

## The Everyday is Good

The Novels of Koen Peeters



262

[ TOMAS VANHESTE ]

*Conversations met K.* (Conversations with K., 1988), the first novel of Koen Peeters (1959), sports a stamp from the Belgian Congo on its cover. Almost a quarter of a century later the Leuven author published *Duizend heuvels* (A Thousand Hills, 2012), his great novel about the small neighbouring country of Ruanda. Anyone linking these facts might be tempted to think that Peeters' oeuvre forms a close unity, within which the former Belgian colonies are an inexhaustible source of literary inspiration. But that idea is both true and untrue. For though the writer has enduring fascinations, he has travelled a long way.

In the early days Peeters was seen as one of the leaders of a new generation of Flemish postmodernists. He and his colleagues were like the young men who, in the novel *Het is niet ernstig, mon amour* (Nothing Serious, Mon Amour, 1996), set up the Independent Research Center. They had high-flown ambitions. But their *Sturm und Drang* were stifled from the outset by the sensibility of the 1990s. They shone particularly in irony and deconstruction. Peeters' first novels were suspiciously like the Independent Research Center: a promising enterprise without great results. The writer showed himself a master in idiosyncratic, warped mental acrobatics and incisive formulations. But, for all the dazzle, his work remained rather anaemic. Art seemed to the author, in daily life the head of sponsoring and social affairs at a major bank, no more than ritual behaviour at the end of the working day. In an interview he said: 'for me writing is coming home from work, eating, a little later sitting at the table with a bit of paper, and working for an hour or so. Every day, and after two years I've got a book.' A refreshing form of self-irony. But the reader of the first quartet of novels had an uncontrollable urge to wipe the irony off the face with which the writer looked at him from the back cover and to shout at him: 'This is serious, Koen Peeters!'

### Divine photo album

Those hoping Peeters would show a little more courage in not simply feigning seriousness were rewarded in *Acaciaaan* (2001). The novel is a labyrinth of stories in which the I-figure, Robert, wanders through the oeuvre of

Koen Peeters (1959)

© Koen Broos



Maurice Gilliams and Louis Paul Boon, through the streets of Brussels and Aalst and through late-twentieth-century Belgium. Interwoven with the book is a wonderful episodic narrative entitled 'My Father'. In it the I-figure describes Father's admission to hospital and death. Before he is anointed, he wants to get something off his chest. 'He saw things very sharply now,' writes Peeters in a strange combination of irony and compassion. 'Up there we'll all be together, in one great mason's hand, a photo album or call it God's eternity.' For Robert it is incomprehensible that their wartime experiences did not afflict his father's generation with existential angst. But he does not ridicule in his incomprehension, and the irony is not deadly. Fascination and emotion carry the day. And Father puts up a fight. 'Don't you think people are too cynical these days? Aren't you like that yourself?'

Father would definitely have had a problem with *Grote Europese Roman* (Great European Novel, 2007). In the 'Mission Statement' the author explains the aim of his Great Project. 'Sweeping and epic, it should sum up the history of European humanity, but from the narrow perspective of people who live or work in Brussels.' We hear an echo of Louis Paul Boon's curses and prayers of the little man confronted with the Great War. Where the young Boon was serious in his rage and hope, Peeters's sentences in contrast drip with sarcasm and he gives short shrift to all high-flown expectations.

Take the mission for which the I-figure Robin scours the European continent: making recommendations for the trade organisation of manufacturers of promotional gifts. On his journey to European capitals he collects local beauties, tourist tips and words in all languages. These do not afford him any deeper insights into the unity of European identity amid the variety of peoples. The main thing he discovers is the emptiness of universal office life.

Yet it is too easy to dismiss *Grote Europese Roman* as an ironic deconstruction of the European dream that ends in cynicism. At the end of his odyssey Robin encounters a youthful love again. Together they savour a thought that brings them close to Father's divine photo album: 'wouldn't it be better to view happiness as a long-term balance, an eternal sum of presents large and small that we receive and give, conversations and chats, exchanged secrets like electric words, slightly smarting wounds, faces that we never forget, and all that added and added and added, perhaps even different lives added together? Perhaps this kind of happiness is built up piece by piece and passed on from generation to generation, families, and dynasties? Like photos in an album?'

