

Jeroen Brouwers' Paper Monument

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[JOHAN VANDENBROUCKE]

"My death will be the only thing I haven't described" was the concluding sentence of Jeroen Brouwers' 'Self-Portrait with Eraser', which he wrote at the age of thirty-seven. Six years later, in the introduction to *The Final Door* (De laatste deur), his book of essays on suicide in Dutch-language literature, he noted: 'I'm a writer who chronicles his own life, adding to his biography with each new book, explaining his existence, clarifying his views, in the hope that this will lead to new insights.'

Ten years on, in 1993, after the jury of the Constantijn Huygens Prize, which he had just been awarded, had mentioned his 'pre-eminently autobiographical work', he was keen to qualify that 'misunderstanding': 'In the strictly autobiographical sense, I've written scarcely anything about my own life.' It is not the content of his oeuvre that is autobiographical, he explains, but its form: 'The autobiographical element in it is the way of thinking, expressing in words, ordering, fighting various kinds of chaos, shaping. Without any concessions and with the greatest possible integrity towards oneself.'

Brouwers does not write in order to tell his life story. The term 'autobiographical oeuvre' refers not to a factual reconstruction of his life and times, but to the making of literature. That is even more apparent in the later novels, the work of the 'mature Brouwers', written after *The Deluge* (De zondvloed), his great novel of 1988.

In April 1990 Jeroen Brouwers turned fifty. In the preceding fifteen years – since he had moved to the countryside of Gelderland near the German border to devote himself full-time to writing – he had published extensively. With *The Deluge* he had completed the magnum opus he had heralded; in his own words, this novel marked the conclusion of the work he had resolved to write. Following *The Submerged* (Het verzonkene, 1979) and *Sunken Red* (Bezonken rood, 1981) the novel was also the concluding volume of the 'Indies trilogy'. Later, from 1992 onwards, the Indies novels appeared as a single volume, the realisation of a long-standing plan. From the time when he wrote the first fragments he had envisaged a book of at least a thousand pages describing his childhood in the Indies and its influence on his character and later life.

He himself had described *The Deluge* as the definitive book, the one which, as the novel says in so many words, 'summarises all my books and in which



Jeroen Brouwers (1940).
Photo by David Samyn.

everything refers to everything I have written’.

His oeuvre appeared to be finished, concluded. Interviewers and students of literature wondered aloud what possible sequel there could be. One reviewer suggested that he would have to publish his next book under a pseudonym and another even alluded to a possible suicide. After all, Brouwers’ other, much heralded large-scale writing plan had also been realised: 1983 had seen the appearance of *The Final Door*, an investigation of suicide in Dutch literature, on which he had worked for years.

‘What next?’ was a question often put to the author, who was not yet fifty.

'I'm not dead yet, you know,' he reacted with annoyance during an interview. 'There's a whole stream of stuff on the way, but people are so impatient. You've got to let people get on with their jobs.'

A new period will probably begin, he declares. He would like to write a novel as spontaneously as he writes letters: 'It's not easy to change style, but still it's an ambition of mine. I'm not tired of life yet.' The reference to his published letters, collected in *Chronicle of a Character* (Kroniek van een karakter, 1987), is not coincidental. Those books of letters were universally acclaimed on publication. The occasional lightness of tone and the humour in particular attracted praise.

Fugal literature

In the autumn of 1990 a new novel, *Summer Flight* (Zomervlucht), appeared. In terms of content the book was again characteristically sombre – 'The theme is disappointment at growing old' – but stylistically it marked the beginning of a new period. For example, it was once again a novel with an imaginary third-person character as protagonist, and hence contradicted Brouwers' repeated assertion that he would never again write a novel with fictional characters. Brouwers was aiming for a simpler style, more laconic, more distanced: 'In *The Deluge* and in other books of mine it's as if I grab the reader by the hair, push him nose-down on top of the text and keep him there. It's too much me, too heavy.'

