CHAPTER 9

Belgium

Geert Buelens

Ceci n'est pas un poème belge de la Grande Guerre.

There is no Belgian canon of First World War poetry.[1] To most people who are aware of the basic military and geopolitical aspects of the war, this might come as a surprise. Wasn't Belgium's fate in the summer of 1914 a major casus belli for Britain? Wasn't 'poor little Belgium' a staple of allied propaganda? Is it possible that a conflict of this magnitude failed to leave an imprint on the country's culture? That wasn't the case, of course. Like in Britain and France, the moniker 'The Great War' is still used in Belgium today, a clear indication of the indelible impact it had on the country and its people. The war's Centenary attracted more than a million foreign tourists to the famous local battlefields and museums, and it also generated exhibitions and publications in scores of small Belgian villages and cities. Monuments were unveiled, official delegations paraded, and unknown soldiers received burial services. What the Centenary did not generate, however, was a true *national* literary culture of remembrance. At key moments Belgian officials – King Philippe included – delivered speeches about honour, sacrifice, and peace, and they laid wreaths bearing the national colours (black, yellow, red), but Commonwealth poetry played a bigger role in these ceremonies than the works of local poets. It is probably not an exaggeration to claim that John McCrae's 'In Flanders Fields' is the best known First World War poem in Belgium.[2]

To most early twentieth century literati this situation was hardly conceivable. Belgian literature equalled Émile Verhaeren and Maurice Maeterlinck, world famous poets, the latter awarded the 1911 Nobel Prize, the former praised in 1916 by *The Times* as 'the greatest exponent

[1] The author wishes to thank Matthijs de Ridder for his comments.

[2] The Ypres First World War museum In Flanders Fields was named after the poem, and prominent modern Flemish poets Bert Decorte, Anton Van Wilderode, Hugo Claus, Paul Claes, and Tom Lanoye have made translations/adaptations of McCrae's classic.

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in European poetry of universal ideals'.[3] Both Francophone authors hailed from Flanders, the predominantly Dutch-speaking northern part of the country and, as such, to the uninitiated they might have seemed like the ideal representatives of their bilingual country. To a growing number of Flemish intellectuals, however, this line of thinking had become highly problematic. They wanted their literature to be represented by their own, Dutch-language writers, and especially the radical youngsters of the age considered Verhaeren and Maeterlinck as their poetical and political enemies in this respect.

The First World War proved to be the defining moment in this development. The global conflict that, one might argue, was (also) *about* Belgium ended with internal strife and cultural and political dreams of Flemish self-rule. The sense of unity that had engulfed Belgium in 1914 gave way to a fractured and decidedly contentious war experience and memory. The most famous and translated Great War volume from 'poor little Belgium' – Paul Van Ostaijen's 1921 *Bezette Stad* (*Occupied City*) – was written in Berlin by a Flemish poet who fled his native country in the autumn of 1918 because he had worked with the German occupiers and was, rightly, seen as an enemy of the Belgian state. Whereas the seventh of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points called for the complete restoration of Belgium as an act vital 'to restore confidence among the nations in the laws which they have themselves set and determined for the government of their relations with one another', quite a few of the Flemish soldiers who were shedding their blood to this end hoped to see the dismantlement of their country. Not unlike other regions in Europe with strong nationalist tendencies (Ireland, Latvia, Czechoslovakia, for example), local poets were instrumental in this mental and political process.[4] Flemish poets were amongst the most vocal nationalist leaders; they were seen as the incarnation of their people's soul, they provided the battle cries and rhymes. Rhetorical tropes about Valour, Freedom, and Sacrifice which were used in poems opposing the German invaders only gained in strength when they were used against the enemy which was Belgium.

Devastated We Stand

In the summer of 1914 few people could have predicted this outcome. The German invasion and the desperate yet heroic fighting of the Belgian army united the country in ways their twenty-first-century descendants only

[3] *The Times*, Wednesday, 29 Nov. 1916.
[4] Geert Buelens, *Everything to Nothing: The Poetry of the Great War, Revolution and the Transformation of Europe*. Translated by David H. McKay (London and New York: Verso, 2015).

