

Changing a life

By Bas Kwakman

Speech to the World Meeting of Directors of International Poetry Festivals 2011

You asked me whether poetry can promote world peace. I'm afraid it cannot. To understand this answer, you need to understand where I come from.

I come from a country where poetry broke free from social reality a long time ago; a country where the value of art rose the moment people realised that art has no fixed value. I come from a country where poetry is no more than a 'crumb on the rock of the universe'; where poetry, as one of the most elevated art forms, doesn't so much speak to the public as to itself.

I come from a country where poetry was once described as *the most individual expression of the most individual emotion...* where the poet, hidden away in the margins, nostalgically cherishes his role.

A successful poet in my country publishes a collection every three years, with a print run of around 500 copies. Fifty copies are sent to the editors of magazines, daily and weekly newspapers. If the collection is covered and the review is positive, 200 copies might be sold. If the reviews are negative only fifty will be sold. Fifty copies disappear under the poet's bed and the hundreds that the publishers have left are sold off at cut-price a couple of years later.

I know an artist who, when success failed to come knocking, piled up pretty much the entire print runs of his two poetry collections and then poured a large sack of plaster of Paris over them. This artwork marked the beginning of an illustrious career.

I come from a part of the world where a good poem doesn't have to be understandable, where political and social reality can sometimes seep between the lines, but never so much so that the ambiguity inherent to poetry is lost.

Here engaged poetry with a clear message is by definition bad poetry. Here one is naturally suspicious of poetry which portrays suffering, of poetry which mainly confirms what we already know, of poetry in which we acknowledge our own righteousness.

I come from a country where a revolutionary poem is a poem which renders the laws of poetry invalid, where reality is too fleeting for poetry, where poetry is always timeless and universal, where poetry aspires to eternity.

This is the tradition I come from. This is how I was born and bred. Art's autonomy is part of my DNA... as is its pointlessness, its helplessness, its intangibility.

But society is a tough old lady, with a great deal of patience and a good memory. She's seen it all before and still remembers the waves and currents.

Things happened in my country which had never happened there before. A politician was murdered in broad daylight by a left-wing animal activist. A famous filmmaker was stabbed on the street by an Islamic fundamentalist. Terrorist plots were uncovered in my country. My country was partly responsible for the slaughter of thousands of Muslims in the Balkans.

A man who drives a wedge between all the different population groups in my country has become the most popular politician, the people's spokesperson. His populism has become the dominant opinion and this opinion, loudly cheered on by the people and expressed in new, simple and unsophisticated terms, calls all art wasteful, an unnecessary luxury. Art is no more than the hobby of affluent liberals, a plaything of the reprehensible elite who are deliberately difficult and therefore have become a symbol of a recent past that should be destroyed.

This populism renders us – writers, readers, culture-lovers – crippled and powerless.

As a result of all of these developments, a new conviction is swelling in my breast; a conviction that doesn't tally with my long-held views on art and literature. It is the firm belief that the artist can no longer remain impartial.

It tears at my ribcage.

Is poetry political? Yes, of course, like any art.

No, of course not, because the importance of art lies precisely in the fact that it only has to do with itself. And if it has to do with the world we live in, then it is primarily to maintain this world in all its intangibility.

We are children of our time

And our time is political.

Polish poet *Wisława Szymborska* said.

And further on in the poem:

*Even when you take to the woods
you're taking political steps
on political ground.*

everything is political, Szymborska decides.

*Meanwhile people were dying,
animals perishing,
houses burning,
and fields growing wild,
just as in times most remote
and less political.*

(translated by Joanna Trzeciak)

Is the poet who writes for a good purpose a good poet?

No, not by definition. A poor poet who writes for a good purpose does that purpose a disservice. Bad poetry is never a bridge to good poetry.

Can I like the work of a writer whose political affinities I loathe?

Yes, I can. Louis Ferdinand Celine's prose, for example, or Ezra Pound's Cantos.

Naturally, like anyone, I'd be touched by a child soldier in central Africa exchanging his weapon for a pen. Of course I'm moved by the poet who dares to use his poetry against his homeland's regime. Like you, I have deep respect for every poet who continues to write in a country where writing is impossible.

I like all poets, because they always and in spite of everything, go through life with all their senses fully attuned. I like poetry because everything can become poetry. But I don't like all poetry.

At an international festival, an important poet, who thanks to his poems has been banished from his own country, is welcomed on stage by the host. The poet has spent many years in prison and has experienced terrible things there. The host lists these experiences in detail in his introduction.

He has been given electric shocks. People have extinguished cigarettes on his skin and urinated on him. He has been tied up for days, beaten and left for days in the burning sun, rolled up in barbed wire.

The man has barely survived his sentence.

The audience in the theatre are deeply touched and shudder as the poet walks onto the stage. He reads his first poem, which turns out to be exactly the same as the host's introduction.

I was given electric shocks.

*They extinguished cigarettes on my skin and
urinated all over me.*

*They tied me up for days on end
hit me and rolled me up in barbed wire
and left me for days in the burning sun.*

The public gives him a standing ovation. I want to stand up and clap too, clap out of sympathy, as support, perhaps even in an attempt to alleviate the poet's suffering.

It is not the poetry I clap for.

On stage at another festival is a poet who has fled war-torn Afghanistan. He works as a journalist for an independent Afghani newspaper and endangers himself and his family on a daily basis with the articles he writes from his place of exile.

His poem begins with the lines:

Writing viruses

And electronic labyrinths

With a blackout and no computer

In a rented house, at seven thousand a month;

Kabul, the Afghan capital!

What silly poem is this?

Next follow verses full of simple, direct words and images which gradually render a tough world, replete with sick images expressing the hopelessness of life in Afghanistan. The inner conflict of a modern journalist in the free West who feels homesick for occupied Kabul, the image of a drunken adolescent at a laptop, hooked up to a diesel-powered generator, writing viruses to bring down computers in Paris, New York and London.

The poem ends with the lines:

They asked a Kabul sparrow

Just what is mankind up to?

The sparrow considered this and died!

I stood up and applauded. I clapped for the poem.

The message doesn't make the poetry. The How surpasses the What.

To return to the initial question. Can poetry promote world peace?

I'm afraid it cannot. To do so, Poetry would have to outline the idea of world peace, the path to it and the insight we need for it.

And what is Poetry?

Poetry: all poetry that has ever been written and ever will be written. All bad poetry, subversive poetry, collaborationist poetry, beginners' poetry, swindlers' poetry, dictators' poetry, brainless bellowing poetry.

And all beautiful poetry. All masterful poetry.

'Poetry' is intangible which renders it useless as a means for something so gigantic as world peace.

Sometimes just a single poem is capable of changing a life. Like a poem by Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa once changed my life and indirectly caused me to be standing here in front of you now. *Du sollst dein leben andern*, wrote German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. Not as an appeal or as a command, but as a sober observation. When confronted with true beauty, there's nothing for it: you must change your life.

It is the only possibility that a truly good poem offers. And it's the highest thing a poet can achieve – to spend his entire life trying to write a poem that changes another person's life.

The value of this cannot be underestimated. In terms of world peace too.

Bas Kwakman