The main character of *Summer Flight* is Reiner Saltsman, a concert pianist, composer and author of a world-famous book on the art of the fugue. Although a celebrated musicologist, he is suffering from a creative block, disillusioned by life and love, a prey to melancholy obsessions. Saltsman – and the same will apply equally to all the protagonists of Brouwers' later novels – may have a completely different biography from the writer, but as regards character and attitude to life there are striking similarities. Saltsman, for example, has spent twelve summers in an isolated "backwater" to which he had retreated "at a low ebb" to write his masterpiece on the fugue. Now he feels like an old man, "who at the age of thirty-five had cut a cord, as if consciously, of his own free will, ceasing to live – but without dying. I've lived for too long in the isolation of that house, I've been for too long too completely cut off from the world, I've become alienated from reality." (The same view of life can be found almost verbatim in diary entries that Brouwers published later, for example in *It's Nothing* (Het is niets, 1993), and *Everything's Something* (Alles is iets, 1998), in which he writes about the inertness of Exel, where he lives: "What happens here is that life ripples on. Apart from that nothing happens.").

Summer Flight is also a novel about the art of the fugue. Saltsman explains that the art form consists of variations on a single theme: "This creates a chain of repetitions that are not repetitions, but variations, in a host of forms, on that same theme." There is also such a thing as fugal literature, he continues, in

which the same technique is used, “sometimes not only within a single work, but even extended into a whole oeuvre”. As Brouwers admits in interviews, it is clear that one “as it were through the mouth of Saltsman talking about music, hears Brouwers talking about his view of writing”.

Of Brouwers' novels *Summer Flight* is somewhat underrated and neglected, though it was reprinted as recently as 2010 in the omnibus edition *The Seasons* (De jaargetijden). The writer himself continues to hold it in high esteem, repeatedly stating: “My favourite is *Summer Flight*. A beautifully serene book of great integrity about a man who has run out of steam.”

A vicious and witty polemist

It was to be ten years before Brouwers published another novel: his bestseller *Secret Rooms* (Geheime kamers) did not appear until 2000. Diary entries show that he began work on the novel as early as 1990.

In the intervening period, though, a flood of publications appeared. Brouwers remained productive with essays, portraits, polemics, memoirs and diaries. He regularly published, in ‘Rough Notebooks’ and later in ‘Feuilletons’, his essays and stories from the preceding period.

In 1995 he was awarded the Gouden Uil non-fiction prize for *Lions of Flanders* (Vlaamse leeuwen, 1994), his collected essays on Flemish literature and language politics. The award made him very proud: “I feel first and foremost an essayist and some of my essays have given me greater satisfaction than some of my fiction.”

Brouwers has always fought against the ‘hegemony of the novel’. The annoying thing is that in the literary world the novel is regarded as the ultimate achievement, as he often said wistfully: ‘I have written essays that I put on the same level as my novels. But funnily enough they’re never mentioned.’

However, he did cause quite a stir with his polemics. That was true in the 1970s – when he made his name as a polemicist – and it remained true. In 1996 he broke with De Arbeiderspers, his regular publisher since 1976, and published a blazing polemic about it. Targeting the new managing director, Ronald Dietz, who had been appointed some years previously, Brouwers set the conflict within a wider context of the decline and commercialisation of literary publishing.

Brouwers as polemicist is severe, grumpy and vicious, but also often irresistibly witty. Literary polemics as a firework display – it is as if his brilliant style and humour are best expressed when he gets angry. That was again apparent in *The Beacons of Sisyphus* (Sisyphus' bakens, 2009), a denunciation he wrote after being awarded the Dutch Literature Prize of the Dutch Language Union. He refused the prize and the accompanying ‘piddling’ sum of money. In the polemic he places the matter in a wider context, that of the wretched economic situation of the literary writer, the producer of ‘merchandise’, who in a small language-area can scarcely live on his production.

