

## Disruptive Images, Historical Friction

On the Work of David Van Reybrouck

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[ TOM VAN IMSCHOOT ]

Will things work out well for David Van Reybrouck? The awards that have rained down on this young writer (°1971) in a scant ten years feel like a tropical storm. And that, please note, in the Low Countries! Has the literary climate lost its way? Or has our literature made a U-turn in the last decade, from focusing primarily on itself to looking more to the wider world? If success is a barometer, then Van Reybrouck is at the focus of that shift. But even if that would prove to be a vain illusion, for him what matters is not to give way under the pressure. By which we mean: not the pressure of being famous, but that of what initially and *à la limite* is an all-dominating commitment, perhaps even a 'mission': to protect the public arena as the heart of democracy, not least by reviving our collective memory, through literature. This is the portrait of an archaeologist who gave up his academic career to become a writer, and since then has given shape in word and deed to the hopes of many a Flemish intellectual. If only that can actually work out, in an age of anti-intellectualism.

### Midas and his asses' ears

The signs are favourable, though. The literary non-fiction of *The Plague. The silent gnawing of writers, termites and South Africa* (De plaag. Het stille knagen van schrijvers, termieten en Zuid-Afrika, 2001) immediately earned Van Reybrouck three prizes, including that for the best first book. For the inspired dramas *The Soul of the Ant* (Die Siel van die Mier, 2004) and *Mission* (Missie, 2007) he received no fewer than four awards. His controversial *Plea for Populism* (Pleidooi voor populisme, 2008) added two essay prizes to his haul. And *Congo, a history* (Congo, een geschiedenis, 2010) – in both literary and historical terms an unparalleled tour de force – was yet to come. In 2010 it won him the Libris History Prize and the prestigious AKO Prize for Literature – the first person to win both for the same book – as well as a shoal of lesser prizes and nominations which may seem hardly worth mentioning, but which would have had many authors jumping for joy.

Rather less than that might make you feel that the sky had fallen on you, even if to the public it might seem more like the seventh heaven. Whatever Van



Reybrouck touches turns to gold – or so it seems. But of course that comes at a price. Combined with the totally distracting media interest that is the inevitable result of all those prizes it doesn't just create pressure, as we said: how do you start afresh after you've written a history of Congo, how do you surpass yourself yet again when 'everyone' is already praising you to the skies? On top of which, staying with the image of King Midas, some people would rather set asses' ears on his head than a crown. By regularly making his views known in public debate the writer brands himself as an 'opinionist' who is spoiling the literary craft for more reserved, less mediagenic colleagues, since by comparison they are sidelined as autistic. And the content has also attracted criticism. The reproach that in *Congo* 'Western interventions are smoothed over' led to a vicious attack on his historical and literary methods. 'Nicely put together, but not an accurate reflection of the facts' was the pithy comment. As though for (literary-)aesthetic reasons Van Reybrouck was playing tricks with the truth.

This is a frequent criticism, and it goes to the heart of his position as an intellectual. In an attempt to make a good book Van Reybrouck has allegedly separated truth from beauty. His only novel, *Cast Shadow* (Slagschaduw, 2007), and his assorted poetry are supposed to illustrate this, little though

Near Kükës, Albania, 1999.  
Photo by Stephan Vanfleteren.

they have in common with the commitment he demonstrates elsewhere, for instance both as chairman of PEN Flanders and in his more opinionist work. But this is not just the result of faulty reading by his critics, it is also based on a dogmatic refusal to appreciate the true power of his commitment. Rather than being disconnected from each other, Van Reybrouck's writings and actions are linked by the constant focus on preserving, and where necessary restoring, the public arena as a precondition for democratic debate. Of course, that does not mean that everything he writes is a success: his play *N* (2006) and his novel are certainly no world-beaters. But it does help if one considers his words and actions on their own 21<sup>st</sup>-century merits, from his experiment with collective poetry up to and including his dedication to 'consultative or deliberative democracy'.

### **Disruption, steadily increasing**

Perhaps there is no better way of understanding the (actual) relationship between aesthetics and ethics in David Van Reybrouck's work than through the essay he wrote for *TLC 13* in 2005 about a war photo by Stephan Vanfleteren. The photo shows three Albanian Kosovar women who are fleeing the violence in their province after NATO started bombing Serbian targets in Spring 1999. Van Reybrouck describes how for five years he lived with that photo before his eyes, shaken as he was at the first sight of it, being confronted above all with the moral dilemma that NATO's use of force, with its 'humanitarian' motivation, posed for him at the time. 'What I do remember is disillusion, so immense, so furious that it had to be masking a deeper sorrow.' And also: 'Stephan Vanfleteren's photos left us in no doubt. In the context of the discourse about the horror of ethnic violence, they confirmed precisely the motivation for going to war [...]. We regarded those women with cool compassion. It was dreadful, but it would turn out all right.'

