



Leonard Nolens
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Winner of the Dutch Literature Prize

The Dutch Literature Prize, the most important literary award in the Dutch language area, was presented to the Antwerp poet Leonard Nolens (b. 1947) by Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands at the end of 2012. Since his debut with *Orpheushanden* (Orpheus hands, 1969), Nolens has published more than twenty poetry collections and five diaries. The anthologies *Manieren van leven. Gedichten 1975-2011* (Ways of living. Poems 1975-2011) and *Dagboek van een dichter* (A poet's diary)¹ each number more than a thousand pages.

The picture that emerges from Nolens' diaries is one of someone balancing between shunning and accepting publicity: a hermit writer who at the same time participates in the artistic life of Antwerp. Those who consider such things important are firmly put straight by Nolens: 'The diary isn't there to tell the story of your days, but to recount what they do with you'. Backing up this standpoint, the scarce anecdotal material serves to support his vision of poetry as something that is absolutely rooted in life, that flows through the finest blood vessels, and as something in which Nolens has invested himself totally. He is someone who has 'made a profession of his soul'.

Nolens' poems are both an analysis of that

soul and a justification of his existence, his birth certificate. Without poetry, this poet does not exist. No surprise, then, that virtually all his collections begin with one or more 'birth poems'. Nolens then repeatedly confronts the identity that he has brought to life in his poetry with love (a second crucial theme in his work) and with a series of questions on how to live. He also not infrequently addresses other poets - linguistic compatriots and contemporaries, but also major dead poets such as Eugenio Montale, Osip Mandelstam, Paul Celan, Joseph Brodsky. These poems are homages, all of which also serve to define the place of Nolens himself.

Focused on communication as it is, this is a highly rhetorical and musical poetry. Nolens has given a strong impetus to a tradition which appeared outmoded. That is not simply a question of metre and rhyme: repetitions, shifts, contrasts, changes in tempo - his arsenal of musical techniques is inexhaustible; every single word contributes to an often stupefying array of sound variations.

For Nolens, music is a matter not just of form, but of an attitude to life. In his own words, he seeks to imbue his poetry with the 'musically controllable tone of honesty'; 'the notes of a musical grammatology' enable him to write 'a rounded text which gave me (...) a childhood of

song and vibrancy, swaddled me in a warmth that was later lost in this adult universe which has lost the ability to resonate'. This is a reference to the major role played by music in his childhood. In the well-to-do bourgeois family in which Nolens grew up, in the little Limburg town of Bree, the grand piano was a constant companion. At the same time, as he writes in one of the many poems in which Bree figures, his family was 'a family of businessmen, teachers, priests, / Men who know the value of a word, the meaning of a number'.

As so often, this apparently prosaic observation is a subtle amalgamation of concepts, with the juxtaposition of 'meaning', which in the first instance is associated with 'word', and 'value' which alludes to 'number' [in Dutch, the distinction is even finer, with *berekent* (= calculate) being switched with *betekent* (= mean)]. Nolens also repeatedly juxtaposes personal and possessive pronouns as a way of intimately linking personae, as in the final line of one of his 'birth poems': 'I cannot leave my room of yours'.

In recent collections, Nolens has increasingly become a commentator on his time and his generation. In *Bres* (2004), he presents a critique of the 1960s in poetic form. Where the slogan in 1968 was 'all power to the imagination', Nolens focuses attention on those who were striving for the same things at that time, but who wished to express themselves more subtly than through slogans: 'We were not some poetic theme of Mao. / We thought, we are making our own poetry. / We thought, we are making history here / On the quiet'.

And in his most recent collection, *Zeg aan de kinderen dat wij niet deugen* ('Tell the children we're no good', 2011), Nolens turns his attention to the legacy we will leave behind: 'Tell the children we're no good. / They'll have to pay for the dung pit, the cesspit / That we dug in our field of clouds, they'll have to / Clear out the celestial sewers, that dumping ground / Of shit and azure that the Ancients sang of'.

But even in this strongly ethical and socially critical poetry, music continues to dominate, the language dances. Nolens is like a dervish² who dances his truth to life.

AD ZUIDERENT

Translated by Julian Ross

NOTES

1. See *The Low Countries*, XIX, 2011, pp. 92-101.
2. *Derwisj* (Dervish) is also the title of a Leonard Nolens collection published in 2003.