

## Giving Form to the Fleeting

A Response to Leonard Nolens' Diary

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[ PIET GERBRANDY ]

### Winterswijk, Sunday 29 November 2009

Poetry, love and alcoholism form a fatal triangle. It's a fact that they are related, but it's not that easy to pinpoint the source of their affinity or the reason they so often need each other. What does link them at any rate is the intoxication that takes hold unexpectedly and causes the helpless victim to wake afterwards with a hangover. This explains nothing. We should like to know what the essence of the rapture is and why it leads to physical and mental exhaustion. Are intoxication and hangover perhaps two ostensibly opposed manifestations of one and the same thing? Is what the poet, the beloved and the drinker are after not relief from the fundamental loneliness of the individual, escape, if only for an hour, from the feeling of being thrown into the world' (to use Heidegger's expression) that constitutes our deepest self? Language, lovemaking and alcohol offer the short-lived illusion that everything is interconnected, and this illusion presents itself as an aesthetic experience.

Does it follow from this that beauty is based on a misunderstanding? That would be a shame. But if it is true, let it be a fruitful misunderstanding. Two people who listen to Bach and each hear something different, but at the end are sure that they have shared something. In such a case mutual misunderstanding is not a problem, quite the reverse, it brings them together. Briefly, but even so.

'He put his mouth in the dust, to see if there were hope there.'

'We must take our solitude with us to others.'

### Amsterdam, Friday 4 December 2009

No literary genre is as impossible as the diary. The author tries to strike up a conversation with someone he doesn't know, whom he *cannot* know because it is a derivative of himself that only comes into existence when addressed. The written other is a construction, a living being that may be constructed from words, but is not therefore any less real than its creator, who after all only takes shape in the conversation. The person keeping a diary wants to become himself. Once you've started on the project you can't stop, on pain of disappearing. Stopping writing puts a full stop after your identity. There are, though, cases where that is the best decision. Sometimes you don't make much headway with an identity.

Leonard Nolens (1947-).  
Photo by David Samyn.



Becoming a person transports you from the frying pan into the fire, because it isolates you from the others. The very first word is a farewell.

‘Every poem is a farewell to the poem. Longing to be delivered from the longing for the poem.’

#### **Winterswijk, Thursday 10 December 2009**

The function of writing, which is giving permanence to speech, seems obvious. The I reaches out to the other, both come to light only in that reaching out, writing tries to bridge an emptiness that did not exist before that writing. Poems and novels are written with an eye to a readership of strangers. Of course a poet may maintain that he writes his work solely for himself, but that is never true. You look for a form to make universal what is strictly individual. You want to contribute to the misunderstanding, perhaps to keep the world turning. That is your job.

But does this also apply to the diary? If you write it purely for yourself you have no need to take account of anyone at all. You can moan about your ailments, the insufferableness of those closest to you and your inability to put anything sensible down on paper, and no one worries if you constantly repeat yourself. And is repetition not the core of every diary, since its purpose is to make you who you already were? Apart from the continual flogging of dead horses the diary need have no structure. Quite involuntarily time forms a stream of fragments, ice floes in a wintry river, which do not need to be ordered. Ordering would be a betrayal.

Isn't ordering *always* a betrayal?

#### **Amsterdam, Tuesday 15 December 2009**

If you are writing with a view to publication, merciless honesty is scarcely sustainable, unless you are prepared to sacrifice yourself and your loved ones to your narcissistic exhibitionism. Are you prepared to pay that price? Do you want to show how life really is and so make it more difficult than it already was? No, anyone who from the outset writes to reveal things to the outside world either exercises a certain degree of self-censorship, even if he is not aware of it, or knows that later publication will be preceded by a process of selection and editing. Unless it appears posthumously, the published diary is always a sophisticated form of fiction.

'Of all literary genres the diary is the least genre-like. But the danger exists that the initial impromptu character of these notes will turn into the everyday compulsiveness of other work (poetry, novel). I must go back to the poem or the novel to protect the diary from premeditated composition.'

Absence of composition as a formal principle.

#### **Winterswijk, Monday 21 December 2009**

How are you supposed to read a written life? The illusion of authenticity is created by phenomena that often make other texts unreadable: things not quite ripe for expression or incomplete, the duplications, the unbowdlerised obsessions, the general absence of direction that characterises everyday life. In addition there is the fact that what fills someone's daily life, a job for example, is often completely uninteresting to write about, with the result that it either does not find its way into the diary – which thereby loses authenticity – or reinforces its unreadability.

The only correct way to read someone else's book is to take as much time over reading as the writer needed to write it. The result is that you begin to merge with the writer. In order to understand him you have to repeat his life. That is quite simply impossible in a compressed form.

