

Brilliant, powerful poems

The poetry of Nachoem M. Wijnberg

ONE OUGHT TO BE ABLE to say of a poem: it begins well, but by line seven it becomes a false claim – according to Nachoem M. Wijnberg, one of the Netherlands' preeminent living poets. He also once said that a child of twelve could understand his poems. Correspondingly, in his phrasing, he seeks clarity and validity. Perhaps this evokes ideas of simplicity and straightforwardness, but that is not the case: opinions are seldom as diverse as those concerning this oeuvre. The vast majority of poetry lovers agree that Wijnberg writes brilliant, powerful poems, but what are they actually about?

Some readers refuse to believe that Wijnberg's poems contain a 'deeper' significance, and enjoy the directly apparent as much as possible. They praise the simplicity, tragedy and beauty of the situations he sketches. They applaud his lack of metaphor. Others put his work through a post-modern filter and maintain that Wijnberg questions language, reason, and unambiguousness.

Yet others refer to the poet's Jewish roots and point to traces of the Talmud. Or they perceive references to the Holocaust in unsuspected corners of the oeuvre. Others again wish to regard him purely as a 'classical' poet who creates his own visual imagery: averse to trains of thought and artistic movements but full of respect for tradition.

If it were not such a cliché, one might say: a Wijnberg poem captures the reader instantly but does not reveal itself easily. However, this cliché is not truly applicable: Wijnberg's poems expose themselves immediately, it is only during re-reading that they appear to comprise unexpected aspects. One of the great issues in this oeuvre is probably: what is worthwhile? This question fragments into all kinds of other questions. Where to sleep? What to sing? What to buy? What should you spend time on? Where should you travel? How should you act? Et cetera.

Wijnberg does not suffer from lack of recognition. His debut *De simulatie van de schepping* (The Simulation of Creation, 1989) was nominated for the Buddingh' Prize, the most important prize for Dutch-language debut collections. He has won several other awards including, in 2009, for his collection *Het leven van* (The Life Of), the VSB Poetry Prize, the greatest honour a Dutch-language poetry collection can receive.



photo Vincent Mentzel

Nachoem M. Wijnberg (b. 1961) has been writing at demonic speed for twenty years now, publishing fourteen books of poetry and four novels. His collections have won practically every poetry prize that the Netherlands can boast, and made him one of the most important Dutch poets of the present day. He's also a Professor at the University of Amsterdam, Faculty of Economics and Econometrics.

You will not readily take his work as belonging to anyone else in the Netherlands or anyone else from his generation.

ROB SCHOUTEN in Dutch weekly *VRIJ NEDERLAND*

What Wijnberg writes does genuinely hurt. For that reason he is a great poet.

PIET GERBRANDY in Dutch daily *DE VOLKSKRANT*

Wijnberg is such a unique author that you always recognize his voice in extremely diverse collections. And that is the characteristic feature of a significant poet.

ERIK LINDNER in Dutch weekly *DE GROENE AMSTERDAMMER*

CONTEMPORARY DUTCH POETS

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

RIGHTS

Contact
Keizersgracht 205
NL – 1016 DS Amsterdam
The Netherlands
TEL.: +31 20 535 25 35
FAX: +31 20 535 25 49
E-MAIL:
mnagtegaal@uitgeverijcontact.nl
WEBSITE:
www.uitgeverijcontact.nl

WIJNBERG ABROAD

Wijnberg's poems have been translated and published in anthologies and magazines in France, Germany, China, Macedonia, Iran and the USA.



