

Writer in the Public Debate

On Stefan Hertmans

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[ANNE MARIE MUSSCHOOT]

Since he was first profiled in this yearbook (*The Low Countries 1998-1999*), the Flemish-Belgian writer Stefan Hertmans (born 1951) has developed significantly as an artist. Hertmans started out as a poet but came to the attention of the general public primarily as a novelist, with books such as *Terug naar Merelbeke* (Back to Merelbeke, 1994) and *Als op de eerste dag* (Like the first day, 2001). He went on to add theatre texts to his multi-award winning oeuvre, and the poet and prose writer is now mainly active as a prominent essayist, well-known in the public sphere for his opinion pieces. His work as a whole is characterised by an unusual degree of erudition and by a rapid evolution in which he, as a critical intellectual, constantly questions and comments on himself and the culture in which he lives. He perpetually pushes back boundaries, and, like all strong personalities, resists all forms of limiting labels.

Yet it is possible to see a development in this many-sided and multiform oeuvre. In the first books of poetry and the early prose, Hertmans used a hermetic form indicative of the need of 'high modernism' to construct a purely linguistic, 'depersonalised', objectified or autonomous world. However, gradually the poet and prose writer moved towards a more open, melodic, flowing and communicative verse and a more recognisable, communicative narrative method. Nevertheless, the world that he evokes continues to explore the boundaries between fantasy and reality, and his linear narrative method is increasingly splintered into fragmentary, often diary-like mosaic structures.

As in the work of Wallace Stevens, considered an important benchmark by Hertmans, one can see also in Hertmans' work a transition from modernism to postmodernism, and a reflection of the climate of the time in which he lives. Most recently he has adopted the critical stand that results inevitably from the non-committal scepticism of postmodernism. The absolute relativism of this movement marginalised late capitalist culture and led to the loss of the public function of literature. The complaint that 'literature no longer matters' was (and still is) widely heard. Not surprisingly, many writers have gained a fresh awareness of their role in social debate - including Hertmans. He remains of course a writer of poetry, novels and theatre texts first and foremost, but he is now also a writer who fulfils his role as a public intellectual with conviction.



Stefan Hertmans

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The past occupies a significant place in the poet's consciousness. Not just the cultural past, with the heritage of all the art forms with which lyrical subject he, as a teacher of philosophy of art, is very familiar, but also the personal past, with the poet's own memories. *Goya als hond* (Goya as a dog, 1999), in which the long, eponymous title poem pays homage to the Spanish painter, is the first collection in which Hertmans gives equal prominence to autobiographical elements. The lover is present, as is the young son who places a 'finger in the palm of his hand' that 'fits perfectly'. As in the earlier poetry, the poet enters into a dialogue with several artists who have gone before him; there are just as many confrontations with and projections of himself, always with a strong philosophical bias. In the title poem, which is based on the painting commonly known as *The Dog* (1821-23), by which Hertmans was transfixed during a visit to the Prado in Madrid, he sees how the painter processes his memories, and this 'releases the things that he himself remembers'. It is also a poem about the

passing of time, about his own dog in former landscapes, which in particular evokes an awareness of the threat of 'the end times', of hellhounds swimming against the current, and of drowning in the present. In the present, that which has foundered and sunk comes back, and time 'is against him'; the dog continues to drown.

Hertmans' maturity as a poet was confirmed with a substantial collection that – rather confusingly – was given the same title as an earlier collection: *Muziek voor de overtocht. Gedichten 1975-2005* (Music for the crossing. Poems 1975-200, 2006), a title that incidentally demonstrates the same fascination with the end, the crossing. This collection also includes a few stray poems not published previously, but fortunately does not mark the end of Hertmans' work as a poet. In 2010, another new volume appeared, *De val van vrije dagen* (The fall of free days), which again deals with the themes of the present melting into the past, cultural tradition, and reflection on what has come to an end but which is at the same time also a portent of what is to come. Time passes and is always an uncertain 'interim'.

Vital melancholy

In his prose of recent decades, it is noticeable that the fantastic, sometimes burlesque and grotesquely magnifying element has been suppressed. However, although Hertmans' prose seems to have become more realistic, the narrative is still far from traditional. In *Het verborgen weefsel* (Hidden fibre, 2008), for example, the narrator crawls as it were into the consciousness of an outwardly very tough, but inwardly very vulnerable woman, and experiments further with ways of expressing the inexpressible. There is a lot of Hertmans himself in this highly empathetic portrait of an extremely sensitive woman. The name of the main character is Jelina, with a nod to the Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek, a passionate feminist. But Antigone was also a source of inspiration, and of course Emma Bovary is not far away. This *journal intime* contains references to the cultural past, and the author also brings in a familiar topic: he condemns the constant failure to write and speak. Things evade the consciousness. The 'hidden fibre' that Hertmans describes in this book resembles another analysis of what he described in an earlier essay as 'vital melancholy': a fundamental discontent that preserves itself through an ever-present will to survive.

