

## How Free Is Dutch-Language Poetry?

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[ PIET GERBRANDY ]

The word is free. Like Gezelle's swift it soars through the immeasurable space of the mind, lifted up or blown along by cool or sultry winds from distant parts, by 'Luft von anderem Planeten', as Stefan George has it. Nothing and no one can thwart its vitality and urge to freedom, however much social institutions, small-minded moralism, money or terror try to subjugate it. The poet's soul is linked to an origin that no church or chancellery will ever domesticate.

I know, this is romantic enthusiasm in which I only half believe myself. Perhaps it is more an ideal to strive for, a benchmark to hold on to desperately, because without faith in the possibility and sense of creativity we might just as well shut up shop. And why should poetry have the best papers to claim the domain of total freedom for its own, rather than music, theatre, film or sculpture? Because it needs nothing but a thinking brain and a hand that can hold a pencil? No money is involved with poetry, the poet needs no studio, he doesn't need to hire an orchestra or acquire a camera. And because he knows from the outset that 'little profit' is to be expected from poetry, as the poet of Beatrijs puts it, he doesn't put his energy into marketing strategies. In short, even if you approach poetry from an economic perspective, it should be able to move among people unimpeded, like breath, light or pheromones.

Yet this vision is also too romantic. Behoud de Begeerte, the Poet Laureate, Poetry International, the VSB Poetry Prize, Perdu, Nooit meer slapen, the School der Poëzie, *De Standaard*, the Herman de Coninck Prize, the *Poëziekrant*, De Bezige Bij, the Tuinfeest in Deventer, Uitgeverij P., De Wintertuin, the Poet Laureate of Antwerp, the Writers' Professional School, *De Morgen*, The Netherlands Poetry Centre, *De Gids*, the World Slampionship, *Menander*, the Turing Prize, the Foundation for Literature – I could continue this list effortlessly for at least another page, there are so many agencies that concern themselves intensively or even exclusively with poetry. For about the past ten years every self-respecting town or city has had a Poet Laureate, poems grace walls in Leiden and pavements in Leeuwarden, scores of Dutch and Flemish publishing houses bring out at least two metres of poetry collections a year, every month there is a festival somewhere, no exhibition is complete without an obligatory poet. Although I suspect that the total sum circulating in the sector would make



any bank manager or consultant chuckle, it is also clear that poets also form part of the commercial circuit – and at a time that, so they say, is plagued with financial crises. Do they actually still exist, the poets who retreat into their hut or garret to devote themselves exclusively to words? More than that, have there ever been such poets?

*Untitled, 2001,*  
Acrylic, acrylmedium on paper,  
31.7 x 42.2 cm

## No centre anymore

Anyone reviewing the landscape of the Dutch-language poetry of the last few years is bound to note that it is flourishing, that it is characterised by an enormously multifaceted structure and that, considering its negligible economic importance, its virtually complete disappearance from education and the low level of social relevance usually attributed to it, it is extraordinarily visible. Of course, there are different circuits and one poet is more successful than another, but a thousand voices can be heard, and they are well looked after. What does this mean for what all those poets have got to say? Does *anything goes* imply that unknown vistas are actually being explored? To what extent are people aware that they are imbedded in social and economic structures? And are globalisation, ecological disasters, Islamist barbarity and unsustainable migration making their influence felt on an art form that could afford to be as free as the ancient song of the thrush?



*Untitled, 2001,*  
Acrylic, acrylicmedium on paper,  
22.2 x 29.9 cm

True freedom is an illusion. Moreover, resistance and limitations force one to be inventive and creative. Where everything is possible and permissible there is no point to anything. Goethe rightly observes: 'In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister, / Und das Gesetz nur kann uns Freiheit geben.' If I look at the Dutch poets who really count at the moment, I see that they are struggling with the limiting frameworks imposed on them by human nature, by socio-economic factors and by the supposed laws of literature itself. In this respect their situation is not basically different from that of all other poets in world literature, but they do look for new forms for it.

However, it is not that easy to establish which poets can at this moment be included among the grandmasters. In recent years a number of undisputed leading lights have been lost to us: Hugo Claus (1929-2008), Rutger Kopland (1934-2012), Gerrit Kouwenaar (1923-2014), Leo Vroman (1915-2014) and H.H. ter Balkt (1938-2015). Of living poets who have won the major prizes, none has the stature to hold a candle to the aforementioned icons. Leonard Nolens (1947), Anneke Brassinga (1948), Tonnus Oosterhoff (1953) and Nachoem M. Wijnberg (1961), for example, are regarded as good poets, but do not really

stand out from the scores of others by whom a collection occasionally appears. Probably that has less to do with quality than with the fact that poetry no longer has a centre. We no longer think in hierarchical patterns and, apart from that, poetry criticism has gradually shifted from its fixed place in authoritative dailies to the diffuse world of the web. Consequently I don't think Claus and Kouwenaar will have successors, and perhaps that is just as well. If I mention a few names below that I consider of importance, it is a fairly arbitrary selection from an overwhelming choice.

