

*Enigmatic worlds concealed behind simplicity*

## The poetry of Martinus Nijhoff



photo Letterkundig Museum

**T**HE POETRY OF MARTINUS NIJHOFF possesses an intoxicated clarity that conceals enigmatic worlds behind its ostensible simplicity. His debut collection *De wandelaar* (The Walker, 1915) appeared during the First World War, which the poet experienced as a mobilized soldier in the neutral Netherlands. The book was immediately received as being different and modern. Without actually mentioning the war by name, the poetry radiates an ambience of upheaval, anxiety and alienation, restrained by all kinds of masking mechanisms and artificial poses. The poems are extremely expressive: a world is sharply drawn in the space of a few words: a factual account. The verse form is traditional but experiments with bold dissonants and refined counter-rhythms are taking place within. We find a neo-classic modernism akin to that of Stravinsky (Nijhoff translated *l'Histoire du soldat*) and Picasso.

Nijhoff was familiar with international modernism: he stayed in Paris regularly in the 1920s and followed artistic developments there closely. As an influential critic he developed an anti-romantic, modernist outlook on literature that displays a correspondence with the poetics of Paul Valéry and T.S. Eliot: poetry is not an expression of emotion but rather an autonomous organism that the poet constructs with the application of all his or her technical ingenuity; the substance is generated by the language itself during the creative process.

In his second collection *Vormen* (Forms, 1924), Nijhoff examines the limits of poetry itself: it is the only instrument that can say more than is possible in normal language and thus functions as an alternative religion in a world in which every bond has disappeared. At the same time, there is the paradox that once the indescribable has been touched upon in a poem, it evaporates.

His third book, *Nieuwe gedichten* (New Poems, 1934), written during the great economic crisis, wishes to redirect poetry to more earthly matters and give it a function there: the secret can only be found here and now, but it remains intact. The highlight of the collection is the narrative poem *Awater*, which can be regarded as a response to Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The poem evokes a surrealist atmosphere and is full of references to world literature. It is an exploration of the modern world, but the purport remains ambiguous, as if often the case in Nijhoff's work. Nijhoff is a master in presenting a vivid mystery that, in an apparently self-evident articulation, consistently challenges one to formulate new interpretations. His poetry has continued to fascinate readers right down to the present day and seems to function time and again as a point of orientation for new poets.

Martinus Nijhoff (1894-1953) wrote essays, translations, theatre plays, and poems. During his life he published four collections of poetry, which belong to the best work ever published in Dutch. Right from his debut with *De wandelaar* (The Walker) in 1916, he was recognized as a poet of rare genius. His following compilations, *Vormen* (Forms) in 1924 and *Nieuwe gedichten* (New Poems) in 1934, confirmed his reputation as a great innovator of the Dutch literary landscape, although he remained faithful to traditional verse forms. Nijhoff's last work of poetry was the long epic poem *Het uur U* (H-Hour), which was published in conjunction with *Een Idylle* in 1942.

Martinus Nijhoff is undoubtedly one of the most important poets of the twentieth century. Unique in his era (with the possible exception of Paul van Ostaïjen), he managed to reach out to the diverse movements of international modernism without losing the distinctiveness of his own oeuvre.

DIRK DE GEEST in *LEESIDEE*

He is the best Dutch poet of the last century.

KIRILL KOBRIN in the Russian review  
*OKTJABER*



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### NIJHOFF

**IN TRANSLATION**  
Translated collections of Nijhoff's work have been published in Germany (Suhrkamp, 1989) and Russia (University of St. Petersburg, 2003). Some of his work is also translated into French, English, Slovenian and Hungarian.

*Poems* by Martinus Nijhoff

(Amsterdam: Prometheus / Bert Bakker)

Translated by Raphael Rudnik and James S. Holmes

**From *De wandelaar*; *The Walker*, 1916:**

*The Gardener*

**From *Nieuwe gedichten*; *New Poems*, 1934:**

*The Child and I*

*The ivy*

*Impasse*

***Awater* (1934)**

translated by James S. Holmes

Followed by *Poetry in a Period of Crisis*

a reading held by Martinus Nijhoff in 1935

translated by James S. Holmes

**One poem by Martinus Nijhoff  
from *De wandelaar* (The Walker; 1916)  
translated by Raphael Rudnik**

## THE GARDENER

The flowers standing on their dark bed,  
Like pieces of broken porcelain:  
God made the world and put us in,  
What is alive, cannot be dead.

