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Foreword

Nowadays, Dutch is spoken by around twenty-three million people in The Netherlands, Belgium and Surinam. It is the language of the medieval mystics Hadewijch and Ruusbroec and also the language in which the German emigré Anne Frank wrote her diary. Through colonial expansion Dutch language and culture had a significant impact in Southern Africa, Asia (Indonesia) and the Caribbean (Curaçao and Aruba amongst others). So although it may seem that languages are inextricably bound to nation states, the reality is far more complex – also more interesting and more challenging. The Dutch language situation is a case in point.

The *Journal of Dutch Literature* presents different forms of research concerning the rich and varied corpus of Dutch literature as described above to an international audience. Whilst acknowledging the force and perseverance of national or regional boundaries, it aims not only to place Dutch literary research in an international context but also to draw on the insights gained through adopting an interdisciplinary and transnational perspective.

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Dutch Novelists Beyond 'Postmodern' Relativism

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Abstract

In this article I will show how Dutch authors reoriented themselves from the late 1980s onwards in relation to the postmodern tradition they inherited. I will discuss the critique of postmodernism formulated by Dutch writers in the light of the following hypothesis. A new, late postmodern position has gradually emerged from the Dutch debate about literature and its function. The authors in question consider (literary) postmodernism as a necessary but insufficient counter-reaction against liberal humanism and its self-assured conception of literature. The question that therefore arises is what, if anything, can be saved in terms of values such as sincerity, authenticity, originality and truth, when postmodernism has succeeded in hedging these modern and pre-eminently literary values with suspicion. Can they be reclaimed for literature without returning to their old, essentialist, rationalistic and humanistic underpinnings? Postmodernism is now seen as a medicine against the liberal humanist conception of culture, a medicine which, in the course of the eighties and nineties, revealed unpleasant side effects, such as relativism, cynicism and noncommittal irony. I will try to explain the tendency towards engagement in Dutch novels, not as a late-in-the-day rejection of postmodernism, but as a reaction to its side effects.

Keywords (Late) Postmodernism, Contemporary Dutch Literature, the Novel, Relativism, Engagement, Devaluation of Literature, Reality Hunger

Introduction: the Demise of (International) Postmodernism

Now that we have reached the point at which postmodernism, rightly or wrongly, has been declared moribund, it is time to assess its literary legacy critically. What has been the effect of postmodernism? Have we gone beyond it in literature? And why this desire to go beyond? What criticism has been levelled against it in the last decades by writers and critics? What have they replaced it with? To what extent do they rely in this respect on (conceptions of) literature that postmodernism has consigned to history?

More than ten years ago, Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema extensively documented the dissemination of literary postmodernism throughout the (mainly Western)[1] world in their monumental *International Postmodernism. Theory and Literary Practice*. Although the authors, as early as 1997, noted that 'the postmodern impulse seems to have run out of steam',[2] they still considered it too early to officially pronounce it dead. In the meantime we can ascertain that anywhere in the world where the postmodern concept has played an important role in discussions about literature, authors and critics are questioning the idea itself and its consequences. 'The demise of postmodernism' in literary criticism has even become a commonplace notion in the new millennium.[3]

The presumed 'death of (literary) postmodernism' is generally believed to be very recent[4] and is highlighted by publications such as Frederick Crews's satire on postmodern literary and cultural studies and their fashionable professors (*Postmodern Pooh*, 2001) and Andrew C. Bulhak's *Postmodernism Generator* (2000), a computer programme that automatically generates academic-style texts filled with postmodern jargon, meaningless but superficially plausible (claiming that this is just like a 'real' postmodern essay).[5]

Not only has postmodern jargon been criticized, but in particular postmodernism's deconstructive mode and, in cultural matters, its scepticism towards the cultural tradition of the West (equating the canon with Eurocentrism, exclusion and cultural imperialism).[6] Interestingly this criticism has been voiced precisely by those authors and critics who were initially a product of postmodernism themselves, as we will see later on. Early postmodern criticism of the universalism that underlies Matthew Arnold's infamous definition of culture ('the best which has been thought and said in the world')[7] currently seems, upon closer inspection, including for many postmodernist critics, to have resulted in an inert relativistic stance in relation to both the canon and the (Western) values that it embodies. Postmodernism, which started as a reaction against the liberal humanist[8] (and structuralist) suppression of the historical, political, material and social aspects in the definition of art as eternal and universal,[9] is now criticized for being relativistic. The anti-essentialist assumptions of postmodernism appear to have unforeseen and unsettling consequences for everyday life as well as for literature. During the last few decades these consequences increasingly came to the attention of postmodern theorist[10] and writers.

Many critics have pointed to social events to explain the waning influence of literary postmodernism. An obvious, and therefore often quoted, date to mark the end of postmodernism is 11 September 2001. The attacks on New York and Washington and the resulting political climate in the Western world seemed a logical end point for the kind of relativistic thinking associated with postmodernism. In the days following 9/11 various international commentators made the link between the terrorist attacks and 'the end of postmodernism'. Regardless of the rhetorical force which postmodernism had applied in fighting universal values,

the commentators agreed on one thing: there would be a very strong temptation to fall back on such values after the attacks as shown by press headlines such as 'Postmodern Outlook Objectively Smashed' (*The Washington Post*)[11]; 'Attacks on U. S. Challenge Postmodern True Believers' (*The New York Times*)[12]; 'The Age of Postmodern Irony Comes to an End' (*Time Magazine*)[13], etc.

Ian McEwan's post-9/11 novel *Saturday* (2005) is placed at the heart of the debate about 'the clash of civilizations', 'the axis of evil' and – in intellectual or literary circles – 'the apotheosis of the postmodern era'[14] or 'the end of postmodern relativism',[15] that followed the attacks. In this novel, in which the literary tradition plays an important background role, both elements of the postmodern criticism which are central to this article can be detected. Firstly we can speak of an overt criticism of the way postmodernism is articulated; for example in the main character's portrayal of his daughter's vaguely postmodern 'relativist' professors (in a way that is reminiscent of the highly amusing professors in Frederick Crews's satire of postmodern criticism, with their tendency to deconstruct and their scepticism about the values of Western modernity).[16] Secondly, the novel probes into the meaning of the literary (canonical, liberal humanist) tradition for today's world. This comes clearly to the fore in the scene where a burglary with murder is prevented by the timely quotation of a poem by, of all people, the man who epitomizes the liberal humanist tradition: Matthew Arnold.[17]

Whatever one makes of this episode – some critics regard it as other-worldly, ludicrous and kitschy[18] – it certainly puts Arnold's liberal humanism back on the agenda, not as a model to be blindly imitated, but as a challenge: when postmodernism has succeeded in hedging its pre-eminently literary values with suspicion, can those humanist values now be reclaimed for literature without returning to their old, essentialist, rationalistic and humanistic underpinnings?

What we see (not only in the novel but also in literary criticism)[19] is a gravitation towards the values made taboo by postmodernism. Authors and critics are looking for confirmation of the function of literature and the usefulness of precisely those literary values which postmodernism had dismissed: sincerity, authenticity, truth, etc. They are not attempting to reinstate these values as if postmodernism had never happened, but rather they examine if and how they can be redeployed in a less absolutist way in current literary discourse.

