

## 'Cast off the names that others had applied'

On the Poet Gerrit Achterberg

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[ P E T E R D E B R U I J N ]

The '*repulsive oeuvre of a dangerous psychopath*' or '*the Netherlands' greatest poet*': Gerrit Achterberg (1905-1962) is undoubtedly the most controversial figure in twentieth-century poetry. A hundred years after his birth he is still either acclaimed or reviled, as was apparent once again in the responses to the new edition of his *Poems* (Alle Gedichten) that appeared in 2005. In the same newspaper the poet and critic Piet Gerbrandy mercilessly pilloried the '*clumsy artificiality*' of this introverted '*monomaniac*', while critical elder statesman Kees Fens then defended '*the incomparable linguistic world*' of Achterberg's '*indestructible poetry*'. This was the latest controversy in a seemingly endless chain of disputes that flare up with increasing regularity. Meanwhile the repulsive oeuvre has found its way to at least a hundred thousand readers at home and abroad (it has been translated on numerous occasions into at least fourteen languages) and has been the subject of an estimated three thousand or more reviews and studies. Are all those readers and reviewers wrong?

### The poet and the landlady

The huge interest is not confined to the poet's work. On the publication of Achterberg's *Collected Poems* (Verzamelde gedichten) a year after his death, Dutch television broadcast a film about his life and work. The film broke what had hitherto been the 'Achterberg taboo' and revealed – albeit in fairly veiled terms – a tragic event in the poet's life: on 15 December 1937 Gerrit Achterberg shot dead his landlady and lover Roel van Es, also wounding her sixteen-year-old daughter. Achterberg was confined to a secure psychiatric hospital, and until 1944 received treatment in various institutions. During the poet's lifetime, his close friends and family had tried as far as possible to keep this secret from the outside world. In the film the veil was lifted a fraction for the first time, and in the torrent of reaction that followed the missing facts and details were finally made public. It became clear that Achterberg's endlessly repeated theme – reunion with a lost or dead lover – was based on a personal drama.

Since then Achterberg's literary 'you' figure and the landlady have been inextricably linked in standard works and school textbooks. And with that bio-

Gerrit Achterberg  
(1905-1962). Collection  
Letterkundig Museum,  
The Hague.



graphical knowledge at the back of one's mind the reader certainly finds that at first sight his work contains countless autobiographical references, in lines such as *'It's the very same December/ of your death./ You don't remember'* and *'This girl is in her sixteenth year./ Take these her breasts and have no fear./ she says, your hands long to hold them near'*. No wonder that many 'ordinary' readers became fascinated, and that 'professional readers' like Gerbrandy and Fens have been arguing for decades about the perennial question whether the biographical background is or is not a factor in experiencing Achterberg's poetry and whether – this was the subject of a national debate three years ago – there was any justification for wanting to read the chilling creations of such a *'psychopathic necrophiliac'*. This placed Achterberg in a rich international line of flawed geniuses.

If one reads this poetry as poetry – as is clear from contemporary responses, long before all the revelations – one discovers that Achterberg's work *also* belongs to an ancient metaphysical tradition: the absent 'you' figure is not a clearly defined person, but a symbol of the elusive Other for which mankind has been searching since time immemorial. Seen in that light, Achterberg's attempts to restore the lost harmony constitute one of the many undertaken to heal the rift in existence. His search is universal, however much personal misery it is based on and possibly motivated by. Increasingly the striving for reunion coincides with finding the magic word, writing the perfect poem. And this also makes Achterberg a modern poet, searching for the linguistic potential of poetry. The receptive reader can see a development in Achterberg's 'monomania', which resulted in his constant reclassification within the literary tradition and finally brought him fame, however relative that fame subsequently proved to be.

## The poet of the dunghill

The contrast with Achterberg's early life and poetry could not be greater. He was born on 20 May 1905 into a simple farming family in the hamlet of Neerlangbroek, a poor backwater in the province of Utrecht. It was a world of strict Protestant orthodoxy, where – as the poet was to put it in one of his later poems – *'religion hung heavily from the roofbeams'*. Gerrit was the only member of the family not to go into farming and was allowed to train as a teacher. During this period he discovered Dutch literature, and together with a friend started writing poetry. In their youthful enthusiasm they found a local printer prepared to publish their efforts under the title *The Songs of Two Men in Their Twenties* (De zangen van twee twintigers, 1925). The two worked hard to sell the small edition of 250 copies in their village, celebrating each sale with a box of cigarillos (at present second-hand copies of the little volume fetch a cool 3,000 euros!).

