

## Searching the Poems as a Suspect Element

### The Poetry of Charles Ducal

172

[ ANNELEEN DE COUX ]

*Once I sat naked at the table, sucked dry  
by the will to make something out of nothing,  
made wife and sweetheart but with a cold eye,  
two stones on my native soil*

*On which I could sharpen myself ceaselessly,  
a father and mother, raised up  
on my own language, four eyes to keep me small  
if proof was needed the strongest one was I.*

*Now I sit empty at the table, pumped full  
with the I that you brought with you.  
And everything I am is put in words.  
And everything I'm not is neatly scrapped.*

The poem 'You' (Jij) from *Tucked up with a song* (Toegedekt met een liedje, 2009), the most recent collection by Charles Ducal (1952), is a neat summary of a writer's life. It gives the reader an excellent picture of the evolution – it is no exaggeration to call it a total volte-face – that the author has gone through.

### Wife and Sweetheart

The man sitting naked at the table in the opening stanza of 'You' is the protagonist in *Marriage* (Het huwelijk, 1987), Ducal's first collection, which was a *succès de scandale*. In it one can hear echoes of the sacrilegious tone of the famous poem, also entitled 'Marriage', by another Flemish poet, Willem Elsschot (1882-1960). The not exactly romantic titles of series such as 'Out of Respect for the Law' (Uit eerbied voor de wet) and 'No Further Obligations' (Verder geen plichten) leave one in no doubt that marriage is a burdensome duty for the protagonist while the title of a series such as 'Community of Property'

Charles Ducal.

Photo by Merlijn Doomernik.



(In *gemeenschap van goederen*) forces the reader to ask whether any community of minds is involved.

The simple answer is that there isn't. Much more than a husband, the protagonist is a poet. From the top of his ivory tower in the middle of his home he looks down on his lawfully wedded wife who is the personification of banal reality. Rather than his wife, it is his sweetheart, the muse, who represents the imagination and embodies a world of unknown possibilities. To escape the gilded cage of hearth and home and indulge in his artistic passions is a vital necessity for the slave of this divinity. Freedom is a relative notion here. As an image for the fact that as a man of the imagination the poet is sufficient to himself, Ducal uses masturbation. In doing so elements from the Christian tradition are perverted. From the poem 'Whitsun' (Pinksteren): 'Then there arose in me great faith. / I felt how God suffered in me, / a sinful pain that stirred my hands. / For him I gladly spilled my blood'.

In *The Duke and I* (De hertog en ik, 1989), Ducal's second collection, the protagonist's sweetheart takes a more concrete form. The second part is

devoted to the mistress of his dreams. The gulf between imagination and reality is also prominent *within* the 'I' figure. The duke of the title (a reference to his pen name, Ducal) is an *alter ego*, a figure from the subconscious who is much more powerful than the everyday I. The latter is a total coward – in this collection he is primarily afraid of *la belle dame sans merci* and of the father. He is the prisoner of them both – he cannot escape his fascination for the enchanting witch and he needs the terrifying father to protect him.

### A father and a mother, bred out of one's native language

The father of the child that is the subject in the first part of *The Duke and I* seems to be the only one who can protect his son against the uncanny outside world. But the result is that the *pater familias*, the lord and master of the farm that is the setting of these poems, himself becomes terrifying. It would seem a paradoxical bargain: the almighty one offers protection to the frightened little fellow in exchange for which he must be feared himself. It is not a coincidence that the first cycle of *The Duke and I* is entitled 'The God on the Mountain' (De God op de berg) – there are plenty of similarities between him and the almighty Father of the Old Testament.

As an adult the protagonist continues to look at the world with fear and trembling. He is now a father himself, and yet he is the inferior of his own son, as is apparent in the series 'God's Parents', (De ouders van God). Power sometimes skips a generation. The lyrical I is only the almost invisible hyphen between two potentates.

In *Mother Tongue* (Moedertaal, 1994), Ducal's third collection, it is the mother who plays the part of the antagonist. Although less powerful than the father, the narrator can never entirely break free of her. The umbilical cord is tied round his neck for ever.