Foundation for the
Production and
Translation of
Dutch Literature

Singel 464
NL – 1017 AW Amsterdam
TEL.: +31 20 620 62 61
FAX: +31 20 620 71 79
E-MAIL: office@nlpvf.nl
WEBSITE: www.nlpvf.nl

Sample Translation

Poems

by Nachoem M. Wijnberg

(Amsterdam, Contact)

Contents

One poem by Nachoem M. Wijnberg, in Dutch: *Eerst dit dan dat*

Twenty poems by Nachoem M. Wijnberg, in English translation:

First This Then That	(2004)
I Am a Doctor	(1993)*
Psalm 22	(1996)*
When Someone Asked Shotetsu This, He Answered Thus	(2004)
I Know	(2006)
Song	(2006)
Song	(2006)
Morning and Evening Song	(2006)
Research Report	(2008)
When I Sit Down at My Table I Get a Cup of Coffee and a Glass of Water	(2008)
Someone Who Wants to Blow Their Brains Out for Love Takes It Seriously and That Is Important	(2008)
The Christian Comes to Visit	(2008)
My Father Says That It Is Sensible To Get Into Something in Which Mediocrity Is Not Too Bad, Like the Field in Which I Am a Professor	(2008)
If I Borrow Enough Money the Bank Becomes My Slave	(2008)*
Desire	(2009)
Another of Ghalib's Jokes	(2009)
Exactly That Much	(2009)
Something Else	(2009)
Do I Have Any More Questions?	(2009)
It Would Be a Good Joke If Ghalib Was the Only Good Poet	(2009)

Translated by David Colmer, except *): translated by Alissa Valles

- 1993: Dutch original from *Langzaam en zacht* (Slowly and Softly), De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam 1993. Translation published in *New European Poets*, Graywolf Press, St. Paul, Minnesota 2008.
- 1996: Dutch original from *Geschenken* (Gifts), De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam 1996. Translation published in *New European Poets*, Graywolf Press, St. Paul, Minnesota 2008.
- 2004: From *Eerst dit dan dat* (First This Then That), Contact, Amsterdam 2004
- 2006: From *Liedjes* (Songs), Contact, Amsterdam 2006
- 2008: From *Het leven van* (The Life Of), Contact, Amsterdam 2008
- 2009: From *Divan van Ghalib* (Divan of Ghalib), Contact, Amsterdam 2009

Followed by 'I use simple words like table and chair': an interview with Nachoem M. Wijnberg

For additional information on Nachoem M. Wijnberg and other Dutch poets, please also visit:

- The poetry pages at the NLPVF website:

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

- The Dutch domain of Poetry International Web:

<http://netherlands.poetryinternationalweb.org>

EERST DIT DAN DAT

Schrijven, dan wachten;
wachten, dan schrijven;
gedicht, dan afscheid,
dan op bezoek gaan.

Verlangen, dan uitkiezen;
examen, dan wakker schrikken van examen;
op bezoek gaan,
dan zijn huis uit sturen.

Hij is bang weggerend,
komt vast niet meer terug.
De nacht in zijn huis blijven wachten,
's ochtends doen wat ik anders zou vergeten.

FIRST THIS THEN THAT

Writing, then waiting;
waiting, then writing;
a poem, then a goodbye,
then going to visit.

Wanting, then choosing;
exams, then waking with a start from exams;
going to visit,
then sending him out of his house.

He's run away frightened,
won't be coming back.

Waiting the night in his house,
in the morning doing what I would otherwise forget.

I AM A DOCTOR

I let the rain destroy my clothes
and stay awake at night and then fall asleep
on the back seat of my car, on my horse.
When I find a dead body in the street
I look for letters and keys in the clothes
and I try to find someone who recognizes the body
(sometimes it's the dog or the horse).

Look at me, I'm a doctor.
Give me your hand, I'm a doctor.
Let me through, I'm a doctor, no a policeman.
No, a doctor and a policeman were walking down the street.

Here are two envelopes.
In one there's a joke that's twice as good as in the other.
You can keep one of the jokes.
Pick an envelope, open it, and read the joke.
The joke in the other is twice or half as good.
If I let you switch, would you?

What's it about, I asked whom I found,
and they all told the same joke about themselves
and gave me lists of their character traits
as if they wanted a place in a better one.
It's me, talk to me.

I'm a doctor, they called me to be sure.

I'm going to make a joke that will last ten years.
I have all the ingredients.

PSALM 22

Listen.
The words that I cry out

like

a herd,
stampeding the field,
and there is no other field.

There is a drowning horse at the bottom of a waterfall,
there is blood on half my face.

Doesn't it distract you to listen to me
from your sure and constant loss?

