Dutch Reformed Theology and Renegade Authors

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Our topic tonight seems to lead us a little off the main track of this conference. To cover our four novelists, we have had to broaden the theme from “Dutch theology” to “Dutch religious background,” for most of the time these writers do not address theological points directly and when they do, when they are tempted to preach like the dominees of their youth, their fiction suffers. Secondly, not one of these authors professes to believe Reformed theology; instead, they began and to some extent made their mark as “rebels” against a community which took that creed as foundation and norm.

Yet, the study of rebellion may have a value, even an unsurpassed value, in revealing the nature of the object rebelled against. In the present case, these novelists expose the underside of the Dutch Reformed religious system, the sorrier aspects glossed over in official accounts. Their novels also supply so many cautionary tales against triumphalist interpretations of its history: demonstrations of the pain, the losses involved in immigration and Americanization; and questions about the proper, middle-class, patriotic life bought at such a price. Less didactically, and often inadvertently, the authors show what is truly fundamental to their native religious system. None of them proved able to expunge its influences but incorporate its axioms, its critical concerns, its temperament into the heart of their artistic production. Which brings us to a third point about rebellion, that it may be so connected with its object, tied to the point of symbiosis, that it is not in the end rebellion after all. Anger can prove as strong a bond as its often surprising companion, loyalty. Their opposite, indifference, is probably the true rebellion, and it produces no art.

We get a clearer conception of the bond, I think, when we consider the particular circumstances from which these authors emerged. Arnold Mulder (b. 1885) came to maturity in Holland, Michigan in the first decade of the twentieth century; that is, just after the immigrant western section of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) had come to terms with and opened up to the larger American world. The other three grew up twenty years later, graduating from Calvin College within five years of each other (1929-34); that is, on the heels of the Christian Reformed Church’s (CRC) decisive decade of Americanization, the 1920s. These writers’ careers, therefore, were launched out of cultural collision, blunt and severe. (To illustrate, in the CRC case the process began with super-patriotic attacks upon this “foreign” denomination during World War I, proceeded through three heresy trials and schisms, and ended with crusades against “worldliness,” the latter including those activities most appealing to college-aged youth—movies, dancing, and cards.) They set out with a foot in each of two different worlds, their loyalties and yearnings torn between inside and outside, native group and adopted society, memory and desire. They qualify as the sociologists’ “marginal men” par excellence. Moreover, both of their worlds were shifting
underneath them—the ethnic under the impact of America and America under the reform crusades of Mulder's time or the "roaring '20s" of the others. All terms were open, definitions upset. Few conditions are more productive artistically than these. It is no surprise, therefore, that the artist to be added to the list of Dutch Reformed products, Paul Schrader, came from the next great cultural upheaval and unsettling of terms (within the denominations and American world alike), the 1960s.

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Let us turn then to Arnold Mulder, the first of our writers in chronology though the last, we should add, in skill. Of the four, Mulder issued the most unmitigated criticism of the Dutch Reformed community, yet remained closest to it; in fact, achieved considerable standing within it. Mulder received a relatively advanced education (Hope College B.A., University of Michigan M.A., and an honorary doctorate from the University of Chicago), after which he returned to his native Holland, Michigan and married into one of its leading families (the Kollens, themselves connected with the Van Raaltes). He edited the Holland Sentinel for seventeen years, long wrote a nationally syndicated library column, and taught English literature at Kalamazoo College for two decades. His four novels appeared between 1913 and 1921, the high tide of the Progressive movement of cultural and political reform, including forced Americanization. His work thus has value as a reflection of the attitudes of the "better sort" in the Dutch community at a time when that community was at its burgeoning and most eccentric stage.

Neither those attitudes nor the ethnic world thereby revealed are very pretty. Mulder worked by extreme condescension and caricature. The Dutch of his rural west Michigan villages are a rude, narrow, suspicious lot; the best among them are subdued and inoffensive, the worst reactionary bigots. Mulder usually skews the situation toward the negative extreme, giving the worst the power in the community. What is more, these are also the most traditionally religious. Here Mulder does capture some of the nuances in the Reformed community. In The Dominie of Harlem the villain is a harsh pietist; in Bram of the Five Corners, a Kuyperian talking always of principles and the antithesis; in The Outbound Road, the malicious faculty of the denominational college.

