

## Individual in an Undivided World

Charlotte Van den Broeck, Maud Vanhauwaert and Ellen Deckwitz  
as New Romantic Poets

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[ L A U R E N S H A M ]

Dutch poetry's progressive narrative has come to a halt. At least that is what Bertram Mourits claims in the literary journal *De Gids*, edition 2012. Mourits describes the history of Dutch-language poetry over the last two centuries as a series of caesuras. Again and again small groups of avant-gardist authors have rejected their predecessors and grasped at eternity. But in Mourits's opinion the Romantic paradigm whereby poets are prophets who can give us a glimpse of eternity has become jaded. He pleads instead for an assessment of the state of poetry based on the authors 'who quietly reinvented themselves'.

He himself does that in this essay by quoting poems by five contemporary authors who, in his opinion, show reality rather than the unattainable. Without actually saying so, but undoubtedly deliberately, Mourits chose only female poets' work. That makes his article implicitly a story about the quiet revolution that has taken place in recent Dutch-language poetry. Noisy groups of men – because that is what the avant-gardist movements were – have made way for individual voices, of whom a growing number are women.

A glance at debut prizes awarded recently in the Dutch language area shows that the rise of young female poets is impressive. Between 2010 and 2017, six of the eight winners of the C. Buddingh' Prize were women; the Herman de Coninck Debut Prize went to women in 2015, 2016 and 2017; while the Liegend Konijn Debut Prize has been awarded five times now – and always to a female author. Yet prior to 2000, hardly any women poets were active in Flanders.

I certainly agree that these women – and the young male poets – operate in a far more individualistic way than twentieth-century poets. But I find Mourits's idea that there has been a break with the heritage of Romanticism unconvincing. In fact, I think there is a deeply Romantic longing in the work of many young poets.

### In-dividual

You can see that, for example, in the way these authors deal with individualism and commonality. On the one hand, many poets write highly egocentric poetry, which is itself a Romantic characteristic. More importantly though, they



also place themselves emphatically in the world, which is an interpretation of the 'individual' that is completely in line with the Romantics. A person is 'individual', a literally 'un-divided' whole that is one with the world in which he or she functions. What is more, contemporary poets are inspired by texts from the environmental movement and certainly by feminist authors like Chris Kraus and Rebecca Solnit, who demonstrate that the personal is political.

Poets like Hannah van Binsbergen and Dominique De Groen reveal how individuals are one with the *political* and *economic* systems in which they are embedded. In recent anthologies Astrid Lampe, Marwin Vos and Maartje Smits opted for an *ecological* focus, showing that all beings and objects in the world are constituent parts of an ecosystem. And still other poets, including Charlotte Van den Broeck, Maud Vanhauwaert and Ellen Deckwitz, concentrate mainly on the *social* systems and public spaces in which people live with each other. These poets can certainly not be neatly divided up into different groups. Vanhauwaert's portrayal of social alienation in the big cities, for example, is reminiscent of Marwin Vos's impossible longing for a nature untouched by modernity. What the poets share is – well, a rather Romantic unattainable longing for purity.

Left  
Charlotte Van den Broeck  
© Koen Broos

Middle  
Maud Vanhauwaert  
© Noortje Palmers

Right  
Ellen Deckwitz  
© Merlijn Doomernik

### The performer as prophet

Deckwitz, Vanhauwaert and Van den Broeck, three of the leading poets of their generation, can be labelled modern Romantics not only because of their themes but for other reasons too. All three quite naturally combine work on paper with poetry performances, which is a response to the nineteenth-century-type desire to see poets speak in flesh and blood.

That desire for the physical presence of the poet seemed to have died out in the first half of the twentieth century, in the slipstream of paper-oriented modernism. Since the 1960s, however, poetry readings have been back in the Netherlands and Flanders, with popular poetry festivals like *Nacht van de Poëzie*, *Saint Amour* and *Poetry International*. In the 1990s poetry slams appeared on the scene too and have grown from a poetic niche into an iconic phenomenon. For countless young poets, poetry slams have become the ticket to success in the 'paper' circuit, as they were, for example, for Deckwitz. She won the NK Poetry Slam in 2009, but ceased to be an active slammer two years later when she debuted on paper. For Vanhauwaert and Van den Broeck, success on festival stages and in poetry films came more or less simultaneously with their success on paper.

