Laudatio Douwe Draaisma

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About a week ago, I witnessed a very touching scene on the television news. I'm sure several of you will have seen it too. The scene takes place somewhere in the English countryside. An elderly lady gets out of a cab. She has just returned from doing groceries in the city. The cab driver gives her a helping hand. The elderly lady is clearly glad to be back in the little village where she lives. And then suddenly, as she gets out of the car, she is confronted by a group of journalists. Several microphones are shoved under her nose, and three or four cameras zoom in on her. Did she hear the news? The old lady is doing her best to look nice on television – an old lady is still a lady, and cameras are cameras, even in the Englis h countryside. What news, she asks. Two hours ago she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Li terature in Oslo. No, she didn't know that, she replies. And what does she think of the news? The camera cannot but read her mind: what in earth can a woman of 88 years old think of that? Would they mind and please allow her to get her bag out the cab's trunk?

The following scene on the television news pictures the same old lady. She is sitting on the threshold of her cottage. She still does not look very impressed with what is happening around her. She is chewing on some thing, a bit of bread, maybe, from the shop in the big city or some grass from he r lovely cottage garden. She has already won several of those important prizes, she says, nearly all of them, and now this one. Not, mind you, that she's not happy about it or proud. She is, but still. If it is true that life speeds up as you get older, as the title of one of Douwe Draaisma's wonderful books

has it, then it must also be true that there is less time to make a fuss about a Nobel Prize once you're 88.

The same day, on the same television news, but twenty minutes earlier. The first headline of the day. Again, a group of journalists, their cameras are buzzing even louder, and microphones are being used as swords and daggers. Their target is much younger now, a young man of 19, who has just been told that a jury of his peers has found him guilty on the charge of two murders, committed with racist intentions. The verdict that he is given can hardly be called a prize: lifelo ng imprisonment. Does life also speed up if you get old in a prison cell? Or do these exceptional circumstances reverse the principle of mental acceleration that characterizes the life of the free human being?

Young Hans Van Themsche (he may come ba ck in Douwe Draaisma's talk later) and the elderly Doris Lessing. As we watch the television news through the eyes of Douwe Draaisma, we start wondering about things which the average viewer will not even think about thinking, things that have to do with the two basic mechanisms used by the human mind in order to feed or to protect itself otherwise, with or without success as the case may be: remembering and forgetting, storing things and erasing things, saving and deleting, to put it in computer jargon. The back cover of one of Draaisma's most recent book publications – the publication of the Van Foreest-lecture that he held on March 27th 2007 and that was entitled: "Wat we over vergeten moeten weten" (What we should remember about forgetti ng) – brings together a numbe r of his central questions in the following way: "Is it possible to forget something on purpose? Is there a special technique of forgetting, in the same way as t here is a 'mnemotechnics'? Is it possible to miss something that we've forgotten? Do peop le who forget a lot also gradually lose their identities?" With respect to the flip-side of forgetting, remembering, these questions

could be translated as follows: “Do our feelin gs of self-love increase together with the quality of our memories? And if so, does th at quality depend on the accuracy of the memory?” “Are memories of something that we had previously forgotten by definition less trustworthy than memories of events that we consider unforgettable, or even than the memories of those very events before we had forgotten them?” “Why do we remember things forwards and not backwards ? Put differently, why does a series of events that we remember always follow the chronological order of what happened?”

This last question (borrowed from the Britis h philosopher F.H. Bradley, the subject of the dissertation that the great poet T.S. E liot wrote) crops up in the book that I mentioned just earlier: *Why life speeds up as you get older. On the autobiographical memory*, the book from 2001 that gained Douwe Draaisma not only a good amount of renown in his native country but also arou nd the world. The book has been translated into several languages: German, Italian, Sp anish, Polish, Korean, Chinese, Hungarian and also in English. The English version, published by Cambridge University Press, was also shortlisted for the prestigious Aventis Prize for Science Books in 2005. The book gained Draaisma an impressive number of awards in the Netherlands as well, the Greshoffprijs, the Eureka!-prijs, the Jan Hanlo-prijs and the NIP-Van Gorcum-media-prijs, to name but those. For his research in the history of psychology Draaisma received the Heymans-prize of the Dutch Insititute for Psychology.

