

## I Found a Form

Hubert Van Herreweghen: Seventy Years a Poet

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[ PIET GERBRANDY ]

How much room for manoeuvre do we have? We are born with a genetic coding, we are shaped by the environment we grow up in, society conditions us, in order to eat we have to work, we reproduce, we experience war and grief and finally our powers decline and we disappear into the abyss. Isn't freedom a spurious concept? Isn't everything we think, say and do determined by forces which we not only cannot control, but of which we are not even aware?

One could see the last few centuries of Western culture as an attempt to escape from the restrictions of origin and nature. In science, philosophy, art and literature, as in politics, there has been an urge towards emancipation and liberation, in which, since every revolution creates its own dictatorship, every victory is a Pyrrhic one. Technology offers both mobility and control, God's laws have been exchanged for those of Darwin, visual artists have obeyed the decree that abstraction and conceptualism have made the depiction of reality redundant, those who left the church were converted to nebulous something-ism or aggressive consumerism. We'll never get any further, while, in the meantime, neglecting valuable traditions and exhausting natural resources.

And what about poetry? Although many wild experiments have come and gone, from Ezra Pound's intertextual fireworks to the hermetic linguistic implosions of Hans Faverey, from the politically charged expressionism of Van Ostaïjen and Lucebert to the elusively evolving on-screen word formations of Tonnus Oosterhoff, basically little seems to have changed. All poets still celebrate, to use an old word, the inexorable progression from birth to death, while focusing en route on love, beauty and life's horrors. They try to give their words a pregnancy that does not work in prose, making grateful use of the universal fact that language is built of sounds. Poems are concentrations of music and meaning. Poets have been doing that for thousands of years. How much variation can you expect? And isn't poetry so precious precisely because it always does the same thing?

Despite the power of tradition many poets begin as revolutionaries and rabble-rousers. Everything must change, and what Harold Bloom calls the anxiety of influence drives them to assassinate their intellectual fathers, but as soon as they are admitted to the establishment a kind of ossification generally appears. What was once startlingly new becomes a party trick. The freedom of the

Hubert Van Herreweghen (1920)  
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adolescent was a rite of passage. Almost no one manages to remain an innovator all through their life. Perhaps that is not even necessary. Gerrit Kouwenaar, once a distinguished champion of an alternative poetics, has been writing the same poem for the last thirty years, but it gets better each time. H.H. ter Balkt repeats himself in every collection, but sparks and crackles as noisily as he did half a century ago.

### Focused on harmony

Hubert Van Herreweghen (1920), revered in Flanders as a master but unknown in the Netherlands, has been through an extremely interesting development in his seventy years as a poet. Although as a journalist and television programme-maker he was in close touch with current affairs and he must have closely followed the technological innovation of what we today call 'old media', as a poet he was always averse to publicity and avant-gardism. In his retreat in the Brabant countryside the poet went entirely his own way. Hugo Claus and Hughes Pernath, Herman de Coninck and Eddy van Vliet came and went, but Van Herreweghen seemed completely unconcerned. Brought up in the ancient Catholic faith, with a strong bond with the countryside and familiar with the long history of Dutch, he made his debut in 1943 with poems that in terms of both form and content might just as well have been written several decades previously. His second collection, *Liedjes van de liefde en de dood* (Songs of Love and Death, 1949) opens as follows:

*The words that hold each other dear  
And glisten in the self-same glow,  
group into sentences so clear,  
and dance out the poem in a row.*

Although in the second verse the anguish of a poet can be heard, even that dissonant note cannot conceal the fact that this poetry is focused on a harmony that is sometimes difficult to reconcile with the turbulence of post-war culture. Old social structures decay and crumble, the colonies fight free of the rule of their exploiters, women fight for emancipation and Charlie Parker's alto sax explores every nook and cranny of tonality, but Van Herreweghen picks a lily-of-the-valley 'to show a girl plain/that no words can explain/ how my heart longs for her'. Nor does he shrink from writing a verse such as this that belongs in the darkest misogynistic tradition of Christianity:

*Women are like a keg that's cursed  
if from the dregs you try to drink  
next morning you'll be full of thirst  
and your breath will stink.*

The poet is totally anachronistic when, as late as 1953, he appears to subscribe without the slightest doubt to the archaic dogmas of original sin and damnation. At least, this does not look like irony:

*Like boils that burst and pus and ordure leak,  
death breaks us open when we are bursting quite  
with viciousness and sin, and with a heretic's shriek  
our souls are lost for good in evil's dreadful night.*

