

A

Great Minor Poet

The Poems of J.C. Bloem

The Netherlands is a country that does not cherish its literary heritage. The after-life of Dutch authors is usually of short duration. Even when they have enjoyed an impressive reputation during their life-time, they generally disappear from public view soon after their death. The collected poems of A. Roland Holst for instance, who was generally acknowledged and revered as ‘the prince of our poets’ in his time, have not been reprinted since their last publication twenty years ago (in an edition of 2000 copies); and the same holds true for the vast majority of his once-famous colleagues. A very small number of exceptions serves to prove the rule. All in all just a handful of poets from the last century (six or seven to be exact) survive and their work is regularly reprinted. One of them is Roland Holst’s contemporary and friend J.C. Bloem (1887-1966). Forty-eight thousand copies of his *Verzamelde gedichten* (Collected Poems) have been printed since he died, and a paperback anthology *Doorschenen wolkenranden* (Translucent Cloud-rims), selected by the poet himself, also sold many thousand copies.

When still at school young Bloem was fascinated by poetry and very soon he started writing himself, to the detriment of his formal education. He was the kind of boy who simply hated to learn and do things in which he was not interested. As a consequence it was not until he was 29 that at long last he became a LL.D. And his subsequent professional career was such that it is not unreasonable that, many years later, in 1944, he would wonder: ‘*Is this enough, a handful of poems, / to justify an existence, / wasted bit by bit in poorly fulfilling pointless duties / for an all too meagre living?*’

But between 1903 and early 1908 he did write about two hundred and seventy poems – an average of more than one a week – and became a skilled craftsman in his chosen field. Later on Bloem would observe that most of the poetry written in one’s youth does not contain any real feelings and virtually all of it is merely ‘*reminiscence of literature*’. So it is not surprising that only four of them were ever published and not a single one included in his books. And, most remarkably, during the rest of his life his total production would not exceed two hundred poems altogether, of which he selected a hundred and sixty for his collected poems.

Having grown up as a spoilt child in a strongly tradition-bound family,

with a French governess (he read French fluently at ten), it is no wonder that the young poet looked to his immediate predecessors for inspiration. In reaction to the messy cult of isolated images of their time, these 'poets of the nineties' had gone back again to well-constructed intricate sentences and formal stanzas. They were the impressive and influential poet P.C. Boutens and his Flemish counterpart Karel van de Woestijne (see p. 214), who wrote a complex and heavily adjectival kind of verse, of which clear traces can be found in Bloem's early published poems.

In 1913 our poet played an important role in the so-called 'debate on rhetoric'. In a review of the French poet Henry de Régnier's *Le miroir des heures* he admired its 'inspired rhetoric', its 'lively formality', 'the art of vitalising old forms and, in turn, discovering the soul in these forms'. And in speaking of *Stances*, a collection by de Régnier's contemporary Jean Moréas, he realised 'how it is possible, by choosing the most common words and the most common images in the most common form, to write genuine and original poetry'.

Two years after his *Miroir*-review Bloem published an essay that is generally considered to be not only a personal profession of faith but also a representative summary of the mood expressed in the work of other poets of his generation. It was called 'Het verlangen' ('Yearning'). He characterised this 'yearning' as a 'divine unfulfilledness that far from turning our lives into a burden, enables us not only to bear the otherwise unbearable burden of life, but even to love it more than anything else'. It opens up a prospect of 'collective immortality', it is 'the unshakeable centre around which (...) our dreams arrange themselves, eternal as life itself. It cannot be fulfilled on earth and is fully aware of this'. Those who share this insight, Bloem writes, will be able to understand 'what one of the greatest men who ever lived among us wrote'. And then he quotes Blake's 'Ah, Sunflower! weary of time ...' A high-minded elitist declaration of faith by a frustrated transcendentalist in a fundamentally romantic spirit, one might say.

