

With a Poet's Eye

A Few Dutch Poems on Dutch Paintings



No painting is safe from Dutch Poets. In fact, the writing of poems based on paintings seems to have become a national sport.

From a reader's perspective, picture-poems distinguish themselves from all other poems in one very important way: the poem's source of inspiration, whether it be sculpture, painting or photography, can always be traced back to its original state. Everything changes or disappears, but a work of art remains as it is. This means that you can look at a work of art through the eyes of the poet and it is still as he saw it, at least if it hasn't suffered some calamity. You can even visit the Tate Gallery with an accompanying anthology under your arm filled with poems that were all inspired by artworks in that museum: namely Pat Adams' *With a Poet's Eye: A Tate Gallery Anthology*. And in Brussels' Museum for the Fine Arts one can not only view Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* through the eyes of Auden and nine Dutch poets, but also through thirty other pairs of poetic eyes. For the *Mona Lisa* you can consult more than one hundred poets. But whoever expects that poets, by means of their picture-poems, intend to make paintings more accessible or visual to their readers, will come away feeling cheated. Most poets would agree with Rutger Kopland that a picture-poem must stand on its own two feet without the help of the painting. Indeed, it is only very rarely that poets provide illustrations of the works to which their poems owe their existence. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the combination of painting and poetry can richly contribute to our experience of the artwork as well as to our understanding of the poem it inspired.

In what follows, I would like to consider six different relationships between poet and painting: the poet P.C. Boutens' reflections on a painting of the Flemish School; Rutger Kopland's and Anna Enquist's contrasting perceptions of Pieter Brueghel's *Hunters in the Snow*; Jan Eijkelboom's self-recognition in a painting of Aelbert Cuyper; Vermeer's *View of Delft* as seen by Willem van Toorn; Ed Leeflang with his, and Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait as the Apostle Paul*, and finally Ida Gerhardt, who appropriates Jan Asselijn's *The Threatened Swan*.

For to live, my child, is to survive

We will begin with *Little Girl with a Small Dead Bird*, painted by an unknown Flemish master around the year 1520. For P.C. Boutens (1870-1943) this relatively unknown panel possessed 'eternal value' and he dedicated a poem to it in his last published volume. The painting depicts a girl of about eight years old, whose gaze is nearly mask-like. One could say that she looks disappointed, but then you allow the bird in her hands – which could perhaps symbolize the vulnerable soul or the brevity of life – to play too great a role. Or the entire painting might be explained as a symbol for the Pietà. In any case, the painting raises the question of the relationship between the girl and the little bird. Has it fallen out of its nest, was this the deliberate murder of a beloved pet, or was it the work of the cat? And, most importantly, is this the child's first confrontation with death? The verse that the old Zeeland poet wrote about his favourite painting is surprisingly simple, considering the style of most of his work; but the voice and style used here are quite appropriate as the entire poem is addressed to a child:

Anonymous, *Little Girl with a Small Dead Bird*, ca. 1520.
Oil on wood, 37.7 x 29.8 cm.
Royal Museum of Fine Arts,
Brussels. Detail.

Little Girl with a Dead Bird *Musée des Beaux-Arts, Brussels*

*Do you remember that other time,
The pain that then still was unknown,
How deeply the first hurt could sting
When you were not yet used to pain.*

*Now suddenly a strange cold
Pierced your body through the heart,
Froze the bird you tried to console
In your small trembling fingers.*

*We did our best in word and deed,
Yet suffered just as you, poor thing:
His own advice no man should heed
From his first step to his wedding ring.*

*We were warned repeatedly
About the sorrows that cause our tears.
We only learned through our own pain
The things that matter in the end.*

*For to live, my child, is to survive,
Emerge from sleep, sorrow, pain of death.
And only experience does benefit
By life's flickering signals.*

*Just act as if you did not hear
And live by the light of your own wit.
On the long road that brings greyness near,
No crime worse than to kill a child's spirit.*



[Translated by André Lefevere and Valerie Robillard]

