

The Poet Laureate and other curiosities

Why the television audience is not being won for the good cause

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It was to be a grand and inspiring poetry manifestation: the first official Dutch Day of Poetry on January the 27th, 2000. The staff of the organising Poetry International Foundation had compiled a vast programme to make sure poetry would be pervasive in all of the Netherlands. Poets recited in buses and trams. There were lines of poetry on buildings, bus shelters and dustcarts. Libraries and schools organised lectures and poetry-workshops. Even the deliberations of the Dutch parliament were opened with the recitation of a poem. The celebrations reached their peak with the announcement of the poet who was granted the title of national Poet Laureate for a period of five years, an honorary title bestowed by the reading public through an election in which they determined who they considered to be the best ambassador of poetry.

The intentions were good, the words sounded great. 'The national Day of Poetry aims at bringing poetry closer to the public,' a headline read in the Dutch newspaper *NRC*, when Tatjana Daan unfolded her plans as the director of Poetry International in the beginning of January. Daan believed the misconception that poetry is for the elite only should be countered. 'Poetry is not inaccessible but invisible,' she explained. 'We want to change all that.' And in the press release that first launched the idea of a Dutch Poet Laureate, Poetry International indicated in the same period that it hoped 'to enlarge public involvement in poetry by installing a Poet Laureate.' He or she was to do away with the elitist image of poetry.

The name of the first Dutch Poet Laureate was announced on the eve of the Day of Poetry 2000 by the Dutch public broadcasting corporation NPS. This 'Evening of Poetry' was viewed by 243,600 people according to Intomart and was presented by Joost Prinsen. The programme featured various poets, short films on the ten 'most beautiful' poems ever, interviews and reports on poetic topics. The suspense was steadily increased, while Prinsen enquired among poets whether they would like to be Poet Laureate. Remco Campert: 'I would not, because I would have to do something for it.' Ilja Pfeijffer: 'A great honour. I would certainly do it. I even

campaigned for it.' Simon Vinkenoog: 'If it could be guaranteed that a poem could be published in a newspaper every week, that would be great.' Willem van Toorn: 'It is an English phenomenon really. Luckily we have a different tradition.' Gerrit Kouwenaar: 'Toon Hermans will win for sure.'

When the moment for the declaration finally arrived, Prinsen gave the floor to Jeltje van Nieuwenhoven, the chair of the Dutch Parliament, by saying: 'It seems no more than reasonable that the result of this democratic election is announced by someone who is at the heart of our democracy. Madam, the floor is yours.' Van Nieuwenhoven admitted modestly she was no connoisseur, referred in passing to the unfortunate flaws in the procedure (actually it had been Rutger Kopland who had received most of the more than 3100 votes, but he had declined the honour) and then announced the result: Gerrit Komrij! The camera panned, and there he sat, the first Dutch Poet Laureate, as always somewhat shy, but with a grin from ear to ear. Was it the smile of someone ill at ease with the situation or was he really beaming with gladness about the adornments he had just acquired? Was he proud as a peacock or was his smile tongue in cheek? 'I feel a bit overwhelmed,' he mumbled. And when he was asked how he planned to flesh out his function, he answered: 'What should I do? Will they call me when something has happened, when something is opened? Maybe there are other possibilities too than merely writing silly poems whenever there is a celebration. Maybe I could do something for poetry in general.'

Then it was time for a commercial break however. 'Komrij old man, my congratulations,' Prinsen shouted, hugging the winner, and then he hastily concluded the programme with the words: 'See you next time!'

The co-ordinated publicity campaign that surrounded the Day of Poetry and the election of the Poet Laureate was of an unheard of scale. The organising Poetry International Foundation had chosen the broadcast corporations NPS and VPRO and the newspaper *NRC* as its partners. As a consequence, poetry was predominant in the Dutch media on January the 26th, 2000, and the following days in a way never seen before. Publicity was the key word. The goal was to reach as many people as possible, and especially those people who normally never encounter poetry, for whom poetry was invisible, as the initiator Tatjana Daan had put it.