It would take Bloem another two years before he managed to cast off the influence of his eminent predecessors, their complicated sentences and their decorative adjectives, as well as the exalted romanticism of his literary environment. For the first time he found his own inimitable way of writing, exactly in the vein of his pronouncements on the French poets. It was a serene short poem 'Regen en maanlicht' ('Rain and Moonlight'), written in January 1917, a couple of months before his thirtieth birthday: 'All I have kept a secret all my life / Formless desire without a name / Has now become a warm and gentle rain / Beyond a silver window-pane.'

Although he still wrote poems from time to time – all relatively simple and mostly short – he felt that his inspiration had run out. 'It has not been bad, but I have not become a Ronsard, not even a Charles Guérin', he said. At that moment his friend the typographer J. van Krimpen, took control. He copied Bloem's scattered poems from the periodicals in which they had been published and with the cooperation of the poet turned them into a well-made 'burial mound of his youth'. Two days after his thirty-fourth birthday, on 12 May 1921, Bloem's first book of verse was published, also called *Het verlangen*. It was favourably received by the critics and sold rather well.

Bloem once said: 'It is my ambition to know European poetry from the beginning of Romanticism to the first World War.' And what he did not know

of it was hardly worth mentioning. At first he was primarily interested in French poetry – together with Dutch poetry of course – but soon afterwards he immersed himself in the work of English poets. In his later verse we regularly remark his profound knowledge of nineteenth-century poetry. In 1958 he published an anthology called *Persoonlijke voorkeur* (Personal Preference) for which he made a selection of Dutch (27), English (33), German (17) and French (20) poems, each of them preceded by a short introduction. Most remarkable is what he writes about A.E. Housman: ‘*Housman, together with Hardy, is one of my three favourite poets. I am quite aware that he is the least important of them (the third one is [the Italian poet] Leopardi). The size of his work is not only smaller in quantity, but his field is much more restricted too. But in his field he is a master. He has expressed the reality of life, stripped of comforting but unrealistic fantasies, in such a perfect way that one keeps wondering whether in fact he is not a great poet.*’ A striking indirect self-portrait of the critic himself!

During the next eight years Bloem wrote only five poems, two of which were not completed till 1929. Then, for no clear external reason, his inspiration suddenly returned and in 1931 Van Krimpen, who in the meantime had become a famous type- and bookdesigner, published *Media vita* (... *in morte sumus*, as a twelfth-century antiphony says: ‘*in the midst of life we are in death*’). And by now Bloem has clearly become a master of his craft. ‘*To me the greatest artist seems to be the one who is able to combine the greatest possible traditionalism with the greatest possible originality*’ and ‘*a poem is all the better the less one notices its words*’. Bloem had discovered that ‘*writing poetry means unlearning*’. All these pronouncements have been put into practice in the twenty-three poems brought together in *Media vita*. Compared with his contemporaries he now writes a kind of verse that looks un-literary and deceptively simple in its choice of words. Although the poems contain many images, these are hardly ever spectacular. From a formal point of view they all appear equally simple: all but one consist of four-line stanzas, in most cases containing lines of five iambs with an alternating rhyme scheme. The line-endings nearly always coincide with the end of a sentence or with a natural pause. One fellow-poet let himself be taken in by the apparent simplicity of Bloem’s new poems and praised their ‘*elegant spontaneity*’. Much nearer to the truth was another colleague, J. Slauerhoff, who wrote: ‘*Superficially considered these poems consist of very simply phrased feelings, nature-impressions and meditations; on closer scrutiny however, they reveal themselves as poems of a very subtle wordcraft. I hardly know of any poems in Dutch in which every word occupies its unique right position in such a deceptively self-evident and nevertheless resolute way. Nearly all of these poems are perfect and vital at the same time.*’

From the very beginning Bloem had always been an exclusively lyrical poet. Although a separate group of poems in *Het verlangen* is called ‘*Gestalten*’ (‘*Figures*’), containing pieces called ‘*De avonturier*’ (‘*The Adventurer*’), ‘*De bedelaar*’ (‘*The Beggar*’), ‘*De eenzame*’ (‘*The Lonely One*’) etc., his colleague P.N. van Eyck correctly suggested that these too were only thinly-veiled personae of the poet himself in the vein of, say, Charles Guérin. Later Bloem admitted that the division between the sections ‘*Figures*’ and ‘*Lyrisch*’ (‘*Lyrical*’) was artificial and cancelled it. Still, there is a remarkable, even a fundamental gap between Bloem’s first collection and