The conversation in the poem – which is in fact a monologue – begins in the middle of events. In the first line, there is already mention of ‘the other time’. We also find that there is something concealed that directly followed the pain, which the poet refers to as ‘the first hurt’, but what this ‘hurt’ is or what caused it remains undisclosed to the reader. In the second stanza, it is apparently not the unwanted death of the bird that is caused by the child, but rather the freezing of it. In the third stanza, the speaker emphasizes that these things happen to us adults as well, especially when we try to offer council or help, and this is due to our own inability to know ourselves. It is particularly interesting that the poet here suggests that wilfulness is a character flaw that will pass with marriage (‘the wedding ring’). In the fourth stanza, the speaker paraphrases a good Dutch expression: one only becomes wiser by making mistakes and not by listening to wise men. It is clear that the poet (speaker?) himself is undergoing some of the same lessons, even though he minimalises their importance in the final lines. Considering the pedantic nature of the preceding stanzas, these lines take a totally unexpected and engaging turn: the speaker says, in essence: ‘Don’t listen to all this moralising of mine. Just do what your heart tells you. It’s a pity to spoil your innocence with the chatter of an old man.’

In the meantime, we have left the second-to-last-stanza for what it is. Here, in my opinion, lies the essence of the poem. The child is taught that life means being confronted by tragedy and that these ‘emergency signals’ of life can only be interpreted by one who has had experience. This would mean, then, that the girl because of her young age had not been able to understand the death of a bird.

If you look at the relationship between the painting and the poem, you see that the second part of the second stanza contains the only pictorial lines in the entire poem. You might, then, ask yourself if you could have derived the pictorial source from the poem, if the poet hadn’t added *Musée des Beaux Arts, Brussels* to his title. For without this title, it might just as well have been inspired by the poet’s memory of a similar lesson of life from his own father. As you have seen, Boutens has done nearly nothing with the pictorial elements in the poem; it appears that for him, the painting is merely an occasion for extracting an important lesson.

The return to the life below – but what life?

Brueghel’s *Hunters in the Snow* (1565), one of the highlights of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, belongs to a series of paintings that depict the months of the year. Art historians claim that each painting represents two months and *Hunters in the Snow* would then represent December and January, or possibly January and February. Among poets, this poem is nearly as popular as *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*: the American poets William Carlos Williams and John Berryman, for example, each dedicated a poem to it, as did at least eight of their Dutch colleagues. Among these are Rutger Kopland (1934), still one of our most popular poets, who, under his real name – R.H. van den Hoofdakker – was a professor in Biological Psychiatry in Groningen, and Anna Enquist (1945), also a psychiatrist. Let me begin with Kopland’s poem:

Brueghel, *Hunters in the Snow*, 1565. Oil on wood, 117 x 162 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Detail.



*Winter by Brueghel, the hill with hunters
and dogs, at their feet the valley with the village.
Almost home, but their dead-tired attitudes, their steps
in the snow – a return, but almost as*

*slow as arrest. At their feet the depths
grow and grow, become wider and further,
until the landscape vanishes into a landscape
that must be there, is there, but only*

as a longing is there.

*Ahead of them a jet-black bird dives down. Is it mockery
of this laboured attempt to return to the life
down there: the children skating on the pond,
the farms with women waiting and cattle?*

An arrow underway, and it laughs at its target.

[Translated by James Brockway]

Kopland accentuates, as Tom van Deel notes in *Looking at Poems: an Anthology of Picture Poems* (Gedichten kijken, een bloemlezing beeldgedichten, 1987), the contrast between the tiring, earth-bound return 'of the hunters to the valley where they live and the free, unrestricted flight of the bird in the air, slightly above the middle'. The hunters want to get home but it seems as though they will never reach it. Their goal seems more distant with every step they take: 'the depths / grow and grow, become wider and further', and home exists in the end as an image imprinted in the spirit, 'as a longing is there'. For the 'jet-black bird', the 'return to the life / down there' is simple; in contrast to the hunters, the bird 'laughs at its target', because reaching it is so simple to him.

Return of the Hunter



The afternoon was a paradise of light. The high snowfield absorbed him. There was no time, no hunger and the valley where his tired house should be was no longer there. No guilt, no regret.

When the sun relentlessly leaves him the hunter finds himself again, numb and angry. As for a child, time to him becomes place, becomes distance that he kicks away. Around his shoulders heavily nestles,

like the denied years, the killed animal. Strangling. Thus opens the ashen valley, where people that he knows toil with fire and wood. He hears the quiet scraping of skates on the pond. Hates

the house where he lives and is safe. Humiliated he bows to season and hour. The hunter flings the treasures he brought into the dirty snow: a bag full of death, frozen blood, cold fire.

