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# Judith Herzberg

## Biographical data

Judith Frieda Lina Herzberg was born in Amsterdam on 4 November 1934. Her father, Abel Herzberg (1893-1989), was a lawyer and writer. As the daughter of a Jewish family, she was taken into hiding at various locations in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands during World War II, including an address in Groningen. Her father survived internment in the Bergen Belsen concentration camp. Herzberg married young and was mother to two children by the age of 21. The two books by Abel J. Herzberg, *Brieven aan mijn kleinzoon* (Letters to my Grandson, 1975) and *Brief aan mijn kleindochter* (Letter to my Granddaughter, 1996), are addressed to her children.

Since 1983 she has lived, alternately in Amsterdam and Israel, with her new life partner. In 1986 she spent several months as writer in residence at Leiden University, supervising three groups of students writing poetry, drama and screenplays.

Herzberg usually declines to be interviewed, and when she does accept, she tends to reveal very little about her private life and the interpretation of her poems.

## Main features of the work

Herzberg's oeuvre encompasses poetry, plays, texts for musical theatre, television plays, librettos, screenplays, translations and adaptations.

Her first poetry collection, *Zeepost* (Sea Post), was published in 1963. It was followed by numerous other collections, whose titles often refer to things normally regarded as simple, fleeting, insignificant or transient. These include a type of grass that grows almost everywhere (*Beemdgras*, 1968), irritating insects (*Vliegen*, 1970), oblique light (*Strijklicht*, 1971), the tail end of the day (*Dagrest*, 1984) or small fish and other sea creatures accidentally caught up in fishing nets (*Bijvangst*, 1999). It is also notable that most of these titles consist of two syllables, the first stressed, the second unstressed.

In her poems, Herzberg draws on the stuff of everyday reality and from her own emotional life. Her aim is not to communicate a message or convey a certain idea, but to bestow attention on the ordinary and to open our eyes to what is unusual, enigmatic or hidden. Anything can form the starting point for a Herzberg poem. Through the painstaking observation of reality, she wants to instil a more profound insight into her own nature and the workings of the world. She has a keen eye for detail and explores connections between things that seemingly have nothing to do with each other. 'My poems stem from my attempt to rhyme two things which, at first sight, seem to have no connection,' she wrote in an essay on her own work in 1976. A good example of this is the poem *Boomchirurg* (Tree Surgeon), in which the pruning of a branch is linked to the prospect of brain surgery.

### BOOMCHIRURG

*Boomchirurg noemde hij zich, en met zijn motorzaag  
zat hij boven in mijn boom toen jij je fiets  
tegen het hek aan zette. Altijd en van nature  
tegen snoeien zei je alleen: 'zo zo' - en ik zag  
dat er iets met je aan de hand was.  
'Ik geloof dat er iets in mij groeit dat er niet hoort.'  
Op dat moment viel er een tak zodat het dak  
van het schuurtje brak. Ik rende weg  
en 's nachts wist ik pas hoe dat voor je was -  
en braken zorgen bij me uit die niet te stuiten  
waren over het ooit als we elkaar verliezen  
en hoe we vóór het zover komt dom  
zullen redderen, en pas wanneer het kraken  
echt vervaarlijk wordt, hulpvaardig  
de verkeerde kant opdraven.*

(from *Botshol*)

Herzberg understands the art of isolating the ordinary, making it extraordinary in the process.

At first sight, the poems she writes appear to be readily accessible. However, she leaves a great deal up to her readers, encouraging them to take their own long, hard look at reality. Her poetry alternately offers acceptance and rejection of life. It 'oscillates between a persistent fear of chaos and violence, and a vitality or cheerfulness which enables her to write these things down with such nonchalance' (Maarten Doorman, *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 March 1999). The awareness of humanity's

insignificance and the transitory nature of life can lead to melancholy or to bitterness. But Herzberg's playful humour often restores a sense of perspective to the gravity and tragedy.

