



passa porta seminar 2016

NEED & NECESSITY

Keynote by Gustaaf Peek

Literature saved my life.

As a child I was not a hungry reader. There are few countries in the world where literature for young readers is taken more seriously than in the Netherlands, and yet it didn't appeal to my green self. I had my favourites, of course, but those books felt like exceptions, as though I had convinced myself that I had learned to read in order to be disappointed, that during my reading life my imagination would only come across something suitable with difficulty.

In the house I grew up in, not much was allowed or possible, but books and films were free of censorship. 'Children have to shiver with fear', my father often used to say, and so it sometimes happened that he would wake my brother and me in the night to watch a horror film on a German channel. That is what I preferred to reading: being awake while others slept and catching horrible glimpses of the tempting and confusing world of adults.

The village of my youth was not large enough for a library or bookshop. Every Tuesday a library bus arrived and parked close to my school. One day – I must have been about eleven – I picked Bram Stoker's *Dracula* off the shelf. I knew the story from the films, I finally wanted to read the original. I still remember the cover, black letters on red cloth wrapped in a thick plastic cover. In my memory, the man who had to stamp my selection wears a red jumper. The sweater hugs a round belly, I hear a grumbling voice, can still make out the grey hair and the dark-rimmed glasses. I wasn't allowed take out *Dracula*, I was too young, surely I could have understood

from the indications on the blurb that this book wasn't for me? I was angry at this man, who did not know what I had already received as a child.

There is no decisive book that won me over to literature. I was thirteen, fourteen, fifteen and suddenly I was reading, suddenly books were a part of my life. Only years later did I begin to scrutinize what had persuaded me at the time.

Books consist of sentences, which in turn consist of words. That may not seem like the most insightful or original remark, but the older I get, the more this basic observation comforts and stimulates me. Books consist of words and sentences and nothing more.

As a child I wanted to lie like adults lie. They seemed free and strong and unattached, and I wanted the same space to give shape to my story.

Even before I had really changed into a reader, I was already writing. Spine-chillers – what else, I think now. I would like to recall that I was writing for my own pleasure, but that emotion doesn't seem to predominate in my personal tradition. It was a serious game. To make up a story and bring it to an end in competition with myself – that is what it was about. I wasn't yet preoccupied with language. Words of horror were for horror, words of bliss for bliss, to convey pain I used words of pain. I particularly wanted to convince my imaginary reader of how at ease I was with horror.

My father was a journalist, he sometimes polished his articles at home. Fireman, infantry soldier, astronaut: I never pictured these professions as a child. Work was sitting at a desk and typing blank pages to life. What little choice, I now think.

Had I not discovered my impassioned connection with words, I doubt whether I would ever have become a writer. I was looking for something. The future seemed opaque and frightening, and only something tangible and wonderful would be able to save me. The more I read, the more I saw that my favourite authors used detours. They almost seemed *not* to want to say what they so clearly wanted to say. By immersing myself in literature, the world lost its causal connection, things seemed to be just things, slumbering and powerless until a writer would challenge them forcibly, would mobilize them for his quest. Meaning seemed to lurk in all words when a serious author had turned his attention to choice and syntax. I had heard music, now it came

down to imitating those scrutinizing sounds. Perhaps writing is the most active form of reading.

Reading or living, I don't seem to be able to undergo both submissively. I am engaged in a fight, it is not otherwise. Without literature I probably would have ultimately directed all unchannelled energy at my own chest. Or perhaps I would have come to a stop, I would have buried myself more and more as a person in platitudes and resignation. I still haven't decided whether I see literature as a redemptive force or as a formidable and long-awaited opponent. Either way, literature unchained me. Apparently I can't do it alone.

The realization that you need something or someone can be frightening. Each liberation requires something in return. Dedication and sacrifice. I underestimated nothing, since literature could have asked anything of me, I was ready to surrender myself.

I know that I sound like a fanatic. Fanatics share broken pasts, the future is apocalyptic and old versions of the self need to be renounced. But as a subsection of the arts, literature offers no clear solutions, no easy steps to a horny hereafter. Destruction versus construction: no one who has given precedence to either of those two will ever have finished a book. Doubt is a must, it is the only weapon that can withstand the ambivalence of words.

The exact sciences do not take their discoverer into account. Existence: man attends and observes. Reality as an energetic, endless joining and separating of substances, a hotbed of formulas. Man, himself just a short-term displacement of air, cannot really blend into what is unchangeable, cannot but obey.

But there is art. Paint, words, musical notes. Man seems to be a cheater, lays down his imagination as his last card. Man drew before he counted, is he too much made up of dreams after all? Or am I creating an attractive niche? The chemical laws that guide an artist's hand steer his temperament, not the outcome of his thoughts.

