

## SPARKS OF REASON



# Sparks of Reason

Vernacular Rationalism in the Low Countries,  
1550–1670

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History is no more than a thin thread of the remembered stretching over an ocean of the forgotten.

MILAN KUNDERA, *The Joke* (1967)

*Teroentoek kakeh dan nenek koe.  
Kamoe tinggalkan doenjamoe.  
Dan tertjptalah doenja kami.*

To my grandparents.  
You left your world—and created ours.

## Preface

In his *Lekenspiegel* or *Layman's Mirror*, the Antwerp city clerk Jan van Boendale calls writing the most difficult and most ungrateful of all arts. During other activities, he tells his readers around 1330, "one can talk, laugh or eat or think about something else unrelated to the work," but when one is writing one can "hardly move, let alone think about something else, laugh, sing or do anything but write."<sup>1</sup> Most people, so he claims, do not understand how exhausting this is, for they see "hardly more than a hand moving."

I too was so often at home writing, seemingly motionless, that my unemployed neighbour started throwing chummy glances my way. Nevertheless, I have never experienced the process of writing this book as difficult or ungrateful. Quite the opposite. It seemed more like a long holiday (my life might have not been that different from that of my neighbour, after all); what could be more wonderful than travelling to distant pasts, into which you yourself have breathed new life through old texts and dusty books? A journey to times long gone, when people had an entirely different attitude to life, but were nonetheless so entirely human.

My journey through time was, in part, a holiday in my own country. Not merely because the books with which I tried to revive the past are to be found in libraries in Amsterdam, The Hague, Leiden or Rotterdam, but also because they have all originated in the area of the Low Countries. For me, this meant that the past functioned as a mirror for the present—after all, the period discussed in this book, the late Middle Ages and early modernity, is the period in which a lot of what makes me Dutch (and European) first originated. Which only proves that if we travel, we do not merely get to know the other, but ourselves as well.

This book was conceived in a number of different academic surroundings: the History Department of the University of California, Los Angeles

1 Jan van Boendale, *Lekenspiegel* III, 125.

(UCLA), the Department of History and Art History of Utrecht University, and the Faculty of Philosophy at the Erasmus University Rotterdam; each and every one of them vibrant meeting places for people, ideas and attitudes.

During the process of writing this book, many people, both there and elsewhere, have travelled with me in many different ways. First and foremost, my dear Monique—at home, in Asia, Africa or Los Angeles, she was (and is) ever my most trusted, yet always surprising, travel companion. Then there are those who sweetened and enlightened my time in the City of Angels, especially: Ellen DuBois, Lynn Hunt, Peg Jacob, Robert Kirsner, David Myers, Jesse Sadler, James Schultz, Christianne Smit, Pete Stacey, Iris Clever and David de Boer, Anne van Wijk, dare-devil Misty Dawn Thomas, Yannick Maurice and his *bande francophone*, the Woods in Park LaBrea, Steve and Jennifer Lamm in the Hollywood Hills, and the “tequila couple” Matthew and Brenda Stoudt. During the times that I was working on this book in the Netherlands and Belgium, my travel companions were, among others: Arjan van Dixhoorn (Antwerp and Pasadena), Arie Gelderblom, Jaap Gruppelaar, Henk Hollaar, Henri Krop, Bart Leeuwenburgh, Samuel Mareel, Herman Pleij, Awee Prins, Bart Ramakers, Joris Reynaert, Han van Ruler, Paul Schuurman, Katrien Vanagt, Jeroen Vandommele, Gerlof Verwey, Gerrit Voogt (in the Netherlands, Belgium as well as several places in the USA) and Michiel Wielema.

Both delightful and productive were the conferences organised by the UCLA Center for 17th- and 18th-Century Studies in the beautiful William Andrews Clark Memorial Library. Equally worthy of mention were the inspiring Premodern History of Science seminars organised by the Descartes Centre for the History and Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities at Utrecht University and the Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands at The Hague. Also unforgettable were the lunches with members of the History section of the Rotterdam Faculty of Philosophy, where the newest insights about history, evolution, war, politics or what have you could effortlessly lead to fierce discussions or, when we were really fortunate, educated forms of cabaret.

During the preparation and execution of my Marie Curie fellowship, Wijnand Mijnhardt greatly helped me with guidance and advice. In Utrecht and “Kuylenburgh” (sadly never under the SoCal sun) we have had very fruitful conversations, which have, in many ways, determined the direction of my thoughts, and which formed my best introduction into the

field of cultural history. Han van Ruler has had a remarkable share in the coming about of the dissertation on which this book is based. He was able to stimulate me without being pedantic, and managed to give direction to my academic hunger without restricting my freedom. Another great source of inspiration was Wiep van Bunge, whose enthusiasm, eloquence and expertise drew me to the field of history of ideas from the moment I embarked upon my philosophical studies.

*Sparks of Reason* is based on a PhD dissertation in Dutch. In addition to actualisations, additions and corrections, Chapter 1 and the conclusion were completely rewritten; and to increase the book's balance and relevance, an extra chapter has been added about the continued effect of Vernacular Rationalism in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic (Chapter 6). Transferring my ideas and research results to English was also a journey. A journey full of surprises, for there is much lost, *and* found, in translation, to borrow a phrase from Peter Burke.<sup>2</sup> Throughout this journey, Elizabeth Verwey of *De Perfectionist* has been indispensable. The lion's share of the already existing Dutch material has been translated by her, while her knowledge of English was also often decisive in the other, newly added parts of this book.

This book is about Dutch texts written roughly between 1280 and 1670 and contains many quotations from this period. To keep it accessible for an international readers public, the original Middle Dutch/Dutch has been left out in most cases, however, in some cases I have chosen to use both the English translation and the original, in order to give the reader an idea of the language in which these texts reached their intended audience. In addition to that, some core concepts are used in the original Dutch, but always with their English translation. Many old texts are written in rhyme; this could almost never be preserved, but I did try to stick to the original line structure as much as possible.

Terminologically, this book deals with a rather complex area of Europe: the Netherlands or the Low Countries (roughly the present-day Netherlands and Belgium), in which Dutch, in all sorts of local varieties, was the most important vernacular language (in the South it was also French, of course). Until, say, the emergence of the Northern Netherlands as an independent political and cultural unity (eventually leading to the Dutch Republic), the term "Dutch" as an adjective can only be

2 Peter Burke, KB Lecture at the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (Royal Library of the Netherlands) in The Hague on 26 April 2005.

used to describe the language (and perhaps the inhabitants of the Northern Netherlands). I therefore often use the term “Netherlandish,” a term which has already more or less been established in the field of art history. I will therefore speak of “Netherlandish city culture,” “Netherlandish Humanism,” the “Netherlandish rhetoricians” and so on.

The research leading to the results in this book has received funding from the European Union under a Marie Curie International Outgoing Fellowship within the 7th European Community Framework Programme.

I am very pleased that this book will be included in the series *Bibliotheca Dissidentium Neerlandicorum*, published by the Coornhert Foundation. I am very thankful that the Coornhert Foundation supported me in realizing this book by awarding me an Encouragement Grant. I hope that *Sparks of Reason* contributes to the international reputation of the Foundation and its goals: extending the knowledge of and interest in non-conformism in the Netherlands.

Finally, I want to thank Laurie Meijers and Johannes Rustenburg of TAT Zetwerk and Anja van Leusden of Verloren Publishers for professionally preparing this book for printing. After all, an important part of the work still has to begin when the author himself has already finished his travels.

Ruben Buys  
8 April 2015, Amersfoort