

HUGO CLAUS' *HET VERDRIET VAN BELGIE*:
ITS RECEPTION AND ITS THEMES

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Hugo Claus' novel continues to attract great critical attention. On the one hand, it recently won the literary prize called "Hoogste litteraire onderscheiding, Prijs der Nederlandse letteren 1986". On the other hand, as André Demedts wrote: "After the exaggerated praise we are now threatened by an irresponsible underrating."¹

At first many critics were exuberant. Piet Sterckx called it "a masterful document." Graa Boomsma comments in *De Waarheid* that it was Hugo Claus' "brilliant lifework". Wim Zaal in *Elseviers Magazine* welcomed it as "his greatest work." *De Telegraaf* wrote that it was "a real contribution to the beauty of the Dutch language." Probably Hanneke van Buren in *Eindhovens Nieuwsblad* was the most enthusiastic reviewer; she condemned the critics and exclaimed: "Now that I have read the book myself, breathless, at one sitting, I think I would kick them out the door, and I would say, 'Go and read it!'"

Recently, however, some critics have become rather more reserved in their appreciation as they discovered a number of imperfections. They have claimed that Claus tries to do too much in one novel, with the result that it lacks unity. Rather than focussing on one single theme, they say, the book tackles a variety of subjects such as the problems of adolescence, marital relations, class differences, wartime collaboration with the Nazis, the problems of Belgian and Flemish identity, changes in society, loss of values, etc. And all this is presented in an endless number of anecdotal miniatures. Hugo Claus could respond to this by saying that this is exactly the nature of history: it does not develop systematically in accordance with just one simple plot.

Claus has indeed made such statements in his interviews. It sounds a plausible argument, but it is not convincing. After all, a novel is never just history in progress: it is always a view of history. A novel needs a theme. It selects some historical events and rejects others. In short, every story is the product of choices. Nevertheless, I agree wholeheartedly with the statement André Demedts makes in conclusion to his critical appraisal: "*Het verdriet van België* may not be an immaculate masterpiece...but it is an inspired, sensitive and beautiful novel"².

The significance of this book is reflected in many literary essays. Nobody can ignore Hugo Claus. Hugo Bousset calls him the

"monstre sacré" of Flemish literature. Claus is indeed something like a venerable giant or a respected Goliath amongst Flemish authors. At the ninth I.V.N. colloquium, held in 1985³, Bousset described the contemporary novel as moving away from unpretentious storytelling to a more sophisticated mixture of novel, document, essay and autobiography. It is not surprising, then, that Bousset mentions Hugo Claus after Louis Paul Boon. Boon wrote novels about Flemish history, and according to Bousset the red thread which runs through all his historical novels is that of "the revolution doomed to failure." Like Claus, then, he claims that unsuccessful attempts at revolution lie at the heart of the sorrow of Belgium. The theme of failure links Boon's description of Flanders' older history and Claus' judgment of its recent past.

In his concluding remarks on Claus' book, Bousset comments: "The mapping of his own ego and the development of a type of encyclopedia of Flanders between 1939 and 1947 characterize Hugo Claus' lifework":

The six-time winner of the Belgian State prize, while demonstrating a secure grasp of an immense amount of data, successfully liberates himself from the religious and sexual frustrations of his youth, murders his father, and mockingly heckles the country he lives in.⁴

The first 1986 issue of *Septentrion* opens with an article by Philippe Noble, illustrated by a photo of Hugo Claus cigarette in hand. The article informs us that the translation of Dutch literature into French used to take place only in Brussels or Wallonia; "an unbreachable Maginot Line seems to mark the Franco-Belgian border, and unhappily these translations never reach Paris"⁵. This, however, is now changing. Since 1984, he reports, three Dutch novels have been translated into French and published by well-known Paris publishers. Thus the French can enjoy Harry Mulisch's *De aanslag* and *Het stenen bruidsbed* and Hugo Claus' *Het verdriet van België* in their own language. In my opinion, the fact that both Harry Mulisch and Hugo Claus have lately been discovered by the French reading public is significant, for reasons which I hope to make clear in the course of this discussion.

Since perhaps not everyone has read the book, I will now survey its contents.

The novel is first of all biographical. It deals mainly with the life of Louis Seynaeve, whose life runs parallel with that of Claus. Louis, just like Claus, is eleven years old when the Nazis invade the country; at the end of the novel he is seventeen. By that time he has written a short story for a literary contest, like Claus. Like him, Louis spends his early years in a boarding school run by nuns. The protagonist's father is a printer, as Claus' father was. Louis' mother works for the Germans, as Claus' mother did. During the Nazi

occupation Louis briefly joins the National Socialist Youth of Flanders; Claus too was once a member of this organization. All this suggests an autobiographical streak. Yet there are differences. Claus said in an interview that the novel is 80% invention and only 20% reality.