The fact that I refer to these poets as Romantics is not only because they operate in a system that attaches special significance to the spoken word. Their work also deals with themes familiar from the nineteenth century. If we look more carefully at the question of individuals in their social environment, which I have already introduced, we will see that these poets deal with themes – changeability, parallelism and flow – that look very like Romanticism.

## Changeability



The title of Charlotte Van den Broeck's debut, *Kameleon* (Chameleon, 2015), immediately expresses the idea of changeability. This first anthology is about becoming adult and Van den Broeck relies a lot on haunting stand-alone images. Take 'Flamingo', for example, in which the I-figure compares her sleep position to that of a flamingo: 'I sleep like flamingos stand, / with one leg stretched and the other one / bent at the knee against the abdomen / like a folded blindman's cane.' In one verse she introduces two apparently unrelated images: the flamingo and the white cane. But later in the poem the birds reappear in one verse with the theme of visibility: 'Flamingos conquer each other synchronously / a courtly mating dance, at least twelve / eyelash flutters and a monogamous life long.' In the final verse, the speaker makes it clear that she and her beloved have undergone some development. Initially, like young flamingos, they were grey in colour, but now they are 'almost pilots / almost an ode to birds.' The crux is the word 'almost'. The I and her beloved are not as perfect and monogamous as flamingos, but are actually poor imitations of flying creatures or people. And that failure is there already in the opening of the poem, because while 'eyelash flutters' are crucial for a successful monogamous flamingo relationship, the image of the white cane suggests that the I-figure has no eyes for her partner.

In *Kameleon* we see the development of a (feminine) identity. The final section, for example, reflects on the process whereby mothers and daughters slowly grow apart, but at the same time remain enclosed in each other forever, as in a process of fossilization. 'Slowly we fossilized into two separate beings. / Uncertain which of us // was becoming insect / and which amber.' *Nachtroer* (named after an all-night shop in Antwerp, 2017) deals with a similar theme, namely the fragmentation of the I into a large number of temporary identities and bodies, but the reach of this anthology is much greater than the debut. The

poems are 'more flowing' due to the lack, on the whole, of interpunctuation. They are more emotional, and are more concerned with sustaining a consistent theme than highly poetic lines. That is clear in the first section, 'Eight, ∞', in which the demise of a relationship is told backwards. In the first poem we see how the duality of the relationship is broken. The poem goes back, step by step, to the beginning, that moment of endless promise and limitless absorption with each other. But that moment is not actually accessible anymore, because it is only available to the I-figure in retrospect: 'In the field lie a boy and girl reminiscent of days gone by / I imagine they are us, eight years ago, yet they look so unfamiliar / that I don't run over to them saying they've not remembered right'. The moment experienced has immediately become a(n unreliable) memory, however much the boy and girl think, in their 'abandon' in 'the blinding light of the afternoon', that they only have eyes for the moment itself.

In this way Van den Broeck's poetry illustrates the essentially Romantic view that identities are not only in permanent evolution – there is no such thing as a 'crystallized I' – but that they are always formed in the world. Several poems play in the big city, for example, where the I must constantly define her position vis-à-vis her fellow human beings: 'It's too narrow here / in the fluid dot that just happens to be my hesitant body / on other people's photos'.

## Parallelism

That urban context plays a crucial role in the poems of Maud Vanhauwaert too. She is particularly interested in simultaneity, in the complexity of events that make up the world and the 'parallelism' with which people live alongside yet separate from each other. In her debut, *Ik ben mogelijk* (I Am Possible, 2011), she portrays that in the image of a city like 'united streets' that are stuck 'to each other with chewing gum'. In one of the sections there is a collage of simultaneous events all over the world that have nothing to do with each other, yet that can be connected to each other purely by their simultaneity: 'The woman in Paris crosses the street but is not / run over, whilst a man in Kinshasa is / run over.'

