The Uniqueness of Willem de Mérode’s Poetry of Boy-love: A (Dutch-Canadian) Classicist’s Perspective

Beert C. Verstraete, Professor Emeritus of Classics at Acadia University  beert.verstraete@acadiau.ca

This paper will, I hope, contribute to an ongoing writing project of mine which will offer a comparative study of male homoerotic poetry composed by a number of authors from Greco-Roman Antiquity and from the late nineteenth century until the present, where it will draw on several modern literatures. My focus will be on poetry of the lyric and personal-confessional, rather than of the narrative or dramatic type. A survey is not my goal. I will be directing myself to a select body of work that I find intrinsically compelling as poetry, and therefore literary analysis and appreciation, and not a biographically or socio-culturally criticism, is my primary goal. However, what we know or can reconstruct of a poet’s personal, social, and cultural background may significantly enhance our understanding of his work; this factor of background must therefore also inform our reading of De Mérode’s poetry of man-boy love.

I should point out here at the beginning that throughout this paper I will use De Mérode’s pen name under which he published most of his poetry rather than his actual name, Willem Eduard Keuning.

I became aware of De Mérode’s poetry only a few years ago from short notices in surveys of homoerotically themed literature. The Internet then provided me with more material, including a number of his poems speaking of his love of adolescent boys, and subsequently the generous gift from Charles Hupperts of De Mérode’s Verzamelde Gedichten (“Collected Poems”) allowed me for the first time truly to immerse myself in his poetry; and finally, a few months ago I received my copy of Hans Werkman’s comprehensive and insightful biography, published two years ago, of De Mérode, Bittere Overvloed: The Wereld van Willem de Mérode (“Bittersweet Abundance: The World of Willem de Mérode”), a much revised and expanded version of the biography which appeared in 1983. This has
provided me amply with the necessary background I just mentioned and which even an aesthetically focused literary criticism cannot afford to disregard. Certainly, without Werkman’s magisterial work I would not have ventured to prepare this paper.

There are two reasons that drew me immediately to De Mérode when I first learned about him a few years ago. First of all his religious convictions and the religious culture in which he moved all his life: by conviction if not by actual church membership, De M. was a life-long devout *Gereformeerde* (“Reformed”), who embraced the faith and teachings of the *Gereformeerde Kerken* (“Reformed Churches”) of the Netherlands, the orthodox Calvinist denomination which had broken away in 1880 from the mainstream *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* (“Dutch Reformed Church”). I was born and raised in the same church. In the late ‘40’s and the 1950’s, when I was growing up as a boy, orthodox Calvinism still was a sturdy religious, social, cultural, and political pillar in the *verzuilde*, i.e. confessionally and ideologically segmented Netherlands. When I immigrated with my family to Canada at the age of fourteen, my family and I joined the Christian Reformed Church of Canada. This had been founded in the interwar years by Dutch immigrants to become the Canadian branch of the Christian Reformed Church of North America; this had been a breakaway in the mid-nineteenth century from the more mainstream Dutch Reformed Church of North America, and it still has its largest membership in the United States. When I was a boy in the Netherlands, the *Gereformeerde Kerken* were still extremely conservative and upheld the traditional teachings and disciplinary practices on homosexuality. It was no different in the Christian Reformed Church which my family joined in 1958. As you well know, the 1960’s and the following decades in the Netherlands saw a thoroughgoing liberalization of attitudes to sexuality which also impacted strongly on the *Gereformeerde Kerken*. However, the comparable liberalization that has also taken place in Canada since the 1960’s has enjoyed a far lesser resonance with the Christian Reformed Church, which still subscribes, officially at least, as per the 1973 synod
pronouncement of both the Canadian and the American churches, to the position which is often summarized as “love the sinner, hate the sin”—although I know that individual attitudes and even the attitudes of entire congregations have become far more liberal and accepting over the years. You will understand that for these reasons I can empathize to some extent with the inner wrestling of heart and mind that De M. subjected himself to for almost his entire life—I say only “to some extent” because the psychological and spiritual struggle I myself underwent in my teens and early twenties cannot begin to compare with the agonizing soul-searching which afflicted De M. for almost his entire life.