Five years later those feelings have disappeared. Only the piercing stare of the old woman in the foreground is left, along with the seemingly banal clouds in the background, to reflect Van Reybrouck's changed perception. Today he cannot describe his earlier reaction to the photo ('affected by its beauty, moved, touched') without 'a feeling of perversion'. Pictorial aesthetics and photographic analysis are replaced by international politics and retrospection: searching for the true facts as a historical antivenin for the appearance of beauty. The result of that retrospection is anger. 'But,' Van Reybrouck at once concedes, 'belated anger is also embarrassment.' And in his eyes it is precisely that 'Structure of Shame', as the essay's title puts it, that the photo exposes: a feeling that goes far deeper than merely being moved: 'That assumes some measure of resolve, steadfastness, even superiority', as he says it. 'Being moved is the melancholic counterpart of a smile, it is being briefly but superficially affected by an incident in the outside world. Being moved is also the empathetic side of pity.'

Averse both to being moved and to indignation ('which is yet another of those good-hearted sentiments'), with regard to his shame Van Reybrouck speaks at the end of the article of a steadily increasing sensation of disruption. And disruption seems to me to be the right word to describe the ethical relationship which results from the friction between an (aesthetic) image and its history

in Van Reybrouck's work. That very clearly covers more than just an insight into the futility of what happened and the relativity of every point of view: roughly speaking, the realisation that what seemed good at first turns out on closer inspection to be bad, and vice versa. Van Reybrouck was reproached for something like this by his fellow-writer Joris Note with regard to *Congo*. The images he uses in reconstructing the story of Lumumba, in particular – on the motorbike with Mobutu *in tempore non suspecto*, or the hand which is said to have stuck up for a while out of his grave – precisely because of their inclination to aesthetic effect they betray an ideological fiction which comes down to this: that any hope of change is pointless. 'A refined form of blinkered conservatism', so Note states flatly. In the end all that remains is *belles lettres*, a deftly told historical tale full of kitsch images, designed to promote... yes... melancholy.

The disruption is more fundamental than this, however. It is not a matter of an established, *a priori* insight into the relativity of things – as postmodernism asserted regarding Truth. On the contrary, it implies the experience of being wrenched out of one's superior point of view, including the idea that truth does not exist, so that room for discussion and consideration is again emerging; in short, so that once more such a thing as truth is in the debate. Disruption relates, then, to the emergence of a radical openness because truth is at work in someone: not as an established fact, but as a summons that enforces an ethical relationship, even if that means that to your genuine shame you have to acknowledge that you had it wrong. The basic condition for that is a sense of involvement. And that being so, it is no mere chance that when he looks back at the NATO bombing of Serbia Van Reybrouck refers to the tragic accident with the ski-lift at Cavalese in Northern Italy, close to the air force base from which the bombers took off and the place where a year earlier he lost five childhood friends – though he does not mention that. After all, for Van Reybrouck history is precisely that confluence of circumstances where sooner or later the small story impacts on the large one, an impact that on occasion can suddenly become visible in an image. History is complexity which implicates 'us'. And wherever this is revealed, however improbably, we find ourselves already 'involved'.

Van Reybrouck's involvement, though, goes further than that. Since it is a precondition of disruption, it also finds its goal in the openness that disruption creates. In other words, his involvement is not only the starting point of Van Reybrouck's work, the ultimate goal of his 'commitment' also relates to the room for discussion which that involvement creates, i.e. insofar as it is so profound as to cause a sense of disruption and is fundamentally receptive to other people's thinking. Van Reybrouck, then, is anything but the 'neutral middleman' that some people take him to be: someone whose work is, because of his uncritical treatment of both sources and words, neither historiography nor literature. Rather, he is a man who by exploring the friction between history and literature opens up a 'space' for negotiation between them, so that the topic in question again becomes a subject for discussion, the gage in a political battle. So this has nothing to do with ideological dithering. Now that our Western democracy is in crisis, partly due to the inability of our 'representatives' to abandon their fixed positions and engage in discussion, it seems to me to be quite the reverse: an emphatic gesture of contemporary commitment.