This oppressive, strong poetic prose was preceded by the remarkable *Inter-cities* (Steden, 1998), which has since been translated into several languages and has contributed greatly to the writer's international reputation. The subtitle of the book is 'Stories on the Road' ('Verhalen onderweg'), but it could be equally well described as a book of essays. Hertmans even shifts or modifies the boundaries of the genres within which he chooses to write. This book marked the definitive end of the image of a rather other-worldly writer and intellectual who stood out high above the rest of society. The essays about cities such as Sydney, Tübingen, Trieste, Dresden, Vienna, Bratislava and Marseille, but also Amsterdam and Brussels and his former, 'indescribable' home city of Ghent, are not travelogues but rather commentaries on what the traveller sees and thinks. They mark the first steps towards the new role that the writer has taken upon himself, that of providing an open, critical reflection on reality. The fact that he has gained great erudition over the years, which he also uses in

his analyses, does not stand in the way of subjective involvement with what he sees and experiences. For here, too, he is seeking to grasp the (always shifting, impossible) essence of things, the intangible Idea beneath and behind things. In so doing, concrete perceptions repeatedly form a mirror in which the I can discover itself. Even the smallest detail can be of significance in this: 'Voices, things and faces [are] linked to an understanding of life'.

Nomadic involvement

Hertmans' growing involvement in public life is evident from a rich collection of volumes of essays in which the leitmotiv is closely connected to the body of ideas contained in the creative, non-reflective work. 'Creative people sail without a compass', Hertmans let slip in passing, as it were, in an essay entitled 'Een vergeten oratorium van Hindemith en Benn' ('A forgotten oratorium by Hindemith and Benn', in *Fuga's en pimpelmezen* (Fugues and blue tits, 1995). The reason for this remark was the indefiniteness he observed in the course sailed by the artist, or of the erratic significance attached to the artist's experiences. The remark as such can also be applied to Hertmans himself: he too chose not to choose, to sail without a focal point. His thinking always fans out; he offers 'open' criticism which provides a commentary without a fixed point. He is a critic of the centrifugal, meandering movement.

In fact, Hertmans' positioning as an 'open' and 'creative' critic goes back to 1988, when he published his first book of essays about literature in *Oorverdovende steen* (Deafening stone). At the time, he noticed when editing or updating his essays that his previously expressed views could quickly acquire a 'completely different meaning', which served to increase yet further his fascination with the 'paradoxes in everything we know and think about literature'. In later volumes of essays, *Sneeuwdoosjes* (Snow globes, 1989, with essays about literature, music and film) and the above-mentioned *Fuga's en pimpelmezen* ('about current affairs, art and criticism'), the writer broadened his outlook even further. Not only does he do away with the linearity of time in his reflections, but this leads to an 'inherent infinity of possibilities', a space in which it becomes possible to consider all art from all time periods. The search for the absolute and for truth is experienced as impossible and abandoned in favour of multiple perspectives, relativism and scepticism. But Hertmans has left postmodernism behind: he has rejected nihilism and lack of commitment and replaced them with prompt reactions to political, social and cultural current affairs.

This development also includes resistance to 'closed' theories and dogmas. In a sound, philosophical consideration of Peter Sloterdijk, the author of among other things the bestselling book *Critique of Cynical Reason* (*Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*), Hertmans discusses the new eclecticism in depth (in *Oorverdovende steen*). Recurring subjects and motifs include an interest in Rilke and his attempt to 'say the unsayable', and renewed attention to the translation of poetry, with the associated problem that the essence of poetry is not apprising and therefore also not translatable. There is a preoccupation with the immovability of things (a focus he shares with Walter Benjamin) and with his own past and memory, which of course brings him to the greatly admired Proust: Proust, who composed his sentences in circular motions and in accordance with musical principles.

Hertmans, himself a creditable jazz musician, is one of the few essayists able to write in depth and inspiringly about music, preferably classical music.

