

C

laus

the Chameleon

A prophet is never honoured in his own country. Hugo Claus has always had a love-hate relationship with his fellow countrymen, and has left the country of his birth on several occasions – only to return each time. With his characteristic mythomania, he has explained this apparent instability as being due to traumas in his youth, such as his birth by Caesarian section in the Sint-Jans Hospital in Bruges on 5 April 1929, and his early separation from his mother, when at the age of 18 months he was placed in the care of nuns at a boarding school, only being allowed home again when he reached the age of 11.

Whatever the truth of these explanations, Claus' life, like that of his parents, has to date been a succession of moves from one place to another. Following an undistinguished secondary school career, during which he acquired the rudiments of Greek and Latin, he left the parental home for good in 1946. His attempts to make a living included working as a house-painter and employment as a seasonal labourer in Northern France. In Paris

Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands and Hugo Claus at the presentation of the Prize for Dutch Literature (1986)
(Photo by Marc Cels).



he met the surrealist playwright Antonin Artaud, whom he regarded for a long time as a spiritual father. While staying in Ostend he made the acquaintance of Elly Overzier, the daughter of a Dutch shipowner. Together they moved to Paris where Claus, then beginning as a painter and writer, came into contact with the international CoBrA movement, while Elly appeared in French films. This led them to become involved in the Italian film world. In 1955 he returned to Ghent and married Elly. Ten years later he moved to the countryside of East Flanders, which he left in 1970 to move house yet again, this time to the metropolis of Amsterdam. There he began a relationship with the Dutch actress Kitty Courbois, whom he later abandoned in favour of the film actress Sylvia ('Emanuelle') Kristel. With this new companion at his side he wandered through various countries before settling in Paris once again. Following his break with Sylvia Kristel he returned to live in Ghent once more. Today, with a new companion at his side, he divides his time between a penthouse in the centre of Antwerp and a country home in Cavaillon, in southern France. But for how long?

The all-round artist

Just as confusing as his restless wanderings and amorous escapades are Claus' explorations in the world of art. He was 18 years old when his first poetry collection, *Short Series* (Kleine reeks) appeared. A few years later his novella *The Duck Hunt* (De Metsiers, 1950) won a quadrennial prize for the best unpublished novel. The experimental poetry collection *Poems from Oostakker* (De Oostakkerse gedichten, 1955) firmly established his reputation as the 'child prodigy of Flemish literature'. In the same year his play *A Bride in the Morning* (Een Bruid in de morgen, 1960) enjoyed a successful première in Rotterdam.

These events were just the beginning of an uninterrupted flow of poetry collections, stories, novellas, novels, plays, translations, adaptations, radio plays, television dramas, scenarios and even opera libretti. Claus sometimes jokingly claims that his example is Lope de Vega, the Spanish playwright reputed to have written more than 2,000 plays. The wonder of this enormous production is that, while sometimes rushed, it has seldom led to repetitive-



The Lion of Flanders
(directed by Hugo Claus,
1984).



ness. The author does not adhere to any single formula, not even when critics and public are clamouring for it.

Pushed to the background somewhat by his literary activities is his work as a painter and drawer, work whose diversity virtually matches that of his efforts as a writer and storyteller. His unwillingness to develop anything akin to a 'personal style' has led more than once to him destroying the majority of works from a particular period, so that his 'special exhibitions' sometimes give the impression of being 'group exhibitions'. His striking eclecticism is also evidenced by the diversity of his cover designs for his own books.

Several times Claus has directed his own plays and driven actors to amazing performances. Although he has a whole series of film scenarios to his name, film-makers and film committees have given him too few opportunities of working as a film director. His debut *The Enemies* (De vijanden,

1967) can be counted a success, given the modest financial resources with which the film was created. Alongside the failure of *The Lion of Flanders* (De leeuw van Vlaanderen, 1984), the films *Friday* (Vrijdag, 1980) and *The Sacrament* (Het Sacrament, 1989) stand out for their sheer professionalism. In a more favourable economic climate, Claus would without doubt have been capable of using his feeling for film to create an original cinematographic oeuvre.