## A resistance called 'writing'

The most obvious example of that contemporary commitment is Van Reybrouck's involvement in the organisation of the G1000 Burgertop in November 2011. This was a voluntary civil initiative by a group of independent thinkers and doers who wanted and worked for a supplementary model of consultative democracy, as a response to the political crisis in Belgium and the crisis in representative democracy as a whole. The aim was 'to feed fresh oxygen into the political impasse and to show that democracy can be restored' by means of 'a frank and wide-ranging discussion between free citizens.' For according to the people behind the G1000, the root of the crisis lies in a short-circuit in the lines of communication between citizens and their politicians, not because of any gulf between them but because of overheating caused by the effect of the new media society. 'Citizens,' Van Reybrouck says somewhere, 'are more vocal but at the same time more powerless than ever, while the politicians are more high-profile but at the same time more desperate than ever.' By organising a genuinely meaningful discussion between free citizens, even if that lack of alignment was also their Achilles heel, they hoped to change matters for the better.

The G1000 was tailor-made for Van Reybrouck, as was apparent from the enthusiasm with which he used his literary fame and his energy in its support. And it follows seamlessly on from earlier work that had already demonstrated his concern for the functioning of press and Parliament. The volume of essays *What Belgium Stands For. A vision of the future* (Waar België voor staat. Een toekomstvisie, 2007), which he compiled with some of his 'brothers-in-arms', is a prime example of this. But in fact there is a continuity between his opinion-forming and his more literary work, and has been from the very beginning. A very early column he did for radio about a fatal explosion in the Nigerian capital Lagos, which killed far more people than a firework disaster in the Dutch town of Enschede, begins, seething with outrage: 'The Flemish quality papers each gave it a couple of lines.' The business logic behind this is something the first-person narrator of *Cast Shadow* (2007) will later experience for himself. As a freelance he notices how his suggestions for reports more and more often lose out to sponsored travel and leisure notes that fit in with the seasonal feelings of the reader, or rather the consumer. 'Private vices do not lead to public virtues', the Lagos column says. Fortunately, there exists a form of resistance called 'writing'.

That in his literary and essayistic utterances Van Reybrouck is looking for an alternative to the talk of privatisation that through the media has increasingly hijacked political speech – so much is evident. The monthly 'threatening letters' which he has written with Jeroen Theunissen in the journal MO\* since being elected chairman of PEN Flanders are proof of that, directed as they are at those of questionable commitment, such as the rocker Bono and Wikileaks guru Julian Assange. Sadly, with their direct, colloquial style the letters are not really convincing. Precisely because they thus seem to be addressing only the local reader, they have something of the playground bully about them. Better, then, *The European Constitution in Verse* (De Europese Grondwet in Verzen, 2009) which he and Peter Vermeersch put together with the Brussels Poets' Collective. Just as in his little experiment with Facebook poetry, compiled from reactions to a posted sentence from a newspaper about the formation of a government, here too the goal was through a harmonious multiplicity of voices to promote the speaking of a different language, as an alternative to the uniform



language used by the political and media hegemony. This did not always produce high-quality poetry, but perhaps that was not the intention; it is 'poetry from below', analogous with his historical writing in *Congo*.

The most recalcitrant example of Van Reybrouck's activism on behalf of voices 'from below', though, is his intellectually 'outrageous', politically incorrect *Plea for Populism* (Pleidooi voor populisme, 2008). He had already touched on the problem the previous year in *Cast Shadow* when the journalist-narrator, wondering about the interest in Flemish folklore-figures in his own reports, asks himself: 'Weren't we keeping ourselves busy providing the paper's well-educated, prosperous readership with a weekly helping of unadulterated authenticity from *La Flandre profonde*? Are we not guilty of the romantic glamorizing of all poor, uneducated or provincial people?' *Plea for Populism* opens with a scene which goes more deeply into the question: Van Reybrouck and his highly educated friends laughing with the common folk at the seaside. On the one hand the image is meant to be didactic, as elsewhere in Van Reybrouck, serving to illustrate the neglected problem of the gulf in education which in his pamphlet he identifies as the root cause of 'dark' contemporary populism. On the other hand, that same image also acts as an example of disruption, holding up to the intellectual, which Van Reybrouck himself first and foremost is, a mirror which forces him to fundamentally revise his original patronizing attitude.

David van Reybrouck (1971).  
G1000: citizens discussing  
politics, Brussels,  
11 November 2011.  
Photo by Stephan Vanfleteren.