But I keep an eye open for you
so that you can look through it
and look again and can think of an answer
and want to take it back like an unintended but relinquished sacrifice.

Like saying: I don't want
to lose you.

WHEN SOMEONE ASKED SHOTETSU THIS, HE ANSWERED THUS

In which province is Mount Yoshino,
in which province is Mount Tatsuta?

When I write about cherry blossoms, Yoshino;
when I write about autumn leaves, Tatsuta.

It doesn't help me to remember
that one is in the province of Ise, the other in the province of Hyuga.

But although I have never taken the trouble of learning it by heart,
I have discovered that Mount Yoshino is in the province of Yamato.

When my house burns down with all my poems,
I get some back from those who have learnt them by heart.

I don't dare to ask for the poems about who I desired.
That's why I'll write them again when I remember who I desired.

I KNOW

You want to go away.
Because they kill all the rabbits here.
But you're not a rabbit.
Try explaining that to them.

It's the rabbits that make it impossible.
No, it's you.
Why me.
Why the rabbits.

If charged by a savage rabbit.
Act like you're dead.
I know that, you know that.
But does the rabbit know it.

And then the sun stops shining.
After how long.
After four days.
Thank you, I thought for a moment you said three days.

Was that it or did it get dark.
What did you think I wanted.
The same story over and over.
I wouldn't want anyone else in your place.

SONG

I saw a shop
went in and bought
something I had forgotten
I already had.

I stood in the shop
and there was nothing else
I could remember
that I needed.

But what do I do
with two of them
except wait
for one to break?

My father wanted
to teach me about money,
that's why he refused
to give me something.

He gave me money
and pointed to a shop,
go in and ask
for what you want.

SONG

Not long ago
it rained hard,
not long ago
it got dark.

I didn't go on
until it had stopped,
so I had to wait
until it stopped.

I heard the rain
fall from great heights
and could have sat
outside on the grass.

The rain as a crown
on my head, or
as if I hadn't yet begun
and got to say when.

Like in a song:
once and once again,
afraid it has changed
or remained unchanged.

MORNING AND EVENING SONG

It is silent above my head,
below my feet,
the dark's not cold, the light's not warm;
when morning or evening comes running up
it's to bring me something to read.

A book I want to keep
or take with me when I travel;
on the first page
I stopped reading three times
and each time I could have stopped longer.

I suddenly dare to say
I want you;
if you suddenly don't want to anymore
I have to accept it,
like when morning or evening don't want to anymore.

What you gave me,
not starting today
with what was taken from me
or abandoned by me
and is now spread over mornings and evenings.

When I was a child
I lived in a house
I still have the key to
because I had to hold it in my hand
in the morning when we left to travel until it was evening.

RESEARCH REPORT

I talk to doctors who have won the lottery: immediately after they have heard the news and then every two, three years.

The first time I ask them what they are planning to do with the money; later I ask what they have done with it.

They are almost always willing to answer, even when they have lost it all again, and the first time I talk to them I do not contradict them if they think I work for the lottery.

There are only a few who have lost it all, most of them have bought a new house and something else they had always wanted and put the rest in a bank account. Of all the doctors I talk to, there is only one whose wife left him after he had won.

It made him feel sick at heart for a few days, but he also once spent a week longing for a woman who was dead.

At the end of that week the longing diminished, but then he realised that he had now really lost her.

Most contented are the ones who give some of it away each year, to a local hospital, for instance, to buy a new bed.

If I could do something new this late in life I would study medicine, because doctors try even harder for colleagues.

The sick doctors I talk to tell me that's really true, and that it's a shame they can't possibly see me as a colleague.

Not even if I had studied everything they have studied, because if I had already done something else before, I could be a doctor *and* do something else on the side, or I would know what they know in a different way, because of studying it so late.

WHEN I SIT DOWN AT MY TABLE I GET A CUP OF COFFEE AND A GLASS
OF WATER

A hat on my head when I come in; I don't take it off when I sit down.
I hang my coat up on a hook on the wall, next to the photo of a man sitting at
the table I always sit at.
The first time I came in I asked who he was and was told he was dead.
But he knew just how to move his mouth to get every word right.
You can't learn that without shadow and mastery in dark layers around your
heart, and the outside layer is your coat.