Since a democratic procedure was chosen for the instalment of the Poet Laureate, the goal was apparently not restricted to merely *reaching* the public. The whole initiative also aimed at actually *involving* the public in poetry. Through the election the aim of involving the people was specified to giving them a say (which is a different aim from merely trying to engage them, the aim of government policies for reading promotion as practised by the Dutch Reading Foundation and the like). It should also be mentioned that there was something of a joke about the whole

election affair the first time. Despite Jeltje van Nieuwenhoven, the democratic nature of the proceedings was not that pervasive. The most votes did not go to truly popular poets like Jean Pierre Rawie, Nel Benschop or Toon Hermans but to Kopland and Komrij, two serious poets, published by renowned publishing houses and taken seriously by scholars and critics alike. The two form a nice compromise, since they are no state of the art avant garde poets either, who are only appreciated by connoisseurs and are incomprehensible for 'normal readers'. For that was not what the organisers had in mind in all probability. They will have thought that people who appreciate such poetry (by much praised Dutch poets like H.H. ter Balkt, Tonnus Oosterhoff, Anneke Brassinga and Nachoem Wijnberg) have already been won for poetry and are served perfectly by the annual Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam, the programme of which is for the most part still made without compromise by and for an elite of poetry lovers.

Komrij proved quite willing to enthusiastically promote the democratising aims of his honorary title. One of the first things he did was to help establish the 'Poëzieclub' (poetry club). According to the website of the club, www.poezieclub.nl, it had as its motto: 'Poetry is not necessarily only for the elite. Poetry is for everyone. The Poëzieclub tries to infuse more people with enthusiasm for reading poetry.' In a letter published elsewhere on the site, Komrij grows almost pathetic while he tries to convince 'his sweet poetry friends' to join the club. It is almost unbelievable that this is the same person speaking as the malicious polemist who has been wont for years on end to crush anything even remotely reminiscent of snug pettiness, bad taste and low culture. 'Isn't it great to share your enthusiasm when it comes to poetry,' he writes. 'Without doubt we will be with many people eventually. I hope so. And I believe so.'

In the poems he wrote in his new function, Komrij also proved to be willing to adjust his approach to the special popularising tasks of a Poet Laureate. He refrained from all complexity and wrote in lines like the following from the quartet of sonnets in honour of Queen Beatrix' twentieth year on the throne with which Komrij started his operations as Poet Laureate in May 2000:

Gradually, in twenty years of hard work,
As it will with managers and bosses,
Certainty became her most trustworthy trademark,
While the world let its certainties go.

Insiders and critics responded in no uncertain terms to the poems he published in the *NRC*. Had a cultured person ever fallen so quickly through all poetic floors? Was this still poetry or should we see it as a bad joke, meant to scare the living daylight out of poetry lovers with the most banal nursery rhymes presented as poetry since

the clerical poets of the nineteenth century? What struck most was the emphatic use of rhyme and the jaunty style of argumentation with which all sorts of truisms were delivered in these and following poems of the Poet Laureate. 'We want the old Komrij back,' thus read a headline in *De Groene Amsterdammer*. Piet Gerbrandy reported to have read the poems 'with a mix of amazement and dread.' 'Dear Gerrit,' he wrote, 'please stop with this tasteless joke.' Michaël Zeeman spoke of 'stupid rhymes with a moralising undercurrent, [...] exactly the sort of poems the sluggish Dutch upper class expects and can handle.' Arjan Peters ('candy poetry') and Adriaan Jaeggi ('crippled verses for royal births and birthdays') joined the critics in the national press. Of course, the Poet Laureate was gladly permitted some advances to the 'ordinary reader', but these nursery rhymes seemed to be so accessible that proficient poetry readers tended to consider them as downright provocations.

The detested poems kept coming, on the occasion of the explosion of the fireworks factory in Enschede (Gerbrandy: 'are we to believe Komrij himself was blubbering behind his television set?'), of the commemoration of the fall of Srebrenica, of the 75th birthday of Jan Wolkers, at the request of the Commission Water Management 21st Century, occasioned by Prince Willem-Alexander's betrothal, by the introduction of the Euro, by the killing of Pim Fortuyn, by the decease of Prince Claus, by the third Day of Poetry and by the impending war in Iraq. The birth of princess Catharina-Amalia on December the 8th, 2003 was the last occasion that could seduce Komrij to write a sonnet as Poet Laureate: 'Orange child'. 'As a poet I now have to speak some words,' reads one of its lines, which sounds somewhat tired and seems to anticipate Komrij's abdication as Poet Laureate. It wasn't long before he tendered his resignation, perhaps partly because he was fed up with always being criticised by colleagues and critics.

Was the criticism justified though? Not completely I think, understandable as it may have been. A man appointed to strip poetry of its elitist image will be read with a certain distrust by the poetry loving elite. Komrij would not be Komrij moreover if he had not fuelled this distrust with relish. 'Orange child' is a case in point. The poem may not appear that hermetic (no difficult words, unproblematic syntax, a subject matter that is readily recognisable), but just try to paraphrase exactly what it says.