A critical reconsideration of postmodernism (a reconsideration that implies just as much affinity as repugnance) and a reorientation towards the deconstructed values of liberal humanism are precisely the elements that can be observed in the Dutch novelists that will be discussed in this article. Interestingly, these authors formulated their reassessment of postmodernism well before the events of 11 September 2001 that made their second thoughts so commonplace and familiar. In what follows, I will show how Dutch authors reoriented themselves from the late 1980s onwards in relation to the postmodern tradition they inherited. I will discuss the critique of postmodernism delivered by three representative Dutch writers in

the light of the following hypothesis. In the course of the past decades a new and late postmodern position has gradually emerged from the Dutch debate about literature and its function. The authors in question consider postmodernism as a necessary but insufficient counter-reaction against liberal humanism and its self-assured conception of literature. The question that therefore arises is what, if anything, can be saved in terms of values such as sincerity, authenticity, originality and truth, when postmodernism has succeeded in hedging these pre-eminently literary values with suspicion. Can they be reclaimed for literature without returning to their old, essentialist, rationalistic and humanistic underpinnings?

Two of the three authors that I discuss in this article were part of the (two-sided) postmodern tradition at the start of their careers: Joost Zwagerman and Marjolijn Februari, both born in 1963 and both making their debut at the end of the 1980s. Both will, however, eventually distance themselves from their initial affinity with postmodernism in the course of their careers, albeit without rejecting it outright. Although starting from different viewpoints in their critique of postmodernism, they nevertheless draw similar conclusions regarding the status and significance of writers in today's world. This is also true of the third author I will examine in this article, Arnon Grunberg (1971). His debut in 1994 is rather more recent, however, and he mostly associates the postmodern tradition, of which he is critical without rejecting it, with a previous generation of writers.

The main witnesses in this article are three Dutch writers reconsidering their postmodern heritage. It should be stressed at the outset that these authors feel above all uncomfortable with the increasingly questionable *reputation* of postmodernism in the Netherlands, and that this reputation is based on postmodern theory (and in particular on its frequently biased representations in mainstream cultural discourse). In the course of the last decades, postmodernism has been compared with abstraction, 'anything goes' and radical relativism. The fact that postmodern practice (fiction, poetry, drama) was sometimes absolutely anti-relativistic and explicitly engaged could not prevent this. The authors in question tried to escape postmodernism's reputation of being relativist (based on postmodern theory), thereby changing their own authorship (postmodern practice) thoroughly.

The next section of this article ('Postmodernism in the Netherlands') explains how postmodernism has manifested itself in Dutch literature: which postmodernism is given shape in local discussion? Subsequently, in the section 'Redefining the Postmodern Heritage', the article explores the question how this construction has functioned in the discussion as a terminus: how was that postmodernism criticized? The final part ('Late Postmodernism in Dutch Literature') analyses three representative authors to discover what has replaced postmodernism in literature: what attempts have been made to challenge (or even go beyond) postmodernism?

I want to make two preliminary remarks. (1) My main concern is not to discuss in detail the specificity of the situation in contemporary Dutch literature, which would take me beyond the scope of this article. Rather, by using Dutch authors and

Dutch literary texts, I would like to contribute to the international debate about the relevance of postmodernism.[20] (2) This article does not claim to be a 'realistic' inventory of what is happening in Dutch literature or to be exhaustive. It seeks to explain a few established patterns in recent literature proceeding from an explanatory model which is, of course, necessarily simplified and sketchy.

Postmodernism in the Netherlands

Postmodernism was remarkably late in entering the literary debate in the Netherlands. It hardly interested journalistic critics.[21] The agenda of leading reviewers in newspapers and magazines in the 1980s and 1990s never departed from the liberal humanism that postmodernism had just consigned to history. When the term did put in an appearance in Dutch literature reviews in the mid 1980s it was with considerable reserve.[22] Critics showed that they were aware that postmodernism had been a buzzword for some time in other circles (architecture, history of art, fashion, lifestyle, etc.) and, for this reason, they used it sparingly and with a certain reluctance.

Academic circles hardly showed any interest either in postmodernism until well into the 1990s.[23] Academics studying Dutch literature at Dutch universities were generally suspicious of it because of its fashionable character. When a Dutch academic summarized the position of literature in the Netherlands in 1993 for an international audience (German in this case), he wrote:

> Recently the concept of 'Postmodernism' also took root in the Netherlands. It is significant that it provoked a response amongst literary journalists in particular and that it – like any buzzword – rapidly suffered from semantic inflation.[24]

Because of this journalistic and academic reserve in respect of the 'P-word', the Dutch chapter of the conceptual history of postmodernism has remained rather thin. Nevertheless, it is possible in retrospect to identify two forms of 'postmodernism' in the Netherlands; two broad mental orientations, which bring some order in the rather chaotic debate around the issue hitherto characterized by terminology confusion and 'semantic inflation': a playful postmodernism (predominant in literary journalism) and an intellectualized postmodernism (predominant in academia). The word postmodernism as I use it here refers to a construction that can be recognized in critical discourse, not to any literary reality (writers, movements, novels, etc.). It is a postmodernism-in-inverted-commas (although I will leave the inverted commas out, as I will be needing them frequently later).

1. *Playful postmodernism*. In the world of literary reviews this concerns a 'postmodernism' (allow me to use the inverted commas just this once) centred upon (American) mass or popular culture. The keywords of this playful version are zeit-

geist, eclecticism, pastiche, relativism and the blurring of boundaries between high and low culture: anything goes.[25] Patron saints: Warhol, Madonna, Fukuyama. A seminal publication for this playful postmodernism in the Netherlands was a special 'Pomo' issue of the trend-sensitive weekly *Haagse Post* of 18 April 1987, compiled by a young Joost Zwagerman.[26] In his ambitious introduction Zwagerman sketched the outlines of an anti-modernistic postmodernism concerned above all with rejecting the elitist rigidity of High Modernism.[27] In this way 'postmodernism' came to be understood in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Dutch literary reviews as the collective name for the texts in which the existential emptiness of the 1980s received form and substance by means of the unbridled cutting and pasting of quotations, especially drawn from popular culture. Zwagerman's zeitgeist novel *Gimmick!* (1989) is a good example. With this novel Zwagerman sought to align himself with what Bret Easton Ellis and Douglas Coupland were doing in English.[28] The writings of Zwagerman, known as a playful postmodernist, have also been linked with international authors such as Paul Auster and Martin Amis.[29]

2. Intellectualized postmodernism. Academic circles reacted with boredom to Zwagerman and others' playful postmodernism. Academics used terms such as 'postmodern pop art' or 'literary pop art' to describe it: a not very complex and essentially conservative and affirmative literature which never forces the reader to change his reading attitude.[30] These negative epithets also reveal what was considered in academic circles to be the 'real' postmodernism. This intellectual postmodernism was rooted in French philosophy which had started challenging the pretentions of modern thought in the wake of 1968. Keywords: anti-humanism, dissemination, deconstruction and the end of Grand Narrative. Paragons: Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard. The texts associated with this intellectualized postmodernism were found hermetic by its opponents, as was the poststructuralist theorizing with which it linked itself. These fragmentary texts were supposed to resist any presumption of understanding reality from within an ontological or metaphysical system. They unmasked the 'I' and 'reality' as fictions and lacked any 'centre'. According to a respected study of (intellectualized) postmodernism in the Dutch novel, writer and philosopher Marjolijn Februari is 'one of the most typical postmodern authors', especially since her first novel *De zonen van het uitzicht* (Panorama's sons, 1989) is constructed around 'the absence of a centre'.[31] From an international point of view this experimental and philosophical novel is reminiscent of the work of authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Julian Barnes and Italo Calvino.[32]

Zwagerman and Februari have a different background but, as soon as they started criticising postmodern tradition(s), they took exception to the same things. It will become clear later that the self-criticism in both postmodern orientations shows remarkable similarities. This comes as no surprise, since the two variants of postmodernism I distinguish share a number of important assumptions. An important starting point for authors from both orientations, for example, is the rejection of all forms of cultural hierarchy or authority (the canon, high and low art) on

principle and the questioning of notions of 'originality'. The critique of postmodernism of both orientations is aimed at the underlying relativism of such assumptions and on the paralyzing effects of this relativism on the writer.