In the wake of the success of *Why life speeds up as you get older* – the beautiful book is now also for sale in a recorded version (a ‘luisterboek’ as it is said in Dutch) – Draaisma’s doctoral dissertation, *Metaphors of Memory*, originally published in 1995, appeared in several foreign countries. Dr aaisma wrote the dissertation (which he defended in 1993, supervised by Piet Vroon) as a research assistant of the NWO and

later as assistant professor at the Department of Psychology at Utrecht University. After the completion of his dissertation he moved to the University of Groningen, where he still works and where he is, currently, professor in the history of psychology.

In 2006, with the publication of *Ontregelde Geesten* (subtitle: *Ziektegeschiedenissen*) (*Disordered Minds. Medical Histories*), Draaisma completed his trilogy on the faculty of memory, one could say. In the latter book, Draaisma tells the story of thirteen scientists whose field was the human brain and who gave their names to one or other phenomenon in this field, a disease or a symptom mostly: Alois Alzheimer, James Parkinson and Hans Asperger are only three of the medical giants Draaisma writes about. Like its predecessors, Draaisma's most recent book[1] bears witness to its author's exceptional talent to treat a complex scientific matter (in which philosophical, historical and medical questions are simultaneously at stake) thoroughly without however disregarding his general readership. As you will shortly notice, ladies and gentlemen, Douwe Draaisma is the kind of scholar who has the rare gift of being able to simultaneously address and entertain an audience of specialists and of laymen.

I have mentioned the three titles of Draaisma's most prominent books, but in focusing on those, I have of course directed your attention away from Draaisma's other work. I have not talked about his numerous publications in such renowned periodicals as *Nature*, *History of the Human Sciences*, *Psychological Medecine* and the *Annals of Science*. I have also left out of the discussion his work as supervisor of several doctoral dissertations and in a considerable number of national and international research projects.

[1] At least, it was the most recent one at the moment Draaisma was awarded the Sarton-medal. In Spring 2008 his new *De heimweefabriek* (*Factory Nostalgia*) appeared, the first instalment of what will become a larger monograph on the idea of forgetting. The book became an instant success in the Netherlands.

Ladies and gentleman, earlier in this laudatio I already suggested that there is a way of looking at things through the eyes of Douwe Draaisma. Those eyes are the eyes of a scientist, sure, but they are also the eyes of the poet. In stating this for a fact, I am not suggesting that Draaisma actually writes poetry, in the literal sense of the word. But he does have a good feeling for matters poetical. This already helps to solve the mystery why this historian of psychology is introduced before you by a specialist of literary theory. My assertion that Draaisma has a good feeling for matters poetical hints at two things, actually. First, there can be no doubt that the quality of his writing equals that of our language's better essay-writers; second, in his analyses of the workings of the human mind Draaisma very frequently makes use of references to literary texts in which the phenomenon under scrutiny (the paradoxical dialectics between remembering and forgetting, say) is described supremely in his view. Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu,* the wonderful story by Borges on Funes, the tragical character that does not manage to forget anything, or Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*: these are all texts which Draaisma has written about and they give credit to his good taste. In writing about these texts, Draaisma is sure not to use literature as a mere example of what he wants to write about – the fictional stories are no t simply illustrations of the phenomenon at hand. Draaisma also has an eye for what makes literature literature and not just a case story for the psychologist.

Ladies and gentleman, a university such as ours that prides itself on its endorsement of the principles of diversity and plurality, is no doubt right to accommodate a diversity of scientific models and cultures, both in terms of the production and the distribution of the scientific results which it obtains. I take it to be a warm and welcome signal that the Scientific board of the Sarton Committee has decided to offer its important annual award to a scholar who unites in his work, and in his entire personality, C.P. Snow's

“two cultures” – not in the tragic, Faustian wa y, but in a highly productive one. By doing so, the Committee rightly celebrates a scholar who manages to combine in his writing practices that are too often thought to be mu tually exclusive: those of popular science and of its ‘harder’ version, those of the natural sciences and those of the human sciences, those of the international forum (with its peer-reviewed agenda, its specialist logic and its global language) and those of the national culture and the language in which he is most at home. The example may be hard to equal, but this surely does not make it a less inspiring one.