Like Van den Broeck, Vanhauwaert relies, in her debut collection, on powerful and often amusing artifice ('a light is something you can dim / but you cannot slightly jump off a cliff'). However, in her second anthology, *Wij zijn evenwijdig* (We Are Parallel, 2014), she takes an important step in terms of theme and form. The anthology has an unusual 'horizontal' form – it is wider than it is high – and consists of ninety-eight unnumbered pages, with two short 'texts' side by side on each page, concluded by an underscore. This character is reminiscent of the cursor on a computer, so the anthology gives the impression of having been written on the spot and being forever 'unfinished' – an element many nineteenth-century Romantics played with in their work. The symbol also creates the idea that the anthology is one flowing whole, which is confirmed by the fluid way in which the first 'poems' flow into each other grammatically. 'We are parallel\_', 'Touch each other in infinity\_', 'And we run\_'. Further on the poems are mainly *thematically* linked to each other, as we see in a sequence about the interactions between people on an underground train. Another series combines associative images around motherhood, physicality and illness.



First the I-figure says she's carrying a 'hollow doll' inside her ('Deep inside I'm not a mother'), after which a man starts to explain black holes and clusters of milky ways. A little later the I-figure seems to respond to the man by giving him another definition of a milky way ('a path (...) through the meadow you follow to go and milk the cows'), after which an association is made between milk and breasts when a surgeon makes a wry joke about breast amputation. Immediately after that there are poems about 'a lump' which, because of the text about amputation, make one think of a tumour. Then the touching of the lump is compared to the exploration of a landscape.

*Wij zijn evenwijdig\_* (We Are Parallel\_) is a radical continuation of the technique of simultaneity and chains of associative meaning which *Ik ben mogelijk* (I Am Possible) contains. An ever-present element in the book is the assumption that people barely understand each other. They are insensitive to each other's weaknesses and cannot fathom what drives other people. But at the same time they want nothing more than to make contact, driven by the impossible desire to be able to touch each other 'in eternity'. Just as Van den Broeck opens *Nachtroer* with the infinity symbol or lemniscate ( $\infty$ ), Vanhauwaert ends with it. 'Then fits her self into mine, makes a / lemniscate. Come. We're late already\_'. In physical proximity there apparently lurks a (utopian?) possibility of reaching infinity and breaking through the fundamental boundary between ourselves and others.

## Flow



Ellen Deckwitz debuted with *De steen vreest mij* (The Stone Fears Me, 2011), in which she used oppressive images of nature to symbolise a family relationship. It is a grim book in which quasi-sweet images of the relationship between a girl and her brother are set in the blackly romantic light of a disintegrating family. The anthology is crawling with images like 'The moon / a child's nail ripped right off' and 'All tucked away, neatly like the cellars that are hidden in daughters'. In the final poem the brother is dug up. It is not clear whether he is dead, undead or alive: 'My brother coughs up clods, / sinks back well I can stand / digging, the stone fears me / for I shall strike till it is broken.'

Its thematically related successor *Hoi feest* (Hi Party, 2012) consists of a number of sections that are called, respectively, 'Hands', 'Others' and 'Hands/Others', in Dutch 'Handen', 'Anderen' and 'Handen/Anderen'. The poet exploits the fact that the Dutch words sound very similar. In this anthology hands symbolise, amongst other things, religion (the image of hands folded in prayer recurs regularly) and the unease of the I-figure with her own physicality. Moreover, again many of the scenes seem to take place during the I-figure's youth, at which the I-figure – just like Van den Broeck earlier – looks with a certain alienation. 'That could be me on this photo, a child with a crate on its back.'

