**Contributor: Heilna du Plooy**

**Entry: Opperman, Diederik Johannes (1914-1985)**

Dirk Opperman is known as a poet whose poetry is deeply concerned with Africa as a physical and symbolic space. As a dominant poetic figure from the late 1940s until his death, he exerted great influence in the sphere of Afrikaans literature as advisor on new manuscripts for publishers and as editor of comprehensive, canonising collections of poetry. He also exerted great influence on young poets for whom he provided training in his so-called ‘literary laboratory’ in Stellenbosch.

Diederik Johannes Opperman was born in 1914 in the district of Dundee in the province now known as KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa where he was exposed to the rich cultural diversity of a region populated byAfrikaans, English, Zulu and Indian people. During his high school years he became interested in language and literature under the guidance of an inspired teacher. He studied at the Natal University College and in 1939 wrote a Master’s dissertation on literary criticism in Afrikaans. After teaching for a number of years in Natal and Johannesburg, he moved to Cape Town to work on the editorial staff of a popular magazine. From 1949 to 1959 he taught at the University of Cape Town and in 1960 became professor of Afrikaans and Dutch literature at the University of Stellenbosch.Apart from his poetry, for which he received many literary prizes, he was also very active in academic publishing, as editor of the influential journal *Standpunte*, as editor and compiler of various collections of poetry and as author of many literary essays, teaching guides and encyclopedias.

Opperman shifted the boundaries of Afrikaans poetry through his conscious interaction with the literary tradition and his focus on the thematic and philosophic implications of living in Africa and being bound to this continent. His poetry reflects a constant concern with the people, the animals, the plants, the rocks, the mountains and the history of South Africa. Through objectification and by projecting these concerns on figures through which the poet can think and speak, he transcended the local.He also had an awareness of the spiritual and metaphysical dimensions of all existing things. The tension between heaven and earth, good and bad, order and chaos is represented in the titles of almost all his volumes of poetry; for example, *Heilige beeste* (*Holy Creatures*, 1947), *Negester oor Nineve* (*Nine Star Constellation over Ninevah*, 1947), *Engel uit die klip* (*Angel from the Stone*, 1950) and *Blom en baaierd* (*Flower and Chaos,*1956).

All the volumes of poetry are exceptionally well-structured, as if they were conceived as complete ‘books’ of poetry, so that separate poems should also be read within the series, cycles and volumes in which they appear. Opperman’s contribution to Afrikaans poetry includes famous long poems such as *Joernaal van Jorik* (*Jorik’s Journal*, 1949), remarkable rewritings of famous Dutch literary texts which are then inserted into contemporary historical and cultural frameworks (the ‘Brandaan’series and ‘Kroniek van Kristien’). His verse dramas, *Periandrosvan Korinthe* (*Periandros of Corinth*, 1954) and *Vergelegen* (*Far-lying* (name of a famous homestead), 1956), excel in poetic quality as well as exhibit cultural and political relevance.

After a serious illness in 1976, which resulted in liver and kidney failure and during which he repeatedly went into a coma, Opperman recovered to write his masterpiece, *Komas uit ’n Bamboesstok* (*Comas from a Bamboo-stick*, 1979). This book of poetry is constructed like a mediaeval journal and consists of nine scrolls. In separate poems key moments of the poet’s life are represented so that the volume as a whole becomes a reconstruction of a life’s story. Once again Opperman hides behind masks and he does this by exploiting the narrative and metaphorical structure of classic texts such as Marco Polo’s travels and the journal of the seatraveller, Bontekoe. The poet speaks through these characters and uses historical events as metaphorical projections of personal experience so that the volume becomes an intertextual web of layered meanings. Opperman was working on a new volume of poetry called ***Sonklong oor Afrika* (*SunYouth over Africa*)** when he died in 1985.

**References and further reading:**

Kannemeyer, J.C. (1986) *D.J. Opperman: ’n Biografie,* Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau.

Kannemeyer, J.C. (1984) *Geskiedenis van die Afrikaanse Literatuur,* Cape Town: Academica.

Van Coller, H.P. (ed.) (1999) *Perspektief en Profiel: ’n Afrikaanse Literatuurgeskiedenis. Deel 2,* Pretoria: J.L. Van Schaik.

**List of works:**

*Heilige beeste* (1947)

*Negester oor Nineve* (1947)

*Joernaal van Jorik* (1949)

*Engel uit die klip* (1950)

*Periandros van Korinthe* (1954)

*Blom en baaierd* (1956)

*Vergelegen* (1956)

*Komas uit ’n Bamboesstok* (1979)