The woman is a 'wet nurse' in various ways. Of course she feeds her children in the most literal sense. In 'Victuals' (Provisie), by means of a metonymic shift, it is a matter of 'a good mother, lovingly / with food for bellies and teeth, / a cupboard we may strip bare'. In 'Bread' (Brood) we are told: 'She is silent, closed off / like an egg, hard shell / turning inward, / towards us, her brood / that may eat from her body / until it's all gone, play with her heart / until it's done for / and the shell breaks'. Despite or maybe precisely because of the woman's enormous self-sacrifice, the prevailing atmosphere of the poem is one of suffocation. In other verses physical decline makes her less threatening. But only death can rescue a son from the loving clutches of his mother.

The second way in which the mother feeds her children comes down to passing on a hereditary disease. It is not that this woman doesn't love her children; it's just that she isn't used to translating her love into words. Her domestic devotion has to suffice as a declaration of love. The first-person narrator has this inability to communicate in his genes, but he does his best: "I teach my mouth to say 'sweetheart' and 'darling'. / Next to me a woman lies, cross and tender, / just as distant from me". From the two last lines one can deduce that the relation of the I with his mother has set the tone for his relations with other women, something that makes an *alma* of the *mater* for the third time.

Finally, the mother figure is associated with the writer's work. She is a source of inspiration as one can see in 'Muse' (Muze). She is also the seat of

the mother tongue, but this is not unproblematic. The real mother tongue is the Flemish dialect in which the narrator was raised and in which he is kept small. The Standard Dutch language is the knife that he has acquired to cut himself free from it. Language and writing means growing up and emancipation, as one reads in 'Standard Dutch 2' (ABN2): 'Fed on Flanders, a giantess, / a glutton body of milk for love. / I bottle her up. I live in secret, / my hands guilty, my mouth pursed thin. // I want to get out of here. I write poems / to reach as far as Amsterdam, / to bud there, far from the trunk, / in a language that doesn't tell me who I am, // no mother tongue, no breast in the mouth, / but instruments, a grammar and / a dictionary to graft an I on, / loveless, but lording it over the earth'.

*And everything I am is put in words.*

*And everything I'm not is quite scrubbed out.*

There are three poems in *Mother Tongue* that seem not to belong there. In 'Judged by God' (Door God gericht) the poet denounces the consumer society. This series is just one of the provocations in Ducal's early work that show that he is keen to find a way out of the ivory tower. In *Towards the Earth* (Naar de aarde, 1998) this movement is made explicit.

*Marriage* (Het huwelijk) ends with a play on the Dutch poet Remco Campert's celebrated line, 'Poetry is a way of saying no'. For Ducal – or rather for Frans Dumortier, the man behind the pseudonym – there was the world on the one hand and poetry on the other. The latter was the refuge where the poet could exact revenge on 'real' life with its requirements and duties, the searching gaze of wife, father, mother and so many others. In the course of time however cracks developed in his poetic bunker. Poetry, or rather the literary world as represented by critics and awards, developed into a monster that with its questions and expectations kept the poet, who was by now addicted to applause, under scrutiny and so left him paralyzed. Through the cracks came the call of the outside world. For a long time Ducal has kept poetry and his left-leaning political ideas strictly separate. Even though he wrote radical columns under his pseudonym, he continued to keep his poems "pure". In *The Relevance of Poetry* (De belangrijkheid van de poëzie), an essay of 1991, Ducal wrote that someone who denounced racism and the corruption of the government in a book of poetry with a print run of a thousand copies soon made himself ridiculous. But as the years passed this situation proved schizophrenic and impossible to maintain. More fresh air entered Ducal's poetry, more engagement, even if it remained primarily metapoetic, and in this sense his work became a poetry of inner poetic conflict.