Like the other two poets discussed Deckwitz also chooses in a later anthology for a broader perspective. The focus of *De blanke gave* (The White Gift, 2015) is on images of water and the sea as a metaphor for the literal and figurative flows that occur all over the world these days. At one time the Western and non-Western world were strictly separated from each other geographically, but the refugee crisis has made the misery of people in search of greater prosperity in

Europe acutely tangible. Naturally, the Mediterranean Sea plays a crucial role in the current migration flows. 'We stuffed a whole continent / into a container. // There are two ships bobbing / there with bunches of lifeboats.' But past and present seem to flow into each other too, partly because of the unheard-of environmental upheaval we are experiencing due to climate change. In one of the poems, three 'ice mummies from the First World War' come out from under the melting ice of a glacier. But besides disasters, in this anthology flowing water also creates ties between people, as we see in a poem in which the I-figure looks to others for a sense of security in a melting world. 'When I left the hut there were people / I crept close to, with some I meant it. / I don't know what was thawing, so much had died in me.' In several 'water psalms' containing dystopic images of a flooded world, the anthology also describes how flexibly people cope with changed environmental situations. So, this anthology, which is more political and to a certain extent more sombre than its two predecessors, shows too how rapprochement can develop from a political crisis.

## New Romanticism

What is interesting about young poets like Van den Broeck, Vanhauwaert and Deckwitz is that while they distance themselves from the avant-gardism of the twentieth century, they also present themselves as new Romantics. Contemporary young Dutch-speaking poets are not afraid of expressing emotions and combine a focus on the I-perspective with a sense of community, while placing people in broader social and environmental systems, as was customary in the early nineteenth century. The result is work that does well on stage and appeals to a diverse group of both younger and older poetry readers. Although at first glance the disappearance of the culture of polemical poetry has resulted in a loss of turbulence, that loss is compensated by many other things: a greater diversity of poets and increasing interest from the public, which no longer needs to feel excluded from the poetical wrangling that used sometimes to dominate. The end of the traditional progressive narrative heralds a dynamic period in Dutch-language poetry. ■

*Translated by Lindsay Edwards*

## Two Poems

By Charlotte Van den Broeck

### Specialist Poulterer

Women make broth of themselves in the bath  
until their insides simmer out in the form of a child.

This is how we are born: without a shell,  
without the reassurance that one day we will find

a mouth so like our own  
that we will speak through it.

We too will end up splay-legged  
in the tub with clucking breath

and the nervous tic of a wobbling head  
on a groggy body

while the water runs away in circles,  
a tiny swirling tornado  
that won't even make the weather report.



### **Speciaalzaak Poelier**

Vrouwen trekken bouillon van zichzelf in het badwater  
tot hun binnenste in de vorm van een kind uit hen kookt.

Zo worden wij geboren: zonder schelp,  
zonder de geruststelling dat we op een dag een mond

zullen vinden, die zo sterk op onze eigen mond  
lijkt dat we ermee gaan spreken.

Ook wij zullen uiteindelijk in kikkerzit,  
met klokkende adem en de tic nerveux

van een kop op een verdwaasd lichaam  
in de badkuip achterblijven,

terwijl het water in cirkels wegdraait,  
kleine kolkende tornado,  
die niet eens het weerbericht zal halen.

From: *Kameleon* (Chameleon), de Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam, 2015  
Translated by David Colmer



## Lethe

A stroke away from if and later, a touch does not  
evoke expectation of connection, that fallacy belongs  
to another generation, always the same metaphor:

all those boxes with all those kinds of cereal in the supermarket  
mild desperation packed in a taxonomy of preference  
the taming repetition

all movement begins with resistance, push back  
until you realise that everything you wanted and did not want  
and everything you will want is just an impulse

what is cherished is locked away behind passwords  
and out of reach of the polyps of this or that desire  
jittering up or down, storm or roars of laughter

as required, distance means haste  
for a lover on speed dial in another city  
in the space between two tones

the stubborn trembling hope that something will open in the silence  
a siren singing glue, finally a lullaby  
a meaningless paradox that points the way

to a boat ride and a ramshackle moon  
from here the drowsy compass indicates a bed  
a possible course

to drink from a river and forget  
and all at once it seems so simple, subdued  
the thirst for nothingness, raise the glass