There is a child. Everyone is happy.
Katie is happy. Lil is even quite delighted.
Because children are innocent and, moreover,
Mabel has been about squeezed dry by now.

It was about time for Orange to win a match again.
The whole intellectual clique

falls silent, deadly silent, before a simple child.
Give birth, give birth, and all criticism takes flight.

As a poet I now have to speak some words.
Well, I will give the child a big kiss
And tell you this: if your cheering is sincere,

Then help this child to a life that is real,
Give it a say, a heart, a path of its own –
And kick the monarchy in the arse.

This poem seems to contain a jibe at the very ‘intellectual clique’ for whom the formal traditionalism of his poems as Poet Laureate had been a provocation anyway. But is it truly a jibe? Is it really the intellectual clique, with its elitist criticism of the monarchy, that gets a licking on this occasion, which offers Katie and Lil such delight? Is Komrij really sincere in his sweet comments on innocent children and the like? Or should we quite to contrary conclude from the last line of the sonnet that Komrij himself is opposed to the monarchy? What is it he is trying to say?

An accurate reader cannot miss how Komrij expresses his disappointment in ‘Orange child’ about the way all dissent is silenced by simple sentiments. Thus, the poem’s sympathy is with those who value dissent, the sort of people who can be found generally in the company of that ‘whole intellectual clique’ rather than in that of Katie and Lil, who are driven mainly by their love of (royal) children and their compassion with poor Mabel in the first stanza. The remarks on ‘the whole intellectual clique’ in the second stanza is therefore not just a populist slashing out at a minority that has become quite unpopular in the Netherlands after the killing of Fortuyn in 2003. Neither do they pay lip service to Katie and Lil.

The complicating thing about the poem is that it contains different voices. In the lines ‘Because children are innocent and, moreover, / Mabel has been about squeezed dry by now. // It was about time for Orange to win a match again,’ the narrator chooses the perspective of characters. He gives voice to the thoughts and perceptions of people like Katie and Lil. We read in these lines how *they* responded to the happy news. Only at the end of the poem we encounter the undiluted voice of the narrator himself, the poet of line 9, who is behind the exhortation in the closing line to ‘kick the monarchy in the arse.’ It is more difficult to make out exactly who are behind the lines in between, and especially those concerning ‘the whole intellectual clique’ that ‘falls silent, deadly silent, before a simple child.’ In those lines the perspective seems to be shifting from Katie and Lil to the poet. It is impossible to decide which of them should be held responsible for these words and for the contempt of intellectuals they

express. It is this subtle unresolvedness, which gives tension to the poem (not a nursery rhyme after all).

The subtleties are what makes 'Orange child' work, as is always the case in poetry. But when people feel offended, they lose sight of subtleties generally. The poem serves two different audiences and plays them off against each other in a masterful fashion. And that is exactly what irritates the connoisseurs. They can't stand the fact that the poem is directed against them in an inaccurate reading. The Lils and Katies among the Poet Laureate's audience can recognise Komrij in the poem as an ally in the battle against the 'whole intellectual clique' (encouraged implicitly by all the publicity around the Poet Laureate, in which poetry tends to be depicted as entertainment for the elite, as something that ought to be won back for the ordinary people under Komrij's inspiring leadership). Komrij, who is shamelessly hamming it up in the first two stanzas – the wording ('clique') and the all too explicit happiness about the royal baby are overdone effects meant for people like Katie and Lil who are probably perfectly satisfied with them – has done nothing to prevent the mistake. It must be said, he has left his more accurate readers nowhere to run.

'Orange child' is characteristic for the poetry Komrij wrote in the four years since his election. The same sly pattern recurs in poem after poem. The people's voice is never absent, always embedded in Komrij's playful irony. See for instance the poem 'The established politician', that was written on the occasion of the killing of Pim Fortuyn.

He has never danced before. He has a clear target.
His pallid clerk's face never showed
An unmeditated smile, but that night,
After the madman had shot the fool,
He crawled out of bed, beaming with delight,
And made, watched by no-one, a pirouette.
Thank you Lord, he shouted, the monster has been slain.
He practised the word 'shocked' for the day after
And slept as twenty oxen can sleep.
In a few hours he would be full of worries before the camera.
Of course he is radically opposed to all violence.
It is that same old worn out tune again.
He walks the streets, unbearably righteous,
And still does not see the true monster.

Once again the whole poem is turned upside down by the last line. But the preceding lines, when read superficially, seem to join the chorus of the many completely unjust accusations and insinuations levelled at Ad Melkert in the days following May the

6th, 2002 (there were a few who identified the 'established politician' of the poem with Wim Kok by the way).

