

As wayward as only the really good poets are

The poetry of Eva Gerlach

AFTER SUBMITTING to several reviews from 1977, Gerlach published her first collection entitled *Verder geen leed* (No Further Distress) in 1979. It immediately impressed by the precise and considered organization of the individual poems and of the whole collection, yet with a strong, dark, emotional current underlying this formal control. Two years after its publication *Verder geen leed* was awarded the Lucy B. en C.W. van der Hoogt Prize, an important prize aiming to stimulate young writers and poets. In many subsequent collections over the years, Eva Gerlach developed into a poet of classical stature. The narrative tone of her early poems, born perhaps from the spirit of the age, gradually gave way to an astute, incisive plasticism, by which she seems to be trying to get a hold on life's events.

Gerlach's poems, in their often dark way, are concerned with the themes that have concerned poets in all ages: transience, loss, the human condition. Avoiding any tendency towards dramatic display or literary effect, she writes about the mysterious, invisible forces that govern our lives, about the thought 'that in presence lives a truth/ greater than just that/ of the address.'

Eva Gerlach's poetry has more and more freed itself from the prevailing trends in post-war Dutch poetry. Irony, therapeutic impact or linguistic autonomy, the three mainstays of the poetry of her generation, never play a significant part in her work. She is first of all a modest, unsentimental, yet penetrating portrayer of human emotions and motives. Over most recent years it has been suggested that a stronger experimental tendency seems to surface in Gerlach's poems and more surrealistic elements are amplified. This might also be regarded a further fine-tuning of a strong and distinct poet's tone of voice, which either whispering, stammering or speaking quite clearly always reminds us: 'Whatever's whole we fail to see' and 'all that is split up sticks in us for good'.

In 2000 Gerlach received Holland's chief literary award, the P.C. Hooft Prize, for her entire poetic works. Since then she has already added several collections to her corpus, including her second book of poems for children *Oog in oog in oog in oog* (Eye to Eye to Eye to Eye, 2001) and her most recent title *Situaties* (Situations, 2006).



photo Roeland Fossen

Eva Gerlach (b. 1948) writes both poetry for adults and poetry for children. She published her first collection for adults, *Verder geen leed* (No Further Distress), in 1979. Her first volume of children's poetry, *Hee meneer Eland* (Hey Mr. Moose), was published in 1989 and promptly awarded the 'Zilveren Griffel', an important children's literature prize. Her entire oeuvre was awarded the highly prestigious P.C. Hooft-prijs in 2000. Her most recent collection, *Situaties* (Situations), appeared in 2006.

Perhaps that's what I love most: one can only classify Gerlach as Gerlach. This poetry is way too wayward to be classified any further. As wayward as only the really good poets are.

JOS JOOSTEN in *DE STANDAARD*

That's what good poetry does: touch upon something essential in reality, something you'd immediately sense or recognize, though you never saw it like that before.

PETER DE BOER in *TROUW*

Everything starts moving, becomes ambiguous, gets a new meaning.

THE JURY OF THE P.C. HOOFT PRIZE 2000

CONTEMPORARY DUTCH POETS

This brochure is part of the *Contemporary Dutch Poets*-series, featuring a choice of today's most interesting poets from the Netherlands. The series is published by the Foundation of Production and Translation of Dutch Literature. If you would like to receive more information or other brochures from this series, please contact Thomas Möhlmann (t.moehlmann@nlpvf.nl).

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GERLACH ABROAD

A collection of Gerlach's poems in translation appeared at Quetzal Editores in Portugal and her poems have been translated and published in anthologies and magazines in Bulgaria, China, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iran, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the UK.



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Sample Translation

Poems

by Eva Gerlach

(Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers)

Translated by John Irons

Contents

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Vocabulair

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KB: Dutch original from *Een kopstaand beeld*, De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam 1983

BZ: Dutch original from *In een bocht van de zee*, De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam 1990

WZ: Dutch original from *Wat zoekraakt*, De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam 1994

NS: Dutch original from *Niets bestendiger*, De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam 1998

Dlh: Dutch original from *Daar ligt het*, AP / Poetry International, Amsterdam 2003

BM: Dutch original from *Een bed van mensenvlees*, De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam 2003

S: Dutch original from *Situaties*, De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam 2006

*) : Previously published in translation in *Poetry Review*, 'Contemporary Dutch Poets: A Poetry Review Supplement', London, October 2007

Followed by a short interview with Eva Gerlach

For additional information on Eva Gerlach and other Dutch poets, please also visit:

- The poetry pages at the NLPVF website:

<http://www.nlpvf.nl/p/>

- The Dutch domain of Poetry International Web:

<http://netherlands.poetryinternationalweb.org>

VOCABULAIR

Dit is je oog. Dit is de zon. Dit koude
dat aan je trekt, is tocht door het open raam.
Dit is water, waarin je altijd past.

