

Righting Wrongs with Words: The Caribbean Dilemma of Frank Martinus Arion

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Analysis of the Antillean contributions to Dutch literature by Frank Martinus Arion appropriately begins with a Papiamentu story about a trickster, the spider Nanzi, who survives by his wits. For Arion—whose African ancestors celebrated survival skills while in slavery through the *Cuent'i Nanzi*¹—sees himself as Nanzi, using words to survive and to succeed against all odds.² “A King wanted to get rid of a huge, prickly Bringamosa tree which made every one itch. He could not stand to see people scratch themselves, so he promised a beautiful cow to anyone who would remove the Bringamosa without scratching himself even once. If one was caught scratching himself, he would be killed immediately. Of course, Nanzi, who loves to eat, volunteered his services. While cutting down the Bringamosa tree, Nanzi naturally had to scratch himself, so he tricked the king by saying: ‘I wonder if the cow has a spot here (scratch), and here (scratch), or perhaps here (scratch).’”³ Nanzi won the cow, not because he had cut down the tree, but because he had given an acceptable impression while relieving his terrible itch.

Similarly, in order to discover the Papiamentu content of Arion's Dutch novels,⁴ one should not be so distracted by what his characters are saying as to miss what their words cover up: the artist's painful awareness of his own inability to alter the conditions of people of color—conditions caused by economic and cultural exploitation before and after political independence.

One of the most successful of the contemporary Dutch-Caribbean writers,⁵ Arion articulates in his work the difficulty of presenting a distinctly black and Caribbean perspective to an audience that is mostly white and European. As Mario Vargas Llosa has pointed out, a writer from a poor country has a special responsibility: “You have to manifest in words and in deeds that you are actively involved with the solutions of the economic and cultural problems of your country. In no way can one escape this obligation.”⁶

¹N. van Meeteren, *Volkskunde van Curaçao* (Amsterdam: S. Emmering, 1977), p. 198.

²John Jansen van Galen, “Schrijver Frank Martinus Arion,” *Haagse Post*, 29 June 1974, no page nos. All translations from the Dutch are my own.

³Van Meeteren, pp. 201-03, and Barbara K. Walker, *Laughing Together* (New York: Unicef, 1977), pp. 67-70.

⁴*Dubbelspel* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1973); *Afscheid van de Koningin* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1975); *Nobele Wülden* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1979).

⁵Other Caribbean novelists who write in Dutch include Cola Debrot (b. 1902), Boeli van Leeuwen (b. 1922), Edward A. de Jongh (b. 1923), Tip Marugg (b. 1923) from the Netherlands Antilles; and Albert Helman (b. 1903), Bea Vianen (b. 1934), Edgar Cairo (b. 1948) from Surinam. For further information, see *Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical-Critical Encyclopedia*, Donald E. Herdeck, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Three Continental Press, 1979), pp. 549-95.

⁶Mario Vargas Llosa, “Tussen obsessie en objectiviteit,” *Bzzletin*, 6, No. 57 (1979), 53.

The Caribbean, including the Netherlands Antilles, adds a heritage of slavery and colonialism to its context of poverty. How deeply colonialism and its aftermath have affected the position of the writers is expressed by Arion in a lecture in honor of the Surinam writer Albert Helman: "Caribbean writers . . . come from countries in which the level of education is usually very low, and the number of illiterates high. The majority of the people has no money to buy books. . . . There is no tradition of reading. . . . In short, it is almost impossible to exist as a writer in a Third World country."⁷

An added complication for Dutch-language writers from the Netherlands Antilles is that they write in a language different from that which would be spoken in actuality by the Antillean characters in their novels. The language commonly spoken by inhabitants of the Antilles is either Papiamentu (on Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire)⁸ or English (on St. Eustatius, Saba, and St. Maarten); Dutch is used exclusively in education. Arion is developing a unique solution to the dilemma shared with other writers of color who address the world in the languages of Europe, for he consciously experiments with the use of Dutch in his first novel, *Dubbelspel*: "If you cannot get rid of Dutch, then you are obliged to feel at home in it as much as possible. You must know the language so well that you can be an Antillean in it. While Dutch in the Antilles is constantly influencing Papiamentu, I turn this one-way traffic around in my work. I Antilleanize Dutch."⁹

Dubbelspel, with its Papiamentu-speaking characters, has been called a "translated" novel.¹⁰ It was received enthusiastically and is still popular in the Netherlands, as well as in the Antilles and in Surinam.¹¹ His second novel, *Afscheid van de Koningin*, however, has not been received well, ostensibly because it was too didactic for Dutch tastes.¹² It may serve, however, as a remarkable window through which to view the dilemma of the Afro-Caribbean writer of Dutch expression. In *Afscheid*, Papiamentu is not spoken, and Curaçao is mentioned only as the birthplace of the protagonist. Instead, the plot focuses on the relationship between West Africa and the Netherlands, and on the application of the Dutch labor struggle and Dutch values to the economic exploitation suffered by West-African workers. Precisely because the Antilles seems not to be important either to the protagonist or to the author, *Afscheid* may help us define the distinctly Antillean contribution to Dutch literature.