Redefining the Postmodern Heritage: Late Postmodernism

Before I turn to Februari, Zwagerman and Grunberg and their respective struggles with (their own) postmodernism, I will go through the four definite themes which appear in the wider discussions about the heritage of (literary) postmodernism in Dutch newspapers, literary and cultural magazines, book reviews and academic criticism from the late 1980s onwards. In doing so, I will try to formulate a hypothesis for discussing the individual writers in the next section. This discussion – amongst other things about the work of the three authors examined in the next section – focuses on four related points: the alleged relativism of postmodernism, the supposed devaluation of literature, the relation between literature and its public and the relation between literature and ethics. I want to make their interconnection more explicit by reformulating them in general terms (and in a somewhat lapidary manner, leaving aside local curiosities or controversies between individual Dutch authors and critics).[33]

1. *Alleged relativism*. Postmodern thought is associated by critics in both its manifestations (playful and intellectualized) with (cultural) relativism. In playful postmodernism there is an eclectic relativism of 'anything goes', and in intellectualized postmodernism it is a cultural relativism which refuses to accept universal criteria for fair or morally responsible actions and thinking. Postmodern man is supposed to no longer have independent foundations that are beyond discussion, no pure leverage point from which his actions and thinking can be directed. Postmodernism has unmasked the 'universal values', with which a modern and humanistic West liked to skirmish, as context-bound ideological constructions. Critics of postmodernism point out that this relativism of both manifestations makes any claim to authority virtually impossible, and that this has consequences for literature too.[34] They do not want a return to the kind of authority that liberal humanism clung to, or to a world in which a homogeneous cultural elite successfully mystifies the ideological content implicit in their taste. The return of the liberal humanist suppression of the historical, political, material and social in the definition of art as eternal and universal is even less desirable. They do, however, question the disavowal of reality which seems to characterize much of postmodern literature. They also pose the (rhetorical) question of whether postmodern deconstruction of everything the West held dear (humanistic values such as *Bildung*, emancipation and progress, the canon, etc.) is the final answer.

2. *Devaluation of literature*. The second theme arising in the Dutch reconsideration of the postmodern legacy in literature (discussed in relation to authors such as

Februari, Zwagerman and Grunberg) is the changed status of literature and its culture in the world. In reflecting on the legacy of postmodernism, the general feeling that literature has a less prominent role in today's postmodern culture and pluralistic society is a crucial point. The authors are confronted with, in Antoine Compagnon's words, 'the erosion of literary culture' and with William Marx's 'devaluation of literature': the diminishing impact of bestowing literary value on the outside world by experts in the field. As Compagnon puts it:

> Literature has become a marginal area, a peripheral appendix of culture; it has disappeared from social discourse.[35]

The liberal humanist idea of a restricted category of authors and literary works that have an absolute example value while serving as a general quality standard corresponds to a hierarchically stratified society which is now firmly consigned to the past: a society whose upper echelons defined a stable order of values that was cemented by the institutions and supposedly endorsed by the entire community. Today, however, we are living in a pluralistic society, differentiated by function instead of rank and which has few common values. The values associated with literature are not part of this limited consensus.[36] As we will see, the authors studied in the next section do not deny this postmodern reality, but they do not take it for granted either. They are seeking a new legitimacy for the writer's authority, one that would allow him to interact with the world.

3. Literature and the public. The third recurring point in Dutch literary discussions since the late 1980s is intimately linked to this reflection on the conditions and the possibility of literary authority, namely the relation between literature and public. There has been a moment in the career of many a Dutch author (including the three authors discussed here) where they started reflecting upon the form, and consequently, the accessibility of their work. Against the backdrop of the shrinking influence of literature on social discourse, these authors broke with the experimental postmodern features which also typified their own work at that time. They experienced the formal and compositional elements of postmodernism (such as fragmentation, indeterminacy, the 'Russian doll'-effect, the severing of all links between language and reality, etc.) either as too playful and non-committal or as unnecessarily puzzling and hermetic. In more recent works of authors such as Februari, Zwagerman and Grunberg any postmodern form experiment has been rejected or watered down. These authors revert to relatively conventional forms (storytelling, plot, readability, character, etc.). Critics have interpreted this as a conventional overture, whether appreciated by the reviewer or not, to the reading public.

4. Literature and ethics. The fourth and final point that continually reappears in Dutch discussions on the legacy of postmodernism is the fact that critics of postmodernism focus on moral and ethical problems, both within their novels and outside (columns, journalism). Februari, Zwagerman and Grunberg all wrote

novels embedding a reflection on the possibility of literary engagement. Thus they echo (or pioneer) a tendency also highlighted in the last few years by Dutch literary criticism. 'It has finally happened', noted a critic of the authoritative book section of the daily newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* in 2008:

> Literature has been chased out onto the street. After years of to-ing and fro-ing about whether writers should concern themselves with social problems, the question has been answered.[37]

When, in early 2010, the weekly *De Groene Amsterdammer* asked critics and other experts to compile a Top-21 of twenty-first century novels the editorial noted:

> The time of great psychological and philosophical novels is over [...] as is that of the purely aesthetic novel. What seems relevant now is actuality. More and more fiction and non-fiction form an alliance, and increasingly the fear of terrorism and concerns about immigration and the environment seep through in literature. The clash between civilizations as a result of globalization is a fertile topic. Many novels are about 'The Other'.[38]

The new attitude of Dutch authors in relation to postmodernism, as examined in this article, therefore correlates with a redefinition of the moral and ethical dimensions of literature.

In the last decades, the image conjured up in Dutch literature by the convergence of these four points is that of a writer trying to think himself beyond the relativism that has been compared with postmodernism. Postmodern theory challenged the essentialist premises of liberal humanism with great rhetorical virulence. The idea that literature stands above politics as a universal form of expression was unmasked as an article of faith and the absolutism of the 'white' canon as an eternal and universal standard came to an end. This postmodern 'victory' over liberal humanism initially went hand in hand with a certain triumphalism but the writers discussed here have distanced themselves from this. They realized that the breakdown of the aristocratic cultural ideal of liberal humanism was only a first step. It was undoubtedly necessary, but in itself it was not a tenable (over)reaction. The postmodern deconstruction of old presuppositions and certainties has been mired in cynical relativism, including with respect to the possibilities of literature which, according to a considerable number of contemporary writers, fails to respond to the needs of an evolving culture. The historical usefulness of postmodernism is therefore accepted but its offshoots are being criticized: an unbridled relativism, an ironical stance in life where nothing is real anymore and the terror of the 'anything goes' slogan.

The three authors discussed in the next section of this article have candidly faced the consequences of these offshoots for writers. They may have settled scores with

an outmoded cultural ideal but have also side-lined themselves in the process.