From such unpromising environs springs up one of Mulder's favorite character types, the sensitive lad yearning for love and learning; or in a later phase, defying the community to win great fame in a noble cause in the outside world. Bram of the Five Corners depicts this figure most thoroughly. Upon discovering that his Dutch fiancee is feebleminded, Bram breaks their engagement (not for his sake but for the children's). Consequently, he loses his church membership and his hopes for a ministerial career. But by diligence and compassion he excels as a journalist, finds marital bliss with an "outsider," and takes up the crusade for eugenics—or as Mulder puts it with classic Progressive charm, to rid society of its "useless lumber."

The decisive role in his stories, however, rests with Mulder's other model character, the older man who "lights the flame of learning" in the youngster's heart. This figure is typically an insider-outsider. Ethnic born, educated at "the state university," himself inspired by a "great professor," he returns to the ethnic community with the gospel of uplift and enlightenment. A large portion of this program turns out to be rescuing a promising boy for "higher
thin gs," a task which sometimes breaks the man but never before he sees his final triumph. *The Dominie of Harlem,* on the other hand, gives that triumph greater sweep. Its hero, manly and tender, brilliant and charitable, not only inspires the boy but wins the girl and brings the entire village to a sweeter brand of faith.

Obviously, these patterns contain sizable portions of autobiographical projection. It is easy to see Mulder's self-image in the young aspirant rebelling against the dogmas of a shabby provincialism, yearning for the realm of high culture where great achievement, great fame, and (not least) getting even would be his. If Mulder's ascent took him no higher than Kalamazoo, he could take comfort in conceiving himself to be a beacon guiding a few bright minds out of the ethnic wilderness along the trail he himself had blazed. In any case, Mulder had no doubts about his own choices. His novels portray rebellion with unqualified approval. No mixed motives, no sense of loss mark these pages, only the picture of a perfect idealist rejecting a contemptible world.

It is interesting to note, therefore, the role Mulder assigns religion. His rebellion against the Dutch brand did not imply disgust with faith itself; quite the contrary, Mulder was sure that nothing else could so comfort the heart or elevate the race. But "the modern world" demanded a "nobler" kind of Christianity which Mulder found in the Social Gospel. *The Dominie of Harlem* has his heart set "afire with dreams of the social salvation of the world" at the state university and adopts the Dutch village as his "rural slum." There he brings the gospel of regular exercise and proper ventilation, of "uplift and purity" and abstinence from tobacco. His counterpart in *Bram* is described as "a modern apostle, preaching a new social gospel. He preaches that gospel with a fervor that can be described only as spiritual fury.... He is eager to translate this vision into human action." Against this, *Bram's* Kuyperian uncle with all his systematic thought counts for little. Love and common sense, if only fired with high ideals, will suffice in America.

Mulder's own strategy of substitutions is best figured by *Bram's* subsequent course; he exchanges the ministry for muckraking journalism, the feebleminded Dutch girl for the beautiful American Cordelia, herself a social missionary to Grand Rapids' benighted Poles. Mulder thus spoke for those elite Dutch-Americans who rebelled against the community by rising above it, joining themselves to the likeminded in surrounding communities. His novels display the ingredients necessary to this alliance: *noblesse oblige,* genteel sentiment, mild Protestantism, and emasculation of ethnic culture. His work's simplicity reflects the Progressive Era's confidence in these virtues; his silence after 1920, when the Progressive dream began to shatter, indicates that such a resolution was neither good for art nor likely in life.

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Turning next to Frederick Manfred, we see the same strategy of substitution at work and many of the same unsatisfactory consequences. But of all these writers, Manfred also has shown the most development over his career, and that in turn owes much to religious qualities inherited from his native group: unbowed perseverance, a sacred sense of his vocation as writer, and the complexity of his pilgrimage.

Manfred's journey began in 1912 on a farm in northwest Iowa. There he passed the normal round of a Christian Reformed youth—hard work to help support a large and close family, church twice a Sunday, catechism every week, and Christian school from the pri-
mary grades through high school. But at the same time he absorbed lessons of quite a different source from the field and barn. His years at Calvin College multiplied his religious doubt and ethical chafings (in re worldliness), so that his graduation in 1934 did not see him become a minister, as his dying mother had wished, but a hobo.