## Lethe

Een armslag naar als en straks, van een aanraking  
wordt geen verbinding verwacht, die dwaling  
hoort niet bij deze generatie, steeds dezelfde metafoor:

al die dozen met al die soorten ontbijtgranen in de supermarkt  
kleine wanhoop in een taxonomie van voorkeuren verpakt  
de herhaling, ze maakt tam

alle beweging begint met weerstand, duw terug  
tot je beseft dat alles wat je wilde en niet wilde  
en alles wat je zal willen maar een opstoot is

wat dierbaar is, ligt veilig achter wachtwoorden besloten  
en buiten bereik van de poliepen van een of ander verlangen  
dat op en neer danst al naargelang

storm of schaterlach, afstand is haast  
voor een minnaar op sneltoets in een andere stad  
in de ruimte tussen twee kiestonen

trilt de starre hoop dat iets zich in de stilte zal openen  
een sirene die lijm zingt, eindelijk een slaaplied  
een zinloze paradox die richting wijst

op een boottochtje en een gammele maan van hier  
duidt de kompasnaald suf gedraaid een bedding aan  
een mogelijk verloop

om van een rivier te drinken en te vergeten  
het lijkt zo simpel opeens, ingetogen  
de dorst naar niets, hoog het glas



From: *Nachtroer* (Night Stirring), de Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam, 2017  
Translated by David Colmer

## Two Poems

By Maud Vanhauwaert

when you cross the intersection someone else has got red  
if you are heavy burdened  
you mostly bow your head

look back far enough, you'll look forward again  
you can tell it was a selfie  
from an arm that's outstretched

to cheer or shout for help there's only one gesture  
when someone taps you on the right shoulder  
they're often standing on your left

you can smile to words like ravioli, overseas and grief  
it won't be the corners of your mouth  
that let the truth come out

a light is something you can dim  
but you cannot slightly jump off a cliff

a wet finger tests the wind, asks a question or points the way  
sex is going against each other, tomorrow  
an excuse for today

your shadow sticks to you however fast you run  
when people count to ten it's best to hide  
and if you don't know where, do it in the daytime

in Marrakesh, on Jemaa El-Fnaa Square



als je oversteekt is het voor iemand anders rood  
als je veel met je meetrekt  
is het normaal dat je gebogen loopt

kijk ver genoeg achterom en je kijkt weer naar voren  
dat je een foto zelf nam  
zie je aan de vooruitgestoken arm

bij juichen en om hulp roepen hoort hetzelfde gebaar  
je rechterschouder wordt getikt  
als er iemand links van je staat

glimlachen kan je op woorden als spaghetti, pierewiet en verdriet  
het is niet aan de mondhoeken  
dat je de waarheid ziet

zoals je het licht kan dimmen  
zo kan je niet een beetje  
van een brug af springen

een natte vinger wijst, voelt aan de wind of stelt een vraag  
seks is tegen elkaar ingaan, morgen  
het excuus van vandaag

je schaduw blijft aan je plakken hoe snel je ook rent  
als men tot tien telt verstop je je best  
en overdag gaat dat bijzonder goed

op het Djeema El Fna-plein, in Marrakech

From: *Ik ben mogelijk* (I Am Possible), Querido, Amsterdam, 2011  
Translated by David Colmer

I am unguarded and the old gent teases  
the tangles from my hair. He has a lump  
on his head shaped like a doorknob.  
When he tells me things I see that his  
lump swells a little. Like an air sac a  
taut swollen air sac or no, a frog a  
big frog you can put your hand on  
like a doorknob that wobbles yes, like a  
soft doorknob. 'Don't worry, it's not  
malignant,' the man says and his lump  
throbs a little, beating, almost like a  
heart\_

Ik ben onbewaakt en de oude heer trekt  
de nesten uit mijn haar. Hij heeft een  
knobbel op zijn hoofd in de vorm van een  
deurknop. Terwijl hij vertelt zie ik dat  
zijn knobbel een beetje zwelt. Als een  
longblaasje een strak gespannen long-  
blaasje of nee als een kikker een dikke  
kikker waarop je je hand kunt leggen als  
op een deurknop die meegeeft ja, als  
een weke deurknop. 'Wees gerust, het is  
goedaardig' zegt de man en zijn knobbel  
bonkt een beetje, klopt, als een hart\_