Dat is de ketel, die op het vuur zingt
boven de vier draaiknoppen van het gas.
Hier zie je het broodmes in zijn plank staan.

Al deze dingen moet je goed onthouden.
Vandaag of morgen krijgen ze hun zin.

VOCABULARY

This is your eye. This is the sun. This tugging
cold, draught from a window left ajar.

This is water that fits you like a glove

That is the kettle singing on the stove
above the four knobs that control the gas.

Here you've the breadknife in its board's long groove.

All of these things you need to keep a grasp of.

Today, or soon, their say will make their sense.

DRY-SHOD

I rushed through water, slipped and fell.
Legs to yourself someone said, deep
asleep beside me, sleep, don't shove. Slept
and rushed. No water anywhere.
Slipped, fell. He beside me
woke up, helped me to my feet,
brushed down my clothes. Better he said
to just run off. Not rush like that.

THE DOORPOSTS AND THE COVERED WINDOWS

For that I once have loved you, that's for sure.
The rest not – whether you existed
and if, what colour eyes then, green at times,
at others grey, a swarm of swallows once
shot out of them. What kind. Those swift ones
that can't walk right, mating takes place in the air.
What happened. You got
ill or something, lost from sight, there was lots to do,
I had another child I think, forgot you
until I heard you tonight, impossible hour,
come it's time. Leave everything, come outside,
I'm waiting for you by the gate.
But when I stood there, the bolt
was loose, it clanged in the wind
against the post and I shot it home and went back,
thinking of you, that godknows you really had
stood there somehow, had undone
the gate, that I have loved you once and that
the wood hung on the hinges out of true.

WHICH ALL THINGS

“Sol qui illustras omnia solus”

(Bruno, Cantus Circaeus)

What was it you said, something about piking
early on winter mornings when the dark
sat round you and your father each apart
on the moped, each would hack
a hole in the ice and you'd cast
your what sort of rod, some hook or other,
undersized bait from the bucket: never caught one
single pike. And wasn't there a lamp,
didn't we have it later, blotchy metal,
standing model, it could also hang.

To keep everything, each single thing,
in mind, time and place, substance
quantity and quality. Be a
god that moves it.

Sometimes you saw just
one unstirring in the depths, with that
pointed mouth they have, patches of grey.

DOPPELGÄNGER

A man who cycled so hard we hardly saw him
on drawing level hoarsely cried watch out
but well before we could do anything he'd passed by
and well before we could look for him he'd all but gone.

He must have been a pro considering the way he disappeared
beneath the viaduct, transparent almost, a small cloud of
dust, not that it swirled up from the asphalt but that he
thinned and thinned away from catching up with himself.

THE STORM AND TEMPEST

Woke up at a gale digging
into the roof. Charging, bashing its unseeing
face, clawing nails under
chinks, us beneath: heady
with sleep, too leaden to be swept off, be
whisked away together. Heard a rising
shriek as if the house might be sucked bone-dry,
windows thrown open, letters
blown chirping into the night. All the wrenchable slipped
from our lives, one two all gone! – look at us
bare as the ground. Twixt least and nothing the roof was still
briefly a skin. It began

CRUMBS

Whatever's whole we fail to see, it is
too big for us, non-fitting, it won't go
inside our head

but what is chopped up, frittered, pounded fine,
crumbs, puréed, blown to dust, disintegrating –

all that is split up sticks in us for good.

ASPHALT

Just now the barge for Haarlem
passed through the street. Along the pavement
towed the scrawny horses with the lad and in
the middle of the road my grandpa's grand
father cleft the waters. Don't leave me
behind here I cried through the window
from where I saw them pass, I can't just stay
here on my own, but borne along they took
the turn left to the park. The asphalt
closed up, from depths that I'd clearly seen
streaming, reflecting and
rushing, no fish leapt. Let's hope
I thought that with still liquid tide they'll
get to where they would be bound tonight.

Everything lay as it always lay.
You arrived, quite late, parked
carelessly as usual, took your case
from the car and standing there on
solid asphalt looked straight up at me.

SO

A dog with iron eyes had clamped my hand
in his mouth. I did not want this
to happen but feared I would tear
if I offered resistance. Dog, listen
I said, let me go and I'll give you
whatever you want. But he just
wanted me to stay put, use my spare hand to
stroke him. So. For days and nights I searched
his eyes to find the stronger of us two.