Everyone is a gardener,  
Each one of us a gravedigger,  
Delving the deep softness here,  
A pit for our own cadaver.

But life itself is tough, fixed fast.  
Though the resting-place is dug aright,  
It never yet has come, the great night,  
And claimed a sleeper at the last.

See the flowers stand upon their grave,  
In this life, nothing can die.  
Though you may burst and the pieces fly,  
The world will pick them up to save.

**Three poems by Martinus Nijhoff  
from *Nieuwe gedichten* (New Poems; 1934)  
translated by Raphael Rudnik**

## THE CHILD, AND I

One day I went out fishing.  
I felt lost in emptiness.  
Between bullrushes splashing  
my hand broke the green-scummed surface.

Light flooded up from under then,  
from out the black mirror-ground.  
I saw an untrodden garden,  
and a child who stood there was found.

He stood by his writing table,  
and wrote on his little slate board  
watery letters, unstable  
under the stylus, made my words.

Without haste and freely certain  
he completed my book of life,  
all I could ever imagine  
and write, or even hope to write.

And each time by a movement  
I showed I knew what I faced,  
he rippled the water a moment  
and it was all erased.

## THE IVY

When I go by the hospital where they took care of her,  
It's not because of a resurrection hoped-for,  
It is because the ivy has gone reaching-up higher since  
last I stepped onto that low brick wall and looked through the fence.

And so to see that building and garden again.  
Once more I smell the roses, the disinfectant then,  
I climb the stairs once more, walk empty corridors,  
and come to the turned-around blank sign hanging from her door.

But, at the same time, O, temple-touching ivy,  
back to a long-gone distant day thou hast led me.  
I lay inside an arbor, her poor sick little boy,  
She sits by me, having just sung the song which gives us joy.

"I'm going for a blanket, it's getting cold, my child"  
she says. Light steps fading-away on gravel. Beguiled,  
surrounded by ivy-leaves I wait, counting stars that begin  
to come out in an already-glittering heaven.

"Dreamer" says the ivy, come down off your low wall,  
go and lay a blanket upon your mother's pall,  
she must be getting cold, all uncovered at the end,  
now that she lies in ivy, and sees the stars ascend.

## IMPASSE

We're standing in the kitchen, she and I.  
All day long I've thought: I'll ask her today.  
But somehow, it's something I'm ashamed to say,  
So, I want her caught unawares, and shy.

Seeing her bent busy now over her task,  
And having the chance I wanted to have  
The most unguarded answer she can give,  
*"What shall I write about, today?"* – I ask.

Just as the teakettle whistles out a jet  
Of steam, a cloud covering her until,  
Shooting-up, it befogs the kitchen-window.

Then I get my answer, given as she lets  
A string of boiling water fall and fill  
The room with the coffee-smell: *"I don't know."*

**‘Awater’ by Martinus Nijhoff**  
**from *Nieuwe gedichten* (New Poems; 1934)**  
**translated by James S. Holmes**

AWATER

*Wanted:  
a travelling companion*

Be present here, spirit primordial  
that hovers over waters of beginning.  
Bend your benignant eye upon this work :  
it is as void and formless as the earth.  
Its aim is not, as in a previous age,  
to see the rubble heaps and sing fair skies,  
for song is but the passion of a fester,  
never rubble, whatever else it was.  
A first stone’s barely lowered in its place.  
Each word renews the silence it disturbs.  
All that now happens happens the first time.  
Be praised! For Noah builds, but now no ark,  
and Jonah preaches, far from Nineveh.

I’ve seen a man. A man who has no name.  
Give him all of our given names in one.  
He is some woman’s and some father’s son.  
As soon as the red sun is in the sky  
he goes toward town. He passes underneath  
my window. Dusk falls : he comes back again.