For the next three years he wandered around the country—New York, the Great Plains, the west coast—doing odd jobs and factory work. Then he settled in Minneapolis, working in turn as a reporter, labor organizer, public opinion poller, and political assistant. After two years in a sanitarium with tuberculosis, he finally became a full-time novelist in 1944. This did not mark the end of his trials, however, for along with praise his early work received sharp criticism; both were deserved. Thus it was not until the mid-1950s that Manfred emerged as a mature author, a stage he marked, strikingly, by moving back to the region of his birth. There, in southwest Minnesota he has created a large body of work which effects a complete philosophical replacement for the religion of his youth, but which also has been made possible only by the camaraderie, the emotional sustenance he has drawn from the nearby Dutch Reformed community. Manfred cannot believe with his fathers but he must live with them and will be buried with them.

It was not always so. Manfred's early work resolutely tried to do without the fathers; its protagonists are all orphans, literally or figuratively. Manfred's autobiographical trilogy, *Wanderlust*, exemplifies this feature as well as the process of philosophical substitution. Its first part, *The Primitive*, shows the hero, Thurs, at Calvin College, oppressed by its regime of narrow dogma and repressive mores. The confrontation aggravates his intellectual difficulties with Christianity and offends his moral sense, which by now has become heavily infused with sexual desire. "Everything is a sin with them," Thurs concludes. "They chase sin away." Thurs leaves for the East, as Part II, *The Brother*, records it, to find freedom and to fight for the working man. Here, in the New York artist-intellectual set he at last finds sex but not love, and enters leftist politics only to find Marxism as dogmatic and venomous as Calvinism. So he returns to the heartland (Part III, *The Giant*) where he gravitates to liberal politics and science only to see the first prove ineffectual, the second (at Hiroshima) ultimately destructive. Finally forsaking social involvement, Thurs retreats to the country to create a final metaphysical-ethical statement through art. Manfred thus describes a classic arc of Dutch Calvinist rebellion: rejecting one strict ideology for another and then rejecting ideology altogether; moving from religious enclave to political cell to suspicion of all sects; judging orthodoxy by science but leaving science for humane naturalism.

But *Wanderlust* and his other early works also exemplify the difficulties of the substitutionary strategy. The philosophical ruminations by which Manfred moved from Calvinism to naturalism appear distressingly rudimentary, as is his exchange in politics of Dutch Reformed conservative authoritarianism for celebration of "the common man." Surely by the 1950s eighteenth-century radicalism and nineteenth-century evolutionary naturalism were utterly conventional, a condition Manfred's presentation did nothing to change. In considering them revolutionary, Manfred persisted in the opinion of his native folk, just as his reductionism and naivete recalled all too clearly their intellectual methods. But most debilitating throughout his career has been Manfred's simplistic use of sexuality. In so many
novels Manfred gives merely the inverse image of his childhood church's. Both give sex far too much power in explaining behavior and measuring morality. Manfred just exchanges the church's negative conclusion with a positive one, but so demonstrates that reaction to one cliché might only produce another.

We would be badly mistaken, however, if we go away with a negative impression of Manfred's ability. Every one of his works has moments—better, whole sections—of excellence and some of them are first rate, pure and simple. Generally, we might say that Manfred succeeds when he unfolds his values in more distant settings, or when he turns from religion to region. Manfred's second phase amounts to the creation of a fictionalized history of the upper Midwest, "Siouxland" as he named it, from Indian times into the twentieth century. Here his naturalism can become credible, even compelling, as his brilliant evocation of the contours and constraints of the land attests. Indeed, the land itself emerges as the preeminent character of these novels. His two "Indian novels" (Conquering Horse and Scarlet Plume) allow him to present a cosmology quite congruent with his own. Describing a Yankton Sioux victory dance, Manfred writes:

...every time the drummer's stick fell...the cottonwoods along the river seemed to thresh their leaves in an agony of joy. Through the beating drum the cottonwoods at least had heartbeat. The drumbeat became the heartbeat of all living things: the rooteds and the wingeds, the twoleggeds and the fourleggeds. The drum beat the tempo of their common origin.

The tribe's medicine man supplies this commentary:

The red rock is our all-father. The red rock is the ancestor of all things. We are part of the earth's body beside the river and this earth is part of our body. We are the breath of the earth... We are also the breath of Wakantanka... Remember this and be good. Follow the right path of living.