The polymorphic poet

If the title 'poet laureate' existed in Flanders, Claus would have been awarded it long ago. Even his opponents admit that he is the most gifted and versatile poet of his generation.

The first verses produced by Claus are examples of a fairly traditional confessional lyric. International contacts later pointed him in the direction of modernism. French surrealism became the model for his experimental,

I'd like to sing you a song in this landscape of anger,
Livia, that would penetrate you, reach you through your nine openings,

Blonde and elastic, fierce and hard.

It would be an orchard song, a canto of the plains,
A one-man choir of infamy,
As though my vocal chords discorded rose from me and called you,
As though
In this landscape abasing me, in this location impairing me
(Where I fourfooted wander) we appeared singular no longer
And locked our voices,
Spring to new shoots,
Come to me, the one who is elusive, unapproachable,
Don't think me strange as the earth,
Don't run from me (lame humans)
Meet me, feel me,
Crease, break, break,

We are the werewind, the rain of days,
Tell me clouds,
Flow open wordless, become water.

(Ah, this light is cold and weighs its horned hands
On our faltering, folding faces)

I'd like to sing you an orchard song, Livia
But the night comes to its end and fills
My plains ever closer closed – I can reach you
Only unfulfilled
For the throat of the male deer chokes at dawn.

From *Poems from Oostakker*
(De Oostakkerse gedichten,
1955)

Translated by Paul Brown
and Peter Nijmeijer.

associative style, a style which he shared with the Dutch Experimentalist poets, such as Lucebert, Jan Elburg and Paul Rodenko. In *Poems from Oostakker* he combined his intuitive wordplay with an intellectual 'quotation poetry' following the example of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. The result reminds one of the poetry of Dylan Thomas and Ted Hughes.

The title of this collection refers to the place of pilgrimage dedicated to the Virgin Mary at Oostakker near Ghent. The Holy Virgin is used by the poet as a symbol for the unapproachable mother figure, who is worshipped and feared by father and son. This family theme is embodied in the anthropological mythology of James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890); Claus interprets the relationship between the earth-mother and the god of nature in a Freudian sense as an incestuous love, which is reborn in the passion between woman and lover. Reason, order and lawfulness give way to the almost animal regression and aggression of sexuality.

Following this outburst of emotionalism the collection *A Painted Horseman* (Een geverfde ruiter, 1961) was more rational, more desperate and more critical. Poems making use of personae and more narrative pieces broadened the range of themes. Claus' first volume of collected verse, published in 1965, concluded with the long poem 'The Sign of the Hamster' ('*Het teken van de hamster*'). In this summation of his youth the criticism of society and religion is also a self-criticism: is the poet not formed by a reactionary past just as much as are his fellow countrymen? From this time on, his attention focused on a broader existential and social set of problems.

In *Lord Wild Boar* (Heer Everzwijn, 1970), man is portrayed as a creature laboriously seeking a balance between nature and culture. The title is highly suggestive: man is both the 'lord' of creation and a 'wild boar', a lowly beast. The collection *Hearsay* (Van horen zeggen, 1970) offers undiluted criticism of Flemish provincialism and ends with a description of a socialist Utopia. Both collections have a place in the second volume of collected verse (1979), which is just as heterogeneous as the first, containing among other things five-line billets-doux, objectifying personae and caricatures of Christianity.

In putting together his next collection, the anarchist Claus abandoned the ordered arrangement of poems and created instead a chaotic *Almanac* (Almanak, 1982) containing 366 'doggerel verses', whose playfulness was not appreciated by the critics. The collection *Alibi*, which appeared in 1985, revealed a poet who, though now older, was still not reconciled to life.

Intertextuality, playing with the work of predecessors, is a constant feature in his oeuvre. A nice example of this can be found in the collection *Sonnets* (Sonnetten, 1986) which, though it consists entirely of transformed Shakespearean sonnets, can be read as a series of contemporary declarations of love.

Claus never ceases to amaze. The minute we think we have catalogued – and thus neutralised – him, he produces a new experiment: the modernist begins rhyming, the moralist produces banal nonsense verses, the lyricist turns into a rhetorician. The only constant is the chameleon-like inconstancy.