⁷F. Martinus, "Albert Helman, de eenzame jager" (Paramaribo: unpublished manuscript, 1977), pp. 14-15.

⁸In a study entitled, "Language and Education in the Leeward Netherlands Antilles" (*Caribbean Studies*, 18, No. 4 (1973), 117), Francine Wattman Frank comments that "Papiamentu, unlike many creoles, enjoys high prestige." Richard E. Wood, in a dissertation on Papiamentu, writes that "No Antillean, from governor down, will hesitate to speak Papiamentu in any setting . . . [A person can] lead a contemporary urban life in [his] native Papiamentu." "Papiamentu: Dutch Contributions," Diss. Indiana University 1971, pp. 13-14.

⁹Lidy van Marissing, "Antillean Arion: 'Ik schrijf mooie boeken over arme mensen,'" *De Volkskrant*, 6 July 1974, p. 29.

¹⁰Gerrit Komrij, *Daar is het gat van de deur: kritieken en essays* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiders Pers, 1974), p. 51. For an analysis of *Dubbelspel*, see Hilda van Neck Yoder, "Frank Martinus Arion's *Dubbelspel*: Search for the Antillean Identity," *World Literature Today*, 54 (1980), 388-92.

¹¹*Dubbelspel* was awarded the prestigious Van der Hoogt Prijs by the Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde in Leiden in 1974. It is on the required reading list for High School graduation in the Netherlands Antilles and in Surinam.

¹²See for example: Gerrit Komrij, "Revolutionairen en ouders van nu op stap," *Vrij Nederland*, 22 November 1975; Alfred Kossman, "Teleurstellende roman van Arion," *Het Vrije Volk*, 22 November 1975; Reinjan Mulder, "De goede mens van Arion," *NRC Handelsblad*, 17 October 1975.

Afscheid has two narrators, who, on the surface, have little in common. Sasa Lopez is a young, black Antillean journalist who loves his own intelligence, is full of Marxist analyses, and is terribly attractive to the women he meets. Attempting to cover a coup in a West-African country for a major Dutch newspaper, he meets a much older white Dutch woman, Mrs. Prior, who becomes the second narrator. This seemingly quite ordinary woman has just returned from a two-year visit to West Africa. The plight of the poor workers there reminded her so much of her own experience as a worker in the Dutch labor movement in the twenties and thirties that she became actively involved in the struggle of African peasants to change their economic and political conditions. She shared their lives to such an extent that she became a guerilla and killed the prime minister, whose death led to the desired coup. It is obvious that Sasa's theoretical responses to the injustices which he observes in Africa and Mrs. Prior's actions reflect two sides of the same value system. Beneath their apparent but superficial differences, they both categorically reject racism and exploitation—one philosophically and intellectually, the other pragmatically.¹³

Not only are there two protagonists; the title also has a double meaning. The novel opens with a description of Sasa at the moment when he becomes politically conscious. He watches the Dutch queen, whom he as a young boy in Curaçao was taught to idolize, dance with the black prime minister of an independent African country in celebration of a multi-million dollar contract between the two countries which they represent—a business contract which will benefit the poor African workers very little. Sasa says farewell to his childish adoration of the queen, satisfying his need for an embodiment of integrity with Mrs. Prior. However, the novel ends with the loss of this second queen, because she is on her way to jail for having killed the prime minister who danced with the Dutch queen.

The duality of the author's perspective is evident on a deeper, more consequential level. On the one hand, the writer presents the reader with a positive heroine, Mrs. Prior, with whom even his apolitical Dutch reader should be able to identify. Arion admits that he is "fond of that woman,"¹⁴ and he has presented her with warmth and admiration. But, on the other hand, the presentation of Sasa is much more complicated and must be understood as Arion's questioning of the value of language and art in the solution of real problems. With Mrs. Prior, Arion has succeeded in presenting a positive heroine in contrast to what he calls "the tragic vision of many West-Indian writers who project an image of self-hate, powerlessness, and contempt for themselves."¹⁵ But in Sasa it seems that the author has projected exactly such an image.