But perhaps you don't want to understand the writer. Perhaps you just want to use his work as a mirror.

### **Winterswijk, Friday 25 December 2009**

In these past weeks, during which I've been reading the diaries of Leonard Nolens, I have felt drawn into a conversation. The work covers a period of almost thirty years, and at each date I try to remember what I was doing on that day, who I was in 1979, in 1992, in 2007. I slide my life across that of Nolens or vice versa, and realise that I *have to* write back. This diary is unreadable, like all diaries, since it provokes a response, since you want to put your own passage alongside every passage, your own aphorism alongside every aphorism. The reading is constantly interrupted because you realise that you are writing along with, or rather in opposition to, the author. 'Unreadable' is the wrong word. This is the most perfect form of reading. But to finish this book I shall need thirty years. I don't know whether I will be granted that many years. Or whether I want to fill them in that way.

'I'm a navel-gazer. But my navel is huge.'

In his diary Nolens, who – as he himself never tires of stressing – is a great poet, constructs an alter ego with which he is infatuated, although it repels him in equal measure. With unblinking frankness and an eye for the telling detail he imparts to me his dramatic union with Leen, his occasional disgusting drinking binges and the despair and triumph that the writing of poems entails, systematically asking himself what role he can play in the world as a poet. With panache (that is, authentically, because the emotions and gestures, as required by the stage, are enlarged), he performs the parts assigned to him of lover, drinker and poet.

'Every *I* is a construction, that's true, but one made by someone, by a human being of flesh and blood. Every *I* is a construction, that's true, and for that very reason that *I* is not a fiction. It has been worked on. It has become a reality. And if that weren't the case, no one else would be able to recognise themselves in it.'

### **Winterswijk, Wednesday 30 December 2009**

Perhaps Nolens' love life is no more exceptional than that of most of us, perhaps his addiction reflects the battles we all have to fight to stay afloat, but it is difficult to argue that his work as a poet is an occupation like any other. With Nolens it is a matter of all or nothing. A poem for which you haven't put your life in the balance will find no favour with him. Probably that is the only way to deal with poetry. Poetry that is not the product of blood sweat and tears has no right to exist.

Yet it is not Nolens' work as a poet that makes this diary a work of vital importance. The most important theme is the writing of the books themselves, writing to maintain the dialogue with oneself, writing as an existential act. This diary is to a large extent about itself. That sounds like incestuous fiddling, and deadly dull, but since for the *persona* Nolens living and writing coincide, it is neither. Writing oneself is a precondition to getting through the day. The diary can be read as an extended poem. What he presents here in the form of a well-nigh end-

less series of fragments does not differ essentially from what his poetry does in highly stylised form: give meaning to being thrown into the world.

'I believe [...] in the greatest possible concordance between my life and my writing, that is, I try not to lie. The poem that I write must have the value of a cheque, covered by what my life has in the bank. A poorly placed comma is a breathing problem; a wrong or redundant adjective implies that there's something wrong with my life.'

Nolens is style itself, and it goes without saying that the diary is also highly stylised. However modest or even mundane some observations are, every sentence is well-formed. Anyone who has ever seen Nolens' handwriting realises that for this poet every stroke of the pen is an aesthetic act, with the straining after beauty interpretable as a moral duty. Every sentence is an ethical statement. It follows that the interweaving of ethics and aesthetics, morality and prosody is a prominent leitmotif in the diary.

'If in 1998 the I no longer exists, then you must make it. Only that newly-made I can save you. Formal innovation and ethical principles always go hand in hand. The innovation you are after in your poems is a rehabilitation of the individual. And paradoxically that insight corresponds with the wonderful saying of Roland Barthes: 'Literature is the Utopia of language.'

### **Winterswijk, Saturday 2 January 2010**

Nolens likes quoting frequently and at length from his extensive reading, which – as was perhaps obvious – includes besides poetry a great deal of life writing. The philosophical notes of Marcus Aurelius, the (fictional) letters of Seneca, the confessions of Rousseau, the reflections of Kierkegaard, the notebooks of Paul Valéry, the jottings of Elias Canetti, the autobiographical essays of Jean Améry. Nolens measures his thinking, his life and his writing against these authors.

"The diarist learns from other diarists how to formulate his intimacy. They provide him with the forms – and the potential of the apparently formless – within which he gives a shape to his fleeting presence."

### **Winterswijk, Sunday 3 January 2010**

Giving shape to the fleeting is an aspiration doomed to failure, which nevertheless occupies our whole lives. What else can you do? Evaporate like alcohol? Be blown away on the wind like the cries of rooks or seagulls? Drain away like infertile seed? Beckett concludes *The Unnameable* with these words: 'you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.'