He's at an office, there he's called Awater.  
Behold him. He is clad in camel's hair  
strung through a needle's eye. His body's lean,  
nourished on locusts and wild honeycomb.  
What he calls no one's ever understood.  
Where he gesticulates is wilderness.  
There's something in him of the monk, the soldier,  
but there's no praying, and no bugle blown,  
when at the office books are opened up.  
They sit at desks as if they're in a temple.  
They mix Italian script with Arabic.  
From figures tumbling down the page like ash  
columns of Delphic language rise aloft.  
It grows still, it grows warmer in the room.  
Thin rattling metal wafts more and more salt.  
Typewriters daydream stuff and nonsense. Read :  
what it says is not what it says. It says :  
'O Mother, you will never wear the furs  
you scrimped and scavenged every penny for,  
and on my days off now I do not go  
with flowers to the hospital; I take  
the roses out to Cemetery Lane...'  
This it says, and Awater's countenance,  
motionless and intent, shows his emotion.  
What time is it? Awater's head grows heavy.  
The telephone sleeps on the writing desk.  
The teacups are collected and returned.  
The clock tick-tocks, strikes, ticks till half-past five  
strikes. In the room the green lamps are put out.

Today, while I was watering the plants  
beside the window, it occurred to me  
to meet Awater when he left his office.  
I've had no travelling companion since  
my brother died. When you seek out a friend  
it's natural to want to find out first  
if you can get along with one another.  
Tonight, then, I'll pursue Awater's trail;  
I'll watch to see which way the cat will jump,  
as people say, and then if all goes well,  
tomorrow I shall introduce myself.  
So here I stand, beside the entryway.  
I'm filled with qualms. A clock strikes half-past five.  
Time has a stop. Wayfarers flood the streets.  
In every shadow is a light ignited  
that in its wandrings shapes contours in smoke.  
Brother in heaven, too, be present here.  
Protect me, let my shade reveal no light.  
Hold me invisible, inaudible.  
– All at once Awater. I see him at  
a turning of the stair, blinking his eyes.  
For him there is no place, no person, no  
red evening sky. He hurries down along  
the sandstone stairs past twisting snakes of bronze.  
He seems to see a distance, a horizon,  
where lightning flashes sempiternally.  
It is as if he hears the thing he dreams of,  
and sees the whereabouts he hopes to find,

the way he rushes by; I feel transfixed.  
He strides across the vestibule in haste.  
He hangs a key among the other keys.  
There is a dried-out thistle on his coat;  
he grasps his cane and saunters whistling forth.  
He puts his hat on; I, though, bare my head:  
Once more, be present, you who dwell on heights  
as inhospitable as Calvary.

The streets are asphalted. I notice that  
the echo that had kept me company  
along the grey-tiled hall falls still outside.  
The city lends a muteness to the foot.  
Caravan-like, a line of cars glides by,  
passing us with a gentle creak of leather.  
Awater has already hurried on.  
Yes, yes, it must be so : he wants to travel.  
He's stopped before a clothing-shop display.  
I see that he is gazing at a group  
of manikins with plaids and telescopes –  
camping along the lush shores of the Nile,  
so pyramids and palm-trees indicate.  
O Awater, I know what you are dreaming,  
there farther on, before a shipping-line  
poster of a Bedouin in the desert  
hailing a ship that heaves in sight at sea,  
and farther still, before a banking house  
where rates for foreign currency are quoted.  
Thus we proceed along the shop displays.

Then suddenly he's vanished down a side street.  
A shopbell rings. He must have gone inside.  
The sign reads : haircuts, shaves. The pungent smell  
of every make and mark of toiletry  
makes the small room with cupboards on each side  
seem smaller still. Awater – I must say  
I'm glad to see him, I had almost lost him –  
is seated in a robe of clear-starched linen  
before a basin of white porcelain.  
The barber's at his work, and I sit down  
off to one side, as if to wait my turn.  
I've never seen Awater from so near  
as in the mirror now; at the same time  
he's never seemed so never-reachable.  
Among the bottles, luminously broken,  
he rises in the mirror like an iceberg  
along which the smooth scissors brush their beak.  
But spring arrives, a passing shower's mists  
hover round about, then the barber's comb  
ploughs a straight parting through the tangled hair.  
Awater leaves the barbershop, and I  
follow him down the street, mechanically.