(Translated by Tiny Hobma and Anne-Marie Petter)

Anna Enquist entitles her poem *Return of the Hunter* (in the singular), which is a subtle deviation from the title under which Brueghel's painting is also known: *The Return of the Hunters* (in the plural). Her poem seems to be more of an answer to Kopland's poem than an independent reaction to the painting. In contrast to Kopland's hunters, her hunter doesn't want to return home, although he must. After sharing in the euphoric and mystical experiences far from home depicted in the first stanza, he must return from his sought-after solitude to the valley of duties and unwanted relationships.

In the second stanza, as evening falls, he comes to his senses: 'When the sun relentlessly leaves him.' The moment of return becomes very concrete for him and is translated into the steps he still must take. It is only at the end of the second and third stanzas that the painting itself comes into view – the point at which the hunter (probably the man standing exactly between the first and second tree) struggles home with 'the killed animal'. The hunter is apparently

someone who wants to forget a past that is bound up with the valley, a past that he could only forget for too short a time in that timeless 'paradise of light' – a past that has something to do with 'denied years'. He doesn't want to return to the confinement of 'the house where he lives and is safe', but he must; it is cold outside. The innocent, mystical experience in 'the high snowfield' from the first stanza can never last.

Kopland's 'dead-tired' hunters long to reach home but are unable to; Enquist's hunter doesn't want to return 'to his tired house' but he must. What is longed for in Kopland's poem, 'the return to the life below', is rejected by Enquist: 'the ashen valley, where people / that he knows toil with fire and wood'.

It is tempting to go further and to find in the last poem an answer to the first. Enquist tells Kopland that we do not want to take the familiar road, but seek the sublime moment outside the marked footpaths. That we must always return disillusioned is another matter. One psychiatrist answers another? It seems so.

Master and Servant

From Vienna to the Mauritshuis in The Hague, to the Aelbert Cuyp *Portrait of Pieter de Roovere, Lord of the Manor of Hardinxveld*, which was painted before 1652, and to Jan Eijkelboom's (1926–2008) portrait of that portrait:

Pieter de Roovere as Lord of the Manor of Hardinxveld (Aelbert Cuyp)

*Sculptured against the sky
the man on his horse looks straight ahead
while pointing at the salmon
held below him by the servant
who stands there and looks up
at him. He lifts the gill
of the freshly caught fish
so his master, if he looks,
will see bright red, just like
the cap on the boy's head.
The master himself wears a plumed hat
of a more refined, dusky red.
The connoisseur admires the velvet
of his elegant coat. My eye
will not rest, it moves
between the horseman and the boy,
from the worn-out, still haughty
but dead-tired look
to that wide-open way of looking
timid but infinitely free.*

*Against a strip of scanty light
under the judgement of the clouds
the realization finally comes:
I am like both of them.*

[Translated by Johanna H. Prins and Johanna W. Prins]

Aelbert Cuyp, *Portrait of Pieter de Roovere, Lord of the Manor of Hardinxveld*, before 1652. Oil on canvas, 123,5 x 154 cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague.



The Dordrecht poet, Jan Eijkelboom, begins with a description of a painting, whose creator was also from Dordrecht. In an earlier version of this poem, he emphasized the art-historical focus of his first stanza by using the words 'Sculptured against the sky', which came from a 1904 study on Cuyp done by still another citizen of Dordrecht, the art historian Jan Veth. Up to the central line of the poem, 'My eye / will not rest', the poem does indeed take on the nature of an art-historical observation. Here, the poet displays a good eye for one particular pictorial element: the red colour of the fish's gill, the hat and the plume. In the second stanza, the poem becomes more personal: the eye shifts between the master and the boy, between the weary man who has seen it all and the boy for whom everything is just beginning, and the viewer recognizes himself in both. The painting which was originally a portrait of the Lord of the Manor of Hardinxveld has, in the hands of the poet, become a double portrait of master and servant.

A woman to be slept with

We are going to stay in the Mauritshuis and spend some time on Johannes Vermeer's *View of Delft* as interpreted by Willem van Toorn (1935). Van Toorn, together with C.O. Jellema, Ed Leeftang and J. Bernlef, is one of those poets who are regularly inspired by the visual arts, just as Albert Verwey was around the turn of the nineteenth century, and Simon Vestdijk after him.

