

# SPLENDID SYMBOLISM

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A translation of pages 59-61 of *Opperlandse Taal- & Letterkunde* (Querido, 1981) by Battus (a pseudonym for Hugo Brant Corstius). This fine book on Dutch wordplay, akin to Borgmann's *Language on Vacation*, deserves a wider audience. Can anyone create similar English-language inventions? I am much indebted to Lee Sallows for cleaning up various infelicities of translation.

1 Mr. Bos of Eindhoven read the title-word in Vestdijk's *Else Bohler* and has extracted the *prachtsymboliek* [splendid symbolism] from it: in this word there appears no single letter more than once! That applies also to words such as *dampkringslucht* [atmospheric air] and *gymnastiekvrouw* [lady gymnast], but it is not easy to discover long words with this unique property. The longest one known to us is *landbouwgeschrift* [agricultural pamphlet]. More than 26 letters appears scarcely possible (27, if both *ij* and *y* are used). We will award a self-portrait to the first person who finds the longest word with letters used only once. *Jungprachtsymboliek* [Jung's splendid symbolism] does not count, for the rule is: no personal names, otherwise there is no end to it. And you know that it is only religions and rubber bands that are allowed to be endless.

2 *Wijzerbladkunst* [pocketknife art], *huwelijksjargon* [marriage talk], *schijnboulevard* [would-be street], *zondagshuwelijk* [Sunday marriage]. These four words each contain 14 letters, and it is noteworthy that all 14 letters in each word are different. No letter appears more than once. Such words we previously showed you, and you showed them to us. We name these words *prachtsymboliek* [splendid symbolism], a word that was stumbled upon in Vestdijk, and that totals 15 letters, just like: *belastingvrijdom* [freedom from taxation], *rijkeluistaxhond* [rich louse tax dog], *volkspartijgezin* [people's party household], *typeomschrijving* [type description], *avondlyceumkwis* [evening lyceum quiz], *banjomusiekprijs* [banjo-music prize], *krijgsbuihandel* [war-spoils traffic], *morgenkusplicht* [morning-kiss obligation], *wolvendrijftjacht* [wolf round-up], *glasbijprodukten* [glass byproducts], *houtsnijwerkblad* [wood-carving work surface].

Or does wood-carving blade count as 17 letters? The letters *I* and *J* are always joined in the digram *IJ*. We count *IJ* as a single letter. According to this agreement we count as 16 these words:  
*wijkzusterdiploma* [district-nurse diploma], *houtprijbewaking* [wood-prize guard], *drijfjachtongeluk* [round-up accident], *klopjachtverzuim* [round-up neglect], *landbouwerszicht* [agriculturalist's sight], *kinderbijslagfout* [children's extra-allowance misallocation].

Here began the first trend which can be characterized: the predilection of contributors from such disparate places as Hoek van Holland and Hollandse Rading for identical building-stones: quiz, jacht [hunt]. Later club and vermijding [avoidance] make an appearance.

Consisting of seventeen letters: tobjufscharminkel [bathtub-lady bag-of-bones], lijkswaschrobguitje [corpse-wash-seal-imp] (this occupation appeared, according to the contributor, in a hijgboekmanuscript [breathless book manuscript]), wildejasmijnvrucht [fruit of the wild jasmine], showpredikantclub [televangelist club] (with the five other possible arrangements of show, predikant and club), unisexklompdracht [unisex wooden-shoe dress], visbakluchtdromen [fish-fry-scented dreams], goudlichtsprankje [little sparkle of golden light], landbouwgeschrift [agricultural pamphlet]. That last word was at one time our longest example. One contributor claimed it was not a good word. What? Landbouwgeschrift not a good word? It is another matter in the New Rotterdam Courant/General Trade-Journal of 26 August 1978. Every Scrabble-speller knows the quarrels over what a word is, although there never occur such long words as those we shall directly present. Out of self-preservation, we locate ourself in such debates always on the most liberal side. Briefly, we had then [in the earlier column] specified no limitations (exception: proper names are forbidden) and agreed beforehand to count all your words as valid.

With words of 18 letters the second trend of our contributors became apparent: the need of their words to be explained. Here are the eighteen-letter-symbol-length words: frambozenplukwicht [raspberry weight after picking], klopjachtvermijding [evasive action of animals being rounded up], onderbuikvachtslijm [slime on underbelly fleece], lynxwormsluipjacht [hunt for lynx-worms on the prowl].

