Marianne Philips – *The Confession*

224 pages, ca. 57.000 words, to be published in March 2019 by Cossee Publishers.

Rights sold: **German (Diogenes)**.

During two late night sessions Heleen, recently admitted as a patient to a mental institution, tells the night nurse her life story.
She spent her youth growing up in a working class household, that she watches steadily fill up with the arrival of nine other siblings. But her life is given a new perspective when she decides to spend the night in Hotel Royal with the well-situated Mr. Groenmans. With his good manners, his little velvet hat and his chic evening cloak, he clearly differs from other men she knows. Not long after, he finds her employment in the city as a sales person in an exclusive men's clothing store. Craving success, and wanting so badly to flee her restrictive background, she quickly climbs the social ladder. The reader visits dazzling luxury stores, enjoys scandalous affairs and a marriage, follows Heleen's tumultuous career and agonising love for a younger man.

Marianne Philips describes a life of riches and humiliation, directed by hatred as much as love. What starts out as the tale of an ambitious young woman, that all of a sudden has to be a mother to her youngest sibling, turns into a feverish tale of a woman who falls off her self-made pedestal. With *The confession* Marianne Philips shows her outstanding talent at building suspense, characterizing difficult relationships, and unearthing the details of psychological crisis. Until Heleen, driven by her yearning and passions, in a flurry of self-pity and jealousy, commits a horrific deed.

"*The confession* is a beautiful, impressive novel. [..] The book is very contemporary still and reads like denunciation of psychiatric care. It also questions the idea of a silent, impassive god, and to a certain extent the idea of a free will. Bit by bit Philips makes above all felt, how tension slowly grows, and disaster begins to loom large, while telling the story of Heleen, Lientje and Hannes." – *Literair Nederland*

"Philips proves herself to be an independent author with a very distinct style. [..] It's especially the menial role of women in the first half of the 20th century that she denounces brilliantly." – *Noord Hollands Dagblad*

"*The confession* is a very personal book. Philips has made credible, genuine literature out of her own experiences. Together with the original form, this makes this novel really stand out." – *Literatuurplein*

Marianne Philips (1886-1951), was a politician and writer, born into a prosperous Jewish family in Amsterdam. She was orphaned at a young age and had to take care of her stepsister and -brother by working in her stepfather's sewing workshop. She wasn't able to finish her education, but nonetheless remained studious and managed to work her way up quickly. In 1919, she was elected, as one of the first woman ever, as board member for the SDAP (Social Democratic Labor Party), heartily defending the position of worker's wives and their children. She started publishing in 1929 and wrote five books and several novella's, she also translated.

Cossee Publishers, Kerkstraat 361, 1017 HW Amsterdam, the Netherlands | For more information, please contact Stella Rieck: rieck@cossee.com or visit www.cossee.com/foreignrights. | To support Dutch literature beyond our borders, translation grants can be obtained through The Dutch Foundation For Literature. Visit www.letterenfonds.nl/en/grants for more information.

Sample translation © 2019, Emma Rault (emmarault@gmail.com)

p.19-20

The house was low in the shadow of the tower—it had just one story—but the windows were tall, all exactly the same height. The door was in the center, a broad green door with a gray wrought-iron grille, and when you walked into the wide hallway with the red tiles you could already tell there was a room on either side. Upstairs, of course, there were three rooms, with one tall, bright window in each.

When I finished kindergarten I was able to count the windows, I had just learned to count to five—anything above that began to get difficult.

I was five years old when my fourth sister was born; the following summer I went to grade school and I remember very clearly having to put six sticks in a row for the first time, which happened to be on the same day my little brother was born. He was the sixth child.

My mother had ten children in all; Lientje was the tenth, but she was a late surprise, and I was already seventeen when she was born. I still think to myself: there are nine of us, just like I told people as a child if they asked about that sort of thing—I only realize later: 'Lientje was there too'—then I'll say, 'Mother had ten children.'

I was the eldest; I watched the house fill up. A 'middle-class family home'—that's what the auction description said when it had to be sold, and that's exactly what it was. We ate chuck steak twice a week and sirloin on Sundays—sometimes the chuck steaks were just fat—but at school I said, 'We eat meat three times a week.'

(…)

p. 22-28

In reality, school and home *were* very important to me after all, I do remember that now. But it's as though I have to open up a closed compartment in my head—a compartment for home and school. A bricked-up compartment—I've broken it open now—how small and bothersome everything seems now. I have the same feeling now that would come over me whenever I was standing on the doormat in the hallway, when the door had closed between me and the street.

Of course inside, at home, everything was very real and important—it was the *only* thing that was

real, in the end—it was food and drink and the box-bed and being careful not to get a thrashing from Father. But it was terribly suffocating, because nothing could ever happen there except for what *did* happen, day-in, day-out: cups I had to dry, and always a little brother or sister needing a bottle, a sour smell rising up from their crib.