Arion has made a significant statement about one of the main characters of *Dubbelspel*, Boeboe Fiel, who shares with Sasa the quality of being talkative. In Boeboe Fiel, Arion tried to create a positive hero: "Objectively, [Boeboe Fiel] is a disgusting man, because he destroys himself [he is killed in a fight that he initiated]. But I love him because in him I can demonstrate that which I feel are positive sides in the misery. The way that guy handles words, the ability to philosophize about unimportant things—that is an escape but it is creative,

¹³In an interview with Aafke Steenhuis (*De Groene Amsterdammer*, 11 April 1979, p. 20), Arion stresses the experimental nature of *Afscheid*: "I wanted to work with double protagonists, as a kind of relay race, in which one would take care of the analysis and the other the action. Moreover, I wanted positive heroes."

¹⁴Paul de Bruin, "Interview met Frank Martinus Arion," *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 October 1979, p. CS 5.

¹⁵Aafke Steenhuis, p. 20.

expressive. . . . That guy with his flowery language—you know that he is busy making things nicer than they are so that you do not notice what is really going on."¹⁶

In the use of language to escape the feeling of failure and inadequacy, Sasa is very similar to Boeboe Fiel. But in *Afscheid*, Arion's attitude to this escapist strategy has changed. In *Dubbelspel*, Boeboe Fiel dies in the end; in *Afscheid*, Sasa survives but his survival, it seems, expresses "self-hate, powerlessness and contempt." Although Arion has treated his journalist with great respect in terms of the intellectual and moral positions that Sasa assumes, the conflicts which he faces reveal him as ridiculous. For example, after much radical talk, Sasa has difficulty maintaining his integrity merely because he is seated in an airplane next to a politically intolerable but physically attractive South-African white woman. Luckily for our "hero," Mrs. Prior is seated on the other side of Sasa. Her story touches Naomi, the South African, so deeply that in less than twenty-four hours the latter gives up her belief in *Apartheid*, abandons her country, her husband, her career, and hops happily into bed with Sasa, saying, "I want to have your child, Sasa."¹⁷

In one of the last scenes of the novel, Sasa and Naomi interrupt their lovemaking because, in Sasa's words, "I do not want to miss the documentary of the KRO [Roman Catholic television station] about the misery of the Third World. In no way" (p. 333). They first watch scenes of starvation in Bangladesh, then in Mali, and finally in Caracas: "The broadcast ends with the usual addresses [to send contributions] and I make a firm resolution not to forget to donate some money this time, certainly for Bangladesh. But her body distracts me and I have already forgotten the poverty" (p. 334). Thus Arion mocks Sasa's diatribes against the exploitation of the poor by the multinationals, since one white body pulls at him with more intensity than the injustice and suffering of many colored abstractions. In his endless talk, Sasa, like Boeboe Fiel, covers up "what is really going on."

The issue in this novel, like Arion's dilemma, is dual. First of all, if we are expected to believe that Mrs. Prior's violent response to the real misery in West Africa will lead to an improvement in the lives of the people, then it is only logical for Sasa, who shares her point of view, to do his part by killing the Dutch queen. However, Sasa does not even consider doing anything. More importantly, Sasa's verbal battle against neocolonialism reveals Arion's doubt about the usefulness of the well-educated and highly political Antillean who feels a strong solidarity with the oppressed.

In *Dubbelspel*, the misery which Boeboe Fiel thought to escape with his rhetoric was that of powerlessness due to poverty; as soon as he asserts himself, he gets killed. The misery underlying the satirical portrait of Sasa Lopez is powerlessness of a different kind. Sasa's problem, hidden beneath 375 pages of talk, is not knowing how to respond to the problems of the Third World he understands so well.

In conclusion, the Antillean novel provides the Dutch reader with an informed perspective on the economic and political relationship between West Africa and the Netherlands. But Arion's deeply felt responsibility to the problems of poverty and injustice of which Llosa spoke has given the white European

¹⁶J. J. van Galen, n. pag.

¹⁷Arion, *Afscheid*, p. 324. Subsequent references are to the 1975 edition and will appear in the text.

audience a novel with a dual perspective—a novel that “makes things nicer than they are so that you do not notice what is really going on.” The novel’s implied questions in the end haunt the reader while the author has given no solutions. If Sasa’s intelligence, his eloquence, and his knowledge have no effect on the injustice around him, then what is the author’s purpose in educating his Dutch readers? In what sense, the Antillean writer seems to ask, can education, integrity and language solve “real” problems? What is the role of the artist in this kind of a world?

The scratches of the Bringamosa tree set Nanzi’s skin on fire, but he relieves the itch while talking about “spots” on the beautiful cow. The inability to end injustice confounds Arion while creating a novel that gives the impression of intellectual control and moral certainty. While the spider relieves the itch by scratching, Arion relieves his problem by giving it to the reader.