### Everyday dust

Peeters draws up the balance of family happiness in the novel *De bloemen* (The Flowers, 2009), which was awarded the F. Bordewijk Prize. The novel is 'very loosely based on family stories', notes the writer in his afterword. But it is clear from every line that the characters are very close to home. In *De bloemen* Peeters is better able than previously to create real characters instead of pawns in a literary game. In wonderful prose he paints intimate portraits of his grandfather Louis and his father René.

Flowers bloom and fade in a trice. But like a twenty-first-century Heraclitus, Peeters sees in what vanishes the germ of the new, and in motion what endures. In the chapter 'Dandelions' the I-figure sweeps the dust out of his house. 'What I see in my hands, I can scarcely give a name. It is the wind of what keeps us going, the movements of intentions, conversations, and thoughts. It is the simple, negligible, everyday things that constantly reappear in the movements in a house, especially through the wind that blows in when the windows are opened in the morning to let in the birdsong.'

*De bloemen* is an attempt to capture this dust, slow down time, find the eternal in the transient. The way Peeters reaches for eternity by stringing together the stories of the generations is almost mystical: 'If I can now go on writing in the right way, time will no longer exist, and we shall all be the same.'

### Endless practice in watching your words

That the right kind of writing can move mountains is also shown by Peeters' latest novel *Duizend heuvels*, which was awarded the E. du Perron Prize. The book is a thousand things at once. A quest for what more there is to Ruanda than a country torn apart by genocide. An ode to the Kinyarwanda language and Ruandan mythology. A portrait both empathetic and harsh of the community of White Fathers, who came full of good intentions, but were silent when

their Christian consciences should have spoken out. An intimate biography of the Ruandan scholar Alexis Kagame, who fought against the white accusation that his country had no history and transcribed the ritual texts of the Ruandan dynasty that went back to the twelfth century, but saw his life's work traduced by Belgian researchers. A jolly novel of manners on the academic community of Ruanda experts. And most of all a web of secret literary paths around such themes as colonial guilt and reconciliation.

It is tempting to read the novel as an indictment of the Westerners who have made such a mess in Ruanda. Peeters quotes the White Father Van Overschelde who saw the Tutsis as 'the aristocracy of the black race' and 'whites in disguise'. Following in his intellectual footsteps, the colonial administration made absolute the previously fluid distinction between the population groups. First the Belgians appointed only Tutsis as vassals of the ruling power, but shortly before independence church and state suddenly took the side of the previously oppressed Hutus. In this way they sowed the divisions that later did their devastating work. An old Ruandan sage argues in *Duizend heuvels* that Belgians exported their language struggle to Africa. 'So Flemings, who felt treated like second-class citizens in their native Belgium, sympathised with the Hutus. And so the Belgians mentally organised the Hutu-Tutsi division.' But before the novel opens, the writer has already warned the reader and the reviewer: 'Every quotation taken out of context is untrue.' And opposed to the vision of the old sage, there is that of a younger Ruandan postgraduate, who says of the genocide: 'We did it. Not you. Our complexes from the past that we had kept hidden for years suddenly surfaced.'

*Duizend heuvels* is not a political pamphlet, but a polyphonic work that undermines facile judgements and unambiguous truths. In contrast, with a kaleidoscope of narratives and perspectives, Peeters shows that there are many truths which, despite the fact they clash, may be equally true. But amid all the ambiguity a core idea does nevertheless seem to take shape. Shortly after the horrors of the genocide have taken place, the Brussels boy Louis, who is visited at night by Ruandan dreams, asks for an explanation of how to weave baskets. 'From now on when everyone sees the big picture, I shall see the little one.' When he is incarnated as the I-figure in the final section of the book and no longer visits Ruanda in his dreams but in reality, he meets the sixty-eight-year-old Abbé Donatien. 'Everyone must practice endlessly in watching their words,' says the abbé. In the eyes of the old clergyman, only when people abandon the big words and raging anger and meet in everyday, simple friendliness can Ruanda be saved.