I fed all the younger children their bottles and changed their diapers; I was the eldest. I was always pushing a baby carriage up and down the street too, back and forth, on the sidewalk, from the pharmacy to the fabric store. When I was trudging along with that carriage it was as if the street took on the odor of the living room—the oily smell of a burner that's had a coffee pot gurgling away on it for hours.

How I detested that clunky wicker thing—I hated it, yes, *hated* it. Because it was never empty. Again and again it'd get a lick of paint; again and again mother would sew a new cover for the blanket—and I'd know that another flat, weak child would end up in there, another child to be pushed around until it became firm and difficult and began to climb onto the bench.

Once, when I got out of school, I found the carriage waiting on the red tiles in the hallway, fixed up yet again. I'd just been playing marbles; my hands were very dirty. I dug in my nails and made two long black scratches in the fresh white paint. I loved it—I laughed the whole time. Mother must have seen, she was just coming out of the sitting room, but she didn't give me a slap; she patted me on the head, and then I wasn't laughing anymore. That night in bed I cried so terribly—because nothing at home wanted to be any different than what it was; because the dirty dishes had to be washed every afternoon and the diapers rinsed out; and because the baby carriage had been fixed up again and no one could do anything about it forever being full.

Do you understand, Nurse? Of course you don't. You have such an elegant, refined face—you don't know about any of that. You must have become a nurse because you wanted to make yourself useful.

Don't you want to *try* to understand? All of it was just as I'm telling you—all of it really happened, it happened like this to me, to me personally.

I wanted to leave home from very young; I didn't want to be useful at all, no thought was further from my mind. Early in the morning, I'd wake up dreading the prospect of the new day so much that I'd grow queasy sitting in front of my breakfast, and had to resign myself to taking it with me for recess. And it got worse and worse—finally I firmly resolved to run away from home.

On one occasion, a Saturday afternoon, I walked until I was halfway down the dike, where the lighthouse is; I had a bar of chocolate in my pocket, and the thirty-four cents from my piggy bank; I thought that would buy enough stale rolls to last me a week. It was an inconceivable bliss, having the house behind my back and walking out into the world—I must have been happy for a

full half hour.

It's peculiar. Now that I'm thinking about all those sunken years, it's that one half-hour that still stands proud. It may have been the most delicious thing I ever experienced. I saw that the trees were staying put—they were laughing softly—but I knew they were watching me go. The clouds were drifting ahead of me very calmly to show me the way, and the summer wind was softly blowing onto my neck, as if it was walking behind me and I could feel its breath; I still remember clearly how mild the air was.

But when I saw the lighthouse getting closer I suddenly felt it was strange that I was walking there, like a gypsy without a home. I knew the lighthouse keeper because Father kept up the paintwork on the tower. Once I had been allowed to climb all the way to the top, where the keeper had showed me his lamps. They were still oil lamps then; they were a lot of work, but they looked very well taken care of; everything was polished to a shine up there. He was very well taken care of too—a former military man with a fat grey mustache and a broad, straight nose. It was only his hands that he couldn't take good care of because he had to do so much polishing and always had to refill the petroleum; that is also why I didn't shake his hand when I thanked him before leaving. But later I couldn't help thinking of him when the beams of light would pass over our house at night, regular as clockwork—I'd smile to myself, thinking: he's at his work now.

That afternoon, when I was running away from home, I wasn't thinking of him or the lighthouse at all; I was just walking along the dike because it's so wonderful being able to look out over both sides onto meadows full of red clover and cuckooflower. But all of a sudden I was already at the tower.

The lighthouse keeper was standing down there in the small flower garden, very tall and straight; he'd seen me and was beckoning. I had no choice but to come closer and shake his hand, and immediately I could smell the acrid tang of oil and polishing cream, which clings for such a long time to fingers that have been polishing until they have turned black.

When I smelled that, I also smelled Mother, going about her Saturday chores. I had avoided looking at Mother as I'd left, because I hadn't wanted her to notice what I was up to. But now I was reminded of how, on Saturday afternoons, she would polish the copper planter that was always in the window at home.

I walked another hundred steps, but then I had to sit down by the roadside. I closed my two hands around two full clumps of grass—that's a wonderful feeling, the sweet scent bleeding into your palms, the blades soft and damp. I plunged my head into the grass—have you ever done that, Nurse? There's nothing in the whole world that's lovelier—for a child.

But the polishing cream had its hold on me—already I was unable to smell the grass the way it was; I remembered that I was supposed to go home to peel the potatoes for Sunday. When I sat up again, the lighthouse had gone back to just being the end of a walk—the world no longer loomed behind it.