Komrij wrote a few interesting and vicious poems as Poet Laureate that have succeeded in stirring up the smouldering discontent with the institute of the Poet Laureate. His 'candy poetry' and 'crippled verses' are less superficial than they seem at first sight and the criticism they evoked was not completely adequate.

Nevertheless Komrij's approach to his roll as Poet Laureate is open to some justified criticism. The institute had been created to bridge the supposed gap between poetry and 'ordinary' readers. If Komrij really intended to do something about poetry's bad reputation, than he has been quite clumsy in his doings as Poet Laureate.

He sold his apparently simple poems written in the supposed language of ordinary people as contributions to the pursuit of democratisation in poetry ('look, this ain't elitist, outsiders can find something of their liking here too'), but actually he only confirmed the existing anti-elitist prejudices about poetry by continually playing the dilettante in his role as Poet Laureate.

If there really are readers who are annoyed with the generally elitist and inaccessible nature of poetry, than Komrij is continually taking their side, both in his poems and elsewhere. In 2002 he remarked about a poem of Christine D'haen: 'Ordinary readers like you and me have become too vulgar for this lady.' This is not an inspiring teacher helping readers appreciate a poem. This is a self-important poet hamming it up at the expense of a colleague. The great populariser is doing the good cause an ill service with such remarks. And the same goes when he refers slyly to poetry connoisseurs as 'scholars' or 'so-called connoisseurs' and when he warns his readers for 'all the secret language and jargon poets and poetry professors use among themselves.' By continually emphasising on behalf of the general public that he as Poet Laureate is opposed to the elite of poetry lovers, he widens the gap he had been supposed to bridge. Furthermore he confirms the misconception that anyone who was already into poetry before the Poet Laureate had started advertising it belongs to a clique of insiders who wilfully turn their back to the 'ordinary reader'.

From the point of view of the targets behind the institute of the Poet Laureate, it was all for the best when Komrij decided to quit after four years. Maybe he had come to the conclusion that the discontented mass of readers disregarded by 'official' poetry was smaller than he had thought. Maybe he had expected more approval. But in any case he left no doubt that he was quite through with it in January 2004: 'I abdicate, I offer my resignation, I've had it, I'm through.'

His abdication evoked a lot of publicity. Even poetry is news apparently, if it can trigger headlines like 'Komrij causes confusion' (*Deventer Dagblad*), 'Komrij quits with fanfare' (*De Gelderlander*), 'Heytze candidate for vacancy Komrij' (*Amersfoortse*

Courant) and 'Complete confusion concerning Gerrit Komrij as Poet Laureate' (*Dagblad van het Noorden*). But it is doubtful whether this is the kind of free publicity the initiators had hoped for four years before. While the news coverage concerning the Poet Laureate slowly shifted towards gossip and drivel, the arts' and correspondence pages saw publicists openly venting their relief that the 'tasteless joke' (Gerbrandy) seemed to be over finally. 'In his four years as Poet Laureate,' Michaël Zeeman wrote at the occasion of Komrij's abdication, 'Komrij has done Dutch poetry a great service. It was new and it was surrounded with expectations and pretensions. He has skilfully undermined them. [...] He has thoroughly ridiculed the task and the idea. The job is now so ridiculous no serious, self-respecting poet can take it upon him- or herself.'

Poetry International did not throw in the towel however. Komrij had only just released himself and his critics of their curious *via dolorosa*, when Poetry International started preparations for the election of a second Poet Laureate. The whole circus of five years ago was repeated and was to reach its peak once again in a television broadcast lasting the whole evening. But the whole affair had attained the character of a farce by now and things started to go wrong. What had started as a joke five years ago was suddenly taken awfully serious in an awkwardly unpoetic manner. The 'democratic' election of the Poet Laureate had been something of a game, a satire of television's tendency to give viewers the idea *they* determine the programming themselves (Jan Blokker thought he could hear the tongue in cheek clack as the *NRC* referred to the 'coupon in the Cultural Supplement' voters were supposed to fill in). Now however, all sorts of people started to take the democratic procedure terribly serious. On websites like www.epibreren.com, which organised an election for an interim Poet Laureate after Komrij's abdication won by Simon Vinkenoog, chatting and blogging web poets protested vigorously against the unreliability of the election, held exclusively through email this time, (people could vote as often on a poet of their liking as they wished) and against the fact that the website for voting was not 'protected'. They were completely right of course, but no-one at Poetry International had counted on people actually worrying about it.