Late Postmodernism in Dutch Literature

The basic assumption of this section is that three representative voices in Dutch literature express a desire to go beyond postmodernism. Februari, Zwagerman and Grunberg have abandoned their postmodern literary posts. They are no longer positioned as more or less prominent players within the closed realm of literature but as public intellectuals whose new playground is the public sphere. Their search for new connections between literature and the world marks a new phase in what is called postmodernism, which is characterized by a reorientation in relation to everything that postmodernism had vigorously dismissed in an earlier phase, perhaps too vigorously. This very reorientation makes them late postmodern authors.

M. Februari: the Writer as a Public Intellectual

Following her first novel *De zonen van het uitzicht*, Marjolijn Februari was described by critics and journalists as a 'notorious postmodernist'.[39] Although she had already distanced herself from the relativism associated with postmodern thinking ('the infinite relativizing of postmodernism is absolutely not the message I am giving' she said as early as 1990),[40] reviewers concluded that the author of *De zonen van het uitzicht* 'narrowly followed in the postmodern wake' or 'took the postmodern tour'.[41] Even academic criticism placed the young Februari in 'the inner circle of postmodernism'.[42]

When her second novel *De literaire kring* (2007; English translation 2010: *The Book Club*) was published, the chosen form was much less experimental and immediately labelled by critics as less postmodern (and even anti-postmodern). 'Februari has converted to linear prose', a critic remarked, and another noted that Februari had renounced 'postmodern theory' in favour of 'pragmatism and worldliness'.[43] *The Book Club* is 'an easy read'[44] which, in contrast to her earlier work, 'excels in its accessibility',[45] and in which the author displays evidence of a 'wider view of society', said the reviewers.[46]

The Book Club concerns a literary circle of self-satisfied, rich and powerful dignitaries of a Dutch village. Februari sketches a picture verging on a caricature of this club's liberal humanism. Its members entertain idealized notions about the healing and character-building powers of high culture in general and canonical literature in particular. They obviously hate 'the extravagances of postmodernism'[47] more than anything: their exalted conception of culture has barely suffered from the onslaught of postmodernism which has failed to enter the world of *The Book Club*.

Februari's book club novel reads as an indictment against the hypocrisy of a self-appointed cultural elite of white males and their out-dated liberal humanism. In

this respect *The Book Club* fits in a broad trend in international literature, from Martin Amis's *The Information* (1995) to Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005). One character in Februari's novel typifies the presumptuous members of the reading group sarcastically as 'right-thinking humanists' ('weldenkende humanisten')[48] and their reading club based on high culture as a 'moral money-laundering organization' ('morele witwasorganisatie').[49]

The Book Club is more than a postmodern settling of scores with liberal humanistic pretentions, however. The novel – which in many ways reminds one of Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of globalization and the newly acquired independence of global elites from territorially confined units of political and cultural power[50] – thematizes the decreasing importance of the public sphere (Habermas's *Öffentlichkeit*) and therefore the decreased social relevance of the writer who, more than anyone else, breathes in the public sphere.[51] The activities of the book club members have ever-increasing financial and moral consequences as they manage branches with annual turnovers in excess of the turnover of the government of the country they live in. Yet no one oversees them. They do business in each other's backyards, invisible to the public and its representatives in the public arena, politicians, journalists and writers. In the world of the book club members, public discussion is seen as a rear guard action, fought between people without either reach or muscle. The fact that the members, high on high culture, place the writer on a pedestal is therefore mere chutzpah: indeed, they have a stake in ensuring that the writer and other potentially embarrassing snoops are kept as powerless bystanders. In their world, literature is but harmless wallpaper.

A crucial question raised by the *The Book Club* is what the writer can do about it. How can he reach the people with power and responsibility again? Certainly not by losing himself in 'the extravagances' of a failing postmodernism. Februari's novel sketches an alternative answer. When a young woman from the village makes waves with an international bestseller the fact that the book club will discuss it is par for the course. The members try to prevent this by all means and it slowly transpires why. The bestseller describes the true story of how a fellow villager, a former member of the book club, knowingly sold impure glycerine to a medicine manufacturer in Haiti with the result that seventy people died, including many children.

Although the powerful club members succeeded at the time in burying the story, they have no wish to face it again. They try to disqualify the book by dismissing it as pulp fiction ('bedside novel', 'girl's diary').[52] Autobiography does not seem highbrow enough for them, convinced as they are that True Literature should above all rise above everyday life banalities. This diametrically opposes two things in the novel: on the one hand the exalted notions of the book club members about what literature does and allows (which dictate that literature is above all a question of abstractions), and on the other hand the more modest opinions of a bestselling writer who prefers the concrete. 'Seen from the writer's point of view there is no such thing as political culture, no world history nor tragedy', Februari says in *The*

Book Club, but only 'the individual reactions to them'.[53] She pleads for concrete engagement rather than inflated abstractions.

It would be difficult to call *The Book Club* 'chick lit' or a 'bedside novel', but the fact is that Februari comes much closer to it with her second novel than with her first experimental postmodern one. She has repeatedly reflected on this reversal in interviews and essays since its publication. Soon after, for example, she looked back on her debut as follows:

> Politics rippled, the money flowed and writers had collectively taken a sabbatical [...]. Paradoxes, mirror effects, echo chambers, illusions and the derailing of illusions: those were the literary techniques during the glory days of postmodernism. They were techniques of literary criticism and philosophical reflection.[54]

But politics no longer flows gently, Februari concluded in 2007, since 'the storm is also raging over the West'. In a short time 'a completely new experimental situation has arisen' and, according to Februari, writers have to adapt and set themselves up as public intellectuals. Februari does it herself in her politically and socially oriented columns, but fiction also requires it. 'The windows have been blown open', she writes, and the writer needs to find 'new goals' and a 'new public':

> A new necessity has arisen to personally take responsibility, in writing, in the public domain [and] to transpose social, ethical and religious theories into concrete social, moral, religious problems.[55]

Literature can feed public discussion by leaving the safe level of abstract convictions and descend towards concrete and small stories. As early as 2004 Februari wrote that with these little concrete histories she wanted to raise the level of 'literary sensitivity'[56], especially in the social elite which normally does not concern itself with individual histories but only the general rules and laws to correlate these histories.[57]

After reaching a small group of cultural insiders with her first novel, Februari aimed at a wider public with her second. She looked for an alliance with readers whose daily work confronts them with moral issues and with 'the real world'. In this respect one could say that *The Book Club* investigates what is tenable in liberal humanism, after its postmodern deconstruction, in the culture and society of today.

Joost Zwagerman: the Writer and the Devaluation of Literature

His work, his interest in popular culture, his obstreperous way of assailing the established order in the world of poetry, his dynamic handling of the media, everything about him was qualified as postmodern when poet and novelist Joost Zwagerman came onto the literary scene at the end of the 1980s. He was seen as 'the

zeitgeist expert',[58] someone well up on the 'Amsterdam pomo-scene'.[59] His novel *Gimmick!* was described by one reviewer as the 'cynical diagnosis of postmodern culture'.[60] The word postmodern itself appears frequently in the novel and refers to an anti-pretentious kind of art and culture, a culture despairing of ever producing something original or real. The self-presentation of the young and career making Zwagerman reinforced this idea of postmodernism. Pretending all along that postmodernism could not be taken seriously was part and parcel of the playful postmodern prose which was becoming fashionable in the Dutch literature of the time.[61]

Zwagerman's flirtation with the postmodern zeitgeist did not last. Shortly after *Gimmick!*, he appeared quite sceptical himself about the type of disengaged and remote postmodernism he had initially represented. During the 1990s he began to engage himself more and more as a writer. He came to view postmodernism as a phenomenon, stranded in its own cynicism, which was responsible for literature turning in on itself. From that point onwards he called on his fellow writers to engage and to show a raised awareness of the needs of society. Thus he speaks repeatedly of the scandalous fact that there is no trace in the European literature of the 1990s of what he called 'the most burning issue of Western Europe: the question of immigration'. 'In Dutch literature all the protagonists are white', he said in 1994, 'as if we did not live in a multicultural society'.[62]

