

## Become What You Are – Between Lavish Living and Piousness

Notes on *The Sorrow of Belgium* and the *Legend of Ulenspiegel*

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[ L U C D E V O L D E R E ]



Greedy sensuality and mysticism: the dichotomy between the two provides a fruitful cliché for evoking the identity of the Southern Netherlands – or its *pars pro toto* Flanders, or even Belgium as a whole. It is a cliché that has long been widespread in the German and French worlds.

After seeing the procession of the penitents in Veurne in 1906, the poet Rilke characterised it as 'Busse und Kermes' (penitence and carnival), while Stephan Zweig, in the chapter on 'The New Belgium' in his book on Emile Verhaeren (1910), spoke of 'Lebensfreude und Gottsuchertum' (*joie de vivre* and the search for God). Two constantly recurring names in the language-game between earthy vitality and religious devotion are those of the mystics Hadewych and Ruusbroek; the uncouth Brueghel is contrasted with the refined Van Eyck, the ethereal Memlinc with the exuberant Rubens.

Later, 'Burgundian' became fashionable as an alternative to 'greedy sensuality', this time as the opposite of all that was rigidly sober and 'Calvinist'. In this sense it is heard mainly in the Dutch language area itself, and specifically in the

North, where even today Belgians and Flemings are referred to with some envy as 'Burgundians', who know how to live, or at least to eat, drink and be merry. The term should never be used in French, for there it refers solely to an area of France that was once a duchy; nor will the word be fully understood in English or German.

In one of his poems the Flemish writer Hugo Claus formulated the cliché aptly and concisely as 'lavish living and piousness':

#### *Anthropological*

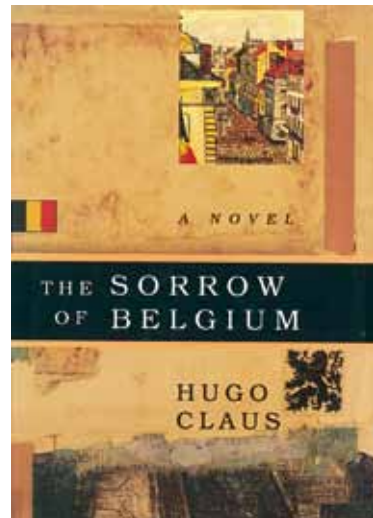
*This people that, so it's said,  
moves between opposite poles,  
lavish living and piousness,*

*believes less in the life to come  
than in its daily grub.*

*This people will give Sunday alms  
for the pope or for the blacks,*

*or burn incense to honour the statue  
of the curé of Ars who stank of the poor*

*but mostly this people, fearing the lean years,  
cajoles with cash and prayers  
its docile rulers, the brokers.*



Claus, however, gives a polemical edge to the cliché: in his paraphrase mysticism has degenerated into sanctimonious piety and cowardly subservience. Lavish living has become humdrum materialism. And there you have the Flemish national character.

In this article I shall examine the extent to which this image of Flanders is projected, if at all, in two books: *La Légende et les aventures héroïques, joyeuses et glorieuses d'Ulenspiegel et de Lamme Goedzak au pays de Flandres et ailleurs* of 1867 by Charles De Coster (1827-1879) (*The Legend of Ulenspiegel and Lamme Goedzak, and Their Adventures Heroical, Joyous and Glorious in the Land of Flanders and Elsewhere*, 1922) and *Het Verdriet van België* by Hugo Claus (1929-2008) of 1983 (*The Sorrow of Belgium*, 1990). I cannot avoid mentioning Belgium, since the Flemish movement only developed within Belgium, which came into being in 1830 when it seceded from the North. The young state felt a need for legitimacy, and in order to acquire this, and above all to differentiate itself from France, it opted to cobble together a glorious history of its own. The elements



Young Hugo Claus.

of that past were readily available, namely in the heyday of wealthy Flanders, often seen as synonymous with the whole of the Low Countries. However, it was expressed exclusively in French. Even Hendrik Conscience's historical novel *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen* (1838; English translation *The Lion of Flanders*, 1855) was written in (rather stiff) Dutch in order to secure a place for Flanders ...within Belgium. Only towards the end of the nineteenth century did it become clear that the attempt to continue presenting a Flemish past in what was officially an exclusively French-language state was doomed. As an "imagined community" Belgium was a failure. The invented traditions no longer united the country, if they ever had done, and the centrifugal forces were unleashed that are still at work to this day.

### 'Lourde beauté'

Yet the defining image of Flanders persisted for a long time in French. There is a line that runs directly from the Francophone 'Flemish' poet Emile Verhaeren (1840-1916) to the equally 'Flemish' *chansonnier* Jacques Brel (1929-1978).