That was how it was however. Someone must have even taken the trouble to hack the website of Poetry International. At a certain moment the personal information and voting behaviour of dozens of voters started buzzing through the Internet. Newspapers were fast to take up the news and once again the Poet Laureate generated some splendid free publicity for poetry: poets voting on themselves, fictitious addresses, mobilised family networks. The idea that the world of poetry is made up of a small clique, the idea the Poet Laureate was supposed to do away with, could hardly have been confirmed in a more painful manner.

The affair kept coming back right up to the television show of the second Evening of Poetry on January the 26th, 2005. Before Simon Vinkenoog announced with much

ado the new Poet Laureate, an audience of only 196,000 television viewers this time was treated once again to Joost Prinsen, short films and reports. Once again an attempt was made to steadily build up the suspense. Instead of Gerrit Kouwenaar predicting Toon Hermans would be the first Poet Laureate, it was this time Joost Zwagerman who questioned the merits of a democratic election, warning the Dutch might once again make a fool of themselves after having chosen Pim Fortuyn as the 'greatest Dutchman' only a few months before.

And the winner was... the entertainment poet and self-declared language purist Driek van Wissen. He had an overwhelming majority of the votes behind him. Driek van Wissen is a poet from another category than last election's favourites Komrij and Kopland. The difference was reflected in the reactions. With Komrij, the criticism only broke loose after the first Poet Laureate had shown how he acquitted himself of his tasks, but in Van Wissen's case the critics did not wait for the publication of his first poem in office. Right from the start the new Poet Laureate was under attack. Once again poetry seemed to sow discord. 'A mere rhymers!' said the one offended. 'But at least his work is understandable,' said the other.

History repeated itself and the organising Poetry International Foundation will once again have been hard put how to evaluate the whole affair. On the one hand it was a great publicity success. The correspondence columns in the newspapers were full of articles for or against Van Wissen's election in the days after January the 26th. All the attention could hardly be called very positive however. In the coverage of the dispute – which pushed the nominations for the most important Dutch poetry prize, the VSB-award, which had been announced on the same day, virtually from the arts' pages – the 'connoisseur' and the 'ordinary reader' were once again emphatically positioned in opposition to one another, and both in their stereotype guise: the connoisseur as elitist obscurantist and the general reader as semi-illiterate moron who considers rhyming witticisms poetry. Van Wissen now faces the impossible challenge to bridge the gap with a few poems...

The polarisation the election of a Poet Laureate was supposed to put an end to has only been reconfirmed time and again after the first television broadcast of the Evening of Dutch Poetry. That is a pity for everyone who had such good intentions with it, and in the first place for the Poetry International Foundation and the *NRC*. The organisers have themselves to blame however. To see what they did wrong we should take the perspective of the people they were trying to reach: new readers for poetry, people who relate to poetry as we poetry lovers relate to the likewise small worlds of say spoolknitters or the game of fives.

I have no idea how the game of fives works. I guess there is a ball involved, which is probably supposed to be bounced in some way or other. But where does the ball

come from? Where should it go? I really don't have a clue. And I have seldom asked myself to tell you the truth. As long the fives lovers keep communicating among themselves in the club magazine of their fives society I will remain ignorant. And that is fine by me. But suppose the people of the national fives federation deemed it important to involve me in their sport. Suppose they tried to draw my attention to fives in my newspaper tomorrow morning. Or suppose they succeeded in convincing a broadcast corporation to devote their broadcasting time to the promotion (or democratisation) of fives. The best way to keep me for once and for all from developing any interest in fives, would be to tell me that my ignorance is not my fault at all. No, fives is to blame! For too long it has remained an obscure hobby for the happy few, but we are going to change all that!

This would obviously be a hopeless strategy. In stead of pointing out the awkward deficiency in my field of interest (just come and watch a game of fives for once, it really is quite an exciting and fun sport!), the fives promoters try and lure me to their fields and clubhouses by unintentionally forcing a prejudice on me that is quite new to me: the idea that fives is dominated by a small clique who turn their backs to the rest of us.

With all their good intentions, the organisers of the Poet Laureate initiative have chosen the stupid fives strategy. In the newspapers and on television, the ignorant audience was confronted with defensive talks about a poetry that apparently considered itself to be hopelessly elitist and inaccessible. Consequently, the first Poet Laureate did what he could to reconfirm that idea. As a result the gap only grew between the 'experts', who became all the more isolated with their preference for not too simple poetry, and the 'ordinary readers', who were discouraged to develop any interest they might have had and withdrew into the territory they were already familiar with: unpretending rhymes.

