

Paper presented at the Conference Narrating Selves and Others: Feminist Theory in Practice. An Interdisciplinary Conference on Sociocultural Critique and (Auto)biography.  
Hosted by the University Antwerp, Centre for Women's Studies.  
Antwerp (Belgium), 29-11-1997.

## **Alice Nahon. Bound in hard cover**

### **Magda Michielsens**

#### **Life**

Alice Nahon (1896-1933), a Flemish poet, who -during her lifetime- had been very popular both in Flanders and the Netherlands, died at the age of 36 after many years of frailty. Her illness and suffering are at the centre stage of her biography. Her work was judged against the background of her suffering, while her life was viewed with her courage and tragic fate in the forefront. About two generations of women learned her poems by heart and cherished the image of the beautiful girlish woman.

Nahon, a lower middleclass girl born at the end of the nineteenth century, had proper education. She finished agricultural school in Overijse when she was about 17, after which she took up a nurse training in a big Antwerp hospital. It was very heavy (during the First World War) and her biographers mention the fact that she incurred bronchitis during the continuous and exhausting work in the damp basement of the hospital (Verstraete, 1983: 19). Shortly after, her lung problems were diagnosed as terminal tuberculosis. Within a short span of time this promising and independent girl changed into a pariah. It was 1914, Alice Nahon was 18 and she started a life marked by a painful label.

She visited several health resorts and sanatoria the following years. In 1917 she moved to a convalescent home in Tessenderlo and stayed there until 1922. This was no place for a frail young woman. As a matter of fact, it was an elderly home in which one ward was reserved for the terminally ill. The home was run by nuns and a harsh discipline prevailed. Nahon felt isolated, lost and especially not loved. She published her first poems from out of this sanatorium. She had no freedom, no future, no life and no hope. She lived in a small white temple of loneliness and self-preservation - that was the way she put it in her poems. The tone of her future work was set.

In 1920 - while she was still staying in the sanatorium - her first collection of poems was published: *Vondelingskens - Little Foundling* (with an archaic or dialect diminutive form). The readers adored her straight away. The following year a new collection was published: *Op zachte Vooizekens - On Sweet Tunes* (again a diminutive form and dialect-like). One reprint followed the

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other and the media paid a lot of attention to this pretty softly suffering girl. Due to her success and her popularity she gained a bit more freedom in the sanatorium.

In 1922 she was awarded the Antwerp province prize for literature; more prizes and awards followed. She started lecturing, reading her poetry to a live audience and was often photographed. She had clearly become a public figure and received a lot of attention from the media and the cultural world. At that time, each comment or review referred to her courage, purity and wisdom while facing death; she was always depicted as the softly suffering, frail but pretty girl.

Her letters show that she knew very well that her image had been created publicly. She played the game. She never objected to the way the public equated her real 'I' with the lyrical 'I' of her poems. In some of her letters she refers to her former dynamic and independent self and the contrast between this self and her new image. But such statements are exceptional; for the most part she conformed to her image.

Throughout the years 1922 and 1923 a charity action was carried out in order to collect money so as to pay Alice Nahon a trip to the South. Since Alice Nahon's health was held dear, the people were generous. It was a peculiar event, for different reasons. First and foremost, it was quite surprising that she needed the money. It is not clear whether she ever gained some financial benefits from her success. There are signs though that her father acted as her manager and that he had a keen eye for the benefits of such a collection. Material affairs were of no interest at all to Alice Nahon.

Her letters, biographies or other archived documents about her life do not tell anything about the way she handled the material aspects of her success. The second peculiar aspect is that she travelled to the South because of health reasons. Travelling through Europe was as much in keeping with the more adventurous side of her personality as with her sickliness. Ever since her first literary successes she had acquired a large circle of acquaintances within the cultural world. She knew a lot of artists, was well acquainted with the avant-garde circles and was loved by a lot of sophisticated artists. She had a personal life which was definitely not a reflection of her suffering, devout, quiet and (solely) god-loving lyrical self. The shortlist of lovers and supposed lovers was only revealed in the nineties. A semi- roaming journey suited these free women rather fine.