Media vita. The vast majority of the poems in *Het verlangen* are explicit 'I-poems' in which he writes about his experiences as referring exclusively to himself; and when he uses 'we' he is including only the chosen few, those elected by the Muses. In his second book, however, the first person singular has virtually disappeared and when using 'we' he only excludes 'the silly or mercenary crowd' – who never care to think of what human life is about. Instead, the central subject of these poems has become 'the heart' or 'life'. In other words: he no longer writes about his private unique emotions, but about human life as it appears to everyone who reflects on his own and other people's experience.

And it stands to reason that at the age of forty-three he has lost the exalted yearning of his youth, having been confronted by the inevitable deceptions life has in store for nearly everyone, and especially in his particular situation: a none too successful marriage, a legal desk job as a clerk of the court that gives him no satisfaction, his life in a Frisian village which he experiences as a place of exile. So it is not surprising that in 'Spiegeling' ('Reflection'), one of the very good poems in *Media vita*, the poet's summary of life is: 't Was first an endless longing, a wandering here and there, / and then a daily sense of lack, and then not even that.' In all its apparent simplicity this poem of sixteen lines – eight distichs – turns out on careful consideration to be a highly sophisticated piece of craftsmanship. The 'reflection'-theme is present throughout; on the level of sound of course: inconspicuous rhymes (mainly assonance and consonance), vertically and horizontally; in the metrical basis of the lines: the second half reflects the first one (u - u - u - u / u - u - u -), and structurally: the second part of the poem is a reflection of the first half, in images as well as content, albeit in a minor key. And also of course in its subject matter: the sky is reflected in the sea, the environment in the soul, the past in the present. Remarkably, in spite of the inevitable disillusionments of life summed-up in the lines quoted, the 'pigeon-feathered sky' of the first line has changed into a 'pearl-black' one in the final line: some of the initial lustre has been preserved. It is a pity that the subtle complexity of this poem makes it impossible to provide an adequate translation ('*Traduttore traditore*', the Italians say: a translator is – inevitably – a traitor). Perhaps these characteristics may serve to give an impression of Bloem's inconspicuous mastership.

Apart from a few poems such as 'November': 'Always November, always rain / Always this empty heart, always.', the majority are never entirely gloomy. There are some situations where, in spite of the oppressive present, he manages to realise 'that the early dreams have not died behind the years', or where he is able 'like a lad, with clear eyes / To look at the inexpressible sky'. In most cases, however, the positive elements are denied, as in 'Graf-schrift' ('Epitaph'), where the deceased one had been 'to no high seat o'er some unthreatened region, / exalted - to no radiant altitude'. And by evoking this kind of non-existent situation he introduces an essential internal tension into most of his poems that saves them from becoming depressive or disconsolate.

After several bitter experiences (divorce, the death of his beloved mother and the final disappearance of his family home, and a period of unemployment and poverty), in 1937 Bloem published a third book: *De nederlaag* (Defeat). Understandably, the majority of these poems are even more dis-

illusioned than the preceding ones, but in spite of that in many cases the internal tension has been preserved. And in several respects the poet has succeeded in subtly renewing his verse: it is rhythmically more flexible, the stanza-forms more varied, the imagery more specific. But at the same time he remained his unmistakable self, in accordance with his lifelong ambition *'to express some essential dimensions of life in such a way that it could have been done only by me and by no-one else'*. At fifty Bloem had not in the least lapsed into self-repetition as so many of his colleagues do at that age.