From: *Wij zijn evenwijdig\_* (We Are Parallel\_), Querido, Amsterdam, 2014  
*Translated by David Colmer*

## Two Poems

By Ellen Deckwitz



I get to know the previous ones better and better,  
they are repeated. Their hands form  
bowls too big for my breasts, there's a draught  
between my bent back and the hollow  
of their lap. They still defend themselves  
with the spirit which floats behind  
like a gas cloud. It's all right

like that. Let me fall  
through the mattress, back  
into dreams. Let me

attack memories, change them  
into previous bodies as they move hesitantly  
from birthmark to birthmark. I am content  
with a foot

that misses mine under the table,  
to stare past a shoulder at the ceiling.  
To see it lacks cracks.

De eerderen leer ik steeds beter kennen,  
men herhaalt ze. Hun handen vormen  
te grote kommen voor mijn borsten, het tocht  
tussen mijn gekromde rug en de holte  
van hun schoot. Ze verdedigen zich nog  
met de geest die er als een gaswolk  
achteraan zweeft. Het is goed

zo. Laat me door  
het matras vallen, terug  
de dromen in. Laat me

herinneringen aantasten, veranderen  
in eerdere lijven terwijl ze aarzelend van moedervlek  
naar moedervlek trekken. Ik ben tevreden  
met een voet

die de mijne onder de tafel mist,  
om langs een schouder naar het plafond te staren.  
Zien dat het barstjes ontbeert.

From: *De steen vreest mij* (The Stone Fears Me), Nijgh & van Ditmar, Amsterdam, 2011

Translated by Paul Vincent

## **Fifth Water Psalm**

We were pumping hard  
and saw the tips of the roofs emerging  
beneath waves.

The oil slick shifted because of the high tide  
from the Mexican gulf to the Amazon

and as the water sank descended  
on the tree tops like a veil  
of a stylish next-of-kin.

In New Orleans they were tinkling hard again,  
fingers flew so high the keys  
seemed made of magma.

There was also a proliferation of coral  
and bamboo, as a result of which in Yemen  
they shot some superfluous pandas, the ugly

frescos proved waterproof too. An excess  
of St John's wort and valerian blossomed  
by the doorstep, we pruned like crazy.

The ocean did not want to swallow up the coast  
and even with the necessary back up  
had little talent for spewing pearls.

It bleated a bit about manoeuvrability  
and other legends. My own kilner jar full of remorse,

while the factories were still working,  
the remaining children sailed happily on.



## Vijfde waterpsalm

We waren flink aan het malen  
en zagen de dakpunten onder golven  
opkomen.

De olievlek verhuisde door het hoogtij  
van Mexico's baai naar de Amazone

en tijdens het zakken van het water  
op de boomtoppen gedaald als een voile  
van een stijlvolle nabestaande.

In New Orleans werd weer flink gepingeld,  
vingers vlogen zo hoog op dat de toetsen  
van magma leken.

Ook ontstond er een wildgroei aan koraal  
en bamboe waardoor ze in Jemen wat  
overtollige panda's afknalden, ook de lelijke

fresco's bleken waterproof. Een overschot  
aan sint-janskruid en valeriaan bloeide  
naast de stoep, we snoeiden ons een ongeluk.

De oceaan wilde de kust niet opslokken  
en had zelfs met de nodige steuntjes in de rug  
weinig aanleg voor parels braken.

Zo mekkerde hij wat over wendbaarheid  
en andere legendes. Mijn eigen weckfles vol wroeging,

terwijl de fabrieken het nog steeds deden,  
de kinderen die resteerden zeilden blij.

From: *De steen vreest mij* (The Stone Fears Me), Nijgh & van Ditmar, Amsterdam, 2011  
Translated by Paul Vincent