In 1994 Zwagerman lends weight to this call for literature to connect with the world and topical issues. His novel *De buitenvrouw* (The Mistress) deals with multicultural society and the lack of understanding between its supporters and its opponents. The writer allows his protagonist to conclude a monologue over the xenophobia of the Dutch with an outraged judgment on artists and intellectuals:

> Now that it was really necessary to kick a conscience into the citizen, the cultural vanguard launched into easy camp and postmodern irony.[63]

De buitenvrouw has clear overtones of self-correction in its political and ethical dimensions. Zwagerman himself was in any event no longer taken by the seductions of postmodern irony. He no longer wanted to be a camp artist. In other words: in the 1990s, Zwagerman constructed his identity by rejecting his former 'postmodernism' whilst looking for direct engagement, which he found in multiculturalism (for many progressive people in those days this was indeed a welcome new interpretation of their engagement).

Three years later he covered this reinvention of himself as a writer in the novel *Chaos en rumoer* (Chaos and Commotion, 1997). This novel pits two stereotypical types of writers against each other: the protagonist (a worrying liberal humanist who finds fin de siècle 20th century culture superficial and calls literature 'a minority sport'[64] while struggling with writer's block), and his opposite (a slick successful author versed in literary fashions who wins prize after prize). In the protagonist's

eyes his popular opponent is a 'non-committal postmodern joker'[65] who does everything that can be expected from a postmodern author in line with the stereotype. He keeps using quotations (as authenticity or originality no longer exist in the postmodern worldview) and plays postmodern games with the relation between fiction and reality.[66]

Zwagerman's *Chaos en rumoer* reads like a critical self-examination in which both types of writer are held up against the light as reflections of Zwagerman himself.[67] With his caricature of a (self-)portrait of the 'non-committal postmodern joker', he again distances himself from his former position as an author. He challenges the playful postmodern conception of literature with the high-minded liberal humanism of the protagonist. However, that liberal humanism is also portrayed as a caricature: the writer with writer's block is the loser who never takes off in the cynical world of *Chaos en rumoer* and whose splendid isolation is not taken seriously by anyone. His seriousness and his somewhat naïve striving for truthful words are not really held up as a worthy alternative for the playful, anti-pretentious and disengaged postmodernism of the successful author (and the former Zwagerman). But this postmodernism is definitely qualified by this (pursuit of) seriousness.

At the end of the novel, after developments we will not go into here,[68] a kind of synthesis is achieved: thanks in part to his opponent, the protagonist overcomes his writer's block and writes a book that aims to be an improved version of his opponent's. His attempt at synthesis can be interpreted as Zwagerman's view on writing: the author takes a step back from his own postmodern position, not by falling back on the completely isolated and necessarily blocked position of his protagonist (who does not suffer from writer's block by chance) but by renouncing the cynical, fashion-conscious and superficial aspects of postmodernism and reorienting himself towards the values and expectations of what postmodernism had ended: those of liberal humanism.

With the conceit of writer's block, Zwagerman proves to be acutely aware of the problematic situation of the writer as a public figure in today's expanding and diversifying culture.[69] The protagonist arrives at an impasse because he has to operate in a world in which there is barely agreement as to who is worth reading and who is not. In *De buitenvrouw*, the reflection on the dwindling public interest in literature also plays a part when the protagonist, a Dutch language teacher at a secondary school, realizes that for his pupils, writers 'had become as abstract as the kings and *stadhouders* (governors) from history lessons'.[70] As a literature teacher, traditionally one of the gatekeepers of High Culture, he experiences the fact that postmodernism's scepticism towards universal standards has made any authoritative attribution of quality impossible. The consequence is that literature highly regarded by experts and insiders is no longer guaranteed a place in a widely shared canon.

Zwagerman's critique of postmodernism (a critique to which he paradoxically gives shape in a novel, *Chaos en rumoer*, which ultimately is thoroughly postmodern:

in the final section, 'reality' appears to be fiction and the other way round) is also a reaction to the crisis in which literary culture has found itself under postmodern rule. In *Chaos en rumoer* he portrays a cynical literary crowd who no longer believe in the power of literature and who consider it as an insider joke for cognoscenti. In the course of the 1990s, Zwagerman reached the conclusion that his own earlier postmodernism was the wrong answer. He exchanged uncaring cynicism for a new engagement. Zwagerman divested his own postmodernism of its cynical and superficial sides. He tried to tone down the postmodern scepticism that prevented writers (like himself) from tackling ethical and moral issues. His own novels have increasingly dealt with precisely these issues and, in doing so, the writer deliberately chose an accessible style. (Zwagerman himself considers his *Chaos en rumoer* to be proof of his competence to write a postmodern novel that is still readable).[71] Beyond his novels, the writer Zwagerman has also expressed himself through columns and other journalistic interventions in the public sphere which are increasingly politically motivated, whether in books, newspapers, magazines or radio and television.

Arnon Grunberg: the Writer's Hunger for Reality

No matter how much Februari and Zwagerman differ as writers, their reactions to postmodernism are similar. Both want to use literature to reflect on moral and ethical issues, they choose accessible literary forms and they intervene explicitly in public discussions, including outside their novels. As the heyday of postmodernism recedes into the distance, the differences between the two manifestations of postmodernism in the Netherlands also disappear from view, and the critique of postmodernism results in similar author strategies.

As happened with Februari and Zwagerman, the early work of Arnon Grunberg was also qualified as 'postmodern' in the second half of the 1990s. The work of this undeniable *jeune premier* of contemporary Dutch literature clearly shows both playful postmodern traits and more philosophically oriented characteristics of intellectualized postmodernism. Critics decried Grunberg's two faces, sometimes in one and the same review.[72] On the basis of novels such as *Blauwe maandagen* (1994, English translation 1997: *Blue Mondays*), Grunberg's first novel about a young Jewish boy who struggles with his identity, he is labelled as an unfettered ironist who is deadly serious when describing love as illusion and truth as a lie. He actually contributed to this image himself with a number of cynical one-liners.[73] At the beginning of his career Grunberg seemed to have associated himself with what Douglas Coupland in *Generation X* (1991) has called the 'Cult of aloneness': 'the need for autonomy at all costs, usually at the expense of long-term relationships'.[74]

While some critics saw in Grunberg's early work yet another, almost routine, exercise in postmodernism,[75] others (including the author himself) declared that, on the contrary, this work marked a departure from it. This peculiarity was also true

of the early reception of his contemporary and spiritual kinsman Dave Eggers. The fact that all reviewers, whether for or against Grunberg (or Eggers), had nothing positive to say about postmodernism, is telling for the new constellation that has been in place since the turn of the century: for many critics, postmodernism is passé.

