

Lighthearted and lucid

The poetry of Toon Tellegen



photo Klaas Koppe

‘Someone told me I was a room.’ This is how one of Toon Tellegen’s poems begins. It is a typical beginning for him, nothing is explained, we have to assume that this is now the reality within which the poem will unfold. And indeed, the person in question seizes the opportunity to look at himself as a room: ‘A room! I thought. Perhaps even a drawing room!’ He elaborates on this insight and concludes: ‘but when I pursued this thought, there were walls missing in me, and doors and slanting rays of light.’

Tellegen experiments with human identity and the poem is the ideal place for reflecting on the subject. This could easily be heavy-handed, except that his poetry stands out for its light-hearted, lucid tone and its unphilosophical, indeed extremely evocative narrative style. Most of the poems are miniature stories, written in free verse that resembles prose but for its line distribution.

Anything is possible in the world of these poems. Round a street corner, for instance, lives a cannibal, who is so incredibly hungry that he eats people by the dozen. ‘Hear how he eats, how he cries out for new people!’ A grave situation for all those thousands of people hiding in the reeds, just round the corner. One can only deduce that man is as fragile as a reed.

The biggest surprise in this work is that Tellegen takes everything literally, thus creating a wealth of meanings. Take for instance this very immediate and intriguing opening: ‘A man falls prey to doubt from time to time, decides to split in half, and moves in two directions.’ After having been split in two for a while, he goes looking for himself again, carefully sneaking up on himself from two different angles. The poem renders a state of mind in the form of a story. Tellegen is a master at projecting emotional states such as fear, helplessness, alienation, surrender, delight in narrative poetry. Strikingly often, he is concerned with disappearance, grief, death. He lets an apple rot slowly, he kills a mosquito, conscious of guilt, he discovers a bull in the china shop of his soul, he watches himself climb a wall on the edge of his thoughts.

Each of these poems – and there are many – is a stunningly sharp and telling parable about human feelings and behaviour. They are never realistic, always grotesque, exaggerated, surreal, absurd (here Tellegen owes a debt to Daniil Charms), and always busy with language. His verse inevitably draws the reader into the poem: ‘Life is a side branch of love’, ‘A man discovered that love does not exist’, ‘Shall I give you a lethal kiss?’

Toon Tellegen’s poetic universe is a densely populated one and literally covers every aspect of our inner and outer worlds. His poetry is simply unparalleled.

Toon Tellegen (b. 1941, Den Briel) is considered one of Holland’s finest poets and his work has been awarded many literary prizes. He has published more than twenty collections to date. While he considers himself in the first place a poet, he is also a well-known children’s book writer, whose animal stories delight children and adults alike. In addition he has written novels for adults and several plays.

Tellegen’s poems are parables for grown-up children. Their world is stripped-down, urgent, playful, quirky, familiar as children’s games yet strangely disorienting. They induce a mini-millennial fever, the disquieting excitement of being about to pass through the needle’s eye.

PHILIP FRIED, *FOUNDING EDITOR THE MANHATTAN REVIEW*

Tellegen’s poetry is full of cheerful human misunderstanding. With their fairytale speed, his poems encompass entire novels.

HERMAN DE CONINCK, *Flemish poet, in INTIMACY UNDER THE MILKY WAY*

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TELLEGEN ABROAD

Translations of Tellegen’s poems have been published in reviews and anthologies in the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Russia. His poetry has also been widely published in British and American journals, and has been very well received. One of Tellegen’s collections, *In N.*, was published in English in 1993 by Cross-Cultural Communications in New York.



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A portrait of Toon Tellegen

Introduction

by Judith Wilkinson (2006)

Toon Tellegen's poetry is one of movement, of surprising leaps, of living speech full of impatient interruptions and impetuous questions. With its absurd humour, coupled with an unexpected urgency, his work occupies a unique place in Dutch literature; indeed, it defies comparison with that of any other Dutch poet and is probably best seen in a broader European context.

Tellegen was born in 1941 in Den Briel, a small town in the South-West of the Netherlands. He grew up in a family of four children and his father was the local GP. Tellegen was to follow in his father's footsteps: after completing his grammar school education and spending a year in America, he studied medicine at the University of Utrecht and later at the University of Amsterdam. After further practical training for the tropics, he moved to Kenya, where he spent more than three years working in a hospital, in Masai country. Once he had returned to the Netherlands he began to work as a GP in Amsterdam, where he lives with his wife, and has since then managed to combine his work as a doctor with his writing. Tellegen considers himself in the first place a poet, and his earliest writing consists exclusively of poetry. Later he also began to publish his now extremely popular children's stories, originally invented for his own children, as well as novels for adults and some plays. He has published some twenty collections of poems to date and has a string of literary awards to his name.

