

The Pen that Circumscribes a Being

A Portrait of Erik Spinoy

Erik Spinoy (1960-).
Photo by David Samyn.



Anyone wishing to zoom in on Erik Spinoy (1960-) cannot ignore Dirk Van Bastelaere (1960-), and vice-versa. Two years after their joint debut *Golden Boys* (1985) came *Argue with Us* (Twist met ons), an anthology featuring poems by Spinoy and Van Bastelaere alongside work by Bernard Dewulf and Charles Ducal. In a highly polemical introduction their fellow-poet Benno Bernard attempted to sell the whole venture as the 'coming out' of a new generation and the breakthrough of postmodernism in Flanders. That this was not the case has – after two decades of *Argue with Us* – been said often enough. Dewulf and Ducal were and are fairly traditional poets, and in 1987 it was somewhat premature to stick a 'pomo' label on Spinoy and Van Bastelaere – Spinoy himself has admitted that it was only Barnard's introduction that really got him thinking about postmodernism.¹ One positive result of that thinking was his contribution to the poetics issue of the literary periodical *Yang* (1989–90), which was far more important in profiling Flemish postmodernism than *Argue with Us*.

Looking back, the poet also referred to that much discussed anthology as being primarily 'a moment of consecration, of public recognition of [him] as a poet' that launched him on 'the capricious course that is the trajectory of [his] poet-hood'². It is true that Spinoy, who nowadays finds it extremely irritating to be tarred with the postmodernist brush and who regards himself as an *einzelgänger*, an individualist, in the tradition of the Flemish modernists Paul Van Ostaijen and Hugo Claus, regularly re-invents himself. It is, however, possible to point to many constant features in his work, the principal one being its high quality. The oeuvre of Erik Spinoy is a feast.

Hunters in the snow (De jagers in de sneeuw) – the title is taken from a painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder that is now in Vienna – appeared in 1986. In that collection Vienna is a décor, a hat stand. What is important here is the human aberration of wanting to order the world – and the senselessness of that frenzied attempt. Against his better judgment, man searches for the soul of a universe that is soulless. In order to discover sense and meaning, he is constantly on the move: there is a lot of motion in this poetry. The lifelong quest, however, is hopeless. Everything is doomed from the outset. It would be better for man to shake off 'every feeling of desire and expectation', but they are 'like dandruff and hairs on one's collar': unwanted and obstinate.

Desire is a (necessary) tormentor for Spinoy, just as identity is. In *Hunters in the Snow* the word 'I' is printed a couple of times in italics – and thus problematised. The intangibility of what is desired and the doubtful nature of identity recur in the collection *Susette* (1990), which, among other things, deals with the relationship of the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) and Mrs Jacob Gontard. The blurb poses some pertinent questions: 'Who is Susette? Is she (1769-1802) Hölderlin's mistress? Is she described, as history? Or is Susette a name, a blank space, a sign of the times, the mark of a longing that torments us all or of emotion that never fades?'

In *Susette* Spinoy's postmodernism would seem to have come into bloom. The poetical jacket blurb tells the reader that the collection contains open texts that 'misuse' the most diverse writings and forms of language and demand to be treated in the same way – with respect, humiliation, protest. All that is certain, it says, is that one answer is never sufficient here – and that that is not a bad thing. These poems seek, sometimes violently, to set in motion the imagination and the linguistic competence of the reader. In the process such sacred cows as unity, coherence and seriousness must be relegated to the background. The reader, then, is to co-write these poems. He is expected to work just as hard as the author, well knowing that the haul of meaning can never be captured in its entirety.

A master of collage

The blurb of *Pranks* (Fratsen, 1993) explains to the reader that these poems pull faces (another meaning of 'fratsen') because they are grimaces at an inexplicable pain and because they are also pranks one laughs at in the way one laughs at something absurd: gaily and grimly at one and the same time. Furthermore, they make tangible something that never becomes visible, the 'sublime' – this in accordance with the interpretation Kant gave to the word *Fratze*. Even more convincingly than in this collection from 1993, the sublime is made tangible in the bibliophile volume *The Taste of It* (De smaak ervan, 1995). That which is – more broadly – unnameable features prominently in all of Spinoy's poetry; he likes to surround 'it' with images. Just as Susette's hand did in the poem 'Childhood' ('Kinderjaren'), Spinoy's hand too follows 'the pen that circumscribes a being'. Very often that being seems to be a void.

One way of circumscribing a core is by cutting and pasting. In the substantial collection *Wicked Wolves* (Boze wolven, 2002) Spinoy has shown himself a mas-

ter of collage (or of composition). The highly diverse elements he has juxtaposed here lend colour to each other. As an introduction to the first cycle, for example, a biblical quotation ('*For we walk by faith not by sight*' – 2 Corinthians 5, 7) and the slogan from *The X Files* ('*The truth is out there*') fraternally rub shoulders. What is important in these poems is not only man's impotence and ignorance but also his eternal subjection to some belief or other, some doctrine or other – Spinoy is extremely good at puncturing such illusions. In another series, which seems to quote from a variety of old documents, the poet exposes the danger of superlatives by linking the massive adulation of sports heroes to the rise of fascism in the 1930s. The series about Frank Lloyd Wright, the architect of the Guggenheim museum, who believed that he was handing humanity a Model with his organic art but who himself did not shrink from financial and other shady dealings, then transitions almost seamlessly into a cycle which lovingly tells the story of a simple woman, a grandmother. It may well be that not all of Spinoy's narratives are equally true to the facts – and who is to say what the truth is anyway? The first poem of the FLW series concludes with: '*And this is what / beforehand / might have taken place*'. What is certain is that the poet – in a jumpy and unobtrusive but unmistakable fashion – knows how to grasp truths about our existence, and that he always gives death – the empty core of everything – the last word.