Striking aspects of Herzberg's poetic style include her colloquial language (eschewing beautiful phrasing, sparing use of imagery), her surprising juxtapositions, the omission of words or phrases (elliptical sentences), internal rhyme and apparent non-sequiturs. Take the following poem for example:

### SPREEUW

*Had niets te beweren  
te klein voor veren  
te nat om bruin te heten  
en snavel dicht  
ook tegen eten.*

*Maar werd een hoogst  
warmpotig geleerde  
specialistisch geïnteresseerde  
zeehondgeveerde  
vetervereerder.*

*Frivoolkelige imitator  
een parel-bespetterde  
wezel, een vliegende  
ongeleterde triomfator.*

(from *Strijklicht*)

The jury who awarded her the P.C. Hooft Prize for her life's work in 1997 characterized her poetry as follows: 'Judith Herzberg makes refined use of sound, of rhyme (which she uses irregularly, often in the guise of internal rhyme), of ellipses and unexpected accents. It is no longer possible to imagine the world of poetry without her voice, her characteristic and astonishing perspective, complete with lines that are uplifting. Judith Herzberg has an unparalleled eye for the very simplest phenomena and a melodious language that seems deceptively like spoken language. She combines these gifts with truly extraordinary observations and an unabashed imagination.'

Through reading her poems, you come to experience reality differently, and perceive the extraordinary in the ordinary:

## ZIEKENBEZOEK

*Mijn vader had een lang uur zitten zwijgen bij mijn bed.  
zei ik, nou, dit gesprek  
is makkelijk te resumeren.  
Nee, zei hij, nee toch niet,  
je moet het maar eens proberen.*

(from *Beemdgras*)

## HIERO EN DAARO

*Er zijn ook mensen  
die nooit een foto zouden vouwen  
maar wel opeens, en overtuigd,  
de overbuur in stukken houwen.*

(from *Bijvangst*)

In 2011 *Klaagliedjes* (Lamentations) was published, a collection of poems inspired by the Lamentations of Jeremiah. Forty years earlier, Herzberg had published 27 *liefdesliedjes* (27 Love Songs), an adaptation of the biblical Song of Songs. These collections are closely related in both theme and form, although the poems in *Klaagliedjes* have a far more fluid connection with the Bible texts. They centre on a widow who looks back on her life and the death of her beloved.

Loss is also a central theme in the 2013 collection *Liever brieven* (Letters Preferred), although according to Luuk Gruwez writing in *De Standaard* (21 March 2014) these poems are less in thrall to bitterness. He describes a Herzberg who 'is once again more concerned with the playful possibilities of the language, a good deal more ironic, at times even humorous (...).'

Between her first collection of poetry and her last, there are no significant differences: Herzberg always remains true to herself, maintaining a tone characterized by wilfulness and even stubbornness.

In the early 1970s, Herzberg expanded her focus to take in drama. Her first play, *Cranky box*, was performed in 1971. An undoubted highlight from her work for the stage is *Leedvermaak* (Malicious Delight), a musical theatre piece first performed by Baal theatre company in 1982. The play – the first part of a dramatic trilogy – consists of 99 fragments and deals with the unresolved suffering caused by war and internment

in concentration camps. The conversations the characters engage in at a wedding reception are superficial because nobody dares to show their deepest feelings, for fear of total spiritual collapse. The play makes it clear that, at a fundamental level, human beings are unable to help one another or genuinely connect due to the after-effects of the war. *Leedvermaak* was honoured with the 1981-1982 Critics' Award and the 1988 Charlotte Köhler Prize. Director Frans Weisz filmed the piece in 1989.

The second part of the trilogy, *Rijgdraad* (Thread, 1995), featured the same actors as *Leedvermaak*. This time the action centres on a 40th wedding anniversary celebration. Frans Weisz filmed the piece under the title *Qui vive* (premiered in February 2002). The third part of the trilogy, *Simon* (2002), Herzberg wrote for the Schauspielhaus in Düsseldorf. She initially wanted the play to be about euthanasia, but ultimately the theme became a question: do you look at death differently once you have narrowly escaped being killed? This was the experience of those who survived the Nazi concentration camps and this work is once again set against the background of World War II.