'As you know so-called postmodernism is already behind us' begins an interview with Grunberg in 2007. Not only is the interviewer convinced that postmodernism ('all stories are already told') is dead and buried, the writer himself is critical. 'The idea that all stories are told seems complete nonsense', he replied. 'As soon as society begins to disintegrate you can no longer hold this position'.[76]

We can see that in the course of his career Grunberg himself tires of the postmodern pose of detachment that he still supported in the mid 1990s. He turns away from the pernicious indifference of the 'anything goes' doctrine and he explicitly rejects the very irony he saw as his salvation before. In line with David Foster Wallace and subsequent New Sincerity writers such as Eggers and Jonathan Safran Foer, Grunberg criticizes the ironic stance that seems to be ingrained in postmodernism because it can get mired in relativism. In this vein he spoke in 1999 of 'irony as a cancer stifling everything. The irony that has rendered our food inedible and many books unreadable'.[77] His own reputation as a writer hiding behind the play of irony increasingly irritated him. 'My God, how I long to be taken seriously' ('Mijn God, wat verlang ik ernaar [...] om serieus te worden genomen'), he wrote in 2007 in a text about the task of the writer, a text which, he assured his readers, was 'guaranteed to be irony-free' ('gegarandeerd ironievrij').[78]

The way Grunberg sees the task of the writer can be distilled in the first place from his novels, in which he shows himself more and more committed and concerned. In 2003, his book *De asielzoeker* (*The Asylum Seeker*) provides a pointed reflection on the (im)possibility of literary engagement. The novel paints a damning portrait of a failed writer who suffers from 'the postmodern drive to unmask'.[79] With *Tirza* (2007) Grunberg proceeded to write one of the most remarkable Dutch 9/11-novels. *Onze oom* (*Our Uncle*, 2008) is a novel about the moral dilemmas in the context of war and terror in a South American dictatorship.

The end of that novel lifts the veil a little on Grunberg's working methods. A journalist – clearly Grunberg himself – is visiting one of the protagonists, an arms dealer, for an interview. The suggestion is that he is gathering material for the story we have just read. The interview the journalist carries out with the arms dealer is the kind Grunberg has conducted himself in real life. During interviews at the time of publication he repeatedly stated that he had researched arms dealing and spoken to dealers.[80]

If Grunberg's early work was often a mixture of autobiography and at times aberrant fantasy, his subsequent work is increasingly based on thorough fieldwork: the writer Grunberg is leaning more heavily on the journalist Grunberg who, since 2005, has visited Dutch soldiers in Afghanistan and camped with the American army in Iraq in the course of reporting for leading Dutch newspapers.[81]

In the novel *Onze oom* the arms dealer asks the journalist the reason for his visit. 'I try and get as close as possible', he answers quietly, 'to danger, destruction, death'.[82] That is exactly what Grunberg is doing in his recent novels. He is interested in making literature out of real experience, out of the proximity of others and realities that cannot be deconstructed away in relativism. Literature has to return to the essence of life and, with this in mind, the writer starts to work in a documentary manner. His novels are increasingly based on journalistic fieldwork. In *Onze oom*, for instance, not only did he incorporate the results of research into the illegal arms trade, but also interviews with imprisoned women in Peru. In this respect Grunberg joins the recent trend towards non-fiction, documentary fiction or 'non-fiction novels' typical of authors such as the Americans Eggers (*What Is the What*, *Zeitoun*) and Foer (*Eating Animals*), but also Europeans like François Bon (*Daewoo*), Aifric Campbell (*The Semantics of Murder*) or Thomas Brussig (*Wie es leuchtet*).

Critics have reacted in different ways to these changes in his work. The new seriousness is valued. One critic noted that 'the mature and serious tone' of his recent journalism contrasted starkly with the 'reckless, boyish and sarcastic tone' of earlier work.[83] Another, however, regrets that with *Onze oom* Grunberg has left the domain of literature in order to bring us 'arid pamphleteering prose' which conveys 'one-sided moral messages'.[84] Grunberg has parried this criticism, aimed at style and form rather than content, as follows:

> Criticism of style is always the means of choice to pacify reality [...], a means of not having to talk about the book and what happens in it, to keep the novel at arm's length from the reader so that his worldview does not have to topple, that everything can stay as it was.[85]

A more frequently recurring element in Grunberg's reflection on literature and authorship is his criticism of writers and critics who hold on to old literary conventions, without re-examining them in the light of a fast-changing culture. Primacy of style is one such convention. According to Grunberg, today we should be asking ourselves whether style has not become an obstacle to the writer who wants to be in touch with reality and his public. Literature is threatened, he said in 2001, 'by the ignorance of those who want to continue practising it against the grain'.[86] They are making a reserve out of literature. This has to be prevented, he wrote in 2009, 'because the idea that the park of literature is a paradise is less obvious than some of its inhabitants like to think'.[87]

According to another literary convention, the author can never be held accountable for what his characters say. While this convention is taken for granted by insiders (breaking it is taboo), Grunberg has re-examined it. When an interviewer spoke critically of the utterances of one of his characters, Grunberg conspicuously did not use this opportunity to distance himself from his character. 'No, I would not call it fiction', he said, 'I appreciate it if someone takes the words of my char-

acter seriously'.[88] Of course it does not mean that Grunberg has to endorse what is said by his character, but neither does he believe that what is said in the novel has a clearly defined function outside of its fictional world. The novel is not a work of art that only refers to itself, but an attempt to intervene in real debates. As Grunberg put it in a recent blog-posting: 'The idea that in the name of literature everything should be allowed in novels or poems pushes literature to the periphery of society.'[89]

Since Grunberg's attempt to overcome the cynicism of his early work which was generally held to be 'postmodern', he no longer tries to hide behind literary conventions or behind postmodern ideas about the crisis in language and the complexity of reality. 'Ah, the exquisite complexity of reality', he quipped in 1996, 'it can serve as an excuse for almost everything'.[90] Statements such as these should alert the reader to the fact that Grunberg wants him to focus on content and abandon his suspicions of postmodernism he may harbour against it .[91] They are characteristic of his genuine pursuit of a literature that breaks free from its isolation and that does not seek to (aesthetically) please the reader but (ethically) shake him up.

Conclusion: Late Postmodern Ambivalence

Two things have come to light in this article. The first is that the authors discussed started criticizing postmodernism after initially embracing it. They searched for a new position and did not shun inspiration from traditions and forms associated with the liberal humanist position that postmodernism was supposed to have left behind. The second is that this quest for a new third position can be interpreted as a reaction against a changing literary climate. The authors seek new ways of exercising their trade in order to revitalize a marginalized literature. They are no longer ashamed of having certain expectations of (the public effects of) their work and they strive to strip writing of its permissiveness.

From their late postmodern position, Februari, Zwagerman and Grunberg have taken an ambivalent stance in relation to the postmodern legacy. They endorse postmodern criticism of the universal pretensions of liberal humanism, but they are also forced to conclude that it has failed to put the historical, political and ethical dimensions of literature back on stage. As a response to a changing culture it is unsatisfactory. This is why these late postmodern writers have turned again to postmodern taboos such as *authenticity* and *originality*.

Late postmodern ambivalence clearly came to the fore after the 9/11 attacks, when commentators all over the world, including in the Netherlands, announced the end of postmodern relativism. Dutch journalist and literary critic Michaël Zeeman wrote on 14 September 2001 in a newspaper that on 9/11 'a few hits' had put an end to the 'feeble cultural relativism of postmodernism'. It seemed that history had not yet come to an end.[92]

It is tempting to interpret the literary forms of the critique of postmodernism,

such as the New Sincerity movement, as a literary variant of the general confusion that followed the attacks of 9/11. Yet if, with today's knowledge, we follow the critical trail back in literature, we can see, long before 9/11, some elements that can be interpreted as 'late postmodern' coming to the surface. This is true for Zwagerman and Grunberg, as we have seen earlier, but also for the work of (dissenting) Dutch writers like Frans Kellendonk, Leon de Winter, Robert Vernooy, Dirk van Weelden or Charlotte Mutsaers from the late 1980s and early 1990s.[93] Literature is not just a reaction to a social reality. Often it is one step ahead of that reality.