Chance sometimes takes a bypath to its goal.  
Must it needs be Awater had to choose  
the same café I went to with my brother?  
It must needs be, he even takes our corner.  
I sit down somewhere else. There's room enough.  
The waiter knows me. He knows what I'm feeling.

This is the second time he's cleaned my table.  
He lingers for a while beside my chair  
in silence, with the white cloth in his hand.  
'The times,' he says, 'aren't what they used to be.'  
I know he's thinking of my brother too,  
how he would breeze in with his dog in leash,  
his hat pushed back a little on his head,  
and fill the whole room with his hue and cry.  
The same sand still is lying on the floor,  
the same dove cooing in its cage as then.  
Whoo, said the wind, on, on. It's best this way.  
'Who's that,' I say, because I must say something.  
And, knowing whom I mean at once, he says,  
'Someone that's never been in here before.'  
With that he pulls the bar-gate shut behind him  
and sets to rinsing glasses in the water.  
– What is Awater hunting in his pockets?  
It is a booklet in morocco green.  
No, it's a chess game, now he's opened it.  
Awater's eyes gaze, cool and reticent.  
His hands that drum the table-top encourage  
the vision that goes raging through his forehead.  
A snowflake flutters amidst drops of blood.  
He shifts the chessmen to a new arrangement.  
His glass frosts over, still untouched, before him.  
In the ashtray his cigarette creates  
a hollyhock that blooms along the ceiling.  
He sits there quite alone and undisturbed.  
He has the thing a flower has, and a planet,

an inward impetus that transports far.  
But now he drains his glass and shuts his book.  
Sitting there gazing straight ahead, he's something  
sad about him. He looks my way, and when  
he calls the waiter I think he means me.  
But no, he pays his check. I do the same,  
and soon we're moving through the crowd again.

Electric lights that shoot along the front  
write out the title of the restaurant  
time after time, and there's a double file  
of people moving in-out past the doorman  
who serves the entry of revolving glass.  
As we go in, there is the sound of music.  
Awater is well known here, so it seems.  
People look round at him as he goes past.  
'What?' says somebody, 'don't you know Awater?  
I think he's an accountant, some such thing.  
I know him, but don't know him very well.  
Some people say that he reads Greek at night,  
though other people will contend it's Erse.'  
– But meanwhile something very strange has happened.  
A man has risen on the podium  
and says he yields his place to Awater.  
'I speak for everybody here,' he says.  
'We have a great artiste within our midst.'  
Awater makes a gesture toward his plate,  
trying to say that he declines the honour  
and would prefer to be allowed to eat.

The billiard players interrupt a break.  
It's stockstill. People curiously range  
along the railing of the mezzanine.  
The fanblade of the ventilator turns.  
Awater rises then and sings his song:

*She, the loved one, would come, wont to console me,  
wont to inspire me in my very sleep  
by her approach; now she has come and broken  
the last support that shored my loss's need.*

*When I descried her figure she was kneeling  
in a deep sadness intermixed with fear;  
I heard her bid me not to cease believing,  
but without feeling either hope or cheer:*

*'Do you remember that last night together,'  
she said, 'when I respected your hot tears  
and left the world behind, and all its worth?*

*After that night I could not, would not tell you  
the tidings I must now commend your ears:  
nevermore hope to see me on this earth.'*

Awater stops. He stiffens into stone.  
The crowd applauds and tosses paper streamers.  
Awater, like a doll, a doll that is  
too heavy for its mechanism, staggers  
across the crowded room and to the exit.

There's still one strip of paper fluttering  
along his back. I follow at his heels.