Most people opt to ease their progress by learning a trade, accepting a job, possibly making a career, reproducing, and, whenever the abyss comes in sight, enjoying themselves. Working, caring and having fun, don't think there's much wrong with organising your life like that. Work does not necessarily have to distract you from what really matters. You can undertake work that has to be done,

for example, to make other people's lives better, or to preserve civilisation.

Nolens has always kept aloof from social activity. That is a courageous choice, which has enabled him to investigate the meaning of that very choice for more than forty years to date. Besides this impossible diary, it has produced an extensive poetic oeuvre, which is rightly counted among the best Dutch literature of the past few decades. But is it the only right choice? Would practising a profession have harmed his production? More than that, might a more profound contact with the world of institutions, money and ambition not have had a fruitful influence on his work, because it would in that case have been even clearer why we need poetry as a place of refuge? And might it not have spared the poet a great deal of suffering? Someone who has to go to work every day, who is responsible for the welfare of others, cannot afford to go on wallowing in his own malaise.

But this is purely hypothetical. Nolens has chosen this life because it turned out to have chosen *him*. We can never know what would have happened if he had become a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher. Just as well.

'Most people have a job, a real job, and hate the idea of dealing consciously day after day with their longing for the poem. Most people work for a living and rely on the evenings, the weekends, the days off when the spirit will move them. Forget *herbeigerufene Inspiration* (invoked inspiration), as Rilke calls it. No, they read and write by virtue of pure grace. I wish I could do that. I wish I could accept that not every day of my life can be poetry. But what was it René Char said? 'There is not one place for beauty. Every place is for beauty.' Yes, the daily fight for air.'

### **Winterswijk, Sunday 10 January 2010**

Last night I sat talking with my lover for ages about Nolens' diary, my struggle with it, my fascination, the way it provokes me to respond and makes me take stock again of my life and writing. My poetic output is about as great as his, which of course does not imply that the quality is the same. What he does in his diary I do at least in part in essays and in teaching. Is my choice of poetry uncompromising enough? Do I still hanker too much for social recognition? Am I looking for an equilibrium between being a poet and serving society? Does the ultimate subservience manifest itself preeminently in seeking an isolation that affords scope for reflection on the human condition of being thrown into the world, for the creation of consoling beauty? I haven't reached a conclusion.

I drank too much, slept too little and wrote this piece this morning in one fluid motion. ■

## **Extracts from *A Poet's Diary 1979-2007***

By Leonard Nolens

### **Berchem, Friday 17 September 1993**

How can the intelligence stay flexible when year after year at school it is pulled taut by parroting?

Does intellectual freedom disappear when at the age of thirty it has to dress in three-piece suits?

Does sufficient blood flow into a married penis?

Can you stay a child if you have children?

Can a child father? Can a child mother?

Can you stay a wanderer if you've got houses, cars and studies to pay for?

How can I regain my innocence after I have put a thousand closely printed pages into the public domain?

How can I regain the passion that for twenty years has made, sustained, given birth to me and my poetry?

How can I regain the intoxication of alcohol, which for almost thirty years has spelled my death?

Is it still possible with this clear head to do something wonderfully stupid?

Will thoughtful sluggishness finally win out over racing thoughts, flashes of imagination, the boundless impulsiveness of the adolescent that you were and want to remain?

Can the pure intellect regain through cunning the state of grace that issued from sorrow, melancholy, the pain of birth?

Do I write only because I have written?

Do I speak only because I was taught to?

Do I live only because I am incapable of not living?

Do I stay with you for fear of my absence?

Is it possible to write poems in exchange for government money?

Is this desperate asking of questions only bearable because your body is not desperate? How can that be squared with the fact that your thought says: there is no hope, and your flesh quite calmly consumes a tartare roll?

Why do you buy yet another book? Won't you ever have read enough? No, the same way a person has to eat every day to stay healthy. (Healthy?!)

Aren't you ashamed to be looking forward so much to the evening of readings to be given shortly? So, are you so turned on by your own texts?



Don't avoid the cat. It's your own flesh that nuzzles.  
Fear power and do not wish for it. Whoever has it can never escape it again.

#### **Missenbourg, Wednesday 18 September 1996**

Poets know with statistical certainty that almost no one is interested in what they make, therefore in what they are. That realisation determines their view of life: they rightly work on the assumption that the man or woman sitting opposite them, with whom they are having a fascinating conversation, sharing a drink and possibly afterwards going to bed, has no interest in their true intimate self. To begin with, that lack of interest provokes anger, sorrow, helplessness and even bitterness, but finally leads the poet, when poetry wins the day, holds its own in the midst of so much indifference, to project his reader into the future and essentially to write for posterity. That is what I mean by the old adage: 'Writing, real writing is always writing for eternity.' That eternity is by definition not quantifiable and only points to the future. The future is: tomorrow, next year, the contemporaries of my children and grandchildren. Writing for eternity is writing in such a way that the letters are still clearly legible on my dying day. Without that hope it isn't worth the trouble of going to work.