The polyvalent prose-writer

It is only rarely that good poets are also good prose-writers. Claus is an exception to this rule, as he is an exception in everything. Who else has written novellas and stories at the age of 20 which still stand up today? Who else

has published in the course of a single year two novels – *Wonderment* (De verwondering, 1962) and *About Deedee* (Omtrent Deedee, 1963) – both of which have become classics? Who else is capable of writing books as diverse as the novelette *The Year of the Lobster* (Het jaar van de Kreeft, 1972) and the mannerist novel *Shame* (Schaamte, 1972)?

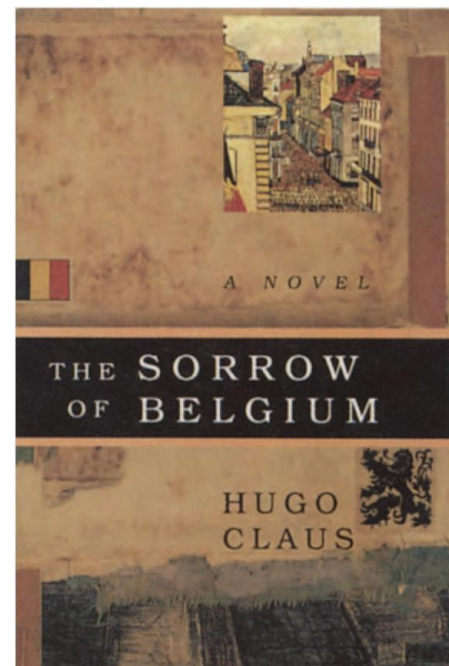
Like Claus the poet, Claus the prose-writer has also evolved in his writing from a thematic content based around his own youth, through problems of relationships, to social criticism. His best work interweaves these three components. The problems of adolescence dominate the novella *The Duck Hunt* and the story collection *The Black Emperor* (De zwarte keizer, 1958), in which the immature main character is pitted against the all-powerful mother figure and the absent father figure. The relationship between man and woman is dealt with in *Dog Days* (De hondsdagen, 1952) and *The Cool Lover* (De koele minnaar, 1956), but is clouded by a failure to come to terms with the traumas of youth. A mother-son bond drives the main character of *Dog Days* into the arms of a young girl (three years before Nabokov's *Lolita*), and inhibits the main character of *The Cool Lover* (the Italian setting of which is reminiscent of Moravia).

Claus reached a high point with the novel *Wonderment*. Once again the main character is a man who is unable to build a satisfactory relationship because of his close ties with his mother. The story is constructed as a quest for the father, who is presented as a symbol of adult love. But this fascist leader who is to serve as an example proves to be just as much a victim of the mother as the main character, so that the latter is left with no alternative but a flight into madness. As in *Poems from Oostakker*, these personal problems have a Frazerian and Freudian loading. *Wonderment* seeks to show how the fascination for authoritarian fascism in rural Flanders is cemented in family structures.

A similar social analysis is undertaken in the novel *About Deedee*, in which a young homosexual man is destroyed in a hypocritical petty bourgeois environment. The only intellectual, the priest Deedee, proves unable to break through the facade of respectability and show genuine understanding and sympathy. The skilful switching of narrative perspectives in this book portrays the situation from the point of view of all the characters. The diagnosis is left to the reader himself, but cannot be a very favourable one.

The Sorrow of Belgium (Het verdriet van België, 1983) is Claus' magnum opus, a book on which he worked, albeit with some interruptions, for ten years. All the characters and motifs of his world, which, by analogy with Graham Greene's 'Greenland' we could perhaps call 'Clausitania', are brought together here in a grandiose synthesis. The book is in the first place a *Bildungsroman* which traces the spiritual development of the young Louis Seynaeve between 1939 and 1948. In a bewildering interplay of fact and fiction, Claus recounts the story of his own youth and his first steps towards becoming a writer. At the same time it is a picaresque novel, in which the boy who began as a victim of the lies and treachery of adults himself becomes a cheat and a liar. The novel is a psychoanalysis in which the neurotic tendencies of the main character are explained as being due to an Oedipus complex with which he has not yet come to terms: the young Louis remains firmly attached to his mother and fails to find a positive model in