In *Fuga's en pimpelmezen*, Hertmans makes a definitive break with focusing solely on the literary. This is a 'creative' intellectual speaking who connects everything to everything else, cuts across all art forms and, freewheeling, with free associations based on his broad cultural baggage, sets about tackling literary and philosophical texts, music, contemporary politics and social issues. The book begins and ends with essays in which the writer positions himself as a 'courageous' intellectual. In a response to the – for him outmoded – nihilism of the twentieth century, the essayist posits that the guarantee of a liveable society lies in learning to live as individuals, i.e. in a non-egocentric way, and in continuing to think along the lines of the current philosophy of doubt. But in the concluding essay, about the French philosopher Bernard Henri Lévy, Hertmans redefines the task of the critical intellectual within 'the philosophy of action'. Not choosing is replaced here by militant reflection and positioning. And that does indeed require courage.

The essay on George Steiner, a philosopher and critic once held in high esteem by Hertmans but against whose *Real Presences* he reacts vigorously, fits into the same framework of thinking. The existence of God (the 'real presence') is impossible according to Hertmans, nor has he, as a reader and critic, any need of an explanatory model. Steiner's condemnation of deconstructionist reading is disregarded as conservative and authoritarian. 'Real' readers are those 'who are not afraid of the thought that the job is never done and never can be done.' What is necessary is 'the courage of the critical intellect' that holds the uncertainty of deconstructionist, never-ending reading in creative esteem 'in a never-ending, nomadic criticism.' Hertmans is in fact himself a nomadic critic: he reveals himself in this book as a critic who sails without a compass, an attitude which he retains in his later essays too, with his finger on the pulse of current affairs, but also with very personal testimonies of his musical experiences. The expression of his personal preference for string quartets (in a piece on Leoš Janáček's *Intimate Letters*) is a dazzling ode to the genre almost certain to move every music-lover.

Against entertainment

The 'nomadic criticism' continues in *Het putje van Milete* (The well of Miletus, 2002), in which Hertmans combines essays on philosophical debates and current affairs with essays on literature. The writer had by this point begun teaching philosophy of art, and this has left its mark. He published a guide to the agogics of art *Waarover men niet spreken kan* (Whereof one cannot speak, 1999) and a comprehensive discussion of the obscene in art, *Het bedenkelijke* (Dubious matters, also 1999). In *Het putje van Milete*, the 'shuttling between study and world' is visible within a single book. The essayist follows the debates and controversies in and around the thinking of Martin Walser, Martin Heidegger and Peter Handke, Th.W. Adorno, Peter Sloterdijk and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and switches with ease to enthusiastic reflections on political and social current affairs in the Netherlands. It is clear from the title, a reference to the paradigmatic joke about the foolish philosopher Thales of Miletus, who fell into a well

while gazing at the stars, that Hertmans' border crossings are figurative as well as literal. According to Hertmans, this incident expresses 'perfectly the greatest risk of lofty thoughts: that you lose sight of concrete situations.'

Hertmans will not fall into a well like Thales of Miletus while he is philosophising about art. His focus on concrete reality is stronger than ever, and he is 'passionately involved' with the world, as one critic put it in a recent portrait. It was only with the publication of *Het putje van Milete* that the true breadth of Hertmans' range emerged. In the space of a single book, he sweeps breathtakingly through the oeuvres of Beckett, Yeats, Borges and a number of important Flemish writers such as Hugo Claus, Maurice Gilliams, Herman de Coninck and Peter Verhelst, and is able in many cases to compare their work with his own work and development. The essay on the dramatic works of Hugo Claus is particularly revealing in this context, leading as it does to a probing consideration of the recent disappearance of writers' theatre and theatre texts recognised as literary. The new relationship between text and director is a development in which Hertmans himself played an important role, with the prominent dramatic text *Kopnaad* (Suture). *Mind The Gap* (2000), in which the audience gets to hear the viewpoint of three women from ancient Greek tragedies, is another impressive example of new theatre practice. In connection with these two texts and the subsequent *Empedokles* (Empedocles), Hertmans also wrote a series of inspired reflections on working with Greek tragedy in our time. They were compiled in *Het zwijgen van de tragedie* (The silence of tragedy, 2007).