The second reason why De M.’s poetry grabbed my attention so quickly is the fact that its homoeroticism is paederastic, speaking as it does of an adult man’s erotic attraction to adolescent boys. Here my response was not so much prompted by my own erotic and sexual preference, which has always tended much more to androphilia, as by the well over half-century of my intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic absorption in the literature of the ancient Greco-Roman world. This started in my high school years in Canada when I experienced the joy of my first encounters with the power and beauty of classical Latin poetry—encounters which were the first to shape my ambition to become a classicist. I must admit that my initial recognition of a fundamental and ineradicable part of myself in the homoerotic poetry and prose literature of the Romans, and later also of the ancient Greeks, was tinged with a great deal of naiveté: this glorious literature spoke so affirmatively of same-sex male eroticism that it served, above all, as an electrifying validation of myself: it was only much later, in fact well past my undergraduate years, that I began to have the first glimmers of realization of the distinct societal and cultural contexts in which male homosexuality was able to flourish in Greco-Roman Antiquity, and of the fact that this homosexuality was generally of the paederastic variety, and that indeed it was paederasty that was the socially normative form of homosexuality.

In the Greek-speaking world of the Classical Era, roughly the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, an
adolescent boy, even if freeborn, was regarded as an appropriate object of desire for an adult male. The latter, it should be noted, might himself be still a young man, in his early twenties, so that the age-difference between the two partners would not be all that great. In Athens, and probably in other communities as well, sexual relationships between slaves and boys were forbidden. In Rome, by contrast, even sexual overtures towards freeborn boys—or, for that matter, towards freeborn adult males-- violated both tradition and law and, under certain circumstances, might be severely punished. Not surprisingly, therefore, in the Roman world adult males found their main homoerotic and homosexual outlets in young male slaves, some of whom might even be coerced into prostitution.

The boy-love themed poetry of Greco-Roman Antiquity, especially that of the lyric and personal-confessional type, is nearly always focused on the adolescent boy’s physical beauty and desirability. A short poem by Pindar (first half of the fifth century BCE) illustrates this well: “You should gather the blossoms of life at the right time, my heart—in the prime of life, but the man who sees the rays of light flashing from the eyes of Theoxenos and is not seized by a storm of desire has a black heart or iron beaten on the anvil.” The second stanza elaborates on the disposition and character of the man who does not fall in love with a boy, and then gliding into the third stanza, says, “But I, by the grace of the goddess, when stung by the flame melt like the wax of the holy bees, whenever I look at the youthful vigour of the boy’s fresh limbs.” This poem is exceptional for its vivid and diverse imagery, but you’ll agree that the speaker’s gaze is directed exclusively at the boy’s physical beauty. In other paederastic poems, something of the boy’s behaviour and character may come into play: if he has an agreeable and compliant disposition, this, of course, is a bonus for the lover and for his estimation of the boy. If the boy is not at all interested or promiscuous, that becomes a black mark for him. Particularly distasteful is the boy who favours rich men; he is certain to become the target for invective and satire. The acme of the ancient Greek poetry of boy-love comes in the so-called Musa Puerilis (“The Boy-Muse”), the Latin
title of a second-century CE collection of boy-love poetry composed by Strato.

Some Greek and Roman poetry moves beyond these narrow erotic parameters. Thus, the Greek poet Theognis of the sixth century BCE assumes the role of mentor towards his beloved Cyrnus, imparting to his beloved his thoughts on contemporary society, where, as he sees it, aristocratic families of noble lineage are being increasingly displaced from their pre-eminence by the nouveaux-riches, who are most certainly lesser breeds in his eyes. In Rome five centuries later, Catullus addresses his beloved Juventius by his real name, the name of a well-established family, the Juventii, and not by a Greek pseudonym, as is the rule in all other Roman love-poetry: “O you who are the most tender bud of the Juventii, throughout all days, present, past, and future…”; (24) thus runs the beginning of a short poem addressed to the boy. Another very brief poem has, this time translated in its entirety, has, “If I could kiss your honeyed eyes, Juventius, forever, thousands and thousands of times, it would never be enough for me, even as a harvest of kisses thicker than fields of ripened grain. “ (4) Just over a generation later, in the early years of the reign of the emperor Augustus, Tibullus, in one of his most animated elegies (1.8), is so engaged with his beloved Marathus that, with an almost unique mixture of affection and irony, he mediates between his young friend and the latter’s newfound girlfriend, who is being cruel and unresponsive to the boy wooing her. The interpersonal dynamics here would not be out of place in a contemporary gay-themed novel. Such highpoints, though, where the poetry moves beyond generic situations, descriptions, and sentiments, all revolving ultimately on the physical desirability of the boy in the eyes of his older lover, are rare in Greek and Roman literature.