Tellegen's earliest literary influence was his maternal grandfather, a Dutchman who was himself an unpublished but lavishly imaginative writer. He came from a family that had been trading with Russia since the eighteenth century and had gradually settled there. Tellegen's grandfather was born in 1875 in St. Petersburg, where he lived and ran a business. After the 1917 Revolution, however, life became practically impossible, and in 1918 he and his family departed for the Netherlands, where he spent the rest of his days like an expatriate, homesick for

Russia. Tellegen recently published his memoirs of his grandfather, who had shared with the young Tellegen his extraordinary stories of Russia, freely blending fact and folktale, full of fantastical metamorphoses and unpredictable twists of fate. He described to his grandson the immense steppes, talked about the peculiarly haunted people he had met, about circus artists and conjurers, and ad-libbed about God and metaphysics. Yet he never moralised or felt the need to drive home a point, and many of his stories end with a sigh. Tellegen probably imbibed much of his grandfather's resistance towards easy logic, his love of the open ending, his ability to jump from the metaphorical to the literal. As in his grandfather's stories, many of his poems contain elements of the fairytale or parable, where a situation is very swiftly pared down to essentials and big issues are made to look almost absurdly simple. Tellegen also inherited a love of Russian literature from his grandfather, who read him Pushkin and Lermontov. Not surprisingly, Tellegen is sometimes compared to Eastern European writers, such as Zbigniew Herbert or the Russian absurd writer Daniil Charms, with whom he shares a sense of the vastness of the universe and the unpredictability of everyday life. Frequently one is left, in Tellegen's poetry, with a sense of infinite possibilities, in which the individual's impulses towards affection, love, can be misdirected or misunderstood. However, Tellegen does not share the Russian feeling for the macabre; not surprisingly perhaps, it is Chekhov, with his lightness of touch, who is his favourite Russian writer.

Tellegen's work remains difficult to pin down. One might recognise some of the candour and immediacy of Catullus, something of Cavafy's colloquial tone and ironic perspective, something of Saint-Exupéry's capacity for wonder and childlike simplicity. Yet Tellegen's poetry very much asks to be taken on its own terms too.

There is something elusive about Tellegen's simplicity. His tragicomic personae often display a certain naivety, a lack of worldliness that allows basic emotions to be expressed in unselfconscious, fresh ways, so that what is ordinary becomes a source of wonder. At the same time, there is always an unobtrusive

awareness of human experience in all its complexity. The Dutch poet Mustafa Stitou comments on Tellegen's range of subject matter and his intriguing ability to approach topics like loneliness and shame, love and death, in an almost playful manner, as in the poem "Dying?? Never heard of it!" Other critics have remarked on the dreamlike quality of many of his poems, in which man is seen struggling against the backdrop of a large and chaotic universe. There has also been much emphasis on Tellegen's philosophical tendencies, his use of large abstractions - often in personified form - combined with a concrete aptness of imagery, often of a domestic nature. The Dutch critic Cornald Maas focuses on Tellegen's ability to take risks, emotionally speaking, and to display vulnerability.

The translations in this collection came about over a period of two years, with input from Toon Tellegen at each stage. I have tried to keep the language of the translations as unencumbered as that of the original texts, remaining close to spoken language in its most concrete form. In terms of the whole rhythm and structure of the poems, I have closely followed the originals and have aimed at keeping the English as dynamic and dramatic as the Dutch. Most of the poems translated here were taken from Tellegen's collection *Over liefde en over niets anders* ("About love and about nothing else"), published in 1997, a collection that consolidated Tellegen's reputation as one of Holland's most distinctive poets, the first edition selling out practically overnight. Since not all the work in this collection lends itself to translation, I included a number of poems from a later collection, *Alleen liefde* ("Just love"), published in 2002, and one poem, "Freedom", from *Verzamelde gedichten 1977-2002* (collected poems).

Sample translation

Poems by Toon Tellegen

(Amsterdam: Querido)

Translated by Judith Wilkinson

Contents:

One poem by Toon Tellegen, in Dutch:

De jaloezie was jong

Fifteen poems by Toon Tellegen, translated by Judith Wilkinson:

Jealousy was young

The truth

A man wanted to talk about love

'One day I will...'

Dying?? Never heard of it!

The emperor is cold

After Cavafy

Freedom

At the end of the day

I will leave just once. Then I will stay

You know what, a man thought

Shall I leave?

At night

There is no way back

Some people are complete

From the manuscript *About love and about nothing else*, consisting of fifty poems by Toon Tellegen translated by Judith Wilkinson.

For additional information on Toon Tellegen and more translations into English, please visit the Dutch domain of Poetry International Web:

<http://netherlands.poetryinternationalweb.org>

De jaloezie was jong,
ze dampte nog,
en de liefde schuifelde onwennig langs het eerste koren,
prikte zich aan de eerste doornen,
wist nog niet wat schrikken was
en bloeden.

In de verte lag het woord: groot, rimpelig en leeg.

De natuurwetten kraakten, knarsten,
kwamen een voor een op gang.
Appels vielen, bladeren, sterren.
Rivieren stroomden van de eerste bergen.

Kaïn hief zijn arm omhoog.
Alles begon, alles was nieuw,
alles was onontkoombaar.

Toon Tellegen, *Over liefde en over niets anders*

Jealousy was young,
still vaporous,
and love shuffled past the first corn ill at ease,
pricked itself on the first thorns,
didn't know what fright was yet
and bleeding.

In the distance lay the word: large, wrinkly and empty.