I ate my chocolate bar anyway; I can still see the balls of silver foil lying there in the grass when I turned around and walked back to the town.

You walk very differently on a dike that leads out to sea than you do on the same dike when it's just the way back to town, when you see all those square cubes and structures growing tall again. My feet were leaden when I walked in the shadow of the railway overpass. Later, when I came back to that spot, I always felt like that's where the town began again.

This was my only childhood adventure—I don't even understand now how it is that I remember it so clearly. I never tried to run away from home again; I knew once and for all that a child isn't capable of such a thing.

That night, when we were sitting down for porridge—buttermilk porridge with syrup—I was back among the others, same as ever; I quite liked it, I think, sitting in front of a white plate with a tin spoon set on a clean white tablecloth. But when the porridge was finished and I had to keep my eyes closed because Father was having a bath, I could smell the buttermilk—the sour stench of it—so strongly that I began to feel myself getting lightheaded.

I was looking into Father's eyes when I came to; I'll never forget. He surveyed me the way he'd survey a cabinet or a table in the workshop that needed some work—very carefully, very meticulously. Father had small, blue, attentive eyes. He told Mother that this kind of thing wasn't unusual for somebody of my age; then he emptied his plate and thanked her.

Father always ate in a very subdued manner—he ate everything he was given. He did, however, slurp very loudly; I hated that even then.

Mother took me to the insurance fund doctor, who said I was anemic; he gave me iron pills and told me to drink milk—in those days children were told to drink milk whenever something was wrong with them. At our school there was a whole row of milk bottles from children who were ailing. In the mornings and afternoons we'd take turns getting up from our desks to drink a cup; we'd walk on tiptoe so as not to disturb the class, with our hands clasped behind our backs—that was the proper way.

A big cup full of milk like that always felt unpleasant in your stomach; a shudder always passed through me when it was empty. It was a shame it didn't give me more color; that expensive milk was quite a sacrifice for Mother, but I stayed just as pale. Then she started giving me cod-liver oil at night too. But it took forever until I stopped tasting it in my mouth and was able to fall asleep.

Would you believe I could lay my head down on your little table right now, Nurse, and cry—cry all the tears I held in during my childhood? I'm not myself anymore, you see, I'm only that small child, and all I feel is the suffocating sadness which that small child carried inside her. It's nothing like the sadness of grown-ups, but it hurts so much that I could scream.

No, please, don't put down your sewing. Let me sit here for another minute, please—don't take me to bed, I won't scream, I promise, I was just saying that. I can hold in a fit of tears perfectly well.

Marianne Philips, De biecht ('The Confession')
Cossee, 2019 (1930)
211 pages
Translated by Emma Rault (emmarault@gmail.com)

I remember no real grievances from my time at school; nothing whatsoever happened there. It was just unpleasant; in school I always felt this pressure between my eyes and nose that made me yawn, which is why I'd often look away from the book or the blackboard, and then I'd get a telling-off. Just a regular telling-off; it was very rare for anyone to be sent to the corner or to the headmaster's office—it was very rare for anything to happen at all at that school. The same teacher accompanied us from the first grade all the way through to the last, and everything fit together just so. The textbooks went from part one to part six; there was less space between the blue lines in the composition books every year; the maps and the wall charts for all the classes stood waiting in the map cabinet, and the sixth grade got the last book in every series. I remember that well because I often had to stack up the textbooks and composition books in the cupboard for Sir; I had very nimble fingers, even then. The teacher was a tall, yellow man with brown teeth—at one point he had his two front teeth pulled and after that I would always find myself staring at the dark little hole where they had been.

So silly—why am I even telling you this?

What I remember best of all about the school is the green wooden fence on which the boys would draw stick figures. I drew on it too, at recess, but not with white chalk; I had a few nice sticks of red and blue chalk that I would use to draw ladies in gowns with sweeping trains.

The girls liked it very much when I did that, but they never looked for long, and it was nicer to draw when they weren't all standing there watching anyway.

Sometimes I would also lean my back against that fence to see the sky and feel the sun on me. Above the fence, against the sky, I would meet a whole row of wondrous figures; this was the cornice of the old provincial government building across from the school. It was wonderful—there was a muscular sea god in the center; he was blowing a horn and his cheeks were puffed out as if he was the very embodiment of the sea wind. Women were sitting and reclining all around him—real, naked, buxom women, their hair billowing around them, bearing aloft open seashells. I remember very well the sense of satisfaction I would feel when the gray clouds lit up behind that beautiful procession and everything became white against a blue sky. When I gazed for a long time, the rest of the world would fall away; I'd ride along on the chariot of waves behind the white dolphins—that was my place.

