

**T**he

## King is Dead, Long Live the King

### *The Uses of Reality in the Prose of Walter van den Broeck*

When Baudouin, King of the Belgians, died suddenly on 31 July 1993, the media released a deluge of mournful prose, much of it maudlin kitsch, on their shattered readers. The writer Walter van den Broeck also reached for his pen, for if so much paper was to be expended on the king's death, then obviously literature too should have its say on the matter. And certainly Van den Broeck was in the ideal position for this. The character of the king had been a central motif in his writing since 1980, both in the novel *Letter to Baudouin* (Brief aan Boudewijn, 1980) and in the four volumes of *The Siege of Laken* (Het beleg van Laken, 1985-1992).

In his contribution on the event, published in a newspaper which is certainly not regarded as royalist, Van den Broeck wrote his final piece on a theme he had already developed in his novels. He had invented a fiction in which the very Catholic Baudouin, who in fact became king more out of a sense of duty than out of ambition, had secretly ceded the throne to his identical twin brother Gauthier (the French equivalent of Walter). The king then retired to a monastery. In his newspaper article, Van den Broeck made the 'real' king, now a monk, reflect on the passing away of his brother. Many readers were offended that Van den Broeck had chosen this literary approach and thus allowed his novel to merge somewhat with reality. They said that by doing so the writer had shown a lack of respect for the deceased sovereign. What they really meant was: a lack of respect for reality.

In itself the affair was no more than an anecdote, but it is characteristic of the common belief that a watertight seal should be maintained between literature and everyday reality. More specifically, it is held that, in the name of good taste, certain basic or delicate aspects of reality should be barred to the literary imagination. Taboo. Playing literary games with the recently deceased king was simply not done. But this is not at all the perspective from which Van den Broeck approaches literature. On the contrary, his iconoclasm derives not from a longing for destruction but from his ethics as a writer, and these are based on the conviction that if literature is to be meaningful then it should strive to develop a real social significance by participating in everyday reality. Van den Broeck had actually sent a copy of his novel *Letter to Baudouin* to the royal palace – after all, once a letter has been written you should post it.

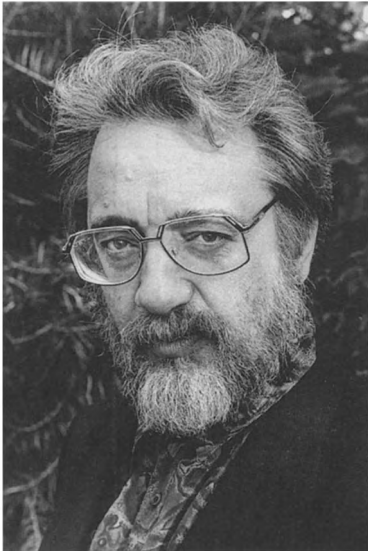
Having been born in 1941, it is no accident that Van den Broeck's literary roots lie in the turbulent and innovative 1960s. In Flanders as elsewhere, many young writers were sensitive to the zeitgeist that held political commitment to be of vital importance and considered art as the ideal means of expressing it. That Van den Broeck opted for criticising the era in which he lived has a lot to do with his roots. He grew up in a so-called 'cité', a working class district which was built around a factory. This factory was the be-all and end-all of existence for everyone living there. And the context was clear: the social segregation and inequality that went with life in a row of back-to-backs was clearly visible to them each day in the architecture of the very streets they lived in. The ultimate dream of every inhabitant was to get rich and move out of the *cité* towards a better future. The expansion of the welfare state in the fifties and sixties made this possible to a certain extent: it allowed talented young people like Walter van den Broeck to acquire an education, and thus escape working in the factory and being tied to the *cité*. So Van den Broeck became a teacher. His much older brother Jules, who turns up regularly as a character in Van den Broeck's work, did not have the same opportunities as a young man; he escaped by seeking his fortune in Mexico.

