

B

ravelly

enjoying life in the face of death'

Gerrit Kouwenaar, Poet

When he was seventeen Gerrit Kouwenaar (1923-) decided to leave school in order to become a poet. And he succeeded in realising his ambition most convincingly: beyond doubt he has developed into one of the greatest Dutch poets of the second half of this century, not only because of the many excellent poems he has written, but also because he has proved to be one of the most influential forces on later developments in the poetic landscape of the Netherlands.

A very curious aspect of his literary career, however, is that it took him nearly as many years again to discover his unmistakable poetic self. Of course he wrote a great number of poems in the meantime, showing evident traces of surrealism and expressionism; he played a noticeable part in the international CoBrA-movement of painters and poets during the late forties, he was one of the politically engaged young writers who started a noisy revolution in Dutch poetry during the early fifties, but it was not until he was thirty-five that he published his first incontestably authentic book of verse: *using words* (het gebruik van woorden, 1958). After so many years he had at last discovered that it was not in the spontaneous expression of subconscious motives, nor in exuberance, that his talents and character lay. On the contrary. The essence of his new-found attitude towards his art was restraint, precision, soberness, avoidance of anecdotal elements. A poem had to be a well-considered construction of complex word-buildings, the poet's task was to control the language and at the same time to respect its structure and its components. In short: Kouwenaar had developed into a poet in the symbolist tradition, in the vein of such writers as Wallace Stevens, who gave him his shock of recognition, and Paul Valéry.

'One could not smash a window with a poem'

Lacking any faith in superhuman powers and hating abstractions, he tried to find his way in the unremitting poetic exploration of the inscrutable *conditio humana*: 'I am not a scholar, not a counsellor / I can't explain to you the impossibilities of earth and air / I make them', he wrote. This is to say that

he was very much aware of the fact that there is no solution to the riddles of life: *'I have failed to get my mind round human existence; I accept it.'* And what he tries to do in his poetry is to make its readers suddenly and deeply aware of his and their position: *'To shock people by their own reality.'* A striking example is: *'One protects oneself by flesh against nothing.'* That is to say: flesh does not amount to much as a protection against attacks from outside or from within, man is extremely vulnerable, but at the same time the flesh is all he has to protect him against that which lies in wait for him: annihilation.

Now the central problem for the poet Kouwenaar is that this effect must be produced by means of *'deceitful and ambiguous language'*. At best *'poetry is something that stands its ground on the verge of losing'* he once said, *'but in spite of that one must try again and again'*. So he feels his efforts forever frustrated by the limitations of his means of expression. *'What I am trying to do in my poems is to make things tangible.'* And of course this is impossible: words are but words, not objects you can hold in your hands: *'One could not smash a window with a poem'*.

*I have built a whole world
with nothing and I suffer
not poverty*

This is what writing poetry amounts to for our poet – he succeeds in building a complete, a perfect world in his verse: in this way it is a triumph, a *creatio ex nihilo*, but frustration is built in because words are not and cannot be concrete objects, they are just sounds or a series of black spots on paper, and so the poet suffers. But at the same time writing a well-made poem does give a measure of satisfaction, and so he suffers not poverty. In thirteen words Kouwenaar has turned a number of somersaults, and in a way all of his pronouncements are legitimate and meaningful. It is no wonder that a man who has the nerve to see his power and his limitations in this way, often resorts to paradox and irony.

What a poet tries to do in his verse, is *'to grasp something out of time and to give it some kind of immortality'*, and of course this too is impossible. *'Once contaminated with words / the landscape will not exist any longer.'* This is one of the reasons why Kouwenaar is fascinated by photographs: each of them a fixation of one infinitesimal moment of the past. Part of his *a hundred poems* (100 gedichten, 1969) is called 'today, a photograph album' ('heden, een fotoalbum'). It is a series of autobiographically inspired poems, making clear that one's 'now' is not a single moment in the course of time, but in fact an accumulation of past experiences. The most fascinating example of photograph-inspired verse however, is a group of poems called 'le poète y, sur son lit de mort', based on a picture of the Russian poet Esenin (1895–1925; the French call him Yesénin, hence the 'y.' in the title) on his deathbed after committing suicide. In these four poems Kouwenaar has managed to evoke an extremely complex combination of experiences and insights into life and death, transience and eternity, and into the power and the impotence of poetry, flawlessly and succinctly.