Secondly the book is a novel about a family. We meet many relatives. Besides Louis' parents we meet his maternal and paternal grandparents, and on both sides of his genealogy there are a number of uncles and aunts. Someone suggested that a family tree would make the novel more readable. But Claus did not want to give all the attention to just one family; their presence is intended to function more in a general than in an individual sense. They are representatives of the Flemish people.

The third theme of the book is the development of the personality of Louis. It depicts his ignorance, especially concerning the facts of life, and the imperfections of the traditional sexual education by his parents and by the nuns with their pseudo-motherly inclinations. Louis' father is so embarrassed by his wife's miscarriage that he tells Louis the old tale that his mother has fallen downstairs:

Papa cleared his throat and leaned forward. "What happened is nothing really, it's just that your mama fell downstairs, that's all, and she'll have to lie down for a while." (p.21)

Louis, in his childlike confusion, asks: "On the stairs?", wondering if his mother has to keep lying on the stairs. Later he learns about menstruation from his socially unacceptable friend Bekka, who calls it the blood procession. The term reminds Louis of the religious procession of that name which takes place every year in Bruges.

Thus we come to the fourth theme: the crumbling religious world of Louis and of many of his contemporaries. Before the second world war, Flanders remained a predominantly agrarian region with some four or five million people living on the borderline of poverty, whose lives were regulated and dominated by a mighty church which had all the answers and did not encourage questioning by the laity. Louis wonders whether he still belongs to the world which he found in his scrapbooks as a child:

The holiness, sacredness and exultation of courage and energy which in his scrapbooks were glorified in the images of Kolbe, Thorak and Breker, was all this just for those who believed in it? Yes. Was he still one of them? No. (p.564)

He discovers that his heroes of former days, heroes with swords and torches, have melted away; they were made not of granite but of lard. Louis is left empty. This theme also helps us to understand the sorrow of Belgium: it is a sorrow caused by the process of

secularization, in which the former solid system of values and morality is collapsing.

A fifth theme that should not be overlooked is that of national identity. Claus wonders: "Who are we, the Flemish people in Belgium?" In his interview with the magazine *Knack*, Claus exclaimed:

A Frenchman, even a farmer in an undeveloped area, has at least the feeling that he belongs to an entity, which he calls France, and which sounds very respectable. So he can say: "I, as a Frenchman, will not tolerate this!" But we Flemish people cannot say "I, as a Belgian", for if we do we hear scornful laughter in the streets.⁶

The nuns of Louis' boarding school tell Louis that the freedom of the fatherland comes before anything else. Sister Kris says: "We must swear to defend Belgium... at all costs, under the protection of Belgium's patron saint, Saint Joseph." (p.77) But the so-called apostles, a group of friends in the school, speak differently. Louis says: "My dad blows his nose in the Belgian flag", and his friend adds: "And my dad wipes his ass with it." (ibid.) Later a character called Raspe cries out:

"People, what have we ever received from the Belgian state? Humiliation. People, what do we have to lose?... People, what is Belgium? At most a pile of gold reserves with a bunch of political scum who administer it and divide it amongst themselves." (p.601)

During this time of the identity crisis of nationalism, it was not surprising that many young Flemish men and women felt attracted to Hitler's National Socialism. They dreamed of a new country that would reach from Lille to Poland: a mighty Diets-land. In an interview Claus said that this ideal was directly related to the education of the young people in Flanders. They grew up with a bizarre kind of nationalism, grafted onto the Middle Ages and promoted by Catholicism, which would protect Europe against communism and create room for a mystical Flanders.

The final themes, then, are war and collaboration. We see that there are many themes, perhaps too many. Claus himself says on this score:

It is among other things a book about the war, among other things a book about fathers and mothers, among other things a book about the identity crisis, among other things, etc. This is the reason why the book became too fat. It is so fat since all this had to be discussed.⁷

Having thus surveyed all the themes of the book, we must now examine the significance of the title, which is itself a theme. The expression is used only seven times in the novel, each time in a different context, yet these few references are extremely relevant. Hugo Claus did not want to make the sorrow of Belgium a very simple concrete entity. Rather it is conveyed as a haze, an accompanying phenomenon, which is always present, like the elements of a typical Dutch weather forecast: mostly cloudy, intermittent rain, and now and then sunshine. Through this book I certainly gained a deeper understanding of the Flemish soul. As a Dutchman from the northern part of the Netherlands, I used to regard the Flemish as carefree happy-go-lucky people, free of the Calvinistic work ethic and without high aspirations: Pieter Breughel and Felix Timmermans people. I knew, of course, of other Flemings such as Guido Gezelle and Stijn Streuvels, but they seemed to be the proverbial exceptions which confirmed the rule. There is, however, more to Flanders than that. The national soul has its own particular sorrows. Claus would say it this way: "Everybody has his own sorrows, but we as Belgians have a particular kind of sorrow." By this he means that Belgians don't know who they are; they only know that they are not Belgians.