When all was said and done, nothing was gained.

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Poet Laureate

The Dutch Poet Laureate was inspired by the English one. Queen Victoria was the first to give the title to Ben Johnson in her later years. After Ben Johnson, Davenant (1638), Dryden (1668), Tate (1692), A.N. Whitehead (1757), Wordsworth (1843), Tennyson (1850), Austin (1896), Bridges (1913), Masfield (1930), Day Lewis (1967), Betjeman (1972), Ted Hughes (1984) and Andrew Motion (1999) were appointed Poet Laureate by the Crown. The title goes back to the title of *poeta laureatus* of ancient Rome, a title given to poets who were crowned on the Capitol in honour of their achievements with a laurel wreath dedicated to Apollo. Interestingly the Dutch version is explicitly linked to the Dutch nationality and was elected on what was initially – before the Flemish joined in – a *national* day of poetry. What could be the origin of the double link to the Dutch nationality?

There has never been an official Poet Laureate in the Netherlands up to the year 2000. Obviously this does not imply that there have never been poets who had an informal position comparable to the formal one Komrij enjoyed between 2000 and his abdication at the beginning of 2004. Figures like ‘father’ Cats or Hiëronymus van Alphen liked to present themselves as poets with a clear public function. And in the nineteenth century the idea was quite common that a poet might provide a special occasion with an eloquent touch. It was quite common for a poet to write a special verse for a happy or sad occasion, which was to be recited by himself or by an actor. When a building was opened or a statue was unveiled, the recitation of an appropriate poem was often part of the ceremony.¹ Moreover there were poets like Jan Frederik Helmers, Cornelis Loots and Hendrik Tollens who championed a poetry of ‘Dutch tones’ as Loots put it in a period of French cultural dominance.² Their non-political patriotism was a topos in nineteenth-century poetry. This devotion was expected of poets. Great artists were not only admired for their genius and their virtues but also as symbols of the nation.³

The poet has not always contributed to the development of a national identity. When the Society for Dutch Literature held a competition in 1785, inciting writers to characterise the Dutch in poetry or prose, no-one sent in a contribution.⁴ Only when the European nation-states started to feel a growing urge in the following decades to

¹ Marita Mathijsen, *Het literaire leven in de negentiende eeuw*. Culemborg 1987, p.70.

² N.C.F. van Sas, ‘Vaderlandsliefde, nationalisme en vaderlands gevoel in Nederland, 1770-1813’. In: *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 102, 1989, p.471-495. M.n. p.489.

³ J. Th. Bank, *Het roemrijk vaderland. Cultureel nationalisme in de negentiende eeuw*. The Hague 1990, p.20.

⁴ Rob van Ginkel, *Op zoek naar eigenheid. Denkbeelden en discussies over cultuur en identiteit in Nederland*. The Hague 1999, p.11.

legitimise themselves and make themselves felt, poets began to devote themselves to increasing the national awareness.⁵ Some have even remarked that this preoccupation with constructing a Dutch national identity has curbed romanticism in Dutch literature to some extent.⁶

This does not automatically imply that the creation of a Poet Laureate is an anachronism in the twenty-first century. 'If one development can be predicted,' Abram de Swaan wrote in 1991, 'it is the internationalisation of the Netherlands.'⁷ For the poetry of today and of the coming decades, it is interesting to know who poets consider as their readers, now that the modern nation-state has lost much of its importance in a united Europe, while regions are growing in importance as a consequence of globalisation. Will poets shift their focus back to regional identities now that national identities are weakening amidst ever increasing internationalisation?

⁵ Remieg Aerts, 'De nationale cultuur'. In: *Comenius* 38, 1990, p.236-255. Compare Joep Leerssen, 'Literary Historicism: Romanticism, Philologists, and the Presence of the past' (in: *Modern Language Quarterly* 65-2, 2004) and Virgil Nemoianu, 'National Poets in the Romantic Age: Emergence and Importance' (in: Angela Esterhammer (ed.), *Romantic Poetry*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia 2002, p.249-256).

⁶ W. van den Bergh, 'Nationalisme, een rem op de romantiek'. In: *Spektator* 18-5, 1989, p.347-350.

⁷ Abram de Swaan, *Perron Nederland*. Amsterdam 1991, p.8.