'One still has to count one's summers'



Gerrit Kouwenaar (1923-).
Photo by David Samyn.

Many poets tend to become repetitive once they have discovered their individual way of writing, particularly so when they grow older. Kouwenaar, however, has succeeded in continually renewing his style, in varying his approach and his means of expression, while remaining immediately recognisable in the twelve collections of verse he has published over the forty years since *using words* appeared. At first he concentrated almost exclusively on the nature and limitations of poetry, but then he realised: *'If I go on in this way I shall ultimately finish off on a blank page.'* Therefore he decided *'to draw more reality into the poems'*. And so he wrote *the voice on the third floor* (de stem op de 3e etage, 1960), starting:

*The city: this peaceful soldiers' camp
in which in the early frost-morning
streetcars chirp
like the whetting of swords*

And once again he makes clear that he has renounced every trace of idealism: *'I don't believe in mankind / being good // I believe in man the way he murders and doesn't murder'*. *'I must live with death / with all those fellow-beings head-over-heels / in this stinging focus of time'*.

In his next book, *without names* (zonder namen, 1962), Kouwenaar's (self-)irony plays an important part, his language becomes even more concentrated, and paradoxical statements abound, especially in a group of poems 'gone / disappeared' ('weg / verdwenen') about the demolition of a once-famous theatre, which he conjures up in his verse: absence made concrete one might say. Several poems in *a hundred poems* are written in a lighter key and the book contains the autobiographical section already referred to. A process of increasing self-relativisation and of growing ever more conscious of his own transience is an important theme in two new collections bearing the paradoxical titles of *dates / scenery* (data / decors, 1971) and *landscapes and other events* (landschappen en andere gebeurtenissen, 1974). It is in these collections that an important change in the designation of the lyrical subject takes place: instead of 'ik' ('I') Kouwenaar now uses 'men' ('one'), an indication that he is not dealing with private experiences and sensations, but that the reader himself is involved as well; it has become a shibboleth in his later work. Growing older, he clearly needs fewer words to express his experiences: his poems become shorter, even more highly concentrated and restrained, without loss of intensity and vitality. Of course by now Kouwenaar is compelled to face the oncoming end: *'One sees / the end of the garden'*, *'future has been degraded to short sight'* and *'what one clearly sees is framed in black'*. But in spite of that he does not lose his taste for life:

*One still has to count one's summers, pass
one's sentence, one still has to snow one's winter*

*one still has to get the shopping done before
darkness asks the way, black candles for the cellar*

'*Bravely enjoying life in the face of death*', the poet Herman de Coninck called it. The loss of friends and relatives has inspired a number of poems in which Kouwenaar openly admits his sadness but at the same time reminds himself and his readers of the love and friendship shared, without ever falling into sentimentality.

In short, Gerrit Kouwenaar is an ever-fascinating poet, a man who has had the courage to face the full extent of life's complexities with impressive honesty.

A.L. SÖTEMANN

Five Poems

by Gerrit Kouwenaar

farewell

Something falters, one has smoked too much, flees
coughing to the orchard, autumn breathes

narrowly, silent as a bed this is, it's silent
a mouth, only the snails on dead wood move

sitting on a stone one would like to stay here
for hours or centuries, living off a brimful

beaker left behind when for a moment summer flesh and spirit
in a near-mute three-voiced choir remortalised themselves –

from *a small of burnt feathers* (eer geur van verbrande veren, 1991)

afscheid

Er hapert iets, men heeft te veel geraakt, vlucht
kuchend in de boomgaard, najaar ademt

ternauwernood, stil als een bed is dit, het zwijgt
een mond, alleen de slakken op dood hout bewegen

men zou hier willen blijven zitten op een steen
uren- of eeuwenlang, terend op een boordevol

achtergebleven beker toen zomer vlees en geest
zich in een hees driestemmig koor even onteeuwigden –

a smell of burnt feathers

One comes home, it's march, one opens up
the wintered house, absence and want
have knotted webs, consumed scavengers, driven
the owl through the chimney to death

the floor full of helpless down, the books
shit chalk-white, the glasses in smithers
on the eternal bed a neat carcass
with huge wings

what did one do to-day?
picked up branches, bewailed the withering
elderberry, fuelled a fire with trash –