There is little in De M.’s poetry that suggests that its homoeroticism was nurtured by a deep and lasting immersion in ancient Greek culture. His family’s limited petit-bourgeois means did not permit him to attend the classics-oriented secondary school, the gymnasium, during his formative teenage years but only to receive the requisite training which qualified him to teach at the Lagere School (“Lower School”)
in Uithuizermeeden in the province of Groningen. On the other hand, his library was certainly extensive and impressive, consisting of no fewer than 3000 books. It was donated after his death to the Library of the Vrije Universiteit, but unfortunately, as mentioned by Werkman, was broken up there and not housed as a unified collection. Werkman gives only a cursory impression of the contents of De M.s library, so on this basis it is impossible to estimate how much of it consisted of translations of Greek and Roman literature and other material related to Greco-Roman Antiquity.

Some poems of De M., however, nearly all of them from his early writings, do draw on the Hellenic legacy of idealized boy-love, and two of these are, in my judgment, quite distinctive and original. We all know of the psychological complex of narcissism based on the story of the adolescent boy who became fixated on his own beauty, gazing endlessly at his reflection in a pool and thus gradually wasting away until the gods pitied him and turned him into a flower. In his poem “Narkissos” (192-3), De M. has cast the story into a first-person contemplative meditation by Narcissus himself, in which the boy does indeed dwell, in an exquisite detail, on every aspect of his physical beauty; here every resource of word and image at the command of a typically neo-romantic poetics is lovingly, narcissistically one might aptly say, pressed into service by the speaker. He sees himself as indeed “godgelijk” (like unto a god”), but then moves to an awareness of a deeper, supra-physical beauty, namely that of his soul: “En daar is niets, dat ik meer minnen moet / Dan u, mijn ziel, die eeuwig, godgelijk, / Zoo schoon verbeeldt uw onverbeeldbaar schoon...” (“And there is nothing that I must love more / than thee, my soul which, eternally and godlike, imagest in beauty thine unimaginable beauty...”). (192) In the godlike contemplation of his own soul, in which his life becomes, as he puts it, “een zaalge stond, / Een nooit voldronken teug van diep geluk...” (“a blessed moment, a never-emptied draught of deep bliss...”) (192), Narcissus willingly risks the envy and wrath of the gods. He foresees his rejection of the amorous advances of the nymph Echo and his transformation into a flower, and then finally and paradoxically
concludes that his beauty is given to him as both a joy and a punishment: “Is mij, onsterfelijk geschenk, mijn schoon, / Mijn vreugde en straf, verderfbre onsterfelijkheid.”(I have as an immortal gift my beauty, my joy and punishment, a perishable immortality.”) (193) Into this very original and perhaps even highly personal treatment of the Narcissus-myth, I am tempted to read a Neoplatonic-style allegory, perhaps of the ascent of the individual soul from the material world into the successive ontic realms of Soul, Intellect, and finally, the One; but whether such an allegory has been consciously or unconsciously worked into the poem by De M. must remain speculation.

The other poem drawing on Greek myth I wish to consider briefly is “Ganymedes” (170-179), a lengthy narrative poem of 256 lines composed in the mid-1910’s, perhaps around the same time as “Narkissos,” although it was not published until 1924, and then separately in a deluxe limited edition which required advance subscription. The story of Ganymede is also well known from Greek myth, art and literature: how the young Trojan prince was abducted by Zeus’ eagle and carried up to Mount Olympus, there to become the supreme god’s cupbearer. Just like “Narkissos,” this poem dwells lovingly, in luxuriant neoromantic detail, on the boy’s physical beauty, as is already promised in the opening line: “Zijn schoonheid had haar rijkste bloei bereikt.” (“His beauty had reached its richest bloom.”) (170) Zeus’ infatuation comes into drawn-out, sensuous focus: “Zeus zag, en peinsde aan de aanminnigheid / Der oogen en den zoeten prillen mond” (“Zeus saw, and was absorbed by the adorableness of the eyes and the sweet tender mouth...”). (170) Towards the end, however, in a highly original interpretation of the myth, the poem moves away from its fixation on erotic beauty and desire, and foregrounds a Zeus who is transformed by his love of Ganymede and lets go of the fickle, wrathful tyranny to which he had hitherto subjected the human race: no longer is he, “blind voor de in wijn gesmoorden nijd / Der zaalgen en voor de angst der stervers doof.” (“blind to the blessed gods’ envy smothered in wine, and deaf to the dread felt by mortals.”)) (176). Zeus’ conversion has come about, “al naar den wil des
knaaps, die liefelijk / Den norschen god bedwong...” (all in accord with the will of the lad who sweetly subdued the surly god...”). (177) In the last fifty lines or so of the poem, Ganymede addresses a direct appeal to Zeus from to be henceforth a kindlier, more temperate ruler of the universe and of humanity:

“Vader van alle goôn, en aller menschen, Zeus, duld het roemen van mijn onverstand. / En als uw hoongelach de stervers teistert, / Laat dan mijn drieste jongenspochen zijn / De zoete wraak die uw verheven toornen / Tempert tot mildgeworden ironie.” (“Father of all the gods, Zeus, suffer the fame of my ignorance. And when thy mocking laughter ravages mortal men, let then my reckless boyish boasting be the sweet revenge which tempers thy towering bursts of wrath to an irony become mild.”) (179) Into this poem, too—and I am again being speculative—I am tempted to read a Neoplatonic-style allegory.

We come now to the poems where, in my view, the distinctiveness of De M.’s poetic vision as a lover of boys reveals itself most strikingly. I would place these poems under the rubric of “glimpses into a boy’s life,” or perhaps more accurately, “meditations on a boy’s life,” although in some poems the focus is on a young man in his late teens or early twenties rather than an adolescent boy. The large majority come from collections of De M.’s poetry published before 1924, the year which, as we will see shortly, marks a sharp turning point in both his personal life and in his career and output as a poet. Paradoxically, these poems are hardly erotic or at least not overtly so. The absence of a blatant eroticism made it possible for De M. to dedicate some of these poems to his male friends, including his young friends Ekko Ubbens and Jaap Woltjer. There are many of them, well over a hundred. I have selected three for Charles to read now: their titles are, respectively, “De Jongen en het Wonder,” (The Boy and the Wonder,” 153), “De Jongen te Paard,” (“The Boy on a Horse,” 366), and “De Verjaardag” (“The Birthday,” 404).

(These poems were next read by Charles Hupperts and have been subsequently scanned from the Verzamelde Gedichten and put in the Appendix at the end of this paper.)
These three poems, I think you’ll agree, require little commentary on my part. They partake of deep empathy with the life of an adolescent boy, but they are also different from each other. “De Jongen and het Wonder” is the most ambitious in scope of the three as it directs itself to the period of tumultuous physical, emotional, and even spiritual growth in a boy’s life in which he awakens to his sexuality as well as to his capacity for erotic love. The eroticism is, typically of De M., kept subdued, but still powerfully expressive to the knowing reader. In the lines, “En hij, ontwakend tusschen ‘t kuische linen, / Beschaamd zijn wagen bergt zoo gloeiend heet...” (And, awakening between the chaste linens, he hides in shame his cheeks so glowing hot...”), I even detect a hint of the boy’s embarrassment over a nocturnal emission.

(In the discussion following my lecture, Charles Hupperts suggested that in the final stanza there may be a suggestion of an auto-eroticism, with the boy becoming erotically attracted, like the mythical Narcissus, to the mirror-image of himself: “Zag hij het wonder diep in donkre ogen, / Lag hand in hand tot onverbreekbren bond, / Stonden zij sprakeloos gebogen, / Reikte zijn mond naar jonge mond.” [“He saw the wonder deep in dark eyes, hand in hand rested in unbreakable bond, bent and speechless they both stood, his young mouth reaching towards young mouth.”]) (153)

The second, “De Jongen te Paard,” is a poem of vivid and empathetic observation, where, it is fair to say, the poet has, as it were, placed himself among “alle menschen” (“all the people”) (366) who, we are told in the last two lines, experience “iets gelukkigs” (“something like happiness”) (366) as they watch the boy galloping by. Finally, “De Verjaardag,” is an at once simple and delightful poem, an imaginative reconstruction of a boy’s feelings of deep contentment and pride as he enjoys, and later on lying in bed reflects on, the festivities of his birthday—perhaps his sixteenth?—where, for the first time,
he is accorded adult privileges such as drinking a glass of wine or smoking a cigarette. The poet may very well not have been present at the birthday party, but he reconstructs this milestone in a boy’s life with admirable psychological insight and a keen eye for vivid detail.