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tend to experience, if at all, in a very superficial way, during high-stakes World Championship football games. Of course, the stakes were never really higher than in 1914. The very existence of the country hung in the balance, and thousands of civilians and soldiers lost their lives during the siege of, or subsequent executions in, cities such as Liège, Dinant, Namur, Aerschot, and Leuven.[5]

Belgium's fate quickly became part of propaganda posters and poems, produced by prominent Russian, British, Dutch, and American artists and writers, but also by Belgian refugees and soldiers. Brussels-born Émile Cammaerts was neither: he had migrated to England in 1908 but remained deeply committed to his native country. His three volumes of French-language war poetry (*Belgian Poems: Chants patriotique, et autres poèmes* (1915), *New Belgian Poems: Les trois rois et autres poèmes* (1916, three editions), and *Messines and other Poems* (1918)) were translated into English by his wife, the Shakespearean actress Helen 'Tita' Brand, and were published in London, as well as selections in Danish and Spanish in neutral Copenhagen and Madrid, emphasising how central poetry was to the propaganda effort.

'Sing the pride of our defeats', Cammaerts wrote in 'After Antwerp', 'To the sound of the bugle, the sound of the drum / On the ruins of Aerschot, Dinant, and Termonde'.[6] This sentiment proved central in the actual poems written about these early stages of the war and in its popular remembrance: the military weakness of the country was matched only by its sacrifice. To underline how the country had suffered for the entire world, but also to gain strength from it, the names of the 'devastated'[7] cities would be repeated like beads of a rosary while dreaming of resurrection or revenge: 'We'll go to Antwerp, Ghent, Termonde, / Louvain and Aerschot again, / We'll purge the land of hated powers'.[8]

At first Flemish poets struck similar chords. Soldier-poet Daan Boens included a section titled 'De weenende steden' ('The Weeping Cities') in his first war volume, including poems about Visé, Leuven, Dinant, and Dendermonde, with strings of diminutives

[5] John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

[6] Émile Cammaerts, *Belgian Poems: Chants Patriotiques et Autres Poèmes* (London: John Lane, 1915), p. 15. This bilingual edition published the poems in French and English: 'Chantons l'orgueil de nos défaites, / . . . / Au son du tambour, au son du clairon, / Sur les ruines d' Aerschot, de Dinant, de Termonde' (p. 14).

[7] Verhaeren, Émile. 1916. *Les Ailes Rouges de La Guerre: Poèmes*. 10th ed. Paris: Mercure de France.

[8] Cammaerts, *Belgian Poems*, p. 25. *'Nous irons à Gand, à Anvers, à Termonde / Nous déliverons Aerschot et Louvain, / Nous purgerons le pays de la race immonde'*, p. 24.

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stressing their smallness and vulnerability (''t volkje leerde lijden, / het stadje stond in vuur'; 'these little people learned how to suffer / their little town ablaze').[9] René De Clercq warned the occupiers of these martyred cities ('Denk om Leuven, Duitschland, en Dendermonde!' / 'Think about Louvain, Germany, and Dendermonde'[10]) in a poem called 'Een lied van trouw' ('A Song of Loyalty'), dedicated to King Albert and Queen Elisabeth. This poem earned him the compliments of the royal couple,[11] but, ironically, around the same time the widely popular poet De Clercq became the focus of controversy about his loyalty to king and country, causing a rift in the Flemish movement which has never really healed.

Divided We Stand

What had started out in the early 1800s as a typical romantic nationalist movement had become more political by the beginning of the new century. The Flemish Movement now demanded a Dutch-speaking university, and in some more radical circles federalist if not separatist tendencies were developing. At the outbreak of the war the king had solemnly asked for a truce ('godsvrede', God's peace) in order to fight the enemy as one. This unity did not last long, however. At the Yser front in Flanders, in the occupied regions, and amongst refugees in the Netherlands this *union sacrée* crumbled due to new incarnations of age-old animosities. When parents at the Belgian school in Amsterdam threatened to boycott this facility for refugees because teacher De Clercq had publicly demanded that the king grant the Flemish self-rule after the war the poet became a symbol for the so-called *activists*, a vocal minority which flat-out rejected the truce and appeared willing to accept the German occupier's favours, including a Flemish university in Ghent. Amongst these activists were also the leading voices of the new generation of Expressionist poets, making this political faction a literary juggernaut able to make some people (literary historians included) forget that, legally speaking, they collaborated with the Germans.

[9] Daan Boens, *Van Glorie en Lijden: Sonnetten Uit de Loopgraven Aan Den Yser* (Harderwijk: Kamp, 1917), p. 58.

