

# 'Ik ben een vreemdeling. Ik sta apart' : een biografie van Paul Rodenko (1920-1976)

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*'Ik ben een vreemdeling. Ik sta apart'*  
*Een biografie van Paul Rodenko (1920-1976)*

Koenraad Hilberdink

SUMMARY

Poet and essayist Paul Rodenko (1920-1976) is one of the pioneers of the Dutch cultural revolution of the 1960s, along with authors such as Willem Frederik Hermans and Gerard Kornelis van het Reve. Shortly after World War II he wrote about art as a means to shock the audience, thus robbing it of its certainties. In an essay about American novelist Henry Miller (1946) he demanded great authors to use obscene language. Rodenko's early essays are introductions to his later idea of relating the autonomous poem with anarchism. An author has no social attachments and aims at disrupting the fundament of society: language.

For Rodenko, biographical notions have no place in art in general, nor in his own work. When asked about his life, he made up entire family chronicles, but the real story of his life remained a secret. The tension between the 'mythical' self-image and his actual life provides me with an important point of view for this biography. This book aims to answer several questions: why did Rodenko hide behind his myth, why was art for him an isolated domain, and where did his radical politics come from. One possible answer that I will exploit further lies in the relation between Rodenko and his father.

The first chapter deals with Rodenko's youth. He was the son of the Dutch Jeanne Sheriff and the Ukrainian Iwan Wasilewitzj Rodenko, who considered himself a Russian. The latter took up residence in the Netherlands in 1917, where he tried to make a living as a businessman. He took his family with him on business trips to Berlin and Riga. Their stay in the Latvian capital was an important experience for Paul Rodenko. He felt it to be something miraculous, which developed into a primordial experience. This can be related to his later fascination with the fiasco poets, poets who try to bring about the impossible.

This miracle, like the obscene use of language, formed a means to confront people with insecurity, something he preferred to dogmatism. Rigidity was something he had learned early on from his father. Iwan Rodenko was a short-tempered man who did not accept contradiction from his son. His repressive behaviour angered the young Rodenko, who had no-

where to go with his aggression. It spread beneath the surface – Rodenko sublimated his anger and wrote against paternal symbols such as the state. It is a partial explanation for his anarchism.

The relation between father and son is an important theme in the second chapter as well. During World War II, Rodenko's father did business with the German occupier. And while Paul tried hard not be contaminated with National Socialism, he was unfortunate enough to end up in Utrecht. After a brief period of studying Slavic Languages in Leiden, he continued his studies in psychology there, under Dr. F. Roels, someone on the 'wrong' side. In this atmosphere it was almost impossible not to sign the declaration of loyalty. It was a period of spiritual crisis, and Rodenko lacked the strength to resist signing the document, also because his father pressured him. It was a dark page in his biography, unknown to most people. Rodenko did not want to change that situation and that is why he shielded his personal life from the outside world.

Through personal experience, Rodenko realised the dangers of rigidity and political impurity. As a citizen he did not know how to deal with these dangers; to fight them he needed art, which was his domain of freedom and creativity.

The relation between Rodenko and his Russian father was complicated, because he partially derived his identity from him. Rodenko wanted to be Russian, or at least cosmopolitan, and he tried to erase his partially Dutch origin. He wrote in Dutch, but his spirit was international. His knowledge of international literary developments gave him a big lead compared to Dutch critics and poets. Shortly after World War II, Rodenko was *the* person to liberate Dutch literature of its narrow-mindedness. Rodenko's poems were un-Dutch as well; W. F. Hermans even called them 'extra-terrestrial'.

The third chapter deals in depth with Rodenko's international education: the influence of Dostojewski, Sjestow, the French *poètes maudits*, Bataille and existentialism. I will deal in more detail with phenomenological psychology, from which Rodenko learned that insanity is inherent to being an artist. This might explain why Rodenko did not want to be treated for his stutter, which he considered to be a sign of neurosis. Treatment, he thought, would harm his creativity. In conclusion, this chapter aims to relate Rodenko's poetics to his experiences as described in the first two chapters.

In the fourth and fifth chapter I describe how Rodenko distributed his poetics in The Netherlands. Chapter four, 'Slavische Missie' (Slavic Mis-

sion) centres upon his search for a literary journal to publish his work. It also focuses on the artistic and political context of the Cold War for his search. His Russian background was a problematic factor since he was often suspected to be an ally of Stalin. Here I describe his attempt to start a journal for literature and psychology along with psychoanalyst L. Hornstra and W. F. Hermans: *De draad van Ariadne* (Ariadne's Thread).

