

All Said Before

Menno Wigman's Ennui

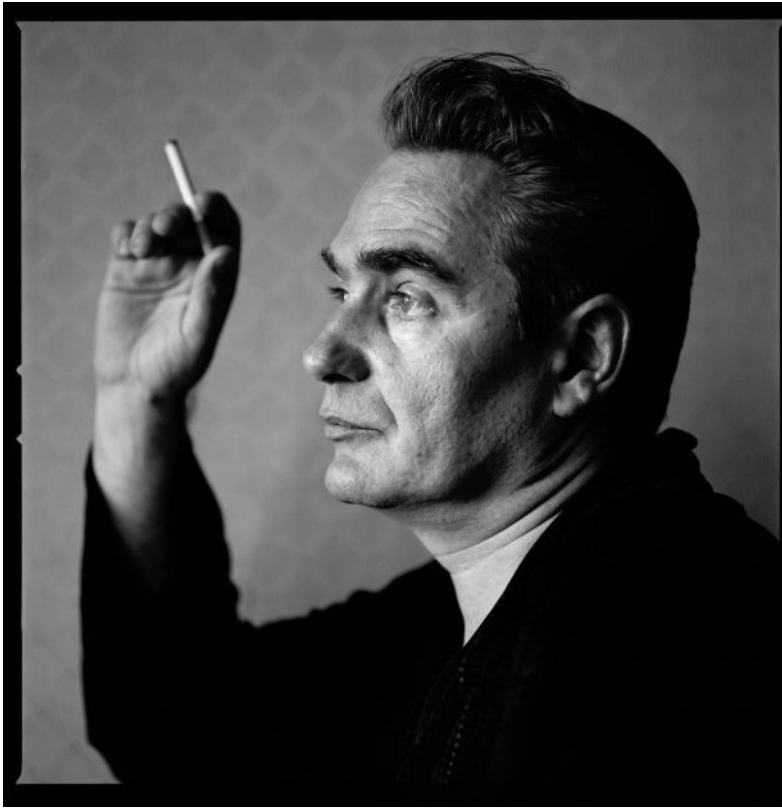
226

[PIET GERBRANDY]

Innovation is impossible. The Earth revolves around the sun, summer gives way to winter, people are born and try to leave a few copies of their DNA behind before they die, and every generation does its best to put the essence of existence into words as if it hasn't all been said before a thousand times. Instead of falling silent or searching for a totally new means of self-expression, we cultivate repetition, which reveals itself in the works of poets, dancers, musicians and visual artists as rhythm. For millennia, the world's poetry has been characterised by periodic repetition, whether we're talking about metrical or musical patterns, graphic regularity on the page or cyclical structures on the semantic level. What's more, poetry owes its indestructibility partly to its being part of a tradition. We are moved or comforted by a sense of being linked to the hundreds of generations that have gone before. For this reason alone, a version of poetry that strives to cut all ties to the past is doomed to fail.

Still, over the last two hundred years in particular, poets and other artists have often tried to radically rejuvenate the tradition, producing free verse, prose poems, cut-up techniques, radical dissociation and furious experimentation in layout and lettering. Baudelaire and Mallarmé, Pound and Eliot, Trakl and Celan have shaken literature and turned it inside out to such a degree that much of what is published today seems, at first glance, to bear little resemblance to the work of Horace, Petrarch, Li Shangyin or Shakespeare. Nonetheless this innovation is relative. Ultimately, even the most revolutionary poets are still concerned with the fundamental rhythms of existence, which remain visible and audible in the most fragmented chaos. This might explain why there have always been poets who deliberately resign themselves to the existence of tradition and renounce all claims to originality.

If there's one Dutch-language poet who is aware of this issue, it's Menno Wigman (b. 1966). His first collection *'s Zomers stinken alle steden* ('Cities Always Stink in Summer'. 1997) includes a poem entitled 'Jeunesse dorée':



Menno Wigman (1966)
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*I saw the best minds of my generation
bleeding for revolts that didn't come.
I saw them dreaming between the covers of books
and waking in a twenty-two-town hell,
ill-omened as the excised heart of Rotterdam.*

*I saw them swearing by a newfound drunkenness
and dancing on the sea-bed of the night.
I saw them weeping for the cattle in the trams
and praying under bright and glaring lights.*

*I saw them suffering from unrequited talent
and speaking in agitated voices –
if it had all been said before, not by them.*

*They came too late. Their promise unredeemed.
The cities gleamed as black as caviar.*

