

Hugo Claus 1929-2008: “Each day we should wake up foaming at the mouth at the injustice of things”

By Paul Bond
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Belgian author Hugo Claus, who died last month, was one of the most prolific and versatile of postwar European writers. From 1947, when he was just 18, he produced thousands of poems, some 20 novels, 18 books of short stories, film scripts, libretti, and around 60 plays, including translations into Dutch and adaptations from English, French, Greek, German and Spanish works. He also painted, and worked extensively in the dramatic arts as a director. He once said that had he grown up in a country with a tradition of cinema, he would probably have been a film director rather than a writer. Some of his works are available in English translations, including his most important novel, 1983's *The Sorrow of Belgium* (*Het Verdriet van België*).

It is not just the scale of his output that is astonishing. His work ranges from realist drama through melodrama to satirical burlesque. He was a dominant literary figure not just in his native Belgium, but in all Dutch-language literature. His death was front-page news across the Low Countries, and Guy Verhofstadt (then still acting as Belgian prime minister) delivered a fulsome official tribute. Such official coopting sits uneasily with a writer who was always awkward with authority and the status quo. “I am a person who is unhappy with things as they stand,” he once told an interviewer. “Each day we should wake up foaming at the mouth at the injustice of things.”

Writers in minority languages can easily be corralled as parochial spokesmen, but Claus was no narrow-minded regionalist. He opposed drives to divide Belgium on regional lines, and was vocal in his opposition to the Flemish separatists of *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest). The Dutch Minister of Culture, Dr. Ronald Plasterk, called Claus “Flemish to the bone,” but this is to overlook his hostility to nationalism. He often claimed that coming from a country largely derided in the rest of Europe was good for his writing, as it prevented him from suffering from delusions of grandeur. Jan Goossens, director of the Royal Flemish Theatre, said that Claus “couldn't stand anything nationalist, closed or monocultural. He fought this tendency in Flanders from his first day to his last.” The Flemish establishment was praising Claus now, said Goossens, but that was not always the case.

Even the manner of his death underscores his strivings for independence. Suffering from the early stages of Alzheimer's Disease, he was fearful of losing his capacity with words. He chose the moment of his death by euthanasia (which has been legal in Belgium since 2002). This earned him posthumous criticism from the Catholic Church, which remains a powerful force in Belgium. Belgium's leading Catholic spokesman, Cardinal Godfried Danneels, referred specifically to Claus's death in his Easter Homily attacking euthanasia.

Hugo Claus was born in 1929, the eldest of four brothers, in the city of Brugge (Bruges), capital of the Dutch-speaking province of West Flanders. Claus's father was a printer who took part in local amateur

dramatics. Hugo described his strict Catholic home as “suffocating.” He had no happier times at various Catholic boarding schools during the war.

He drew on this stifling background for *The Sorrow of Belgium*, whose protagonist Louis Seynaeve is partly autobiographical. Claus draws a compelling picture of a Catholic lower middle class in largely rural West Flanders enthusiastically welcoming and collaborating with the Nazis. Fascism found a response amongst a layer of Flemish nationalists who were promoting a pan-Netherlandish union. Several of Claus's wartime teachers were fascist sympathisers; his father was briefly interned at the end of the war.

Claus himself had been drawn into the Flemish fascist youth movement, welcoming the tanks into Flanders. “There was an ecstatic feeling,” he told an interviewer in 1990. “They were very exotic enemies.”

Much of his subsequent work aimed to understand the attraction of such reactionary movements for sections of the middle class. His huge novel, made up of impressionistic snapshots of dialogue and narration, captures well the reactions of this layer through the course of the war. It roots support for, and collaboration with, fascism, in the prevailing social conditions, not in national or regional groups. (Rex, Belgium's main pre-war fascist party, was predominantly francophone).

He shows, through the unfolding of the Seynaeves' war, how sections of the middle class acquiesced in the deportation of the Jews. Papa Seynaeve, at the end of the war, says, “Agreed ... Hitler did do some nasty things, he butchered his own ideal by butchering the Jews, it was inhuman ... but you can't really expect me to believe that there were so many of them. A hundred thousand perhaps, even two hundred thousand, I'll give you that, and out of those how many were criminals and the sort of people who plotted to overthrow the State? Surely the State had to do something to defend itself, it was a question of life and death ...”

Forty thousand Belgian Jews were deported by the Nazis.

This is a profound novel of political betrayal and confusion. After the war, the Belgian state was in crisis. Belgian industry had been incorporated into the Nazi production programme through the efforts of self-styled “socialist” ministers working alongside the main fascist parties. King Leopold III attempted to negotiate a modicum of independence under a future fascist administration. After the war, he was prevented from returning to the country because of this, and replaced by his brother. Social democratic forces were called upon to restore the status quo for Belgian capital. The social democrat Paul-Henri Spaak became the architect of Belgian foreign policy, and one of the founding fathers of NATO. Discussing the first election after the occupation, one character in the novel explains the options:

“You either have to vote for people you don't know from Adam, who claim they were good patriots during the war, working with the underground, which means that the man-in-the-street has no way of

checking up on it, or else you do know them from before '40 and they're the ones who took fright and scuttled off to London with shit in their pants. And if it isn't them, then it's their uncle or brother-in-law."