From *a smell of burnt feathers* (een geur van verbrande veren, 1991)

een geur van verbrande veren

Men komt thuis, het is maart, men ontsluit
het verwinterde huis, afzijn gebrek
hebben webben gestrikt, mee-eters verteerd, de uil
door de schoorsteen de dood in gedreven

de vloer vol hulpeloos dons, de boeken kalk
wit bescheten, de glazen aan gruiszels
op het eeuwige bed een proper karkas
met machtige vleugels

wat heeft men gedaan vandaag?
takken geraapt, de kwijnende vlier beklaagd
vuur gestookt van afval –

the last days of summer

Slower the wasps, scarcer the gadflies
greenflies greyer, angels none, nothing
that heavens here, all burns lower

these are the last days, one writes
the last halt of summer, the last
flames of the year, of the years

what was keeps being there barely
and what one clearly sees is framed in black

one must sign off here, imply
the garden in the garden, spare the open book
the ending, one must withhold oneself

keep secret how language comes caving in at the lips
how the ground swamps the poem, no mouth
shall speak what winters here –

From *a smell of burnt feathers* (een geur van verbrande veren, 1991)

de laatste dagen van de zomer

Trager de wespen, schaarser de dazen
groenvliegen grijzer, engelen gene, niets
dat hier hemelt, alles brandt lager

dit zijn de laatste dagen, men schrijft
de laatste stilstand van de zomer, de laatste
vlammen van het jaar, van de jaren

wat er geweest is is er steeds nog even
en wat men helder ziet heeft zwarte randen

men moet zich hier uitschrijven, de tuin
in de tuin insluiten, het geopende boek
het einde besparen, men moet zich verzwijgen

verzwijg hoe de taal langs de lippen invalt
hoe de grond het gedicht overstelpt, geen mond
zal spreken wat hier overwintert –

a winter evening

Sat a long time looking at the gangrenous trunk
of the old elder burning down

beyond words this slow self-absorbing leave
this natural birth of cinders

and not to be grasped how meanwhile next to time
in a neighbouring snowed-under now
the dormouse awoke and the radio
was singing the song of the glittering chalice

and how, later, the white room was blacker and later
than ever and the luminous watch
held its breath, listening for
the immortal ticking of the woodworm –

From *time is open* (de tijd staat open, 1996)

winter stands still

Write winter stands still, read a day without death
spell the snow like a child, melt time
like a clock mirroring itself in ice

it's ice-cold today, so translate what one writes
into a clock that won't run, into flesh
that's there like snow in the sun

and write how her body was there and bent over
supple in flesh and looked back
straight in the eye of to-day, and read what this says

the sun on the snow, the child in the sled
the track snowed under, illegible death –

From *a glass to break* (een glas om te breken, 1998)

All poems translated by Lloyd Haft.

een winteravond

Lang zitten kijken hoe de verkankerde stam
van de oude vlier verbrandde

niet na te vertellen dit trage eenzelve afscheid
deze vanzelfsprekende geboorte van as

en niet te rijmen hoe onderwijl naast de tijd
in een belendend dichtgesneeuwd heden
de zevenslaper ontwaakte en de radio
het lied zong van de fonkelende beker

en hoe later de witte kamer zwarter en later
dan ooit was en het lichtgevend horloge
zijn adem inhield, luisterend naar
de onsterfelijke klok van de houtworm –

de winter staat stil

Schrijf de winter staat stil, lees een dag zonder dood
spel de sneeuw als een kind, smelt de tijd
als een klok die zich spiegelt in ijs

het is ijskoud vandaag, dus vertaal wat men schrijft
in een klok die niet loopt, in het vlees
dat bestaat als sneeuw voor de zon

en schrijf hoe haar lichaam bestond en zich boog
gelenigd in vlees en keek achterom
in het oog van vandaag, en lees wat hier staat

de zon op de sneeuw, het kind in de sled
het dichtgewaaid spoor, de onleesbare dood –