

Translated excerpt

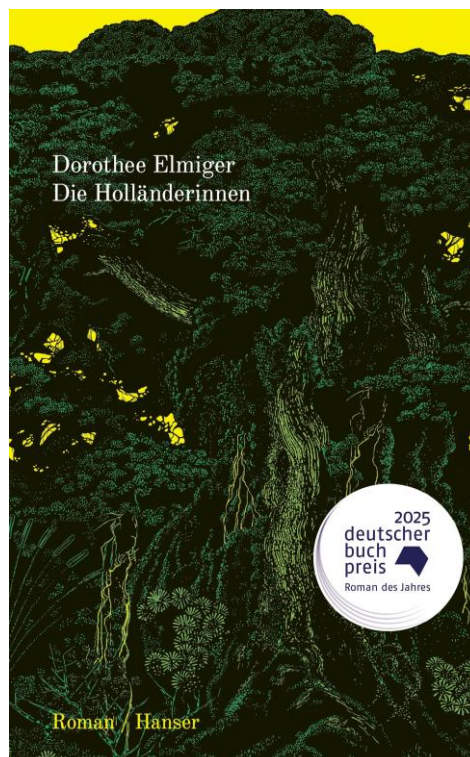
Dorothee Elmiger
Die Holländerinnen

Hanser Verlag, Berlin 2025
ISBN 978-3-446-28298-8

pp. 9-17, 18-20

Dorothee Elmiger
The Dutch Women

Translated by Jen Calleja



She's introduced as an important teller of stories, one of the most vital voices of the age, who caused a stir with her early cycle *The Chastisement of the Maids* before ultimately gaining notoriety with her verse novel *The Ethereal Tent*, and when she's given the signal, she steps up to the podium, a stack of papers in her hand, a small woman, at least smaller than expected, she touches the microphone with the fingers of her free hand and gives thanks for the invitation, she considers herself very lucky, she says, to be able to speak here today and in the weeks that follow. Her original plan had been to say something about the premises and methods behind her work, about the texts and positions that guide her, and which had accompanied her thinking over the years, supplemented with a few brief autobiographical remarks and two or three sentences on her relationship to the groundbreaking schools and traditions, before introducing her oeuvre. But even though she had repeatedly done exactly that in the preceding decades, and even though she believed that she'd certainly developed a coherent poetic theory of writing and storytelling, every reasonably clear understanding of her work, every definite conclusion regarding her literary endeavours, had now become impossible. Day after day, she says, she sat in front of her laptop to work on this lecture, but whatever she'd written the previous day kept becoming meaningless overnight, and like a spectral Penelope, she repeatedly unravelled what she'd woven the day before. Instead, images forced themselves upon her, hieroglyphics, as abrupt as flashes of light: women with ash crosses on their foreheads, a dead man in an U-Bahn station with his arms and legs thrown out at random, the memory of four women on horseback with veiled faces, who rode towards her in a closed-off intersection in New Orleans in February two years ago. Her own writing had dissolved in a very similar way; she had, with her own hands, if you will, broken it into smaller and smaller pieces: the text, every attempt at a text, had fragmented, had become increasingly formless.

Naturally, she says, one could now consider this in light of current circumstances, circumstances that are undoubtedly and in many senses bad, indeed, fatal, one could say that the text itself refuses to accept the effect of an impending death, and when everything is sliding so rapidly towards its irrevocable ending, the meaningful text becomes superfluous, the reference to beauty, to possibility, and so forth, becomes superfluous, but from her

perspective this would be an overly simplistic interpretation that testifies to a certain hubris. At any rate, she had in all her years spent writing never thought of the text as *salvation*, and much more as an expression of wild, shrieking vitality, a present *through which she is shot*. The text as a note from the chaos, the maelstrom of life – for years, Bruegel’s *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* has been hanging over her desk, and like him, Bruegel the Elder, she is interested in the encyclopaedic, the carnivalesque, the simultaneity of things: here are the people in their consumes, the gamblers and drinkers, the carnival prince brandishing his roasted piglet on a spit, and over there’s the leprous with their little bells, their crutches, a blind man with his eyes cut out, nuns in their black habits, the ground with its broken eggs.