I try to keep step with Awater's step,  
for it is quiet and the street is narrow.  
This way he won't hear someone's following.  
My cares are manifold : there's post at home,  
I haven't told the maid I'd be away,  
my window's open, there's fire in the hearth,  
I've nothing with me; and why, anyway,  
should I go travelling? – Upon its string  
the kite tosses and soars : each perturbation  
shifts to more steadfast joy. What then, what then?  
And with my head bowed down I carry on  
the crucial conversation with myself.  
The street grows wider. Dew drips from the trees.  
The railway station looms up straight ahead.  
Is there a midnight meeting being held?  
It's jam-packed in the square. Amid torch flames  
stands a young woman, a salvationist,  
upon a platform rudely built of wood.  
Tourists with rucksacks slung across their backs,  
women, children, and workers with their blue  
workclothes still on make up her audience.  
'We live our lives all wrong,' she starts to say.  
Awater, who has stopped, looks round at me  
as if he thinks he'd met me long ago.  
But where? a tram? the intermission of  
a play? inquires the gaze he turns on me,

holding his hat, because the wind has risen.  
Wind, playing with the soldieress's hair,  
lays on her sleeve a loose-tied knot of gold.  
'One never puts one's trust in love in vain,'  
she says. Awater stays, I hurry on,  
as if I'd seen the train I had to catch.

The fireman tosses coal upon the fire.  
The engineer leans out and stares ahead.  
Beyond the station roof, above the rail  
patterns, the signals start their overture.  
The clock's hands jump from minute on to minute.  
The locomotive calls, time after time,  
calls that it has been waiting far too long.  
Its pile of sighs becomes a clew of clouds.  
But do not think its fretting is for you,  
this Orient Express; nor does it share  
your joy at seeing place names in a script  
that is adventure's opening accord.  
Its readiness to travel is relentless.  
Whatever hopes you cherish or reject,  
it does not care, it is immune to even  
the fancy of a travelling companion.  
That you, alone in all its luxury,  
put down the window with a heavy heart  
and cast one final glance along the platform;  
or that you taste that sheerest human bliss:  
to know that you were guided, it was not  
without a reason, you have not been duped –

be praised – it does not care. It sees blue skies.  
Its clanking girdle is of iron links.  
It sings, it lifts a knee, enswathed by steam.  
And it departs at the appointed time.

#### **A NOTE BY THE TRANSLATOR**

The Dutch text of *Awater* is technically something of a *tour de force*. Nijhoff, casting back to the vowel rhymes of the *Song of Roland* to give form to his poem, confined himself to no more than eight vowel sounds for his rhyme scheme, making each line rhyme assonantly with every other line in the same section. Short of writing a new poem, I could see no way to retain this element in the translation.

A second formal element borrowed from the *Song of Roland* is Nijhoff's strong emphasis on the end-stopped line: three-fourths of the lines in *Awater* conclude with a punctuation mark of some kind, and more than half of them have a full stop. The result is a stress on the isolated individual line that is unequalled even in neo-classical English verse. I have tried to keep as many of these end-stopped lines as I could, the more willingly because in the absence of Nijhoff's rhyme scheme they would help me to avoid the pitfall of easy traditionalism characteristic of much enjambed blank verse. (JSH)

## Poetry in a Period of Crisis

by Martinus Nijhoff

(Enschede, 1935)

Martinus Nijhoff (1894-1953) completed his long poem *Awater* in 1934. The next year he gave a talk at Enschede Folk University which affords a clearer insight than any critic could provide into his poetic aims and aspirations during those years of economic and intellectual crisis. The text of the talk was not published during the poet's lifetime; the following passages, those most closely having to do with the genesis of *Awater*, are from a draft of the talk found among his papers after his death.

I started talking to the waiter when he came to my table to settle up. How was business doing? 'Poorly, sir,' said the waiter, 'we can certainly tell there's a crisis.' Our talk threatened to take on a less than cheerful note. I paid and set *off* for home.

The waiter's word 'crisis' nagged at me. During the boom years poetry may possibly have fallen short, to the extent that it had brought more self-glorification than self-exploration – though none of the great poets could be found guilty of anything like that. But what of poetry in a period of crisis? What interest could poetry demand at a time when the production of goods is no longer profitable? The street lights, a tram rattling by, a policeman standing at his post were clear proofs that the world was going on, that the producing agencies were still providing light, power, and energy, that the world of man had arrived at a kind of blind method, and the various parts went on rotating like the stars in a constellation. Whatever revolution the world's history may hold in store, it will have to take over this order of trains, steamships, aeroplanes, factories, strict discipline. Man has built a technological structure across the world, and this structure functions as perfectly as the seasons, as day and night, as birth and death in nature. The tram is a star, the policeman is a star, even though they are stars that are moved along their courses by a propulsive force created by men, multitudes of men, generations of men.

