**Contributor: Heilna du Plooy**

**Entry: Louw, Nicolaas Petrus van Wyk (1906-1970)**

N. P. Van Wyk Louw is regarded as the most prominent poet of the group known as the Dertigers, a group of writers who began publishing mainly in the thirties. These writers had a vision of Afrikaans literature which included an awareness of the need of thematic inclusiveness, a more critical view of history and a greater sense of professionalism and technical complexity in their work. Van Wyk Louw is even today considered one of the greatest poets, essayists and thinkers in the Afrikaans language.

Nicolaas Petrus van Wyk Louw was born in 1906 in the small town of Sutherland in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. He grew up in an Afrikaans speaking community but attended an English medium school in Sutherland as well as in Cape Town where the family lived later on. He studied at the University of Cape Town majoring in German and Philosophy. He became a lecturer at UCT teaching in the Faculty of Education until 1948. In 1949 he became professor of South African Literature, History and Culture at the Gemeentelijke Universiteit van Amsterdam. In 1960 he returns to South Africa to become head of the Department of Afrikaans and Dutch at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johanneshurg. He filled this post until his death in 1970.

Van Wyk Louw’s oeuvre is usually divided into three periods. Between 1935 and 1939 two volumes of poetry, his debut *Alleenspraak* (*Soliloquy*, 1935) and *Die halwe kring* (*The Semi-circle*, 1937) were published. Both volumes contain a number of folk ballads and love poems in a clear and simple style, but Louw’s concern with larger issues becomes apparent in his idealistic ideas about insight acquired in loneliness, the meaning of beauty and the yearning for purity of spirit.

As an established and respected poet, Louw became more and more preoccupied with humankind’s relation to powers larger than itself. Between 1940-1954, seen as the second period in his work, his poetry becomes more complex and metaphorically more dense, though he retains a remarkable clarity of expression. Important works are *Raka* (a long epic poem, 1941), *Gestaltes en diere* (*Figures and Animals*, poetry, 1942), and two verse dramas, *Germanicus* (only published in 1956) and *Dias* (1952).

Throughout his career Louw wrote essays on South African and Afrikaans cultural and political issues, and on literature as a form of cultural expression *Lojale verset* (*Loyal Opposition*,1939); *Berigte te velde* (*Reports from the Field*, 1939); *Liberale nasionalisme* (*Liberal Nationalism*, 1958); *Swaarte- en ligpunte* (*Heavy and Light Points,* 1958) and *’n Wêreld deur glas* (*A World Through Glass*, 1958) and *Vernuwing in die prosa* (*Renewal in Prose Fiction*, 1961). He also experimented with other literary genres, such as radio drama and radiophonic opera.

*Nuwe Verse* (*New Verses*, 1954) heralds the last phase of Louw’s work, in which his poetry becomes even more refined and simple, though thematically complex and embedded in an extended intertextual field of reference. The culmination of Louw’s poetry is the volume *Tristia en ander verse, voorspele en vlugte 1950-1957* (*Tristia and Other Verses*,1962), in which poetry as such and the act of writing poetry feature prominently. In this volume Louw’s poetry is stripped of idealism and reflects in a technically self-conscious poetic style, a deep coming to terms with himself, his failings and psychological complexity.

**References and further reading**:

Kannemeyer, J.C. (1984) *Geskiedenis van die Afrikaanse Literatuur*, Cape Town: Academica.

Steyn, J.C. (1998) *Van Wyk Louw: ’n Lewensverhaal*, Cape Town: Tafelberg.

Van Coller, H.P. (ed.) (1999) *Perspektief en Profiel: ’n Afrikaanse Literatuurgeskiedenis*. *Deel 2*, Pretoria: J.L. Van Schaik.

**List of works:**

*Alleenspraak* (1935)

*Die halwe kring* (1937)

*Raka* (1941)

*Gestaltes en diere* (1942)

*Dias* (1952)

*Nuwe Verse* (1954)

*Germanicus* (1956)

*Tristia en ander verse, voorspele en vlugte 1950-1957* (1962)