The attention to small things that Louis and Donatien cherish fits in perfectly with the philosophy that emerges from *De bloemen*. Whether it be in the nearby Kempen or distant Ruanda, Peeters' literary universe expresses an unclamorous devotion to the small and the everyday. The postmodern mocker has turned into a serious collector of fragile happiness. ■

## Two Extracts from *Great European Novel*

By Koen Peeters



### Mission statement

I want to write a book in the style of the Great American Novel, disguised as a Great European Novel. I've googled it and there's no such thing as yet. Sweeping and epic, it should sum up the history of European humanity, but from the narrow perspective of people who live or work in Brussels.

I'd like to write this novel in the form of the periodic table. Like the Italian Primo Levi - each chapter a chemical element. Yes, each chapter of my novel should be about a capital city, as if each city were a chemical element in an ingenious Brussels system. With characters in search of all-consuming love, promising and impatient. Or else driven by a past that has made them wise and sad.

I'd like to describe the beauty of Administration, the eroticism of the Brussels business world. With you, in a European way. In conference centres, airports and hotels we'll examine how we, strangers, are nevertheless able to find one another. How we sometimes delight in misunderstanding one another. How we feel one another out with hands full of language. How there are some secrets we can only entrust to people we've never seen before and will never see again. The Portuguese writer Pessoa talked about ants that 'communicate amongst themselves using tiny antennae which work a thousand times better than our complex language which eludes all comprehension'.

Everyone knows the miracles in the Bible, the beetle story by the German Czech Kafka, and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which gods and demigods are turned into trees and springs.

Stories like this are about the fluidity of things, the rearrangement of bodily atoms, forever on the move. Or, as in the tradition of the Talmud, we should interpret texts, adapt and comment on them time and again, until we've forgotten how the first text went. Or like that story about the ship...

Consequently, any resemblance to persons or cities is coincidental. Even dates have been moved around effortlessly here and there. Because, even now, someone has to prepare the rooms for the future, fold the sheets tightly on the beds and lay out clean clothes for the travellers. The first arrived last night, and the fastest, the most intelligent are already running through our streets.

## Nicosia

Brussels, the 1950s. Theo had recorded the monthly figures and discussed the new targets with his colleagues. Next, he entered the profit in the ledger. Everyone was working away diligently. The stationery sported the company name in a very vigorous red: MARCHAND NV/SA, Avenue Louise/Louizalaan. 'Marchand' was in sturdy, broad capitals. The red of the letters was not the signal red of warning signs or stop signs. Nor was it the colour of fire, of glowing, hot ash just before it turns into dead, white powder. No, it was the warmest, the most commercial red possible.

Marchand then. But didn't this young man used to go by a different name? Marcus or Maerski? Or Marcowicz? Or something to that effect? Perhaps these were silly questions, because the mercantile red was meant to draw attention to the brand name Marchand, if only to command business success, or as publicity, or as a guarantee of profit.

Theo did good business after the war. He chose the publicity industry and specialised in promotional items, which even then people began to call 'gadgets'. He bought and sold. He was the sort of young, dynamic person who has hushed conversations, whispers or shouts, swallows softly and murmurs, or places eye-catching advertisements. Their words slip away skittishly when you grasp them, their thoughts curl. All year round, these men dress in timeless black tailor-made suits, white shirts, and the latest fashion in ties.

Whenever Theo rang a European business contact, he always asked what the weather was like where they were. In Madrid, scorching heat. In London, cloudy. In Paris, rain.

'Then it will soon be drizzling here in Brussels', said Theo, and all these international reports made him feel liberated and rich.

He was international, European.

To him, these telephones represented freedom, progress, prosperity. He put up a European country map in his office. He had decided that people speak more passionately if there's a map on the wall. It gave more weight to their words. *Navigare necesse est*, he thought, we have to sail, we have to explore the world - travel, trade and talk uninhibitedly. He talked about the helicopter view, big gestures. But not about our deepest desires, because we don't really know what they are.