You don't need to study this poem long to see how much it owes its impact to repetition. First, there is a visual pattern in which each new strophe is one line shorter than the previous one, giving a double suggestion of withering and disappearing on the one hand and condensation and reduction on the other. The poem has the fourteen lines of a classic sonnet, but lacks the usual volta. Wigman will use this form, which I like to call the Wigman sonnet, many times in later collections. Second, there's the anaphoric repetition of 'I' – although the speaker defies expectation by presenting himself as a detached observer rather than a participant in what he describes. Of course, this detachment is merely assumed, as the slightly bitter tone betrays an involvement the poet would rather not admit. Third, we have the strong iambic rhythm and the assonance that gives the poem its gloomy resonance.

It's clear that this form is the perfect vehicle for the atmosphere of failure the poem expresses. The *'jeunesse dorée'* dream of revolution and throw themselves into the heady rush of urban night life, but in the end talent and energy peter out into disappointment and boredom. There is no hope. The poem illustrates the fact that everything has been said before, not just by referring to the nonconformist urges we know so well from the poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, but also by citing the first half of a famous quote from Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl': 'I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked'. Even the repugnance for the fact that nothing ever really changes must be expressed in other people's words.

The poem typifies Wigman's work over the last fifteen years. In carefully composed iambic verse, he explores the *ennui* of a man who experiences life as an inane blind alley, giving voice to an attitude towards life that will be familiar to many. As this poetry is also extremely accessible, he has enjoyed great popularity from the outset. His second collection, *Zwart als kaviaar* ('Black as Caviar', 2001) won an important literary prize, and in January 2012 he was appointed Poet Laureate of Amsterdam for a term of two years. At poetry festivals his compelling performances win him a lot of applause. Wigman is an established poet, a fact that he must inevitably see as a source of new discomfort. He is not highly productive. He has published six collections, but one of these (*De droefenis van copyrettes*, 'The Melancholy of Copy Centres', 2009) is a selection of his own work, while *De wereld bij avond* ('The World by Night', 2006) was included in its entirety in *Mijn naam is Legioen* ('My Name Is Legion', 2012).

For all of his oeuvre's thematic and formal consistency, Wigman is not a monotonous poet. Sad childhood memories, a difficult love life, the meagre consolation of alcohol and cigarettes, lonely nights in rainy streets and impersonal hotel rooms – it would all be the elements of a tawdry depression if it wasn't so beautifully written. On top of this, Wigman is also a keen observer of modern urban life. He writes about the ugliness of supermarkets and internet porn, about resentful Islamists and the mentally disturbed homeless, about his demented mother and about the menace of the demise of the book as a cultural phenomenon. For quite some time he has been part of a collective of poets who take turns to write poems for so-called 'lonely funerals', ceremonies for those who have died without friends or family. This too leads to poems that help him to keep a finger on the pulse of contemporary society.

In his first two books, Wigman seems to have deliberately adopted the pose of a nineteenth-century *poète maudit*, flaunting his spleen, his thirst for alcohol and his seedy sex life. He bent, according to a poem in the second collection 'deeper over that past of his/ with all those famous parties, foreign beds/ and infatuated telephone conversations', after which the dejection kicks in with 'years gone up in careless smoke/ and powdered excess'. The reflection doesn't get him very far:

*But he saw nothing. Only the thin light
of a back room with nothing to celebrate
beyond two bodies passing on a name,
only a bored and sturdy pair of hands
scraping his last few fibres out of a furnace.*

The disgust is superbly worded, but not entirely convincing. The poet revels in his exaggeration of his own revulsion. One drawback is that he leaves little or nothing to the imagination. Wigman's poetry is so explicit that a single reading is usually enough to plumb the depths of each poem, even if the formal refinement is a lasting pleasure. Sometimes his products are no more than a skilful incarnation of Paul Verlaine.

Wigman achieves his greatest perfection in *Dit is mijn dag* ('This Is My Day', 2004). A simply brilliant poem is 'In Conclusion', which starts like this:

*I know the melancholy of copy centres,
of hollow men with yellowed papers,
bespectacled mothers with new addresses,

the smell of letters, of old bank statements,
of income tax returns and tenancy agreements,
demeaning ink that says that we exist.*

*And I have seen new suburbs, fresh and dead,
where people do their best to seem like people,
the street a fair impression of a street.*

The thoroughly dispiriting tedium is situated in 'copy centres' and 'new suburbs', both conceived as modern innovations but in reality grim and dingy shops people are forced to frequent and soulless housing developments on the outskirts of large cities respectively. In this context the repetition of the words 'people' and 'street' is exceptionally functional.