Although by now he has been canonised, praised, showered with prizes and recognised as one of the greatest living Dutch writers, Brouwer's repeated complaint remains the difficulty of making ends meet. In published diary entries he is strikingly frank about his financial condition: 'It's not my literary production that is a failure – I've written a few good books – but my literary career, the social side of being a writer: disappointing sales of my books, hence constant poverty, hence the humiliating necessity of going cap in hand to agencies that offer subsidies, humbly, on my knees.'

In interviews one senses a certain bitterness: 'I'm getting on for sixty and I still can't earn a living from my books.' Sometimes there is a note of weariness: 'If there were a pension scheme for writers, I'd pack it in right away. I've had enough. To a great extent you write to stay alive.'

A light-hearted dreamer

In 2000 the novel whose appearance had been proclaimed for years, *Secret Rooms* (Geheime kamers), was finally published. A bulky tome about love and its unattainability, and also about deceit and adultery: the main character, the sometimes pathetic, sometimes amusing Jelmer van Hoff, is secretly in love with the mysterious and capricious Daphne.

Of course the affair ends badly, and the storyline is vintage Brouwers, but stylistically the touch is lighter than usual. In interviews Brouwers declared: 'I wanted to write a drama for a change and this is one, but in such a light tone that you sometimes burst out laughing because it's just *too* awful.'

In the same promotional interviews he stated: 'The composition is no longer as tough as rye bread,' and said hopefully: 'I wouldn't mind a bestseller that sells a hundred thousand copies.' Apart from *Sunken Red*, which has meanwhile assumed the status of an evergreen, Brouwers' books are not immediate commercial successes: 'But there's hope, hope springs eternal: that next novel, perhaps that will finally be a bit of a blockbuster.'

The reviews were surprisingly favourable. The novel was called a masterpiece, stylistically sublime, but what attracted particular attention were the light tone and wealth of action, a new development in Brouwers: 'Usually not much happens in my novels. *Secret Rooms* on the other hand is a novel with a plot, full of intrigue and mystery.'

He confided to another interviewer: 'It turned out wonderfully well; upbeat, structurally supple. Jelmer van Hoff isn't as much of a wimp as my earlier characters. He endures his fate fairly laconically.'

The novel sold unusually well and won numerous prizes. What is the explanation of that commercial success? Besides the more accessible style and lighter tone the subject may also be a factor. "It's a good book, but not my best," stated Brouwers in interviews: 'At the end of my career I'm now suddenly receiving high praise and prizes and money. *Secret Rooms* is my first book with the features of a bestseller.'

In 2002 sales passed the hundred-thousand mark, and the book continues to sell: it is 'the surprise of my old age – That I should have lived to see it!' He already had literary fame and prestige, but never such a degree of commercial success. He can no longer maintain that his career has been a failure: 'But why didn't this happen to me twenty years ago?'

He had written eight novels to date, said Brouwers in 2003, and there was one more to come. But first he published some memoirs: *Dustpan and Brush* (Stoffer & blik, 2004), about his time as a publisher in Brussels (1964-1970): 'I need to get a few more memoirs down on paper before the light is turned out for good.' In other publications, such as *Paper Lives* (Papieren levens, 2001) or *Dusk is Falling* (De schemer daalt, 2005), he again excels as a portraitist, a genre he has made his own, often in the form of an empathetically and sympathetically written in memoriam. After the death of his contemporary Freddy de Vree, for example, Brouwers wrote: 'Around me, closer and closer and in ever greater numbers, the friends, acquaintances and contacts are falling to the ground like felled trees. (...) writers and others I have known, sometimes I can still hear their voices. Dusk is falling.'

High-flown bellyaching

Brouwers was already working on a new novel, when suddenly another book clamoured for precedence. The trigger was the premature death of his eldest son. In a few months – surprisingly quickly by his standards – he wrote *Dateless Days* (Datumloze dagen), which appeared in the autumn of 2007.