Notes

1 In this article the term 'Western world' broadly refers to all the European nations or nations that are greatly influenced by European languages, traditions and culture (including, e.g., the US).

2 Bertens in Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema (eds.), *International Postmodernism. Theory and Literary Practice* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1997).

3 Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism. American Fiction at the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 19-24.

4 In the 1990s for example, when, in the words of Maggie Humm, the commodification of postmodernism was a business success story ('The Business of a 'New Arty': Woolf, Potter and Postmodernism', in J. Simons and K. Fullbrook, *Writing: a Womens Business. Women, Writing and the Marketplace* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 111). Minsoo Kang dates 'the death knell of postmodernism in the U.S.' to 19 June 1993, when 'the standard [postmodern] devices of self-reference, ironic satire, and playing with multiple levels of reality' were moved out of the realm of literature and high culture into the more profane domain of popular film. They suddenly also seemed to appear in an Arnold Schwarzenegger film, *The Last Action Hero*, which made the 'intellectual idea's final demise' (Kang) a fact (cited in Andrew Hoberek, 'Introduction: After Postmodernism', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 53-3, 2007, p. 233). In this view postmodernism simply became a victim of its own success.

5 See Frederick Crews, *Postmodern Pooh* (New York: North Point Press, 2001) as well as [http://www.elswhere.org/pomo/]

6 See, e.g., Frank Furedi, *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone? Confronting 21st Century Philistinism* (London/New York: Continuum, 2004), Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense. Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1998), and *Intellectual Impostures. Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science* (London: Profile Books, 2003). In this article I am not dealing with the kind of anti-postmodern criticism Paul Michael Lützeler addresses when he writes that postmodernism has always been criticized by 'Anhänger der Moderne wie Einheits- und Werteverteidiger' who judged the superficial and cynical character of postmodernism from the start. Lützeler (Von der Postmoderne zur Globalisierung. Zur Interrelation der Diskurse', in Paul Michael Lützeler (ed.) *Räume der literarischen Postmoderne. Gender, Performivität, Globalisierung* (Tübingen: Stauf-

fenburg Verlag, 2000), p. 1) gives German examples, but he also mentions Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself. Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

7 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy. An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Murray, 1869; repr. New York: Macmillan & Co, 1882), p. 4.

8 I use the term 'liberal humanism' to denote the ruling assumptions, values and meanings of mainstream literary theory until the late 1960s: literature is timeless; literature contains its own meaning; the text will reveal constants and universal truths for each of us; the purpose of literature is the enrichment of life; content stems from form; a literary work is 'sincere'. See Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: an Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory: the Basics* (London/New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 6-9 and Patricia Waugh (ed.), *Literary Theory and Criticism. An* Oxford *Guide* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 245-55.

9 See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction* (New York/London, Routledge, 1988), p. 178.

10 See, e.g., Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 146, 1984, who argued that the late capitalist cultural logic of postmodernism had ruined the normative values of modernism (and that this is not necessarily a good thing), or Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) who analysed the drawing apart of postmodern theorists and the (general) public and who posed the question if and how politics and ethics are still possible after the postmodern rejection of concepts such as 'truth' or 'foundation'.

11 London 2001. See for a critical statement about the link between the end of postmodernism and 9/11: Stanley Fish, Condemnation Without Absolutes', *The New York Times*, 15 October 2001.

12 Edward Rothstein, 'Connections. Attacks on U.S. Challenge the Perspectives of Postmodern True Believers'. In: *The New York Times* 22-9-2001.

13 Roger Rosenblatt, 'The Age of Irony Comes to an End', *Time Magazine*, 16 September 2001.

14 Martin Amis in *The Guardian*, 18 September 2001 (Martin Amis, *The Second Plane. September 11: 2001-2007* (London: Vintage Books, 2008), p. 5.

15 Luke Slattery, 'Wake Up and Smell the Cordite', *The Australian*, 24 October 2001.

16 Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), p. 124, but also p. 77 and p. 146.

17 Liberal humanism: see note 7.

18 See, e.g., Max Watman, 'Ignorant Armies Clash by Night', *New Criterion*, 1 May 2005; Gregory Miller, 'Saturday, Bloody Saturday', *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 20 March 2005; Barber van der Pol, '222 keer niet van hetzelfde', *De Volkskrant*, 20 May 2005.

19 Thus, Andrew Gibson, begins his *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel. From Leavis to Levinas* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 6-9, with a direct challenge of postmodern discourse

by referring to another precursor of the same reviled tradition: 'It is time to go back to Leavis', he writes, an opening which, with its reference to one of the most influential twentieth century representatives of liberal humanism, courted yawns of boredom or disbelief, wry smiles and ironical jeers. Unnecessarily, according to Gibson, because even the most convinced postmodern theorist has already converted himself anew to a neo-humanistic focus on ethics. Gibson addresses the work of Nussbaum and Rorty, which he calls 'rather pre-structuralist'. Rorty (1989) does indeed refer to liberal humanists such as Arnold, Leavis, T.S. Eliot, Frank Kermode and Harold Bloom in a very positive sense.

20 I will focus on the Dutch situation, leaving Belgian literature written in Dutch aside: the idea of postmodernism has a different history in Belgium and therefore the reconsideration of its legacy by Flemish authors (such as Pol Hoste, Koen Peeters or David Nolens) has taken a different shape. See, e.g., Bart Vervaeck, 'De kleine Postmodernsky: ontwikkelingen in de (verhalen over de) postmoderne roman', in Elke Brems et al. (eds.), *Achter de verhalen. Over de Nederlandse literatuur van de twintigste eeuw* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007) and Sven Vitse, 'Flemish Literature: Questions of Commitment and Authenticity', in Thomas Vaessens and Yra van Dijk (eds.), *Reconsidering the Postmodern. European Literature Beyond Postmodernism* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011, forthcoming).

21 The exception that proves the rule is Carel Peeters, the only critic in Dutch newspapers who thought it was worthwhile to parry postmodernism's criticism of liberal humanism. None of his colleagues reacted to this essay. See Frans Ruiter, 'Postmodernism in the German- and Dutch-Speaking Countries', in Bertens, Hans and Fokkema, Douwe (eds.), *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1997), Jeroen Overstijns, 'Van realisme naar postmodernisme (en weer terug?). Advocaat van de hanen van A.F.Th. van der Heijden in een postmodernistisch perspectief', *Spiegel der letteren*, 38-1, 1996), pp. 15-42, Odile Heynders, 'Poststructuralisme in de Nederlandse literatuur- en architectuurkritiek: een vergelijking', *Tijdschrift voor literatuurwetenschap*, 2-3 (Amsterdam; AUP,1997), pp. 220-1 and Thomas Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman. Literatuur, autoriteit en engagement* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 209; repr. 2011), pp. 55-6.

22 The first review (available in the comprehensive digital database of Dutch literary criticism in newspapers: LiteRom, [http://www.knipselkranten.nl/literom]) in which the word 'postmodernism' is used to characterize a Dutch work of literature appeared on 12 May 1983 (Leo Geerts, 'Jaap Goedegebuure over Jeroen Brouwers of een kletsmeier over een praatgenie', *De Nieuwe*, 12 May 1983).