I have already referred to the year 1924 as marking a sharp turning point in De M.’s life—Werkman, in fact, entitles chapter 16, perhaps with some exaggeration, “De catastrophe.” (Werkman, 133). As you may know, in February of that year, while he was still teaching at Uithuizermeeden, De M. was arrested on a charge of committing an act of “ontucht” (“sexual indecency”) with “een minderjarige van hetzelfde geslacht” (“with a minor of the same sex” (Werkman, 149). Since the age of consent for homosexual acts had been raised in Dutch criminal law in 1911 to 21, gay men who were having any kind of sex with adolescent boys and young men had become very vulnerable. In April De M. was convicted and sentenced to a term of eight month in prison (with subtraction of the time he had already served while in detention), and he was also barred for three years from teaching (he never returned to teaching)—by current standards, especially those prevailing in the United States, not a particularly draconian sentence, I would observe.

We must neither underestimate nor overestimate the trauma de M. suffered. Yes, he became somewhat of a recluse, after he moved in the same year to a farm in Eerbeek in the Veluwe, there to receive his room and board from the widow Doom until his death in May 1939 at the age of 51. But, while rarely receiving guests, he continued through correspondence to keep up his contacts with numerous persons—his brother Carel, editors, publishers, friends and acquaintances inside and outside his literary circles—and even made friends with a few young men, Guus Koelman, Jaap Romijn, and Bram Corbijn van Willenswaard. The friendship with Bram was especially close, and both he and Jaap accompanied De M. on major trips inside and outside the country. I suspect that that was above all his poor health, of which he writes frequently in his correspondence—he had suffered from a serious
cardiac condition since his childhood--and which got worse over the years and which led to frequent physical breakdowns, that contributed De M.’s self-willed seclusion, his frail health aggravated, moreover, by a his highly nervous disposition.

It is clear that De M. never became a pariah within his own religious-cultural milieu or was in many way marginalized by it, even though the Gereformeerde Kerk in Uithuizermeeden had barred him from the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. After the trauma of 1924 he persisted in his conviction that his sexual orientation per se was not sinful or perverted; this belief went, of course, totally against the grain of Calvinist orthodoxy and indeed against contemporary Dutch attitudes and mores in general.

Interestingly, as Werkman points out, De M. never considered his boy-love as a species of sexuality had to be sharply demarcated from male homosexuality in general, and I suspect this was not untypical of the attitudes of his contemporaries as a whole.

Paradoxically, in many respects De M.’s religious faith became more Calvinist-orthodox, with its enormous stress on the wretched condition of the sinner before a just and unforgiving God, and the absolute need for Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross to pay the penalty God demanded for man’s sin and thus to restore the God-man relationship to its primordial wholeness. De M. would not hesitate to chide his religiously more liberal friends such as Wilma Vermaat for ignoring or blurring what he considered the central tenet of the Christian faith, namely Christ’s atonement for man’s sin, which secured man’s justification before God. His political views during the last fifteen years also became more conservative, as he aligned himself more explicitly with the ideology and policies of the Calvinist-confessional political party par excellence, the so-called Anti-Revolutionary Party, which played a dominant role in the coalition governments of the Netherlands during the interwar years.

The conflict in De M’s heart and mind between his boy-love and its absolute repudiation and
reprobation upheld both by Christian orthodoxy and by nearly all of his contemporaries enters some of
his personal poems—poems which give powerful expression to his emotional and spiritual turmoil, even
while his sexual predicament is left unsaid or at least blurred. However, in many poems, already from
his pre-1924 period, we can see that De M. never allowed himself to be defeated by his inner distress
and, in fact, overcame, at least to some extent, the bitter dichotomy of his faith and his sexual
orientation. The two poems that Charles Hupperts will now read, “Wat is er tusschen ons?” (“What is
there between us?” 230) and “Sledevaart” (“Sleigh Ride,” 541) show that De M. found the ultimate
justification of his love in sublimation and spiritualization. (These poems, too, were read by Charles
Hupperts and have been included in the aforementioned Appendix.)