The novel has its limitations. It does not look beyond its immediate West Flanders setting. But within that milieu it reveals the festering backwardness and its impact in drawing a whole social layer into complicity with the fascists. Arnold J. Pomerans, the book's English translator, also notes how the Flemish characters' speech is peppered with "old-fashioned, sometimes archaic, words (which makes it High Flemish), with dialect (Low Flemish), and with a great many Gallicisms. The irony in the use of so many French words and phrases by Flemish nationalists (the "Flamingants")—in direct contradiction to the scorn they express for the French-speaking Flemish elite (known as the "Franskiljons")—is pointed." This also underlines the difficulties in translating such a wide-ranging and erudite author as Claus.

The rebellious Claus, although a good student with a sound basis in classical and modern languages, could no longer stomach his oppressive education as the war progressed. He quit his studies at the age of 15. Tensions within his family were so bad that after the war he left for Paris, where he worked in a sugar factory. He later used his experiences here for the naturalist play *Suiker* (*Sugar*, 1958).

His experiences confirmed him in his determination to go his own way. "I found it so senseless that I left and decided never to work for anyone again," he said. This, like his often-stated professions of "laziness," should be taken with a pinch of salt. He wrote of the injustices he had found. In Paris he was making contact with various avant-garde artists, and he was already writing. He was a great admirer of the French surrealists. Another hero was Antonin Artaud, for whom he wrote his second book of poems *Registreren* in 1948. His first collection, *Kleine Reeks* (Short Series), had been published the year before, when he was 18.

He became involved in the avant-garde movement CoBrA (named after the cities where it was founded: Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam). CoBrA brought together a number of artists, some of them from the surrealist movement, in various mediums. The Belgian section of CoBrA was very closely affiliated with the Communist Party. Claus collaborated as a poet, painter, and sculptor, with a number of other CoBrA artists, particularly the Dutchman Karel Appel, as well as illustrating his own poetry.

CoBrA was perhaps Claus's opportunity to break out of the narrow confines of his Catholic Flemish upbringing. He returned to Belgium over the rest of his life, but also spent periods living in France and Italy, as well as travelling widely. Visiting Chicago in 1959 with other European writers like Fernando Arrabal, Günter Grass, and Italo Calvino, he noted, "A verse from Luke won't help you here." In 1968 he visited Cuba with the Dutch author Harry Mulisch.

If there was a radical element to him, it was the reaction against injustice rather than the espousal of a particular political line. Much of his writing was aimed provocatively at the provincial attitudes of the Belgian establishment. Through the 1960s, particularly in his theatre work, he tackled a wide range of taboos in Belgian society: homosexuality, incest, adultery, masturbation, nudity on stage. The sexual explicitness of work like the poetry collection *39Dag, Jij* (*Morning, You*, 1971), along with his high-profile marriage to *Emmanuelle* actress Sylvie Kristel, created a prurient interest in his private life.

If at times his attacks on such targets seemed childish (he nevertheless received a four-month jail sentence—suspended following popular outcry—for offending public morals with one show) they also conveyed something of his dissatisfaction with social complacency. Belgium, in the postwar years, established itself as the headquarters of a number of European bodies, notably NATO. He was restless and uncomfortable with the establishment, but recognising a political problem is not the same as overcoming it.

At his best he tackled some important subjects. He wrote often of collaboration with the Nazis during the occupation, and drew attention to the way Belgian writers had neglected the subject of colonialism. His 1970 play *Het Leven en de Werken van Leopold II* (The Life and Works of Leopold II) was a satirical pantomime of the impact of the rape of the Congo. He returned to this theme in his last two full-length novels, *De Geruchten* (*Rumours*, 1996) and *Onvoltooid Verleden* (*Unfinished Past*, 1998).

CoBrA also gave him the opportunity to experiment with literary and artistic forms. He was a restless artist, constantly pushing at stylistic boundaries. He once said he had "a perverse inclination to do things I've never done before." His first novel *De Metsiers* (1950, published in English as *The Duck Hunt*, and later as *Sister of Earth*) was an attempt to write in a Faulknerian style.

In the early 1950s he was clearly identified with a new generation of Dutch-language poets. He continued to study and read the literary classics, and brought them to bear on his experimentation. He continued to adapt European classics for the stage, and wrote poems about many of his literary influences. J.M. Coetzee's English translation of *Tien manieren om P. B. Shelley te zien* (*Ten ways of Looking at P. B. Shelley*) can be read here.

He was also constantly striving to create something new by mixing art forms, by not being constrained. "Purity is the dirtiest word I know," he once said. Jan Goossens saw this as the roots of his hostility to nationalism: "He was a bastard-artist. He loved mixes, anything hybrid. His biggest enemy was purity. In his literary work and as a human being. He couldn't stand anything nationalist, closed or monocultural."

There clearly were limitations in his outlook. His concentration on resisting Belgian parochialism seems at times to have sucked him into the very milieu he was trying to expose and reject. In the absence of an independent perspective it is possible for the writer to find him- or herself either co-opted for the establishment or demoralised. Claus's constant vigour, his determination to continue experimenting and writing, seem to have sustained him. In his best work he was able to see clearly, and portray, the devastating impact of provincialism and injustice.

"First and foremost," he told Radio Netherlands, "I am a poet. I write poetic plays, poetic novels. But don't equate poetic with lyrical. It is not the yearning for the stars or one's loved one. It is a way of seeing. The poetic aspect is a vision, having the effect of transforming reality, changing it into something else, running in parallel to the actual reality."

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