Although he'd always written with soft blue ink in his youth, now he wrote in a cheerful, post-war turquoise. He remembered how this colour materialised in the words on the page as he wrote. For a moment the colour was greenish, the green of mint and eucalyptus, before turning turquoise. He leaned back

with his hands behind his head and studied the ceiling. His ultimate ambition was a public limited company with one hundred employees.

*Naamloze vennootschap, nv.*

*Société Anonyme, SA.*

*Aktiengesellschaft, AG.*

*Public Limited Company, PLC.*

Because he thought he could have a perfect overview of one hundred employees, like before with his linguistic family tree and his constellations. He could just manage to know them all personally still.

Theo was the inspired, driven type. He could fire off ideas the way you can separate water from mud if you beat it gently. He clapped people on the back in a studied fashion. He did that to get closer to his people, to inspire them. He even remembered the names of most of his employees' children, but perhaps that was just to do with his passion for lists.

In 1958, Brussels hosted the World's Fair. The city was appropriated by cheery foreigners. That's what tourists are like, open, inquisitive, always in high spirits. Theo was amazed at the optimism which the concrete and the metal called out to him.

*Everything will be O.K.!*

*We are human progress!*

*Alle Menschen werden Brüder!*

*Brothers! Frères! Fratres!*

At the American theatre, beneath flowering Japanese cherry trees, he watched as letters appeared between the branches. He could read them easily: an N, an I, a C, no, an O, and he tried to make out the rest of the letters that spell 'Nicosia', the capital of Cyprus. He knew that from his stamps. But a curly S appeared, the prongs of an E, an X in the intersection of some twigs. And X. And another X. Theo fell in love with a woman, and shortly afterwards he finally had sex for the first time. His thoughts dissolved into something pink, something heavenly white, something with the sensitivity of eyelashes. So this was it, this momentary, inward-focused deafness.

This soft, graceful underside of things.

When he came, words flew at him out of nowhere. He listened to the echo of the ejaculation. What did the words mean? He didn't know. It was something from his innermost depths, from gaps and chinks in his being. Something which managed to rise to the surface before evaporating. Every time they made love, he was beset by messages he was completely unable to identify.

His girlfriend said he was quiet, non-communicative. Sometimes she called him antisocial, self-absorbed, far too sober. Her resentment mounted.

The relationship broke up. Theo's second girlfriend was someone who came up to him one day and told him she was in love with him. It all happened very quickly. She taught him to drink alcohol, but Theo remained on his guard the whole time, afraid as he was of spluttering, staggering people who talk too much. She insisted he spend the night with her.

In the morning, they were awoken by the sound of children playing in a nearby school. They had sex, and when Theo came, all he heard were the little fools shrieking relentlessly in the playground. He looked outside, looked at the commotion of the children. It was as if someone was daubing paint with an invisible hand. Theo wanted to hear messages he couldn't make out. Should he go back to the watermill of his youth sometime?

Nothing came of that relationship either.

When Theo drove to the watermill a month later, a board with a primitive drawing of a watermill was hanging from the gable. The mill had been turned into a restaurant with a small bird park around the back. Theo accompanied the manager as he went from cage to cage dishing out apples and alfalfa. There were partridges and a hoopoe, a magpie without a tail, a reddish bird from America. Under eucalyptus trees, large black grouse were being reared.

'*Tetraotetrix*', said Theo, and he surprised the manager even more as they stood in front of the cages with a stork, falcons and a sick cuckoo. Theo just came out with it:

*Ooievaar, stork, Storch, cigogne, ciconia.*

*Valk, Falke, falcon, faucon, falco.*

*Koekoek, cuckoo, coucou, Kuckuck, cuculus.*

In the restaurant, Theo saw a photograph of the man and woman who had taken him in during the war years hanging beside the parchment lampshades.

'Is that the miller?' asked Theo.

'Yes, they died one shortly after the other ten years ago. Do you know them?'

