

Goya as Dog

SAMPLE

Also by Stefan Hertmans in English

Intercities

War and Turpentine

The Convert

The Ascent

SAMPLER

Stefan Hertmans

Goya as Dog
Selected Poems

translated from Flemish by
Donald Gardner

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Lightning Source France
1 Av. Johannes Gutenberg, 78310 Maurepas, France
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SAMPLER

WITH INVISIBLE INK

As a poet who writes in the Dutch language in Belgium – in other words, as a Flemish poet – I am very much aware of the hybrid character of my culture. Being Flemish means belonging to the Germanic linguistic world, while living in a nation in which French is the second language. I was taught French from my primary school onwards; Flemish school children of my generation, who attended Dutch-language schools, studied Lamartine, Baudelaire or Gide in French for their leaving certificates. This means that they are perhaps the only linguistic group in the Germanic world to have a Latin heart. Their identity is fundamentally mixed-race; their use of Dutch is therefore also completely different from that of poets from The Netherlands, who feel more affinity with Anglo-Saxon traditions. Although the Flemish population is the demographic majority in Belgium and although, together with Dutch nationals, they form a linguistic area of some twenty-five million Dutch-speakers, their language is a minority language in the capital Brussels; this national ambiguity means that Flemish people are exceptionally aware of the ‘otherness’ of their own culture and identity. In our present-day polyglot world, I see this as a cultural advantage, and for a poet it is a source of open-mindedness. In the context of Europe, belonging to a minority linguistic group means that one has to be polyglot – from earliest times, the world has been polyglot for those who speak minority languages, because they are obliged to cross a linguistic bridge. As a young poet, I have incorporated in my bloodstream both the English Romantic poets in English, the poetry of Paul Valéry and Stéphane Mallarmé in French and the great German poets, Trakl, Benn and Rilke, in the original; I have also explored the Spanish of writers such as Jorge Luis Borges or the Italian of Dante, even if it was somewhat faultily and with a dictionary at my elbow. It was not only their ideas that moved me, but also their specific linguistic music and physical feeling. In this way all these strange sounds, these quite different discourses, their culturally differently determined sense of rhythm and sentence structure left their mark on my own distinctly personal poetry – not to mention the great Dutch and Flemish poets whom I grew up with, or the memories of

my years at secondary school when we bent over Latin or Greek texts. I suppose that this eclectic background has above all given me a feeling for the fluidity of poetic language – that has after all also remained my mother tongue, my most intimate language. Cultural identity is nothing other than the result of the position we occupy in the system of languages; whenever we free ourselves from it, our notion of what it means to be an individual in a rapidly changing world is also modified. What Gilles Deleuze called a ‘littérature mineure’ is therefore also a literature of receptivity.

My first collection of poetry, which I worked on for five years, consisted of some fifty extremely reduced linguistic cores, inspired by the magic of Georg Trakl and the ascetic incantations of Paul Celan. Earlier, as a student at the University of Ghent, I had been under the spell of the musicality of poets such as W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot, while remaining aware that I did not possess the power to equal their impressive *largo*. I therefore began my career as a poet under the influence of the concision of German Expressionism in order to avoid any false pathos. I was soon reading the *Neue Gedichte* of Rilke, and his *Sonnets to Orpheus*, and that expanded my notions of the possibilities of contemporary poetry: I realized that inspirational poems can also be a form of philosophical discourse. Beauty in poetry is the result of thinking in images. It was only gradually, after three collections, that I dared to write in a more amplified fashion and to attempt different tonalities – that of irony, free indirect speech, the play with influences and references, with sensuality and suggestion, with invisible quotes. I read as eclectically as possible – Petrarch and Seamus Heaney – and I felt liberated from all systems of poetics. It wasn't the case that I surrendered to easy forms of *parlando*; for me, poetry remains a carefully constructed language that a poet can constantly polish, while the result should still seduce the reader with an impression of spontaneity and ease. But with each new collection, I learned that I had to win my own form of freedom over again.

In the literary world in which I live and work, the position of the poet is not distinct from that of the novelist, the essayist or the dramatist, or even that of the politically-committed author who states his views in the media. In other words, as a poet I don't identify with a specific ‘type’, and definitely not with a ‘poetic type’ – that caricature of the artistic individual. Nothing is more unlike me than “to feel myself to be a poet” when I am writing poems; that would only undermine

my sensitivity to nuances in language. Writing poems is critical thought with the additional element of a finely tuned intuition; this delicate balancing act must be maintained by a constant vigilance against all facile rhetoric.

