

## Olla Vogala (hinase) (All Birds (save))

A Canon of Dutch Literature

90

[ L U C D E V O L D E R E ]

I would like to discuss the Dutch literary canon, and already see storm clouds on the horizon. How do you dare to give a ranking to books, to raise the personal preferences of a few self-proclaimed experts to the level of absolute truth, and to solidify living literature into a list set in stone?

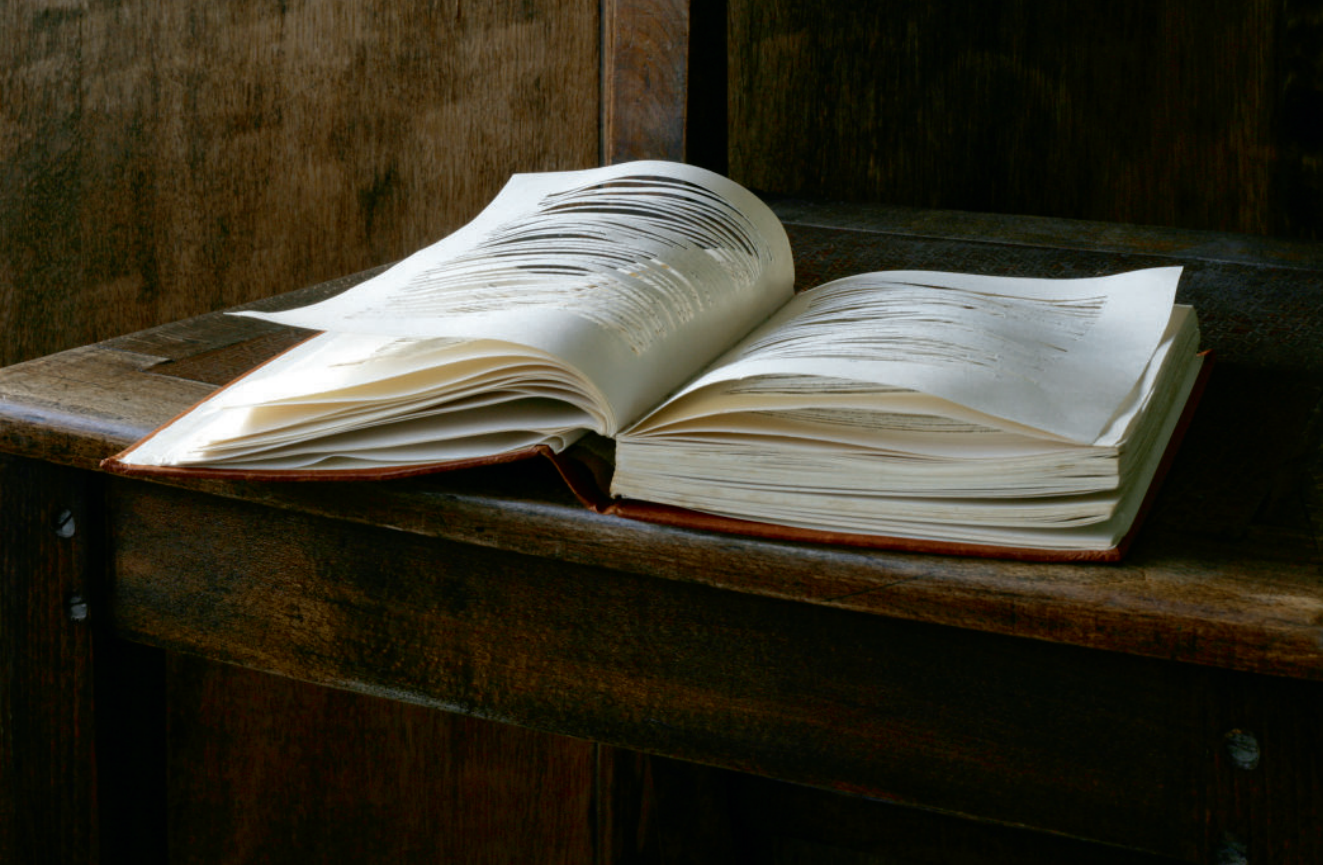
And yet I'm doing it. Because the canon is the conversation about the canon, the discussion, even the arguments about books and writers. Because you first have to have something if you want to set yourself against it. Because I would like to be able to answer the woman from Bucharest or the man from Sydney or Osaka when they ask me what Dutch literature they should have read.