[10] René De Clercq, *De Zware Kroon: Verzen Uit Den Oorlogstijd* (Bussum: C. A. J. van Dishoeck, 1915), p. 13.

[11] Matthijs de Ridder, *Staatsgevaarlik! De Activistische Tegentraditie in de Vlaamse Letteren, 1912–1933* (Antwerp: Universiteit Antwerpen, 2009, unpublished PhD thesis), p. 367.

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Almost two-and-a-half years before Woodrow Wilson would proclaim self-determination to be 'an imperative principle of action',[12] activist supporters of De Clercq framed the war as 'the dawn of freedom for Poland, Finland, Ireland, Transvaal and Orange Free State', adding Flanders to the mix as a 'country' [sic] which tended to be 'repressed' by the Belgian State.[13] In his next volume, *De noodhoorn* ('Bugle of Distress/ Need'), published in November of 1916, De Clercq, having been fired from his teaching position in the meantime, explicitly called for 'zelfbestuur' ('self rule'),[14] a term bound to raise eyebrows anyhow and obviously even more so in a volume subtitled *Patriotic Songs*. That De Clercq included a poem entitled 'To King Albert' seemed to suggest that the *patria* in question (still) was the one with Albert at its head, but the poem's twenty-odd stanzas listing the different kinds of discrimination the Flemish had to endure could easily be read as a thinly veiled threat: Flemish loyalty had become conditional.

The new generation made very similar points. In the summer of 1916 Paul Van Ostaijen, only twenty but already generally considered the leading voice of the Flemish avant-garde, published a poem to commemorate a historic Flemish victory against the French in 1302. From occupied Antwerp Van Ostaijen did much more than remember this founding moment of Flemish mythology-cum-nationhood; 1916, he claimed, would show how 'het aktieve leger groeien zien, / tot een wil en tot een daad' (the active army would grow / unto a will, unto a deed).[15] What exactly that deed would be remained implicit, but in the wake of the Easter Rising and considering how the Flemish tended to compare their situation to that of the Irish, it does not seem far-fetched to read this poem as a threat as well: Flemish legions would rise, they were ready to fight.

It was one thing for Flemish poets in the Netherlands or occupied Belgium to denounce Belgium, but for poets fighting in the Belgian army it was obviously quite another thing. The few soldiers who dared to be critical of the army or government paid a heavy price. They were sent to disciplinary companies like those at Auvours or on the French island of

[12] *Congressional Record*, Vol. 56: 12 (Feb. 11, 1918).

[13] Leading article in *Het Vlaamsche Nieuws*, 29 August 1915; around the same time the young Expressionist poet Gaston Burssens would call for 'self rule', mentioning Flanders with Finland, Ireland, and Poland. See Gaston Burssens, *Verzameld Proza* (Antwerp: Elsevier Manteau, 1981), p. 343.

[14] René De Clercq, *De Noodhoorn: Vaderlandsche Liederen* (Utrecht: Dietsche Stemmen, 1916), p. 38.

[15] Paul Van Ostaijen, *Verzamelde Gedichten* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1996), p. 125.

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Cézembre. The case of the Cézembre-sent army chaplain Paul Vandermeulen became notorious; Van Ostaijen wrote the poem 'Zaaitijd' ('Sowing time') in his honour, comparing the soldier's experience to that of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. Again, it remains implicit what type of conversion he was hinting at, but an abrupt turning away from Belgium seems likely. In his 1918 volume *Het Sienjaal* (*The Signal*), Van Ostaijen put 'Zaaitijd' right before 'Aan een moeder' ('To a mother'), a poem dedicated to the mother of a soldier who fell in the war. The poet deconstructs the official war rhetoric, but when he lists 'Slagveld, veld van eer, / vaderland, en de zaak van het recht' (Battlefield, field of honour, / fatherland, and righteous cause),[16] his criticism of these propaganda staples seems to go beyond Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' in that it also questions the legitimacy of the soldier's and poet's actual fatherland, Belgium.