For me, writing is not an impartial act. I never wanted to feel anymore that I was making something up. 'The historian will tell you what happened. The novelist will tell you what it felt like.' An arresting quote from the late American author E.L. Doctorow. What could be a more encompassing description of fiction than the conveying of

emotion? Who can carry all his objective deeds? As human beings we live for our greedy memory, which retroactively gives meaning to the present. Without the laws of physics, we would have collapsed into densely printed pages a long time ago.

Fiction, novels, literature itself. These terms are non-committal, they lack an essential connotation. But it is misleading to believe that man searches for what he urgently needs, that he instinctively finds his way like an animal to the drinking spot, the salt block and the resting place. Literature seems to have to be imposed, while every human being is naturally wired to catch experiences in words.

Everything dies, everything perishes. I have fiction so as to be able to keep visiting my loved ones; I have fiction so as to worship my enemies; I have fiction so as to find myself again on lost days; I have fiction so as to scare myself; I have fiction so as to turn myself into someone else; I have fiction so as to be myself far too much; I have fiction so as to keep daydreaming; I have fiction so as to reveal myself as an enemy; I have fiction so as to give in to desires; I have fiction so as to flee towards cold and pain; I have fiction so as to drive out a devil; I have fiction so as not to have to be a fearful little child forever.

To commit fiction. There are but few other things that a human being “commits” in Dutch.

The reader isolates himself with a book, the writer works in silence, possibly in solitude. With such a social dynamic it's not surprising that a connotation of onanism is attached to literature. Reading and writing are silent skills, draw little light, are vulnerable to a reputation of arrogance and escapism.

As a writer and artist I am a defender of the space of freedom.

Whoever really imagines something places himself outside of what is commonly accepted, hammers the first nail into his servitude. All fiction is subversive.

Today writers are not the only ones to make up things. Politicians, clergymen and businessmen all use narrative and rhetorical techniques to achieve their goals. How can we tell that a writer is not in fact a politician, clergyman or businessman? A meaningful, impassioned connection between the words, which again form sentences. Literature has no goal. And I think that that is what I am trying to clarify

about the space of freedom, the acknowledgement of the unknowability of all striving. The artist works progressively, he wants to get hold of something, but once his effort has been completed he looks back in surprise.

But that does not mean that he has accomplished nothing.

Every human being is again the first being. A thought to drive you insane. Knowledge is not in the genes. Every human being is again the first being, outspoken and foolish, with only a rudimentary instinct for fear and bowel movements. A generation that does not learn or does not need to learn will start to believe again that thunder exists because someone in heaven is hitting an anvil.

Literature is not there for the facts. It will give a delicious description of the man with the hammer and in doing so keep alive an insane misunderstanding. And yet literature is not a betrayal. From the oral tradition to written verses to the contemporary boom of the novel – every listener and reader realizes in the end that he is learning something from the horse's mouth, but not experiencing it. A reader who fails to experience (or no longer experiences) this gap between experience and medium turns into an adherent. Some readers of the Bible (not literature), for instance. But also Mark David Chapman, who decided to shoot John Lennon after obsessively reading J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.

One of the definitions of literature in the Van Dale dictionary of the Dutch language is: '*alle proza-, poëzie- en toneelteksten v.e. bep. niveau*' (all prose, poetry and dramatic texts of a certain level). That level is defined by the measure of doubt that the writer has left in his text. A good book makes one an accessory. The writer activates the imagination, the reader is responsible for his experience. Whoever must follow the writer too slavishly is probably not reading literature.

Every human being is again the first being, and it is literature that provides the red lines between the generations. What we feel, for ourselves and one another, is the most essential element that immediately vanishes after our death. The facts, the measurements and weights of a life are simple and can generally be recorded uncontroversially. But what each new generation hungers after are the genuine stories.

Personal stories tend to lapse into self-justification, self-defence or self-pity. No memory is exact, the past is fair game. The general moral prescribes that we must learn from history, our own included, but how real and weighty is the moral content of deeds and experiences which tradition continuously adapts to new circumstances, whose meaning tradition always changes?

Nothing approaches the space of freedom as non-committally as the imagination. And yet they are not synonyms for one another. The imagination seeks, while everything can land in the space of freedom. An artist wants to give shape to experiences in order to then attach a meaning to them and he generally does this by narrowing the perspective, by bringing the story to a personal and thereby representable level.

Every human being is again the first being. What does it mean to lose everything? What does it mean to stand at the beginning of everything with too little awareness? Why are we not naturally cursed with answers?

In the event of disasters, emergency situations and acts of God, mobile phones seem to be revealers of last thoughts. We think back and want to take our leave, to say what we perhaps did too little of. This is what a writer does, what he cannot leave behind. To seek out the end of something and to devote his searching words to this goal.

Literature proves that we have already existed. Literature is a super conductor for love.