SOLVE ET COAGULA

When you had that nose-bleed remember
the one that just wouldn't stop,
you sat head down over the basin
“will I bleed empty now?” and I looked at you there,

it was as if I never more would
dare touch you again, as if you'd dis-
solve then and there into reality like
gold in aqua regia had I but stroked
you the slightest;

of course you hadn't got to die for
ages, I knew that full well, but he who sings to
the hares and the bears the songs where
he tells how he shot them had now just
started on yours, I could hear it
inside my head *pling*,
pling, the opening
tentative notes.

MAN ALIVE

He's there then outside, a fly lands on his tongue and
he spits it out, sees if it's living, allows it
to dry in his hand, with his stick touches all of the
mulberry tree's yellow leaves, each one in turn,
they fall at his feet. And the crow
does not leave him.

You want him, he's never again that man out there,

you've only just seen him and yet: at no time before
so perfectly framed in the light, man a-
live, all you know of him touches now
all that you see of him, there in the crook
of the question-mark mulberry tree
standing briefly translucent,

how you see him, his whole face
uplifted, the triangle under his chin, with the throat
most vulnerable, the skin there
now taut – never yours in this way, except when
inside you perhaps, forgotten – you want him, rap
on the window, he sees you, the fly he
throws up from his hand and upward it flies.

THE WAY OF TRUTH

Your dog, you write, likes watching you under the shower.
Your dog goes with you to the coast and you accept the fish
that he catches and you throw it back. The fish is
no longer the one lifted out of the sea and will
never be the same again, and neither am I, having
known you, still any good to myself. “I’m moving
towards an empty space coming out of
what wasn’t there and all my scales
cannot protect me.” Your dog has no knowledge of
this sort of confusion. Parmenides (everything is
1 and indivisible, everything has always existed
and cannot be otherwise) appeals to your dog.

You send a photo of your dog, with its front paws on the
window sill he takes a look inside, his member stiff
as if standing for what he sees, which is
of course the case, thus does he ride
on what he thinks and is, has what I lack.

KST

It cannot have a form and does
not have one. It

intends always to
be like that but does not know

how. Nobody
sees it just as it is. But

sometimes in crowded rooms it seems
to stop and recognise you, come

towards you. *Give*. Say nothing,
motion in the opposite direction

(like shooin a strange cat)
and it is gone.

HELLEBOSCH, 5

Someone sings in the house behind doors that are five,
walls that are ten centimetres, bawling,
bellowing, someone scrubs herself bare, lets
air loose everywhere. In pipes and against

tiles, window-panes and thing contrary to
floor what you call? then an echo,
a whistling proceeds, a resonance audible
even in hearths and in logs, sweeping via

chimney flue over beeches, puff balls, sawdust
of guile bug, woe beetle, tumbling on cabbages and
ricocheting against village eardrums. Other than

this song soon nothing will exist. Drum, air,
on the skin round death in the fruit, fair
bursting out of its peel, so. Hours so. Days.

NOW

the poem happens now
in the body of it this
happens. it breathes and it
runs and if you

Speak to it it speaks. there is

everything the voice says (in the open window
naked the soft and smooth one's reading proust far off
a car overturns the poem slits a throat) and

everything is with itself here in the glass of water
the tidal wave rolls a draught comes from a chink there is
the whirlwind there is sand on which you walk well
sand that falls on you. there is always the oven
where the wood burns up nicely and there is dough
risen that becomes bread in the
empty oven with the fragrance of a
child's neck. there is the bread and i cut it
in the poem that eats it.

heartbeat
flagellum and dream

everything the voice says there is always the drop
and there is the face full of blood there is turbulence and
final breath there is on the floor the destroyed one
who ruins himself with clamour and there is the destroyer
in silk with a cup of tea in the morning and from
its spot on his robe the heron flies shits on the bed
of language goes fishing in spittle.

someone drives through the night and the word pushes his car
over the edge and his head snaps over the wheel

and the poem lays its floor on
that of reality and begins. it is everything
there is. and its form opens out
and it lets go and happens.

An interview with Eva Gerlach

“I allow myself to be carried away in the whirlpool of the poem”

by Peter Henk Steenhuis
(August 21, 2000, Trouw)

translated by George Hall

This is a short conversation with Eva Gerlach, held after she had been awarded the P.C. Hooft Prize 2000. It is one of a series of discussions with poets who have built up an oeuvre that they can review with pride, surprise, and self-criticism. This conversation covers her grasp of reality, and the differences between her older and her newer poems.

The book entitled *De invulbare ruimte* (Space to be Filled In), which appeared this year to mark the occasion of the presentation of the P.C. Hooft Prize 2000 to Eva Gerlach, also contains a special kind of interview: the poet responds to written questions by e-mail. This strictly managed interview is typical of Gerlach, who is no great lover of publicity. She regards herself as being not the best expounder of her poetry, and if anything at all has to be said about her work, this ought to take place in an accurate and measured fashion.