In 2015 the Royal Academy of Dutch Language and Literature bent their heads together in Ghent over the canon, and came out with fifty titles, fifty works from between the end of the twelfth century and the 1980s. All the authors on the list are dead. The living need not feel frustrated. The list actually consists of 51 titles. After it was concluded, Jef Geeraerts passed away, so his book *Gangrene 1 (Black Venus)* (1968) was added to the list. Which goes to show that the canon can evolve.

### A lament in a margin

Dutch literature begins with an amorous lament in the margins of a manuscript. We decided that unanimously. We are in England, a bit before 1100. The culprit is a monk who most likely came from West Flanders. He tries his pen – *probatio pennae* – bent over a manuscript that he was meant to be copying in a cloister in Kent. The monk first chooses trusted Latin. *Habent omnes uolucres nidos inceptos nisi ego et tu. Quid expectamus nunc.* He hesitates for a moment, then chooses a confession in his own language:

*Hebben olla vogala nestas hagunnan hinase hic enda thu wat unbidan we nu.*  
'All birds are a-nesting / save me and thee / why now do we tarry' (translated by John Irons)



The language is discovering itself: linguists describe it as Old Dutch with an English substrate, or even as Old English - Kentish, to be exact - with a strong Dutch veneer. What does it matter? The language is there. To stay.

### **The carnival of the bourgeoisie**

I, too, would like to begin building a few nests here, but also to limit myself. To books from the twentieth century, roughly speaking. I presume that the woman from Bucharest and the man from Sydney will get more out of a limited number of titles. Even so, I would like to begin with a novel from 1860: *Max Havelaar, or The Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company*. The author is Eduard Douwes Dekker (1820-1887), alias Multatuli (what a pseudonym! 'I who have borne much'). The importance of this novel can hardly be underestimated: it is the first modern novel in our literature, written in modern Dutch. Even the author said of it, with his provocative irony: 'I set myself to the task of writing living Hollandish. But I went to school.' (Idee 41, in *Ideeën* (1862)).

It is not an accident that in 2002 the book was acclaimed as the best book in the canon of Dutch literature by members of the *Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde*.

*The story*, 2015,  
Piezographic print on paper,  
27 x 39 cm  
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In *Max Havelaar*, Douwes Dekker exposes and denounces colonial abuses in the Dutch East-Indies. As a colonial official, he had experienced them firsthand. He had acted against them in vain. Now he chooses the pen as his weapon. And an unusual literary form: a framed story with multiple storylines and various narrators. There are official documents in this book and compelling tales ('Saidja and Adinda'), and with the figure of coffee broker Batavus Droogstoppel, an immortal caricature of the Dutch-Calvinist entrepreneur takes the stage, upholding the system of repression with his studied and devout self-interest, half naïve and half cunning.

A solid half-century later, Willem Elsschot (1882-1960) would claim of Multatuli: 'This true Prometheus has held aloft the torch of rebelliousness and non-conformism. The whole of modern Dutch literature has flared up from his ashes. His cult is our most sacred duty.' That counts as a salute of honour.

In Elsschot's work, especially on the thematic level, there are also parallels with Multatuli. There is at least *one* noteworthy allusion. In the poem about the confused young Dutchman, Van der Lubbe, who was convicted in 1933 for setting fire to the Berlin Reichstag and subsequently executed, Elsschot writes: 'Let it (Holland and co) suffocate in its money, / in its cheese and in its skinflints' – which most certainly echoes Multatuli's angry jab at Droogstoppel at the end of *Havelaar*: 'Suffocate in coffee and disappear.'