Brel was the last to give voice to the commonplaces – and brilliantly too. So what was Brel? A Fleming, or at least a misunderstood lover of Flanders,

Ulenspiegel.



a Belgian or a Frenchman? Certainly France annexed him, and after the initial years of frustration he scored huge triumphs there. Venues like Olympia in Paris were his to command. Paris appeared as a backdrop in his songs, and it was there that he eventually came to die. But his accent marked him out as a Belgian. 'Belgian' remained a label that he made use of when it suited him and then discarded, like 'Fleming'. 'Flamingant' on the other hand was anathema to him. For someone from Brussels, a member of the Gallicised Flemish middle class, the term meant nothing more or less than a narrow-minded, fanatical Flemish nationalist. Brel had little sympathy for the social and cultural emancipation of the Flemings. That robbed him of his mythical Flanders, in the tradition of Emile Verhaeren and Georges Rodenbach: a Flanders where the Dutch language is replaced by a warm, folksy and hence harmless 'Flemish', to which one is deeply attached because it is the *langue des choses*, while French of course remains the *langue de culture*. Given the irrevocable evolution towards monolingual areas within Belgium, Francophones who have remained in Flanders have fallen between two stools. They feel that Flanders has been stolen from them, and respond in different ways. But they share the same nostalgia, a nostalgia for a Flanders that never was, which often makes the books and songs of French-speaking Flemings so poignant, for in many cases it is they who have sung Flanders' praises most memorably. Take the song 'Le plat

pays', for instance, in which Brel conjures up a non-existent country out of sky, rain, fog and wind; take 'Mon père disait', in which the father calls London a suburb of Bruges (a mythical Flanders if ever there was one!) or sigh sympathetically at 'Marieke', the Flemish girl who lives somewhere among the towers of Ghent and Bruges. For that matter, Brel did the same thing with the port of Amsterdam, which he celebrated as a kind of mythical harbour where lonely seamen with pent-up longings eat, drink, dance and empty their bodily fluids into women and the gutter. And then of course there is 'ça sent la bière de Londres à Berlin': the bacchanalia of Brueghel and Teniers are never far away, and form part of Brel's clichéd image of the past of the Low Countries.

In 1959 his 'Les Flamandes' sparked a controversy that now seems very distant. Compare it with Verhaeren's 'Aux Flamandes d'autrefois' from his first collection of poetry *Les Flamandes* (1883). In Verhaeren the Flemish women, with their 'chairs pesantes de santé' (flesh heavy with health), have a 'lourde beauté' (ponderous beauty). For the bard with his wild moustache they embody 'notre idéal charnel' (our carnal ideal). Brel paints a grimmer picture of the healthy Flemish wenches' passion for dancing. Ultimately they are dancing to the tune of the clergy, who keep them pious and industrious, true to the gospel of reproduction and the maintenance and increase of material prosperity. He chastises the Flemings because he feels he is one of them. As always, the opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. The women in Auvergne and Brittany were just as bad, he once remarked, but since he happened to be a 'Fleming' he satirised *his* women. Towards the end of his life Brel fled to the Marquesas Islands. When he did return to the subject of Flanders, he was deliberately provocative: 'Les F.' (by which he meant 'les Flamingants') receive a final rebuke: 'Nazis durant les guerres et catholiques entre elles' (Nazis during both wars and Catholics in the interim) – one has to overlook the fact that it was difficult to be a Nazi in the First World War. People usually forget, though, to quote the agonised lines from this 'chanson comique' that sum up the hybrid identity of Jacques Brel (and many Belgians, somewhat embarrassed about their *belgitude* and hesitating between their languages):

*(...) quand les soirs d'orage des Chinois cultivés  
Me demandent d'où je suis, je réponds fatigué  
Et les larmes aux dents: "Ik ben van Luxembourg".*

[(...) when on stormy nights cultured Chinese  
Ask me where I'm from, I answer wearily  
And with tears in my voice : "Ik ben van Luxembourg".]

## **A carnival at the foot of the stake ?**

Charles de Coster's *La Légende et les aventures héroïques, joyeuses et glorieuses d'Ulenspiegel et de Lamme Goedzak au pays de Flandres et ailleurs* appeared in 1867.

In his book on Emile Verhaeren Stefan Zweig wrote that De Coster's *Légende* signals the beginning of Belgian literature, just as the *Iliad* marks that of Greek



Charles de Coster.

literature. The story of *Ulenspiegel* was acclaimed as a prose epic in which the blood flows as freely as the beer, as a carnival at the foot of the stake.