In Ducal's fourth collection the descent to earth represented, among other things, reconciliation with his wife. In 'Towards my wife' (Naar de vrouw) the first-person narrator begs her: 'Take me away out of this head, / this image of myself I cannot sustain, / stop the applause, enter the room / and make your husband readable again, [...] because I can no longer live my me, / I've shut my body down, it's a disgrace / no one can read what it means // to spit in one's own face'. It is his sweetheart who saves him with her love when his own self-love deserts him and he finds himself in an impasse through his own assertiveness, a fever that the narrator was already familiar with as a child. The series 'Lean Years' (Magere jaren) describes the time spent in a strict

boarding school; in the poem 'Primus Perpetuus' the promising lad dreams of 'the little village that looks up and greets / the halls, the papers and public squares, / the thousand, thousand clapping hands, / the undying muse, the fruit in the ear'. All of this proved to mean nothing. Pride leads to a fall, or to a leap in the void.

Inherent in Ducal's next collection, *Dipped in Ink* (In inkt gewassen, 2006), which was not published till eight years later, is the idea of purification. But ink by its nature remains dark, something that reminds the reader of the mysterious layers of the soul that were so important in *The Duke and I*. In the meta-poetic poems, which again make up the bulk of the volume, the world of the imagination and the real world are played off against each other. The narrator now stands with both feet on the ground and can think himself lucky, but it remains a close call – the poet sometimes has to tie weights to his feet in order not to fly off in search of higher realms. The artist who is with difficulty cured of his elitism and the politically engaged pen-wielding citizen struggle here for dominance: "Is it possible for one to become another // by hiding oneself away like a passport / that is no longer valid? To avoid / a mirror as though one was ashamed / of oneself? To search the poem // as a suspect element?"

### The school of pornography

The confrontation between imagination and reality is embodied in the tragic dream woman Lolo Ferrari, the protagonist of the series 'Lolo'. The porn star who lets her body be moulded to gratify the fantasy of thousands of men, making them crazy, and yet who – when reality claimed its rights – swallowed an overdose of antidepressants.

'Lolo' is a preamble to the series 'The School of Pornography' in *Tucked up with a Song* (Toegedekt met een liedje, 2009). In it Ducal makes certain connections. Pornography is poetry. It is a form of art, or seems to inspire the making of art. In 'www.openwide.com' one reads, 'She's widened herself to a hole / as though something in her must shine. / The eyes that prise her open are mine. / I know the depths, so scheming that // she responds to the excitement on this page'. 'www.brutalviolence.com', a poem that, amongst other things, with its enjambment after the word 'good' looks like a review of an SM film, is also about the artistic side of things: 'There are the boots and there is blood / and the liquid whistling of the whips. / A woman's crying, she's crying well and good // rid of all imperatives / provided by an invisible voice, / soon to be tucked up with a song: / *Warum betrübst du dich, mein Herz?* A repressed concern prevails here about how such scenes may alter our perceptions: 'We could call this a horror story. [...] // But it's only a trial or study, / an innocent exercise with the lens: / high-heeled, made up and manicured / that makes us artistic for violence'.

Pornography is poetry, but because both of them reveal at once too little and too much, the reverse is also true: poetry is pornography. As in certain websites, poetry allows the interested party to see what he wants to see. Anything he doesn't like is left out. The poem 'www.doglove.com' makes clear the perverse proportions that the re-creation of reality can assume, and how bestial a human being can be: 'Like syllables finally capsized / to make up this unnatural word, / tail on tailbone till the knot subsides. / It's difficult to believe // but then

one sees the woman's paws / and the dog with human eyes, the same breed. / I, that hypocrite I, stand and gawk / because there's nothing it would like more // than to have the guts to cut loose from speech / like a god in the depths of his own flesh'. In the title poem of the series we read that 'Pornography is the mother of politics' and the poet is found to be at least complicit: 'All we are is this boy's voice / biting in the milk. Music of power. // Child's play.' Whether one bites in the milk, in the breast out of protest or gluttony, remains an unanswered question. The idea of poetry being a cover-up operation is in any case tainted with guilt feelings. The last stanza of 'Unprepared' (Onvoorbereid) reads: 'We too were silent, only caring / about the plumb line in the ink / to gauge the unfathomable depths in us / and not to notice that it stinks'.

