The Fierce Talent of an Unpolished Chronicler

Dimitri Verhulst's Prose

[ELSBETH ETTY]

When Flemish author Dimitri Verhulst (b. Aalst, 1972) took the literary world by surprise with his tragicomic autobiographical novel *The Misfortunates* (*De helaasheid der dingen*) in 2006 he was still a complete unknown. Of the nine books he had published since 1992, the only one that had received any attention was *Problemski Hotel* (2003), a fictionalized reportage from a centre for asylum seekers, where he stayed for a while disguised as a refugee. The book made an impact because of Verhulst's merciless portrayal not only of the asylum policy but also of the asylum seekers themselves. Fourteen years ago that sort of thing was just not done. Asylum seekers were by definition victims and therefore beyond criticism. But because Verhulst had himself experienced homes, institutions and clinics he could see through all the facades. He revealed how the asylum seekers in the centre accused each other of racism and came to the conclusion that there are creeps everywhere, refugee centres included. Meanwhile the issues depicted with biting humour in *Problemski Hotel* have only become more topical, as evidenced too by the successful film adaptation in 2016 by the acclaimed documentary maker Manu Riche.

It was the jury of the AKO literature prize that gave the starting shot for Verhulst's triumphal procession, when it put *The Misfortunates* on its shortlist in 2006. The highpoint of this novel about the dissolute lives of aimless losers and antisocial semi-criminals in filthy Flemish backstreets is the chapter titled 'The Tour de France'. In it, an uncle of the youthful main character Dimitri organises a drinking contest in the form of an alcoholic Tour de France. This Pub Crawl was the best scene in Felix van Groeningen's 2008 film of the book. But however amusing it may be the film is not a patch on the book, because what Verhulst writes is pure literature. It's all about eruptions of language and word explosions, which just can't be filmed. In the meantime, a good hundred thousand copies of the novel have been sold. Its strength lies in its use of contrast, as it exposes not only the underbelly of society but the 'upper crust' too, and the hurtful smugness of so-called decent people in their model families.

Dimitri Verhulst

De helaasheid der dingen (The Misfortunates, 2009).
A film by Felix Van Groeningen

'Family polka'

For those inspired by *The Misfortunates* to pick up Verhulst's other work a new linguistic universe and a skilfully fictionalised autobiography opens up, providing insight into the ills of Western society. All his books deal with topical social problems. That was already clear in *De verveling van de keeper* (The Boredom of the Goalkeeper, 2002) a novel in which he pokes fun at Flemish nationalism by having a Flemish national football team become world champion. He himself called the book an attack on Vlaams Blok, the xenophobic party that later changed its name to Vlaams Belang. His self-declared commitment puts Verhulst in the tradition of great Flemish writers like Louis Paul Boon, Hugo Claus and, more recently, Tom Lanoye.

Verhulst's stories are almost always set in institutions where people go to deal with their misfortunes, but often his characters, frenetically trying to adapt to what is considered to be normal, end up worse off. In *The Misfortunates*, Dimitri is himself removed from his home by child welfare, an autobiographical detail with which nearly all his books deal. His themes are parents who fail and the children they neglect, who are dumped in children's homes or with foster families.

This is also the subject of Verhulst's 2015 Book Week Gift (a free novella, subsidised and distributed by the Dutch government, for which a prominent author is honoured with the commission each year). *De zomer hou je ook niet tegen* (You Can't Stop Summer Either), printed in an edition of 723,000 copies is not Verhulst's best work, but it is an interesting introduction to the rest of his oeuvre. The story features the multiply disabled Sonny, whose deceased mother once had a love affair with Pierre, a man in his sixties. Pierre abducts the dribbling, incontinent youth and takes him to the top of a mountain in the French Provence to tell him, as a gift for his sixteenth birthday, the story of the love between Sonny's mother and himself. Their relationship ended because Pierre did not want a child with her, but neither did he want to hinder her in her desire for a baby. So she became pregnant by an anonymous other man and gave birth, in the words of Pierre, to 'a pot plant'. Pierre did not want a child with his great love because he didn't fancy what he called the 'family polka'.

Family values

We can gather from all his books why Verhulst's characters are so averse to family life, beginning with his collection of autobiographical stories *De kamer hiernaast* (The Room Next Door, 1999). In it, the writer portrays his biological mother with her own name as a revoltingly fat, stupid and monstrous person. It is a brutal settlement of accounts, which led Verhulst's mother to sue her own son for defamation. She lost, by the way.