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Thirdly, something rather bizarre went on in relation to her tuberculosis diagnosis. A doctor in Switzerland told her that she did not have tuberculosis but chronic bronchitis. The most peculiar thing though was that she already knew. The general public did not know that she knew that she did not have tuberculosis. Nahon had kept this TB-image alive. The original 1914 diagnosis had already been corrected by a Brussels doctor (van den Brandt, 1996:31). As compared to her secret knowledge that she did not have TB, the Swiss doctor's verdict was surely no good news: chronic tuberculosis, while the Brussels doctor had promised her full recovery.

Her third collection, *Schaduw*, was published in 1928. Again it became a success. Nahon was knighted by king Albert I in 1930. Even though she was successful, she kept on wandering about during the last ten years of her life. She was restless, had no fixed abode, stayed with friends and acquaintances and tried to get a grip on her life now and then. From 1926 to 1930 she worked as a librarian in Mechelen and sometimes worked as a lady-companion. When the situation became even worse than the ailment she quit her job. Whether she had tuberculosis or not, she still died very young - exhausted, coughing and alone.

### **Work**

Alice Nahon's poetry is like a practical everyday philosophy. It is about the serenity and the importance of the small things in everyday life, it is about the love of god and the silent suffering because of unanswered love. It is about being courageous while facing misfortune and death. It is about silence, tranquillity, quietness, waiting, longing and flowers. This is, in a nutshell, the reason why she was adored by female readers in the period between 1920 and 1950 and why she was despised by post-war critics.

The poem which, even to date, has been known by heart, reads like a checklist of goodness: (this is a literal translation, not poetry)

It is good to look oneself in the heart  
just before going to sleep  
whether between dawn and evening  
I haven't hurt one single heart  
whether I haven't made some eyes cry

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whether I haven't put nostalgia on a face  
whether I have spoken words of caring  
for people craving for love

The same themes are distinguishable in a poem which was properly translated into English.

'My little deed...'  
My little deed, so simply good  
For me who leads a quiet life  
And find no great things on my way  
Be thou the silent joy I ask  
And my revenge - my only task  
My aim of every day  
Who just like I may never give  
the gift of every bride

Is our heart but poor a harbour  
Where no ship finds happy shore  
That we know our longing ardour  
Is enough to thank there fore

Can our song not be a shouting  
Let us after harvest home  
We together take our outing  
To find the lost ears we roam

and

'My youth'

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My youth is a call through the silence  
Sounds which no echo abide  
But can better resign  
When your hand is in mine  
And when I cannot sit by your side

My youth is like smouldering branches  
Of Mayfire quenched on the farms  
But that Bruges up high  
When I know you are nigh  
And when I can rest in your arms  
My youth is music of longing  
Wandering wild across the moor  
Though many people dear  
Give me a smile or a tear  
My heart remains lonely and poor

Especially in the *Shadow* volume god plays an important role. Only god can provide an escape route to the wandering and longing mind. Femininity and Catholicism - indeed, to her (female) readers Nahon incorporated the combination wonderfully.

During the Second World War some articles were published in the Flemish collaborating media, celebrating the ideal femininity of Alice Nahon. At that moment she had already been dead for several years, but her Flemish virgin image was appropriated and celebrated by extreme rightists. These appropriation mechanisms are still going on strong today. In 1983 on commemorating the 50th anniversary of her death, there was a kind of Alice Nahon revival. It was inspired by a wave of nostalgia for politically extreme right values. Nahon's own social position or political ideas had nothing to do with it. Dirk de Geest (1996) analysed how two female critics commemorated the 10th anniversary of Alice Nahon's death in Flemish national-socialist magazines during the German occupation of Belgium. These texts were part of a larger strategy to link up the fascist ideology with our 'own' cultural heritage. "How they carefully tried