Those who got rich or had the chance to study escaped this predetermined future. Many young people who tried to do so ended up in an ambiguous state of alienation with respect to their roots. This ambiguity stemmed from the idea that they didn't have to be like their fathers and go and work like robots in the factory, though the brighter ones among them realised that once they left their neighbourhood they would end up in an equally conditioned environment, that of the middle class. The factory workers did manage to improve their lot with time, but paid the price in addiction to consumerism, ecological disaster and the decline of the spontaneous sense of solidarity.

Walter van den Broeck's awareness of all this led him to the profession of writing, with the dominant father figure as the symbol of his biological but also of his social origins. Consequently, his first novel, *Heir to the Throne* (*De troonopvolger*, 1967), written in a more or less traditional vein, was a story of symbolic patricide. To no avail, for his father would continue to haunt him throughout his whole work; Van den Broeck has never sought to deny his origins, quite the contrary.

In his second work, *A Long Weekend* (*Lang weekend*, 1968), an often hilarious slapstick novel, Van den Broeck raised the issue of his own work by appearing as a character in the book. In doing so, he extended his satire on the age he was living in to include himself: his character 'Walter van den Broeck', tormented by ennui, already embodied his first meditations on the meaning of being a writer. In retrospect, this doubting self-critical consciousness of his is certainly the reason why Walter van den Broeck has become one of the most important writers in Flanders today, unlike other members of his generation, many of whom have fallen into oblivion, and not unjustifiably so.

The few authors who escaped this fate, like Paul de Wispelaere and Daniël Robberechts, and continued to build an interesting oeuvre – though often without much public acclaim – distanced themselves from semi-naturalist and psychological novels. In their so-called 'opus literature', they



Walter van den Broeck (1941-) (Photo by Klaas Koppe).

combined social criticism with an extremely detailed critical analysis of language in which French Structuralism was often an important source of inspiration.

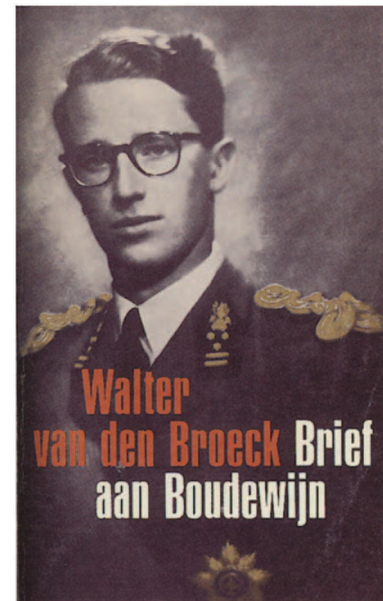
Like them, Walter van den Broeck, who is usually considered as belonging to this school of opus writers, never showed any sign of being one of those know-it-all do-gooders who wrote in that classical realistic style of prose which makes so much of the politically-active literature of the time so indigestible to present-day readers. When he subjected the comings and goings of his own time to critical analysis he did not forget to include himself in the proposition. It is characteristic of his work therefore that he allowed both himself and the other members of his family to become increasingly prominent characters in his novels. An indirect demonstration: his hastily written satire *Seized* (*In beslag genomen*, 1972), full of amusing and sometimes facile allusions to the cultural and political world of the day, is not without reason one of Van den Broeck's most dated novels, and technically perhaps his least successful work.

The desire for literary freedom in the 1960s provided Van den Broeck with the opportunity not only for innovation in the content of his prose but more particularly for a series of striking experiments with form. Unlike most of the other opus writers, in doing so he did not start from an existing concept of literary theory, but conducted an experimental search for ways of infusing a more powerful expression into the narrative tradition which had been handed down to him. These aims would change with the development of Van den Broeck's oeuvre. He no longer sought to provide a symbolic or satirical true-to-life image of reality. He became increasingly aware that reality seemed more and more problematic to him and so could not be known absolutely, let alone improved upon.