**SOMEONE WHO WANTS TO BLOW THEIR BRAINS OUT FOR LOVE TAKES
IT SERIOUSLY AND THAT IS IMPORTANT**

I don't think I can watch you if you, the actors, can't admit it's funny.
Someone dies, but that's halfway, and someone at the end, but he kept saying he
wanted to die.
Not that everyone always gets what they ask for, but nothing happens to
someone without their having asked for it at least once.
Like in a play with too many roles when I read it, but it's easy when staged.
It's even easier when all the roles are for one actor, in haste and regret that he
met her so late in the night.
Please don't cry about what you have to say, otherwise I'll give you lines, you
can write down one hundred times: this is so important no one can ask for it.

THE CHRISTIAN COMES TO VISIT

My grandfather is in his garden when the Christian comes to visit.
He can see how well his neighbours who believe in Jesus Christ are doing.
My grandfather says that he is doing well too.
That's an advance payment, the Christian says, because Jesus Christ assumes
that later a man like my grandfather will start believing in him.
If he believed in Jesus Christ he would do better than his neighbours, because
he is a better man and works harder.
He is sure of it, the Christian says, and could my grandfather possibly cut down
the biggest tree in his garden, as an advance payment.
My grandfather asks why, he doesn't believe in the tree, or do his neighbours
think he does.
The Christian says that the neighbours don't think that my grandfather believes
in the tree, but that the tree still helps him.
They are stupid people, the Christian says, if Jesus Christ didn't take pity on
them they would be on the street and starving.

MY FATHER SAYS THAT IT IS SENSIBLE TO GET INTO SOMETHING IN WHICH MEDIOCRITY IS NOT TOO BAD, LIKE THE FIELD IN WHICH I AM A PROFESSOR

He decides to obey the law, as someone who doesn't know the law, but expects his children to know it, and therefore does what he can to avoid embarrassing his children.

My father says that he became a mediocre man especially for me, so that no one would think that I could never be as good as my father.

He would still like someone to remember him when he is no longer here, not every day but now and then, without having planned it.

If what's left after someone's death is their part of truth, what happens to my part of untruth?

When someone is dead there is nothing left of them, except of my father, who walks around by himself where he is.

IF I BORROW ENOUGH MONEY THE BANK BECOMES MY SLAVE

A bank lends me money, if I don't pay it back they tell my boss he has to pay them my salary.

But they have to leave me enough to eat and sleep and an umbrella if it's raining.

They can also strip my house, the furniture isn't worth a lot but every small bit helps.

Every morning I go to my work, if I don't start early they'll get someone else right away, then no bank would lend me money if the sun were shining.

My boss has given me a cat to raise as a dog.

I know perfectly well it can't be done, but I asked for a week's time – maybe the cat is lucky, maybe I'm lucky.

My hands around a cup of coffee before I go to work, warm-empty, cold-empty, as if hidden in the mist over a field of grass.

What I get if there's no more work for me, I'm ashamed to say how little it is.

When I get outside I count it over, if they look out the window they can see me do it.

Say it's so much that I go on counting for hours, night falls and I'm still standing there.

They stay and watch for a moment when they finish work, but they have to go home, I understand that, I could also go home and continue counting there.

If it's too little it won't help to run straight back, because there's no one there anymore, and if I come back tomorrow I might have spent what's missing tonight.

To go someplace where it's warm enough to walk without clothes in the daytime, it helps me to know there's something more there than here. For someone like me there's work everywhere, it shouldn't take a week to find work for me there.

Three times work and a house near work, I can choose one and try for a week if I want to stay there.

If I don't want to stay at the end of the week I'd be back the next day, then it was just a week's vacation.

DESIRE

I wished my only problem was your not wanting to see how I desire you,
it's not a pretty sight, if I had a choice I wouldn't want to look either.

Everywhere I stop I lay down my desire, my eyes too tired to see who's standing
there.

Is that what I call a desire? I just want to learn how to do something.