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to set up a fruitful balance between on the one hand discontinuity - the knowledge of a radical breach with the decadent past - and on the other hand continuity - the connection to certain 'healthy' trends from the past -, is clearly shown by the way in which the literary canon and the own tradition were applied. It is quite striking how the artistic greatness of the past is highlighted in numerous literary-historical contributions". (De Geest, in van den Brandt, 1996:127). Nahon is favoured and presented as a literary figure with national character and her 'femininity' is seen as a healthy trend from the (pre-national-socialist) past. This new label will of course influence Nahon's post-war reception.

### **Feminist interest: Nahon and I**

In 1996, at the occasion of the 100th commemoration of Alice Nahon's birthday we published a book about her life, her work and its reception. 'We' are a group of Flemish and Dutch Women's Studies researchers or women with strong bonds with Women's Studies. The book had the following subtitle: *Can our song be a Song of Songs?*

I collaborated on this project in order to find out whether what we know at the present about the position of women and about the importance of writing and reading 'difference', would generate a new view on Nahon's life and work. Would I be prepared to see the Nahon phenomenon in a different light? By (re)reading Nahon's work I tried to position myself in relation to 'a femininity' which had been shown by women (amongst which, Nahon's poetry) and which had been so radically rejected by my teachers. It became quite a revealing undertaking.

The poetry of Alice Nahon does not belong to The Literature. I have always known that: I learned it at school and I have always memorised it. I was a good pupil. During our Dutch lessons at school I learned all about Culture. I learned to see the things which constitute part of our heritage and what should be left out. I learned the things which are of value.

I learned this at school - between 1956 and 1962. I learned that poetry had been made by Van de Woestijne and Elsschot and heard that Alice Nahon had just managed to produce *rhymes*. I was taught that she was too feminine, too sentimental, too romantic and too small to be Culture. I learned to shun her world. She belonged to the world of oversensitive mothers and romantic women. A world to be avoided if you wanted to become someone or to know someone. I did not

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hear her name very often. Some clear warnings were apparently seen as sufficient. To me Nahon seemed to belong to my mother's.

I learned it all with eagerness: maths, the Great Writers, the Roman war stories. I understood then, and I still understand. A breach with daily life, distance from binding feelings, resistance against absorbing sympathy is necessary in order to think clearly. Sic itur ad astra, my professor told me at the end of an oral examination. I had learned my lesson, but kept on asking myself why they wanted me to reach the stars.

I inherited my mother's volumes of Alice Nahon and kept them. I still have them all: original editions but not in a perfect state. They have turned yellow and have been read to pieces. Most of them have simple cream-coloured covers; two others have a hard greyspotted cover. They have been bound again. With as a result that I cannot see the original title of these 'Keurgedichten' which had been taken from the two following volumes: *Vondelingskens*, ninth edition and *Op zachte Vooizekens*, seventh edition. The date of publication has also been removed by the bookbinder. Even a limited edition of *Schaduw*, published in a larger format by the Nederlandse Boekhandel (1928) is bound in a sturdy harness. My mother received the volumes as a present from her fiancée - a much-appreciated present. The hard covers came twenty years later. They represented the unwanted intervention by the same man, my orderly father. My mother regarded the binding as larceny.

The first page of the selected poems carried a handwritten date and name; it was hers and the date is the date of her sixteenth birthday. Probably it was written later, as one of the many rituals to appropriate the poetry, to link it to her own life, memories and emotions. 12 May 1928 is written in the top left-hand corner, her maiden name is written in the right-hand corner. I am still most surprised by the fact that certain statements, verses and expressions have been carried along during a lifetime, while they were read as part of what now would be called a juvenile book. She was still a girl when she got engaged. Dr. Tazelaar's introduction to the life of Alice Nahon ends with the following words: 'Our literature has been enriched by this girl'. At that time Alice Nahon was already way past thirty, but the Flemish poetess was so ill, so simple-hearted and so moving that she was still seen as this poor child.