Again seen in retrospect, Van den Broeck's novel *362,880 x Jef Geys* (1970) was ahead of its time; as what he called a 'multiple' it was based on the principle of fragmented reality – though only developed in a rudimentary fashion. Postmodernism *avant la lettre*! In the book, the character of the artist Jef Geys (a real person) is developed from the point of view of 9 non-hierarchical narrative agents in no specific sequence, as a result of which the novel is capable of 362,880 different readings, depending on the order one chooses to follow.

Doubts and insights gleaned from the fragmentary led Walter van den Broeck to a global analysis of the Self, to a complex all-inclusive *Identitätssuche*. In *Notes of a Genealogist* (*Aantekeningen van een stambevaarder*, 1977) he corrects idealistically and politically manipulated historiography by reconstructing his own family history. This was his first essay in giving literary form to a real experience, i.e. that of his grandparents, that flew in the face of deceit, canonised lies and official appearances. Van den Broeck completed this genealogical quest in his *Letter to Baudouin*, which provided a cross-sectional view of his childhood in the *cit *.

Though both novels are reconstructions commented upon by the author, and attempt to be as true to life as possible, Van den Broeck built an element of fiction into the second: he presented a snapshot in the form of a guided tour given by himself, as a nine-year-old child, to the recently crowned Baudouin. To the child, the king represented absolute power and unimaginable wealth, the antipode of the powerlessness and poverty of those living in



the back-to-backs. But the king also stands for ritual and pomp, and as a result is only allowed to see a 'cleaned-up' version of 'his' people and country. This metaphor of kingship offered Van den Broeck the opportunity to draw our attention to the semblance and to the veil that always shrouds reality. By giving it a name, he succeeded in breaking through it.

These two novels set out a problem which had to be solved. The four volumes of *The Siege of Laken* which followed attempt to provide an answer, presented in narrative terms as a return visit by the character of Van den Broeck to the royal palace. Throughout this, Van den Broeck is on a quest for the cultural influences that determined his development as a person and as a writer. He quickly comes to the conclusion that a person can be peeled like an onion, layer by layer; in other words that an individual consists of nothing but cultural influences.

Formally, this four-part work with its complex structure consists of a long series of seemingly autobiographical fragments set within various narrative frameworks. But here the fictionalising process dominates – something which also can be seen from the striking intertextual character of these four volumes and the many mirror effects used in constructing the text. Throughout the four volumes, Van den Broeck projects reality upon literary fiction, creating a new literary reality in order to counterbalance the deceptive appearances that dominate everyday life. He turns the king who, blinded by semblance, stands on the other side of the mirror, into his ally in order to cancel out the contradiction between being and appearance and thereby eliminate alienation.

Using purely literary means, *The Siege of Laken* attempts to bring about a synthesis within the field of literature between a thesis bursting with sharp criticism of the period (power relations and human exploitation) and an equally critical antithesis (the illusory *petit bourgeois* dream of prosperity and cosy happiness). In striving for this synthesis Walter van den Broeck does not turn his back on reality. All reality is a construct, however. If people are to gain control of their own reality and take their fate into their own hands, they must commit themselves to living squarely and enthusiastically in their own 'banal' everyday world. He himself does it by writing, for what is a writer's task but to conquer reality and make it visible through literature?

MARC REYNEBEAU  
*Translated by Peter Flynn.*

## Extract from *Letter to Baudouin*

by Walter van den Broeck

Your Majesty,

You, who are wont to show a lively and uninterrupted interest in culture in general and Flemish letters in particular, you will not take it amiss that I do not provide you with a detailed account of myself. You already know me more closely and value my work more highly than those whose positions in the cultural sector should require that they devote serious consideration to such matters. This is more than obvious from the occasional modest allowances you extend to me by Royal Decree, which allow me to dedicate myself to *belles-lettres* without being subjected to too much material hardship.<sup>1</sup>

To enclose a curriculum vitae would, I fear, be but a demonstration of false modesty, and you know how I detest even ordinary modesty.

You should not regard the fact that I address you with a small ‘y’ as insolence. I am aware that your consort’s secretary once declared in an interview given quite some years ago that you no longer insisted on the capital ‘Y’.

