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SLAVIST WILLEM R. VERMEER (1947–2024)

Slavic linguistics has lost a major scholar with the departure of Dutch Slavist Willem R. Vermeer, who passed away after a long illness in September 2024. Willem's interests were not limited to Slavic linguistics, but he had a wide range of interests, including visual art, music, and literature. He was an accomplished and generous teacher and mentor, a devoted husband to Trille and father to their daughter, Wotienke, both gifted artists. He will be greatly missed in the Slavic field for erudition and insight.

I first became aware of Willem's name when I was studying South Slavic dialectology and Slavic word prosody at UCLA in 1986, during two intensive graduate seminars given by Academician Pavle Ivić, then a visiting Fulbright scholar. The term papers he had assigned sent me to the University Research Library, where I found Willem's publications and those of other Dutch Slavists, who were among the few scholars writing in English on South Slavic topics. More than that, I was astonished to learn that Willem and other Dutch Slavists had conducted dialectological fieldwork in Yugoslavia (and elsewhere), rather than limit their analyses to dialect data only from published sources. There had been a common understanding in those days that that sort of thing was reserved for native speakers, and it was the lot of outsiders like me to do our dialect work in the library. In consultation with Academician Ivić I discussed my hopes to work directly with dialect speakers and he suggested that the right interlocutor was Willem,¹ for whom he had great praise as both a scholar and fieldworker, who also had close familiarity with Slovene. (My local role model was Ronelle Alexander, who had collected field data for her dissertation

¹ From the beginning Willem insisted that I call him by his first name and that we dispense with academic titles. In the continuation of this text, I invoke his egalitarian spirit by referring to him this way.

on Torlak dialects, whom Professor Ivić also held in high regard, but Torlak presented a completely different set of structural problems.) By then Willem had published his 1982 study on development of the vowel system, which gave a thorough structural account of the dialectalization of Slovene, building on earlier work by Fran Ramovš and Jakob Rigler. A letter of introduction from Academician Ivić to Professor (then Universitair Docent in the Dutch system) Vermeer helped to open a lively correspondence between Willem and me, which was to begin a fruitful mentorship and later also friendship.

When my Fulbright Fellowship to conduct research in the former Yugoslavia came through in 1987, Willem invited me to stay at his house in Amsterdam on the way to my fieldwork destinations. That short visit was a formative experience for me. I benefitted from rich discussions about linguistic topics from Willem, who then also introduced me to the experienced Dutch Slavist-fieldworkers Janneke Kalsbeek and Peter Houtzagers, as well as Han Steenwijk, who was then preparing for his work on the dialect of Resia. Willem's daily routine included sifting through dialect description at the breakfast table; he had filled hundreds of handwritten notebooks with forms that awaited explanation and integration into his analyses. He also set me straight then about the place of dialectologists-cum-historical-comparativists in the firmament of Slavic linguistics: "We're the lunatic fringe." I had found my tribe.

Being a mere graduate student, I was honored and fortunate to have found such a generous and helpful mentor as Willem. He was more than just a caring and patient mentor, however. His writings proved to be a continued source of inspiration and insight in the decades hence.

Willem's many Slavic research interests ranged from South Slavic historical dialectology to the East Slavic Birchbark letters and many related topics in between. The main thrust of his work grew from the Dutch School of Slavic accentology, which dates back to Nicolaas van Wijk (1880–1942), and developed in the post-Stangian vein through the work of Carl Ebeling (1924–2017) and his PhD student Frederik Kortlandt (b. 1946), Willem being the latter's first PhD dissertator. Through this lineage Willem was an indirect heir to Jakobsonian linguistics (RJ having been Ebeling's mentor), and through dialogue to the Moscow Accentological School (MAS). From these influences one can discern leitmotifs in Willems work, such as close attention to systemic structure, concern with the spatial dynamics of innovations, and focus on prosodic phenomena in inflection. It is this latter point that may arguably have

been the foremost impetus for the Dutch School researchers to venture into the field, because full accented paradigms were then, and remain today, rare sightings in the published dialectological literature. Willem's work tackled both individual matters of detail, thorough analysis of single (village) dialect systems, as well as large, complex topics. His work was always insightful and original, characteristically providing a thoughtful critique of previous work, proceeding logically and with disciplined attention to the comparative method, along with pertinent exemplification.

A remarkable feature of Willem's writing, whether it was in the form of lengthy personal letters or substantive articles, was that they seamlessly bridged pedagogy and research. As his daughter Wotienke aptly put it, explaining why Willem had saved his correspondence with me, as well as with other scholars, "Writing with people has always been a way to order his thoughts." Among his publications in the "thinking-aloud" vein is his 64-page article critiquing two shorter articles, totaling 36 pages, by D. J. L. Johnson (Vermeer 1984). This extended discourse with Johnson is a brilliant exegesis on the insights afforded to the development of the (Balto-)Slavic accent system by Stang 1957 and its followers in Moscow, Amsterdam, and Leiden. As a graduate student trying to crack the code of the esoteric subfield of Slavic accentology, I spent many intensive weeks studying Willem's 1984 paper and thinking about not only how much more was to be mined from the existing descriptive literature, but how new field data could enrich the collective endeavor to comprehend the labyrinthine paths of accent developments in Slavic dialects.