The laws of nature creaked, crunched,
got into their stride one by one.
Apples fell, leaves, stars.
Rivers flowed from the first mountains.

Cain raised his arm.
Everything started, everything was new,
everything was inescapable.

The Truth

You must, they said, face the truth.
Now! Immediately!

When it grew dark they whispered:
now you may face something else –
if you like.

It was quiet
and I faced love
and thoughtlessness with its giant wings
and the simplicity of the moonlight on my wall.

Now the truth again, they said. Now!

A Man Wanted To Talk About Love

A man wanted to talk about love.
‘No...! Not about love...!’ everyone cried
and everyone departed or knocked him down,
and death peered through a window:
‘About love...? Ridiculous...!’

That man put on a pair of wings
like those of a thrush,
but larger and more despairing,
and away he flew and sang about love
and love sang about him, murmured about him –

never did a man go to bed more sorrowful
on the indifferent earth.

‘One day I will...’
but she put her hand over his mouth.
‘You don’t even know what I want to say!’
he cried, in a smothered voice.
‘No,’ she said.
The room wept,
the windows shed bitter tears
and the floor sobbed.
The walls lamented quietly
and the bed wished itself dead, worm-eaten, in a basement,
all in pieces.
But the sun came up
and she took her hand from his mouth,
for he no longer knew
that he would leave, just like that, under false pretences,
one morning,
when it was still dark.

Dying?? Never heard of it!

But one evening, under a street lamp, I found a poem about dying.
It was rain-drenched and almost illegible,
but everything was in it.
I learnt it by heart and thought:
might there be just such a poem, such a rain-drenched, almost
 illegible poem,
about love, with everything in it about love,
and should I learn that by heart too?

The emperor is cold,
appears on the steps of his palace,
cries:
'Why don't I have any clothes on?'

Everyone keeps silent.
Men keep silent.
Women keep silent.
Those who know everything keep silent.
Children keep silent.

'Why?' cries the emperor. 'I must know!
Now!'

Soldiers take aim.
Searchlights sweep back and forth.
It's winter and I am a poet
who writes about love and about nothing, nothing else,
ever.

After Cavafy

The philosophers ran into one another in the street.
It was a whim of fate –
not one of them was missing.

Fundamental questions were not answered that day,
such as: who is happier than who,
and what purpose does happiness serve and what purpose loneliness.

They stood there together for a long time.
They held a parasol over one another's heads
and decided not to flinch
and even more fervently and even more accurately to long for nothing.
They nodded.
Then they thought of someone – each of them thought of someone else –
and cast down their eyes.

They greeted one another and continued on their way.

Freedom

For killing and being happy and holding back
and hesitating
and falling into an abyss
and denying and being guilty
and feverishly searching for truth, beauty –
freedom makes no difference,
or at most the difference between a flowering apple tree
and no flowering apple tree,
or between a kiss and no kiss, however fleeting
and treacherous it may be.

At The End Of The Day

At the end of the day,
when someone comes rushing in with love,
when you're tired and clumsy and just at that moment caught in a tangle
of fears –
what do you do,
what do you do with love, downy, easily frightened,
that someone still brings you?

I will leave just once. Then I will stay.
Perhaps I will leave twice. But then, for sure, I will stay...

After I have left I will stop once
and hesitate,
perhaps twice – I don't know.

I am right, I'll think.
I will take the shortest road, the most beautiful road,
and the fastest road too,
the road past precipices and elegant ruins,
the road past poppies, past screeching gulls –

the road home.

You know what, a man thought,
I am going to pity myself,
with a pity as large as a stone,
as a rock, as a skyscraper!
And once I've come to pity myself that much,
then I will comfort myself.

He rubbed his hands,
whistled a tune,
paced up and down a room.
The sun shone through the windows.
That is what I will do, he thought,
and he sat down
and bowed his head.

Shall I leave?

Shall I grow sad and leave?

Shall I finally conclude life is insignificant, shrug my shoulders
and leave?

Shall I set the world down (or hand it to someone else), thinking: this is
enough,
and leave?

Shall I look for a door,

and if there is no door: shall I make a door, open it carefully
and leave – with small meek steps?

Or shall I stay?

Shall I stay?

At Night

At night, in the dark, under his horse blanket –
having seen his gruffness in mirrors –
Newton thinks:
'But does the apple *wish* to fall,
does God *wish* to exist...'

and see, the wish walks across the waters,
and on his shoulder gravity
and in his hand love, of ash wood
and loneliness,

walks towards us.

There is no way back –

Samaritans leave their riding animals at the side of the road,
rush towards someone
and lean forward,
with their large, greedy eyes –

there is no way out, no middle course, no side-road to a sea
where ships are anchored,
rocking gently in the wind –

and yet life is not a fatal journey
and it never ends badly. For no one.
On the contrary!

Some people are complete.
They tear themselves apart in vain.
They always remain complete.

Women take them with them,
carefully wrap their feelings round them,
tie them up, in a bow,
place a rose in it – a white rose –
and put them away. For later. In difficult times.

And they rise and tear themselves apart,
shout and tear themselves apart,
become large and almighty and tear themselves apart,
but in vain.