## **In the margins of prayer books**

But lo and behold, the poet matures, and as he grows older does not cling to what is so familiar, but instead undergoes a step-by-step process of poetic liberation that I find fascinating. In one of his less lucid moments Herman de Coninck called him 'Flanders' most recalcitrant, language-grinding innovator'. That is nonsense, since Van Herreweghen is in no way an innovator and his language does not grind, but sings and dances. But the older bard definitely reinvented himself. Although there has been no shift to speak of in his themes and he remains true to the prosody copied from fifteenth-century rhetoricians like Anthonis de Roovere, his work gradually opens up in a way that allows the wealth of phenomena to speak for themselves. Perhaps even the older Van Herreweghen finds it hard not to preach, yet he observes the world with a detachment that some years ago I described as Buddhist. The seasons pass as they always have, the farmer goes on ploughing, the hops are added to the fermenting beer, children are born and the old return to the earth. The poet looks on and smiles.

In 'Jug', from the collection *Aardewerk* (Earthenware, 1984), he speaks about form. Discovering is not invention but recovery:

*I found a form that many found,  
a space that fire and clay surround,  
a wall of mud from ploughed-up land.  
Its stone-like fullness filled my hand.*

The image of an earthenware jug for poetry is of course not new; one has only to think of John Donne's 'well-wrought urn' and Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. However, it is striking that Van Herreweghen stresses the earthly origin of the clay and the simplicity of form, which is expressed in the repetition of the rhymes. The jug contains nothing but water, with which the poet refreshes himself. But even the absence of living water does not detract from the value of the earthenware:

*Thirst quenched, your virtues I expound:  
your belly's curvature rings out  
up to your rim, all hollow and round.  
The vacuum leaves your beauty safe and sound.*

The virtues are not those of some divinity, but of the poem itself, as a self-contained artefact enclosing an emptiness full of meaning. That is a modernist principle.

If the form of 'Jug' is still evocative of the poet's late-medieval models, he also began gradually to experiment with typography. Indentation and extra spacing between lines create air and space, creating a visual rhythm that suggests an interplay of voices. The poems seem to become a series of responses, in which the right-hand side of the page enters into dialogue with the left-hand side. Dialectic would be too ponderous a word, since Van Herreweghen is seldom concerned with conflicts, but he does create a musical question-and-answer dynamic which is in search of a new equilibrium. There is a nice example of this in *Een kortwoonst in de heuvels* (A Smallholding in the Hills, 2002):

*Flowers after the lightning*  
    *terror's allowed*  
    *and thunder all night long*

*Peonies irises unopened*  
    *the sensitive membrane*  
    *too tender to touch*

*still stand next day*  
    *disarmed and terrified*  
    *glad that they're alive*  
*and feel the tepid light upon their eyes...*

*Though I tremble too*  
    *we can still laugh together.*

In the first two verses, if I can call them that, the three lines that begin at the left-hand edge indicate steadfastness in difficult circumstances, while the indented lines evoke rather the vulnerability of the flowers. Even the happiness

at still being alive issues from the fear that has been endured. Since the right-hand side has more than twice as many lines as the left-hand side, in the last verse the speaker tries to restore the balance by placing his concern on the left and his relief on the right, and in addition neutralises the 'night' of the first verse with 'laugh'. Over and against this there is the fact that in a musical sense the trembling of the 'I-figure' constitutes an answer to the survival of the peonies. The initially separate characters – since the flowers are personified – are united in the final four words. A provisional state of harmony has been reached.

In 'Still Life' culture and nature enter into a dialogue. On the left we read about an elderly couple that are on the point of dissolving back into the landscape from which they emerged, on the right their situation is related to old prayer books and still lifes. At the same time there is a suggestion that we're not dealing with wild nature but with farmland that has been rather left to its own devices, while on the other hand the above-mentioned art objects derive their beauty from the vegetation:

*Though crops we'd long been, grown wild  
just like woad plants, we,  
two death's heads seemingly,  
we blend along the lea  
with the blue of chicory,  
clay's multiplicity  
and, more real than a painting compiled  
in the margins of missals,  
of ancient epistles,  
to princes or abbeys supplied,  
serrated silverweed,  
beside.*

*Wild life mild  
in the oval of an afternoon  
made a mild  
still life.*

The rhymes 'wild', 'compiled' and 'mild' are telling: rough is opposed to civilised, until in the final word they merge in a kind of Hegelian synthesis, which does not represent a compromise or an Aristotelian golden mean, but a new phase at a higher level. The princes recall the famous medieval song of the two royal children, who are contrasted with the old lovers who *did* find each other. The phrase 'serrated silverweed' is striking – 'serrated' refers to the leaves of this member of the rose family – which both through the suggestion of a carpentry operation (sawing, fretting) and the material silver, seems to belong more in the world of applied art than at the edge of a meadow. However, the fact that the plant is more real than 'painted' suggests mainly the realism of the illumination in the margin of the manuscript. The longer you look at this tranquil scene, the livelier it becomes.