When recess was over, the bell would sound. It was a cracked old bell, it could not be rung very loudly, but sometimes it would give me such a jolt that I would feel sick with it. I can still hear the sound now, and I can still see my high, black lace-up boots, which would reappear before me against the bricks of the schoolyard.

You couldn't see the sky from inside the school; I only remember gray light through a high window that black flies would crawl around on.

When I was twelve, after the sixth grade, I left school. I never longed to learn more like other children in my class, and I never felt like I didn't know enough to get by in the world. The world could make use of me straight away.

Oh, but then I knew a great deal about the world, much more than is taught in school. It wasn't pleasant knowing so much, it meant having to think too much and that was only possible at night, in bed; there was never time during the rest of the day. I would lie in bed and think about everything to do with men and women, everything the girls had told me in school—the others would whisper about it in quiet corners, but I couldn't join in because they'd giggle too much; I thought that was very unbecoming even then. I would never giggle myself—it was all much too frightening and serious—at home, I'd often seen how mother got her children; because I was the eldest, I was always the one to be sent to the midwife. And I couldn't laugh about…everything else either—I buried the thoughts. It seemed dirty and silly to think about something like that; Father and Mother did not even kiss in front of us.

Cossee, 2019 (1930)
211 pages
Translated by Emma Rault (emmarault@gmail.com)

Only later, when I was already at the workshop, did I wonder about Father and Mother, who never kissed and yet had ten children. I was working as an assistant to a French seamstress, and she always ran her hand through her husband's hair when he got home.

Of course, now I know everything about the world—far too much, Nurse. I know so much I wish I were dead; what I know would kill anyone. I also know now that Father wasn't the kind of man who kissed—he had only married a woman for his own sake.

I don't know if Mother understood that she'd ended up in a living hell. I don't think so, though she did very much long for heaven. She had an old calendar frame—a Christian frame with angels on it in white gowns. I thought those white angels should have had white ribbons in their hair, but they were only holding green branches in their hands.

The frame had been empty for a long time when Mother finally took it out of the living room, but she tacked it to the wood paneling above the kitchen counter; it hung there for years, until it was all greasy. I would see her looking at it when she was peeling potatoes—she could do that very fast, almost blindly, and her eyes would be among the angels.

By the time I was twelve, Mother had nine children; she was forty-two years old. Father and Mother had married late because in their day it was considered a disgrace if you bought furniture on credit. I cannot remember my mother without gray hair.

I spent one year at home with Mother to learn how to take care of the household—Father wanted it that way. At first I thought it would be nicer than school because at home you got to spread the work out over the day as you wished. But it was much worse; at school I knew from the outset that the work never stopped, so I'd take my own time to look beyond the book. But at home, in the beginning, I'd often be walking around with this small happy feeling, thinking I might have some time to do something nice once the work was completed. I'd hurry, but then by the time I was finished, I'd find out there was always something else to be done, something that hadn't occurred to me but that *had* occurred to Mother.

Nurse, you know nothing of such things, rich people and posh people do not know such things, and nurses and all the people who know that they can rest once their work is done do not know of such things; they cannot know. It's such a terrible disappointment, when you are ready for the moment when you can do nothing, or go for a stroll, or talk to someone who is also doing nothing—and suddenly new work is put in front of you, work that you have to do because you know there is no other choice. Especially when you're only thirteen.

It was just awful, I remember this well; I was not entirely a child anymore. It was also during that time that I tried to poison myself. I ate all the matchheads from an entire box of matches because I thought the phosphor would kill me—I had learned in school that phosphor is poisonous. But it didn't work; our teacher must have exaggerated; I only got a stomachache.

If Father hadn't had his accident just then, I would probably have been kept at home forever to help Mother. However, while Father was painting the eaves of the Reformed Church the rope that his painting bench was hanging from snapped. It was quite a fall; the people that found him said it was a miracle that he was still alive, but he never worked again. Of course Mother got support from the Overseers of the Poor and from the Diaconia—the church welfare board—but when those gentlemen saw that I was helping around the house, they thought it would be better for me to bring in some extra income, which is how it came about that Mother sent me off to become that Frenchwoman's errand-girl.

Nurse, you have never considered yourself to be a bad person, I can tell; you have such a nice healthy complexion and your hair is so neatly parted. Perhaps you are the daughter of a pastor, who is

proud of you because you are doing good work in the world.

Would you be able to understand that in church, I prayed to God—*please don't let my Father get better*—because then I'd have to go back home?