Heidegger maintained that poetic utterance is the closest thing to what it is to be human – we are an animal that knows language and that therefore has an understanding of absence and of its own finiteness, of what death and desire have to do with each other. Poetry is transgression; it means coming up against the limits that language permits, attempting to look beyond these boundaries and realizing that infinity does not exist beyond, but rather within language. According to the famous dictum of Kant, art is ‘purposefulness without purpose’; its methodology is located precisely in the absence of a well-defined method, because one has to be on one’s guard against tradition, euphony and all that is self-evident; this is where the linguistic-critical dimension of poetry is to be found, as well as the only possibility of integrity. The poet has to reinvent his own language with each new poem. How does the language speak in and through us, when we try to speak in a strictly personal fashion? Every poem in fact poses the question of who is speaking in and through us when we believe that we are being ourselves.

‘It is not a matter of happiness, nor of the ideal – it is about the work that succeeded’. In this way the great German poet Friedrich Hölderlin once described what it was to write poems. In poetry, it is never a matter of the poetic effect; what matters is the specific form of language that is deployed, with the possibility of remaining silent being incorporated in the movement of speaking. It is not affirmation that makes modern poetry; it is the uncertainty of meaning contained in it, that reaches further than what is actually there. Perhaps the essence of every good poem is written between the lines, with invisible ink. The French word is ‘encre sympathique’ – the *sym-pathein* or mutual experiencing lies in this concord that is concealed in the poem.

Nor can the language of the poem be unquestioningly ‘consumed’ by the reader; it must remind us of the fact that it is not we who speak the language but the language that speaks us. Good poetry doesn’t allow itself to be dominated by facile beauty; on the contrary, its beauty originates in its distrust of everything that is too obvious. Poetry’s point of departure is a fundamental deficiency in speech. It is this lack that enables it to attain insight; this is its invitation to the reader to interpret

language in a way that is aesthetic and not just utilitarian. Ambiguity, metaphor and allegory are part of its potential, not its dogma; enjambment, rhyme and trope exist not to charm the reader, but to evoke this form of alienation that captures our attention. Poetry that shows off with its armoury of styles misses the opportunity to exploit this linguistic-critical layer, resulting in an uneven beauty. To quote Paul Celan's memorable statement, 'La poésie ne s'impose plus, elle s'expose'. Poetic language exposes the wound in our communication: the continuous inadequacy that results from our everyday unthought-out use of language. That ill-considered speech forms an enormous flutter in the heart of the language. The poem endeavours to eliminate this noise by not deploying language in the first place as communication, but as a means of extracting beauty from this lack. Poetry is the surplus of our lack of total meaning.

But because writing poetry also belongs to the most intimate use of language, it also contains the possibility of being a universal experience of reading. This paradox is its secret weapon. Writing or reading contemporary poetry is to cultivate a sensitivity to the possibilities, the limits and the blind spots in our language usage. It is in those obscure openings in the tissue of meaning that the potential of poetry is displayed at its most forceful. Poems have to be concise, striking and personal, without lapsing into the literal in any way. For this reason, even the personal becomes political in poetry, because every individual utterance is an act of resistance to the pressure of the collective cliché. This is why the real meaning of what we want to say through poetry lies in what is implicit. That is also the point where what is lyrical also contains a philosophical and critical value – where it refuses to follow the templates of rhetoric and aims to attain a critical, lucid and polysemic expression of its concerns. That is something that carries a great deal of weight in an age that advocates 'explicit lyrics' – because the latter leave nothing to the imagination. The power of poetry is concealed in 'implicit lyrics', in the folds of the language.

Every poet must learn to write his own *Kunst der Fuge*, against the background noise of the present juncture. To achieve intimacy, one should not close oneself off from the world, but rather be open to the noise that streams through the open window; this noise penetrates one's grammar, and syntax, in the construction of the poem. One must learn to distrust the melodious cliché and any facile rhymes, while at the

same time listening to the polyphony of our own times. One should not shun any disruptions of style – these brusque transitions from the exalted to the banal, but at the same time one must cautiously watch out for the limits between effect and allegory. One should use rhyme as it were against itself, and learn to breathe in another rhythm through unexpected enjambments; there is an ancient affinity between breathing and writing poetry.

I dislike nothing more than the old adage, 'le style c'est l'homme'. I am not interested in locking myself up in a definition of stylistic authenticity – the present world is too polymorphous, too complex and too culturally diversified and one's subjectivity is too unstable. And yet I aim in every line to be recognizable; I aim to stand behind every line as something that belongs to me entirely, while at the same time it transcends my own identity. To be oneself in the most intense fashion, without laying claim to the language – perhaps this is the secret of what personal style means in poetry. To be a medium for oneself, while struggling with every detail – and to be grateful for what the language gives one in return when one succeeds in bringing the unexpected together in this extremely sensitive constellation. Every successful poem is a mini-novel; it offers a whole world as a cluster of carefully combined associations; in this way, it comprises a small allegory, a monad with a view on the world outside.