The contributor of the first 19-letter word offered us a specimen of the object indicated. However, dear Luc, we already have in our house countless schuifgordijnklampjes [small curtain-clamps]! Schuifgordijnklampje [small curtain-clamp], bevolkingsdrijfjacht [population round-ups], bankforumzwijgplicht [pledge of silence at the bank-forum], triomfzangclubwijsje [club-sponsored song of triumph], wijfjesbigdrankzucht [craving of a female piglet for a drink], gymclubavondstrikje [gym-club evening bow-tie], wolvendrijfjachtbuis [jacket for wolf round-ups].

If you say that last word is a bit stretched, then read what its contributor, Mr. M., wrote about it: "After the boredom of the drizzly damp thaw, when the hunter had been confined to his house for a whole week, never to leave, suddenly there was a freeze. The hunter got up early. After a fresh-fried fish for breakfast, he walked singing about his rooms, driven as he was by winterkoublijdenschap [joy of winter's cold], looking for his jacket. The wolves had been crying around the houses in the night. With his jachtklubvriend [hunting-club friend] he had agreed to a wolvendrijfjacht [wolf round-up] at the first cold-snap.

"'Where is my jacket, my love?' he called to his wife, who hadn't yet been able to take leave of the warmth of the eiderdown-bed and now was

awakened from her visbakluchtdromen [fishbake-scented dreams]. 'Which jacket do you mean?' she said foggily. 'The wolvendrijfjachtbuis [jacket for wolf round-ups], naturally.'

3 We received the following words, each containing 20 letters: herfst-kampclubwijding [autumn dedication of camp-club], vakbonderszwijgplicht [trade-unionists' secret duty], vakbondjeszwijgplicht [pledge of silence at the small trade union], mijndagopzichtersklub [my club of daytime overseers], mijnopzichtersklubdag [my overseer's-club day], vlugzwichtparoxysmen [quick-acting paroxysms], bovenlijfkrampzuchtig [longing for upper-body cramps], bouwplichtmijderszang [building-pledge refuser's song], zwijgclubavondstrikje [silence club evening bow-tie -- no doubt the Diogenes club of which Mycroft Holmes was a member].

Here the third theme appears: the contributors of these words try to justify all that they have achieved. Longer words [than their own] they judge impossible, and they try to impose requirements on the proffered portrait.

But to 21 letters belong: schutbladvormknipwijze [flyleaf-format-clasp-wise], busklopjachtvermijding [avoidance of a bus round-up], lynxvacht-wormpjesquiz [quiz about wormlets found in a lynx-fleece].

You aren't sure whether this is a quiz or is about wormlets in a lynx-fleece? Read the comments by its contributor, the Drs. P.: "In the Western Hemisphere the lynx some years ago became infested by a new parasite, the lynx-fleece worm (named the lynx-worm in its peregrinations). Now a few people last February at last discovered a method of treatment for this tiny but clever species, using spores and extermination. The strategy was developed in San Diego and gave every reason to be called a breakthrough.

"The Ancient and Respectable Brotherhood of Lynx Care-Givers, the Lynx Foundation, the Society of Friends of the Lynx, and numerous other sympathetic organizations shared in the grand program, the lynxworm-sluipjacht [hunt for peripatetic lynx-worms], and the first results were quite encouraging. By local custom, songs were immediately dedicated to the success, so many in fact that a special choir came into being. Everywhere one could hear the theme song, the joyous triomfzangclubwijsje [club-sponsored song of triumph], both whistled and hummed.

"Alas, the victory was celebrated too early; the symptoms of a fast-acting death-struggle (biologically speaking, of vlugzwichtparoxysmen [quick-acting paroxysms]) turned out to be deceptive; the vermin recovered, and anxiety for the health of the lynxes again increased. In our part of the world, how long will our lynxes be saved from the scourge? Let everyone become acquainted with the appearance and habits of this apparently-insignificant little creature. How much better that the population be informed as to the seriousness of the problem, in order to decrease the chance of confusion and panic. Keep an eye on your lynxes daily. Be attentive to governmental brochures. Take the rural

lynxvachtwormpjesquiz [quiz about wormlets found in a lynx-fleece] under the direction of Maarten 't Hart, with beautiful prizes."