Yet Hertmans still continues to surprise. In 2011 he published a new collection of essays, *De mobilisatie van Arcadia* (The mobilisation of Arcadia), with further lucid, sharp and always highly erudite analyses of the spirit of the age and contemporary art in his own country. This time he is fulminating against the lack of 'real' commitment on the part of artists. He unleashes an eloquent tidal wave of outrage over what he calls emotional sensationalism and the runaway hedonistic economy for which the media are responsible. Where the focus has shifted 'from the artist and the work of art to the public', art has become chiefly 'an entertaining, easily consumable art'. However, the *locus amoenus* and 'Arcadian existence' do not belong to our reality, the teacher points out, and art must remain free from general condescension. Once again, Hertmans explores the ambivalence surrounding the status of the artist accused of elitism. Or: how the centuries-old relationship between artist and society can still provoke elevated and profound discussion, perhaps today more than ever. With Hertmans as an inspiring guide. ■

An Extract from *Intercities*

By Stefan Hertmans

Sydney: Parallel Worlds

It is as if for centuries a substance has flowed from the human eye that affects and changes the world, a glue that binds places and things. That substance doesn't really exist, things are not joined together into a meaningful whole by any glue. And yet it is our eyes that bind things together, that give them a place in the whole; a look that hesitates between understanding and incomprehension, as if we intuitively want to assign things a place in an otherwise chaotic world by the simple fact that we see them; though without necessarily having the guarantee that we can actually place them.

However, the human eye certainly does put the whole world into a meaningful context: all urban and rural landscapes have been formed, determined and constructed by concepts from geometry and perspective. Nothing is simply there. What we see is always determined by what others before us have seen in it. We, who stand there and look on, as the popular Dutch song says, link things when we see them; not a single landscape in which man has intervened escapes this linking look, which connects things, glues them back together again and interprets them as a coherent whole - a bridge, a tunnel, a tower, a bend in a road - as if we are forming sentences, 'making syntax' of the discrete things around us. The open places in urban landscapes are the most far-reaching example of this binding, this assigning-of-a-place by the human eye: we immediately fill the emptiness with the meaning of a square. These open places suggest spatial continuity without our actually seeing it or being able to say much about it, but which we nevertheless recognize immediately and intuitively as a common experience.

Seen in this way, the desolate plain around the Berlin Potsdamer Platz before 1990 wasn't simply an empty site, but a scar full of meaning, a story about war and cities, and what might seem empty was immediately glued together by the eye into an historical site in which each thistle shooting up could acquire a meaning of its own.



In the film *Der Himmel über Berlin*, the old Homer, a leather cap with earflaps on his wrinkled head, stumbles across the immense fallow field through the overgrown grass:

I can't find Potsdamer Platz! No, here I thought ... No, that's not it! Potsdamer Platz, surely that's where Café Josti ... So this can't be Potsdamer Platz! And no one to ask ... It was a district full of fun! Trams, buses with horses and two ears ... Tell me, Muse, of the poor immortal precentor ...

This twentieth-century Homer staggers past rubbish through the grass that has grown grey with urban dust and slowly the vanished square looms up in the mind of the viewer. As he talks of them blindly, the things rise up and walk in the midst of old paper, condoms and greasy chip papers, between the garbage and the signs of a space left to its own devices. The fallow field again becomes a square, the bell of the tram rings, the coffee in Café Josti regains its aroma and the first cars draw up. Time's arrow is reversed for a while. Then the old man sinks into a dilapidated sofa and gets his breath back as he sadly meditates. In the background, we see the ugly improvised pedestrian bridge that, in the meantime, has disappeared.

The Campo dei Miracoli in Pisa, the Piazza dell'Unità d'Italia in the glittering bay of Trieste, the canal basin like a square of water in front of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, the vague (disquieting) open space in front of the Kremlin or behind the Hermitage in St Petersburg, the unforgettable bleakness around the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, the ancient emptiness of the great Roman sites; but also the new emptiness deliberately filled by architecture with nothing but the potential of the human eye, the deserts of suburbs. This eye immediately fills with memory and makes the new into something that can be understood in a different story. Take Sydney harbour, with its twentieth-century version of what Venice must once have been, in which the famous shell-shaped

Opera House contrasts with the tall metal bridge, the park with its white ibises and corellas, and the quay with the metro line above it - all these things that were placed in a different perspective by the intervention of that most recent building, the Opera House. Such open spaces are linked together by the subtle adhesive of the human eye, which sticks contrasting elements together; even through the arbitrariness of pleasant diversion, they interact and complement each other, in turn forming the glue through which the eye goes exploring and assigns a place to the skyline, the water, the arc of the iron bridge or the kissing couples, the same the world over, in the warm dusk by the railing of a ferryboat that is just leaving.

The human eye knows about proportions and plays with them consciously but, at the same time, absent-mindedly, looking with a detached emptiness that prevents the viewer from being pinned down by a single object or focus.

The same emptiness that activates the glue of the eye assails you all the time in Australia. It begins the moment you start flying over the outback for hour after hour, the monotonous landscape intersected by heat and vague dream lines, the empty heart of this continent, like a huge deserted square around which the cities have assembled like buildings and through which the central emptiness acquires a meaning that cannot be found anywhere else; for example, this meaning remains noticeably absent when you fly over the Siberian steppes - here there is no longer any boundary, only centripetal emptiness, far below zero.

