

Lost dreams, nostalgia and the fear of life

Elias or the Struggle With the Nightingales

MAURICE GILLIAMS

‘Elias or the Struggle With the Nightingales’ can be read as an account of the months a twelve-year-old boy spends on a country estate with his parents, uncles, aunts and cousins. For the eponymous hero, the house in which they are gathered, called ‘the chateau’ throughout Gilliams’s book, is similar to the aquarium in which his eccentric aunt Henriette has imprisoned an ant colony: a closer examination of that little world reveals a universe in which each and every one is after each others’ blood. At the same time, however, this house seems like a bastion against the destruction and alienation of personal identity.

Every single line sparkles and shines

DE VOLKSKRANT

In a series of fascinating scenes, Gilliams evokes the vulnerable position of a boy growing up amongst older people in a world shaped by nostalgia and the fear of life. Elias perceives that world ‘in the lucidity of a dream’. The precision of observation and narrative evocation is what makes ‘Elias’ such a masterpiece. In the past the novel has often been compared to both Rilke’s ‘Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge’ and Alain Fournier’s ‘Le Grand Meaulnes’. Nowadays one might be more inclined to think of Danilo Kiš’s ‘Rani Yadi’.

His work is some of the most exquisite to be found in Dutch

HET VADERLAND



AUTHOR



Maurice Gilliams (1900-1982) spent most of his youth surrounded by older family members on a country estate, which later inspired him as a setting for his novels. The sizeable body of his works includes prose and poetry. Although Gilliams is familiar with the naturalism of his time, he demonstrates a greater affinity with romantic and symbolic authors, such as Rilke, Rimbaud and Baudelaire. The solitude cult with themes such as the dream, imagination and the inner experience is prominent in his work.

ORIGINAL TITLE Elias of het gevecht met de nachtegalen (1936, Meulenhoff, 115 pp. Latest edition by Polis, 2017)

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