Do the pleasure of saying do  
     (first your tongue-tip tight on teeth  
     then expelling the ooh hoooh)  
 often paralysed my tongue  
 leaving me without a clue  
 how to keep the poem's sounds  
 that hold the crazy words in bounds  
 within its ranks securely strung.  
 (...)

[Note: 'toe' can be used in Dutch as an encouraging, inviting, mocking interjection (Compare: 'Do come in, vicar'). It also means 'closed'.]

The interplay of sounds acquires biblical associations in 'Rattle':

*The man who held together  
     the shabby lamb  
 that came from its mam  
     in his arms crammed  
     before it could be a ram  
                                 or a wether  
     or a ewe  
     I stared after him:  
                                 A-  
                                 bra-  
                                 ham?*

*So lame so tame  
     so blade so male  
         so meek a fine view.*

In the second half of the poem, as in Jan Hanlo's 'Oote', only ostensibly meaningless syllables are left (ra, ta, ram, ma), scattered casually over the page. But a note informs us that 'tarara' is the Spanish word for 'winnow', and if one looks further one sees a tame lamb (*tam lam*) emerge, a mother, the Indian god Rama and the holy month of Ramadan. What does all this suggest? The holiness of all creation, for which one is required to sacrifice new-born children? The magic of old syllables? Whatever the case it is a poem that one can listen to for a long time.

Listening is probably Van Herreweghen's greatest virtue. In 'Wang' he says: 'my writing is more wordless listening / than saying what I may know'. In a wonderful, not too serious prose text of 1955, the poet describes his visits to Brabant breweries where special beer was maturing. After pointing out the earthy smell of the fermenting brew he describes its auditory aspects:

*Sometimes the beer spits like an angry cat, and you can hear it doing its best and making an effort, and on a lukewarm summer's evening, as you walk through the galleries with slow cautious steps, you hear, not without a surge of strange and altruistic emotion, how the beer is tiring itself out for you. Sometimes you hear it squeak like a nest of young mice.*

Is this not a splendid image for the fermentation of the poem? ■

*Translated by Paul Vincent*



## Six Poems

By Hubert Van Herreweghen

### The poem

The words that hold each other dear  
and glisten in the self-same glow  
group into sentences so clear,  
and dance out the poem in a row.

A poem can start just like the rain  
or swaying like snow, and light.  
All at once in the chorus's train  
you hear the poet's sobbing plight.

You hear him under the to and fro  
of the words imbued with pain  
because no sultry phrase can flow

over March leaves like rain,  
because no word can weigh like snow,  
no sound make flowers smell again.

From: *Songs of Love and Death* (1949)

### Het gedicht

De woorden die elkaar beminnen  
en glanzen in hetzelfde licht,  
rijen aaneen tot zuivere zinnen,  
dansen de rei van het gedicht.

Als regen kan een vers beginnen  
of wiegend als de sneeuw, en licht.  
Plots hoort gij in de rei daarbinnen  
de dichter die te schreien ligt.

Gij hoort hem onder het bewegen  
der woorden, waar 't verdriet in vaart  
omdat geen zin zo zoel als regen

kan ruisen op het loof in maart,  
omdat geen woord als sneeuw mag wegen,  
geen klank de geur der bloem bewaart.

Uit: *Liedjes van de liefde en van de dood* (1949)



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### And you

If to death you're blind  
in the child in the wife  
all you love in life  
you can't read my mind

if you can't hear or see  
in the water and wind  
in the eyes of a friend  
in words, melody

shy things that portend  
the swift flight is through  
the child starts to bend

earrings' tinkles end  
you want to call that friend  
but he's dead. You too.

From *Poems IV* (1967)

### En gij

Wie de dood niet ziet  
in de vrouw in het kind  
in al wat hij bemint  
die begrijpt mij niet

wie niet hoort en ziet  
in 't water en de wind  
in de ogen van een vriend  
in het woord en 't lied

het schichtige het te snelle  
de vlucht het is voorbij  
het kind gaat overhellen

stil vallen de orenbellen  
de vriend wilt gij nog bellen  
maar hij is dood. En gij.

Uit: *Gedichten IV* (1967)

### Source

The water that's in love with life  
    long yearning must learn to bear  
    till the appointed day is there  
it came towards me from its cave  
    always cheerful and pious  
    wildly composed  
    it looked at me up close  
    my eyes in its eyes  
and I said good day mr water,  
    liquid lady,  
having come to greet the sunrise  
on this holy day  
    from a thousand deep nights  
and I said lick me lick  
    my hand, I said  
and it licked me and blessed  
    the deeply reverend  
and where it flowed  
    and tried to fall  
    we laughed, we all  
    willow, alder and grass,  
    the herbs that were there  
the sun and I, the cloud and the earth.