*Untitled*, 2013,  
Ultrachrome print, 48 x 72 cm  
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Karel van het Reve (1921-1999), one of the best postwar essayists in the Dutch-speaking world (who, sadly enough, didn't make the canon because the commission decided, with heavy hearts, to leave essayists off the list - for this same reason you won't find Huizinga in the canon. But I will mention van het Reve's *Literatuurwetenschap: het raadsel der onleesbaarheid* (Literary Studies: The Enigma of Unreadability, 1978), the deadliest and wittiest reading on the subject that I know of), Karel van het Reve considered Elsschot the most important Dutch-language writer after Multatuli.

And while we're at it, I'd like in the same breath to mention Nescio (another clever pseudonym: 'I don't know,' alias Jan Hendrik Frederik Grönloh (1882-1961)) who made it into the canon with three short stories.

Multatuli, Nescio, and Elsschot all share a common theme, that of the eternal struggle between the poet and the bourgeoisie, the rebel and the defeated. Multatuli is the man who goes to war against the bourgeoisie with panache. Nescio's characters are young men with artistic aspirations who can't cope with society. They are swallowed up by it, fall prey to insanity, or commit suicide. Elsschot is a full-blooded member of the bourgeoisie who nonetheless dissects it like no other. His scalpel is irony. The result - melancholy.

In *De Avonden* (The Evenings, 1947) Gerard Reve (1923-2006) describes ten dreary days full of loneliness and boredom, in the life of twenty-three-year-old hero/office clerk Frits van Etgers, but really he is the voice of the generation that came out of the war feeling numb and without faith. In this novel the petty bourgeoisie is shot to pieces. The dry, documentary style, in which the smallest details are revealed, contrasts with the hero's solemn style. The grotesque is liberating.

### **'... the glorious realm of Insulinde that coils yonder round the equator like a girdle of emerald...'**

The Dutch East Indies, or the Dutch colony of 'Insulinde', gave us not only *Max Havelaar*, but also *The Hidden Force* (1900) by Louis Couperus (1863-1923) and the gem *Oeroeg* (1948) by Helle S. Haasse (1918-2011).

Couperus, using the narrative sharpness of Maugham, the spiritual depth of Conrad, and the moral compass of Forster, wrote about the decline and fall of a colonial official who remains blind and deaf to the dormant, mysterious powers of the East. 'His insight into the tragedy of European colonialism made Couperus a great writer. And his sympathy for the hybrid, the impure and the ambiguous gave him a peculiarly modern voice. It is extraordinary that this Dutch dandy, writing in the flowery language of fin-de-siècle decadence, should still sound so fresh,' wrote Ian Buruma in *The New York Times Review of Books* about the translation by Paul Vincent in 2012.

*Oeroeg* tells the story of the friendship between a Dutch and a Javanese boy, and the gap that grows between them because colonial relations simply are what they are. In the War of Independence (1945-1949) the two meet again: now opposed, and only then does the European understand that he never really knew his friend.

### **'It is a pool, a sea, a chaos'**

What does prose of the twentieth century still have to offer? I'll line up a few completely different books.

In the long-winded novella '*Het leven en de dood in den ast*' (Life and Death in the Oast-house, 1926), the autodidact Stijn Streuvels (1871-1969), called the Flemish Tolstoy by David van Reybrouck, describes in an inimitably rich, Flemish idiom, a night in which five seasonal workers do their work in an oasthouse,



*The letter*, 2011,  
Alabaster, 28 x 20.5 x 2.5 cm  
© Lynne Leegte

a chicory drying factory. Locked up in this *huis clos*, they have to keep the fire going uninterruptedly, night and day. In their moments of rest they daydream by the open hearths. Their conversations turn into dreams; past and future change places. But all the characters remain locked in their own beings. Powerless to understand each other, to change themselves or their lives. A tramp looks in the oasthouse for a place to die. With the arrival of death the dreamers are shaken from their slumber: banal, unavoidable life awaits them.