Faced with a populism that threatens our very democracy, we are compelled to realise that the supposed cultural gap between right-thinking Left and narrow-minded Right actually follows the contours of a harder fault line: that between the highly- and the less well-educated. The success of the populist Right turns out to be mainly a case of powerless poorly-educated masses who are consistently cold-shouldered by the highly-educated establishment for which they are supposed to vote. That certainly does not justify their electoral behaviour, but it does add to the familiar explanation – that populism takes root most easily among those who are ‘afraid, angry or discontented’ – a further and more profound diagnosis. A cultural impoverishment is taking place among the less educated sections of the population who, regardless of their material prosperity, are poorly integrated into the community. The result: where educated people see advantages, in globalisation for example, the uneducated react mainly with fear or resentment at equality that never materialises. The point Van Reybrouck eventually makes here is not just that this fear must be acknowledged, or that this resentment has a legitimate place in our democracy, but above all that the well-educated too have to come up with an answer to that cultural impoverishment and its current political expression. In this sense his plea for an ‘enlightened populism’ is an attempt to explore the gap between the well- and the relatively un-educated and make it a topic of public debate.

## Entangled in history

When you come down to it, that system of research into intellectual attitudes, with the varying intermediate forms that it yields, probably provides the basic pattern of David Van Reybrouck’s writing. It is no coincidence that he began to write at the precise moment that he gave up his academic career as a researcher (in cultural history and archaeology). His monumental first work, *The Plague* (2001) makes the point in a literary form that is intermediate between research, travel story, autobiography and reportage. The research began when towards the end of his doctorate Van Reybrouck stumbled upon a bizarre accusation of plagiarism: in his *La vie des termites* (1926) the Belgian Nobel laureate Maurice Maeterlinck had supposedly plundered an article by the South African Eugène Marais. The non-fictitious quest that followed, though, should certainly not be called ‘literary’ simply because it is ‘beautifully’ described, or because it deals with this *petite-histoire littéraire*. It is ‘literary’ because it is an account of a metamorphosis: the genesis of a figure who changes the course of his own history and exchanges it for a future as a writer, not to prove himself, but because he has become entangled in a history the topicality of which he finds more and more disruptive.

‘Being gripped by a new research topic is a particular form of falling in love’, according to Van Reybrouck in the prologue to *The Plague*. In the first place he is intrigued by the figure of Eugène Marais and the story behind him. And that’s not surprising: ‘Anyone who tries to reconcile the impossible worlds of poetry, journalism and science can’t help making my heart beat faster. He is playing simultaneous chess with the three Aristotelian virtues – the beautiful, the good and the true.’ Beyond the initial recognition on which that fascination clearly rests, though, it also brings about an intellectual *volte-face*. His research into Marais sets him on the road to an experience which will radically change him:

the confrontation with present-day South Africa. The reason for this will later be tellingly summarised by the narrator of *Cast Shadow*: 'In Africa, history is not something from the past.' It is the beginning of a symbiosis between the expertise of the archaeologist and the politics of the writer which would eventually, ten years later, result in *Congo, a history*.

In fact, in the years between *The Plague* and *Congo* the same basic pattern systematically recurs, often with Africa playing the lead role. Like a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Pygmalion Van Reybrouck falls in love with a historical image which he 'brings back to life' by recollecting it, not out of nostalgia but in an attempt to have that history take a central place in public discussion. The image of the missionary in *Mission* (2007), a figure who is a composite of facts from numerous interviews, reactivates the colonial memory in order to discuss the theme of commitment and what underlies it in an age of permissiveness and fundamentalism. In his 2007 short novel *Cast Shadow*, which deals with press privatization, the narrator-journalist tries to rescue from total oblivion the historical truth behind the statue of Gabrielle Petit (a First World War Resistance heroine) on Sint Jans Square in Brussels. And the stage play *N* (2006) recounts the life of the French musician Raymond Borremans, a figure (à la Marais) whose *Grand Dictionnaire encyclopédique de la Côte d'Ivoire* is a forerunner of *Congo*, which itself appeared – not coincidentally – at the commemoration of fifty years (1960-2010) of the former Belgian colony's independence.

It is significant that time and again Van Reybrouck will dig up an image or, better, prise it out of the petrified layers of meaning under which passing time has buried it. This is not just a reminder of the archaeologist and cultural historian that he is by training. It also indicates the primordial importance of beauty, or of a pictorial experience of beauty, as a precondition of his personal involvement. There is no question here of a conflict between what is beautiful and what is true. Van Reybrouck too is someone who 'plays simultaneous chess with the three Aristotelian virtues'. His perception of beauty often relates to someone's 'life's work' or the ethical stance that it reveals: the Resistance heroine, the (socially committed) missionary. At the same time that perception serves as a starting point for research and more in-depth social analysis, because it tends to prevent jumping to conclusions and enforces further consideration.