Since De Coster's death in 1879 the novel has gone through over twenty editions in French and a hundred or so in other languages. The book eventually became better known outside Belgium and the French-speaking world, especially in Russia, where a translation appeared in 1915. Actually, for a long time many French-speakers thought that the book had originally been written in 'Flemish', and had been translated into French by De Coster. Understandably, since the book has nothing to do with France, but is all about ... Belgium. De Coster placed the Low German medieval hero of folklore against the backdrop of the sixteenth-century Southern Netherlands. His *Ulenspiegel* is born in Damme near Bruges, the son of Claes and Soetkin. At the same time, in faraway Spain Philip II first sees the light of day. A greater contrast than that between *Ulenspiegel*, growing up in open, free and easy surroundings and the lonely, gloomy and cruel royal child in a Spanish palace is scarcely imaginable.

These are dark days in Flanders. De Coster evokes an apocalyptic land of terror and fear, cowardice and betrayal, greed and hypocrisy; a country of torture and scaffolds, gallows and burning at the stake. Claes meets his end on one such pyre, and his son rescues a handful of ash to hang around his neck in an amulet. 'Les cendres de Claes battent sur ma poitrine' (Claes's ashes beat upon my breast) becomes the story's mantra, *Ulenspiegel's* spur to action. As recently as the late 1980s this ominous sentence was quoted by Eduard Shevardnadze, the Soviet foreign minister, during a visit to Belgium.

From the picaresque rogue of German folklore *Ulenspiegel* is transformed into a freedom fighter and a herald of justice, a patient avenger who never forgets, a wanderer among ruins who wades through blood and tears. He embraces the revolt against Spain and joins the Beggars' resistance movement.

He is the spirit, the intellect of Flanders ("*Esprit de Flandre*"), while his sidekick Lamme Goedzak is its stomach. Goedzak glistens with fat, but it is an honourable fat: 'ma graisse de Flamand, nourrie honnêtement par labeurs,

fatigues et batailles' [my Fleming fat, nourished honourably by toil, fatigue and battles). After hard toil, the Fleming may gorge. Lamme also embodies the longing for everyday and domestic happiness.

Ulenspiegel's sweetheart Nele is the heart of Flanders, to whom he remains true in spirit, without that preventing him from having carnal relations with other women.

At the end of the book De Coster despatches him to eternity by contriving a splendid vanishing act. Ulenspiegel awakens from a deep sleep that everyone had taken for death. He shakes off the sand that has been thrown over his body: 'Est-ce qu'on enterre, dit-il, Ulenspiegel, l'esprit, Nele, le coeur de la mère Flandre? Elle aussi peut dormir, mais mourir, non! Viens, Nele.

Et il partit avec elle en chantant sa sixième chanson, mais nul ne sait où il chanta la dernière.'

["Can any bury," said he, "Ulenspiegel the spirit and Nele the heart of Mother Flanders? She, too, may sleep, but not die. No! Come, Nele."

And he went forth with her, singing his sixth song, but no man knoweth where he sang the last one of all.')

Ulenspiegel.



Few books or characters have taken on more of a life of their own than De Coster's Ulenspiegel. Of course the writer was an anti-clerical liberal, who was not focusing on the Flanders of his time, but wanted to give his country, Belgium, an icon of freedom. But that icon very quickly transcended Belgium. In the Soviet Union Ulenspiegel was admired as a right-thinking hard-line guerrilla. The good-natured Lamme Goedzak became the prototype of the jovial Fleming. Die-hard Flemings in turn saw Lamme as the incarnation of the spineless good nature that had to be written out of the national character if that nation was ever to amount to anything. Ulenspiegel became a model for that Flemish nation and an all-purpose banner for the Flemish Movement. In the end Left and Right were able to unite around him, and even Catholic Flemish Nationalists forgot that he had fought on the side of the Protestant Beggars.

### 'Nazis durant les guerres et catholiques entre elles'

*The Sorrow of Belgium* is the magnum opus of Hugo Claus, or is regarded as such by foreign critics: at any rate the French, German, Spanish, English and Italian translations met with great acclaim.<sup>[1]</sup> The book was seen as the definitive interpretation of an incomprehensible country. The Great Flemish/Belgian novel had finally arrived. Claus himself called his book a family novel, but it is also mythologised autobiography, a picaresque novel and a *Bildungsroman*. He had previously said of it: 'It's intended to be a book about life in Flanders as I knew it, but which now no longer exists.' By this he meant a Flanders where the Catholic church was still all-powerful, a Flanders fascinated by the New Order whose highly-disciplined troops had marched into Belgium in 1940. To make matters worse, part of that Flanders expected help from that New Order in its own struggle for liberation from the Belgian state, and 'collaborated' in spirit and/or in deed with the German occupier.

The hero of the story is an eleven-year-old boy, Louis Seynaeve, a pupil in a Catholic boarding school and later in a Catholic high school. Confusion, vague

longing, friendship and betrayal are his lot. Reality is incomprehensible, perception murky, the world of adults unreliable, and so he constructs his own reality, a world of his own.