'I have fallen into the trap with my very first sentence', says Kaspar, the melancholy hero of Peter Handke's memorable play – Kaspar Hauser, the unworldly young man who has to learn to speak after having spent sixteen years in a stable living like an animal. It cost Kaspar his life, just when he had mastered the gift of speech (he was murdered under mysterious circumstances). For us, as poets, it must be constantly revivifying: inventing your own language over again is a way of continually 'entering the world'. Deliberately falling into the snares of your own language and attempting time and again to wrench it open – this is what drives poetry forward. Furthermore, the interesting thing is not the assertive personality of the poet, but the way that he or she endeavours with each poem to expand the boundaries towards the unknown, towards the obscure lack one experiences in one's own speech. The language continues to be the 'great Other', the Thing that offers us not so much established meanings, as eternal shifts in sense, its dimension of open possibilities. This means that the debate about plain

or obscure poetry is in fact not relevant: in the depth of every allegory this specific clarity is also present – that of the analogy, by which the world is directly addressed, but not explained. In poetry, thought becomes erotic: it lends sound to the intimacy of a thinking body, that hungers for contact with the strange. It is therefore concrete, above all when it speaks of the lure of riddles and all that is invisible.

* ‘Schon mit meinem ersten Satz bin ich in die Falle gegangen.’

Stefan Hertmans,
Paris, November 2021

SAMPLER

Translator's Preface

In recent years Stefan Hertmans has acquired an international reputation for his fiction. *War and Turpentine*, a memoir of his grandfather's experiences in the First World War, was one of the *New York Times's* ten best books of 2016, while *The Ascent* (*De Opgang*) sheds an abrasive, troublesome light, on the historical tradition in Flanders of collaboration with Fascism. Before he began to write fiction and autofiction, however, he already had a very high profile as a poet. Hertman's output has been prolific, and it was as a poet that I first made his acquaintance in 2013, when I was asked to translate two of his poems for an annual cultural miscellany, the *Lowlands Yearbook*. I was struck by the airy lightness of his work: "A child summons you to these hours, / imagine trickling water, / centuries without people. / Be still as ancient stones." This was a poetry that was both layered and transparent. I saw it as a challenge for a translator and deserving of an international readership.

This book is the result of a number of translation commissions I received over a period of more than ten years. It includes a sequence recalling scenes in Flanders in the First World War for the *Poetry Review* and a set of poems, *Take and Read*, commissioned for the Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam. This was work that I felt was important and original, and that always had something to say. Fairly recently, I realized I had enough for a book.

At Hertmans' suggestion, *Gone with Dog* is thematically, rather than chronologically organized. I have chosen poems from all his collections: *Music for the Crossing* (*Muziek voor de overtocht*), his *Collected Poems (1975–2005)*, *The Lure of Idle Days* (*De val van vrije dagen*) (2011) and *Under a Bronze Sky* (*Onder een koperen hemel*) (2018).

With its insistent musicality, Hertmans' poetry lodges itself in the reader's memory. It also engages in a political and social discussion, which means that, while remaining highly concentrated work, it is anything but hermetic. Its relevance to current world issues, in combination with an almost traditional lyricism, makes him a unique figure in the Flemish scene. Perhaps the notion of 'metamorphosis' is a key to his work: each of his poems seems like a living creature, undergoing a transformation from start to finish. It is this quality that makes his poetry hard to grasp and consequently a particular yet inspiring challenge for me as his translator. It has been a pleasure to work with Stefan Hertmans. His fluency in English,

as well as his knowledge of English literature has meant that I could avoid any pitfalls and, so I hope, arrive at versions that accurately reflect their Flemish originals.

Donald Gardner

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Goya as Dog

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TAKE AND READ

You can study history,
riddles, rumours and gossip,
pages of crazy electronics,
but suddenly you're facing
a beggar in the rain and no longer
know what you are doing in the world.

A ghost grows warm beside you
and taps you on the shoulder.
Golden shower, Danaë in foam,
the glitter of life.

You're being hugged; the sun breaks through.
Someone deciphered a brand new
cuneiform, kids on their Vespas go
in hot pursuit of Vestal girls.

Everything costs, and everything's null.
Tolle, lege, St Augustine,
take this poem and read.

Don't mention us
in your unbearable prayers:
it wasn't for us
your God once suffered.

GOYA AS DOG

It felt like a morning for proclaiming the Last Days;
Saturn, eating children in the ecstasy of his own
flesh, who had grasped his times, even if that made no difference.