I have always known that my mother cherished Nahon's volumes and that she loved her poetry. When I had learned that Nahon was no real art, I was slightly ashamed of my mother's

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great adoration. I was not ashamed by the fact that she had only finished secondary school; that was typical of those years, that generation. But pseudo-culture seemed to me to be far more dangerous than no culture. Wrong tastes seemed to lead to wrong paths. But having no access to culture prevailed among the children around me. But that was changeable, that was what school was for. That is why we lived in the fifties: men resurrected the ruined buildings and all children could go to school. The mothers mothered. The war had been won.

Meanwhile I had found out how my mother dealt with Nahon's poems -intensively. Time-consuming, but there was no lack of time. Later, I found the copied lines in notebooks, diaries and on small scraps of paper. It was often difficult to trace the author. Sometimes it was definitely Nahon, copied because of reasons difficult to reconstruct. Maybe just in order to do it, to write them down, to taste them or learn them by heart. Just once, they are H  l  ne Swarth's. But sometimes I think they must have been her own attempts at poetry. Vague, modest and saddening. I am not touched by the contents of those verses, but rather by the old words and the longing.

Whatever my teachers thought of Nahon, my mother was definitely not the only one to be attached to her. I have found an eighteenth edition of *Op zachte Vooizekens* - 40 to 44,000 copies in 1942. The figures are known: 70,000 of *Vondelingskens*, 60,000 of *Op zachte Vooizekens*, 40,000 of *Schaduw* and of *Maart-April* were printed according to Erik Verstraete (1983: 8). And everyone still knows 'it's good to look into your own heart'.

The state the volumes were in allow me to infer what simple poetry must have meant to simple women. The worn volumes constituted a small package of C/culture which was really hers. That is the only thing. The volumes show me the way to feelings which I somehow knew at that time. A folder, a dried flower, an obituary card and one obituary letter tell me something about the moments when Nahon's poems must have helped.

The page of *Armo  * (VG, 113) has some dirty spots, because all these years some lilies-of-the-valley have stuck to it.

I'm so hungry for a song  
in this house of being lonely  
in which I haven't caught a glance



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telling me someone loves me

the clock is ticking melancholically  
and makes me monotonous and sick  
God! I long for deeper sounds  
I'm so hungry for music

Alas ... if I soothe myself  
with a flower or a prayer  
can you see my lips begging?  
I'm so hungry for a kiss

The life I have to love  
Life ... can you leave me like this  
without love, without hate?  
I'm so hungry for your glow

According to Nahon this poem referred to her experience at the sanatorium. The first stanza is quite euphonious and can be repeated at moments of alienation. I also connect these sentences with the way women felt as housewives at that time. It is not her own particular loneliness, nor Nahon's or my mother's. It is the institutionalisation of femininity. It is 'dit huis van eenzaam wezen' (this house of being lonely). 'Mother's little helpers' still had to be invented, but alienation was already present.

Alienation differs for men to women. There is alienation due to work routines and discipline. One does not know why or where to go to, but the wheels keep on turning. Alienation due to being dependent on surrounding people and the chill of their proximity. *Mensenogen* (VG, 169) was written in the interbellum period. But also after the war this poem supported the women who felt uncomfortable by the general inability to mourn, move or act.

I love eyes blessed by melancholy

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I love eyes that have cried  
or yearningly look forward due to a great lack  
or starrily stare because of grief

I love eyes which brightly and spontaneously  
want to go from great grief to happiness  
and tired of pondering in the nightly countryside  
will sparkle like windows where sunlight burns

But more divine are the eyes which, ready to cry  
sparkle and sing high beyond their suffering  
It are they who - on assuming the souls' grief -  
will laugh so as not to hurt the others

Nahon describes the romantic pangs of love, but also the stupidity of just having a love ideal to cling to.