The play *En/of* (And/Or, 1985) explores a love triangle between a man, his wife and his lover. What seems like a permissive relationship, is in fact based on feigned emotion. In the chamber opera *Merg* (Marrow, 1986) the theme is donorship: a man is willing to act as a donor for his sick brother, but his wife objects because she has not been consulted.

Herzberg has also written several screenplays. *Charlotte* (1981), directed for cinema release by Frans Weisz, made a considerable impact. It tells the story of painter Charlotte Salomon, who was born in Berlin in 1917 and died in Auschwitz in 1943.

She also adapted Stravinsky's 'fairy tale' *L'Histoire du Soldat* for the Groningen dance company Club Guy & Roni, reworking the text and maintaining only the characters and the motif of the soldier returning from the war (*NRC Handelsblad*, 16 January 2013).

There is a clear thematic unity to Herzberg's poems and dramatic work, however different the motifs and ideas around which they are constructed. In both genres, the key is exploring the world of feeling and investigating life's possibilities. She asks fundamental questions. How do I want to live? Is it possible to live a carefree life? In a review of her collection of poems *Bijvangst* (Bycatch), the aforementioned Maarten Doorman said: 'Herzberg's poetry is especially powerful in dealing with what we might call the emotional ecosystem. This is also what makes her work for the stage so compelling, to say nothing of the monologues, often in the guise of dialogues, to be found in her poetry' (*NRC Handelsblad*, 19 March 1999).

Her work has been widely recognized. In 1981 she received the Jan Campert Prize for her collection *Botshol*, followed in 1984 by the Joost van den Vondel Prize, awarded by the University of Munster. She had also won two awards for her entire oeuvre: the Constantijn Huygens Prize in 1994 and, in 1997 the P.C. Hooft Prize.

Just like the prominent writers who founded *Barbarber* (the self-proclaimed 'magazine for texts' published from 1958 to 1971), Herzberg takes everyday reality as her jumping-off point and, in many of her poems, makes highly individual use of quotations from spoken and written language ('ready-mades'). There is also a clear affinity with the *Tirade* poets, most notably Jan Emmens, Dick Hillenius and Rutger Kopland, who reacted to the exuberant lyricism of the experimental Vijftigers movement by emphasizing the common word and a natural, conversational tone ('parlando').

## Bibliography

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1971 *Strijklicht* (dichtbundel). G.A. van Oorschot.  
1971 *27 Liefdesliedjes* (dichtbundel). Thomas Rap.  
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1987 *Zoals* (dichtbundel). De Harmonie. In 1992 verscheen een uitgebreide uitgave.  
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- 2004 *Soms vaak* (dichtbundel). De Harmonie.
- 2005 *Negentien toneelstukken*. International Theatre & Film Books ; De Harmonie.
- 2008 *Het vrolijk* (dichtbundel). De Harmonie.
- 2011 *Klaagliedjes* (dichtbundel). De Harmonie.
- 2013 *Liever brieven* (dichtbundel). De Harmonie.

## Audio recordings

- 1997 *Het vertelde* (compact disc). De Harmonie. Door Herzberg voorgelezen gedichten uit de bundels *Zoals* en *Wat zij wilde schilderen*.
- 2007 *Zijtak* (compact disc). De Harmonie. Door Herzberg voorgelezen gedichten uit de bundels *Bijvangst* en *Soms vaak*, aangevuld met niet eerder gepubliceerde gedichten.

## Film adaptations

- 1989 *Leedvermaak* / regie Frans Weisz. Gebaseerd op het gelijknamige toneelstuk.
- 2002 *Qui vive* / regie Frans Weisz. Gebaseerd op het toneelstuk *Rijgdraad*. Vervolg op *Leedvermaak*.

## Television plays

- 1971 *Een giraffe zijn is erger*

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1976 *Lieve Arthur*

## Screenplays

1975 *Rooie Sien*

1977 *Twee vrouwen*

1978 *Een vrouw als Eva*

1979 *Mevrouw Katrien*

1981 *Charlotte*

1986 *Langs lijnen van geleidelijkheid*