Get changed, I mean, get undressed,
you are the only one who is left, everything around you is empty, not
because you desire someone.

Turn around, turn around, turn around,
I see you – if I say I see you, you can come out.

Ghalib complains that you're not doing your work,
which he thought was his due, if others get it why shouldn't he?

I have heard that less desire helps, but wouldn't more desire save me from this,
the way someone saves the life of someone he doesn't want to talk to?

No one knows what desire is until Ghalib says something about it,
he reads the history of the world and when he's finished he says what he
lacks.

ANOTHER OF GHALIB'S JOKES

I go from door to door like a dog or a cat because otherwise I have nothing to eat,
sometimes they give me something because they've heard I write poems.

A joke the way one tries to be more generous than the other,
each time a door opens, I look as if I am longing for something, I can see that from their faces.

It's true, I write as if I'm translating from another language
and doing my best to stick as closely as possible to the parts I have understood.

I wished that someone would come to explain to me what a poem is to someone who is not human,
then I might be better able to explain what a poem is.

Someone asks you if you're not going to cut off someone's head today.
Today? Whose head would that be?

While I explain to you where I am, as if I am explaining a joke before I tell it,
you come up behind me – please don't scare me like that.

I can't joke about everything, not that my jokes are always successful,
and then say something as if I mean it and it will be ruined if someone doubts it for even a moment.

Don't tell Ghalib that he is ironic, because he doesn't want to be,
except when he can hardly breathe – yes, then he wants to be ironic.

Again Ghalib says something that is just a little too wise, instead of one prime number after another,
so that those who hear are almost certain that thought has gone into what is being said, can't he do better?

EXACTLY THAT MUCH

Waving a beggar aside, but still giving him what he's asking for
if he stays standing in front of me, exactly that much!

I give him money to buy drink, but five minutes later he's again standing in
front of me
and asking, before he recognises me, for exactly that much!

When he speaks to me I smell that he doesn't smell of drink,
and no, he's not getting money from me a second time, exactly that
much!

Making myself come, when I'm far away from where I want to sleep,
not asking someone, for exactly that much!

Asking whether I can remember something I used to really want and don't
anymore,
if I'm honest I can't think of anything, I still want it, exactly that much.

Asking whether I think it would help me if I didn't want something anymore, it
wasn't that much,
it's not that it would help me to want less and less, it's not that much.

You can cut the heart out of my body if you say that that is what I owe you,
exactly that much,
I didn't make that up, I got it from an old Jew, he said I could use it as I
liked, exactly that much.

SOMETHING ELSE

When I was a child I could have pretended I was sleeping next to someone I loved,
perhaps later I would have needed less nights to learn how.

All the things I shouldn't have done when I was a child, didn't I have anything else to do then,
every night I tried to imagine what it would be like if I loved someone, isn't that enough?

If I can say that I am so slow that I always arrive late, I have something,
if I can say that there are more examples than necessary, I can take one back.

My father said that it helped to think of something I can look at for a long time,
a sailing ship on the water, for instance, or whatever I can look at for a long time.

Poetry is making meaning, not something else,
each time Ghalib thinks up a new meaning God wants him to exchange it for something else.

A poem brings the day of decision closer, a dream about a poem gives a day's respite,
where words mean something, Ghalib's are law.

DO I HAVE ANY MORE QUESTIONS?

Each time I get fired they ask me later
to come back for a few days.

I shouldn't lose heart if I hear them say
that things haven't worked out the way they'd hoped.

I'm giving up buying new clothes because I have enough clothes I've never
worn,
but they're not new, they were bought for this very purpose long ago.

Just say you don't want to hear that I have been fired again,
because that's something different from ransoming me, when will I start
to behave?

That's what you get for asking me too often what I want to be later,
a day will come when you will no longer ask me that,
you'll have asked it so often.

IT WOULD BE A GOOD JOKE IF GHALIB WAS THE ONLY GOOD POET

Ghalib hasn't prayed a day of his life, should he start now he can no longer speak,
gesturing a number of times a day as if he would like to say a prayer?