I have loved love  
that is probably why it hasn't loved me (VG, 191)

Was this the thing my mother thought of when I tried to explain to her that marriage was dangerous to women and that monogamy was like being unfaithful to oneself? She had already known for years what could be dangerous to women. She did not need my lecture on Simone de Beauvoir to know that.

I dream my love happier  
(...)  
I dream my love stronger  
(...)  
dream my love wider

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(...) (VG, 209)

Who doesn't?

I dream my love stronger  
so that my final goal  
is not the mercy of a man  
and so that I can encompass  
with my woman's hands  
the world's misery.

With this poem Nahon's obituary card was left in my volume. To her it was just dreaming. Everything was lost for her because she had been told that she was suffering from a terminal disease. That is the way she kept on writing, until it was found to be the wrong diagnosis. A better diagnosis did not gain her a better health. I do not see why her TS-agony could have induced other feelings much different from her existential feelings. Even AIDS-artists do not live in another world than the healthy artists. They can see the world much more clearly as being more delineated, sharper and faster. Doctors and biographers have done Nahon wrong by attributing her state to tuberculosis.

My father's obituary letter is added to the following poem. I will never remove it.

Please, eyes, be quiet  
don't tell what I silently want  
since laughing through my sadness  
is a very beautiful lie  
Just do as if you were happy  
and laugh, laugh you both  
the nice laugh of children's eyes

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Please, my heart, sing again  
you haven't done it for a long while  
and singing is the escape to God  
for world weary people  
singer higher than this old grief  
sing more warmly than that tepid song  
of vain hope  
and vain wishes

Grief and liberation go hand in hand. It touches me. Naturally, because of the personal link. But of course, also because of all these women, one or two generations older than me who found solace in the idea that 'God must really like me' and who had to wait a long time before they could pick up their life as a widow.

I only heard the Nahon stories as late as the fifties. I could reconstruct a stroll through Antwerp from the deepest levels of my memories full of lieux de mémoires which have something to do with Nahon. But even when I was roaming the Antwerp streets as a child, Nahon had been reduced to nostalgia. Her real popularity had gone.

At school (luckily, liberal, co-educational, progressive, hectic, strict and Latin and maths as main subjects) I no longer had any ties with Nahon. Apart from this one image she had left me: roaming independently through Antwerp. At home I did not hear a lot about her poetry either. I can only recollect certain things about her vigour and her independency. My mother had lost me: I was 'studying'. Of the many points of Nahon's significance to her, were the fact that Nahon had not been trapped into marrying and that she was a poetess. A writer, an intellectual. Refined, smart, brace and independent. These were the only characteristics which still had some legitimate appeal to me. The only things she could still dare to tell me aloud. Of course she was entitled to tell me something different, but what can you tell someone when 'emancipation' and 'learning' are the new values.

One selects and Alice Nahon's story had enough aspects which indeed fitted very well into the girls' new world: being able to write, not being dependent on a breadwinner whom you

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had to obey, nobody binding you, verbalising thoughts and being understood, having a job. Even though all this demanded a lot of courage and made you lonely it was something to go for. Photos made by a street photographer on the major Antwerp avenues are perfect to show this kind of identification. That is the way it goes: just me on the road. Natural and graceful, spontaneously posed. Every day's courage.

I have not read Nahon's poetry for a while - of course not. I had become too rational to have something to do with poetry. I had become too emancipated to toy with diminutives or scatter flowers. I have nothing to do with religion, with catholic schools or priests and definitely nothing with the Flemish movement. I really do belong to another generation and ideologically speaking the gap cannot be bridged. And yet, I do have something with women and with popular culture. And eventually I had to read her in order to better understand women from the interbellum period and the first years after the war.

While I am now burying myself into Nahon, I am interviewing women who used to love Nahon's poetry. I can actually test out the knowledge I gained from the past by comparing it with the reading experience and perception of others. They list names of Flemish female authors whom I do not know or whom I have never heard of. Not canonized but marginalised. When I check their names and their work I am only too happy that the men and women who trained and educated me, have spared me this. I experience suffocation with retroactive effect as soon as I think that I would have had to read them. The training into obedience and the continuous encouragement 'to make the best out of it' are quite familiar to me as part of my knowledge of the history of feminism. Texts and their use clearly show - in every sentence, in every line - how the construction of femininity worked.

It's good to check your own heart  
just before going to sleep  
whether I - from dawn till evening -  
haven't hurt a single heart

Whether I haven't made eyes weep  
or made a person melancholic

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or whether I have told a word of love  
to loveless people.

It is too constructive to be against it. And yet, it has kept women into this hysterical position where wanting and not wanting, attraction and rejection, inclusion and seclusion have come together in their extremist forms.

Apparently, the writer Alice Nahon, the poor Flemish girl, the nice child, the suffering soul could handle the maturity of her own hysteria very well. My mother passed on her own filtered and thwarted feelings in relation to this poetry and presented it as an image of silent power in which the battle against embitterment and the resistance against disciplining were far more important than pangs of love or a bad health.

Can our song not be a Song of Songs  
leave us the grain after harvesting  
like the poor women gathering  
the grains which were lost (VG, 156)

To make the best out of it. To adapt. That is why our song cannot be a Song.

I try not to damage the dried yellow butterfly stuck to the Poem, called *Mist* from the 1942 edition of *Op zachte Vooizekens*, while doing my research.

I'm afraid that I might once become the same  
like this cloudy day  
a child that never protests  
but is not allowed to sing, ever (VG, 144)

### **Reception**

While collaborating on the research for this book, I got to understand Nahon's ambivalent position much better. It was not our ambition to update Nahon's work through a new reading and

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to introduce it as great Literature. Rereading her work and a new study, do not make her work less kitsch, her feelings less a number of variations on the same paradigm, her language less a simplified version of Guido Gezelle. In this book we have tried to show how popular culture worked in the twenties and the thirties and how in those days the construction and reproduction of women's images was applied in the media.

Our book attracted a lot of attention from both the popular and intellectual media. Nahon's reputation is still strong enough to attract a lot of attention. But the dividing lines have hardly moved at all. The popular media focused on the Nahon phenomenon, the allegation or possible repudiation of the allegation (did she have lovers?, maybe she wasn't that virtuous?, didn't she have TB, did she have any national-socialist inclinations or not?).

The progressive and intellectual media had the same venomous discussion again about what constitutes Culture and what not. The most striking thing was that the so-called enlightened, Cultural critics seemed to lack one elementary skill. They cannot read. The fact that our book was made by researchers from within the centre for women's studies, seemed to imply to most highbrow reviewers that we had wanted to upgrade Nahon's work and to rehabilitate as an early feminist. They read what they had expected to be there. Like all feminists we should be indignant about the lack of recognition of Nahon's work and we wish to restore this.

Throughout the whole process - setting up the project, the research, the editing, the reception - I have seen what I kind of battleground the construction of femininity is. Then and now. Nahon's life and work is a perfect archaeological site to serve this purpose.

Alice Nahon is taboo  
as an independent intellectual writer  
as a witness to bad taste  
as a very devout person  
as a hypocrite (the Flemish virgin would have had some lovers)  
as a TB patient  
as a con woman (because of her TB)  
as a person who kept women in their place  
as an agitator who charged against the things women had to endure

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One can write up a biographical story about Alice Nahon taking each point of view. A leftist intellectual who has decided that Nahon is just an example of bad taste, stupid Catholicism or female obedience will only be too glad to see her volumes on second-hand markets. They do not want to be interested in popular culture for women and their slightly discoloured icons. However, I think it is a small part of women's history, of a period to which women of today are still personally linked. It's about texts and facts and how to personally relate to these. It has nothing to do with rewriting the canon, but with learning to read along.

### **Literature**

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