The power of the world works always in circles. All things try to be round. Life is all one. It begins in one place, it flows for a time, it returns to one place. The earth is all that lasts.4

Later in the historical sequence, Manfred finds a world appropriate to his democratic-egalitarian politics and stoic virtues in the epoch of the mountainmen and cattle-range (Lord Grizzly, Riders of Judgment). And when these frames are established, his concept of sexuality as sacrament, as the mediator of earthly and sacred, also becomes fitting.

The Siouxland books especially reveal an essential difference between Manfred and Mulder. Neither believes in sin, but whereas for Mulder the problem was ignorance to be overcome by uplift, for Manfred that very cultivation constitutes the problem and is to be pierced by a return to the primordial, to the earth, the instincts. These in fact come in Manfred to have an inexorably determinative effect upon character; Manfred is full of predestination, and grace becomes finding and following it in one's own case. This, of course, recalls a fundamental of Manfred's childhood religion and intimates another difference from Mulder. Manfred's corpus includes two massive novels, one early (This is the Year, 1947) and one late (Green Earth, 1977), that evoke his parents' world with deeply felt affection. Between the two we have a complete picture of Dutch farm life in the Midwest—the landscape, the activities, and all shapes and shades of characters. We also see, especially in Green Earth (the more closely autobiographical of the two) the religious side of that
life—as thoroughly intertwined with the everyday as any Calvinist could wish; neither caricatured nor sentimentalized; warts next to virtues, still standing at the end. The final word on the power of that religion might be that the character of Manfred's fiction—earthy detail, metaphysical sweep, both set to biblical cadence—is exactly that of the church he grew up in.

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From two authors who do not believe in sin, we turn to two who have trouble with salvation. Peter De Vries has turned these difficulties into cosmic circles; David De Jong chose the straight thrust, the ruthless dismantling of all pretensions and delusions of comfort. De Jong's bitterness traces back to the Grand Rapids ghetto where he learned his lessons, but the sadness which his books pile up one after another reflects his inability to work his way back there and reclaim it as his home.

De Jong is especially valuable for the work of historiographical correction. Born in a Frisian fishing village in 1905, he immigrated with his family in 1918, settling in one of the poorer Dutch neighborhoods in Grand Rapids. Comparing the Netherlandic and American portions of his autobiography (With a Dutch Accent, recounting his first sixteen years), or Old Haven, a marvelous evocation of a Dutch village, with any of his novels set in the States, one gets an overwhelming impression of immigration as decline, as suffering that remains, finally, unredeemed.

The fault lies first of all with the ethnic community to which the immigrants came. Two Sofas in the Parlor shows the newly arrived family crammed into a shabby bungalow on a crowded alley, factories all around. The place comes equipped with outhouse, but not running water, and with a boundless supply of meddlesome neighbors. The family's landlord never misses a chance to gouge them, quoting Kuyper and Bavinck all the while; their peers exploit the children's ignorance of American ways; the father's employers scorn his European craftsmanship and force him to do shoddy work for poor wages, lecturing him all along on the superiority of American techniques. The most blatant viciousness wears off after a few years, but never the greed and cruelty. Small wonder that De Jong's autobiography recalls, "...steadily, unflaggingly, almost unconsciously, I started to hate these self-righteous Grand Rapids Dutch." This hatred mellowed later "but not quite to the point of forgiveness" or of an even-handed fictional treatment. 5

De Jong's work sketches his neighbors with succinct comprehensiveness:

They were all neat as pins, and thrifty, and though poor and benighted, full of great moral virtues and strict behaviors, and they all kept their neighbors in rein likewise. Everyone living in them [the alleys] was stubbornly intent on being or becoming an American with Christian principles....6

Just as reputed, in other words, religion seems the community's foundation. But the reality, De Jong reveals, was quite different. Religion is not root but product, product particularly of the fear and desperation caused by immigrant uprooting. The mother in Belly Fulla Straw, religiously indifferent in Europe, becomes Calvinistic with a vengeance in America, partly to conform to community standards, partly as "a substitute for family ties and for the old familiar things, which were becoming only faded memories...." And Two Sofas opens with the mother admonishing her son:

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...remember first of all you are a covenant child, a Calvinist boy, here in this uncoath land, where virtue and worth seem to be measured by dollars only... It is a land wholly without pattern, and I am not going to sit meekly by and see my children lose their souls in it.7

From this beginning things got worse, but the point is that De Jong attacked first of all the perversion of Dutch Calvinism, not its substance. Piety turned vile exactly as it became the servant, not the master of the community's passions.