I have always wished to write to you at length, ever since I was a child. I must tell you that this is typical of our family. My grandfather, you know who I mean, Peter Jules van den Broeck, corresponded for a considerable period during the 1950s with Lyndon B. Johnson, the Texan senator who, following the death of John Kennedy in 1963, was to become President of the United States. There was something the matter with my granddad’s pension arrangements or some such. I will find out exactly what happened for you in due course.

My father, Robert Sidney van den Broeck, followed in his father’s footsteps. He considered himself a socialist because he read the *Volksgazet* and was a loyal listener to the *Politieke Tribune* on the NIR, particularly when the socialist leader Jos van Eynde, with whom you are more than familiar, addressed the Flemish people so vociferously.

He was never a member of the Belgian Socialist Party, and only very briefly of the socialist trades union ABVV.

And every time we didn’t finish our dinners he would say that they had better start another war right away.

He thought that the class struggle was an illusion. He knew working people too well, and was convinced that neither patient persuasion nor spontaneous reflex would make them cast off their yoke.

Someone who has been working hard for eight hours doesn’t feel like preparing the revolution – he only wants to be left in peace.

He expected an awful lot more from the written word, though. If dark thunderclouds began to build up on the horizon – the Berlin Airlift, the Korean war, the Cuban crisis, the Vietnam war – he would reach for his pen and write, shrouded in a mist of silence and detachment, to the mighty ones of this earth.

We would automatically hold our breath far too long and walk on tiptoe all evening.

Eisenhower shouldn't be so spineless; he certainly knew the Russians from the war! He had to know what those Russkies had in mind for Western Europe!

Castro shouldn't slag off when it came to the United States like that; he would pay dearly for it one day. And then what would happen to all those world famous Havana cigars – three of which he would like to be sent in return for his good advice. Khrushchev should stop playing with fire. Hadn't his people suffered enough during the Second World War? It was the height of imprudence to so recklessly provoke America, which had the most powerful army in the whole world, by banging on conference tables with his shoes! And Lyndon Johnson should finally put an end to that business there in Vietnam. It could be done in a jiffy if he were only willing to take that top-secret laser gun they were talking about in the *Reader's Digest* out of the deep freeze. And so on.

This was clearly a substitute for taking real social action, but nobody would be able to reproach him later with having done nothing to try and improve the state of the world.

That my mother, fearing complications that might prove too much to bear for a working man's family, threw most of these letters in the fire is of little consequence.

I have briefly brought all this to your attention in order to prove to your majesty that my complaint is not based merely upon a whim<sup>2</sup>.

And yet at the same time, I would like to make this distinction: it is not my intention to appeal to you to intervene personally in repairing an error of administration nor to provide you with any political or military advice.

1. On behalf of my wife, my two children and of course myself, I would like to take this opportunity of extending to you my heart-felt thanks.

2. This is, it seems to me, a real family trait. Five years ago my eldest boy, who was eight at the time, asked at dinner what the name of the mayor of Turnhout was – *Alfons Boone!* And where did he live? – *Look in the phone book!* An hour later he shoved a letter under my nose.

*'Dear Mister Mayor, wouldn't it be possible to open a hall where poor people could get a square meal for three franks? Stefan van den Broeck, 18 Freedom Street, Turnhout.'*

And could I post that for him in the morning.

A week later an envelope bearing the arms of the town of Turnhout dropped into my letter box. *'Dear Sir, In reply to your letter of 19.04.74 in which you requested that a hall be opened where poor people could be given a square meal for three franks, we hereby have the honour to inform you that we shall be forwarding your letter for further consideration to the Royal Benevolent Society for Social Charity which shares responsibility for the affairs of the poor in our town.*

*With the highest regards,*

*On behalf of the Town Council*

*A. Goossens, Interim Secretary*

*A. Boone, Mayor'*

From *Letter to Baudouin* (Brief aan Boudewijn. Antwerpen / Amsterdam: Elsevier Manteau, 1980, pp. 5-7).

*Translated by Peter Flynn.*