Achterberg's enthusiasm about this debut was short-lived. He soon realised that the volume was *'worthless'* and anxiously kept his youthful peccadillo secret: *'What is not good, was never written.'* The poems in the collection certainly show very little resemblance to his later work: they are childishly clumsy, edifying and above all rural tableaux featuring a faraway heron, a distant tramp, a belated traveller, in which the emptiness of life fills the young poet with nostalgia: *'Oh, sweet life's melancholy, I weep with you, I weep!'* Yet these inoffensive poems contain the germ of the fascination with absence and death that will dominate the later work – there is even mention of a *'lost lover'* – although that fascination here assumes an exclusively one-dimensional and sometimes morbid form, as in the description of a dead *'rigid body'* in a *'narrow box'*: *'there lies the corpse's carapace,/ the nails grab at the box's side, / a few sporadic twitches/ of the dear life that's died.'* How different is the conciliatory tone in the poem 'Trinity' that Achterberg wrote three years later:

*How sweet it is, the alliance we've made,  
yourself and death and I.  
To think that love has lost nothing at all  
in achieving such peace at last.*

In Achterberg's 'official' debut collection *Casting Off* (Afvaart, 1931), in which this poem was included, reunion with the absent beloved, in death or in a new life, is a prominent theme. From the very first poem it is clear that ruptured existence (the *'old wound'*) can be healed only in the poem itself (*'in this place'*):

*Across this land alone  
I roamed, but this land has no end  
and now I stray inside of you;  
our old wound that would not mend,  
will you begin to heal in this place,  
or sting us even fiercer?*

*Casting Off* is a thoroughly romantic collection, partly also because of the atmosphere evoked: *'These overcast afternoon poems are full of rain, dusk, snow and sadness,'* wrote the poet and critic Martinus Nijhoff, *'and in this atmosphere*

*a poet and his dead love wander like ghosts, together for one last time, through the vague infinity of country roads shrouded in fog*. Still, the personal voice found by Achterberg in  *Casting Off*  was welcomed by most critics as a pleasant surprise. J.C. Bloem wrote that it was years since he had been so struck by a talented and original debut, and others too discerned an individual poetic voice: warm, profound, elegiac and natural. Roel Houwink, who wrote an introduction to the collection, talks of a still  *'virgin primitive quality'*, which he associates with Achterberg's farming background:  *'The imaginative realm of this young poet lies somewhere deep in the country in the basin of a still, clear watercourse; it adjoins the pigsty and the dunghill, and in winter it is advisable to wear clogs.'*

### **The poet of the sarcophagus**

After the fateful events of 1937 those publishing Achterberg's work were sensitive to its possible repercussions on his personal situation. His literary friends hoped that the appearance of a new collection of poetry would accelerate his referral to care in the community, and the composition of the collection was subordinated to that hope. The compilers decided, for example, that the cycle 'Sixteen' – including the poem quoted above – should be omitted, given the circumstances of Achterberg's 'case', because of its over-direct sexual references to the sixteen-year-old daughter of the landlady.  *Island of the Soul*  (Eiland der ziel, 1939) does on the other hand contain various 'neutral' poems, which are not, or only obliquely, connected to the central theme, but take their inspiration from the outside world: the visual arts (Jan Toorop, Henri Rousseau, Théophile Alexandre Steinlen), music ( *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* , Ravel's  *Bolero* ) and the Bible (the journalistic 'Traveller "Does" Golgotha'). Other striking inclusions are the light-hearted 'The Poet is a Cow' ( *'... I meet/ my shape in ditches when I drink,/ and looking at my head, I think:/ how come that cow is upside-down?'* ), and the nostalgic 'Hulshorst', about a country station in the wooded Veluwe National Park (the regular rendezvous point for Achterberg and his first fiancée):

*Hulshorst, your name is like  
 abandoned iron, amid the pines  
 and bitter conifers  
 your station rusts;  
 where the north-bound train  
 stops with desolate grating,  
 letting no one on  
 no one off, oh, minutes  
 when I hear a faint waft  
 like an ancient legend  
 from your woods: grim gang  
 of robbers, rank and rough  
 from Veluwe's white heart.*

Even the critic with the deepest dislike of Achterberg's  *'monotonous obscurity'* was forced to admit that this was  *'a perfect poem'*, and also found the other

'breakthroughs' in the collection 'very striking'. Indeed, for the leading poet and critic Hendrik Marsman the diversity found in *Island of the Soul* was proof that Achterberg's work 'ranks among the most important modern Dutch poetry'.