The first of these poems dates from the same collection of poems which contains “Narkissos,” the date
of publication date being 1919; the second appeared in a collection which was published in 1924. I am
sure that you will have been struck by the fact that there is nothing specifically homoerotic about these
two poems. The love spoken of could just well have the love of a man for a woman, even in the second
poem if, without having the necessary context, we would have to assume that the driver of the sleigh
was a woman. Also striking is the use of the formal second-person pronoun, which one would not expect
when a speaker addresses an adolescent boy with whom he enjoys a close friendship. Are these two
modes suggestive of a strategy chosen by the poet to circumvent any possible censure by the publisher
or disapproval by the reader? Or is this manner of formality and restraint meant, above all, to convey
the deep respect De M. felt he owed to his beloved? The erotic is certainly there, but it is subdued,
indeed, in the final analysis, sublimated into a tranquil affection coloured by a deep spirituality.

Tellingly, in “Wat is er tusschen ons,” the speaker says he is content to receive the “genegenheden,”
which I would translate as “affections,” of his beloved. Love still imbued with carnality can never satisfy
man’s deepest longing for happiness: “En daar kan nooit een dieper liefde wezen, / Ziels heimwee naar
geluk zal nooit genezen / Door de verrukkingen van inner kozen...” (“And a deeper love cannot come of it, the soul’s longing for happiness will never find healing through the rapture of heartfelt caresses...“)

(230) It is thanks only to his beloved’s “genegenheden” that the lover find peace and feel an intimation of God’s presence: “En in den schemer, glanzend van uw lach, / Rijs ik uit uwen avond tot God’s dag.” (And in the twilight, from this your evening I rise up radiant with your smile into God’s day.”) (230)

(In the discussion following the lecture, Charles Hupperts noted the possible philosophical-religious implication behind the poetic image of the final two lines: “En zien de lichte ziel, die brandde and blonk, / Door ‘t overspringen van God’s helle vonk,” (“And seeing the lit-up soul aflame and radiant as God’s bright spark leapt across.”)] (230). I myself am inclined to view the image of “God’s spark” lighting up the human soul as ultimately Johannine-Christian in inspiration although embellished by De M.; cf., for instance, the opening verses of the first chapter of the Gospel of John, especially verses four and five.)

We learn from its superscript that the inspiration for “De Sledevaart” came from “Herinneringen aan Vrijdagmorgen, 28 Dec. 1923” (“Memories of Friday morning, December 28, 1923”) when, as Werkman tells us, De M. enjoyed a ride in a sleigh driven by Ekko Ubbens. On this occasion, riding with his beloved through the snowy, ethereal landscape, the poet experiences the stunning transformation of his love for Ekko into a sublime spirituality, an ecstatic awareness of the presence of God hovering over them: “Opeens doorvoer ‘t mij met een schok: / Dit is des Heeren heiligheid.” (Suddenly it passed through me with a shock: this is the Lord’s holiness.”) (542) The final stanza, which repeats the first, also deserves our special notice: “Dit is het laatst geluk geweest, / Dat u en mij op aard verbindt: / Een sledevaart in sneeuw and wind / En dit geluk gedenk ik ‘t meest. “ (This has been the last happiness which unites you and me on earth, a sleigh ride through snow and wind, and this happiness I remember most.”) (542) This occasion, slightly less than two months before his arrest, was indeed that of his last-
experienced happiness with Ekko, who became estranged from him for the remaining years of his life.

(As I added at the last moment in my presentation, it is worth noting, though, that in much later years, Ekko Ubbens became clearly reconciled to the memory of his friendship with De M., for a photo in Werkman (385) shows him on September 2nd 1987 unveiling the monument honouring De M. that was erected in Uithuizermeeden.)

The year 1924 marked a sharp turning point not only in De M.’s personal life but also in his career and output as a poet. After that year’s trauma, his love of boys, whether vaguely eroticized or completely spiritualized, loses its status as one of the dominant themes and preoccupations of his poetry. De M. also moves away from his earlier pervasively neoromantic poetics, with its lush imagery, it to us now dated diction (“remember “genegenheden”?), and its now obsolete poetic morphologies (remember “zaalgen” for “zaligen” and “goôn” for “goden”?), and moved closer to a style and manner which is often referred to in Dutch as “De Nieuwe Zakelijkheid”, or in English “The New Matter-of Factness” and which became increasingly dominant in Dutch poetry of the 1920’s and 30’s. I myself don’t think the fading away of the homoeroticism was a serious loss for his poetry. In his earlier poetry, he had pursued his experience as a lover of boys as far as he could within the limitations but also, I would maintain, to the unique strengths of his literary artistry and spiritual vision.