On Circular Quay, the bow-shaped quay around which Sydney's waterfront square lies, a *Writers Walk* has been set up - about 40 brass plates with quotations from authors like D. H. Lawrence, Robert Hughes, Eleanor Dark and Charles Darwin, David Malouf, Jack London, Rudyard Kipling, Mark Twain and Arthur Conan Doyle. They are all quotations which in a strangely varied way evoke a fascination with what has been forgotten, hidden under the shuffling feet of laughing tourists who, without one look at the plates, are far beyond



the Oyster Bar on their way to something undefined, which they hope to find in Botany Bay.

'Silence ruled this land,' it says on Eleanor Dark's plate. 'Out of silence mystery comes, and magic, and the delicate awareness of unreasoning things.' (from *The Timeless Land*, 1941)

The rollerbladers whizz across the words.

Would Australians have done anything differently if their country had not been settled as the jail of the infinite space? Certainly they would. They would have remembered more of their own history. (from Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore*, 1987)

Nearby sits an Aborigine, dressed up and decorated with what was once a unique heritage but has now degenerated into its own exotic form of kitsch, playing his sonorous didgeridoo. Fascinated by the primeval power of this spectacle, the rhythm and the sound, more and more clusters of people stop. Then the man, who is at least six feet tall, takes the instrument out of his mouth, and with a smoky voice says in broad Australian, 'Well, if ya like ta hear what I play, why don't ya put some money in here?' He points contemptuously at the bowl by one of his knees and goes on playing. The primeval sound that left his listeners free to think their own thoughts has suddenly acquired a voice straight out of a soap opera, but with a tone that frightens the anonymous public to death, a direct challenge to its non-committal attitude. This is more than a walker out in search of the exotic can bear. Immediately the ogling group disperses, the man is alone again and behind their backs the monotonous ancient rhythm begins again - as the fascinating bad conscience of the exotic dream. ■

Translated by Paul Vincent

From *Intercities*, Reaktion Books, London, 2001

(*Steden. Verhalen onderweg*, Amsterdam/Leuven, Meulenhoff/Kritak, 1998)

Two Poems

By Stefan Hertmans

The Free Fall of Days

There is in intervals of expectancy
no pit so shallow that the soul
fails to tumble in: the phlox that are no roses,

cloudlessly raining, bronze that crumbles
like stale cakes, empty portraiture
before a breathed-on mirror,

your pale eyes which, said Baudelaire,
convey the tempest of a passion in a stain,
more insignificant than you or I,

because our dying is announced
in someone else's clothes,

the interval in which you are no more
expected, a hole in which
your life once lay,

as night draws in your neighbour whistles low
'No milk today', or for tomorrow anyway.

De val van vrije dagen

Er is, in tussentijden van verwachting,
geen gat zo ondiep of de ziel tuimelt
erin: de floxen die geen rozen zijn,

wolkeloos geregen, brons dat tot
koek verkruimelt, lege portretkunst
voor een beademde spiegel,

je bleke ogen die, zoals Baudelaire,
het onweer van een passie in een
vlekje dragen, nietiger dan jij en ik,

want aangekondigd is ons doodgaan
in andermans kleren,

de tussentijd waarin je niet meer
wordt verwacht, een gat waar
ooit je leven zat,

tegen de avond fluit de buurman zacht
No milk today, alvast voor morgen.



The Jerónimos Monastery in Belém

You can start your life all over
any minute by wanting nothing
other than this now:

blue and yellow, aerolite and sand,
the shadow of a column and
voices in an arcade.

Look at the transient:
the airplane humming lazily in
the flawless day glides
with swallows and seagulls
above the roof.

A child summons you to these hours,
imagine trickling water,
centuries without people.
Be still as ancient stones.

It is now.

Klooster San Jeronimo, Belém

Je kunt je leven elk ogenblik
opnieuw beginnen door niets
meer te willen dan dit nu:

blauw en geel, luchtsteen en zand,
de schaduw van een zuil en
stemmen op een gang.

Kijk naar het vluchtige:
het lui zoemende vliegtuig in
de smetteloze dag glijdt met
zwaluwen en meeuwen
over het dak.

Een kind roept je naar deze uren,
denk aan druppelend water,
aan eeuwen zonder mens.
Word stil als oud gesteente.

Het is nu.

From *The Free Fall of Days (de val van vrije dagen,*
De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam, 2010)

All poems translated by Donald Gardner