The disconsolateness continues in the second half of the poem, again with a lot of repetition:

*Who are they copying? Who am I?
A father, mother, world, some DNA,
you stand there with that shining name of yours,

your head crammed full of cribbed and clever hopes
of peace, promotion, kids and piles of cash.*

And I'm a dog that's kennelled in its cantos

and howls for something new, something to say.

Light. Heaven. Love and death. Decay.

I know the melancholy of copy centres.

Life is one big copy centre, that much is obvious, and in it even the most existential questions have been reduced to clichés. A nice touch is Wigman's choosing Dante's terza rima. The world is an *Inferno*. Whoever enters here must abandon all hope.

With a project like Wigman's, there's a constant danger of the poet getting bogged down in his own material. One must pay a price for cultivating unfathomable dejection. January 2006 saw the release of an uneven volume of ten poems, published and distributed in a print run of many thousands on the occasion of Dutch 'Poetry Day', but after that a six-year silence set in, interrupted only by an anthology. I suspect that Wigman had come up against the walls of his self-made prison, with a formidable writer's block as a result.

The 2012 volume *Mijn naam is Legioen* seems to take a new direction. The poetry is harder and more uncompromising than the work in previous collections. The sorrow and irritation no longer seem to be part of a literary game; the presentation is harsher, the emotions placed in the context of an equally sordid world. The title derives from the Gospel according to Mark, in which a man who has been possessed by evil spirits undergoes an exorcism. Western Europe is a madhouse, but writing may enable the poet to free himself from his demons.

In the first poem, which has the familiar form of the Wigman sonnet, he addresses his penis:

*It's getting cold. The days are made of glass,
of armoured glass and Seroxat. If I sought words
for everything that doesn't have a word,
not anymore. I'm an arse, an arse is what
I am for writing poems now. And you,*

*my dick, what have we achieved today?
Spare me your cut-rate melancholy, come on,
you've slept for days now in my shorts, so tired
of the seething tyrant who rids you of your seed.*

Although the poem was already published in 2009, it is a worthy introduction to the disillusionment that follows. The poet is not so much bored and sombre, as angry. That turns out to be a fruitful emotion.

The poem 'Old West' – a title that refers to a scruffy, working-class neighbourhood in Amsterdam that is home to many non-Western immigrants – bears a motto from Rimbaud: 'Merde à Dieu'. It starts like this:

*We're living here with Turks, Moroccans, Sikhs,
Afghanis, Kurds and Pakistanis and we
are scared. And I, a stubborn white man,*

*ni Dieu, ni maître, without the slightest hope
of pleasure gardens when I'm dead, assess
the street from three floors up and see the heated*

*prayer around the clock, how people lie
on dingy floors and hurry off to places
of worship and constant collection.*

If he is here cursing the perverse devotion of uneducated immigrants, we see several pages later that the death of the Christian God has not brought the salvation he covets. This poem is based on a news item about a man who lay dead in his apartment for months. When he was finally discovered, the corpse of his cat was lying on his chest. After the first strophe has sketched this lugubrious situation, the poem continues:

*There, in that street, there is a church –
got fitted out with cameras recently.
Is God asleep? No, but thieves abound*

*and they defy the Allseeing Eye to search
for silver, pulpit bibles and candlesticks,
beheading Mary's statue in its niche.*

God has disappeared and surveillance cameras have taken over His job. Or does He manifest Himself in some other way? That's what the last lines of the poem might suggest. Yes, mankind is lonely and abandoned, but there is still some possibility of solace:

*remind me of the guy who lay there dead
while his companion paced, miaowed and pined*

then nestled finally down upon his chest.

The collection also includes a number of poems in which the speaker clearly differs from the poet's persona. In 'Egmond aan Zee' we hear the voice of a violent youth from a Dutch seaside town: 'Come Friday night, come beer, come coke / and the sea breeze stokes the fire in your head. // Knuckles, blood, a star, a knife and screams. / Our sky above is hard and criminal.' Elsewhere Wigman reproduces a schizophrenic's ranting, complete with spelling mistakes and jangling italics. Apparently it's the psychiatrist who's being addressed:

*Blind and deaf, hardjacker & killer
of all I own, I'm warning you.
Sicksofreen & manic, the way you claim.*

*Well prove that manic and Sicksofreen
for once and all; and write those symtones
down on paper, misery guts & Liar.*