With a sober 'New Objectivity' style, Ferdinard Bordewijk (1884-1965) in *Character* (1938) tells the baffling story of Katadreuffe, the illegitimate son of Jacoba and the bailiff Dreverhaven, in the hard Rotterdam of the 1930s. These three characters relate to each other like water and fire. They constantly plague each other, but are also irresistibly drawn to each other. Jacoba refuses to marry Dreverhaven. The ruthless bailiff does everything in his power to sabotage the life and career of his son. Despite this, the son becomes a lawyer through superhuman effort. But at the cost of friendship and love. 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger'? The film of the same name won an Oscar in 1998 for Best Foreign Language Film.

The thoroughbred writer Louis Paul Boon (1912-1979) updated the Dutch-language novel in one stroke, just as Multatuli had done a century earlier. *Chapel Road* is a failed book about a failed world: the ideologies are in fact dead. The author knew it already in 1953 when his book finally appeared, in which the rise and fall of socialism was described. But even individual lives are failures, as well as the novel as a bourgeois epic. An anti-novel then, 'a novel into which you [the author] pour everything higgledy-piggledy, plouf, like a tub of mortar falling from a scaffold'; 'a pool, a sea, a chaos'.

The closing sentence of Boon's *My Little War* (1947) reads: 'Kick people aside until they've obtained a conscience'. In the second edition, from 1960, when the world was irrevocably changed and the West was bracing itself to become rich, the book received a different closing sentence: 'What's the point of anything?' Between the two sentences lies the work itself; the work of a man who was

more anarchist than socialist, and no, not a gentle one, a dismal nihilist, who became more and more lonely and melancholy. A dirty old man who kept thousands of pictures of naked women and dreamed of young girls.

W.F. Hermans (1921-1995) described the novel as science without proof. Everything that occurs in a novel and everything described should be, in his eyes, purposeful: no bird should fall from the roof, so to speak, without consequences. In his books he knows how to capture the cruel, ruthless reality that remains after all illusions have evaporated. His obsessive theme is the impossibility of man to really understand the world, let alone communicate with his fellow human-beings.

In *The Darkroom of Damocles* (1958) the protagonist Osewoudt is recruited as a resistance fighter by Dorbeck, who is Osewoudt's doppelganger in appearance, but contrasts with him when it comes to personality. Osewoudt blindly carries out his orders, believing that in doing so he will obtain a personality, but when his doppelganger is nowhere to be found after the war, Osewoudt has no way of proving his actions. Has he been a resistance hero or a traitor? The novel can be read in three ways simultaneously: as a thrilling war adventure, as a psychological story about identity crises, and as a philosophical novel about the inscrutability of the reality of the past. Milan Kundera greeted the French translation of this novel in *Le Monde* in 2007 as a masterpiece. He knew nothing about the author. He didn't know, therefore, that the author was so dissatisfied with the first translation of his book in 1962 that while alive he forbade all translations of his work into French. 'I dive into this book, at first intimidated by its length, then astonished to have read it in one sitting. Because this novel is a thriller, a long chain of events where the suspense doesn't let up. The events (which take place during the war and the year following), are described in a precise and dry style, detailed but quick, they are terribly real and yet at the limit of all probability. This aesthetic captivated me; a novel enamoured of reality and at the same time fascinated by the strange and improbable. Is this a result of the nature of the war which is necessarily rich and unexpected, exorbitant, or is it a sign of the aesthetic intent which wishes to be out of the ordinary, to touch, to use the word dear to the surrealists, what is marvelous?'

But, spoilt for choice, the canon commission chose another of Hermans's novels: *Beyond Sleep* (1966) takes place in the north of Norway. The main character, Alfred Issendorf, undertakes a scientific expedition in search of meteors. Initially Alfred has company as he takes on the inhospitable landscape. In the end he finds himself alone and left to his own devices. *Beyond Sleep* can be read in three ways: as the account of a scientific expedition, as a psychological story about a young adult wishing to step out of his father's shadow, and as a philosophical story in which the search for meteorites functions as a quest for the Holy Grail, which nevertheless results in the conclusion that there can be no deeper insight into unfathomable reality and life.