In 1942 a small collection appeared: *Enkele gedichten (A Few Poems)*, just before the Germans made publication impossible for authors who did not agree with their ideology. Apart from one piece, 'Keats', that glorifies *'the immortal poem'* defeating the transitoriness of human life, nearly all the other ones are negative: *'There is no escape from a life that has become a failure past retrieval.'* And then, at the very moment the town of Zutphen, where Bloem lived, had been liberated, *'while still the neighbouring air / Reverberate[d] with war'*, he wrote a sublime sapphic 'Ode', afterwards called *'Na de bevrijding'* ('After Liberation'), by general consent considered to be the most impressive poem written in our country during the five years of German repression: *'[it] Is worth it all, the five years on the rack, / The fighting back, the being resigned, and not / One of the unborn will appreciate / Freedom like this ever'* (Tr. Seamus Heaney).

Of course several of the ten poems collected in *Sintels (Cinders)* a few months later, are in the same key as his earlier work, or at best display a sense of resignation, but most of them show a remarkable inner tension by opposing the present situation to past dreams of fulfilment: *'Incomparably clear the moon is shining'*, *'When in the perfect light of the first nights of spring / Youth returns ...'*. And another aspect of this regained vitality is the fact that nearly all of them are written in different rhythmic and stanza-forms, an unusual phenomenon for this tradition-bound poet.

During his remaining years Bloem published three more slender volumes: *Quiet Though Sad* [a quotation from Milton], *Avond* (Evening) and *Afscheid* (Farewell) In these poems he not only maintained the level of his earlier work, but quite a number of them have attained proverbial status, for instance *'Thinking of death I cannot get asleep / And unsleeping I keep thinking on death'*, *'Simply happy in Dapperstreet'* (a sombre street in an Amsterdam working-class area), *'And, then, it could have been so much worse'*. You can hear them quoted in the most unexpected places. And this is characteristic of Bloem's work. It is highly memorable and quotable, more so, I would say, than the verse of practically all his colleagues. Yet he was never 'popular' or facile.

Bloem was a superior craftsman, as I hope to have made clear. He has written quite a number of poems about human life that are both very personal and generally valid. From this point of view there is good reason for calling him a great poet. That, nevertheless, I have called him a great *minor* poet, is because his range is so clearly limited: exclusively lyrical and even that in a restricted sense. The poet himself was fully aware of these limitations and openly said so. But, as I wrote at the very beginning of this article: his work is still very much alive, in spite of his own epitaph on his tombstone: *'Past, past, oh and forever past'*.

Five Poems

by J.C. Bloem

Mirroring

A pigeon-feathered sky is mirrored in the sea.
Blue light steams between sky and tranquil sky-reflection.

On one and the other side rounds the blade of the shore
Towards a faint horizon of sea, sky, land and haze.

Now memory awakes of a beauty that is lost;
An old feeling returns out of a long dream.

A dream of voices and of faces and of idle sound
And ever-increasing tiredness that one calls life.

't Was first an endless longing, a wandering here and there
And then a daily sense of lack, and then not even that.

– The hour is getting later, the dark grows through the grey.
And still a pearl-black sky shadows the twilit sea.

1930

Translated by A. Verboeff.

Epitaph

Nameless among the nameless that are legion,
to general sameness seemingly subdued;
to no high seat o'er some unthreatened region
exalted – to no radiant altitude –

The safely sheltered ever and anon
bore with him, or forgot him, but none saw
the shadow of two wings that drove him on,
and in his bent neck the relentless claw.

And now, after desire, tired and outworn,
and lifelong patience under restless strain,
a tombstone, cracked by weeds, and weatherworn
letters and figures filled by the slow rain.

1931

Translated by A. Roland Holst.

Spiegeling

Een duivenveren hemel weerspiegelt in de zee.
Blauw licht damp't tussen hemel en stiller hemelbeeld.

Ter ene en andre zijde rondt zich de kling der kust
Naar een vervloeden einder van zee, lucht, land en mist.

De herinnering wordt wakker aan een verloren schoon;
Een oud gevoel keert weder vanuit een langen droom.

Een droom van stemmen en gelaten en gerucht
En steeds vermoeder worden, en dien men leven zegt.

't Was eerst een eindloos hunkren, een dwalen her en der,
Werd toen een daaglijks derven, en toen ook dat niet meer.

– Het uur wordt later, 't duister groeit door het grijze heen.
Een parelzwarte hemel schaduw't de schemerzee.