Be that as it may, she says, now that her creative work finds itself in a process of dissolution – a process that under certain circumstances is in fact logical and which she perhaps can’t abide only because it would present to her a problem that is both professional and financial – now that she’s experiencing this dissolution, she could, it’s staring her in the face, not present a theory of her work, but at most, as she initially thought, a theory of dissolution, of decomposition, of disintegration, but this process doesn’t follow any rules, it has no system, it’s a downright Bartlebyesque *no* and therefore also resists – this was the realisation she was forced to make in front of her laptop over the preceding weeks – its theorisation.

Nevertheless, she says, it would have seemed wrong to her to cancel her lecture at the last minute, to *cheat the gallows*, as it were, and remain silent, especially now in *her moment of crisis*, even if she had tried to do precisely that time and time again. Instead, she eventually committed, completely against her own principles, to talk about her final, unfinished text – a jumble of notes, fragments, the remnants of a journey, which she wants to take in hand and bring to light for the very first time.

In January three years ago, she says, she received a phone call from a theatre maker she’d heard of but had never come into contact with. During interviews and in-conversations, he often referred to Arendt – Arendt, Adorno, and some French sociologists whose work she’d invariably only skimmed. He frequently declared that he was constructing a huge *theatre machine*, working towards nothing less than a new and hypnotic realism, which, according to him, only theatre, this place of constant doubling, could achieve, where reality and fiction, as a famous German dramatist so perfectly put it, encounter one another and lose their form in a ‘holy collision.’ He was currently making preparations for a new play, the theatre maker said back then in January over the telephone, it’s about the *reconstruction of a case*, difficult,

tragic subject matter, which he envisaged as a *tropical Passion*, referencing also Herzog, Coppola, and in that moment she put on her hazard lights and pulled over in order to hear him better. What he had in mind was a large-scale investigation, he continued, an investigation that could only take place in a repetition, a reproduction of the events, indeed, as in the theatre, it's about experiencing things *firsthand*. He had read her *Chastisement of the Maids*, in fact he'd followed her entire myth project over the years with interest, he told her, and this was why he wanted to engage her as the writer for his undertaking, provided she would be able to travel and be prepared to spend ten days or two weeks on location, *between the tropics*, where the necessary *material* would be developed by the collective. She understands, she said, though she could only follow him with some effort due to the bad connection, she had agreed to some time to think it over and had noted down some names and keywords on the back of a petrol station receipt, which now, three years later, she found looked like a secret code. When she carried on driving a short time later, it was snowing heavily, and far out in front of her, on her left, the mighty white salt heap of the Werra potash mining district rose up out of nowhere.

Later that evening, when she returned to the house on the outskirts of Frankfurt where she was living at the time and entered her dark study, it seemed to her in that moment as if the books, piles of newspapers and empty waterglasses illuminated by the orange light of the streetlamps all belonged to a very distant past – as if she were observing the props, the writing paraphernalia, of another, someone who had in some way *vanished*. She had at the time, she says, been working on a history of the eye, which for a long time had the working title *Adele Brise's Right Eye*. During the nights spent hunched over her writing desk in the small Frankfurt house, she studied texts about the hallucinatory images and visions of the seers, sightings of the Virgin Mother, the *Marpingen apparitions of the Virgin Mary*: they spoke of figures with bright cloaks, with almost fluorescent capes, the Redeemer is said to have ridden by on a *white mare*, the Virgin appeared in a living room in Queens in April 1970, she had stood between a maple and a hemlock, little flames hovering over everything, the world was on fire. She was interested in the opulence of apparitions, the hocus pocus, the strange beauty of auras and faces, she says, and also the flickering on the outermost edge of the binocular field, the twirling lights, the dazzlements, but she'd hit a wall with the manuscript, at least that's what she'd believed at the time, and had been glad to be able to apply herself to something else. In any case, the very next day she called the theatre maker and agreed to the project; not long after, she received an email with her travel documents.