That's not very subtle. His account of a prison riot is much more convincing:

*A cauldron full of cats and the heat ticking,
All summer long we were steaming in our cells,*

*the sun a tongue of flame and our heads a hell
where brutal guards reduced you to a name.**

Remarkably enough, the collection ends with a couple of love poems, which – for the first time in this oeuvre – are not cynical but seem to have arisen from a genuine, heartfelt passion. Although the poems are not especially good and clash with the rest, they do suggest that the poet, even if fictionalising here, has sunk a new well:

*The moon has left the sky and I, I think my way to you,
it's three days now that I've been thinking in your scents,
you'd hoped that I might lose my head and how –*

*the moon has left the sky, what a strange line, that can only be
from Sappho – yes, and now I'm on a roll: she drank,
my god, even more than me, she wrapped me round*

with hips and stories, lips and looks, mascara.

Like the decadent ennui and the 'melancholy of copy centres', this love is a thoroughly literary emotion, but it won't do Wigman any harm to read Sappho, Occitan troubadours and Petrarch for a while instead of Baudelaire and Gottfried Benn. I am very curious about the second half of this poetic career. ■

* This excerpt only translated by Judith Wilkinson

's Zomers stinken alle steden, Bert Bakker, Amsterdam 1997

Zwart als kaviaar, Bert Bakker, Amsterdam 2001

Dit is mijn dag, Prometheus, Amsterdam 2004

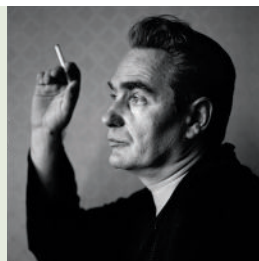
De wereld bij avond, Poetry International & Prometheus, Rotterdam/Amsterdam 2006

De droefenis van copyrettes, Prometheus, Amsterdam 2009

Mijn naam is Legioen, Prometheus, Amsterdam 2012

Five Poems

By Menno Wigman



Semper eadem

There are whores in your head
when you turn thirty.

An hour of keen delight
outweighs each word you say.

But sinking ever deeper
into your unwashed grave

you think of who she was
and who has slept here since.

What happened to the wide-eyed awe
of mornings after new delight?

There are whores in your head
when you turn thirty.

From: *Cities Always Stink in Summer*

Semper eadem

Er wonen hoeren in je hoofd
wanneer je dertig wordt.

Een uur van scherp genot
weegt zwaarder dan een woord.

En toch, je ligt steeds dieper
in je ongewassen graf

te denken wie zij was
en wie hier na haar sliepen.

Waar blijft het staren en verbazen
na een nacht van nieuw genot?

Er wonen hoeren in je hoofd
wanneer je dertig wordt.

Uit: *'s Zomers stinken alle steden*

Big-city

What she did *pre-me*? With Hugo she ate lobster,
with Thomas she drove through LA, she slept
with Sander in Berlin, with Rick, with Jim... And I,

so green about the cryptic equations
of our pleasure, whose hair, whose lips,
whose eyes do I recall when I see hers?

She doesn't know her smile's just like Lisa's.
And I don't see how I resemble Hugo.
But now that six or seven weeks have passed,

the ghosts all gather round our bed at night
to watch the slow and tender, dogged way
we strive to exorcise their deepest names.

From: *Black as Caviar*

Grootsteeds

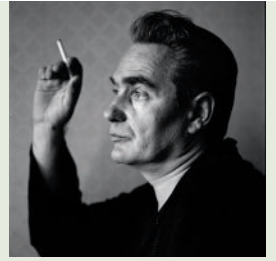
Wat ze vóór mij deed? Met Hugo at ze kreeft,
met Thomas reed ze door LA, met Sander sliep
ze in Berlijn, met Jan, met Stein... En ik,

zo groen in de geheime algebra
van ons geluk: wier haar, wier lippen en
wier oogopslag zie ik bij haar terug?

Ze weet niet dat ze net als Lisa lacht.
En ik zie niet wat ik van Hugo heb.
Maar na een week of zeven staat er 's nachts

een kring van schimmen rond ons bed te kijken
hoe traag, hoe teder en verbeter wij
hun diepste namen uit ons hoofd verdrijven.

Uit: *Zwart als kaviaar*



Hotel night

The libraries have been shut for hours.
The city centre celebrates a street.
Insomnia. Pick up a book and put it down again.
TV it is. To watch the way it creeps.