So *Island of the Soul* was a literary success, but did not bring the hoped-for social changes for Achterberg. The struggle for rehabilitation continued, conducted by the poet with the only means at his disposal: his work. 'If my work is anything, it has been written solely in hope, first and foremost in the hope of getting out of here.' Poetry is literally a matter of life and death. Between 1940 and 1946 Achterberg published no less than eleven new volumes of poetry, and in the three subsequent years a further five. The titles of the collections indicate that since *Island of the Soul* other worlds have penetrated Achterberg's poetry, namely the exact sciences (*Osmose, Limiet, Radar, Energie*), classical antiquity (*Thebe, Eurydice, Sphinx*) and fairy tales (*Doornroosje* – Sleeping Beauty and *Sneeuwitje* – Snow White).

The volumes gained Achterberg the reputation of being a modern but obscure poet, a 'magician', an 'alchemist' or a 'stray medicine man', to mention a few tags used by contemporary critics to pin down the Achterberg phenomenon. The endless variety of 'non-poetic' words and concepts especially give his work an encyclopaedic quality, as the autodidact Achterberg readily admits:

*Eighteen amino acids gave shape  
to the protein from which you grew,  
this lexicon tells me it's true.  
Out of the window in awe I gape.*

But of course, via those scientific facts the trail inevitably leads back to the death of the 'you' figure:

*Measure and potential comprise  
the unit to value your demise.  
Graphically I track you down.*

'He has been speaking for whole collections to an alabaster statue of the beloved beside him on the tomb', wrote Bertus Aafjes in his essay 'The Poet of the Sarcophagus', and was the first to venture to call Achterberg's quest 'crazy', since the poet is trying to reconcile the irreconcilable – life and death – which is possible only in the extra-rational world of the poem. 'Don Quixote in the Underworld' is another significant tag given to the poet at this time, except that Achterberg is both more normal and crazier than Cervantes' hero: more normal because he *knows* that he is fighting windmills, crazier because he nevertheless continues the struggle. The more hopeless things appear to him, the more obsessively Achterberg clings to the resources of poetry:

*I forge the word  
called after you,  
and I exist  
by dint of this  
busy and blind activity.*

## Poet and mathematician

After his 'release' from eight years' detention in institutions and home care – though he remained under official supervision until 1955 – Gerrit Achterberg led a relatively peaceful existence. By doing simple administrative work from home, he was able to earn a living and apart from that devote all his energy to poetry. In 1946 he married his childhood sweetheart Cathrien van Baak, and the couple moved into a number of rooms in a farm complex in Neede, a locality near Hoonte in the Achterhoek on the German border. Hoonte gives its name to his first 'neutral' collection, containing poems that fall outside his central theme. The title poem 'Hoonte' breathes the paradisaical calm that has descended on the poet:

*I've never savoured nature so  
as here in Hoonte in the Achterhoek.  
'Mariahoeve' is the tall farm's device.*

*Here the moments can gain depth and grow  
enough to be an ever-open book  
in which I can imagine paradise.*

Meanwhile the torrent of poetry of recent years had not gone unnoticed or been in vain. In 1950 Achterberg was the first Dutch poet to be awarded the P.C. Hooft Prize, the state prize for literature, as 'the most gifted representative of the metaphysical current in European poetry'. This was the first official honour he received for his work, although it was not his whole oeuvre that was crowned, but only a very small part of it: the orthodox-Christian *And Jesus Wrote in the Sand* (En Jezus schreef in 't zand, 1947). Quite apart from this official recognition Achterberg was regarded as a very important poet, precisely because of the new poetic avenues that he opened up. While the poetry of the rest of his generation was ditched as old-fashioned by the experimentalist Young Turks of the 1950s, Achterberg was revered as the major living poet, the 'Prince of Poets'.

Remarkably, at this very period Achterberg's poetry became more traditional in form. While the Dutch poetic landscape was undergoing a drastic renewal and Achterberg was singled out as its main precursor, he presented himself increasingly as a formalistic poet, the 'mathematician of poetry' (Bert Voeten). His collections consisted almost exclusively of sonnets and were largely cyclical. The main theme does not essentially change, though it is qualified: 'Sometimes I think it's no longer about you/and find myself losing track of you in me'. At the same time the personal problems are objectified by having someone else pursue the quest for the 'you' figure (*Ballad of the Gasman*), by locating it elsewhere (*Ode to The Hague*), or by presenting it as an illusory performance (*Game of the Wild Hunt*, which is constructed like a play). The poetry of these years can be characterised by Simon Vestdijk's description of the latter collection: 'Hermetic humour'. Achterberg remains an unrelenting systematist, but qualifies an overly absolutist approach to his central theme through self-irony. He takes a 'holiday' from his work:

*Vacationer, a stranger in the present,  
I roam through Africa, enjoy my fling  
say letters home; they don't suspect a thing.*

[...]  
*the main thing is to lose myself while here;*

[...]  
*to be another, occupy his skin,  
 with ID, purse, suit, watch, hat begin,  
 braces, pumps, underwear, necktie and pin,  
 bygones are bygones; in his shoes as it were,  
 I reach a white town, and without a stir  
 greet you in the lobby checking in.*

## Poet

Bygones are bygones. In 1959 Gerrit Achterberg received the prestigious Constantijn Huygens Prize for his whole oeuvre, as a token of appreciation for a poet who 'throughout his poetic lifetime' had remained true to his 'high poetic calling'. This apparently marked the end of the poet's life. His low visible productivity in these years was interpreted as a decline in creativity: it was thought that he regarded his poetry as complete. The critics detected mainly frustration, depression and resignation in his last collection *Oblivion* (Vergeetboek, 1961), and wondered whether Achterberg was capable of developing in a new direction.