What he hates most about his mother are her attempts to lead a nice bourgeois existence, as he described again grotesquely in the novel *De laatste liefde van mijn moeder* (My Mother's Last Love, 2010). Chronologically this part of Verhulst's autobiography precedes *The Misfortunates*. *De laatste liefde van mijn moeder* (My Mother's Last Love) is about the episode that ends with the child, called Jimmy in this case, being thrown out onto the street by his mother Martine. The mother, an uneducated thirty-year-old fatso, works in a factory where she assembles bicycle saddles and spends the rest of her time stuffing herself with food and watching soaps on TV. After her divorce from Jimmy's father, she wants to establish a model family with her new lover Wannes. She herself and the eleven-year-old Jimmy must therefore be provided with fictionalised identities. Verhulst offers a merciless exposé of his deep aversion to Wannes and Martine's petty-minded bourgeois ideal in this book.

The two of them personify the kind of people portrayed in *Godverdomse dagen op een godverdomse bol* (Godforsaken Days on a Godforsaken Planet): unscrupulous, aggrieved, thoroughly stupid creatures, who live only for themselves, without love or real ideals. *Godverdomse dagen* was offered free as a supplement to the Flemish weekly *Humo*, in 2008, and was awarded the Libris Literature Prize in 2009. The jury praised it as a sardonic comedy, a firework display of language and a literary performance worthy of someone who had mastered the art down to the finest details. 'It is a book that corners the reader and forces him to make a choice.'

Kaddisj voor een kut (Kaddish for a Cunt, 2014) is another novel that forces the reader to think about choices, namely about bringing children into the world. Conditions in the children's home where Verhulst sets the novel are as

Screenshot from the book trailer *De laatkomer*, 2013

heartrending as they are realistic. The main character describes how two of his former housemates from the 'Sunchild Home' (Home Zonnekind) get into the newspapers after murdering their own children. According to the narrator, that is a logical consequence of their youth in a children's home, because such children have never learned about family life and have no idea how to cope with it. As so often when he refers to his own experiences in children's homes, Verhulst comes over as a bit of a preacher here, extolling family values. But in his stronger moments he uses great humour and stylistic brilliance to show his loathing for both family life and the abhorrent way in which children, the elderly, the disabled, the demented and all the other people for whom family life is not an option (any more) are treated in many institutions.

Dadaistic praise of folly

The novel in which Verhulst brings all these themes together in sublime fashion is *The Latecomer* (*De laatkomer*, 2013). Once again, it is about his aversion to marriage and family and an institution in which the main character, seventy-four-year-old Désiré Cordier, has himself detained voluntarily. He pretends to be demented, because that is the only way he can be rid of his ghastly wife Moniek. After serious medical tests, he ends up in the closed geriatric centre Winterlight. The descriptions of Désiré's horrendous marriage and his increasingly crazy efforts to escape it are bitingly funny. To be officially declared demented, he must consistently behave like a completely brainless idiot with no memory. That is by no means easy, but then life isn't easy for anyone.

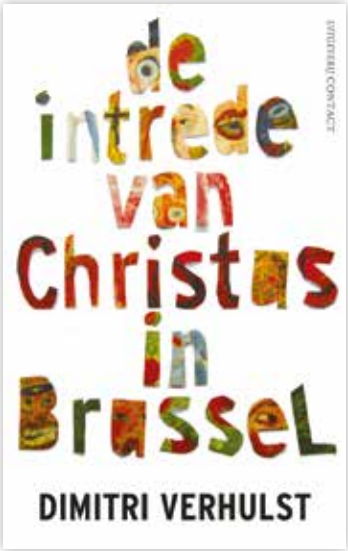
Little by little the realisation dawns that Désiré's marriage and the whole passionless bourgeois existence, in which he vegetates both physically and mentally, is a metaphor for life. Désiré seems to find his escapist endeavours 'delightful' and is consumed with regret that it had not occurred to him sooner to live life as if he were playing a role in a Dadaistic play instead of taking it completely seriously. He considers the bizarre antics he gets up to, in his efforts to convince his wife, children and the neighbours in his oh-so-respectable street that he is demented, as the prelude to his absurdist performance. The main action is set in 'Winterlight Geriatric', a centre where the demented can pretend to be 'normal' in a Dadaistic decor specially designed for them. There is a fake bus stop, for example, complete with a signpost to a non-existent town, to give the demented inmates the impression that they can escape at any moment. Désiré would much rather hang around at the stop on this 'phantom route to somewhere else', waiting for a bus that never comes, than in the blind alley of 'real' life. As a budding librarian, he had once written a theoretical essay on Erasmus. Once he has passed the entrance exam for the psychiatric home he can finally sing the latter's *Praise of Folly* at the top of his voice.