The city centre celebrates a street
and sniffing taxis stand out in the rain.
TV it is. To watch the way it creeps.
For hours now the weather's been repeats.

The empty taxis drifting through the rain.
At worst you'll have four decades more of days.
For weeks the weather's only been repeats.
You read your palm and hope that you exist.

At worst you'll have four decades more of days.
God knows the kinds of secrets that you keep.
You read your palm and hope that you exist.
Your orphaned spirit gives and starts to slip.

From: *This Is My Day*

Hotelnacht

De bibliotheken zijn al uren dicht.
Diep in het centrum triomfeert een straat.
Insomnia. Drie boeken ingekeken.
Tv dus maar. Toekijken hoe het jaagt.

Diep in het centrum triomfeert een straat
en staan verkouden taxi's in de regen.
Tv dus maar. Toekijken hoe het jaagt.
Al uren wordt het weerbericht herhaald.

Er drijven lege taxi's door de regen.
Je hebt desnoods nog veertig jaar te leven.
Al dagen wordt het weerbericht herhaald.
Je leest je hand en hoopt dat je bestaat.

Je hebt desnoods nog veertig jaar te leven.
God weet wat voor geheim je verzwijgt.
Je leest je hand en hoopt dat je bestaat
nu je verweesd en wel je hoofd uit glijdt.

Uit: *Dit is mijn dag*

Rubbish dump

A knoll of dead things taunts the air.
Nothing is itself. A mass of addled chattels.
Liquid, black liquid leaking from a fridge.
Forever broken, squandered, sick of human hands,
a city of refuse rises up before me.

And I look and I look. And as I walk
I lose my hair, I feel a beard, my coat
grows threadbare on my back and all the clouds
go racing off to Dortmund.

That's just the start: a village church floats through
the water, fish make their homes in city squares,
a wet grey sea from Utrecht to The Hague.

Knowing what I know of time and dykes,
I write this for the future drowned to read.

From: *The World by Night*

Vuilstort

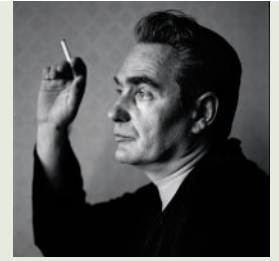
Een terp van dode dingen tergt de lucht.
Niets is zichzelf. Veel jichtig huisraad. Vocht,
zwart vocht dat uit een koelkast welt. Voorgoed
kapot, versjacherd, mensenhanden moe
tijgt me een stad van afval tegemoet.

En ik kijk en ik kijk. En als ik loop
verlies ik haar, ik voel een baard, mijn jas
verrafelt waar ik sta en alle wolken
jagen Dortmund achterna.

Dan gaat het snel: er drijft een dorpskerk door
het water, wier en vis bevolkt de Dam,
nat, grijs, week, dacht je randstad, zag je zee.

Om wat ik van de tijd, van Holland weet
schrijf ik voor wie dit onder water leest.

Uit: *De wereld bij avond*



Sick of Hitler

Berlin. I'd had a fuck but in the shower
the Holocaust was back there in my skull.
I saw my dick and counted tiles, white,
the tiles were white, I counted and a cloud
of breathlessness hid them from sight.

I read I don't know how many books,
kept digging round in Adolf's life,
the seven spoons of sugar in his tea,
Geli, Eva, forelock, whip and testicle –
what good were they to me? Here in this shower,

here in a warm and workaday Berlin,
my shame ran off and gurgled down the drain
and I could never be too lax, too late or all to blame.
And light and fresh and sick to death of Hitler
I made a beeline back towards her bed.

From: *My Name Is Legion*

Hitlermüde

Berlijn. Ik had geneukt en nam een douche.
Toen sloop de Holocaust weer in mijn hoofd.
Ik zag mijn pik en telde tegels, wit,
ze waren wit, ik telde en een mist
van ademnood vertroebelde mijn zicht.

Ik las ik weet niet hoeveel boeken, bleef
maar in het leven van Adolfus wroeten,
de zeven scheppen suiker in zijn thee,
Geli, Eva, teelbal, spuuglok, zweep – wat
moest ik ermee? Hier onder deze douche,

hier in een warm en doordeweeks Berlijn,
hier gleed mijn schaamte in een doucheput weg,
kon ik nooit laks, te laat of schuldig zijn.
En licht en fris en hevig Hitlermoe
stapte ik weer op haar kamer toe.

Uit: *Mijn naam is Legion*