I realized that, with phrases like the tram is a star, the policeman is a star, I was well on my way towards making dadaistic poetry, that I was attributing such cosmic significance to images observed as reality that every separate noun started whirling through the universe like a meteor. The dada movement was a direct

renunciation of God. The universe created by mankind was placed on a level with the divine universe, or even above it.

An explanation was that the World War had given rise to a tremendous disappointment. It took daring to go on. The war had shown what unnatural forces man could make use of without intervention from beyond. Label it pessimism, cynicism, optimism, man's right of absolute self-determination has become an accomplished fact. We are alone. The Creator gave us a vast natural environment, but we are no longer children, we have grown up, and now we have to manage things for ourselves.

No, that image still gives a suggestion of growth, progress. It's too idealistic. Man has always been thrown back on his own resources, ever since he ate from the tree of knowledge. The sweat of his face, the sorrow of bringing forth children were a kind of toll for that freedom. Yet there were ideals to make life bearable. But now sweat and sorrow have become a sombre glory; ideals are no longer necessary and are being cast aside, and now man is faced by the hard task of divesting sweat and pain of their sombreness without being able to reach back to those irrevocably lost ideals, For this is the clearest thing in the crisis: it is a realization of the bankruptcy of our ideals. The economic crisis will pass by, of course; that is to say, at a certain moment a new balance will be struck. A shorter working day, a general obligation to work, a lower standard of living, but with more freedom in the sense of time for oneself, ever faster and more highly mechanized production and distribution under the supervision of agencies representing ever – growing multitudes – all this will probably be the outcome, and at the same time will reduce the sombreness of sweat and sorrow to an ever-smaller minimum. And no one will yearn for the old over-simple ideals, just as no one, however much admiration he may have for the system, can seriously yearn for the return of Roman law or pyramid-building. But the spiritual aspect of the crisis, the bankruptcy of ideals, is definitive. It is out of the question that things such as religion, beauty, and nature will ever serve again as refuges for any but the introspective individual, Man, the multitude, no longer considers these notions to have any guiding value, and will not change his mind.

If I rightly understand Huizinga's book *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, he holds the same opinion. He trembles on surveying the bankruptcy. Only of scholarship – to his thinking certainly not the party least guilty of destroying ideals, if there is any question of guilt – only of scholarship does he say that it has no recourse other than to go on according to its established method. His 'Diagnosis of the Spiritual Distemper of Our Time,' as the subtitle of the book reads, is extremely

apt. The shadow of the future blurs each sharp line. Nowadays everything seems vague, and there is practically nothing that promises a vital future or appears to be rooted at all in solid ground. Our human organization, with its details that function so precisely, sticks together like grains of sand – if one actually still can speak of an organization.

There are still a few master spirits, but no disciples. And what is spirit without disciples? A museum curio and nothing more. We are living in an age of which in all probability everything will disappear, and in which all that is still being created is doomed to death. But that is simply the way things are.

Verse can be of particular importance in a period of crisis. The world is turned upside down. The old order of things is gone for good: that much is certain, everyone admits it, in more or less friendly or covert terms. There will be a new order, a new level, in which the old spaces will give way to spaces constructed by mankind. Man's spirit must be adapted to the products turned out with apparent ease by man's technology. The arts can play an important role in this process of adaptation. Poetry must work for the future; that is to say, it must conceive of the future as already existent and so to speak prepare a place in it for the human spirit.