In the departures hall she sat beside a nun, a Benedictine nun, who was slicing an apple with a little knife. Then, on the airplane, the seat next to her remained empty and she spent the flight over the Atlantic reading and sleeping. She looked out of the oval window just before landing: at the bright formations, reefs, the multistorey cloud constructions far beneath her; before long, the sun was gone.

She took a taxi through the deserted centre of the capital to the hotel. The driver, a slim, markedly polite exiled Nicaraguan, crossed the empty junctions of the city centre while the lights were red and told her about his likewise exiled brother, who for his part had gone to Nebraska and now worked on a poultry farm there, in Omaha. The Americans, his brother reported, are *gordo*, everything's extremely cheap there, in Nebraska, *muy barato*, especially chicken meat. At the hotel, which was literally fortified – the entrance to the lobby and the doors to the garage were sealed with iron bars, which the receptionist, who appeared after a long wait, hurriedly unlocked and relocked – she went straight up to her room and turned on the television. TV-5MONDE Amérique Latine was showing an interview with an author with whom she had crossed paths a few times over the decades, most recently during a conference in the Wachau Valley. She listened, by now quite drowsy, as he explained that his novel was about a man who's primarily trying to escape himself, and at some point she changed the channel and saw aerial photographs, static images of a barren, steppes-like terrain, that she wasn't able to place.

The overland journey the next day: out the bus window were skinny, white cows in a stormy light, yellow fields, billboards. *Tengo fútbol. Se venden lotes*. The route went through a high mountain range, a massive one, which the locals called *Hill* or *Mountain of Death*. The vehicle had wound its way upwards over three thousand metres beneath an overcast sky; fog rose up from the gorges and deep valleys. *Jesús te ama. Pollolandia*. Later, the canopy-like coronas of distant trees, endless palm plantations on the plain. She momentarily had the landscape painters before her eyes, the Dutch, the Spaniards in front of their easels. Humboldtians in the Andes. The volcanic fields of Michoacán. Brazilian landscapes: a great blue, low-lying horizon. Late that afternoon, the weather became increasingly gloomy, as if they were driving into a storm, and when she disembarked with two or three others in a southern village around seven, a restless darkness reigned over it. Some men were standing on the edge of the road, among them a bald man in a faded Nike T-shirt, who immediately approached her, the tourist, and offered his services as a taxi driver, so she got into the back of his car. The footwell of the dented Hyundai was lined with ripped up cardboard boxes, quite possibly in anticipation of the rainy season, to protect it from the mud. They left the

village in a southerly direction, crossing a wide river on an arched bridge. On her right were the silhouette of a church, scrapped railroad cars, the narrow runway of an airfield lit by a single spotlight. United Fruit Company, the driver said, gesturing out the window with his thumb. *Mamita Yunai*.

At that moment, they had passed an area that she would later see on old maps designated as *zona blanca* or *zona americana*. That is where the manager of the United Fruit plantations used to live, gringos in spacious, white houses with generous, well-kept gardens, *campos de golf, piscinas, pistas de tenis*. The man behind the wheel ran his finger across his neck as if he were slitting his throat: in the eighties, the Americans gave up the plantations, left the fincas, their houses, the whole area.

At some point that evening, she says, the taxi reached a kind of boulevard, a palm-lined road, which they then followed for a long time. In the blueish light of the dashboard, she could see the sweat on the driver's temples and neck. To her question about whether it was possible to live a good life here, he replied in the negative without hesitation: the heat is awful, almost unbearable. He was from the capital, and an unfortunate stroke of fate had led him to this godforsaken place, and he couldn't go back, he had nothing, he didn't even own the car. Her Spanish, she says, is poor, she can just about muddle through with it – she could only follow the litany recited by the driver with some effort. He repeatedly complained about the heat, *qué calor*, and his life and damned the great misfortune that had led him here and which burdened him like a curse. She didn't say anything for a while. Two cyclists in rubber boots turned onto the main road in front of them as if out of nowhere. Just before they arrived at their destination, the last settlement that could be reached by land, she says, the man asked her, glancing in the rearview mirror, whether she, being a writer, believed in God, in karma, *crees en Dios, en el karma*, and it was only later that she understood the significance of this moment, that she understood how dramatic his question had been, which he, she now believes, had asked perhaps for the first time and never expressed again.