It was bound to happen that the Second World War, more traumatic for the Netherlands than for Belgium (which had the First World War behind it), would enter this canon in the form of a novel.

Harry Mulisch (1927-2010) threw himself at the task. Didn't he himself say: 'I am the Second World War'? His mother was Jewish and his father a collaborator. The novel could have been *The Stone Bridal Bed* (a novel about the Dresden bombings), but it became *The Assault* (1982).

*The Assault* is a novel about the enigma of guilt. The book recounts an assault on a collaborator by the resistance during the German occupation. The neighbours set the body in front of the house of Anton Steenwijk. As retribution, Anton's parents are arrested and murdered by the Germans. Throughout the rest of Anton's life, the reader is presented with various perspectives on the assault. In this way it becomes clear that objective guilt doesn't exist, but depends on the situation. Thus *The Assault* reminds us of W.F. Hermans's *Darkroom of Damocles*.

*The Sorrow of Belgium* is Hugo Claus's (1929-2008) magnum opus. This great Flemish/Belgian novel is seen abroad as the final reading of an incomprehensible country. Claus called his book a family novel. But it is also a mythologized autobiography, a picaresque, a political novel and a *Bildungsroman*. 'It shall be a book about life in Flanders the way I knew it, but which no longer exists', he said. A Flanders in which the Catholic Church still reigned supreme, a Flanders fascinated by the 'New Order' of the Germans, who marched with discipline into Belgium in May, 1940.

### Three poets

I must limit myself yet again, but these three poets, 'surprised to find each other together,' belong to, and are quite possibly the best of the first half of the twentieth century (again roughly speaking).

Guido Gezelle (1830-1899) was a priest-poet, with an extreme Catholic ideology best left unexplored, but who, in his poetry, made Dutch, his West-Flanders variety of Dutch, sing as no one else has done. If poetry is 'what gets lost in translation', then the expression certainly applies to Gezelle's verses. In other words: if this poet had written in English with the same ability to manipulate language, he would be world-renowned. You'll just have to believe me, and his translators.

Paul van Ostaïjen (1896-1928) casts a great shadow over all Flemish poetry to follow. In the course of barely twelve years he reinvented himself multiple times. He was the pioneer of humanitarian expressionism. Like Apollinaire in France, he introduced wild typography into poetry. The war acquainted him with Dada, and his stay in Berlin after 1918 turned him into a political and artistic radical. In his final years, Van Ostaïjen was a proponent of 'simple lyricism': purely phonetic poetry, without ulterior motives. The poem had to be 'de-personalized,' autonomous, separated from reality and from the poet's feelings.

In *Nieuwe gedichten* (New Poems, 1934), a collection that came to light during the great economic world crisis that led to Hitler's rise to power in Germany, Martinus Nijhoff (1894-1953) develops a new, self-confident, and modern poetic form, moving far away from every supernatural or otherworldly ideal, he aims for earthly reality.

In *Awater*, a narrative poem about 270 lines long, someone looks for a travel companion in the desert of the city. The enigmatic clarity of this poem led T.S. Eliot to remark that if *Awater* had been published in English, it would have been world famous, and Joseph Brodsky considered the poem, 'one of the grandest works of poetry in this century'.

*Reclining figure*, 2015,  
Piezographic print on paper,  
34.5 x 64.5 cm  
© Lynne Leegte



## Classics

Every literature has its 'classics.' They say nothing new, discover no new idioms, only perfect existing genres. They deliver the sentences that resonate within a culture and use words common to obituaries and more superior salon conversations. In Dutch literature you encounter J.C. Bloem (1887-1966) and M. Vasalis (1909-1998). Both have left behind a limited oeuvre.

Bloem is the poet of desire, of its fundamentally unfulfilling nature and of, still worse, the absence of desire. He is the poet of resignation in appearance only. In *Dichterschap* (To Be a Poet) he asked the key question for any poetry, any art:

*Is this enough: a handful of poems  
For the justification of an existence,  
[...]*

Using timeless words, Bloem mercilessly expresses the failure of every life, the impermanence of everything. The paradox is that these words seem to bring a certain consolation. That has to do with the flawless structural stability of his verses. The wording is inescapable.