Shortly after this failure, Rodenko started working with Bert Bakker, publisher in The Hague. Rodenko published essays about the experimental poetry of the 1950s, and about Gerrit Achterberg in Bakker's literary journal *Maatstaf*. At first, he used the experimental poetry as a means of illustrating his own poetics and it was not until later that he chose a different direction. Achterberg remained a big influence on Rodenko because his work was the best example of the fiasco poetry. Thanks to Rodenko's anthology *Voorbij de laatste stad* (Beyond the Last City), Achterberg's audience grew by the ten thousands.

Chapter 6 describes the art scene of The Hague and the influence it had on the life and work of Rodenko. His publisher Bert Bakker would develop a crucial role as his main patron. Rodenko, who lacked insight in business matters, put him under financial wardship. Even after Rodenko married Jettie Schaper in 1953, Bakker would remain influential.

Rodenko often visited the café De Posthoorn with Bakker. He also joined the Kunstkring (Art Circle) in The Hague, where he eventually even became a member of the board. Since childhood, Rodenko had been used to drinking. The nightlife in The Hague gave him the chance to continue this habit, much to the dismay of his wife Jettie Rodenko who decided they should move to Warnsveld.

Chapter 7, 'Buitenstaanders' (Outsiders) deals with the matter of Rodenko's silence and the 'division' in his poetry, that coincided with his moving to the east of the Netherlands. Rodenko wrote less and less poetry and what he did publish, became steadily more cerebral. By that time, he hardly wrote any essays. This was partially due to the changing literary climate in The Netherlands: his poems and essays got more negative reviews than they used to. Another reason is that he no longer felt at home in the literary constellation of the 1960s. The modern poet could only flourish in a time of desperation and those times were over. Rodenko needed the tragedy that was part and parcel of his Russian soul, or so he believed. His views on art and society, as well as his poetry had grown out of necessity and could only have been written by someone living 'on the edge'. Like Sjestow, Rodenko felt that man could only get deeper in-

sight in times of tragedy and crisis. In the 1960s, with magazines such as *Barbarber*, literature had become just 'fun'.

But Rodenko was only partially silenced. He started focusing on drama, but gave that up as well when his second play got negative reviews. He continued his work as a translator of drama.

The changing literary climate coincided with changes in his personal life. He was now the father of two children. A financially problematic situation forced him to take up work, solely for the money. There were two more ideas that gave him back his real passion. These are described in the final chapter 'Al leef je nog eens twintig jaren' (If you live for another twenty years). In the mid 1960s he restarted his studies in psychology, and he became the editor of the so-called *Manifesten*-series. Both ideas failed.

He could have got comfort from a Rodenko-revival in the beginning of the 1970s. His old essays were reprinted and his Collected Poems appeared in print. Furthermore, he was asked to become a regular contributor to *De Gids*. It was too much, especially because his health grew worse as a consequence of heavy drinking. In 1974 he suffered a stomach bleeding and got the advice to follow a strict diet and quit drinking. He ignored this advice and died in 1976 from an acute stomach bleeding.

Rodenko's life was tragic – his imperative for writing poems and essays. He wrote his best work during the period 1945–1955. In these essays, an artist is speaking who reacts to social as well as personal crises. A preliminary chronological divide can be made for his poetry as well. Rodenko is mainly the poet of the 'Kamerpoëzie' (Chamber Poetry) in his first collection *Gedichten* (Poems). In 'Bommen' (Bombs) and 'Zondagmiddag' (Sunday Afternoon) the silence is almost devastating. This is the Rodenko we have met in this biography: subdued-noisy, someone who needed to find ways for his anger to be canalised. The later poems are more intellectual, and from these the personal element has disappeared.

(Vertaling Bertram Mourits)

Koen Hilberdink werd op 15 april 1957 te Groningen geboren. Hij deed daar in 1976 eindexamen Atheneum-A aan het Zernike College. Daarna studeerde hij Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde aan de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen en Algemene Literatuurwetenschap aan de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen en de Rijksuniversiteit Leiden. In Leiden studeerde hij af op het vroege werk van de dichter Albert Verwey. Na zijn studie was hij als docent verbonden aan verschillende onderwijsinstellingen en werkte hij als publicist. Hij bezorgde eerder de *Verzamelde essays en kritieken* van Paul Rodenko.