But how can poetry make the world habitable once more? The world is a hell, a desert, for whoever dares open his eyes. Neither the infinitely vast nor the infinitesimally small, the two areas where the imagination takes over the task of the intellect, arouses any interest except in laboratories. The only invention which our age can match against the Parthenon is the motor. I am not an embittered poet. I do not go round with long hair and a corduroy jacket fulminating against my times because my times do not appreciate me and my soul. I have adjusted myself, I am an ordinary human being. I admit that the principle of the motor is as ingenious in conception as the drawing which must have served as a basis for the Parthenon. But I say that the Parthenon has achieved reality once and for all, whereas the motor, though it is perfect as a principle, is dust as material. I have had spells of modernism. Sitting in a cinema, I have been as moved on seeing the skyscrapers of New York in the newsreel as when I first saw the cathedral looming up above the narrow streets of Chartres.

'No,' says an American friend of mine, 'there you're mistaken. The cathedral of Chartres said something to your grandfather and will say the same thing to your grandchildren, but the New York skyscrapers are only built for a shorter or longer period, like temporary buildings for an exposition. We don't build cathedrals in America, we build ruins. The reality is gone, the rhythm that makes

matter durable. All right, you say, we make a machine; the machine is dust, but the principle remains and we make a thousand machines. We are living in a world that provides food, clothing, and all the rest for infinitely more people than was ever possible under any earlier economic order. We simply have to pay more attention to the quantity than to the quality. And it doesn't make any difference, because everything can be replaced and copied. In fact, new needs are created: speed, cigarettes. And everything within the means of all.'

'Fine,' says the man with long hair that I actually am, 'I can admire all that, but I want to live. My mind needs to have contact with others, not merely to prowl round in empty imagination. My mind meets no obstacles, it glides through everything like a ghost. I don't feel matter anywhere. I feel dust. Between the urge and its gratification there is no longer any interval to strengthen the urge and ennoble the gratification. When I go walking through the new suburbs built on speculation and long-term leases, I am walking through a house of cards where people eat badly, dress badly, and make love for fear of loneliness. The heart of town that has stood for ages will survive for ages longer than those desperate garden suburbs with their tiny front lawns and coloured floor-lamps. How can poetry make this almost shifting sand habitable?'

Yet it wasn't that easy. Of course you should live in the desert too.

But no, no, not yielding, not playing fair weather. No more of art as a consolation, no more using poetry to dupe a half-aroused humanity. Rather than that consider yourself a John the Baptist feeding on locusts and wild honey, clothed with camel's hair, crying in the wilderness, in the belief that someone will come mightier than I, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose. Reduce yourself to the minimum, yet retain a firm faith in order, in numbers, in the universe created by man, formed by his mature hand but still immature spirit. Be like a monk, be like a soldier, constantly with order and discipline in mind, for the moment present only in abstract elation.

I, for my part, made my choice. I decided to study Dutch. I went to another town where I had no sentimental ties, where there was not a memory at every street corner to make me live in the lost tense, and I moved into a workingman's house where I had the walls painted white and cut my furnishings to the bare minimum. My chief activities were studying, watering my plants, and throwing bread to seagulls skimming past.

Gradually life became bearable. As I walked through the crowded streets, or sat beside my window in the evening, the multitudes of people began to murmur like a river. I was as elated as a thirsty traveller in the desert when he hears the

sound of water. I began to realize that people do not live in the unreal suburban homes dotting the countryside like tents; where people live is in the offices, the factories, the hospitals, the cafés, the stations, everywhere that masses of people gather together.

And in research, in pure study, in formulas.

I was at my wits' end how I could combine abstraction and multitude. They seemed as remote from each other as the South Pole and the North. The combination between abstraction and multitude *was* being made, as I could see, but ideologically, with political intentions. Such slogans as nation, race, fatherland became popular as enthusiastic terms over against family, household, birthplace. The circle became somewhat larger as a result, but the term border became all the sharper. It had about as much to do with what I imagined as a formal garden with a forest. No, multitude and abstraction, my two sole sources of elation, either have universal validity or they are illusions. English is the finest language, because it is such a mixture of the Romance and the Germanic. Our whole culture developed along the shores of the Mediterranean, because that inland sea linked three continents together like a navigable market square. National awareness can only be of value as a need to communicate to other nations. Borders, accentuated by ideologies but ever more quickly crossed by new means of transportation, are nowadays difficult to take seriously. They are utterly incompatible with the urge towards spiritual expansion, the human universe.