I will discuss the examples which best illustrate Claus' usage of the phrase "the sorrow of Belgium":

1. Louis' maternal grandmother is called Meerke. Being from a lower middle class milieu, she is not quite acceptable to the Seynaeve family. The cause of her husband's death, Meerke suggests, was simply over-indulgence: he was too fond of his porridge with brown sugar. Whenever the children did not empty their plates, he would quickly do it for them, behind Meerke's back. Until their father died, the children would never eat all their food:

In those days I either cried or slapped them, and during that time I could not cry. It was as though I let all the sorrow of Belgium wash over me. (p.241)

It may be asked what the death of Meerke's unimportant husband, the sneaky man with a sweet tooth, has to do with the sorrow of Belgium. But it is not as strange as it seems. Like Belgium, Louis' grandfather was on a path of self-destruction; giving in to impulses, to a hedonism of the moment, Meerke's husband ate himself to death, leaving Meerke with the immense task of raising a family. His sin was to allow immediate gratification to take the place of his fatherly responsibility. It is as though Claus wants to tell us that such mediocrity will lead to death.

2. When he is a member of the Nazi youth, while on an excursion, Louis suddenly falls in love with the pharmacist's daughter. She is looking at his reflection in the window of the bus, and in her eyes, he sees all the sorrow of Belgium. (p.402) You would expect that in

the eyes of this girl whose father is prominent in the National Socialist movement, some joy and self-respect would be reflected. After all, things are still going very well for the collaborators. But no, again there is that feeling of malaise, a general undefined and perhaps undefinable depression. Belgium is sick, it suffers from depression.

3. After the war Mrs. Parmentier gives a reception for Belgium's authors. They take a picture with young Louis in the foreground. In a conversation Mrs. Parmentier confides to Louis the fact that she too has a son who writes, or rather used to write; he began at the age of twelve but stopped when he was seventeen. She comments: "I felt great sorrow about this, the sorrow of Belgium,ahaha." (p.770) Again there is something intrinsic about this sorrow: an ideal which has not materialized, a beginning without an end, something half-baked. Belgium looks like a house without a roof.

4. But the strongest clue to the meaning of the title is provided when Louis enters in a competition his first short story about the war. Entitled "The Sorrow", it offers a glimpse of wartime corruption in Belgium, with officials on the take. The man to whom he hands in the manuscript says:

"The Sorrow', it's a good title. On the other hand... something is missing. It's... it's... so empty... Everybody has sorrows. Why don't you call it 'Sorrow for the Fatherland'?"

and a moment later:

"Or simply 'The Sorrow of Belgium'. If you win the prize with that title, you might remember me with a small commission." It was a joke. It was not a joke. (p.756)

These examples illustrate the nature of the entire book. Its heroes are anti-heroes. Nobody is great, except for one strange teacher of Louis, nicknamed de Key (Rock). He understands National Socialism. One day Rock is arrested and sent to a concentration camp from which he never returns.

One of the best explanations of the book's title, however, is found outside the text, in a review by André Demedts:

What mattered was to do a painting, a kind of Vanity Fair in the style of Breughel, in which some of the figures of Hieronymus Bosch roam around. In the beginning of his book the author warned us: We are appearances. We are never what other people think we are⁸.

The anecdotal character of the book should not deceive us. It is set in an environment where deep sorrow reigns. Claus presents us with the "blues of Flanders". Under the "toujours sourire" is the sorrow

caused by indifference, betrayal and a criminal lack of responsibility. We eat our porridge with brown sugar till we die.

Often Hugo Claus is compared with Harry Mulisch. Indeed, they are about the same age, they grew up during the second world war and they started to write after it. Mulisch has said that he has one objection to Claus: he reads too much and does not forget enough; however, the same objection can be made to Mulisch himself. Moreover, the works of both authors reflect an exhibitionistic and chaotic trend. But there is a clear difference, which Claus felt when he said of *De aanslag*:

This book is an elegant parable about guilt and remorse and getting rid of guilt feelings. It is not clear why he used the war for this purpose.⁹

In short, the difference between Claus and Mulisch is that Claus portrays a general, vague sorrow, whereas Mulisch undertakes a much more violent, penetrating and impatient examination of the problem of guilt. Claus' universe is filled with sorrow, but Mulisch's world is permeated with guilt.

NOTES

¹André Demedts: "Halfweg voorbij", *Tijdschrift voor Nederlands en Afrikaans*, July, 1983, p.23.

²*Ibid.*, p.28.

³Hugo Bousset: "A Bird's Eye View of Flemish Prose Literature since 1970," lecture to Ninth Colloquium of Internationale Vereniging voor Nederlandistiek, Nijmegen, 1985.

⁴Bousset: "Hugo Claus' spotziek verdriet", *Kreatief*, June, 1983.

⁵Philippe Noble: "La Littérature néerlandaise en France aujourd'hui", *Septentrion*, 1986, no.1, p.5.

⁶Sus van Elzen and Marc Reynebeau: "Ik maak mijn eigen kerktorens", *Kuack*, March, 1983, p.32-34.

⁷*Ibid.*, p.33.

⁸Demedts, p.24.

⁹Van Elzen and Reynebeau, p.33.