

to him as a prospect in his youth, but in the late work it is mainly an ancient location that takes no account of man's brief presence. The longer he looks at the farmland and the river, the stranger the surroundings become: 'all those years that I sat here looking, I've seen / the familiar change into / the unfamiliar, and return again' (2003).

The imperturbability of the landscape actually acquires a consoling quality. When the poet returns home after a period of illness, he observes that 'the garden is not altered / for it I've not been away' (2008). The garden does not remember him, it 'is there, just as I is there too.' Every metaphysical vista has collapsed in the previous half century. We are here; any spiritual connection is a mental construction and after a relatively short time we are reabsorbed into non-being. The analogy between the garden and the speaker suggests that the landscape is not granted eternity either.

In the Dutch-speaking world Koplant has always been a popular and fêted poet. Readers, particularly contemporaries, have sought solace in his casual wisdom. The street noise of our age scarcely penetrates this poetry, with the result that the poems evoke the atmosphere of a traditional agricultural Netherlands that was rapidly being swept away. It sometimes made this poetry rather too sedate, but does provide a space for spiritual reflection, albeit abandoned by God. I don't know how long people will continue to read Koplant, but it is crystal clear that his work has fulfilled an important function in the post-war Netherlands.

PIET GERBRANDY

Translated by Paul Vincent

JAMES BROCKWAY, *Memories of the Unknown*

(intro. J.M. Coetzee), Harvill, London, 2001

WILLEM GROENEWEGEN, *What Water Left Behind*,

Waxwing Poems, Dublin, 2005

RIA LEIGH-LOOHUIZEN, *An Empty Place to Stay*,

Twin Peaks Press, San Francisco, 1977

A Cutting Critic

Gerrit Komrij (1944–2012)

In 2012 Dutch literature lost Gerrit Komrij, poet, novelist, critic and anthologist; altogether a cultural institution.

Two days after Komrij's death my eye fell upon an obituary in a Spanish newspaper describing him as 'the national poet of the Netherlands'. That is correct, as Komrij held the title 'Poet of the Fatherland' for some time but it is also laughable, because the title is largely ironic, a sort of trophy for poets who compose in response to national current affairs. Komrij was an important poet, but not the greatest in the Netherlands, so what was it that gave him his unmistakably central place in Dutch literature?

Leaving a degree in Dutch literary theory at the University of Amsterdam unfinished, Komrij turned to literature in 1967 at the age of 23, first as a poet and editor at a publishing house, and later as a literary critic.

When Komrij started work as a critic he was still a young, unknown poet. After his poetic debut in 1968 with *Maagdenburgse halve bollen* (Magdeburg hemispheres) his criticism was a shock to the system, a noble stranger lashing out in elegantly written reviews, setting to work on established names with merciless sarcasm. Komrij's reviews were a punishment for some, a source of malicious pleasure for others. Komrij was notorious, claiming afterwards, 'at the time I had no idea of the effect of my articles, just as you realise only later that you looked just fine when you were young and unhappy.'

Komrij stopped reviewing at the end of the 1970s because he felt too much a part of that 'little world'. Nevertheless he remained active as an essayist and opinion former. He targeted TV – the neologism 'treurbuis', meaning 'sad box', was his – as well as architecture, modern art and politics. The range might seem broad, but there was an overarching theme: in all these domains Komrij sought to combat amateurism and slop-



Gerrit Komrij © Paul Leviton

piness. He was annoyed by praise for lack of literary technique, the fact that there were no entrance exams for representatives of the people, and so on. He hated people who hid their sloppy thinking behind jargon, and believed that writing a clear poem was much more difficult than writing an airtight poem. In keeping with this conviction, his poetry, although melancholy, was accessible and he did not shy away from humour. In addition to a great deal of non-fiction and poetry, Komrij published a handful of novels, the most important of which is *Verwoest Arcadië* (Arcadia Destroyed). In this semi-autobiographical work Komrij appears in the form of Jacob Witsen, a homosexual boy who lives mainly inside his own head. The outside world cannot compare to the fairytale he has made up for himself, but it gradually encroaches, as the boy grows up and must find his place in a continually disappointing reality. This book is effectively Komrij's declaration of his critical attitude to reality, the cabaret side to his personality and his predilection for playing with identity and masks.

The search for the lost Arcadia was to continue later. Komrij tried to emigrate to Greece when he was twenty, and moved to Portugal for good in 1984, together with Charles Hofman, the artist who had been his life partner since 1964.

Komrij has become a household name chiefly for his work as an anthologist. Being a cultural glutton and bibliophile, he had a broad general knowledge which helped him in compiling all kinds of anthologies. His best known work is *De Nederlandse poëzie van de 19de en 20ste eeuw in 1000 en enige gedichten* (Dutch poetry of the 19th and 20th centuries in 1001 poems), which really caused a stir among his peers. Each new edition of Komrij's weighty tome caused further ructions in the Republic of Letters. Poets gauged their importance by it: were they mentioned, and if so, how many poems were included? Those excluded could always claim to be proud of the fact. According to fellow writer and monument Jeroen Brouwers, Komrij's anthologies rescued more writers from obscurity than any museum of literary history.

Gerrit Komrij was born on 30th March 1944 in Winterswijk, in the province of Gelderland. He died, after a brief illness, in Amsterdam on 5th July 2012. Between those dates he became one of the best known faces of Dutch literature. He leaves behind his life partner, and a melancholy, hilarious, acerbic and extensive body of work.

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