The protagonist of this extended monologue is an older man who lives in a deserted wood. The novel begins as follows: 'The hundreds of things you've done wrong in your life. Not necessarily on purpose, it may have happened out of stupidity, clumsiness, thoughtlessness, by mistake, out of spinelessness, with no intention at all.'

Remorse, regret, melancholy, shame. The novel is about a troubled father-son relationship, written with such apparently nonchalant stylistic mastery that it makes a deep and even painful impression. The first-person narrator reviews his futile relationship with his son, whom he scarcely knew. Biographically the main character does not resemble the writer at all, but he does psychologically.

Stylistically the book continues the pattern of *Secret Rooms*, and unsurprisingly the critics again highlighted the surprisingly light-hearted, deft style. A characteristic of the older Brouwers, together with the apparently nonchalant but ingenious construction, with references to Classical myths and previously explored Brouwers themes. And also with clear links to earlier novels, beginning with his début *Joris Ockeloen and the Waiting Game* (Joris Ockeloen en het wachten, 1967), which was also about the father-son relationship. In *Dateless Days too* everything relates to everything else. On the second page there is already mention of 'a sun taking its leave', 'which touches everything one last time and casts a shadow.'

In 2011 the novel he had previously been planning, *Bitter Flowers* (Bittere bloemen) appeared. Brouwers sketches a burlesque portrait of Hammer, an elderly man very unlike himself in physique or biography, who takes a reluctant cruise around the Mediterranean. With cheerful cynicism and light-hearted whinging he looks back at his life as an ex-judge, ex-politician and ex-writer, until he is once again ambushed by romantic infatuation.

However cheerful it may be, and however refreshing the language, in content it is far from being a light-hearted book. As usual it is about thwarted illusions, but here couched in a sublime, well-crafted style which gives the constant moaning and bellyaching about human decay an exalted feel.

In *Bitter Flowers* Brouwers writes about the decay of old age, the treachery of the body, but thanks to the exceptional narrative perspective and exceptionally musical style manages to suggest that literature can transcend death.

In 'The Exel Testaments' ('De Exelse testamenten'), a key text from the 1970s, the young Brouwers wrote: 'I should like to make out of all my writings, even my failures, of which I'm ashamed, a paper monument, which can, somewhere, still be visited in a landscape where it is forever autumn and everything is draped in cobwebs, long after I am dead and buried. It must be possible to say of that monument: this is the life of Jeroen Brouwers. People will comment that it was full of crinkles and tears when it was put up, but that sentence about that com-pote and the flies and the rotting fruit isn't bad at all.' ■

An Extract from *Dateless Days*

By Jeroen Brouwers



The hundreds of things you've done wrong in your life. Not necessarily on purpose, it may have happened through stupidity, clumsiness, thoughtlessness, by mistake, out of spinelessness, or with no intention at all.

Sometimes a poisonous memory suddenly sneaks into your brain, like an intruder throwing a piano wire over your head and pulling it taut against your throat.

When such memories appear I tend to emit a very loud, sustained scream, in order to blow the scenes out of my brain, just as in spring one uses a gas gun to drive the rodents from one's newly-sown fields or the winged rabble from the orchard full of young fruit.

Actually I don't even mean the painful memories themselves, but the shame they give rise to. The older you get, the more shame you feel.

I live alone, like a hermit, in a white house in a mixed wood made up partly of deciduous, partly of coniferous trees.

In autumn, like now, the birches, beeches and oaks shed their clothes and colours and pose like pencil-sellers among the evergreen of pines and firs, which only turns a little rusty. All this needs, what is now actually happening, the thin glow of a departing sun that touches everything one last time and provides it with a shadow.