Unpleasant truths

With *L* (2004) Spinoy would again seem to have produced a kind of report, this time on the repeated rise and fall of the dream of brotherhood. In 1967 the Beatles sang their 'All You Need is Love', a message that did not fall on deaf ears. The whole of hippie culture can be summed up in one letter: the L of 'love, love, love' but also the 'L / of lazy [...] and of languid, laid-back / of long hair / glutted lice'. All very Lovely, but two years later there was the somewhat over-vehement Beatles fan Charles Manson, who heard references to the Apocalypse in *The White Album*. Manson, the self-declared new Man-son, felt that the end of days was nigh, expected a rebellion by the blacks against the whites, and thought someone had to light the fuse. By allowing his disciples – giggly youngsters – to go on a lunatic killing spree, in Roman Polanski's home among other places, the charismatic leader generated disenchantment. Disenchantment also came in the 1980s, after new hippies seemed briefly to have appeared on the scene. In their drugs and dancing the yuppies also sought intoxication and unity – even if only the unity of the happy few. They deliberately closed their eyes to all the misery in the world. And so the dream of '*Alle Menschen werden Brüder*' had already been reduced to rubble even before the Wall was.

Of course, *L* is not simply a report. With Spinoy, anecdotes are always a pre-amble. This poetry is cultural analysis decked out in rich attire. In *L*, one of the things that strikes the reader is that a 'we' invariably leads to self-loss of the individual, *and* has an annoying tendency to react against a 'they'. But first and foremost this collection wants to show the path taken by every argument – one of the author's hobby-horses. Spinoy is a cerebral, critical, even a satirical poet, even though his poems often retain a sober, registering tone.

Two of the most important features that make this poetry poetry are language-play and intertextuality. The finest example of the former from *L* has to

do with soldiers in Iraq: *'First to come into the picture was / soldier Samantha S. // who receives a small fuchsia / from an elegant dark man / [...] // and laughs. // [...] see here / Lynndie E. now stands. [...] // she is smoking a cigarette / and laughing / while straining at the leash / and showing / genitalia.'* After the mention of the small flower, the reader might perhaps fleetingly think, when coming upon the word 'genitalia', of some sweet little sister of the primula, while 'fuchsia' conceals the word 'fuck'. As far as intertextuality is concerned, the mixture of high and low culture is striking. *'Only yesterday / the walls of the cell fell down flat, merely by song / and sound of trumpets'* is a reference to Joshua 6, while *'from Africa to America'* is a quotation from the 'poetry' of the immensely popular Flemish children's pop group K3.

In *Hunters in the Snow* the word 'I' is placed in italics on several occasions and thereby problematised. In his most recent collection *I, and Other Poems* (Ik, en andere gedichten, 2007), Spinoy has gone deeper into the thematics of identity and identification, and he has also gone much further as regards typography. Incidentally: that the potential of typography is exploited here and elsewhere in his work may well remind the reader of Paul van Ostaïen (1896-1928). And it was on this Flemish poet that Spinoy, who lectures in Dutch and Flemish literature at the University of Liège, wrote his doctoral thesis.

The I is a poem, a text, a construction, a fiction. Yet, however makeable it may be, the I remains ungraspable, even to itself. And in these poems too a being is being circumscribed. In the opening series 'I', a pathologist-anatomist circles round mortal remains and around the gruesome fascination with them that remains incomprehensible, even to the protagonist. 'Image and likeness' zooms in on a supposed societal core that forges a link between people. There is dancing, with perverse and aggressive gestures, round the fundamental hole in our existence, death, and the senselessness of everything that results from it in 'In a noose'. The new catechism 'All new' attempts to make that hole less black. The final series 'Cordyceps' shows how exotic fungi live as parasites on insects – everything, everyone carries within it the seed of its own destruction – and how futile is our eternal *'turning just monotonous / and hopeless / like itself'*. The circle of life and death, the entire dynamic, is one big zero.

Unpleasant truths, that is what Erik Spinoy confronts his readers with. Despite this, his oeuvre is one long, beneficent flash of beauty. Even someone already aware of the magnificence of Dutch is continuously surprised when reading this poet, whose words seem to tally in more than one sense. In *Hunters in the Snow* he wrote about the language of the child: *'The word had still been nothing else than flesh / the sun thus named because it gives warmth and / light, and carries out only for yourself / its task laid down / by your father. // A rose was a rose was a rose. Language / an etymology.'* That lost paradise is what Erik Spinoy restores to his readers. ■

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NOTES

1. Karl Van den Broeck & Bart Cornand, 'Twist met ons. Vier dichters over poëzie in Vlaanderen'. In: *Knack* 36 (2006), 20: pp. 70-75.
2. Tine Hens, 'Als iedereen je Willy noemt'. In: *Standaard der Letteren*, 19 May 2006.