Occupied City

Around the time that *Het Sienjaal* was published, Van Ostaijen, realising his wartime conduct would land him in a Belgian jail after a German defeat, left for Berlin. Almost two years later he started working on *Bezette Stad* (*Occupied City*), a volume in which he would mix Dada-influenced cultural criticism and Flemish nationalist political analysis with his own wartime experiences in his native Antwerp. After 1945, its irreverent tone, experimental typography, and collage (sample) logic would guarantee this book a place in literary and avant-garde histories (it has also been translated into German, French, and English), but to some extent it can also be read as a condensed version of the more traditional Flemish Great War volumes: the German invasion and rapid advance, the retreat of the Belgian army, the siege of Antwerp, and the exodus of the thousands of refugees are all dealt with. In its treatment of the martyred cities and the king, however, *Bezette Stad* diverges dramatically from this template. Visé and Liege are named as quick stops during the Germans' initial offensive ('Visé march Liege mortars'), but neither the atrocities against civilians nor Leuven's torched university library are mentioned.[17] In Van Ostaijen's account the Belgian army is not heroic, but '*vertraPte*' (tramPLed) and engaged in 'de Masochistiesemarsj' (a Masochistic march). King Albert does not appear as

[16] Van Ostaijen, *Verzamelde Gedichten*, p. 150.

[17] *Bezette Stad* is quoted after David Colmer's translation, *Occupied City*, an edition without page numbers: Paul Van Ostaijen, *Occupied City*. Translated by David Colmer (Ripon: Smokestack Books, 2016).

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a father to his soldiers but more like a puppet, used by the Belgian establishment for propaganda purposes:

> vergat men niets bij de verdedigingslinie
> niet de koning de eerste soldaat in de eerste loopgraaf
> toujours là
> of zijn staalhelm*
> God God misschien vergat men de koning
> of zijn staalhelm
> en morgen wordt hij gekiekt met staalhelm
> voor nieuwe postzegels
>
> have they forgotten something in the line of defence
> not the king the first soldier in the first trench
> still there
> or his steel helmet
> Good Lord maybe they forgot the king
> or his steel helmet
> and tomorrow he's being snapped with his steel helmet
> for new stamps

Later mentions of the king debunk his image even more. In 'Good News' the poet satirises the patriotic press's tendency to overstate the monarch's capabilities (as if Albert was able, all by himself, to conquer 'een gans bataljon Feldgrauen'/a whole battalion of Feldgrauen), also pointing out the grotesque consequences of the fact that most European royals were related by marriage; when German troops approached a trench with the Belgian Crown Prince Leopold they 'withdrew' immediately:

> Waarom
> Het ware Beieren Es lebe Wittelsbach
> Eisner!
>
> Why?
> They were true Bavarians Long live Wittelsbach
> Eisner!

Leopold's mother, Elisabeth, was Queen of Belgium, but also Duchess of Bavaria, from the House of Wittelsbach – to these Bavarian soldiers Elisabeth's son could not be an enemy. The anachronistic cry of 'Eisner!' reinforces the revolutionary nature of Van Ostaijen's nationalism; what Eisner did in November 1918 – deposing the Bavarian King and declaring Bavaria an independent republic – is what Van Ostaijen had hoped to see happen in his own country and to his own king. The page opposite 'Good

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News' demonstrates yet again why he deemed such a revolutionary act really necessary (see Figure 9.1).

The collusion between the monarch, the Belgian Cardinal Mercier, and other parts of the Belgian state establishment – presented on this poster as a circus act aimed at deluding the audience – prevented Belgium from ever becoming a true democracy. When the German army collapsed and Belgian sovereignty was restored, the poet of *Bezette Stad* could not share in his countrymen's enthusiasm: 'de bezetting houdt op / de bezetting

Figure 9.1 'Great Circus of the Holy Ghost', page from Paul van Ostaijen's *Bezette Stad/Occupied City* (1920)

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begint' (the occupation is over / the occupation begins), he dryly noted in the final section 'De Aftocht' ('The Withdrawal'); one enemy simply succeeded another one. '[N]ationale himnen / nationale helden / nationale linten / alles nationaal' ([N]ational anthems / national heroes / national colours / everything national) seemed cause for great public exhilaration, but not to him; his boldly sarcastic outcry **'hulde aan de koninklike vulven'** (**hip hip hoorah for the royal vulva**) on the penultimate page of *Bezette Stad* was the ultimate sacrilege of the royal body which had been sanctified by years of Belgian war propaganda. Van Ostaijen never really supports the Germans in this remarkable volume of poetry (specifically, Prussian militarism routinely gets ridiculed), but the most derisive comments are aimed at Belgian (Catholic and State) institutions and phrases.