But still a letter longer is: banksexforumzwijsplicht [pledge of silence about sex in a bank forum], jachtbucksflopvermijding [avoidance of failure in a hunting rifle], bankforumzwijsplichtjes [insignificant pledges of silence in a bank forum], budofrankjeszwijsplicht [judo-franc pledge of silence].

For this last word, the contributor (Prof. V.) wrote: "In Belgium one of my acquaintances won a handsome amount as a participant in the Oriental championship prizefight. He didn't want to declare the sum of money for tax, and therefore laid a budofrankjeszwijsplicht [judo-franc pledge of silence] on his family and friends."

We received not one word of 23 different letters, just as there exists no ladybug with 23 spots on its back [a 1912 Dutch treatise coined a 38-letter solidly-written name for a 22-spot ladybug, described on page 136 of *Opperlandse Taal- & Letterkunde*]. But we did receive words with 24 letters from three contributors. Our hearts now began to beat faster. Perhaps you are thinking: what kind of nonsense is this?

But there is a lofty goal behind this contest [to find long isograms]. The 'splendid symbolism' words belong to the so-called (among scholarly words in print) isograms. An isogram is a word in which each letter appears the same number of times. So one day we meet in Van Looy the word doodgelukkig-luie [dead-lucky people] in which each letter appears twice. An entirely different phenomenon is exhibited by the pangram: a word or sentence where every letter of the alphabet appears.

From Drs. S. we received the sentence "De journaliste, buisverknocht, glipte watervlug in bed, gypjeszacht, omdat d'r man, c.q. ex-vrind al mafte" [the journalist, devoted to his jacket, slipped as quick as water into his gym-shoes-soft bed, because that man, in this given case an ex-friend, was sleepy]. In this pangram every word is also an isogram.

Isograms must be as long as possible, pangrams as short as possible. At their intersection, isograms and pangrams equal each other: a word of 27 letters, each letter of the alphabet once. According to a legendary story, once such a word is realized the Earth with a contented sigh will go flat.

So far we have not seen this. The record stands at 24 letters. In order from less desirable to more desirable, here are the words: sexy-jufvakbondzwijsplicht [pledge of silence of a sexy young lady trade-unionist], smurfvakbondzwijsplichtje [insignificant pledge of silence of a Smurf trade-unionist], ex-vakbondsjuryzwijsplicht [jury pledge of silence of a former trade-unionist]. The contributors of these three toppers were P. van Vollenhoven, Mrs. Van der Zant, and A. Vormaat (the last by telegram).

Near closing-time we also received in A4-format the miraculous and awe-inspiring 25-letter word gymwifvrindjeskopbalzucht [the desire to

see your friend, a female athlete, ricochet a soccer ball from her head]. Fortunately, this was from the hand of the formerly clear winner, Mr. Adrie Vormaat, so that the prizes remain where they were.

### **The USA Today Crossword Puzzle Dictionary**

The above-named crossword puzzle dictionary, compiled by Charles Preston and Barbara Ann Kipfer, is published in paperback by Hyperion for \$12.95. Its subtitle asserts that it is "the...most comprehensive and authoritative crossword reference book around," inviting numerical comparison with three crossword dictionaries now in print: The Random House Crossword Puzzle Dictionary, The New Comprehensive A-Z Crossword Dictionary (edited by Edy Schaffer), and the 6th edition of the Andrew Swanfeldt Crossword Puzzle Dictionary, all selling in hardcover for \$22-\$23. USA Today has 45 lines per column, 2 columns per page and 910 pages for a product of 82,000 lines; this is exceeded by Swanfeldt's 100,000, New Comprehensive's 154,000 and Random House's 233,000. Sampling main entries (those in boldface type) beginning MIN-, the four dictionaries have counts of 28 (USA Today), 61, 56 and 46. (It is worth noting that the gold standard of crossword dictionaries, the out-of-print Master Crossword Puzzle Dictionary by Herbert M. Baus, has 325,000 lines, four times the USA Today lineage, and 65 MIN-entries.) Still, if a relatively low price and a reader-friendly typeface size is important, one may wish to forgo the larger word stockpiles of USA Today's competitors. (Those who do value comprehensiveness are urged to comb second-hand bookstores for Baus.)