I will set Vasalis aside now and look at Ida M. Gerhardt (1905-1997), classic, stately, and robust. She was a 'polder person,' raised with classical discipline; Dutch through and through, a tough cookie, honed in the Greek spirit of 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur'. The classical, combined with the rustic, was a counterweight to her sombre, at times apocalyptic world view. It made her leaden conception of poetry, the awareness of a task to be completed, bearable. The poetic profession was, for her, a gift from above, a task that the recipient could not refuse. Is loneliness not the fate of the poet, is labour not his daily bread and service not the essence of his being? In this spirit she wrote about the tensions of an unhappy youth, hypocrisy and the demise of Holland's landscape.



Ghent-born Richard Minne (1891-1965), on the other hand, is the greatest of our minor poets. His collection is small. Melancholy fights with bitterness and resignation. His life is that of a loner, impractical and grim. He admired Voltaire, Heine, and Stern, and has elements of all three, though less well developed:

*Work without plan or measure,  
But peep through every curtain;  
Despise the solid burgher,  
But drink deep of his flagon.*

(translated by Tanis Guest)

### **'To express the breadth of life's totality'**

In his anthology *Nieuwe griffels schone leien. Van Gorter tot Lucebert van Gezelle tot Hugo Claus* (New Chalk Clean Slates. From Gorter to Lucebert from Gezelle to Hugo Claus, 1954), Paul Rodenko introduced experimental poetry to a large audience. Of the group of poets also known as the 'Vijftigers,' we would like to mention Lucebert (1924-1994) and Hugo Claus.

Lucebert said of 'winsome' poets, who even after the Second World War gladly continued to believe in the traditional values of goodness and beauty, as if these values hadn't been forced to declare bankruptcy by the abominations of that war,

*I report that the velvet poets  
perish shyly and humanistically.  
henceforth the hot iron throats  
of moved torturers will open musically.*

(translated by Peter Nijmeijer)

*Book, 2012,  
Piezographic print on  
paper, 22 x 42 cm  
© Lynne Leege*



This 'expeditious swindler of love' wanted 'to express / the breadth of life's totality' (Paul Vincent). A new time needed a new poetry, of that Lucebert was convinced. After all, 'in this age what was always called / beauty beauty has burnt its face.' Reason, common sense, good taste, they all had to accept defeat. Taking their place were physicality, intuition, uncensored authenticity. The poet is no longer the master of the language or the form of the poem, on the contrary he must surrender himself to the language and to the mysterious and elusive meanings that emerge from the language.

*The Oostakker Poems* (1955) by Hugo Claus fell into postwar poetry like a shrapnel shell too. Only Vondel (1587-1679), the Milton of the Low Countries, and the chameleon Claus have two titles in the canon. Because these men were so multifaceted and versatile and used a variety of forms. The critic Paul Claes succinctly described the mystery of Claus's collection: 'A poet on the threshold of adulthood. An attitude towards life that hangs on to the past with every fibre and yet yearns for freedom with all its might. A person that covets animal purity, but is unable to escape society. (...) An experimental poet who writes almost classical verses, and a surrealist who doesn't deny reason. The paradox of a culture that doesn't denigrate nature, but integrates it (...)'.  
*Translated by Zoe Perot*

## Send-Off

With these birds - a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush - I send you forth, to your nook with a book. They give a picture of the diversity of literature written in Dutch. Their translators are their best ambassadors. I have full faith in them.

As fodder for the road, these lines by Lucebert:

*so that's why I  
sought out language in its beauty  
heard that there was nothing human left in it  
but the speech impediments of shadow  
but those of ear-shattering sunlight*

(translated by Paul Vincent). ■

*(With thanks to my colleagues from the Royal Academy of Dutch Language and Literature in Ghent.)*

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