'No,' lied Theo, 'but it would make sense for you to have a photo of them here.'

'Will you be eating here tonight?' asked the manager. 'We have wild boar on the game menu, and confit de canard.' Theo assured the man he would, but he drove back to Brussels without stopping. ■

From *Great European Novel*

(Grote Europese Roman. Amsterdam-Antwerpen: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2007)



## An Extract from *A Thousand Hills*

By Koen Peeters



Hello young man, come in. How nice of you to come and shave me.

I close my eyes.

Does this interfere with your work?

I can't see you, but I can feel you.

I like the sharpness of your knife, I quite like the way it rasps. The bare sound cleanses me. Mind my throat, I'm not an ox.

All my archives are here in this splendid head you now hold in your hands. *Enchanté*, my name is Alexis Kagame, Abbé du Clergé indigène de Ruanda-Catholic priest, Doctor of Philosophy and lecturer at the University of Ruanda. I am celebrated, renowned; I am the man of Ruanda's history. Don't forget to trim my nostril hair.

Thank you for your attentions, I'm as good as new again. It's going to be an unusual day, I can feel it. I fear it won't be much longer.

In the 1950s, the African world changed radically. From then on, we lived in modern times, and I travelled regularly to Belgium. In Tervuren, in their royal Belgian institutes, they studied us.

Us, *les Africains*.

At the time I was still one of the exceptions. As a Ruandan, I published books about our armed forces, cattle breeding, overviews of dynastic poetry, races, the tribes. They contained photos of bare-chested Twas and Hutus, but the Tutsis were serious, tall and wore white clothes.

In 1952, I was at the carnival in Stavelot with Father Hulstaert. There were men in loose-fitting clothes with long red noses. Confetti, pigs' bladders. I, the African, thought: look at these primitives. In Ruanda we don't have any masks.

We're not Congolese.

Some people say our language is our mask. They say we're proud, complicated, elitist. We don't need any masks.

In Belgium, I learned how I should behave in Belgium. I mean, how they would like me to behave. For example, if you don't know the way, you should act as if you're exceptionally helpless. They like that. Only then will they help you. I liked that play-acting. In Luxembourg, I found I'd run out of money. Apparently in Luxembourgish my name - Kagame - means 'no money left', *keigei meh*.

The Europeans thought that was so funny when I told them. I repeated it as often as they wanted to hear it. In 1953, in the Royal Belgian Colonial Institute, I was the only black member of the assembly. This made me proud and angry at the same time. I, the Ruandan historian, was allowed to address the gentlemen. I wasn't just anybody, I realised. I told them how our cultures were kindling each other. A spark that landed in a pile of dry grass. There were bound to be flames. Yes, these were recent, modern times and I, Rwandese, bore a Belgian stamp. We were Belgian Africa. This history, this now, had to be recorded too. Suddenly I had to live more carefully, I thought, and continue carefully to write our new history. From now on, there were thousands of witnesses, Belgian and Ruandan. There were no omniscient old men any more, I was just one of the spectators of the events.

The events. *Les évènements*.

We Ruandans believe the man who says he's seen it. I've seen a lot. In the 1950s, political parties started to emerge in Ruanda, Hutus against Tutsis. Aprosoma, Parmehutu, Rader, Unar. Our King was not happy about this. Since the Hutus, Gitera in particular, were so angry about the Karinga, the ancient drums were hidden.

By whom? I shan't say.

In July 1959, King Mutara went to see a film in Usumbura, *Les Seigneurs de la Forêt*. Mutara III had been drinking with friends, heavily according to some. Some said he was addicted to alcohol, but I'm not saying that.

Others claim his own mother said he was mad, that he was suffering from tuberculosis of the spine. Or something to do with syphilis. I don't think so.

Did I hear his confession before he departed?

I'm saying nothing. Of course not, I'm a priest.

In Usumbura, our King went to see Doctor Vinck, who gave him an injection of megacillin, after which he collapsed. Brain haemorrhage, dead on the pavement. Some say he poisoned himself to invoke the shadow of revenge. Most said the Belgians had murdered him.