Dutch-America's real God was mammon, De Jong declares: "Beneath a hard surface shell of religiosity they were undeviatingly materialistic in a thousand petty ways."8 The disjunction wrought hypocrisy, which accounted for some of the ghetto's sins. The other faults were more ironic. By their pecuniary scale of values, the Dutch had to regard themselves as failures. Their poverty told them that; their innocence of American ways made improvement unlikely. Consequently they adopted delusions of grandeur (the elect children of God, light to the American gentiles) and respectability. Maybe the kitchen pump poured rusty water but there were two sofas in the parlor. These poses have their comic side and a good measure of pathos, but De Jong concentrated on their connection with the community's worst flaw, conformity. The official illusions required daily and unanimous reaffirmation. Besides, everything quietly shaped in the old country now was consciously prescribed, overtly enforced, and that by the raucous gossips of the ghetto. For this, naturally, religion provided a ready sanction. Thus in De Jong's portrait, each vice feeds upon the other, eventually coming full circle to make a prison, or better, an asylum. His ghetto is a seething bed of neuroses from which contempt for self and neighbor issues in endless protestations of love for God.

It is the tragedy of De Jong's art that he could neither escape nor settle with this experience. He tried. After graduating from Calvin College in 1929, he taught school for a year, took an M.A. at Duke, began his Ph.D. at Brown, then quit that upon publication of his first novel. Thereafter he lived in Providence, Rhode Island, writing poetry and fiction with a variety of settings, yet insistently making them all over in the image of Grand Rapids. Whatever the situation, De Jong targets the same conjunctions of propriety and pretensions, the same sources of desperation and self-hatred, the same neurotic results and presiding old shrews. Against them De Jong raises two character-types straight out of his autobiography: the wondering or rebellious youth battling for his identity and integrity; and the grande dame (modelled on his forceful Frisian grandmother) who lends guidance and protection in the effort.

What was the result of this authorial transfer to the "American" world? Books more forlorn yet than those set in the ghetto. A reviewer's characterization of one applies to the lot of them: De Jong "subjects the reader to long, dreary sessions with the insides of foolish minds," constructs "purely synthetic" characters, "tracks his game with weighted boots and whacks at them with a bludgeon."9 The non-ethnic works have none of the vitality, immediacy, and color, none of the poignant and subtle currents of affection that redeem his evocations of the Netherlands and Grand Rapids; but read as morality plays set in abstraction, pitting clichés of good and evil in tedious battle.

If De Jong's work thus illustrates the plight of a rebel unable to get over his rebellion,
it also grants more to the religion rebelled against then we might think. The parents in his
autobiography, the father in Two Sofas, several of the finer characters in Old Haven are
thoroughly admirable and thoroughly Reformed; De Jong does not obscure the connection.
More broadly, his whole fictional program follows the first Calvinist mandate. This struggle
for absolutely clear and honest perception, this piercing of the pretenses and proprieties, the
collective self-delusions which mask the human problem but cannot solve it: what do these
recall but that famous Puritan conscience probing relentlessly to the utter realization of sin?
The other side of this “religious austerity,” as a keen critic saw, is a sense of “the harshness
of God,” of an awesome Power abroad in the world, brooding in judgment, punishing
folly. When the autobiographical child sees God in the thunderstorm lash him and his
village, he remembers their mutual guilt. And the opening pages of Old Haven begin De
Jong’s corpus on a brilliant symbolic conjunction of sin and Sovereignty. The town huddles
behind the dike; the sea thunders above it every moment of the day, then one night bursts
through as the church bell rings the alarm in the darkness.

But what of redemption? De Jong ventures little and that ambivalently. His tough
survivors of the struggle against duplicity and self-deception bear witness that young David
listened well when the Grand Rapids dominees rehearsed the familiar themes of suffering,
pilgrimage, and the faithful remnant. A bleaker possibility arises from one poem where he
might be acknowledging the wages of his own rebellion:

...let remembering be stone after stone to throw at the windows of this once
lucid head, wherein my pride sat winding its skein of self so long.