Conclusion: At the Front / After the Front

On the fringes of Flemish society, the hatred towards Belgium would lead to the formation of the first Flemish nationalist party in the nation's history. This *Frontpartij* (aka *Het Vlaamsche Front*/The Flemish Front) – supported by veterans from the Yser Front and activists who had been promoting Flemish self-rule while under German occupation, as POW in German camps or as refugees – would have limited success in post-war elections, but its anti-Belgian rhetoric survives until today. In its early years Het Vlaamsche Front was also a publishing house, printing, for instance, the collected poems of Ward Hermans, another one of the Flemish soldiers who had been punished for his political activities. Hermans was never considered an important poet, but the very existence of this volume underscores yet again the importance of poetry in these nationalist circles. Its rhetoric is noteworthy as well. The real Krauts, the poet claimed, were the Flemish who adopted the French language, culture, and political positions (the so-called 'Franskiljons' or Gallicized Flemings). They thought they were loyal and honourable, but if that was the case Hermans – who had been accused of betraying his country – gladly accepted the blame for being 'Vlaamsche schand' (Flanders' disgrace).[18] The 'haat' (hatred) he felt was to be cultivated;[19] a message not lost on the poet himself. After the Second World War, in which he was one of the founders of the Flemish SS, he was sentenced to death in absentia; he spent

[18] Ward Hermans, *Naar de Daad: Verzamelde Gedichten* (Antwerp: Het Vlaamsche Front, 1919), p. 25.
[19] Hermans, *Naar de Daad*, p. 16.

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almost ten years in jail – again writing poems full of resentment towards those who failed to appreciate his particular brand of idealism.

Hermans might have been typical of a specific type of Flemish war veteran prone to radicalisation, but Daan Boens's poetic account of the war was probably much more characteristic of how most Belgian soldiers experienced the Great War. His three volumes follow a pattern that has also been observed in other war poets. Staunch patriotism gives way to shock and horror, only to find (or try to find) some solace and meaning in the carnage. In his darkest hour Boens managed to put into words what darkness really means amidst the relentless barrage of trench warfare:

> Geen puinen meer, omdat ik-zelf een puin ben,
> geen droomen meer, omdat ik-zelf een droom was,
> geen zang, geen zon – het Niet, waar alles zwart is,
> en 'k niet meer zie, wat vroeger lief en schoon was.[20]
>
> No, no more rubble – I myself am rubble,
> No, no more dreams – I was myself a dream,
> no song, no sun – the Void, where all is black,
> and I'll not see what once was fine and sweet.[21]

Even more striking are his generosity and compassion. Those fellow soldiers who had been court-martialled or imprisoned because they lacked discipline, those who could not stand the war any longer ('zwakke menschen, als wij allen zijn'/weak people, as we all are[22]), and those who had given in to their lower instincts and had stolen from their peers . . . all of them deserve some sort of redemption, the poet claims.

His final war volume is entitled *De Verrijzenis* (*Resurrection*), a title in keeping with this regeneration theme, but in its Christianity – Boens was a non-religious socialist – also an illustration of Jay Winter's point about the power of tradition to deal with catastrophe and trauma.[23] Boens's final position was not one of resignation, though. After almost three hundred pages of war poetry, the poet concluded his contribution to the genre with 'Mijmering' (Reverie), which was anything but soft-hearted. If a day came where he would be thankful for all the suffering he'd endured because it had taken him closer to the community of people, it would be a lie if he no

[20] Daan Boens, *Frontpoëzie*, ed. Els van Damme and Yves T'Sjoen (Leuven: LannooCampus, 2014), p. 187.
[21] Translation by David H. McKay, in Buelens, *Everything to Nothing*, p. 265.
[22] Boens, *Frontpoëzie*, p. 214.
[23] J. M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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longer raged against blood and against hatred.[24] This message of militant pacifism perfectly suits the current Great War commemorations in Flanders Fields. In fact, it would suit them much better than John McCrae's, which urges all surviving soldiers to '[t]ake up our quarrel with the foe' and fight to the end. Any future canon of Belgian First World War poetry should include Verhaeren and Van Ostaijen, but Daan Boens deserves to be treasured as the country's greatest combatant poet.

[24] Boens, *Frontpoëzie*, p. 306.

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