CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Hugo Claus

The sorrow of Belgium

Het verdriet van België

Presented by: Yoana Ganowski

Het verdriet van België is widely regarded as one of the major works of twentieth century Belgian literature. In this novel, Hugo Claus offers a sweeping portrayal of Flemish society during the Second World War, covering the years 1939 to 1947. The text is not simply a historical or ideological narrative; it constitutes a political examination of mentalities, social practices, and the mechanisms through which ideology circulates within an ordinary community confronted with war, occupation, and collaboration. Claus, a central figure in Flemish letters, is also known for his stylistic innovation and his incisive critique of nationalism and the moral compromises embedded in Belgian society.

The narrative follows Louis Seynaeve from childhood to adolescence in German occupied Flanders. Through his daily life in a Catholic and nationalist milieu, Claus explores the subtle dynamics of collaboration and the moral tensions that permeate a society at war. Politics is presented not as a sequence of heroic acts or dramatic turning points, but as a pervasive environment woven into education, language, social rituals, and collective expectations. Ideology does not operate primarily through coercion or overt propaganda; it insinuates itself through everyday norms, ingrained habits, and the desire to belong to a community imagined as vulnerable or threatened.

The coming of age structure – partly autobiographical – serves as a crucial literary device. It enables Claus to depict the formation of consciousness within a complex and ambiguous social world. He deliberately distances himself from the post war tendency to simplify responsibility or restore a sense of collective innocence. Instead, the novel presents an ethically unstable environment in which ideological allegiances arise from fear, conformity, and banal mediocrity rather than from fervent conviction. Around Louis, characters such as his father, classmates, and teachers embody various forms of compromise and loyalty within Flemish society.

This critical perspective is articulated through a bipartite narrative structure that reflects the protagonist's passage from childhood to adolescence. Composed of fragmented scenes, the text deploys irony, satire, and the grotesque to expose the fractures of its social world. Claus's aesthetic recalls the tradition of Flemish painting associated with, for example, Brueghel or Ensor: the novel operates as a densely layered fresco that lays bare the contradictions, tensions, and impasses of a society attempting to define itself within an unstable political landscape. It foregrounds the profound ambivalence of Flemish society, oscillating between loyalty to the Belgian state and attraction to the pan German ideology propagated by Nazi Germany. This oscillation is conveyed not through major political events but through everyday gestures, casual conversations, and seemingly trivial situations. War and collaboration thus become woven into the fabric of daily life, manifesting as opportunism, silence, and pragmatic accommodation. The characters in this novel embody the ordinary dimension of politics. These characters, neither heroes nor leaders, serve to illustrate the

porosity between innocence and guilt, shaped by social norms, language, local culture, and collective pressure. These dynamics are further complicated by the characters' relationship to their bodies and sexuality, heavily influenced by a guilt laden Catholic morality. Such intimate experiences become sites of tension, revealing the contradictions between submission to dominant discourses and the desire for emancipation.

On a symbolic level, *Het verdriet van België* presents a profoundly disenchanted yet authentic perspective on Belgian history within a broader European framework. Claus challenges national memory itself, rejecting retrospective narratives that would preserve collective innocence. The term "grief" in the title does not evoke noble or redemptive suffering; it denotes a persistent unease arising from shame, compromise, and silence. The novel refuses moral resolution or redemption, presenting instead a crisis of identity and historical certainty that compels readers to confront the discomfort and complexity of the past. Upon its publication in 1983, the novel provoked considerable debate for its uncompromising portrayal of Flemish collaboration, yet it was swiftly recognised as a landmark of twentieth century Belgian literature.

LANGUAGE: Dutch

This title was not censored before publishing