[...]

The next morning, she says, she climbed into one of the motorboats waiting at the jetty. She paid the captain, who was wearing a blue balaclava with small openings for the eyes, with US dollars, and shortly after ten the boat set off into the extensive delta, loaded up with canisters and supplies for the remote settlements, the lone houses too difficult to reach by land. There were only a few people on board, a handful of holidaymakers – older American couples with

sunhats, binoculars and telephoto lenses, a German from Meckenbeuren, a municipality in the district of Bodensee, son of an apple farmer, who, as he told the French women next to him, had emigrated to Venezuela in 1985 – and a couple of locals with their children who had few belongings with them, plastic bags filled with empanadas and bottles of Fanta. When she thinks back on this journey, she says, she remembers swamp forests, mangroves lining the grey, muddy river. Leafy branches, no, entire trees floating on the water, and black, wide-winged birds coming in from the open sea towards them. Out from nowhere, she says, while on the boat, a line from Bernhard's *The Carpenter* came to her, something that the carpenter, Winkler, who is newly released from prison with nowhere to go and who therefore spends the night walking through forests, says to his lawyer: some forests are warm, some forests aren't. And later, days later, a second line follows it, perhaps given a nudge by the first, a line that the carpenter characterises from the point of view of his sister, who has been threatened and mistreated by him, Winkler, her entire life: "He would often be home the whole day in a sweet-tempered mood, then in a flash he would become the animal he habitually appeared as in the night".

Since the beginning of her journey, she says, she thought she could perceive a kind of danger, an unease, that washed over her in waves, but it'd been impossible for her to say at the time whether this feeling emanated from the surrounding landscape and its climate, a kind of *meteorological disturbance* or *pressure*, whether it was the work ahead, the theatre maker's project, that had unsettled her, or whether it was the disquiet of someone dislocated, someone in a way disorientated, who had suddenly found themselves in different surroundings. It was only in retrospect, weeks later, that she believed she understood that her concern possibly had something to do with the abandoned plantations, the derelict fincas, the incredibly long, now deserted roads that the United Fruit Company had drawn like a grid over what was once the forest almost a hundred years ago. She had in any case travelled in silence, silently and watchfully, logging everything, the theatre maker had, after all, specified her task as the transcriber, the recorder of all things – provided that she had understood him in January while on the side of the road with her warning lights flashing, had really understood him – and at some point the river, which the locals called *the snake*, opened wide then wider, and the motorboat shot in a wide arc out into the light blue ocean.

Only after the boat had made it across the rugged surface of the Pacific, shooting out of the trough of a wave only to once again plummet a short time later, falling from great heights into the depths, causing the passengers on the hard, narrow benches to clamp on tightly –

only then, she says, did she start talking to the very young woman sitting next to her and apparently travelling alone, who it soon turned out was from a north-eastern valley community in the foothills of the Alps.

This woman, too, she says, had been hired by the theatre maker for his play. Her task, she went on to explain, was to portray one of the Dutch women around which the project, given the working-title *The Dutch Women* on all documentation, completely revolved, but when she asked the Swiss woman over the roar of the motor whether she was an actress, she said no and laughed, she was, for want of a better word, the opposite of an actress, at least there was nothing she would dislike more than being up on a stage, in fact she was extremely afraid of it, and to be honest, she was also afraid of the kinds of people who felt the urge to pose and exhibit themselves in that way, floodlit for all to see. And that's what she'd also told the theatre maker when he came to her with his request, but he didn't waver; he himself, he explained, isn't interested in this form of *spectacle*, for him, if anything, it's about a wholly different kind of *embodiment*, and he didn't need her to be the performer of another person in that sense, but rather, the one that she *is*, with her very particular knowledge, her specific origins, her personal experience of being a woman, a European, a nascent agronomist, etcetera. [...]