Dust-jacket of *The Sorrow of Belgium* (translation first published in 1990).



his father. The author expands this psychological analysis into a sociological and political critique by showing how psychological infantilism of this type opens the way to a petty bourgeois ideology with fascistic tendencies (which manifest themselves in nationalism, racism and anti-socialism). He does not express his social criticism directly, through commentary or by setting out arguments, but indirectly, by quoting clichés from the mouth of the common man. A more brutal exposé of the spiritual poverty of both Flemish society and its intellectuals has seldom been presented. Little wonder that the novel was received much more warmly in the Netherlands than in Flanders itself: no one likes to be confronted with such an unembellished self-portrait.

It is not given to every writer to be able to present his personal problems in such a way that they throw light on the society of which he is a part. In novels such as *Wonderment* and *The Sorrow of Belgium* Claus has achieved this with brilliant success, thus demonstrating how polyvalent are the effects of his prose.

The diversiform dramatist

As a playwright, Claus is virtually without rivals in Flanders and the Netherlands. The four national prizes he has won for his stagework could even be seen as an under-appreciation of his talent, so great is the extent and diversity of his dramatic production. Comedy is the field for which he has the least aptitude, a deficiency for which he compensates by turning virtually all his plays into tragicomedies.

Claus began as an experimental playwright following in the footsteps of Artaud. Later, too, he was to allow himself to be influenced by foreign examples, authors such as Anouilh, Tennessee Williams, Büchner, Strindberg and Beckett. Among writers whose plays he has reworked are Seneca, Tourneur, Fernando da Rojas, Ben Jonson, Euripides, Aristophanes and Shakespeare. Particularly remarkable are the antique pieces, which through translation, adaptation and reinterpretation have been turned into modern plays. In these endeavours he has made his own the device employed by Ezra Pound, a writer whom he greatly admires: 'Make it new'.

As in the other genres which he practises, Claus strives to achieve a diversity of approach: he is an experimentalist in *The Witnesses* (*De getuigen*, 1952), a neoromantic in *A Bride in the Morning*, a satirist in *Life and Works of Leopold II* (*Het leven en de werken van Leopold II*, 1970), a naturalist in *Friday* (*Vrijdag*, 1969), and a writer of slapstick in *Serenade* (1984). His dramatic work is remarkable for the shifts in tone which take place within a single play, always giving his work a slightly surrealist effect. A good example of this is *Jessica* (1977), which begins as a modern realistic drama and ends in a nightmare atmosphere. These continual shifts in style were not always appreciated by audiences: only his most traditional works such as *Sugar* (*Suiker*, 1958) and *Friday* have achieved unqualified success, while more innovative work such as *Look, Mummy, no hands!* (*Mama, kijk, zonder handen!*, 1959) were given a much cooler reception.

In spite of all this diversity, something resembling a basic structure can be found in the majority of Claus' dramatic works. His plays usually divide into two parts: a first part in which the unsustainability of a particular situation is described, and a second part in which, in spite of a number of unexpected twists, the basic problem ultimately remains largely unchanged, so



Blind Man (Blindeman), a play written by Claus for the Ghent Theatre Company (NTG) and performed in 1985 (Photo by Luc Monsaert).

that the play ends at more or less the same point at which it started. The only thing which has been gained, apparently, is a certain insight into a hopeless situation.

The liberal artist

However perilous it may be to attempt to pin down an artist as protean as Claus to a single basic attitude, it is perhaps possible to trace his incessant experimenting and his continual shifts in form of expression back to a fundamental sense of a lack of freedom. Time and time again the artist makes it clear that he is stuck fast, a prisoner of his own past, hemmed in by the traumas of his youth, constrained by social compulsions, moral convention and religious dogma. In the face of this paralysing slavery the only thing he has to offer is his creativity. The realm of liberty which he has vainly sought in sexual profligacy or in the permanent revolution of a Utopian socialism proves to be a figment, if not of thought then of dreams, which can exist only in the continually changing products of the imagination. Variety is the motto of this chameleon, whose art is one long ode to freedom.

PAUL CLAES

Translated by Julian Ross.

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