## Hopeful polyphony

Van Reybrouck's committed appreciation of pictorial beauty appears at its best in the essays he has written on the work of some plastic artists who are friends of his. In *Belgicum* (2007), the first monograph on Vanfleteren's photographic work, he is concerned less with aestheticizing melancholy for the unique progressive project that unitary Belgium once was than with critical consideration of what is being lost, insofar as it is still visible today. In *Schei-seimmer* (2009) he wrote a text to accompany what can literally be called the life's work of the artist Koenraad Tinel: a series of 240 paintings in ink that describe, 65 years after the event, the fantastic happiness that Tinel experienced as the child of a 'blackshirt' during the Occupation, and the horror that that happiness turned into when he was grown up: stigmatised for what had happened, burdened with guilt and scarred for life.



The possibility of thinking differently which an image invariably opens up for Van Reybrouck has continued into his provisional magnum opus *Congo*. Around the middle of the book Van Reybrouck recalls the moment when he and his father, who had worked in Congo for a while, saw a really upsetting photo on the table in the dentist's waiting room; he was then aged ten or eleven. 'That photographer must have been standing very close to me,' his father told him. 'It happened right outside my door.' Later Van Reybrouck discovered that it is very far from being just a photo, as he had already recognised from 'the deadly fear in the man's eyes'; it was actually 'the most famous photo of the Katangese secession'. His father had been an eyewitness of the event. When he visited the spot in 2007, though, Van Reybrouck was not tempted to assume and breathe new life into the perspective of 'the colonial'. Rather, it provided a starting point for observing and portraying the changes in Congo over the past fifty years, with the maximum of personal involvement and with no timid focusing on the 'decline'.

'The windowless garage where for five years my father had parked his Ford Consul had now become an improvised prayer-house. I attended a service there. Some thirty of the faithful sat packed together on rickety wooden benches. In the half-darkness I saw glowing colours from the praying people. I thought of black-and-white photos. 1963 and 2007 merged into each other. My father had died the year before. The people sang splendidly.' (*Congo*, pp.335-336)

Looking more closely, one cannot imagine an image that would better express the hopeful harmony of voices that as a historian the writer envisaged in *Congo*. 'Every African who dies is an encyclopedia lost', as he put it in *N*. In *Congo* Van Reybrouck puts that principle into practice by bolstering his 'history from below' with numerous testimonies by Congolese, particularly the improbably distant but surprisingly accurate recollections of the – by his own reckoning – 128-year-old Etienne Nkasi (whose picture adorns the book's cover). That choice brought him not only praise but also criticism. Especially when one of his historically spectacular conversationalists proved unreliable (the man who claimed to be the figure seen stealing King Baudouin's sabre in the famous photo taken during Congo's Independence celebrations), some critics were extremely quick to cast doubt on the authenticity of the other Congolese contacts with whose aid Van Reybrouck added colour to his reconstruction. Under the mantle of scholarship they not only came out with exaggerated generalisations about the Congolese ('When they have no more stories to tell they will think some up, just for something to do. If they see that visitors are interested in their stories, and certainly if they think that those visitors have money in their pockets, they will try to keep them hooked'). The main object was to dispute Van Reybrouck's integrity and independence ('He was once allowed to share a stage with a Congolese musical star, who was consequently given an excessively large role in his history'), especially since he also got accused of having lapsed into 'pedantry', 'as is not uncommon with intellectuals who find themselves in a tight corner'.

I don't think Van Reybrouck should feel himself driven into a tight corner by such envy. In my opinion, the fact that for some journalists the concept 'intellectual' has now become a term of abuse is a greater cause for concern. In that context the slightly ironic question whether things will work out well for him depends mainly on the extent to which as a writer, in an anti-intellectual age, he can consistently give expression to the intellectual that he essentially is. That is no easy task, especially now that after a ten-year odyssey (from *The*

*Plague to Congo*) the African subject-matter of his writing is more or less exhausted. For a new play *In the Maize* (*In de maïs*), which unlike the monologue style of earlier work (*Mission, The Soul of the Ant*) will continue the use of multiple voices of *Congo*, Van Reybrouck has announced a return to the Westhoek, with its Dranouter Music Festival and its scars from the First World War. One should not, though, expect this to be a self-sufficient retreat into his own locality. More than most other Flemish writers, Van Reybrouck is able to weave a global perspective into his local histories, often through the way in which globalisation plays havoc with local lives. Take the words of Albert Camus that he quoted in his speech on receiving the Ark Prize: 'The artist forges himself in that eternal shuttling between himself and the others, somewhere halfway between the beauty he cannot do without and the community from which he cannot withdraw.' One might say that by his writing Van Reybrouck has expanded the Flemish community to which he belongs into an international community – affected by beauty, intrigued by history, focused on a future which rediscovers democracy. ■

*Translated by Tanis Guest*