

De huid vanzelfsprekend bewonen : literair existentialisme en mystiek bij Ellen Warmond

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XIII. SUMMARY

In this book research is carried out into Ellen Warmond's work in relation to literary-existentialism. The first two chapters deal with the problems concerning definition and time-span of this literary-philosophical 'movement'. In chapters III – V attention is focused on Warmond's novel, *Paspoort voor Niemandland* (1961), not for its literary qualities, but because of its high literary-existentialist content. Moreover, the novel can help to explain the poetry, and vice versa. Warmond's poetry is discussed in detail in chapters VI– XI.

Chapters I – II Literary-existentialism

Shortly after the second world war existentialism was popular with theologians, philosophers and writers in the Netherlands. Initially, the interest was for existentialist texts which were connected with the war and it was only later that novels such as *L'Étranger* (Camus) and *La Nausée* (Sartre) were translated. The dichotomy between, on the one hand, an existentialism of loneliness and despair and, on the other hand, a later development of an existentialism of moral choice is incorrect, being as Sartre had, in 1944, stressed the liberty and responsibility of the individual.

Reaching conclusions concerning the magnitude and time-span of literary-existentialism in the Netherlands is only possible when three conditions have been met: first of all research must be carried out based on an adequate definition; secondly, not only should novels and plays be looked at but also poetry, and thirdly, research should show whether literary-existentialism started later (and also ended later) in the Netherlands than in France.

An adequate definition of literary-existentialism is not only connected with the content but also with the form. Apart from focussing on elements such as borderline situations (viz. a difficult situation in which a person is confronted with him or herself and is therefore forced to make a choice), the other person as a catalyst, engagement and enclosed spaces, attention must also be paid to the form: a range of what are mostly modernist techniques which also make the problems apparent. Examples of this being the perspective techniques, a variation in philosophical and literary passages, simultaneity, irony and paradox.

My proposal would be to include both Sartre's *conflict model* and Merleau-Ponty's *ambiguity model* in the definition, being as both are connected with a difference in attitude concerning important aspects such as pre-reflectivity, reflectivity, corporality, the look, alienation, sexual intimacy and liberty. Generally speaking, in contrast to Sartre's conflict model, reconciliation and reciprocity are central to the ambiguity model. Both models could be found in both the *ethical* and the *aesthetic* variant. In the ethical variant the emphasis is on the wish to change that which is seen as the unjustified reality. The aesthetic variant, also known as the existentialism of the art of living, stresses the acceptance of reality with all its negative and positive aspects. This, however, does not exclude social and political involvement.

The relation between literature and philosophy is complex, especially in a literary-philosophical 'movement' such as the literary-existentialism. In this book I have used the *hermeneutic model* to study Warmond's work, viz, the literary work is clarified for the reader by using certain philosophical terms without endangering the autonomy of literature. Contents and literary style are, as far as possible, studied in relation to each other.

Chapters III – V Paspoort voor Niemandsland

Warmond's first and only novel, *Paspoort voor Niemandsland* (1961), meets the criteria for literary-existentialism, both contextually and formally. The strong unity between form and content is apparent from the wide range of literary techniques which also uncover the existentialist issues. This novel belongs to the aesthetic variant of literary-existentialism. It is remarkable that not a single one of the book's reviewers associate it with existentialist issues, although the connection with the problems of the postwar youth was made. It wasn't until 1984 that Jan van der Vegt in an article on Warmond's poetry links her work to existentialism.

Chapters VI – VIII Existentialism and Poetry

It is useful to study poetry, especially that of Warmond, from a literary-existentialist *perspective*. Themes such as fear, alienation, borderline situations, the *personification* of objects, enclosed spaces and a secularised interpretation of Christian concepts point to an affinity with the existentialist range of thought. This is also shown in the representation of the body. The perception of the body as subject (*Leib*) or as object (*Körper*) appears to be connected with the pre-reflective and the reflective consciousness respectively. Sartre's view of love as a game with a conqueror and a conquered cannot be found in Warmond's work.

Both her novels and her poetry show not only affinity with Sartre's conflict model but also with the ambiguity model of Merleau-Ponty. The characteristic feature of this is a field of tension between, on the one hand, alienation (Sartre) and, on the other hand, a desire for unity and contact (Merleau-Ponty). The pre-reflexive experience of unity is, at times, definitely possible, namely in eroticism and mysticism. In her poetry, Warmond uses the abstraction technique remarkably often. Generally speaking, she uses this technique to generalise individual experiences, feelings and so forth, therefore placing them in a more universal context. An example of this is the so-called "he-poems", written in the masculine, third person singular. Another example is the sex-neutrality in her work. It appears from interviews that Warmond does not consider sex-distinction to be relevant. Her sex-neutral style of writing increases the freedom of interpretation and the reader's possibilities for identification.

After 1970, political commitment becomes more prominent in her work. However, this does not mean a break with existentialist themes. First of all, political commitment was a part of existentialism very early on, and secondly, this aspect could be

seen in Warmond's work before 1970. At the most there is a shifting of emphasis. Apart from the "melancholic" Warmond there is also a militant Warmond who is aware of her social responsibility as a writer.

Chapters X – XII Mysticism and Existentialism

A desire for unity, a release from time and space, transformation, a different consciousness and pre-verbal images all play an important part in Warmond's poetry. Up till now I have used the existentialist phenomenology and its related existentialism as an interpretation framework for these experiences. However, these experiences also make one think of mysticism. In this book, mysticism is seen as a literary genre as mystical texts throughout all ages and cultures have shown a great deal in similarity in vocabulary, use of images and ideas. In chapters X and XII I have placed the two poems, "*Voor Wie Uit is op Inkeer*" and "*Everest/Himalaya*" in a mystical context. The so-called *empty transcendence*, which is supposedly a feature of all modern poetry is not a contemporary western invention but can be found in all ages and cultures, among others in the centuries-old mystical tradition of the *via negativa*. This also applies to the poetry = mysticism idea: in many ideologies the creation of the world by use of the word plays an important role. This concept for example dominated the mythical or pre-mythical ideas of the ancient world.

In the dyptich, "*Voor Wie Uit is op Inkeer*", there are two images with a spiritual meaning: the mine and the mountain. The former symbolising the "katabasis", the descent and the latter symbolising the "anabasis", the ascent. The attainment of either spiritual state, however, is hampered by the noisy intervention of a restless spirit.

Due to the fact that the mountain theme plays an important part in the "*Everest/Himalaya*" cycle, I first outlined in chapter XI the differences and similarities in the historical appreciation of the mountain in the Eastern and Western world. It is at this point that, among other things, the history of "the sublime" is looked at. Warmond's view of the mountain appears to be a mixture of Eastern and Western elements. The poetry sequence, "*Everest/Himalaya*", is dealt with comprehensively in chapter XII. This sequence is an example of natural mysticism: landscape and atmosphere evoke and strengthen the experience of timelessness and non-duality.

Chapter XIII Final conclusion and recommendation for further research

What is Warmond's contribution to literary-existentialism? First of all her work shows that Sartre's conflict model has been wrongly highlighted as the only basic model for existentialism.

Secondly, Warmond has broadened the interpretation of the existentialist liberty theme by blending sexual identity and gender. In her novel categories such as homo/hetero and, or male/female intermingle naturally and playfully.

Thirdly, Warmond occupies an original position in the canon of “transgression motives”: her spirituality is not directed towards “higher” and “further”, but towards “below” and “close by”. It will only be when “transgression poems” by both male and female poets are examined in more detail and mutually compared, that it can be ascertained whether or not choices such as those made by Warmond are determined by gender.

Translation: Dave Mahoney