See, now I've got your attention. Yes, Nurse, I was that bad. But I wasn't sorry. I'm still not sorry; at least I've been honest with God. If I'd prayed for him to heal Father, I would have been lying to Him. I didn't pity Father; he just had to lie still, that was all. I did not pity him; every day he got his steak or his pork chop that we'd all look at, but he'd never give us a bite. And the other parishioners would come to visit him—he'd been a church elder. Slowly but surely his worker's hands changed; they became white and fine, and he acquired a fine voice, too, that could talk about the Bible the way the pastor did—and then they said he'd been 'renewed in his faith' and the notary's wife brought over preserved cherries.

He died only four years ago—he was laid up for twenty-three years and the death announcement said that he bore his suffering gracefully.

But I tell you, Nurse, he didn't suffer, he enjoyed life; he ate at a leisurely pace and drank whatever he was brought; he said beautiful words to the people and knew that he was a changed man. And when he had been laid up for five years, Mother had to give birth again after all—to the tenth child. That was Lientje.

There's no need for you to count your stitches out loud; I know it doesn't make any difference to you whether I speak or remain silent. I'm talking for my own sake alone, because I want to make sure that I'm not crazy.

And yet your ears pricked up at something—or you wouldn't be counting your stitches.

Let's pick up where we left off. No, you needn't look at me. I do not pity you either. At six o'clock your shift will be over, and your sandwiches will be waiting for you in the nurses' lounge. And tomorrow morning when you're walking down the street in your nurses' uniform, people will respect you—not knowing that you are afraid to listen to the story of an unfortunate woman. For God's sake, why will you not answer me?

If only I told you everything about myself and the world—the way I would tell God if I knew that he had ears…

Oh, now your brow is furrowing—now you're listening. But God won't listen. I do not blame Him—it would be simply too much if he had to listen to the entire world. I wouldn't be capable of that either. You see, that's another thing they didn't teach me at school, but that I realized when I was lying in bed at night, unable to sleep because of the taste of the cod-liver oil. Ever since my school days I've known, conclusively and in perpetuity, that God does not listen.

In our class, Sir would start at nine o'clock with a prayer; each teacher in each class did the same. It was the same in all the Christian schools throughout the town. And Sir prayed so inelegantly—I knew that he was checking all the while whether our sponges and pens were already out and whether we were all saying the words. I was never able to pray along with the others because of the way his yellow teeth would chomp on that stale morning prayer.

Imagine if God had to pay attention to all those morning prayers! And to the boys counting the marbles in their trouser pockets throughout, or to the girls pinching each other. It would be terrible for God. And later, when I'd see the new summer hats of the rich ladies in church as they stood so tall and straight to sing, and when I went to the open-air meeting, at which everyone had to shout, I was very sure that God wasn't watching and that he kept his ears shut.

It's strange—an intimation like that never quite lets go of you again. Nurse, when I was burning with grief, I would lay prostrate in front of my bed and bury my head in the bedspread—the sort of

things one does in one's miserable state—but I was never again able to find the right words; I never knew if I was talking to someone who was listening.

They spoiled it for me, Nurse—it's terrible, together they spoiled it for each person individually. God no longer looks at people; he turns his gaze to the sky, where the stars wander.

Look up, Nurse, do you see that the stars have shifted between the bars? How blue the sky is on a summer's night, bluegreen like the water and the sky at the same time. Now the stars are floating on the sky like waterlilies on a park pond—if I were standing on the other side of the bars now, I'd hold up my hands and wait to see if a star might choose to fall into them.

Perhaps such a thing might be possible—should God wish to perform a miracle for me. It was under this kind of night sky that Hannes first put his hand on my breast…

God, Nurse, I know I'll end up talking to you about Hannes, I can feel the words coming—and I don't want to, Nurse—you can't listen to any of that, it belongs to me alone. I'll tell you everything else; I've already told you all those little things from childhood, and there are still many others left, but regardless, in the end there will be Hannes, come what may—after all, he was the end of everything.

Let's pick up where we left off, there's still a lot to come before we get to that point, maybe I'll be able to talk all night about everything else—and then when the day nurse comes at six, you still won't know about Hannes.

Now I've gotten to the start of everything else.

I set out into the world on my own; the house was behind me. I was thirteen years old and I know that I had big brown eyes; the whites of my eyes were bluish like porcelain, and my hair was black, very smooth and sleek. I wasn't quite as pale now and I'd begun to grow, but my legs and arms were still very slim and girlish. I knew exactly what I looked like because, in the Frenchwoman's workshop, I sat opposite a large mirror. It was a little mottled, but you could still see yourself clearly in the smooth glass. At home we only had one small, murky mirror next to the sink.

Sitting across from that large dressing mirror I must have sewn thousands of hooks and eyes onto all manner of different gowns, and every time I pulled another piece of cloth or a new color onto my lap, I'd hold it up for a moment to see how my own face looked against the frock. It was wonderful at first; for several years it remained my greatest joy to see my own eyes and my hair above all those elegant dresses. It was so adventurous: when that mirror-girl looked at me, I suddenly knew that my own faded dress was only a dream, and that the lush, soft fabrics that were spread over my lap were being set aside for me to wear later, once I'd woken up.