But I'm saying nothing.

Just like our country, I was shocked, saddened. Our earth shook. I mourned. The King had always supported me, we talked to each other like colleagues, and our King had no heir.

We say: 'The days pass, but they don't resemble each other.'

We say: 'No-one knows which way the ram's horns will grow.'

We say: 'The things of tomorrow are told by the people of tomorrow.'

Every country needs a leader, to know where evil lurks, solve problems, protect the weak. I pulled my curtains shut, considered and reflected on everything the King had said to me. I had to retrieve every royal word, and I did so. The King isn't just any dead person. The Hutus were in favour of democracy. That was fine by me, but I wanted a king to realise this democracy. History prescribed it, I was a historian and did what I had to do. I knew the ancient secret texts that dictated how the transfer of power should take place after the king's death. I knew the *Ubwiru* and therefore I felt responsible.

On 27 July 1959, I was in my room working on old war poems. All of a sudden I smelt burning wood, charcoal from the hills. I was informed of the death of the King. Then I heard the sound of bones breaking in the poems on my desk, they were crying out to me. 'Shout away, old poems,' I said, 'set fire to each other', and sure enough the poems, with their embellishments and frills, caught fire, as blue flames shot up and burned my fingers. I doused the flames.

I had to do something. In any case, the King had given me an order before. Perhaps I was also curious about my authority.

I doused the flames of the poems. I made telephone calls, paid visits, I had my contacts. That night, we decided on a successor. The abiru and I. I wrote a confidential letter to Monseigneur Perraudin. I reminded the Bishop that the ceremony of the *Ubwiru*, for which I possessed the secret texts, had to be followed, even though we were burying a Christian king. The childless Mutara had told me personally who was to be his successor. I was the *umwiruw'ljambo*.

It was his young half-brother Jean-Baptiste Ndahindurwa, also a son of Musinga. The young man was only twenty-one years old. I said that the new King should bear the name Kigeli V, as custom - *la coutume* - prescribed, and be designated before the funeral of his predecessor.

Bishop Perraudin did not answer me.

My house was being watched by men working for the Belgian Colonel Logiest. In those days, he had already quite clearly chosen the side of the Hutus. The Belgians: first they used the Tutsis to govern the country, then they used the Hutus to block our independence.

At the funeral on 28 July, on Mwima Hill near Nyanza, many people were gathered with spears. There was shouting. A lot of whites discreetly carried revolvers. Deputy Governor Harroy read out condolences from the Belgian King Baudouin. Around the coffin people began jostling and pushing, clapping wildly, and Francis Rukeba, his inside pocket full of banknotes, stirred the people up.

He shouted out that they must know the name of the new King immediately.

Or was it Kayihura, from the family of the guardians of the Karinga, who shouted that out?

Kayumba was there too, the grandson of Gashamuza, though not a true umwiru himself, because he didn't know the whole code. In the commotion, Kayumba said the name I had told him.

Or was it Kayihura, after all, who said the name of the successor in a doubtful voice, because he was made to by Bideri? In any case, it was in either case the name I had said. The name the King had told me.

Jean-Baptiste Ndahindurwa gave a start. I was standing right beside him, whispered to him that he would do well. The Belgians knew nothing about it. They were stunned. They had no choice but to accept the new King. Harroy nodded uncomfortably, nodded and nodded again. He said he was ready for the official inauguration of the new King.

We say: 'Drink the white man's milk while it's still fresh. If you wait until it curdles, it will be spilled.'

We say: 'A mouth that is not used murders its owner.'

We say: 'I wear my pagne inside out, not my heart.'

Under my breath, I said: 'We must show the successor to the crowd now', and Musinga's son was lifted onto the shoulders of four men. He was carried around in celebration. He was a half-brother of Mutara, Jean-Baptiste Ndahindurwa, and he was given the royal name Kigeli V. Some people called it a coup, but it wasn't. The old, dead King was buried, long live the new King. He would make our country independent. Or not. ■