That is Ghalib telling his friends they shouldn't stop
giving him their poems to improve.

Not because he loves poetry, what gave them that idea,
but like a woman defending the man she has been married to her whole life.

I know a secret I want to tell all my friends,
from the poems you have sent me I can tell they're not the first you have written, and you're not asking for anything either.

Give me a poem and the next day I'll give it back improved, unless I have lost it,
if my hands can't hold anything anymore, you mustn't give me anything anymore.

When I am no longer here, they can give it to you, the bloodied flag I gave my life for,
there are many good poets but I would rather wait outside until it's Ghalib's turn.

An interview with Nachoem M. Wijnberg

‘I use simple words like table and chair’

Nachoem M. Wijnberg on form, meretricious style, swimming with a cat, emotion, and the damned

by Ron Rijghard

(NRC Handelsblad, August 2009)

translated by George Hall

Nachoem M. Wijnberg is regarded as one of the most important poets in our language region. Critics acclaim him and he is a source of inspiration to younger poets. His status has been confirmed by the various prizes he has received for his work, with the VSB Poetry Prize 2009 for *Het Leven van* (The Life Of), his most recent collection, as the highlight in his career up to the present. It is a collection with winding sentences that deal with indecision, unemployment and loneliness, and with doctors, actors and fathers. ‘My poems are clear, easy to read, and at least promise to cover important affairs in everyone’s life.’

You were nominated on a previous occasion, but this year you received the VSB Poetry Prize for Het leven van. What does this mean to you?

‘I am genuinely happy with this prize, but I did have the conceited idea that they could have given me it for my earlier collections. I was surprised, slash disappointed, that my previous collection, *Liedjes* (Songs), was not nominated. The luxury of receiving a prize now and again is that I don’t have to get worked up about prizes. I haven’t yet won anything for my novels, unfortunately.’

Where does your work originate?

‘If I think seriously about a topic, I make a note of ideas. I don’t have to sit down purposefully to write a piece. Usually there’s enough happening in my head, and then I work at different moments. I make use of every opportunity.’

As an academic you will have enough time to sit down and think.

‘In the modern academic setting there is little opportunity for academics to sit down peacefully. I do research and I also teach a lot.’

What kind of thoughts do you have?

‘Every poem has many fathers. In my case, a poem never comes all at once. I

write something, review it, and then other ideas arise. And ultimately a poem can deviate a great deal from the original stimulus. I am anxious about mentioning too many impulses, because I'm afraid that people will devote more energy to searching for that stimulus rather than simply reading the poem.'

Don't be afraid. Let's examine a poem from the prize-winning collection. Such as: 'If I borrow enough money the bank becomes my slave'.

'Ahaa. That is a long poem with at least twelve inputs. The poem is about a lack of money, about a lack of things in general. It contains memories and thin jokes. (Quotes from the poem) "Every morning I go to my work, if I don't start early they'll get someone else right away, then no bank would lend me money if the sun were shining." This belongs to a series of associations with banks, just like the cliché that a bank will lend you an umbrella when the sun is shining and ask for it back when it is raining.'

The bank lends you money when you have money, not when you have none and therefore really need it?

'Exactly. This collection was written in 2007 and 2008, when there was enough news to appraise the position of banks ... and disregarding the fact that I am a poor economist who often thinks about banks anyway.

At the end of the poem there is the sentence: "Three times work and a house near work, I can choose one and try for a week if I want to stay there." I got the idea from a programme on the BBC in which people who wanted to emigrate to Australia could choose one of three places and give it a try for a week. It fits into the story of the poem in which someone is worried that he cannot repay a loan from the bank, gets fired, has to find another job and move somewhere else. Then you have the question: what will happen if this doesn't work either?'

Someone receives his pay and starts counting it. That sounds a bit archaic.

'It is a kind of redundancy bonus. I like to use abstractions in a concrete way. With a universal and almost abstract concept such as money, I have it counted out on the streets; that's concrete. It creates tension. On the one hand I try to use abstract concepts, without particularizing them – that makes me nervous – on the other hand, I try to make them as tangible as possible. I prefer to use simple words like table, chair and plant which do not lead to a specific association. A word such as cactus carries a plethora of symbolism and associations and that can disrupt the rest of the poem. I try to be as precise as possible. The more general I am, the more solid the poem. The more things a poem covers, the greater its power of expression.'