Whenever I was walking down the street carrying the big plywood box to deliver gowns, I wasn't sad at all that my own dress was old-fashioned and plain; I was thinking about what I'd be wearing later, when I could choose between all those beautiful clothes.

In those days, I'd often walk home in the afternoons with the maid who worked in the fishmonger's next to the workshop. We lived in the same part of town—it was a shabby little neighborhood, but after Father's accident Mother had had no choice but to move to a back street; Mother wasn't able to afford the mortgage and interest payments on that elegant middle-class home any longer.

We only knew each other from the street—we'd never been to each other's houses—but we knew perfectly well that neither of us was well off. And yet we told one another the most elaborate stories about the splendor we lived in. I don't think she believed me, and I definitely didn't believe her. But I told her there were three silk evening gowns in my wardrobe, a pink one and a pale-blue one and a white one; I described them to her and they became more ornate each time; then I contrived some

gilded dancing shoes to go with them, and a silk scarf—I enjoyed it so much. She told me about the dinners her mother cooked on Sunday afternoons; she'd eat salmon with mayonnaise, and oysters as a starter; later she'd drink champagne too.

The wonderful thing was not the listening; it was the telling. As she held up her fingers to indicate how fat the fried eel was, I designed a purple damask evening coat for myself.

When I turned fifteen, the older seamstresses in the workshop all got together and sewed a velvet frock for me, but it was only cotton velvet. I was dismayed when I found the present on my chair, that morning of my birthday—the velvet felt so coarse. I couldn't bring myself to thank them, but they didn't notice; they were so pleased with their surprise. Mother came over the next day to do so; whenever we'd been given something, Mother would always ask, "Did you say thank you?"

There was so much at home that we had to say thank you for; almost everything. The children were all dressed in fancy hand-me-downs; the beans and peas came from the church welfare organization and the rent was paid by the council. Mother earned a living for all of us because she knew how to say thank you.

I didn't—I wasn't able to say thank you. People said I was a sullen child. I almost never wore hand-me-downs either; usually there wasn't anything for me in the package, so every now and then Mother had to buy a piece of fabric for me at the market. She was very happy with that brown cotton-velvet dress.

But that dress made an adult of me on my fifteenth birthday.

The other seamstresses were so pleased with their gift; they wanted me to put it on straight away. They took off my faded blouse and skirt; then I saw myself in the mirror with my yellow cotton underwear—it was just me, there was no mirror-girl looking back.

Then they pulled the brown velvet dress over my head and suddenly I was dressed in poor people's clothes. I saw it happening—so often I'd seen my own face in that mirror above glimmering, smooth silk. But now, it was my own eyes looking back at me above the rough, dull cotton-velvet—in that moment I knew myself to be none other than myself, the eldest child from the household of a pauper. I also knew that I was supposed to show them how happy I was. And I couldn't; I wasn't happy; I knew once and for all that being poor is ugly.

AFTERWORD
Marianne Philips (1886–1951): A Peculiar Talent

From Activist to Author

In 1919, city council elections were held across the Netherlands. For the first time, women were not only able to vote, they could also be elected. As a member of the Social Democratic Workers' Party, Marianne Philips was a candidate for the city council in the town of Bussum, where she lived. Third on the ballot, she was elected and sworn in. Not long after, she gave birth to her third child. Balancing her duties as a council member with taking care of the infant turned out to be too much. After a year and a half, she found she had no option but to resign from her position.

My grandmother came from a wealthy middle-class family. She was born in a double-fronted

canal-side mansion on Amsterdam's Kloveniersburgwal, which was also home to her father's haberdashery store. But her life took a course of its own. Before her second birthday, Marianne's father died, and her mother's second husband was unable to keep up the successful family business. Gradually the family became more and more impoverished. When Marianne was fourteen, her mother died in childbirth. Her mother's death left her an orphan—and because she was a girl, she was now responsible for looking after the family. By this point they were living in a small working-class home in the Watergraafsmeer neighborhood: Marianne, her stepfather, her half-sister and the baby—her half-brother. Rather than going to high school, where she'd enrolled at the age of twelve, she took care of the household, looked after the children and sewed aprons in her stepfather's workshop to earn a living. Without an education or a future, she was lonely and desperately unhappy. But she was intelligent—a hard-working perfectionist who realized she would have to forge her own path. At the age of eighteen, she left the family, moving in with her married older sister Sara Philips in Haarlem. It was here that her future began. She tried to make up for the lost years of school through self-study.