My thinking found added support when I looked at surrealist painting and reflected on the possible significance of *neue Sachlichkeit*. It is not for nothing that such a term has become popular. *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or surrealism, for one is the literary term and the other the term in painting for the same principle, think along the following lines, if I am not mistaken. The essence of multitude and abstraction is not depictable. Just as the unconscious, just as the forces of nature are not depictable in themselves. Elation consists only in the awareness of their presence. The effect of their presence is everywhere, no matter where. The perceptible presence in every thing whatsoever of a force of nature, an unconsciousness, a multitude, an abstraction sets the thing in vibration, and this charge makes it into inspired matter, that is to say, beauty. A single leaf from a tree, any leaf, is beautiful, not because of its beautiful form, as people used to say, but because it is a product representative of the woods, the sun and rain, the soil, and the moment. The entire sea waves in every wave, all mankind lives in every man, whoever or however, as long as he does not restrict himself artificially and

become enslaved to his individuality. Surrealist paintings with their silence, their unemotional lucidity, their clearly distinguishable objects, as mysterious as they are banal, objects that seem to be arranged in the very universe and whose cool forms seem to indicate where the beginning is of that universe that does not stop inside them (for they themselves are only an edge, a transparent surface) – seeing such paintings, and reading modern prose in which the ordinary run-of-the-mill things that we do automatically, unconcernedly, are treated as of more universal importance than the violent moments of conflict and passion, in which we are usually more than ever the slave of our individual delimitations – this painting and this prose filled me with an intense elation, welling up from both sources, abstraction and multitude, together.

Then I began on my poem *Awater*. *Awater* was to be an arbitrary individual with whom I had no personal ties. *Awater* had to be the name for one person, but he was to remain abstraction and multitude.

At any cost I had to avoid coming into contact with him, for that is when the weaknesses begin, and thinking about him I noticed that even before I had given him a name I had already begun transferring a great deal of myself into him. No, he must remain a silhouette, a clear, translucent surface. At the outside he might be a travelling companion. I had no examples. I could find some help in the masterly early verses of Jean Cocteau, the French poet, and the American T. S. Eliot. But they, unlike the surrealists, had tended to under-estimate their *métier*, their craft. In search of abstraction and multitude, they had thrown their very verse-form overboard as ballast. I too felt that the emotional verse-form was no longer any good. But for what I wanted I had to search rather for the source than for an extreme. I had already decided to choose an old European form, the form of the *Song of Roland*.

Now that I've started talking about the origins of this poem, there were a few other things that should be mentioned, even though they are of a personal nature. My brother had died in the Indies. My plans for a trip, I was to go and meet him, came to nothing. Suddenly the notion of travelling took on an indeterminate quality. Every turn round the block became a trip. The unfamiliar town became even more wondrous than before.

And I should also tell how I came upon the name *Awater*. At first I had another name, the name of a former acquaintance of mine, as a crutch. That name bothered me once the poem began to take shape, because it was so difficult to put aside the image it called up from my memory. A name is a man. One afternoon I was having coffee at a friend's. A doctor whom I had never met before was also

there. He said, 'I'll just phone the hospital to see if I can stay a bit longer.' He asked to be connected with a clinic and inquired how the patient Awater was getting along. I can still hear him saying, 'Awater, no, no, Awater.' I immediately decided to use that name.

It would be hard to think of a more fleeting contact than that between me and the man who was called Awater in real life. Only his name, accidentally heard for the first time, obsessed me. The philologists have given ever so much significance to that name. 'A' is the old word for water. Awater is twice water. The water that restores taste to the water. The primeval water. But there are more and deeper meanings in the word. It is also a word in Sanskrit; it is also a monogram of my parents' two given names. And above all it means it-doesn't-matter-which individual, a neighbour, a fellow man representative of the multitude, who has approached me along the sheerest thread of contact.

This, then, is the entire prehistory of the poem. The pursuit of Awater, and the love I developed for him, made the desert habitable, or at least travelable, for me. The journey began in his shadow, but the love did not degenerate into attachment. Rather, it gave me the strength to continue the journey. I hope that something of this comes through in the poem.

translated by James S. Holmes