From: *Basket and Trough* (1993)

### Bron

Het water op het licht verliefd  
    moet lang verlangen dulden  
    tot de dagen zijn vervuld en  
't kwam uit zijn grot naar mij gelopen  
    het altijd vrolijke het vrome  
    het wild bedaarde  
    het keek mij aan dichtbij  
    mijn ogen in zijn ogen  
en ik zei goedendag heer water,  
    vochtige vrouw,  
naar de opgang van de zon gekomen  
op deze heilige dag  
    uit duizend diepe nachten  
en ik zei lik me lik  
    mijn hand, zei ik  
en 't likte mij en zegende  
    het diep eerwaarde  
en waar het liep  
    en wilde vallen  
    lachten wij allen,  
    wilg en els en gras,  
    van kruiden wat er was,  
de zon en ik, de wolk en de aarde.

Uit: *Korfen en trog* (1993)



### Stubborn day

The stubborn day beech hedge and holly  
all sullen wood with knots in  
from the shadows of  
bristly bushes in the verge  
and thorny undergrowth  
wrests the green night forth  
and wounds me as it feels  
the tender epidermis  
with its scored bark  
the soul a membrane of nerves  
with its rock-hard grooves  
and ridges of displeasure  
greys the light  
and in horror he retreats.

Like this love might begin  
a lick of love's what we lack  
but time is short

it's freezing within  
at noon the sky's black.

From: 'Uncollected Poems' in: Dirk de Geest (ed.),  
*Bloemlezing uit de poëzie van*  
*Hubert Van Herreweghen* (1999)

### Stugge dag

De stugge dag haagbeuk en hulst  
van nukkelig hout met kwasten  
wringt uit de schaduwen van  
borstelig bermgewas  
en doornig onderhout  
de groene nacht naar buiten  
en kwetst mij als hij tast  
de tedere opperhuid  
met neuten van zijn basten  
bezenuwd vlies de ziel  
met zijn steenharde groeven  
en ribben ongenoegen  
vergrauwt het licht  
en gruwelend wil hij weg.

Liefde zou zo kunnen beginnen  
er is een lik liefde vandoen  
maar tijd te kort

het vriest al binnen  
het avondt op de noen.

Uit: 'Ongebundelde gedichten' in: Dirk de Geest (ed.),  
*Bloemlezing uit de poëzie van*  
*Hubert Van Herreweghen* (1999)

### The great schools

One who paints the sea as a white plane  
knows that the moon beneath the tiles  
of the roof  
rules the hard roe  
and soft.

Then great schools move south  
the armies of clones  
homeless, alone  
banished from sea to sea  
along with the ancient law  
of moons

there goes what longs for deep and dark  
there that raging silver churns

they turn north  
drilled into a single sect  
where the maternal net  
silences the writhing of the death urge.

### De grote scholen

Wie de zee schildert als wit vlak  
weet dat de maan onder de pannen  
van het dak  
regeert de kuit  
en hom.

Dan trekken grote scholen zuid  
de legers klonen  
die zoeken waar te wonen  
van zee tot zee verbannen  
met de oude wet  
der manen mee

daar gaat wat diep en duister wil  
daar gaat dat woedend zilver om

en keren noord  
tot één sekte gedrild  
waar 't moederlijke net  
't gespartel van de doodsdrift stilt.

From: *A Smallholding in the Hills* (2002)

Uit: *Een kortwoonst in de heuvels* (2002)



## Tangle

I can't get a comb through my hair anymore  
I hold a thing and let it go,  
Things' existence is absurd,  
people's helpless gesturing.  
I am the wind, I romp with leaves  
I hold a thing and let it go,  
it's caught in a wild tangle,  
fingers don't know where to begin,  
it doesn't stick out, it doesn't stick in.  
I held a thing and let it go,  
with the wind it's gone to sail.

My ma'd have wound it without fail  
round her wooden reel just so,  
which she to the last would not let go.

From: *Webs and Tangles* (2009)

## Wargaren

Ik krijg geen kam meer door mijn haren,  
ik heb iets vast en laat het los,  
der dingen zijn is zonder zin,  
der mensen 't hulpeloos gebaren.  
Ik ben de wind, ik stoei met blaren,  
ik houd iets vast en laat het los,  
't verstrikt in een wild warregaren,  
de vingers vinden geen begin,  
't steekt er niet uit, 't steekt er niet in.  
Ik had iets vast en liet het los,  
't is met de wind gaan spelevaren.

Mijn moeder vroeger zou 't wel klaren  
en winden op haar houten klos,  
die liet ze voor de dood niet los.

Uit: *Webben en wargaren* (2009)