Vermeer: View of Delft

*I make you appear in this.
Your shadow announces you
round a corner. Had done some shopping
in invisible alleys. Quivering*

*painted sunlight touches you
when you turn up on the quay.
Hatted governors are waiting
for dead vessels.*

*Their eyes follow you. Young miss. For certain
I'll let one of them sleep with you
tonight, if I keep you alive,
three hundred years from here.*

(Translated by Ria Leigh-Loohuizen)



In this poem, Van Toorn focuses primarily on one of the two women in the left foreground of the painting, the one with the shopping basket. Tom van Deel, compiler of a collection of poems about the visual arts called *I Love the Red of the Jewish Bride* (Ik heb het Rood van 't Joodse Bruidje lief, 1988), has written a very illuminating essay about Willem van Toorn's picture-poem in *If I could paint* (Als ik tekenen kon, 1992). In this essay, he of course devotes some attention to *Vermeer: View of Delft*. Nevertheless, I am not sure whether Van Deel is right

when he states that Van Toorn in his Vermeer poem 'simply creates a damsel by talking about her (...) both in the poem as well as on the canvas - whom he causes to move over Vermeer's painting for the duration of the poem'. In my opinion the damsel is already present in the painting and she is therefore not created by the poet. After she has done her shopping 'in invisible alleys', she falls into conversation with a friend 'on the quay'. This is what Vermeer shows. In the third stanza she moves off again, watched by the men. If the poet has anything to do with it, one of them will sleep with her that night. In the second stanza, the painting as a frozen moment of time, a motionless picture, is part of a simple story in which a woman is doing her shopping, is being watched and (who knows?) will be slept with. According to the poet, the city-scape must become a love story, if at all possible. The reality of the painting is changed into the poet's pipe dream.

Johannes Vermeer,
View of Delft, ca.1660-1661.
Oil on canvas. 96.5 x 115.7
cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague.
Detail.



Should one trust the poet?

Some years ago, when I was busy compiling *An Angel Singing behind a Pillar* (Een engel zingend achter een pilaar), a collection of poems in Dutch inspired by the paintings of the Flemish and Dutch masters from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, I came across the poem *Like St. Paul* in the relatively unknown volume *The Ferries* (De veren) by Ed Leeflang (1929-2008):

Like St. Paul

*We stare out without hope in anyone,
our chin moves even closer to our chest.
The reference book that's in our hands
distracts, they almost let it rest.*

*Our forehead furrows in the mocking light,
our eyebrow, after all the peering,
in its highest arc now stands.*

*In our face our cheek has frozen,
and our eyes have opened wide
refusing to show scorn,
revulsion or self-reproach,
and resist the impulse so to do.*

*Outside, the seasons are changing:
meaningful for neighbours, but
we are alone and our gaze has taken off,
turning away from walking,
towards the mirror.*

(Translated by Paul Vincent)

Is this a picture-poem or not? Being relatively well-versed in the Scriptures as I am, I had not interpreted it as a poem inspired by a painting, but rather by Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians; to be more precise, by First Corinthians 13, verse 12: 'For now we see in a glass, darkly, [...]', mainly because of the title and the first and last lines. The elderly 'poetic I' identifies himself with the apostle Paul, onto whom he projects his feelings of loneliness, disillusionment and resignation. The 'we' which is constantly used – not the *pluralis majestatis*, but used to denote Paul as well as the 'poetic I' – draws attention to the fact that both see themselves as old and full of days. They are no longer the slightest bit interested in the outside world. They are only interested in themselves. In short: the 'poetic I' permits itself to coincide with the aged, disillusioned apostle, who is pondering the past with no regrets, and who is only roused by his own reflection. The poem can be read in this way with no problem at all. However, information from the poet himself, when I confronted him with this reading and he told me that the poem refers to Rembrandt's famous *Self-portrait as the Apostle Paul* in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, changes the matter.



