I own a single work by Professor W.J.M.A. Asselbergs, Professor of Dutch and general literature at the Catholic University Nijmegen, and for a time rector of this venerable bastion of knowledge and culture. It is the ninth volume of the Geschiedenis van de Letterkunde der Nederlanden [History of the Literature of the Netherlands], which deals with the Tachtigers (the Movement of 1880) and their revolutionary innovations. It is his academic magnum opus, which I have often have reason to consult. In the foreword, he writes: ‘The history of literature is a science of facts, before becoming a science of values.’

I have never undertaken university study, just as Professor W.J.M.A. Asselbergs never graduated in any subject. All in all, this makes us both autodidacts, which isn’t to say that I hold myself in such high regard as to come within an inch of his authority.

By ‘the science of facts,’ Asselbergs meant everything that could produce clarity in order to arrive at the ‘science of values’: historiographers should have knowledge of biographical and other personal and additional facts, which they can use – ‘in unfettered fashion’ he writes – to create connections and make analyses. I have made this view my own in my essays and historiography: the most insignificant crumb is invaluable when mixing the binding dough from which bread is made. I derive the greatest satisfaction from my portraits of writers, in which life and literature blend inseparably. Many of them can be found in my own history book De laatste deur [The final door].
As well as being a professor, Asselbergs was himself a literary writer, as I will be after him. He called himself Anton van Duinkerken. You will no longer find this name in the latest literary histories because his oeuvre has melted away in the constant climate changes that have affected the history of literature. That’s how Kees Fens put it – Kees Fens, the other professor at the Catholic University in Nijmegen who never graduated in any subject and who fundamentally disagreed with the scholarly way of thinking of his predecessor. I have also learned a lot from Fens. Autodidacts together.

Nevertheless, the three-volume collected works of Anton van Duinkerken have stayed in my library. They mainly contain essay-type work, fairly polemical in tone. I also browse through these books regularly, inspired by his erudition and no less so by the writing style of that declamatory orator. Melted away, alas, in one heat wave after another, but – plucking fruit from his orchard – I have largely continued to appreciate them.

‘That’s why, sir, I call myself a Catholic.’

Van Duinkerken in a polemical war poem, one that is still well-remembered, about Anton Mussert, leader of the Dutch National Socialist Movement.

I am sorry, and at the same time not at all, to admit in the hallowed halls of this Catholic alma mater that I am a renegade, although – unaware – baptised a Catholic, but for the rest holy water and I have gone our separate ways.
Incidentally: when asked what W.J.M.A. – the initials of his first names – stood for, the Catholic Van Duinkerken replied: they stand for *Was Jij Maar Antichrist* – if only you were the Antichrist.

Actually, his name was simply Willem.

Flanders then.

In everything, he was – and felt himself to be – a Burgundian, a label that in English lacks the connotations of the Dutch term, *bon vivant* in his lifestyle and pleasures. He is reputed to have been able to drink alcohol by the caskload without anyone ever seeing him drunk. In terms of the former, I have shown myself to be a talented follower in Van Duinkerken’s spirit. At one time. He loved Flanders, which he referred to in a poem as ‘a dreamland’ where, according to the same poem, ‘a trembling haze of Sunday hangs about the spire’. Always Sunday in Flanders, always fun and laughter, *bon vivant* and ‘pour me another ten glasses.’ The reality was – and is – of course different, which Van Duinkerken – on weekdays – knew full well.

Although forgotten and *passé* – these too are the words of Kees Fens – Van Duinkerken has devoted rivers of ink to reflections on Flanders and Flemish writers, critical but with understanding and love.

Where Flanders is concerned, I am also walking in the footprints Van Duinkerken has left in the snows of oblivion. I have lived more than half of my life, divided into two periods, in northern Belgium and in my own way I
have also contributed to an understanding of that region and its writers, albeit foaming with fury at times, but never without close affection.

What I would like to say with all of this is that I have continued to feel a spiritual affinity with Professor Asselbergs, alias the writer Van Duinkerken. His reflections on literature continue to be of interest to me, his character and attitude to life have shown parallels with my own.

I never met him, which in retrospect I have also bitterly lamented. I was close by, here in this same city of Nijmegen, while he struggled through his last years with the cancer that had spread throughout his body.

My writing life, like that of Van Duinkerken, began with journalism, for which I was not suited. I worked for De Gelderlander, the local Nijmegen newspaper. I lived in the Roodborststraat; my first wife was from Nijmegen, and her parents lived in the Burchtstraat. And although I didn’t name the city, the first chapters of my novel De zondvloed (The Flood) were set in Nijmegen. What I mean is: I’m not entirely out of place here. It would never have occurred to me, as the young whippersnapper of twenty-one that I was back then, to knock on the door of the colossus at number 23 Regentessestraat, let alone actually go ahead and do it.

Some sixty years later I myself am happy that no complete stranger, no aficionado, comes knocking uninvited on my door, panting with admiration or similar sentiments.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted with the mantle that the Catholic University of Nijmegen has draped around my shoulders for my
accomplishments and I am decidedly not insensitive to the recognition that has been accorded me.

At the funeral of Asselbergs/Van Duinkerken in the Church of the Nativity of our Lady on the Berg and Daalseweg, fifty years ago this year, the celebrant said of him: ‘He lived with the knowledge of the specialist and the passion of the dilettante.’

Eventually, everything is lost to oblivion, apart from knowledge, which must be passed on, and which is made up of the science of facts. Passion is a Catholic word that can express unquenchable enthusiasm and engagement. And dilettante, like Asselbergs/Van Duinkerken: here I am, seeking in my turn the science of values, satisfied, proud of having remained full of passion.