitions that might be accepted without criticism.

In 1916 she published an essay in which she pointed out that patriotism hampers true humanitarianism. Patriotism is nothing but sublimed self-love and it obstructs love of one's fellow men. Community ideals serve no other cause than the preservation of the collective, of the *superior* collective. And they always culminate in the suppression of minorities. Always. A glance at the history books will tell you that.

According to Van Bruggen, The Good was therefore anti-social, opposed to the masses. It afforded the individual some breathing space.

The collective, by contrast, always opts for the preservation of the common denominator. Everything that differs, that deviates, must be eliminated – and when that happens under the guise of national interest, no justification needs to be offered. For people and country: those words always surface when a questionable act needs to be explained away. For people and country...

A century ago, Van Bruggen was one of the first to raise her voice loudly in protest at the rising tide of nationalism. Alas, she was a voice in the wilderness. To her dismay, even the intellectuals remained silent. In the meantime, anti-Semitism began to take on alarming forms, and Van Bruggen suffered heavily as a result, both as an intellectual and as a Jew. She died in 1932 from an overdose of sleeping pills.

It was only after the Second World War that her work received the attention it deserved. In hindsight, the damage had already been done. And ironically enough, her work was used — sorry, misused — to demonstrate that not all Dutch people supported the populist ideas at the time, to demonstrate that not all Dutch people were docile sheep. As often happens with the writing of history, the past is used for self-congratulation, for singing one's own praises. That's why on May 4 and 5 each year we celebrate freedom, to show that we're not such a bad lot, and we do it with plenty of fanfare.

Let me offer you a sobering fact from the most recent opinion poll: the PVV is now the biggest party. That's the extreme-nationalist party that advocates

shooting foreigners in the knees, that initiated an Anti-Polish Complaint Desk, that wants to introduce a 'head rag tax', the party that got the audience to chant 'more, more, more' to admit 'fewer, fewer, fewer' immigrants into the country. And the VVD, the other big party, takes a similar line, to give the electorate exactly what it wants: you demand, we deliver. And the prime minister laughs away the objections with an optimistic thumb in the air. 'Hey everybody, that's democracy.'

Let me repeat it again and probably for nothing: madness lurks in collectivity.

Just like a century ago, a rabid right-wing wind is blowing across the country – across all of Europe – and it's not going to die down any time soon. Indeed, the wind is set to pick up in the years ahead. The magic words – no, the fig leaf – employed to legitimise that tendency is after all incontestable: security. Everything is for our security. Never before has it been so safe in this country, but we've never felt less safe. Perhaps it's a decadent expression of tedium? Or have we lost ourselves in our economic thinking by believing that only scarce goods are valuable? Perhaps too much freedom has a negative effect on their market price. Or is it an indication that we cannot cope with so much freedom, that we literally want to be restricted?

Who knows the answer? Whatever the case, one of the grotesque effects of our freedom fetish is that we are doing all we can to keep refugees out of our country. Language is an effective instrument in that effort – words are misused unscrupulously by the government to justify policy. For example, refugees are compared to professional criminal Willem Holleeder, by the leader of a government party at that, making it so much easier to deport the black ruffraff. Or refugees are suddenly labelled as victims, not of repression or war — imagine that! — but as victims of genuine human smugglers. The solution, therefore, is obvious: time to tackle those human smugglers, so that those poor Syrians and Africans aren't transported to Europe against their will.

These are clearly the words of merciless politicians, of anxious opportunists who are still afraid to face up to the Netherlands' colonial past. Or rather: who are unable to fit that colonial past in their time line. They are the words of neatly coiffured careerists who see empathy as a left-wing hobby.

So the Netherlands closes its borders and calls on other European countries to do likewise. Security. All for the benefit of security.

But because somewhere deep in the hearts of many Dutch people there's still an ounce of feeling, and because many Dutch people like to see a self-assured star staring back at them through the mirror, we compensate by exporting good intentions and opinions to foreign countries in a spot of bother – usually accompanied by an admonishing finger to emphasise our good intentions and opinions. The message is clear: we are sound.

To state it more precisely: our economy relies to a great extent on the export of weapons. But if those weapons are used by the importing country, for whatever

reason, how dare they, then we climb up the tallest tree and loudly scream in indignation.

In the meantime, for the sake of formality, we fervently discuss freedom of expression, perhaps even in the company of a foreign cartoonist or writer.

A.H.J. Dautzenberg, 22 May 2015