A bag of cocaine or a box of explosives

Dimitri Verhulst is by definition a humanist writer, with a deep-rooted aversion to institutionalised religion and the associated commandments and prohibitions, without falling into banal nihilism. In what he himself considers to be

his best novel, the slightly absurdist winter tale *Madame Verona Comes Down the Hill* (*Mevrouw Verona daalt de heuvel af*, 2006), which is set in Wallonia, he sings the praises of a (life) artist's love for her deceased husband. Her capacity for love, even beyond the grave, sets this character apart from the local villagers, who know neither love nor beauty and live like animals. They elect a cow as mayor, and the female vet to whom they turn in the absence of a doctor treats them like ageing cattle on their way to the slaughterhouse. Love takes the place of God. Madame Verona has organised her life like a religious service for her deceased husband. How pathetic then are the lives of her fellow villagers, who must do without God or love.

Almost all Verhulst's books are allusions to classics from world literature and art. The essayistic prose poem *Christ's Entry into Brussels* (*De intrede van Christus in Brussel*) refers expressly to James Ensor's eponymous impressionist painting from 1888, and in a somewhat more veiled fashion to Dostoyevsky's



Letters from the Underworld. In fluent effing and blinding vernacular and with a large dose of humour, Verhulst once again delivers razor-sharp social criticism of everyone and everything, from the Catholic Church to the monarchy, from baby boomers to the youth of today and from established politicians to shrill populists on the internet. In retrospect, Verhulst himself was not pleased with his 'little chronicle'. In an interview in the *NRC Handelsblad* newspaper dated 18 May 2013, he referred to *Christ's Entry* as a complete failure.

> 'It is not sufficiently developed, I was too lazy and not courageous enough. I realised that about six months ago. Unfortunately the rights had already been sold and it will be published in England next week. I'm dead embarrassed. I advise any readers who haven't bought it yet not to.'

Verhulst is mistaken. Since the terrorist attacks in Brussels on 22 March 2016, we know how prophetic his analysis of hypocritical Western society was. Like *Problemski Hotel*, *Christ's Entry into Brussels* has only become more topical as the years pass. Take the passage about Ohanna, an illegal immigrant living in Brussels, stigmatised by most Belgians as 'the personification of a bag of cocaine or a box of explosives'. 'Illegal: imagine hearing it about yourself! That your existence is unauthorised! That your birth was non-statutory! That you weren't actually allowed to exist!' writes the nameless first person narrator. The illegal girl may stay in Belgium if she is prepared to act as an interpreter for Christ, who is expected to speak only Aramaic. But if Jesus calls off and doesn't turn up in Brussels, she and her family will be deported without mercy.

Translated by Lindsay Edwards

A modern evangelist

Christ's Entry reads like a pastiche of the New Testament. It was followed in 2015 by *Bloedboek* (Blood Book), Verhulst's rewriting of the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Old Testament. Although the creation myth and the stories of Noah, Abraham, Joseph and Moses remain basically the same, Verhulst's raucous narrative style and brutish choice of words put them in an even starker light than was already the case. And even though the original is better, in *Bloodboek* this modern evangelist once again succeeds in both amusing his readers and confronting them with a terrifying analysis of the human condition.

Dimitri Verhulst has already been referred to as a Flemish Jacques Brel. A fierce talent and an unpolished chronicler of a lot of what is squalid in the world and especially in Belgium. ■

FURTHER READING

Problemski Hotel, translated by David Colmer. London/New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2005
Madame Verona Comes Down the Hill, translated by David Colmer. London: Portobello Books, 2009
The Misfortunates, translated by David Colmer. London: Portobello Books, 2012
Christ's Entry into Brussels, translated by David Colmer. London: Portobello Books, 2014
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