Rembrandt, *Self-portrait as the Apostle Paul*, 1661.
Oil on canvas. 91 x 77 cm.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

It turns out that there is a layer between 'the poetic I' and Paul; 'we', in a complicated way, are three: Paul, Rembrandt, 'I'. At the root of this poem is not a confrontation between the poet and his reflection, but rather a self-portrait of Rembrandt. This is not something you can surmise from the poem, not even from the title *Like St. Paul*, which is the clearest indication of a possible reference to a painting. After all, you could imagine '*Self-portrait*' in front of the title *Like St. Paul* and then end up with Rembrandt (or another painter). If only the poet had made use of the attributes peculiar to Paul, as Rembrandt has, such as the sword in the fold of his cloak – symbolizing Paul's beheading in Rome – or the rolls of paper covered in Hebrew script in his hand, which probably represent Paul's epistles to the Christian communities in Asia Minor, then we could have linked the poem with a portrait of Paul, or with a painted self-portrait as Paul, and we could have come up with Rembrandt. Now we have to rely on the poet and the question is, of course, if we can trust him. If we believe him and view the poem with him as an interpretation of Rembrandt's *Self-portrait as the Apostle Paul*, then we must reconsider our idea that the first person plural used throughout the poem refers to Paul and the 'poetic I'. 'We' refers, then, to the double entity Rembrandt and the apostle. The poem, which can be read as a self-portrait of the 'poetic I' as Paul, turns out to be the poetical interpretation of one of Rembrandt's last self-portraits.

'What have you done to your children?'

We are going to stay in the Rijksmuseum and move on from Rembrandt's *Self-portrait as the Apostle Paul* (1661) to *The Threatened Swan* by Jan Asselijn, one of the most important of the so-called Italianizing Dutch painters, who painted landscapes which looked Italian, often peopled by picturesque figures such as herdsmen, merchants and tramps. *The Threatened Swan* is unique in Asselijn's oeuvre, which otherwise consists only of landscapes. After his death in 1652, the painting was changed by the adding of captions from a realistic natural tab-



Jan Asselijn,
The Threatened Swan,
before 1652.
Oil on canvas. 144 X 171 cm.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

leau – a swan defending her nest against the attack of a dog – into an allegory on the politics of Grand Pensionary Johan de Witt. In this, De Witt (the white swan) is defending the nest of eggs (the Netherlands) against an attack by the dog (England). The allegory refers to De Witt's role in the second Anglo-Dutch war (1665-1667), which ended in triumph for the Dutch. The captions which were later added to the painting are clearly legible: above the head of the dog is 'the enemy of the state', next to the swan's right foot is 'the Grand Pensionary', and on the left egg is 'Holland'.

Ida Gerhardt (1905-1997), however, in her poem *Confrontation* from *The Bracken* (De adelaarsvarens), based on Asselijn's swan, notes: 'Allegorical depiction of a terrifying swan whose nest is threatened by people.' Thus she is falsifying the picture to a certain extent in order to give it a different interpretation: not a historical-political one, but an ethical one. She is not concerned with the responsibility of the statesman, who ought to defend his country, but with that of parents, of whom a considerate and fit parenthood is asked. Perhaps the difficult relationship which the poet had with her mother, and which she expresses in various poems, has something to do with this attitude, and so the poem could be read as a reproach to her mother, with Asselijn's swan being held up as an example.

Confrontation

Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

*The Swan of Asselijn, large as life,
spreads its wings diagonally
across the canvas and expels by force
whoever dares approach its aerie.*

*An archetypal swan guarding its nest,
where something barely feathered restlessly
seeks daylight and taps against the shell.*

Soon it will risk the water, fearlessly.

*And whoever casually passes by
or shops short in his steps
will be summoned to a brief trial.
The hearing, long delayed, begins:
'What have you done to your children?'*

[Translated by Johanna H. Prins and Johanna W. Prins]

Anything goes

This brief excursion has shown that a poet can do to a painting exactly what he does to anything else that inspires a poem: just about anything he wants. He can, for example, like Boutens, use it to extract a lesson about life and virtually ignore the depiction as such; he can use it to enter into a discussion with a colleague, as Anna Enquist has; he can see a self-portrait in it, as did Eijkelboom, or transform the painting into a banal love story, as Van Toorn does in his *Vermeer: View of Delft*; he can also set us off on the wrong track by telling us nothing about the source of the inspiration for the poem, as Leeflang does with his poem about Paul; and he can, as Ida Gerhardt does, falsify the reality of the painting as it suits him ...or her. In short, the poet subsumes the painting, and any other thing which actually inspires him, into his own themes and conceptual world, and, in the final analysis, he subsumes it to his own immutable personality as an artist. The main characteristic of a picture-poem for the reader is that he can return to the source of inspiration for the poem, and thus can occupy the same starting point as the poet. He can look 'With a Poet's Eye' at what the poet saw, and that's not something he can usually do. ■