But then – the painter has just got out of bed and in the streets
the fatty smell of fried calamari is wafting upwards –
he shudders at what he knows and sees a dog's head emerge
out of Bordeaux's oceanic blueness,
floating in oyster juices.

He is alone; a murmur humming on the faint signals
of memory. A tubby old man
is strumming his guitar
in a darkened shop in a back street,
a cast-off lover with a young man's soul.
Fingers like sausages, gleaming and gnawed at
and the heave of his chest is wheezy
while the angel kneels by the foot-rest
and bites his slender fingers –
a hand that caresses virgins
but does not know what she is playing.
Los Madrileños, the shining wheat and the whispering chaff.

The painter barks at the emergence of his own Self –
something his hand has achieved,
hidden from the previous naïve panorama.

It's only paint – dried earth,
grit and the pulverizing rhythm
of the pestle, the patina
of what I see when I'm seeing him –
but, like spittle-moistened white of egg
in the miasma of the canvas,
it releases the things that I remember:

the old angel in the shop, and I who for my
love – I didn't know it then – clasp my hands
in a long-forgotten pose while among the nameless people
in the winding queues on the Prado steps,
somebody is singing.

We drown in the present and breath falls short.

(Anyone who gets as far as the darkness of the Final Gallery,
and sees what is blatantly there
in the unreal twisted mugs –
can maybe find himself in this mirror:
speculations, last days, the belling of hellhounds in
the hoarse barking of a stray decoy dog, swimming
against the current, coloured by pus, delirious syndrome.
The boy in the queue has reached the great door singing,
feverishly rummaging in the deep pockets of
his raincoat for his crumpled artist's pass).

I used to live in a low house in the plains, clouds sunk
far under the golden section, and with my fingertips
I could touch the smoke-blackened ceiling –
a young lad exhausted with self-pity,
the kind who, sinking in a glaze, still succeeds
in irritating the viewer with his painfully precious princely soul
in the sublime emptiness of portraits.
I had a dog that liked to swim in polder ditches
swollen with flood water; a beast
that slept in wintertime on the horizon. And I walked out
with him, lost him in the wide
landscape devastated by sky.

But now that the boy has descended singing
into the black room, hideous Cerberus thrusts
his muzzle upwards and everything yelps against him.
His little head, with the drooping ears,
sticks up just above the rising water line –

or is it quicksand that chafes him so.
His paws flounder invisibly, cutting
deep tracks in the thick coat of paint;
the eyes turned upwards focused on something,
in the ochre hues of a last judgement.

This is Goya, drowning like a dog – time is against him
and this portrait howls, whines and barks and swims
as dogs swim with their far too short paws.

(The swimming teacher, long ago,
snapping at him that he'll fail the exam
because 'You swim like a dog, my boy,
you won't be able to cope with life,' while the chlorine
stings his eyes) –

Goya peers at a scene in which the shapes
lie deeply sunk. He licks the sombre gold
of his paint brush.

The entrance to these black Elysian Fields, it's announced,
is free on Sundays, the *Hoi Polloi* can pour in.
But only someone acquainted with this old gift for drowning,
can penetrate the whirlpools of the canvas
in which the dog drowns over and again.

No harm is done; behind the broad boulevards, the café terraces are
decked out
with the ironic theatre of *décolletés*, the clinking of ice
in cocktails and the worldly-wise commentary of a studied smile.

The creature has been scraped from its wall;
nimble are the paws of these little masters.

How good it is to linger in the lukewarm squares
where someone with plump fingers is still playing *duende*
while another is frying squid and laughing at his opposite.
Ah, tender is the flesh of Spanish angels.

Come, you who are drowning, at any moment the stream
can begin again right from the source, and every bit
as overwhelming. The boy lingers in the Last Gallery
till closing time, forgets his sweetheart,
his little ailment, and when he leaves
in the evening light there is Madrid, the clouds
of filthy ozone over the boulevards, untidy as
life always is, the *Glockenspiel*, the
silk dresses at the entrance to the Ritz.

He sees a young woman with her dog,
tongue hanging from his mouth.
He greets the return
of the fearsome Beast.

SAMPLE

*Francisco Goya, died Bordeaux 1828,
'A Dog Struggling against the Current', 1821/23,
Prado, Madrid.*

MONT NOIR

Just like the landscape in my eyes –
I led you up the garden path
and said the things are there to grasp.

But as for us –
casting around in dewy meadows,
fruit that's too hard to bite –

this is the form we willed.
Look at the landscape
where trees turn into icons
and everyone gives someone
else a name.

Hold onto this.
Hold that we know each other,
even in twilight,
just as stories look like a horse
and children may be clouds.

Hold onto this.
Some day you will be taken by the wrist,
someone will draw with your hand,
and we will really be

a landscape for each other.