#### **Berchem, Wednesday 2 April 1997**

It's such a damn small world I live in and write about. But it is mine, inalienably. I have recorded that world, albeit only a fraction of a second of it, have signed with my own hand and passed on a square millimetre of it, and the circle of pain I drew round my personal chair with my personal voice was recognisable to some. *Actual* reality – that monster that journalists, critics and naïve philosophers are constantly talking about – remains for me an open question and a closed book. *Actual* reality is my reality, and if that's solipsism I can live with that. After fifty years in this anthill I've remained an ant without decorations and titles and functions, and with my ant's soul and ant's pen I crawl across the squared paper of my cheap exercise books and explore the immense world of a small room near Antwerp.



### **Missenburg, Friday 17 July 1998**

Say we, us, everyone as little as possible. But in this case you're right: all of us, usually without realising it, are obsessed with the yearning to belong. Even those who supposedly distance themselves from the group, stridently or tacitly, are unconsciously joining the race of eccentrics and misanthropists, recluses and know-it-alls, tramps and lunatics, and perhaps half of young people paradoxically enough belong to the group of the marginalised. The desperate individual who does away with himself hasn't recognised himself in anything at all. He hasn't read a novel, heard music, not met anyone who could hold up a mirror for him to see himself in. But he too wanted to belong, namely to the society of the unseen, the insignificant, those not worthy of mention, the unrecognisable, the non-legitimated, the living dead, the dead. All of us are forced from and by virtue of our birth to belong, even if we want to annul that birth itself. Even when we refuse to say we, since even the words of that refusal are part of that we, belong to everyone.

Fifteen years in a ground-floor flat at Marc's place, seven years in Missenburg: twenty-two years in Edegem. For twenty-two years you came here from Antwerp almost every morning on the bus or by bike to find, or better, secure a place in the world. You didn't succeed. But you did intuit here the possibility of living a life that couldn't deceive itself by shaking the wrong hands, the parroting of smarmy polite phrases, the kissing of the wrong cheeks. Doubtless different, new lies were woven in this gap, but you don't know them. (Oh, that depressing rhetoric of interior monologue!) The books you wrote in those twenty-two years were actually nothing more than attempts to obey as often and as thoroughly as possible the demands of your true nature. What that comprises should be clear by now. If your poems and diaries constitute one big lie, so does your true nature. (No poet, no writer, no contemporary intellectual dares to utter the expression true nature... Your eternal naivety.)

Those twenty-two years, from twenty-nine to fifty-one, what else are they but your youth? The isolation of that long No to the mass, to the institutions of society, the isolation of that long Yes to the impossible dream and your personal destiny explain why you don't feel any age difference when you deal with twenty-year-olds. But they of course do feel it, except when they read your books and



realise that your instability has remained intact. Your only grown-up feature is that you have found a form for immaturity. No, you're still wet behind the ears, but you have deliberately chosen that wetness.

You've substantiated that weakness here year in year out.

The diary records the bank transactions, the poetry is the visibly covered cheque. The diary is the gold mine, the poem is the gold. The diary is the eternal *I in statu nascendi*, the poem is the actual birth certificate.

### **Berchem, Friday 6 September 2002**

Making an inventory of your merits based on everything you've refused; you've straightened and strengthened your backbone by saying no aloud or under your breath. In the last thirty years never had a job, never worked for papers, never written reviews, never sat on juries, never spoken at book launches or private views, never operated in cliques or coteries, never accepted membership of political parties. Never indulged your ambition anywhere but in a small room, on a blank page. Never been born anywhere but in a note, never played the hero but in a poem. Never found the strength to say no anywhere but very close to a woman who gave you your head, the odd friend who's stayed loyal to you, two sons who haven't rejected your ways of living. In short: you've cultivated the stubborn myopia of your dream until it became visible and tangible to someone else. Or as Stefan wrote: you've made a profession of your soul. While here, next to your exercise book, four papers and a weekly hector your powerless gaze about the imminent commemoration of 9/11, the towers, the victims. What is the name of the proud brat who dares say I to the terror of a religious and nationalist, racist and fundamentalist *we*? I've forgotten who once wrote: '*Le fascisme est le lyrisme du troupeau.*'

*Translated by Paul Vincent*

**From *A Poet's Diary 1979-2007***

*(Dagboek van een dichter 1979-2007. Amsterdam-Antwerpen: Querido, 2009)*