...let it be so until hell stands at last with its legs apart pointing agonies and
dreams to an everlasting place.11

But I prefer to leave him as he left himself at the end of Two Sofas, his last autobiographical
novel: Renze! the wondering son and Johannes the wandering one, welcomed back together
into their father’s house.

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This talk of ambivalence and multiple options brings us to the home turf of Peter De
Vries. De Vries is the most skilled and renowned of these four writers; also the last to reach
his vocation (his first works appeared only in the mid-‘50s) and the one whose professional
location was farthest removed from his origins. It is “a long way” indeed, as one commenta-
tor has put it, from the De Vries family home—“three little rooms full of religious agony... theo-
logical comedy and ethnic tragi-farce behind...a moving-company office on South
Halstead Street”—to the New Yorker and elite suburbia where De Vries has attained his
fame.12 But throughout his career the two worlds have dwelt side by side in De Vries’ mind,
ever synthesized but juxtaposed, supplying the tension that has generated no end of
humor.

Again, several recurrent character types may be taken to exemplify De Vries’ attitude
toward his two worlds. High in his affection stand old-fashioned common folk, paragons of
common sense and simple honesty, representing De Vries’ childhood elders with their reli-
gious-ethnic eccentricities removed. These “characters” have little formal education and no
professional credentials but exhibit far more intelligence than those so endowed. Such is
Frank Spofford, the Connecticut chicken-farmer who drives around a Model-T with license
plates “SCAT” because urban sprawl has made him a displaced person in his home town (Reuben, Reuben). Such also is the title character of Mrs. Wallop, the mother—natural and surrogate—of several budding writers who pay the dues of cultural fashion by insulting her values, then follow their bright minds into a maze of difficulties from which only she can rescue them. Yet these characters themselves move toward the world of glitter, not plunging all the way in but wetting a toe or two. Such ready charity and independence of mind De Vries values above all.

A second character type is more directly autobiographical, as its representatives are almost perfectly divided between the two worlds. One of De Vries’ best creations, Tom Waltz of Let Me Count the Ways, forms a complete repository of these tensions. For parents he has a raging agnostic father (that piano-mover extraordinaire, Stan) and a raving fundamentalist mother. Mrs. Waltz, in Stan’s words, is not one of your “intellectual converts to Catholicism or cetera...[but] plain lowdown, cornball, meat-and-potatoes Jesus Saves saved” and bears witness to her Lord by giving her husband tracts on the street and a Bible belt for his birthday. Tom further brings a Midwestern, ethnic background to a culturally elite job (college professor). He tries to bridge his divided soul by visiting revival halls and saloons in the same evening, by teaching Shakespeare on campus and sobbing to sentimental ballads in his room. But when his composure snaps in the face of “the three little prigs,” faculty colleagues of Harvard pedigree, Tom goes on a pilgrimage to Lourdes, only to fall ill there. This triggers a convoluted and ambiguous religious conversion that amounts to a split decision for the provincial side of De Vries’ past.

Another heavily autobiographical figure, Don Wanderhope of The Blood of the Lamb, exemplifies probably the most recurrent pattern in De Vries’ fiction, the quest of the self-described brilliant young man to soar from his gauche origins to the glittering heights of chic. Don’s aspirations are crystallized in one incident. Sneaking in from a date with an “outsider,” he is confronted by his father, standing in long underwear, “scrubbing his teeth with the dishrag, as was his wont,” and thundering, “Any girl you go out with you take here, verstaan, because I want to see what Jesus would say.”

I laughed softly as I hurried to my bedroom, a chuckle of affection for origins from which I would soon be gone, had already in spirit flown. I had a vision of polished doors opening, and myself in faultless tweeds in a party moving toward dinner across a parquet floor, under a chandelier like chiseled ice.

Don gets his wish (he “makes it” as an advertising writer in Westchester County) and learns that that can be the greatest torment; that the Vanity Fair for which he, the “reverse pilgrim” has left the City of God lives up to its name (i.e., is at once arrogant and empty); and that the old world is not so simply left behind. As he loses his wife to suicide and his daughter to leukemia, he reenacts in the suburbs of New York the theological disputations his elders had concocted on Sunday afternoons in Chicago parlors redolent of coffee, cigar smoke, and the cologne-scented handkerchiefs “of Old World women...listening respectfully while their menfolk gave each other chapter and verse.” In the moment of crisis, Don touches the faith of his childhood, reciting the benediction over his daughter’s body and, by means of De Vriesian convolutions, casting his cares on Christ and falling prostrate at the foot of the Cross. A few months later, however, after he presumably has returned to his
senses, Don reaffirms the secular stoicism proclaimed decades before by his brother on his deathbed, deciding to live "without the consolations we call religious."  