## In the shadow of tradition

Tonnus Oosterhoff is known as an innovator. He was the first poet of repute to begin experimenting with the possibilities of digital poetry. On his website poems appear that change shape as one reads them, as if to stress the provisional nature of every statement. In some of his collections he disturbed the typography of his poems by adding notes in his own handwriting, as if the reader had only a rough version in his hands. However revolutionary these formal procedures may be, they cannot hide the fact that Oosterhoff's themes are overwhelmingly traditional, because he writes about loss, transience and futility. The final poem of *Wij zagen ons in een kleine groep mensen veranderen* (We Saw Ourselves Change into a Small Group of People, 2002), in itself a title that evokes the omnipresence of death, seems to achieve a harsh departure from both language and life. 'Go on,' he says, 'demolish this house / Use my pneumatic hammer'. If in the second stanza there is still talk of a summer barbecue, a little later it is already autumn and a storm is brewing. The text is presented as a still fragmentary whole to which a few suggestions have been added by hand. For example, the third stanza ends with the printed letters 'ades', preceded by three possible words to fill in, two of which are legible enough to give 'galoppades' and 'Hades'. When at the bottom of the poem a deeply religious song is quoted three times, 'Ach wie nichtig, ach wie flüchtig' ('Ah how insubstantial, ah how fleeting') it is as clear as day that in terms of content Oosterhoff has little to add to Sappho, Horace and J.C. Bloem. He is aware of the limited scope of the mayflies that we are.

Runa Svetlikova (1982), who was awarded the Herman de Coninck Prize for the best debut in Flanders, also produced a collection, *This Soft White Room*, in which the fragility of both the world and human existence is central. The book is structured in an idiosyncratic way, referring to recent scientific research, and here and there cultivates a certain casualness in style, but what she is speaking about is located in the all-too-familiar terrain of love and death. In one of the best poems a child is born: 'Every birth is an infectious wound / so I don't hold it right up against me,' reads the opening. Then the 'thing materialised in my arms' is regarded with disbelief, when the young parents realise that something has been produced 'with at least as great a capacity / for horror as we have'. Once they get home 'we lay it carefully between us: as if this child / could detonate at any moment'. It is a feeling that many mothers and fathers will recognize: that you have brought something into the world that on the one hand is a part of yourself, but on the other hand an alien being that you will never be able to fathom.

Svetlikova allows herself the freedom to create her own universe, but the elementary building blocks have been established for thousands of years – or actually since the Big Bang. The first poem in the collection is called ‘A Big Bang’ and begins with the sober observation:

*Nothing more is needed than distance to see us as we are  
the growth and dying off of temporary structures, light  
in the darkness in the light we grow in all directions, proliferate*

In the last poem, ‘The Big Rewind – Revisited’, the cycle of expansion and contraction is complete, perhaps ready to start again: ‘we all fall back into the same bang. There is only beginning –’. Not only these themes, but also the fact that the duration of the universe coincides with the course of the collection itself, so that the cosmological layer acquires a metapoetical layer, are traditional through and through.

### **Refugee camps should preferably be on the horizon**

Other poets focus on the way in which mankind has ordered the world. It is not only scientific laws that determine our scope, we are also governed by structures and concepts that we have produced ourselves. Political activism may be rare in Dutch-language poetry, but that by no means implies that the alarming reality of racism, terror and environmental devastation do not appear as themes. In ‘Wwwwwhoooshh’, the last poem in *The Herald of Something Great* (2006), Dirk van Bastelaere sketches a modern dystopia which he constantly interrupts with quotes from a German work on political systems: ‘*Der Faschismus an der Macht ist / die äußerste Systemsicherung in äußersten Krisenlagen / des monopolbestimmten Kapitalismus.*’

Then he writes:

*Begin again with the sun, which is sailing to nowhere, a pure event, a catastrophe with no quarter given or ‘powerful voice’. No religion is involved. No anthropomorphism. ‘In four billion years’ time your phenomenology and utopian politics will be dead and there will be no one to sound or hear the death knell.’ Nature ignores our existence, that much is clear. The only remaining question is whether here and now you have a sore throat, stroke her shaved mons Veneris, smell petrol vapour, feed the cats or like Harrison Ford in Blade Runner are uncertain about your ‘life’.*

So even in the poetry of Van Bastelaere, heavily charged with political theory, the cosmological perspective is not missing.