These unique strengths are thrown into sharp relief when we compare De M. with the so-called Uranians of the English-speaking world contemporary with him or preceding him by one or two generations. Some of these were also authors of prose, and the reputation of a few of them, like that of Oscar Wilde and John Symington Symonds, rests on their works of prose. For those of you who are not familiar with the Uranians, let me just offer a few explanatory sentences. Uranian comes from “Uranian Aphrodite,” as the goddess is designated by Pausanias, one of the speakers in Plato’s famous dialogue, *The Symposium*. She is the “Heavenly Aphrodite,” who in contrast to “Demotic (i.e. Common)
Aphrodite,” presides over and is the protector of same-sex erotic love, especially between adult males and adolescent boys. The Uranian poets of the Anglophone world, spread out as they are in time by three-quarters of a century, from the mid-1800’s to the first two or three decades of the last century, must not be thought of constituting a distinct school, such as the Dutch “Tachtigers” of the 1880’s and “Vijftigers” of the 1950’s. Their sole commonality is that in their poetry they gave voice to the love of boys. They include writers as radically different as Oscar Wilde and the devoutly Catholic Gerald Manley Hopkins. The vast majority of them are minor authors who would have been consigned to oblivion if had not been for the industry of a few anthologists. My knowledge of the Uranians was, until recently, based only on the excellent major article by Donald Mader published in 2005 and, before this, on bits and pieces I gleaned from various sources such as the 1970 anthology of Brian Reade, Sexual Heretics. Fortunately, although I still do not consider myself an expert like Don Mader on this subject, I have been able to profit a great deal from the recently published two-volume anthology of Michael Matthew Kaylor, Lad’s Love; with its generous selections, its lengthy introduction and helpful annotation, this is a major work of scholarship without which I would not have ventured on my comparison between De M. and the Uranians. Finally, the recently published biography by Benjamin W. Wise of the American Southern plantation-owner, William Alexander Percy, who wrote poetry until the mid-1920’s, has added immensely to my knowledge of the American Uranians, which are largely excluded from Kaylor’s anthology.

With all the reading I have done over the past few months, I feel confident now to say that while there is some affinity between De M. and the Uranians, it is only one of the most general nature. Perhaps in this connection it is relevant to mention that in his comments on De M.’s library, Werkman states that British authors were not well represented there. The affinity does show itself in the Hellenism of a few of De M.’s poems, two of which I discussed, although I still maintain that De M.’s visible indebtedness to
the Greek legacy is not deep-going and was certainly not long-lasting; and certainly there is no trace in him of the almost neo-pagan Hellenism affected by some of the Uranians. There is nothing even remotely comparable in the Uranians to the large body of poems of De M. that I have put under the rubric of “Glimpses into a Boy’s Life” or “Meditations on a Boy’s Life.” Even Gerald Manley Hopkins’s very fine poem, “The Bugler’s First Communion” is permeated by the poet’s own subjectivity and lacks the crystalline clarity of portraiture that characterizes a poem such as De M.’s “De Verjaardag.” Finally, the almost superhuman striving for sublimation and spirituality in his love of boys that stamps De M. has, in my judgment, nothing comparable in the Uranians. One will find it in the poem of Hopkins I just mentioned, but this is only one poem, and the body of Hopkins’s poetry which is distinctly homoerotic is very small. I find more of it in the strongly religiously coloured poetry of Digby Dolben, who died of drowning at the age of nineteen in 1868. However, as one would expect from Dolben’s age, his idealized boy or young man as embodied in the figure of Jesus or an angel, is his age-peer, and this makes any comparison with De M. or even with the Uranians with whom he is included in Kaylor’s anthology a very tenuous one.

I close this admittedly sketchy and impressionistic comparison of De M. with the Uranian poets with the observation that De M. probably found one of his greatest literary inspirations for his poetry of boy-love in the Romantic German poet August von Platen (1797-1835), whom he eulogizes in four of his finest sonnets (105, 121, 226, 465). This indebtedness is borne out by my thus far rather limited reading of Von Platen. This topic deserves to be explored separately at much greater length.