Between the two of them, Don Wanderhope and Tom Waltz represent the delicate ambivalence with which De Vries addresses his divided experience. Don's renunciation somewhat outweighs Tom's curious conversion, but the rest of De Vries' work quite amply demonstrates him to be a secular Jeremiah, a renegade missionary to the smart set. If the sophisticates have a balloon, De Vries is sure to prick it: fads of dress, architecture, child-raising; the rituals of cocktail party and business lunch; liberal theology ("their speciality here was honest doubt"), liberal politics, and above all "Freudianity," "psychological analysis, that major industry of today. Not by their faults shall ye know them, but by their roots. Criminals are understood, do-gooders unmasked. All that." This is the device most amenable to sophisticated self-deception, to simplistic reductions of the complex and devious complications of the simple.

The sophisticates De Vries impales, in sum, are innovative but quite unoriginal sinners. The cardinal sin involves, as always, hubris. One after another his suave males contrive schemes whereby lost luster can be restored, freedoms regained, a mate, mistress, or fancier job captured. But they all learn that events, much less people, least of all oneself, are not susceptible to management. As the postmortem of all their "plans" would conclude, "complications set in." The second error is, again, the eternal Puritan charge: a false confidence of grace rooted in deception about oneself. De Vries' subjects believe they are free of the pressures that make so much of their inferiors' lives commonplace; of course they are not but merely pursue pettiness on a higher plane. They are also conformists, and duplicitous conformists at that. Their naivete touches the most precious aspect of their self-image, for they pride themselves on their independence precisely as they run the cultural establishment, and on their modernity just at they perform rituals of insurgency that are a century old. Exposing rebellion as the preeminent convention, De Vries embalms the very myth which he and his compatriot novelists had followed out of their native world.

Most often, the wages of sin for De Vries are the pratfall, the punctured balloon, the embarrassment so bald as to force self-recognition if not repentance. But all his books sight more terrifying possibilities—flirtations with self-destruction that build up into full embraces, a universe not mysterious but hostile. This tendency became most pronounced in the books of De Vries' middle decade, the 1960s: beginning with "the slaughter of the innocents" in Blood of the Lamb, through the family viciousness of Reuben, Reuben, through Stan Waltz's lifelong hangover in Let Me Count the Ways, to Professor Tattersall's end in The Cat's Pajamas. Determined that his life will come to reflect an absurd world, Tattersall is reduced to eating his meals out of a bedpan and freezes to death while trying to get back into his house through the dog's trap-door.

De Vries subsequently has not so much "answered" the challenge of the absurd as fallen away from it, back into the realm of "normal" human relations and domestic comedy. But this is the "answer" he gave in the darker books themselves. The note on which Blood of the Lamb concludes is, appropriate to both a CRC son and De Vries' irony, one of common grace:
...for we are indeed saved by grace in the end—but to give, not to take...[we feel] again the throb of compassion rather than the breath of consolation: the recognition of how long, how long is the mourners' bench upon which we sit, arms linked in undeluded friendship, all of us, brief links, ourselves, in the eternal pity.

And the picture with which we can take leave of all these writers is nowhere more beautifully etched than in Joe Sandwich's elegy in *The Vale of Laughter*:

So I am like all of us, reluctant thinkers, emotionally resisting truths toward which we are intellectually borne, still dreaming of islands though the mainland has been lost, swept remorselessly out to sea while we spread our arms to the beautiful shore.17

**FOOTNOTES**

1 Mulder, *Bram of the Five Corners*, p. 82.
4 Manfred, *Conquering Horse*, pp. 55, 145, 287.
7 Ibid., p. 11. *Belly Fulla Straw*, p. 105; cf. pp. 112, 124, 149.
8 De Jong, *With a Dutch Accent*, p. 252.
9 Grace Frank, Review of *Somewhat Angels*, *Saturday Review*, November 17, 1945, p. 52.
11 De Jong, "The Time Has Come," *Across the Board*, p. 53.
15 Ibid., pp. 157, 241, 243.


... *Snow-On-The-Mountain and Other Stories*. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1946.


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