The conversation deals largely with the impossibility of obtaining a grasp of reality:

‘The point is that there is a certain reality outside or beyond you (you can’t deny that, otherwise you immediately run into problems) as well as another one in your head. You cannot perceive more than your own perception permits, so a great deal escapes me.’

Then Gerlach deliberates on how she, with her limited capacities, can gain access to the present, which seems to shrink from her on all sides.

‘There you go, transported in the flow of time, no firm footing, impotently flailing your arms in an attempt to get a hold of something while everything whizzes past, or remains so far behind you that you have no grasp of it at all.’

‘The poems I have now chosen,’ she says, ‘also cover reality, the instability of reality. But there is a great difference in the way they describe this instability. I have the idea that I used to be abreast of what intrigues me, the entire commotion around one and in one’s head. I believed I could display something like the shadow of that. Not quite on the wall of Plato’s cave, but rather the canvas of the *dalang* (puppeteer), with all his clattering and calling. Nowadays, my poems lean towards instability, although this sounds more metaphysical than I actually

intend. In other words, I am less and less concerned about whether or not a poem is a responsibly finalized whole.’

‘However, it is not the case that I always wanted to present a nicely balanced picture. Even as a child there was something interesting about instability, something that I began to refer to as the Phenomenon (I didn’t dare to call it “Principle”) of Apparent Equilibrium. It was closely linked to the Apparent Overview, but that’s another story. Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold, but you don’t always notice it. And all those categories by means of which your consciousness keeps itself in check, such as time, place, identity, etc. are just grips on the wall of the pool, for instance. The way in which I used to tell stories about this feeling, all of which deal with the notion of slipping away along the bottom of the pool, for example, might evoke more of a sense of equilibrium than I actually wanted to give. Besides that, the core of these poems always comes across rather tragically, or tragi-comically at best – which I may not really mean and which, both then and now, is contradictory to my intention to abstain from giving an opinion and to allow the image to speak for itself. I try not to describe feelings, to be careful with adjectives, to be careful with everything that communicates a judgement. And yet I still produce those tendentious narratives. I might be more successful nowadays in letting the poem find its own balance – maybe that way you investigate more, the poem becomes more of a sling than a telescope.’

‘In those days I tried to express the Phenomenon of Apparent Equilibrium in a form that offered a suggestion of stability or coherence, while there was actually friction, a second rhythm under the first, a rhythm that strayed from the metre, lines crazily truncated in the wrong metric places, saved by rhyme and thus acquiring apparent significance. I hoped to evoke an impression of naturalness within a certain distortion; and so on and so forth. Occasionally a kind of prism automatically arose from all those contradictions, giving me the opportunity to do what I really wanted, although I was not always sure that I truly wanted that: drawing near, having the feeling that I was penetrating something, reaching a core, something like truth or essence. In short, by presenting the outside world, I could approach that essence. At least, in language. Of course, the ongoing risk is that the procedure will turn against itself, give the idea of a put-up job. If everything went properly, the poems had something that you could call ‘puzzled’, in all its connotations. But it often went wrong too.’

‘I always tried to explain directly what it was all about. I normally find the use of similes or comparisons pretty laborious, although not always. After all, a poem simply works as a metaphor, no one can avoid that, it has compressed significance on all sorts of levels. It is not that I’m not sensitive to all those ‘as-if’

comparisons that have been written down in the course of centuries, but in that respect my original poetry has only hardened with the passage of time. I recently read a poem by the Scottish author Norman MacCaig, which ended with the statement ‘I am less and less concerned with metaphors, more with drizzle’. That idea.’

‘I hardly force my poems into the straitjacket of the intelligible narrative any more, over instability for instance. Now I attempt to access that instability via the whole poem.’

Did you suddenly make a conscious decision to approach things differently? Or did the change happen gradually?

‘When I had children, I lost the idea of fixed form. Life became increasingly chaotic, and you immediately see the consequences of that in your work. I was only too pleased to surrender to my children’s associative way of thinking. My style of thinking was perforated by theirs, and thus became more porous. Perhaps it learned to breathe a bit more. As a result, I began to make use of other possibilities. I tolerate more coincidences and incidental circumstances than I used to, that is one aspect of it. Whereas I used to stand on the edge looking at the commotion on the surface of the pond, I now allow myself to be carried away in the whirlpool of the poem, without precisely knowing what is going on.’

The integral interview was published in Trouw. Editorial adjustments by Thomas Möhlmann.