## Schlechte Zeit für Lyrik

In those poems by Ducal that deal with the outside world, the approach is not one of hard-line Stalinism but of ethical concern. Once more he draws on religious motifs, for instance in 'Subhuman' (Ondermens): 'There is also a god of rubbish, / a god of failure, of scum, / that on the day without number / who created a Man that skulks, // the self-polluted angel who remained / in the garden and who knows full well/ created out of disdain / he is nothing but dust and a bad smell. // He never ate the apple / which lies rotting under the tree, / he has never wanted to measure himself, / he has no knowledge of the dream. // He is the creature of day nought, / still able to love and to write, / but like a sweaty stench or skin complaint, // and the rod is always right'.

As in *Marriage* in the series 'Too close for poetry', (Te dicht voor poëzie) which includes the poem 'You', reality takes on the guise of a woman. Unlike Ducal's first collection, here there is a feeling that life in a minor key might be sufficient. The fact that the loved one cannot be captured in art, as is already clear from the title of the series, would appear to be a victory of fleeting reality over the creations of the imagination. The balance of power and all other relationships have shifted. If there must be poetry, there must also be more authenticity.

Charles Ducal's poetry offers a constant questioning of the medium itself, an unrelenting criticism of the figure of the poet who feels he has ducked his responsibilities in what Brecht called a 'Schlechte Zeit für Lyrik'. The conflict between verse and responsibility ensured a crisis *in poeticis* right through a couple of collections. It should be clear by now that over the years Ducal has renewed himself, while always remaining true to himself. One strong feature of his work is that his struggle with poetry often occurs in lines that are extremely poetic – if at least 'poetic' may be defined as a passionate, if primarily formal engagement with language and tradition. Ducal is at his best when his forms fit him perfectly and he demonstrates what he can do with the quatrain and half-rhyme. In short, Ducal's doubting of poetry is, willy-nilly, the ultimate affirmation of it. ■

## Five Poems

By Charles Ducal

### Misunderstanding I

Recently there's been a woman in my house.  
She calls me 'sweetheart' or else 'darling  
man', ]  
fusses over my uncut fingernails and under-  
wear ]  
and puts down unfinished that book of mine.

She smiles indulgently when I write my  
poems ]  
and doesn't notice I'm two-timing her.  
She refers to you as a ghost or an old grief:  
I think she simply doesn't grasp our code.

On sunny days she sits out on the lawn  
and turns for an even tan from side to side.  
Deep in the dark indoors I invent your body.  
The two of us grow pale self-gratified.

### Misverstand I

Sinds kort dwaalt hier een vrouw in huis.  
Zij noemt mij 'schat' en 'lieve zoet',  
bekreunt zich om mijn nagels en mijn ondergoed  
en leest het boek dat ik haar geef niet uit.

Zij duldt dat ik gedichten schrijf  
en merkt niet hoe ik haar bedrieg.  
Zij noemt u een fantoom, een oud verdriet:  
ik denk dat zij de code niet begrijpt.

Op warme dagen ligt zij buiten in de tuin  
en wentelt zich een kleur om te behagen.  
Diep in huis vind ik uw lichaam uit.  
Wij worden bleek van zelfbehagen.

From *Marriage*

[*Het huwelijk. Amsterdam: Atlas, 1987*]

### And yet

Does your wife like this? his friend asked  
on being shown his poems to read.  
He looked for an excuse. There wasn't one.  
What was said there was said. And with some  
need. ]

Still he stayed on without quite knowing why.  
He no longer missed the dusty roads  
and far-off women only for form's sake.  
I love you. He uttered it in the void,

for when she looked it sounded heavy on the  
tongue, ]

an excuse for years of letting go.  
Yet she was the only one who was wanting.  
Poetry is a way of saying no.