And then the German armies invade his world. 'The arrival of the Germans was dazzling for a boy of eleven,' the author commented. Louis' father is a German sympathiser, his mother flirts with an officer whose secretary she is, and the son joins the National Socialist Youth of Flanders. A boy tries to find his way amid gossip and rumour, words that have lost their meaning, if they ever had one.

A priest who teaches him in high school tells him – quoting Baudelaire – that there are only three respectable professions: priest, soldier and poet. Naturally, as a child he had dreamed of heroic missionaries; now he looks up to the knights in high boots with death's heads on their caps. Ultimately, though, it is words and sentences that prove to exercise the greatest seductive power.

When he comes across books by 'degenerate' writers hidden in a cellar, he discovers his true vocation: if he belongs anywhere it is with these Cubists, Expressionists, all the other –ists. Louis learns fast. The New Order crumbles before his eyes and in his heart. After the liberation his father is arrested, the son now hangs around with the Americans, and an aunt initiates him into love.

At the end of the war Louis learns of the suicide of his friend from boarding school. Eternal loyalty has long since been smothered by time. From now on the protective crust around his soul will be called literature. It will save him, or at least give him something to hold on to. He writes a book called 'Sorrow', which is published. A child dies, and a writer is born.

### **'It's the language, stupid'**

The *Légende* and *The Sorrow of Belgium* have become the idiosyncratic national epics of a country that is not a nation. A Flemish hero, borrowed from Germany and celebrated in French, and a Flemish boy struggling to find himself in a country called Belgium.

How do you find yourself in a hypocritical country where nothing is what it seems and people collaborate with the powers that be, be it in the sixteenth century or in the years 1939-1947? By 'lying the truth', by forging lies into art, by adopting the pose of the artist.

Ulenspiegel is a rogue, a jester and a smooth talker who gets away with everything, and a lady's man too. Louis Seynaeve positions himself amid the lies that surround him. He dreams up his own reality; the survival strategy becomes a pose, the pose a method. The final result is the story of his life, the book itself, the work of art. Claus rewrites his own genesis as a writer. From the publication of *The Sorrow* onwards, in his public life as a writer he will increasingly merge with the smooth talker and poser. In each interview he will methodically answer the same questions differently, play games with truth and with the interviewer, each time, like Ulenspiegel, like a jester, concocting a different image of himself. When every expression of reality fails, we must capture that reality in words in countless ways, ever anew.

The two books are first and foremost linguistic works of art. Their world is constructed of language and consists solely of language. De Coster's novel works best in French: the writer found a language of his own that was not a



pastiche of sixteenth-century French, but has an epic, incantatory force, larded with Flemish words that give it just the right flavour. When translated into Dutch those Flemish words, which are intended to guarantee the *couleur locale* of the French original, lose their meaning. The incantatory repetitions do not impede the tempo of the narrative, quickness being one of the demands that Italo Calvino made of literature in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*.

The true splendour of *The Sorrow* also resides in the language. Claus wrote a multi-layered artificial language comprehensible from Southern Flanders to the northernmost tip of the Netherlands, but the substratum of that layered language is the dialect of Kortrijk, the town where the novel is set. As a native of Kortrijk myself, I can say with some authority that that substratum is accessible only to someone born and bred there. The British writer Tim Parks observed recently in an interview with the daily *NRC Handelsblad* that many contemporary writers strive to be "international": "Writers no longer focus on the local situation and local matters, since an international readership is not interested in them." In this context he mentions Claus: "A wonderful writer like Hugo Claus is not easy to understand for readers outside Belgium; you really have to make an effort to enter into his world." The fact is that Parks believes that a text is totally transformed in translation. Must I end with the depressing truism that books like those of De Coster and Claus can only be fully understood in their own language? Let us accept the fact that great books are always rooted in the local and the private, and that they always transcend their roots.

Do De Coster and Claus confirm the clichés of lavish living and pioussness? No, as we have seen. Do they play with them? Yes, each in their own way, and according to their own rules.

At most they show how artists become what they are, how they manage to survive amid the lies and the horror, the hypocrisy, the vulgarity and, if you like – the lavish living and the pioussness. De Coster sings the song of the liberation of the senses and the mind, freed by the imagination from all frustrating religiosity. Claus displays and celebrates reality in its submissive corruption, but as a master of the disappearing act he remains – *ni dieu ni maître* –out of range. ■

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## NOTE

1. *Le Chagrin des Belges* (Julliard, Paris, 1985)  
*Der Kummer von Flandern* (Klett-Cotta, 1986)  
*La pena de Bélgica* (Alfaguara, Madrid, 1990)  
*The Sorrow of Belgium* (Viking, London, 1990)  
*La sofferenza del Belgio* (Feltrinelli, 1999)  
*Der Kummer von Belgien* (Klett-Cotta, 2008)

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Photo by Stephan Vanfleteren.