Dignified camp

When the *NRC* first announced their plans for an election, Jan Blokker wrote in *De Volkskrant*: “‘The Dutch Poet Laureate is not appointed by the Crown or the Parliament,’ I read in the front page article in which the newspaper proudly announced its initiative, ‘but is chosen democratically. Anyone can cast a vote by filling in the coupon in the Cultural Supplement.’ What an awful idea! Choosing a Poet Laureate in the same way as filling in a bonus coupon in the supermarket. [...] I know the *NRC* is generally read by civilised people, so it could have been worse – but still, it remains the civilised voice of the people.’ Blokker distrusts the whole enterprise. ‘You can hear the tongue in cheek clack. [...] I think I know what they want: a twenty-first century Tollens, they want distinguished camp.’

Criticism beforehand

On the eve of Komrij's election, Serge van Duijnhoven wrote in *De Groene Amsterdammer* that he expected the initiative to boil down to an embarrassing 'folklorisation of poetry', which would be one of the many symptoms of 'a cultural arteriosclerosis that is plaguing the stinking rich Netherlands: the country is growing more bourgeois, tolerance is decreasing and views concerning the arts and society at large are steadily growing more conservative.'

And what did the 'ordinary reader' think?

An implicit claim behind Komrij's poems as Poet Laureate was that they might evoke mockery, compassion or irritation among connoisseurs but that they were at least in keeping with the way the general public thought poems ought to be written. Was this true? That is not easy to verify. The countless web logs and electronic discussion forums on poetry have very little to say on the content of Komrij's poems as Poet Laureate. The readers' letters that were occasioned by Komrij's poetic eruptions do not offer clear indications either to what extent these poems were appreciated by ordinary readers. Most letters were critical ('What is this,' an indignant reader wrote, 'our first Poet Laureate does not know how to write a sonnet. Unfortunately, Komrij's sonnet is a wobbly nursery rhyme.'). but then again, most readers' letters are. There were enthusiastic letters too moreover. 'The Poet Laureate has written a memorable sonnet with "A void after the disaster",' another reader exclaimed. 'The sublime use of the caesura deserves special mention. Poet Laureate, bravo!'

Television, commerce and literary criticism

Of course literary agents hope attention for books on television will boost sales. Interest groups like the Dutch association CPNB are very keen on television exposure for this reason. There is something mythical about the success achieved in this way however. The most recent Dutch literature history contains a special chapter on the so-called 'Van Dis effect'. It is titled 'The influence of the media on the literary sector' and tells the story of mediocre Dutch authors like Frans Pointl, P.C. Kuipers and Monika van Paemel who suddenly saw their books being reprinted again and again after having appeared in the show of Adriaan van Dis.⁸ And the poet Jean Pierre Rawie sold the outrageous number of 40,000 copies of his collection *Onmogelijk geluk* after having displayed his sense of humour one evening in 1992 on primetime in Sonja Barend's talk show. The 'Van Dis effect' should not be exaggerated however. True success are exceptions to the rule. Joos Kat, an editor at the publisher De Wereldbibliotheek, pointed out he had heard of many authors who made no impression at all in Van Dis' talkshow, while their books had already been reprinted in anticipation of the expected success.⁹

Television makers meddling with literature are often viewed with distrust by literary critics. Hans Goedkoop gives a charming explanation to this phenomenon in his recent collection of essays *Een verhaal dat het leven moet veranderen*. Goedkoop sketches a model of literary communication in which the authors and their books are put to the one side (the messengers and their message), and the readers to the other (the receivers). As of old there is an enormous no man's land between them according to Goedkoop. In the fifties this was still the exclusive domain of the literary critics. As literary experts, it was up to them to bridge the gap between book and reader. They were the middlemen who told the people what to read. In the sixties and seventies, journalists started to discover the no man's land. On radio and television they started mediating between authors and readers too. And since the authors were interviewed in their programmes, these were suddenly directly involved in the literary communication as well. The critics fell back 'in a pack of unlike quantities,' Goedkoop writes, 'who often lacked much of their expertise and,

⁸ Jaap Goedegebuure, '16 maart 1983. Eerste uitzending van het televisieprogramma 'Hier is Adriaan van Dis'. De invloed van de media op het literaire bedrijf'. In: M.A. Schenkeveld van der Dussen, a.o. (eds.), *Nederlandse literatuur, een geschiedenis*. Groningen 1993, p.846-852.