That also applies to the work of Mustafa Stitou (1974). In *Pig-Pink Postcards* (2003) he depicts a soulless new estate, where, despite the cheerful ideology of progress and financial security, suspicion and petty-mindedness rule:





*The Gaze*, 2004,  
Acrylic on wood, 23.7 x 32.2 cm

*Here pioneers are little shits or criminals*

*and those who can't be categorised go  
in a separate box – parlours teem  
with rumours about a paedophile neighbour*

*and refugee camps should preferably  
be seen on the horizon, in that way one can tell  
the good from the black.*

The series in which these lines occur, has an epistemological as well as an anthropological tenor, since the poet speaks several times of 'underlying what shows itself, / what shows itself what shows itself'. How knowable is the world? That is not exactly a new question. The fact that Stitou is fond of his classics also emerges when we see that this series is made up of tercets. Suburbia is hell, that much is clear.

## Familiar rhythms

For a third group of poets it is precisely those ancient literary conventions that limit the freedom of poetry. With a degree of self-mockery Leonard Nolens looks back at his period of *Sturm und Drang*, which has produced depressingly little new. That can indeed be seen from the form of his poems, on which a well-tried rhetorical order has been imposed:

*We rewrote Athens, Schubert and Rembrandt  
In the tongue of our vanished home region.  
We wrote theses on our personal pathos.  
We gave our heart a degree.  
We gained doctorates in lyricism.  
We set our sights on many forward positions  
Without status. We couldn't find our feet.*

Our feet, says Nolens, searched for a point of attachment in 'the thread of old traditions'. No wonder that Nolens' poetry is so popular: readers feel at home in familiar rhythms.



*Mirrorbook*, 2006,  
Acrylic, acrylmedium on paper,  
16.9 x 24.2 cm

## Sowing confusion

However, there are also a few young poets who are actually campaigning to ditch literary tradition. The most interesting of them is undoubtedly Maarten van der Graaff (1987), who in 2014 won the Buddingh' Prize for the best Dutch-language debut. In *Getaway Car Poems* he cheerfully dispatches his predecessors.

*I saw Rutger Kopland hunting in blind panic for that and that poem. Tonnus Oosterhoff may die amazingly early, or he'll die on the motorway with a dog in the boot. Jules Deelder must die on the platform. H.H. ter Balkt will be standing weeing by the side of the road and then it will happen. Not like he has lived, because dying that way is sentimental and besides that a lie. Duinker doesn't get anything and grows old. Whistling he receives the Dutch Literature Prize.*

Van der Graaff sees the traditional forms as *passé*, and enjoys sowing confusion, but his personal commitment is great. He could grow into a poet of great stature.

Yet not even Van der Graaff rejects the possibility of assigning meaning. He is sharp and rebellious, but his world is ours. With Marc Kregting (1965), even meaning and coherence sometimes go out of the window. In *Our Nietzsche. Catechisms* (2014) he appears to juxtapose separate sentences haphazardly. True, the text is constructed in such a way that after a while you start to discover leit-motifs, but the whole radically resists interpretation. Surprisingly enough this chaos is not only highly amusing, but even has a conjuring effect. That comes from the rhythmic effect of the separate sentences and the sound repetitions with which they are linked together, which ensure that the text does not disintegrate at the auditory level. This is an arbitrary fragment:

*Apart from that our Nietzsche has nothing to complain about after going bankrupt. The clocks can be restarted with relief. Where is the inspector? You mustn't cycle without a G-string. The almighty cannot bear that. That will cost her a reprimand from behind. Does that smell like an extra round of Paris Camembert? And are you coming in? 'Tolerance is conditional, elaborate, anxious hospitality,' says Jacques.*

Despite destroying most aspects which have made poetry poetry for the last few centuries, Kregting maintains precisely the principal element that underlies the poetic experience, and that is its physical manifestation. Language without semantic coherence continues to fascinate, as long as it is supported by sound and rhythm.





*Untitled*, 2006,  
Acrylic, acrylic medium on paper,  
18.5 x 28.6 cm

## The age of one-sided movements has gone

Dutch-language poetry, in short, is multifaceted, alive and well. Its social imbeddedness may have changed, the advent of the internet has created new opportunities for publication, old forms are adapted or rejected, 'the age of one-sided movements has gone', to quote Lucebert. But ultimately poets are still doing what they have always done, with the freedom and the limitations which also characterise the flight of the swift and the song of the thrush. That is a hopeful thought. ■

*Translated by Paul Vincent*

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