Surely the fact that a poem can signify many things is not the same as having great power of expression?

'The notion that a poem bears much significance is something you can see in terms of breadth and depth. Having both is ideal. The craftsmanship I have built up is related to the sensitivity for words that can be too universal or not universal enough. What will happen if I replace "plant" with "cactus"? Or by the word

“non-mineral”? I test everything this way. And hopefully the poem will then signify something that makes the theme clearer to me. And to others too.’

What did the poem about the bank make clearer to you?

‘I’m afraid I have to say something that thousands of poets have already said: If I could say the same thing in two sentences then I would immediately tear this poem out of the collection, it would no longer be needed.’

You once said that a poem must make a true assertion.

‘A poem must say something that is true, in the same way as a scientific article makes true assertions. And, similarly, these assertions must not be trivial, they should appeal to the emotions of the reader. I expect people to get agitated about matters such as employment, banks and poverty, just like I do.’

*In contrast to the previous collection, *Het Leven van* contains long sentences that run the entire width of the page. Take the poem ‘Style’, for example, which begins with: ‘The late style, as if it is no longer important’. Does this refer to your own development?*

‘I made use of all kinds of form in my first collections. Later on I got better in selecting and using forms. In my most recent collections I restricted myself to one single form, in order to generate unity.

At a certain moment I noticed that I could create different rhythms by allowing the sentences to run on. This generated tension and induced significance. And if you have the idea that a new form works well, you pluck up the courage to do more, even a timid personality like me.’

Those page-wide lines don’t look like poetry.

‘I had announced that I would curse the first person who started talking about prose.’

Fortunately I’m not the first. I have already seen a review that discussed prosaic lines.

‘Everybody is free to write what he or she wants, just as I can curse anyone I like. That’s part of the trade. But I haven’t gone that far. I have protested in web logs that mentioned the term “prose poem” and inserted the e-mails I sent.

The texts are not printed as prose, otherwise there wouldn’t be a hard return after every sentence. In a poem, the text is reduced to the most essential elements.

Besides being timid I am also extremely impatient, so words have to get to the point as soon as possible. This makes a poem exciting and, as such, gives it the chance to touch you emotionally and intellectually. In that case, it makes no difference whether you cast the essence in rhyming verse or long sentences, as I do.

The characterization as prose poetry is, to me, a reference to meretricious style, with a hint of “all style and no content”. A prose poem is prose, but written so elegantly that it closely resembles a poem. That is exactly the opposite of what I wanted to do here.

I used to distrust sentences that carried you away. I was afraid to let my imagination run wild and thus lose the meaning of the passage. I don't have that problem now I have more self-confidence. That was already the case with my previous collection, *Liedjes*. And my new collection entitled *Divan van Ghalib* (Ghalib's Divan), which will appear in September, is actually full of outrageously elegant poems.'

The 'Liedjes' collection was different in terms of content and tone. What was the starting point for this collection?

'I wanted to write something that was a bit closer to music, partly because I thought that that would make it easier to work with more explicit, major emotions and with powerful small words – like “my heart” or “song” – without appearing ironic or exaggeratedly pathetic. And I wanted to see what would happen if I produced poems that looked like they could sound beautiful.'

Going back to the poem entitled 'Style'. Did you think: style is unimportant?

'No, not at all. This poem is about styles. The late style is explained after the comma: “as if it is no longer important, I can just as well say something to make it easier to be with me in one room”. This is a serious demand on something that is no longer important, because it is not that easy to be with me in one room. And it is certainly not easy for me to say something that makes it easier to be with me in one room.

So it doesn't mean that style doesn't matter to me. What makes me happy, and what even makes me proud as a poet, is that I am not doing much more than repeating the sentence when I try to give an explanation.'

Even favourable reviews mention that you write in such a complex way. In his panegyric, Rob Schouten, the chairman of the VVSB jury, said that your poems were more than brainteasers. More than, but meanwhile...