However, the view that the poet was 'burnt out', had done what he had to do and was resting on his laurels, is contradicted by a statement of his own, in an interview also from 1959: 'If I have to go on trying to my dying day, I shall keep going.' At this period Achterberg immersed himself in new developments in astronomy and nuclear physics. On his sudden death in 1962, drafts for that new cycle were found in his study: forty or so manuscripts containing poems in progress, and notes on his reading. There were also two finished poems: 'Critical Mass' and 'Anti-Matter'. According to his widow, he planned to strike out in a completely different direction in his work. It is impossible to say what that direction was, and what effect it might have had on his reputation. Nor does it matter at this point, as witness 'Epitaph', the poem that quite appropriately was to be inscribed on Achterberg's own tomb:

*From death to death he went, until he died.  
 Cast off the names that others had applied.  
 Saving this stone, with its inscription:  
 The poet of the verse that will abide. ■*

## Two Poems

by Gerrit Achterberg

### Charlady

She knows the underneath of wardrobe and of bed,  
rough wooden floorboards and forgotten nooks,  
and crawling forward on all fours she looks  
less like a human than a quadruped.

Her life to lower surfaces is wed;  
she toils away to beautify their looks  
for feet of grocers, preachers, men of books,  
since rank and station cannot be gainsaid.

God will one day find her on His floor  
working towards His throne down golden lanes,  
with brush and dustpan she comes banging on.

Symbols resound like cymbals at death's door  
– and see, to make a mockery of her pains,  
there await the parson, the baker and the don.

From *Hoonte* (1949)

Translated by Paul Vincent

### Werkster

Zij kent de onderkant van kast en ledikant,  
ruwhouten planken en vergeten kieren,  
want zij behoort al kruipend tot de dieren,  
die voortbewegen op hun voet en hand.

Zij heeft zichzelf aan de vloer verpand,  
om deze voor de voeten te versieren  
van dichters, predikanten, kruidenieren,  
want er is onderscheid van rang en stand.

God zal haar eenmaal op Zijn bodem vinden,  
gaande de gouden straten naar Zijn troon,  
al slaande met de stoffer op het blik.

Symbolen worden tot cymbalen in de  
ure des doods – en zie, haar lot ten hoon,  
zijn daar de dominee, de bakker en de frik.



## Ichthyology

They've found a coelacanth in the sea,  
the missing link between two kinds of fish.  
The finder wept, at its discovery,  
in wonderment. The age-long broken chain

lay for the first time close beneath his eyes.  
And everyone who stood around the fish  
felt at that moment quite consumed by all  
the thousand thousand years that stretched behind.

Order from man down to the dinosaur  
and from the dinosaur deep into dust,  
further than all our instruments can reach.

Aware of this, we may pretend as though  
the order upwards is the same, and so  
be able to look in on God at lunch.

From *Cenotaph* (Cenotaaf, 1953)  
Translated by James S Holmes

## Ichthyologie

Er is in zee een coelacanth gevonden,  
de missing link tussen twee vissen in.  
De vinder weende van verwondering.  
Onder zijn ogen lag voor 't eerst verbonden

de eeuwen onderbroken schakeling.  
En allen die om deze vis heenstonden  
voelden zich op dat ogenblik verslonden  
door de miljoenen jaren achter hen.

Rangorde tussen mens en hagedis  
en van de hagedis diep in de stof,  
verder dan onze instrumenten reiken.

Bij dit besef mogen wij doen alsof  
de reeks naar boven toe hetzelfde is  
en kunnen zo bij God op tafel kijken.

The Dutch texts of the poems are taken from: Gerrit Achterberg,  
*Alle Gedichten* (Eds. Peter de Bruijn, Edwin Lucas and Fabian R.W. Stolk).  
Amsterdam: Athenaeum – Polak & Van Gennep, 2005. Vol. 1, pp. 657 and 812.

Recently, translated poems by Achterberg have also appeared in the Winter 2005/6 issue of the  
*Poetry Review* ([www.poetrysociety.org.uk/review.htm](http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/review.htm))