Despite not having a diploma, she was hired in 1906 at the age of twenty, by the I.J. Asscher Company, the precursor to what is now known as the Royal Asscher Diamond Company. She'd become proficient in modern languages to a level that made working there possible. She joined the General Dutch Union of Trade and Office Workers, which had been co-founded by Sam Goudeket, whom she would later go on to marry. In 1909 she joined the Social Democratic Workers' Party, the SDAP. She had seen the poverty and lack of prospects of the working class first-hand and, as a modern working woman, she was determined to improve their fate. She became a staunch activist, giving speeches all over the country; in 1919, she was elected as one of the first female council members in the Netherlands. She went on to serve on the town council once again between 1927 and 1928.

In the spring of 1927, she gave a political speech in Maastricht. After the long train journey, she went for a stroll through the city, exploring the churches and squares. She walked back to her hotel to prepare her speech for the next day. She grabbed a pencil and a piece of paper and started scribbling. But what came out weren't notes about the major social issues of that time; she wrote nothing about the deplorable position of the poor—women and children in particular—no plea for world peace. As if propelled by an invisible force, she started writing about what fascinated her in the city, and what was on her mind. Just like that, at the age of 40, she discovered that she was also a writer.

After almost two decades of combining political activism with heading up a household with three growing children, her health began to decline. She thought she was dying. Her doctors, however, were convinced that her symptoms were not physiological but psychosomatic in nature, and recommended that she see a psychoanalyst. Between 1928 and 1931, she was in therapy with Dr. J.H. van der Hoop, an exceptional psychiatrist who applied both Freud and Jung's ideas in his treatment and was very interested in the creative process. She even joined him in Vienna for almost three months in 1931, when he traveled there for further professional training. With him she unraveled her patterns of psychological behavior, her unconscious thoughts and feelings such as fear, shame, guilt and insecurity. Van der Hoop encouraged her to write. It was in the course of this therapeutic process that both *The Miraculous Cure* (1929) and *The Confession* (1930) came about.

Both books take the form of a monologue. In *The Confession*, a patient who has been committed to a psychiatric hospital for observation tells her life story to the night nurse, who remains silent all the while. This life story culminates in the murder of her much younger sister. My grandmother knew full

well what it was like to spend long nights in a hospital bed. In 1913, following the birth of her eldest daughter—my mother—she'd spent six months in the Valerius Clinic, a psychiatric hospital in Amsterdam. After giving birth, she had developed postpartum psychosis. The book contains a number of other autobiographical elements: her years of poverty in Watergraafsmeer; the sewing workshop; the young woman with a menial job and a shabby rental room; the lavish environment of the Asscher offices—all mixed with fears, dreams, and fantasies.

Marianne Philips as a writer: a 'peculiar talent'

In 1930, it wasn't yet common for personal, complex psychological processes to be described in novels, especially not by women. *The Confession* was an unusual book that did not fit into the conventions and fashions of the time. The critics were divided: some hated the book; others appreciated the author's authenticity and sensitivity.

In the May 2, 1930 issue of the *Algemeen Handelsblad* newspaper, A.R.-V. (Annie Romein-Verschoor) writes that 'Marianne Philips has a strange tendency to present her story in a somewhat artificial autobiographical form.' She goes on to describe the limitations and pitfalls of a restrictive form like the monologue. She ends by saying: 'Although her next work will have to give us a better idea of the limits of her talents, Marianne Philips is definitely among those who have been "born with the caul." She has the peculiar second sight of those who have an innate interest in and understanding of people—the gift that is shared by all true storytellers, whether they be romantics, realists, classics or what have you. (…) Yes, I'd like to say it once again: Marianne Philips' book is a good book, and Marianne Philips is a novelist.'

An anonymous review that was published in the *Haagsche Courant* on April 20, 1931 was also positive. Covering both *The Miraculous Cure* and *The Confession*, it states: 'The merit of both of these novels, then, lies in the voice—the genuineness. They remain very psychologically subjective—no grand composition, no taut construction—but they do consistently demonstrate the deepest level of attention—and for that reason, they are very dear to me.'

In her own circles, however, the reactions were very different. The book was already mentioned—without any commentary, but with great anticipation—in late 1930 in *The Proletarian Woman, Magazine for Female Laborers and Laborer's Wives.* But on April 9, 1931, A.M. de Jong writes a scathing review in *The People, Daily Newspaper for the Workers' Party.* As successful as she was as an activist, her own party was unable to appreciate her writing.