In the city, if one steps out of one's house one is at the same moment surrounded by one's fellow city-dwellers and their noise. If I walk out of my house, I'm in woods – I rarely meet anyone on my walks and I hear exactly the same as in my study: silence, silence. Just listen. Silence that nevertheless consists of all kinds of noise, but which is integral to the wood and forms part of the silence. Blank out the birds, that twittering and flapping of wings, that dull hammering of a woodpecker on wood up ahead. Pretend for a moment that you can't hear the hysterical, helicopter-like buzzing of woodland insects hovering around your ears on their way to the decomposing body of a rabbit or a hedgehog. Then it will not be silence you hear, but the uninterrupted mute yawn of death: What you hear in a hospital when the patient dies and all the machines to which he was attached by tubes and wires fall abruptly silent at the same moment, stop croaking and snorkelling as an accompaniment to the curving patterns on the monitor screens surrounding him and recording his breathing, heartbeat, blood pressure. The silence that then manifests itself with a dull sigh splashes against the white walls with

their notice boards covered in postcards wishing the deceased 'get well soon' when he was not yet dead. Silence that creates echoes of silence. Deathly silence. At the moment of death everything on the monitors goes haywire, the vital-signs curves on all the screens shrink simultaneously into long, straight, horizontal lines, which would continue into infinity if one of the hospital staff did not pull a bunch of plugs out of the power-point at the head of the bed. As a result the light disappears – phut ! – from all the machines, the screens go black and suddenly look like gaping jaws exhaling silence.

Such a silence never prevails in this wood, - something is always rustling, something is creaking, a pine cone or an acorn falls onto the sandy path with a drumming sound. Something is always whispering, growling, singing, something is screaming, moving. The leaves fall with a faint sound like rustling paper. A wind gets up, like the wind in my head, where it's never still either, but never still in a different way than in the wood.

Shame at everything that has gone wrong. The older you get, the greater the expanse of your past, the more it looks as if your life has consisted of a succession of bankruptcies. It's not only bankruptcies, not everything has gone wrong, but still.

There are howlers you have committed deliberately and with premeditation, though you could have known in advance you were doing something stupid. The kind of blunder you'll be confronted with for the rest of your life, comparable with a recurring, incurable disease. When thoughts of it come charging into your brain like armed bandits with nylon stockings over their heads, there's no way of shouting it down to drown out the shame.

As you nevertheless start wailing at the top of your voice, you slap yourself in the face with the flat of your hand as you do when a mosquito lands on your cheek and drills its sting into you, you pound your head with the knuckles of both fists until stars and lightning flashes shoot across the backs of your eyes. At night I take to my car and tear along deserted motorways, past black industrial estates, with in the black spaces behind them a vague glow above black cities. Does it make me any calmer? The slurping sound of the tyres on the asphalt makes me sleepy. I enter this wood to walk the restlessness out of my body, but I know everything here too well to be distracted, I go on walking till I'm knackered and sit or lie on the ground if it's not too damp. Try to calm down by counting all the trees in my field of vision – there are more of them in autumn and winter than in summer when there is thick foliage everywhere. One, two, three, four... Or all the toadstools. I turned off onto a side-path, where the red of the toadstool caps had caught my eye like a fever. Scores, several hundred, the path was covered with them as if with a carpet floating a few centimetres above the ground. With every step I made a hole in it, as I kept

kicking over and crushing toadstools. At the end I looked round and saw my footsteps in all that red, all those shades of red – crimson, vermilion, coral, Bordeaux, amaranth, pomegranate... and in it every half-metre the havoc I had caused with my footsteps like a museum vandal who with a knife or a corrosive liquid attacked the Rembrandt red of the Jewish Bride. My eyes became hot and to my troubled gaze the red woodland path liquefied, changed into a stream in which all the tints merged into a single red.

By squeezing your eyes shut a few times you can force back your tears. What good are tears to me?

A lapping rivulet of blood; the damaged bits my shoes had left in the red filled up with it and again became invisible. When I stopped squeezing my eyes shut, so hard that my ears buzzed, and looked again, there was no longer any question of lapping and flowing: all the red had congealed as if into candle grease, all the red consisted of clotted blood.

What good are tears to me? Why do I count tree trunks? ■

From *Dateless Days* (Datumloze dagen. Amsterdam: Atlas, 2007)



Translated by Paul Vincent