⁹ Charlotte Govaert & Francine Smink, 'De uitgeverij. Boeken uitgeven is het publiek verleiden'. In: *Vooys* 10-1, 1991, p.32.

perhaps even worse, the attitude that had been linked as of old to the appreciation of literature.¹⁰

The process described by Goedkoop might be summarised as the transition from literary criticism to literary marketing. Critics have always responded in a rather defensive manner to this commercialisation process. This response is quite adequate, at least if you believe in the necessity of a healthy literary criticism to assure some sort of literary survival of the fittest. When the distinction between literary criticism and 'attention for literature' starts to fade, literature is at risk of lapsing into mediocrity. You can see this phenomenon at work in domains that know (as yet) no serious criticism: among performing poets and on literary websites. With no critical discourse to create something of a hierarchy, quality poets are generally drowned in the clamour created by people who have more time at their disposal than actual talent.

Goedkoop has a point. It is doubtful however whether he is right in placing the turning point in the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century. Critics did not start complaining about their trade being undermined thirty years ago. They were already complaining in the nineteenth century. Commercialisation has been the most feared enemy of literature and literary criticism for ages. As soon as financial considerations made their entrance in literature (which happened in the Netherlands with the enormous success of the ladies Wolff and Deken¹¹), a fierce resistance was mobilised to oppose it. This reaction, Romanticism, has surrounded literature more and more with an aura of anti-commercial integrity. Thus a schism came into being between two sides that might prove impossible to reconcile.

¹⁰ Hans Goedkoop, 'Visie! Expliciteren! Nu!. Literatuurkritiek in de vaart van de massamedia'. In: *Een verhaal dat het leven moet veranderen*. Amsterdam 2004, p.170-185. Quote: p.175.

¹¹ See Marita Mathijssen, *Het literaire leven in de negentiende eeuw* (Culemborg 1987) and Lisa Kuitert, 'Schrijver van beroep. De professionalisering van de literaire auteur in de negentiende eeuw'. In: *Boekmancahier. Kwartaalschrift over kunst, onderzoek en beleid* 13-47, 2001, p. 23-33.

The results

The day after the second Evening of Dutch Poetry, the *NRC* published the exact results of the elections of the Poet Laureate. This was the top ten:

1. Driek van Wissen – 1736
2. Simon Vinkenoog – 435
3. Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer – 377
4. J.A. Deelder – 371
5. Joost Zwagerman – 333
6. Elly de Waard – 288
7. Leo Vroman – 212
8. Hagar Peeters – 210
9. Anna Enquist – 190
10. Marjoleine de Vos – 161

Source: *NRC*, January the 27th, 2005.

Sad misconception

In 2004 the Dutch television channel RTL4 introduced the books programme *Kaft* ('Cover'), presented by Sylvana – 'no need to pretend I know anything about it' – Simons. Sylvana kept emphasising she did not form part of the literary world, which she considered elitist. She was given ample opportunity for making herself heard. On the eve of her new books programme, the former presenter of *Sexquiz on the beach* was extensively interviewed. *Kaft* would not deal exclusively with 'the literary highlights for the Dutch cultural elite,' she confided to a journalist. After all, that was only 'a mysterious group of initiates who are shielding themselves from the crowd.'

This provocation of the literary world did not remain unanswered. In his column for the *Volkskrant Magazine*, Adriaan Jaeggi criticised the presenter for confirming the idea that authors would not like 'intruders': 'Honestly, Syl... May I say Syl? You really think we tell each other in our little literary world: 'What are those strangers doing on our premises, Oek?' 'Just let the dog have a bite at them, Adriaan.' Don't you think I would prefer to have a hundred thousand people buy my book in stead of a mere hundred?'

What sparked Jaeggi's only too justified indignation was Sylvana's lazy and populist suggestion that an incessant longing of the crowd after literature has been frustrated since time immemorial by a 'mysterious group of initiates.' Behind her quixotic battle against the literary elite lurks the assumption that the crowd cannot wait to dive into literature, if only the elite would quit their malignant attempts at keeping it all for themselves. This is a preposterous suggestion obviously. No-one is waiting for literature behind the television set, as has consequently been confirmed. Sylvana's sympathetic pioneering work for the democratisation of literature has come to nothing. With no sign of even the least interest, her programme vanished from the screen within weeks.

Sylvana (and other television makers who try to do 'something with literature') choose a defensive strategy. The assumption is that the general public is *a priori* disinclined to engage in literature ('literature? but that is for the elite, isn't it?'). This disinclination is a myth however. Only when Sylvana starts complaining in countless interviews about 'a mysterious group of initiates,' do the faithful viewers of *Sexquiz on the beach* who have never seen a book from close by begin to believe: 'if Syl says so, I guess it's probably true.' No wonder *Kaft* did not succeed in amusing them. 'Lets hope her next programme is simply entertaining again,' they probably will have thought.