Grafschrift

Een naamloze in den drom der namelozen.
Aan de gelijken schijnbaar zeer gelijk,
Door geen vervoering stralend uitverkozen
Tot heersen in een onaantastbaar rijk –

Wie van die hem vergaten of verdroegen
Ontwaarden uit hun veilige bestek
De schaduw van twee vleugels die hem joegen,
Den fellen klauw in zijn gebogen nek?

En nu, na het begeerde, het ontbeerde,
Na de onrust en het levenslang geduld:
Een steen, door 't groen gebarsten, en verweerde
Letters en cijfers, die de regen vult.

After Liberation

Sheer, bright-shining spring, spring as it used to be,
Cold in the morning, but as broad daylight
Swings open, the everlasting sky
Is a marvel to survivors.

In a pearly clarity that bathes the fields
Things as they were come back; slow horses
Plough the fallow, war rumbles away
In the near distance.

To have lived it through and now be free to give
Utterance, body and soul – to wake and know
Every time that it's gone and gone for good, the thing
That nearly broke you –

Is worth it all, the five years on the rack,
The fighting back, the being resigned, and not
One of the unborn will appreciate
Freedom like this ever.

April 1945

Translated by Seamus Heaney.

Dapper Street

Nature is for the empty, the contented.
And then: what can we boast of in this land?
A hill with some small villas set against it,
A patch of wood no bigger than your hand.

Give me instead the sombre city highroads,
The waterfront hemmed in between the quays,
And clouds reflected in an attic window –
Were ever clouds more beautiful than these?

All things are riches to the unexpectant.
Life holds its wonders hidden from our sight,
Then suddenly reveals them to perfection.

I thought this over, walking through the sleet,
The city grime, one grey and drizzly morning,
Blissfully happy, drenched in Dapper Street.

October 1945

Translated by James Brockway.

Na de bevrijding

Schoon en stralend is, gelijk toen, het voorjaar
Koud des morgens, maar als de dagen verder
Opengaan, is de eeuwige lucht een wonder
Voor de geredden.

In 't doorzichtig waas over al de brake
Landen ploegen weder de trage paarden
Als altijd, wijf nog de nabije verten
Dreunen van oorlog.

Dot beleefd te hebben, dit heellijfs uit te
Mogen spreken, ieder ontwaken weer te
Weten: heen is, en nu voorgoed, de welhaast
Duldloze knechtschap –

Waard is het, vijf jaren gesmacht te hebben,
Nu opstandig, dan weer gelaten, en niet
Één van de ongeborenen zal de vrijheid
Ooit zo beseffen.

De Dapperstraat

Natuur is voor tevredenen of legen.
En dan: wat is natuur nog in dit land?
Een stukje bos ter grootte van een krant,
Een heuvel met wat villaatjes ertegen.

Geef mij de grauwe, stedelijke wegen,
De' in kaden vastgeklonken waterkant,
De wolken, nooit zo schoon dan als ze, omrand
Door zolderramen, langs de lucht bewegen.

Alles is veel voor wie niet veel verwacht.
Het leven houdt zijn wonderen verborgen
Tot het ze, opeens, toont in hun hogen staat.

Dit heb ik bij mijzelf overdacht,
Verregend, op een miezeringen morgen,
Domweg gelukkig, in de Dapperstraat.

The Nightingales

I've never hoped for bliss that life would bring.
The search for happiness is bound to fail.
What matter? – The immortal nightingale
Is singing in the chilly night of spring.

May 1947

Translated by A.J. Schemann.

De nachtegalen

Ik heb van 't leven vrijwel niets verwacht.
't Geluk is nu eenmaal niet te achterhalen.
Wat geeft het? – In de koude voorjaarsnacht
Zingen de onsterfelijke nachtegalen.

All poems from *Verzamelde gedichten* (Collected Poems)
[1964]–20th ed.] Amsterdam: Athenaeum Polak & Van Genrep,
2001.



W. Schuhmacher, *Portrait of J.C. Bloem*, c.1948.
Pencil, 46 x 31.5 cm.
Collection Letterkundig
Museum, The Hague.