But over time, that was to change. In 1935, H.G. Cannegieter publishes a ten-page article about the writer and her work so far in *The Socialist Guide, Monthly Magazine of the Social Democratic Workers' Party.* About *The Confession*, he writes: 'Boundless respect for the multiplicity and pluriformity of life,—this not changing, not judging, perhaps not even trying to understand,—being empty of self in order that one can be filled with empathy and love for everything else, look attentively at things and at each individual person, approach them cautiously and wonder what precious potential may be concealed within each of them,—this, I believe, is the secret behind the peculiar talent embodied by Marianne Philips.'

The poet Jan Greshoff, too, voiced his opinion following the publication of *Wedding in Europe.* In the January 19, 1935 issue of the *Arnhemse Courant* newspaper, he writes a long article both lauding and vehemently criticizing the writer: 'What we appreciate in this book [*The Confession*] above all is the

total honesty with which Marianne Philips presents not only her gifts, but also her flaws and shortcomings. It simply does not occur to her to pull the wool over our eyes. She is too bashful to brag, and yet sufficiently aware of the value of her character to find it important to show it to us as it is, with all its lacunae and rough edges. This gleeful shamelessness is an incontestable sign of the disposition of a true artist. (…) With *The Confession*, which contains several truly flawless passages, Marianne Philips has freed herself from the battalion of writing ladies and ascended steeply to a level far, far above the Boudier-Bakkers, Ammers-Küllers, Lokhorsts, IJssel de Scheppers and whatever other names they may have. However, that shouldn't lead one to think that *The Confession* is a flawless novel. The book contains the same flaws as *The Miraculous Cure*, i.e. an inability to achieve a harmonious structure and a painful lack of rhythm.'

Jan Greshoff and his colleagues took notice of *The Confession* because the book is different from conventional 'ladies' novels.' It has more depth to it; it is less preoccupied with the superficial aspects of women's lives. What he did not know—*could* not know—was that the book is part of Marianne Philips' psychotherapy, her wish to get to know herself, even if that meant a confrontation with the darkest sides of her soul.

Despite the ambivalence about her work among critics and readers, between 1929 and late 1940 she published six novels, several novellas and a translation of Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza.* In 1938 she was one of the three authors of that year's National Book Week gift, *Three Novellas*. She wrote far away from the clamor of her big house and her family in her 'writer's cottage' in one of the back streets of Bussum. No one else was allowed to come there. Writing was her intimate domain where she—who had become so reticent as a result of her past—could express herself freely, where she could immerse herself completely in her work and forget her obligations to her children or her family. Negative reviews got to her. She replied to positive reviews with a handwritten thank-you note. She remained reticent and modest on the one hand, but on the other she enjoyed moving in literary circles. As resolute as she was in her political activism, she felt deeply insecure about her position in Dutch letters, as a latecomer with no education.

She wrote her final novel, *The Labyrinth*, in a hurry. She had started before the Second World War broke out, and submitted the manuscript to the publisher in October 1940—right before the introduction of the 'declaration of Aryan descent' by the German occupying forces, which required people in certain kinds of jobs to submit a form stating whether or not they had Jewish ancestry. The book could still be published, but the persecution of the Jews had begun. It was a tough confrontation for someone like Marianne Philips, who—like so many Social Democrats—no longer had any Jewish ties. In July 1940, she was appointed a member of the Society of Dutch Literature, but a year later it became illegal for Jews to belong to any organization, and she was forced to cancel her membership. Marianne Philips survived the War, albeit incurably ill due to a neglected case of rheumatoid arthritis. Nevertheless, she continued to translate and write stories, including *The Beukenoot Case*, 1950's National Book Week gift. She died in 1951.

She would have been very proud to know that she was commemorated at the Society of Dutch Literature's annual general meeting on June 20, 1951: 'With Marianne Philips, our country lost a novelist who, without being among its greatest, was nonetheless highly captivating thanks to the warmth of her love for people and her sharp powers of observation, elements which we particularly appreciated in *Wedding in Europe* and *Henri from the Other Side*.' Both of these books are traditional novels, but for

fans of her work they were uninteresting, because they lacked the rawness and originality of *The Confession*. As *De Telegraaf*'s critic wrote in 1936, reviewing *Henri from the Other Side*: 'One reads this book, too, with above-average interest, but also with the fear that this author has chosen the well-beaten path and has vowed to become a Dutch novelist. Hopefully, it's not too late to ask her to remain Marianne Philips instead…'

In her time, my grandmother was an elusive, enigmatic author. Her work was reviled and admired in equal measure—sometimes by the same readers, depending on the book. Some felt that *The Confession*, in particular, was an unusual book, but were unable to put their finger on why. In contemporary literature, we are familiar with the plumbing of the depths of the soul, with all its terrors and complexities. In that sense, Marianne Philips was ahead of her time. This year, almost ninety years after the publication of the book, it is still modern and she is still an interesting writer.

Judith Belinfante
Amsterdam, January 2019