### Toch

Vindt je vrouw dit leuk? vroeg de vriend  
aan wie hij zijn verzen liet lezen.  
Hij zocht een excuus. Het was er niet.  
Er stond wat er stond. Met reden.

Toch bleef hij en wist niet waarom.  
Hij miste niet langer het stof op de wegen  
en verre vrouwen alleen voor de vorm.  
Ik heb je lief. Hij sprak het uit in de leegte,

want als zij keek klonk het dik op de tong,  
als een excuus voor jaren gewenning.  
Toch was zij de enige die niet volstond.  
Poëzie is een daad van ontkenning.

From *Marriage*

[*Het huwelijk. Amsterdam: Atlas, 1987*]



## Vespers

Wind and rain blew shut the shutters.  
We sat there kneeling at the hearth  
in the form of worship we were heirs to.  
The woman to whom we owed our birth

spoke incantations to make us small.  
Her voice nagged nonstop in our necks.  
We sat there dumbstruck, just baptized.  
As for the man who'd begotten us

he raised his hand. We bowed our heads.  
He pressed his thumbprints on our brains.  
Wind and rain fuelled the dream.  
Wolves and witches beneath our beds.

## Avondgebed

Wind en regen sloten de vensters.  
Wij zaten geknield bij de haard  
in de godsdienst die wij zouden erven.  
De vrouw die ons had gebaard

zei formules om ons te verkleinen.  
Haar stem zeurde taai in de nek.  
Wij zaten stom, pas ingewijden.  
De man die ons had verwekt

hief de hand. Wij boden het hoofd.  
Hij prentte zijn duim in de hersens.  
Wind en regen bestookten de droom.  
Onder bed sliepen wolven en heksen.

From *The Duke and I*  
(*De hertog en ik. Amsterdam: Atlas, 1989*)



## Wife 2

Let this poem be imperfect, read  
a hole in the language, summon me alive.  
I've been refining these hands such a long  
time that your body has become mislaid

(something naked seen in the morning  
lying in the bath, with moistened cheeks,  
that one avoids resting one's eyes on  
so as not to be drawn into making love).

Scratch the gloss off my soul. Scrap  
the woman of paper I write down  
to take possession of me. Wipe the ink  
from my lips. Stir up enmity

between me and my poetry.

*From Towards the Earth*  
*[Naar de aarde. Amsterdam: Atlas, 1998]*

## Tot de vrouw 2

Maak dit gedicht onvolmaakt, lees  
een gat in de taal, roep mij levend.  
Ik heb deze handen zo lang veredeld  
dat je lichaam zoek is geraakt

(iets naakts dat men 's ochtends ziet  
liggen in bad, met vochtige wangen,  
waaraan men vermijdt de ogen te hangen  
om niet tot de liefde te worden verplicht).

Krab de glans van mijn ziel. Schrap  
de vrouw van papier die ik opschrijf  
om mij te bezitten. Veeg de inkt  
van mijn lippen. Wek vijandschap

tussen mij en mijn poëzie.



## Revolution

is not the same as insurrection  
with barricades, drunken masses  
and the blood ablaze.

The city is calm and surfeited,  
a little lethargic from the sun,  
shining in all its streets.

People are out there shopping,  
at ease with the day and the times,  
deaf and blind.

A young lad shouts out something against  
all that brandishing a newspaper aloft.  
There's something despairing about it, but  
still, ]

it's a start.

*From Dipped in ink  
(In inkt gewassen. Amsterdam: Atlas, 2006)*

## Revolutie

is iets anders dan opstand maken  
met barricaden, dronken massa's  
en opgezweept bloed.

De stad ligt kalm, weldoorvoed,  
een beetje lam van de zon,  
in haar straten te blinken.

Mensen lopen te winkelen,  
in vrede met uur en dag,  
doof en blind.

Een knaap roept daar iets tegenin  
en steekt een krant in de hoogte.  
Het heeft iets wanhopigs, maar toch,

het is een begin.

*All poems translated by Donald Gardner*