'My poems are clear, easy to read and at least promise that they will cover the important affairs in everyone's life.'

A number of poems deal with 'My father'. That sounds personal. Are the poems personal?

'There is one poem with the title “My father says that it is sensible to get into something in which mediocrity is not too bad, like the field in which I am a professor”. My father never made that statement. He died more than thirteen years ago and I wasn't a professor then. Nevertheless, it is true that he talked about how much more risky it was to be an artist, because mediocre work in art is worth absolutely nothing.

In the poem, the father says that he became a mediocre man especially for his son, “so that no one would think that I could never be as good as my father”. I got that statement from my father, but it referred to the banker Mendelssohn who said that he was finally no longer the son of Mendelssohn the renowned philosopher but had become the father of Mendelssohn the composer.'

What recurs repeatedly in your poetry is the problem of making decisions. Is this so difficult?

‘I write primarily about things that move me. I try to write about emotions and I know that I can be moved when someone else decides or doesn’t decide something.’

Several poems deal with wishful thinking, with a yearning for a different life and dissatisfaction with life as it is. What’s wrong?

‘It is not discontent as such. If I deliberate on a desire, I think about what there is. And I deliberate on what I don’t need to wish for.’

In one poem you have the line: ‘Still, that was my dream, to swim with a cat.’

‘Isn’t that a nice dream? I once heard somebody utter the cliché about how marvellous it would be to swim with dolphins, to be at one with nature. But in view of the fact that many people have a more intimate relationship with a cat than with dolphins, it seemed to me to be a more extreme and intimate wish to swim with a cat.’

It is irony, a joke?

‘You may laugh about it but you can take it seriously. It is a poem that can be read as a series of statements by a first-person character, in which an exchange of thoughts and discussions with others are recalled or imagined. The successive statements, which are both a discussion and a narrative by the first-person character, are seeking mutual connection. If you take the sentence about the cat as an inlaid joke, detached from the rest of the poem, then I have done something wrong. After all, wanting to swim with a cat is rather tragic, don’t you think?’

The poem is about someone who has difficulty is making contact.

‘I have the overwhelming inclination to read the poem out loud: “I go to work, but remain silent there until someone says something to me.” This poem is about problems you could have in getting along with others. (Reads the second sentence of the poem.) “I say I resign, but the next day I ask for my job back./ Perhaps I might never find another job.”

The fact that there are communication problems evokes the question: “What do I want to become – a gypsy, living where there are no longer houses.” That is not what someone deliberately opts for. (Reads the rest of the poem.) Clear, clear, clear!’

Does creating a poem like this make you feel calm and secure?

‘Yes, I’m afraid so. Even though I don’t really believe in therapeutic writing, engaging in this type of discussion in a poem does help in controlling some of my restlessness.

I am never troubled by a lack of topics for poems, after all, I have enough problems. But the poems don’t necessarily deal with those problems. They are a combination of what happens to me and to other people. And I like to tell stories and amusing anecdotes.’

Nachoem M. Wijnberg is now in the process of being discovered. Whereas he was long known as an extraordinary but inaccessible poet, his reach has gradually extended since *Eerst dit dan dat* (First This, Then That) was published in 2004. This collection was nominated for the VSB Poetry Prize and was picked up by a larger public than his earlier work, largely due to the oriental poetry and philosophy that punctuate these poems. *Liedjes* appeared in 2006, a collection full of ‘verses about love and longing,’ according to *De Standaard* (Belgian daily); ‘Some stanzas may even have hit potential,’ observed Piet Gerbrandy in *De Volkskrant* (Dutch daily) with reference to several poems.

In terms of poetry, you could say that *Het leven van* is a modest bestseller. The collection was awarded the VSB Poetry Prize, and the jury mentioned ‘Escherian grammatical constructions’ that nevertheless produce ‘endlessly readable poetry’, ‘containing the conclusion, which cannot be over-appreciated, that the world can be both complicated and amusing at the same time.’

Het leven van is followed by *Divan van Ghalib* (Ghalib’s Divan) in mid-September 2009.