Willem's close attention to detail could also illuminate and historically contextualize an existing work in such a way as to add considerable value to it, such as to Jedvaj's classic description of the Bednja kajkavian² dialect (Jedvaj 1956), as is the case with Vermeer 1979. This sophisticated and insightful work, more than three-fifths the length of Jedvaj's description, is among the earliest of Willem's publications, the first one on his vita being his 1975 essay on Susak čakavian, where he had himself conducted fieldwork. Today Jedvaj's description cannot be read responsibly without considering Willem's critical analysis of 1979.

² In most of Willem's English-language publications he does not capitalize the labels kajkavian, čakavian, and štokavian, and I follow this practice here for consistency. In my writing I prefer using capitals, Kajkavian, etc., in accord with the current mainstream English practice, which bestows quasi-ethnonym status on the labels and thus comports with native usage.

Not one to shy away from tackling the most complex developments in the Western South Slavic sphere, Willem undertook a thorough and original reanalysis of the development of Resian vowel systems, one of most perplexing in all of Slavic dialectology, pointing out shortcomings in previous analyses and providing a reasoned structural account in 11 synchronic cross-cuts, beginning with the first South Slavic innovations (Vermeer 1987).

Focus on detailed dialect systems did not prevent Willem from engaging with big-picture matters – far from it. A great insight, in my view, is contained in his article “The rise and fall of the kajkavian vowel system” (Vermeer 1983), which reconciles two broad tendencies to explain a peculiarity of kajkavian, i.e., the merger of the reflex of Proto-Slavic jat (*ě) with the reflex of the jers (*ь/ъ): first, the tendency towards the raising of Common Slavic *ě, a general Slavic trend; second, the tendency in Western South Slavic to merge the jers as a low vowel. In his 1983 article, Willem discusses possible scenarios for this merger, preferring the explanation that this merger occurred when both the jat reflex and the merged-jers reflex were low vowels and, subsequently, they raised together in accord with the general (i.e., all-Slavic) tendency toward raising the jat reflex (448–451). This possibility, hitherto not entertained in the literature, provides a natural explanation for how this “defective” — as Willem was fond of characterizing such developments — outcome fits in with contiguous dialects, without assuming a radical systemic divergence. Willem’s vision could extend also beyond the South Slavic data to “see through” to the substratum languages: in Vermeer 1989, in the *Gedenkschrift* for Jakob Rigler, he demonstrated that two types of Romance substratal vowel systems underlay Western South Slavic, a western one, characteristic of modern Friulian and Dalmatian (Vegliote), corresponding to Slovene and kajkavian; and an eastern one, characteristic of Romanian, corresponding to čakavian and štokavian.

One could continue for a long time describing the many virtues that shone in Willem’s writing, but I will limit myself to just one further observation. In a subfield that lends itself to dense, dry, even mathematics-like writing, Willem managed to imbue his prose with a storyteller’s gift for lively narrative. Take, for example, his treatise on the continuity of vowel-quantity oppositions from Proto-Indo-European to Slavic (Vermeer 1992a), in which he describes successive vowel systems through time. On pages 128–129 we come to a crescendo of pent-up tension: “In pretonic syllables the laryngealized vowels

had been eliminated at an earlier stage [...]. So in that position either quantity was redundant or the new timbre contrasts were. Something was bound to happen.” And then comes the reveal: “What happened was that length was lost.” I like to think that this narrative technique comes from one of Willem’s eclectic reading choices, which, included — when he was “feeling low,” he once confided — Raymond Chandler’s crime novels (set in my native Los Angeles, where my grandfather had been a police reporter in the 1920s). But I really don’t know.

In the early days of Willem’s mentorship in the mid-1980s, he advised me to steer clear of Yugoslav politics, emphasizing rightly that outsiders like us would inevitably miss nuances and could thus get ourselves into trouble. He departed from his own advice when the killing began, publishing on the Yugoslav wars both in the Dutch press (e.g., Vermeer 1991) and in academic journals. Regardless of the audience, his writing remained on a high scholarly level, building arguments with verifiable facts and with a view to illuminating the problems to a readership that would otherwise have trouble identifying — let alone differentiating — Croats, Serbs, Bosnians, Montenegrins, Macedonians, Slovenes, or Kosovar Albanians. The bewildered reader could hardly do better to consult Willem’s scholarly explainer on the Serbian-Albanian conflict than his article Vermeer 1992b, which in a mere 23 pages sorts out not just the conflict, ranging from the prehistoric Illyrians to Serbia in 1878 in the wake of the Congress of Berlin to the infamous SANU Memorandum of 1991.

My sadness on the loss of Willem to our field is compounded by a particular regret: I could not manage to convince him to write an entry for the *Encyclopedia of Slavic Languages and Linguistics* (Brill), which I have been editing since 2016. While he expressed that he was honored to have been invited, he felt uncomfortable having the last word on a topic. This attitude reflects the nature of his engagement with the field: he was continually in dialogue with its ideas and refining them through deep analysis and systematic discovery. For him, I believe, there was no obvious end point to inquiry. He was also a consummate perfectionist, as is evidenced by his annotations and corrections of errata to his earlier publications, republished in *samizdat* form — with scrupulous attention to original pagination — on the Academia.edu website (leidenuniv.academia.edu/WillemVermeer). Let this be an invitation to read and engage with Willem’s incandescent and important writings, which richly deserve to be studied by future scholars.

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