Another source of inspiration for De M. must have been the more recent German poet Stefan George (1868-1933). As mentioned by Werkman, his works formed a part of De M.’s library. George’s homoeroticism, too, as reflected in some of his poetry, mainly of the 1890’s and 1900’s, is of the paederastic variety, and its emotional catalyst was his infatuation with a series of teenage boys, notably
Maximilian Kronberger, Hugo Zernik, and Hugo von Hofmannsthal (the famous Austrian poet), and like De M. he chose to stay virtually celibate all his life. (As was pointed out in the post-lecture discussion, though, recent scholarship on George suggests that his sexual austerity was more of a pose than a reality.) But here is where the resemblance ends. The beloved boys who figure in his poetry have undergone a metamorphosis into a figures of mythopoeic and theophanic fantasy. This is true of the almost dream-like boy in the collection *Algabal* of 1892 which draws on the life and reign of the androgynous Roman boy-emperor Elagabalus of the early third century, and is also true of the beloved boy in a series poem entitled “Maximin” published in a 1907 collection; here the inspiration was the person of Max Kronberger, who had died tragically in 1904 just after he had turned 16. The first stanza of the “Maximin” sequence says it all: “Dem bist du kind; dem freund. / Ich she in dich den Gott ? Den schauernd ich erkannt ? Dem meine andact gilt.” (“To some you are a child, to others a friend, but I behold in you the God whom I hailed with shuddering awe, on whom my gaze must be fixed.”) (George, 279)

(In the post-lecture discussion, Charles Hupperts suggested that the possible influence of Plato on De M.’s ideal of sublimation and spiritualization of his boy-love, in both his life and his poetry, also deserves investigation, the influence mediated, of course, through translations, perhaps the canonical translations of the classicist and poet P.C. Boutens (1870-1943), who was gay and with whom De M. had some slight contact, which, however, never materialized into a close relationship. Such influence might be traced, for instance, through verbal echoes in De M. of Boutens’s translation of Plato’s *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. I remained convinced, though, that De M. was never a thoroughgoing Hellenist.)

I’ll conclude my paper with a question for you to consider perhaps more than anything else: As I began to use the word “sublimation,” I was reminded of the idea of “non-repressive sublimation” developed several decades ago by Herbert Marcuse in his landmark book *Eros and Civilization*. Can
we speak of De M.’s poetry of boy-love as the fruit of a “non-repressive sublimation” of that love?

Marcuse draws on iconic figures from Greek myth and literature such as Eros, Orpheus, and Narcissus in order to arrive at this concept, with a special indebtedness to Plato’s Symposium. De M., as I have argued, was not a Hellenist and all his life had to contend with the implacable morality of his fiercely Calvinist orthodoxy. Were the sacrifices that he had to make as a man and as a literary artist so great that one cannot, in good conscience, speak of “non-repressive sublimation” for him, with all the connotations of an achieved liberation and freedom which that phrase inevitably implies? I'll leave this question now for you to consider and possibly to debate. Of course, I will be open to any other questions and comments.

(The question I raised of the relevance of Marcuse’s idea of “non-repressive sublimation” to De M’s poetic oeuvre did not substantially enter the following discussion. My own thinking on this subject is that, given his religious convictions and the social and cultural environment in which he lived, and above all given his own unique personality and his precarious psychophysical health, De Mérode’s sublimation and spiritualization of his erotic attraction to adolescent boys could not help but be “repressive”; even so, he has bequeathed to posterity a uniquely memorable and beautiful legacy of poetry of boy-love.)

Note: This paper was presented at the University of Amsterdam on September 26, 2013, at the invitation of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. It was a much expanded and revised version of a paper I read at the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, on June 1, 2013. In the Dutch-language preface to my paper, I thanked Dr Gert Hekma of the above-mentioned Department for the invitation to give this paper and making the necessary arrangements. I also expressed my thanks to Dr Charles Hupperts of the Department of Classics for broaching the suggestion that I present this paper at the University of Amsterdam and for offering, for the benefit of my audience, to read in the course of the lecture the full text of five poems I discuss in my paper. With a few exceptions as indicated in the text, the page references are to the Verzamelde Gedichten. All the translations are my own, with the exception of Pindar’s Theoxenos poem, where I have used the excellent prose translation by Constantine A. Trypanis in the Penguin Book of Greek Verse (Penguins Books, 1971, p. 197).

References:


