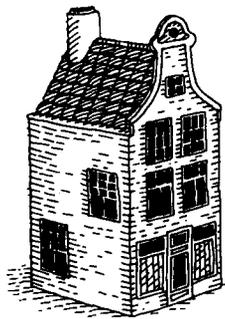

POINTS OF THE COMPASS

Faults of the Dutch

The Changing Debate—By HANS DAALDER & BART TROMP



OPINIONS ON a country which is rarely discussed in the world press are bound to be formed from a mélange of stereotypes—fleeting impressions based on infrequently reported incidents. Intellectuals may be aware of the prominent role Holland played in the early days of modern capitalism and colonial expansion, or grant the role of Dutch printing presses in the development of international intellectual exchange in the 17th century and the French Enlightenment, but that special position is long past. The Netherlands clearly became less prominent within Europe long before Europe itself began to decline on the world scene, and folkloristic images soon got the upper hand. What was this country, after all, but a miniature state, with small cities and tiny houses, a tidy man-made landscape, and a reputation for cleanliness? Such a nation could more easily be given credit for its ability to make cheese or sell tulips than for creating multinational companies like Philips, Shell, or Unilever. The long tradition of neutralism and interest in the Law of the Seas might make it a natural home for a Peace Palace, housing a not overly effective International Court of Justice, and after the horrors of 1940-45 (symbolised by the fate of Anne Frank) the country could develop into an active proponent of the new Europe or a faithful ally in NATO. But on the whole it seemed above all sedate, not to say stodgy—fittingly symbolised by the House of Orange which (they said) was surely the richest royal house in the world. . . .

In the last two decades, that image has changed. Troubles

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about the monarchy (over two marriages of royal princesses, including the present Queen, as well as the Prince Bernhard/Lockheed affair) reached the world press. So, in the mid-1960s, did the activities of *Provo*, which made Amsterdam a credible rival to Berkeley, California, as the cradle of counter-cultural movements. The city acquired a reputation as an easy centre for the street-wise trafficking and use of drugs, and in the 1980s, squatters' movements led to rioting on an unprecedented scale. Just as the announcement of the engagement of Beatrix as Crown Princess in 1965 and her marriage in 1966 had triggered spectacular manifestations of a new protest culture, so the official ceremonies at the time of her inauguration in 1980 were largely overshadowed by street fights between youngsters and the police. The Netherlands, home of many liberties, gained a reputation for libertinism and rebelliousness.

This was a trend confirmed by the findings of social research: the Dutch were singled out as showing great "value changes" in "libertine directions", and a growing tolerance for unconventional actions in both personal and political life. At the same time the Dutch Catholic Church, so it seemed, had undergone radical changes in doctrine and practice, causing a head-on collision with the Vatican (which has recently been using the weapon of episcopal appointment in an effort to tame its once favourite, and now rebellious daughter).

The Netherlands developed new stands on foreign issues: a clear *tiers-mondisme* in the UN, an ambiguous stance within NATO on the stationing of *Pershing* and Cruise missiles, and vast Peace Marches—followed recently by a massive petition against the stationing of missiles, organised by an Inter-Church Peace Council and a host of other political and social organisations. Walter Laqueur coined "Hollanditis" as the technical term for a disease which might prove infectious.¹

In such traditional and present-day images, however, there is substantial simplification and error. Other countries take little serious interest in Dutch developments, let alone studying them, and many of the Dutch are themselves hardly interested in changing that situation (for all the active social-science research carried out in and on the country). One reason is, perhaps, the rather large gap between Dutch

¹ Philip P. Everts, *Controversies at Home: Domestic Factors in the Foreign Policy of the Netherlands* (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1985). Walter Laqueur, "Hollanditis", *Commentary*, August 1981.

politics and the world of industry and commerce. About 10% of Dutch industry is export-oriented, and that 10% produces almost half of the national output. Dutch banks and commercial companies tend to go their own way in the world market without bothering much about domestic politics—provided they receive the necessary government backing in their economic and scientific transactions.

The Impact of History

DESPITE ITS SMALL SIZE, the Netherlands for long remained internally a highly localised and differentiated society. Born from a 16th-century revolt against an attempt to establish a strong central government, insistence on “privileges” and “liberties” stood at the cradle of the nation, and such demands often had a rebellious and particularist flavour. From the outset Dutch society had possessed strong bourgeois characteristics.

A true hereditary aristocracy was found in some less-developed parts of the country, but urban patricians were generally more prominent than noblemen. In the absence of a strong central government, political élites remained dispersed and divided. The Netherlands may have had a sustained period of oligarchical and traditional rule, but there was no such thing as a visible, public “upper class”. The poor were numerous, but a strong, self-conscious proletariat hardly existed. Eventually the country developed as a rather middle-class society, with many petty social distinctions and jealousies, but no clearly marked differences between different estates or classes.

Diversity also marked the religious make-up of the country. Foreign observers have often regarded the Netherlands as the Protestant country *par excellence*. Didn't it attain independence during the period of the 16th- and 17th-century religious wars, under Calvinist leadership? Such observers have generally not been aware that for a long time the Catholics remained an extremely large minority; in fact it never fell below one third of the new nation's population. Within the Dutch Protestant world there were not only a number of Non-Conformist groups (Mennonites, Remonstrants, Lutherans), but there was also considerable conflict over the precise nature of the relation between Church and State within the very much larger Dutch Reformed Church. Somewhat Erasmian and worldly outlooks were common among the city rulers; and stricter forms of Calvinism, far from attaining undivided power, never even saw their Dutch Reformed Church become the formal State church. Once the new, unitary state was established in 1795, other churches attained fully equal rights. If there was interference between Church and State in the

19th century, it was the State which sought to regulate the internal affairs of the Churches rather than the Dutch Reformed Church, or other Protestant or Catholic churches, dictating to secular rulers.

At the same time, there is little doubt that religious differences and claims were to provide the main 19th-century social cleavages in Dutch society. Paradoxically, processes of social modernisation in the Netherlands consisted for the most part in active mobilisation of both Calvinists and Catholics, who eventually built up a wide array of social organisations for all manner of activities. Jointly, they obtained in Parliament a clear political majority, which lasted for half a century, from the introduction of universal suffrage in 1917 until 1967. There were always Catholics and usually Calvinists in the Cabinet, but this was a coalition of separate religious minorities, rather than one dominant movement.

Many political commentators have fallen victim to a “French” (or “Italian”) perspective on the role of religion in European politics. They hold that the Churches were naturally on the side of Tradition if not Reaction. They overlook the alternative perspective of the mobilisation of religious groups in the Non-Conformist manner—as in England or in the counter-cultural movements of a Scandinavian Left. Dutch Calvinists and Catholics were on the whole rather “internally”-directed, and within either group the role of clergy and doctrine was strong. But their position in society was such that the formation of powerful, if separate, religion-based *familles spirituelles* also reflected social modernisation and democratisation. This reinforced older pluralist and particularist traditions in Dutch history. It also tied local believers and national decision-makers more closely together in strong social and political organisations.

The powerful position and social organisation of religious groups, the absence of strong class demarcations, and the rather late arrival of modern industrialisation in the Netherlands—all these put definite limits on the potential for Socialist growth. Agnostics and the less observant religious groups, which were most easily accessible to Socialist attitudes, remained a minority. That part of the population was internally divided, moreover, between all manner of liberal and socialist groups, and for a long time this condemned Dutch Socialists to somewhat of a ghetto position—Socialists-plus-Communists hardly ever acquired more than about a quarter of the national vote, and the Socialists were unable to join national coalition governments until just before World War II. They therefore also developed into a somewhat “introvert” social group, which with its plethora of social organisations became a secular “church for the churchless”, somewhat doctrinally oriented, and with little effective power.

As a result of the efforts of Calvinists, Catholics, and Socialists, Dutch society became highly organised but also clearly divided, leaving the once-dominant Liberal groups to proclaim “general” (in practice mainly secularist and middle-class) goals, while retaining only a numerically weak basis in the population. Among social scientists, the Dutch system of segmentation or subcultural fragmentation (dubbed *Verzuiling*, a society with three to four separate “pillars”) became a somewhat curious model,² posing the problem of

² This picture was reinforced by the circumstance that this was exactly the lead theme of the one influential book on Dutch politics to appear in English, Arend Lijphart's intelligent study on *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* (Berkeley, 1968, 2nd rev. ed., 1975).

how such a divided society could cohere and govern itself in relative peace.

The End of Social Segmentation

WHATEVER THE VALUE OF THE *Verzuiling* model (it has come in for extensive criticism as to its value both for contemporary understanding and for historical explanation), there is little doubt that it has begun to show many cracks and changes in the last decades.

Church attendance has dropped drastically in the Netherlands. For many walks of life, survey research reveals a massive gap between official doctrine and individual beliefs and practices. Many sectoral organisations have gone their separate ways, with little reference to the ideological groupings which originally fostered them. Elections were once a census of different ideological groups, with highly stable numerical relations between them, rather than a matter of clear choice. But traditional ties between voters and parties were broken, leading to massive electoral volatility and, at least initially, to a clear fragmentation of the party system. A number of new, smaller parties sprang up, and as a result the major Calvinist and Catholic parties saw their strength reduced in the elections of the early 1970s to less than one third of the vote (as against half, or more, in previous decades). The votes went to either Socialists or Liberals, or to the new parties which could be found both on the Left and on the Far Right, as well as nearer the centre of the political spectrum—*Democrats '66* being the best known international example of a radical reform movement posturing in a new pragmatic stance.

Why such changes, in what had seemed a rock-like political and social landscape?

ONE MAJOR explanation centres on the theological changes which had been taking place in the Churches since the 1930s.³ The influence of Karl Barth within different Protestant Churches, and the impact of new philosophical and theological currents within the Catholic Church (given official encouragement at the Second Vatican Council) led to a much more active concern with contemporary political and social issues, whether in confronting the dangers of “national-socialism” or atheistic Communism, seeking “new ways of social justice” within the Netherlands, or meeting “the misery of the Third World”. As the Churches came to be judged on their “relevance” to this-worldly, rather than other-worldly matters, they moved (sometimes willingly, often unwitting-

ly) nearer to political controversy. The hold of Churches and Church leaders on their followers was affected, eroding the bonds which tied the religious subcultures together.

Another factor was the nemesis of success. The building of specialised organisations gave different ideological groups secure access to the levers of power. Rights were *granted*; they no longer had to be fought over. Claims were settled by routine procedures, and ideological fervour was sapped. The very success of social emancipation weakened the role of the emancipationist organisations, for it replaced political content with bureaucratic regulation. Similarly, the *Verzuiling* process had led within each of the subcultures to the establishment of many specialised organisations for comparable social activities. Special interests began to forge links across the ideological dividing-lines. From looser forms of cooperation, new patterns of confederation, even amalgamation, could develop—de-emphasising earlier ideological origins and loosening the structures which earlier had tied different interests within the ideological family.

The system also underwent direct attack. Within the ideological family (and in society generally) new groups began to challenge existing patterns of authority—a theme which was reflected in modern Dutch literature. These groups rallied round the banner of “participatory democracy”, and practised many forms of “direct confrontation”. Existing doctrines were opposed by a congeries of values, often uncritically borrowed from the new international “Counter-Culture”. In thus challenging existing authority and institutional patterns and procedures, the “new democrats” represented a new emotional fervour. Frequently they behaved like a “new elect”, holding their new truths to be self-evident, without the need for much critical analysis (for all their self-professed reliance on imported *Kritische Theorie*).

The response was highly ambivalent. In recent generations, Dutch political and social leaders had rarely been exposed to “confrontational” politics, let alone to rebellion from within existing élite circles (including the universities⁴). Some leaders shied away; others handled confrontation ineptly; many wavered between permissive and repressive stances. To some extent the challenge could be accommodated in new particularist groups, but dissension soon manifested itself within the ranks of the neophytes. However, the quasi-revolutionary clamour became, to some extent, routinised. The mass media tended initially to over-report militant activities; but fatigue eventually set in, implying a decreasing rate of return for action in relation to effort. In recent years, it has become fashionable to speak of a “restoration” or a “new realism”, but these trendy terms were also put forward with little critical evaluation.

The Roles of the Mass Media

MASS MEDIA have always played a considerable part in Dutch society. Just as the Dutch Republic had its *libellen* (the numerous broadsheets of that period) so the processes of social modernisation, democratisation and mobilisation of different ideological tendencies was accompanied by the establishment of a large number of daily

³ For an interesting analysis in English, see Herman Bakvis, *Catholic Power in the Netherlands* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1981).

⁴ For a much more elaborate analysis see Hans Daalder, “The Netherlands: Universities between the ‘New Democracy’ and the ‘New Management’”, in Hans Daalder and Edward Shils (eds), *Universities, Politicians & Bureaucrats: Europe & the United States* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 173-232.

newspapers, weeklies, and monthlies, and by extensive pamphleteering. Leaders of the different communities often combined political roles with active journalism (including the editorships of major ideological newspapers). From such positions in the media they addressed not only their followers, but also one another.

But there was no absolute symmetry between the different sub-cultures. Liberal bourgeois interests were generally the first to get a strong footing, both in the larger daily newspapers of the major cities (which developed into national newspapers), and in many of the provincial centres. Calvinists, Catholics, and Socialists sought to build up their own daily newspapers in competition with these more “neutral” and “bourgeois” dailies. But they never attained the full strength in the world of the printed press that they achieved in many other sectors (politics, educational institutions, the umbrella organisations of interest groups, health care, etc.).

IN RADIO, and later in television, things were different. Radio arrived in the 1920s when the various ideological families had attained strongly entrenched positions in society and could see that the new medium was neatly carved up between them: Socialists (VARA) and the bourgeois-neutral AVRO broadcast on one station, and Calvinists (NCRV) and Catholics (KRO) alternated on a second (with some common services between them). Television arrived, much later, at a time when the idea of independent commercial television found numerous sympathisers; but the same system was followed.

Television time, like radio time, is allotted to specialised media associations on the basis of membership figures. Three thresholds must be crossed to reach what is called A-status (acquiring maximum time on the two television channels, on a proportional basis, once a limited number of common programmes have been scheduled). In addition to the four major ideology-based organisations, two more popularly oriented companies (TROS and Veronica) have climbed to A-status in recent years, while two smaller companies (VPRO and EO, representing respectively a more progressive and a fundamentalist Protestant public) have a lesser but secure place of their own. As television and radio time depend on the different broadcasting groups retaining adequate public support (usually counted by the number of persons subscribing to the particular Radio and TV guides published by each broadcasting organisation), there is considerable competition for public attention. This has had a paradoxical effect. Each company tends to cater to what is regarded as “popular taste” (calculated by the number of listeners or viewers, and the degree of appreciation expressed for any particular programme); and as their distinctive “personalities” are subdued they begin to resemble one another.

Has television been a neutral factor? Hardly. Whereas the press could still follow and reinforce ideological dividing lines, neither radio nor television was able to prevent audiences listening or seeing rival programmes, and ideological boundaries were rapidly penetrated. The different companies reacted increasingly to one another’s programmes,

and the pace of politics quickened as political leaders sought out (and were sought out by) the directors of radio and television commentaries, chat-shows, etc. Journalists on daily and weekly newspapers in turn reacted to the rapidly shifting monologues and dialogues of Radio and TV.

THE WHOLE HAS RESULTED IN a rarified political world. Prominent players in that world are the many TV and Radio journalists, initially of the 1960s, who, coming from younger generations, frequently had considerable sympathy for New Left causes, while within the Calvinist and Catholic TV and Radio networks many of the more articulate journalists tended to sympathise with “modernist” and activist strands within their respective Churches. Many of the news and political commentary programmes have therefore tended to be couched in highly critical tones. Loaded interviews, deemed to be “tough” journalism, are in fact an easy substitute for the much more arduous task of responsible in-depth investigative reporting.

All this has led to the development of what has been called a “political-media complex”—a world in which a small number of politicians and journalists tend to react to one another in public, on TV and Radio, and in the Press, but the public itself does not participate or even pay a great deal of attention. The older ties which linked particular political groups to specific media have largely been broken; the daily and weekly newspapers, especially, have been de-emphasising (in their search for commercial survival) long-standing links with traditional groups. Radio and television companies receive grants from the proceeds of a Listening-and-Viewing Tax, and income from regulated advertising; they therefore remain somewhat freer from the laws of the market.

The Nature of Intellectual Debate

IF WE FOCUS more directly on the role of intellectual debate in the Netherlands since the early 1960s, and the standard at which it is conducted, certain pervasive characteristics stand out.

There is, in the first place, a strong separation of “the two cultures”. Dutch science is traditionally of a high level (witness several Nobel laureates, and the continuing presence in the country of several of the world’s most prestigious industrial research laboratories). But the contribution of that scientific world to intellectual debate has been almost nil.

Then there is the heavy—and not always conscious—foundation of intellectual debate on religious and theological concepts. Calvinism was, after all, the dominant religion of the population, and Dutch Catholicism (and even Socialism) are heavily imbued with the Calvinist atmosphere. Debate is therefore normally carried on in strongly moralistic terms, and centres on sin, on motive and intention, and on guilt. This tendency was for a long time reinforced by a related characteristic: an emphasis on legalistic reasoning. Empirical questions (and questions of political and social theory) have largely been regarded as of secondary importance, in

comparison with the issue of who is, morally or legally, wrong; and who is right.

In the last twenty years this strand of thought has been replaced by something that might be called “vulgar-sociological thinking”, which tends to “explain” particular events not as discrete phenomena but as “symptoms” of more “fundamental” (or more important) currents. It thus, to a great extent, eliminates the idea of personal responsibility, and reinforces the traditional notions of moralistic reasoning by giving concepts like “guilt” and “sin” the stamp of “social science” and “objectivity”.

A third characteristic was until recently the segmentation of intellectual debate along political and religious lines, with very little debate between the different ideological groups. If there was a “free-floating intelligentsia”, it tended to concern itself mainly with literary issues; social and political subjects tended to be debated on their own merits only in so far as they made their way into works of literature.

The emergence of “secondary élites”, after the virtual disintegration of the traditional segmented subcultures in the 1960s, bringing new and younger generations into the current intellectual and political debate, also brought change in the form and tone of the debate. The new participants were generally recruited from backgrounds in journalism, the universities (especially the rapidly growing social science departments), and from the lower regions of the greatly expanding public sector. Many aspired to positions of power. The traditional ways of quiet cooptation by the ruling élites had been discredited in the 1960s; now the preferred manner of reaching the top was to confront the Establishment with criticism and demands, ostensibly on behalf of “the People” (or particularly worthy sections of it), under the banner of some ringing moral principle. Intellectual debate proliferated in several directions. It shifted from the small cultural journals—the “little magazines” which cared most for literary subjects—to the more glossy magazines, the weeklies, and even the daily newspapers, where attention focused not on artistic and literary topics, but on social and political themes. For some, intellectual debate became merely an instrument in power struggles. The packaging of intellectual discourse for the mass media did not differ from the “cultural revolutions” of other Western countries, such as France, Germany, Italy, or the USA. What made the Netherlands different was that the new political discourse was so readily accepted by society in general and in particular by its ruling circles.

The demise of the politics of segmentation caused an ideological vacuum. Since the fundamental characteristics of democracy were identified with the particular form of Dutch politics in another era, they were often discarded in tandem. Dutch culture has always had a strong cosmopolitan flavour. Most members of the intelligentsia read English, German and (to a diminishing extent) French, and nowhere else outside the English-speaking world are so many books in English sold. All this facilitated the borrowing of new political and social ideas, while “vulgar sociology”—combined with the

need to attract as much media attention as possible—added a particularly noisy and expressive dimension to the new debates.

Thus political debate in the 1960s and '70s came to be characterised by a strong emphasis on rhetoric and expressive slogans—in stark contrast with the sober nature of practical politicians. Over the years, the dissonance between rhetoric and actual policy has tended to cast a shadow over parliamentary policy, as demonstrated in a spectacular manner by the growth of the “Peace Movement”. Even so, it must be kept in mind that, despite the sometimes idiosyncratic reporting of foreign observers,⁵ and the opposition of about half the population to the stationing of Cruise missiles on Dutch soil, support for NATO has not changed in the last 30 years; it still stands at between 80% and 90% of the electorate.

On most political issues, however, the distance between the three major political parties (Social-Democrats, Christian-Democrats, and Liberals) is quite slight in comparison with many countries in Western Europe. One can interpret the strong emphasis on expressive symbols as an instrument for making clear distinctions between parties which in reality are not very far apart.

The Media & Intellectual Debate

THERE ARE important distinctions to be made when it comes to the electronic media as opposed to daily newspapers, weekly magazines, and other journals.

Due to the special nature of the Dutch broadcasting systems, fewer programmes can be considered a real contribution to political debate compared to those put out by radio and television stations in, for instance, the UK or the Bonn Republic.

Dutch newspapers offer a more favourable impression. Although the large-circulation daily newspapers take a conservative (or apolitical) stance, not catering in any way for political-cultural issues, the quality newspapers (notably *NRC-Handelsblad* and *De Volkskrant*) give a great deal of space to such matters. In the 1960s a variety of weekly newspapers took over the function of the earlier, small (monthly or bi-monthly), mainly literary journals which had traditionally provided the main platform for the intelligentsia. These weeklies (generally of a Left-wing character such as *Haagse Post*, *Vrij Nederland* or *De Groene*) became the main means of disseminating new intellectual trends among the broad audience of students, teachers, young professionals, political activists and the like.

In the 1960s and '70s there was a virtual absence of conservative or Right-wing voices in intellectual debate. Even the Liberals (who in the Dutch context stand at the conservative pole of the Party spectrum) offered no distinct intellectual opposition to the dominant forces of the Left, while the Christian-Democrats offered no resistance at all, often pleading their own “progressiveness”. There were—and are—hardly any intellectual circles or groupings on the Right which counter the leading ideas of the Left with analyses of their

⁵ An example, apart from Walter Laqueur's famous piece on “Hollanditis”, is the report on the Netherlands by Richard Reeves in the *International Herald Tribune* of 23 October 1985.

own. Perhaps as a result of this, the political debates of the 1960s and 1970s can best be described as providing a generally vague, if sometimes sharp, altercation between the more traditional Social-Democratic views and those of the various strands of the New Left.

In the Netherlands, the New Left, though intellectually rather shallow, was much more moderate than its counterparts in other countries. In general, New Left ideas served above all as an instrument in the struggle for power inside the Labour Party, in trade unions, universities, and other public institutions. The authorities of the time met its onslaught with considerable meekness.

OVER THE YEARS one can clearly discern the phenomenon of political and cultural issues becoming “sinking commodities”. Lively issues that had first been introduced and debated in academic circles were taken over in later years by other institutions and publics, and soon lost whatever intellectual or scientific originality they may have had. For example, ten years after Dutch academic circles had exhausted whatever useful ideas there were in the historical writings of American “Cold War revisionists” or the first generation of “Peace Researchers”, their views were taken over by the Dutch Churches as if they were theological dogma.

Things change. In the 1980s there has been a general retreat from interest in public causes. Literature (which in the Netherlands took the private domain as its favourite subject) has tended to replace politics and general culture as the

central topic of what passes for intellectual debate. Political debate, in daily and weekly newspapers, has become ossified. The participants are more and more self-appointed or official spokesmen for particular pressure groups, and on almost all issues, reactions have become predictable (as exemplified by the rapid proliferation of columnists who, though the column is a newish *genre* in Dutch cultural debate, are generally routine and superficial).

Does this tend to favour the return of the traditional cultural journals as the central platform for intellectual discourse? Most of them—notably those which emerged in the 1960s and '70s—now focus almost exclusively on literature. Only four journals can be said to deal with political and cultural subjects in general: *De Gids*; *Hollands Maandblad*; *Tirade*; and *Maatstaf*. Apart from *Tirade*, which is staunchly conservative—although its conservatism is that of disappointed Social-Democrats—these are all, more or less, moderately to the Left. In comparison with the quality papers (*NRC-Handelsblad* at about 180,000 circulation, and *De Volkskrant* at about 260,000), and the progressive weeklies—*Vrij Nederland* (about 100,000), *Haagse Post* (about 30,000), and *De Groene* (about 13,000)—their readership is very small indeed. The two biggest (*Maatstaf* and *De Gids*) have a circulation of approximately 3,000 subscribers.

CERTAINLY, DURING THE 1980s, the intellectual mood of the country has switched from what had been a hegemony of the Left to growing doubts. It is perhaps a telling comment on Dutch society that no ideological alternative to that dominance has been proposed. Nor is one likely to emerge.

In the Emporium

In the emporium a man is always sitting
waiting for his wife
to come out of the eternal changing-rooms.

Greyly he sits, brushed by cobwebs
of lace, swirled at by chiffon.
The satin legs of the assistant
scissor past his face.

He takes his rod to a quiet, riparian
stretch. There is nothing in the world
but a point of light.
When it moves, everything will break up
and his creature will come to him,
sinuous in the spindrift—
glinting in all colours of the rainbow—
electric under his hand,
beating at his slippery wrists.

His breath comes short:
his fingers itch to pick the wicked barb
from the pink mouth; but on the bank
a matronly figure materialises
revolving slowly, stiff with taffeta.

Connie Bensley