23 The first essays on postmodernism by Dutch literature scholars in the Netherlands are: Anthony Mertens, 'Een tikkeltje te koket misschien? Marjolijn Februari is niet voor één gat te vangen', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 14 February 1988; Ernst van Alphen, 'Een kind droomt zich af', *Forum der letteren*, 26-1 (The Hague: Smits drukkers-uitgevers, 1985), pp. 20-32 and 'Naar een theorie van het postmodernisme', *Forum der Letteren*, 30-1 (The Hague: Smits drukkers-uitgevers, 1989), pp. 21-37, and Klaus Beekman, 'De strategie

van het postmodernismedebat', *Spektator* 18-5, 1989, pp. 343-46 and 'Een proeve van postmoderne parodie en pastiche', *Forum der Letteren*, 32-2 (The Hague: Smits drukkersuitgevers, 1991), pp. 81-9. Some subsequent publications include Wiljan van den Akker, 'A Mad Hatter's Tupperware Party. Postmodern Tendencies in American and Dutch Poetry', in *The Berkeley Conference on Dutch Literature 1991*, ed. by J.P. Snapper and T. Schannon (Lanham enzovoort 1993), pp. 171-95, Thomas Vaessens and Jos Joosten, *Postmoderne poëzie in Nederland en Vlaanderen* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2003).

24 All translations are the author's own unless otherwise mentioned. 'Seit kurzer Zeit hat der Begriff 'Postmodernismus' auch in die Niederlände Eingang gefunden. Es ist bezeichnend, daß er vor allem die Phantasie der Journalisten anregte und wie jedes andere Modewort innerhalb kürzester Zeit an semantischer Inflation litt',Mertens in Frank Ligtvoet and Marcel van Nieuwenborgh, *Die niederländische und die flämische Literatur der Gegenwart* (München/Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1993), p. 120.

25 While it is true that this notion has become one of the landmarks in the debate on postmodernism, it should nevertheless be noted that a general relativist stance, a juggling with genre conventions, a blurring of boundaries between high and low culture, and a hypertrophy of intertextual or intermedial references *may* but does not necessarily lead to, or indicate, an 'anything goes'. In fact, there are several contributions to the debate on postmodernism that critically discuss such an uncritical equalization (see, e. g., Wolfgang Welsch, *Unsere Postmoderne Moderne* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993)).

26 Joost Zwagerman, 'De tijdgeest en het geheim van de zeven schoenendozen', *Haagse Post*, 18 April 1987, pp. 20-50.

27 Ibid. and Luc van Peteghem, 'Standplaats Zwagerman. Van de eclectische kruisbestuiving of: een tomeloze diversiteit', in Elik Lettringa (ed.), *Standplaats Zwagerman* (Amsterdam, De Arbeiderspers, 2003), p. 151.

28 See Bert Bultinck, 'Ik had wel hevige reacties verwacht maar niet dát', *De Morgen* 15 April 2009.

29 See, e.g., Pieter Steinz, *Lezen etcetera. Gids voor de wereldliteratuur* (Amsterdam: Prometheus/ *NRC Handelsblad*, 2004), p. 401. Some Dutch 'playful postmodernists' include Joost Niemöller, the writing duo Martin Bril and Dirk van Weelden and the poets who came to be known as 'De Zestigers': J. Bernlef and K. Schippers.

30 Bart Vervaeck, *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman* (Brussel/Nijmegen: VUB Press/Vantilt, 1999), p. 14; Frans Ruiter and Wilbert Smulders, *Literatuur en moderniteit in Nederland 1840-1990* (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: De Arbeiderspers, 1996), p. 288.

31 Vervaeck, *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman*, p. 47.

32 Willem Brakman, Gerrit Krol, Louis Ferron and Charlotte Mutsaers (in her early work) are among Dutch 'intellectualist postmodernists'.

33 The debates are discussed extensively in Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman. Literatuur, autoriteit en engagement* and Vaessens, 'Een weg door het korenveld. Het Nederlandse poëziedebat sinds Maximaal'.

34 In the Dutch debate this criticism was expressed by journalists such as Michaël Zeeman and Carel Peters, and by academics such as Maarten Doorman. See Vaessens, *De*

revanche van de roman. Literatuur, autoriteit en engagement, p. 220.

35 'La littérature devient une zone marginale, un appendice périphérique de la culture; elle disparaît du discours social.', Antoine Compagnon, 'Après la littérature', *Le débat. Histoire, politique, société*, 110 (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), p. 136. See also William Marx, *L'adieu à la littérature. Histoire d'une dévalorisation XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2005).

36 Renate van Heydebrand and Simone Winko, 'The Qualities of literature. A Concept of Literary Evaluation in Pluralistic Societies', in Willie van Peer (ed.), *The Quality of Literature. Linguistic Studies in Literary Evaluation* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2008), p. 224.

37 Yra van Dijk, 'Vaarwel vrijblijvendheid. De Nederlandse literatuur betreedt het post-ironische tijdperk', *NRC Handelsblad*, 29 August 2008.

38 Joost de Vries, 'Top-21', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 3 March 2010, p. 35.

39 Jeroen Vullings, 'Wie P.C. Hooft zegt, zegt penose. Over vervlakking, verwarring en verwachting in de nieuwe Nederlandse letteren', *De Gids*, 170-12, 2007.

40 Arjan Peters, 'Dat men mij postmodern noemt, vind ik droevig', *Vrij Nederland* 10 March 1990.

41 Carel Peeters, 'Loodzware luchtigheid. Een postmoderne rapsodie van M. Februari', *Vrij Nederland*, 10 February 1990. See Karel Osstyn, 'Ergens gelezen', *De Standaard*, 9 June 1990 and Mertens, 'Een tikkeltje te koket misschien? M. Februari is niet voor één gat te vangen'.

42 Vervaeck, *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman*, p. 12.

43 See Sophie Gielis, 'Vlees noch vis. Marjolijn Februari's literaire spiraal', in *Ons erfdeel*, 2007-3, p. 170 and Daniël Rovers, 'Wie gemein ich bin! Over de auteur die zijn eigen lezer wordt', *De Witte Raaf*, 131, 2008, p. 3.

44 Mark Cloostermans, 'Eenvoudig en ongevaarlijk', *De Standaard*, 7 February 2008.

45 Jhim Lamoree, 'Ik stop alles in mijn werk en raak daardoor uitgeput. Een gesprek met Marjolijn Februari', *Het Parool*, 22 March 2007.

46 Janet Luis, De literaire kring', *Opzij*, 1 April 2007.

47 Marjolijn Februari, *De literaire kring* (Amsterdam: Querido, 2007), p. 61.

48 Ibid., p. 85.

49 Ibid., p. 86.

50 Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization. The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998).

51 See Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman. Literatuur, autoriteit en engagement*, pp. 168-75.

52 'Keukenmeidenromans' Februari, *Literaire kring*, p.147; 'Omdat zo'n meisje in het dorp heft gewoond, hoeven we toch niet meteen haar dagboeken te lezen', Ibid, p.147)..

53 'Maar Ruth Ackermann zou tegenwerpen date r vanuit de schrijver gezien geen politieke cultuur bestaat, geen wereldgeschiedenis en geen tragedie, het enige wat zij in literatuur kan ontdekken, is de individuele reactive erop', Ibid., p. 207.

54 Marjolijn Februari, 'Schrijven met open raam', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 19 October 2007, p. 30.

55 Ibid., pp. 30-1.

56 'literaire gevoeligheid', Februari, *Literaire kring*, p.209.

57 Marjolijn Februari, *Park welgelegen. Notities over morele verwarring* (Amsterdam: Querido, 2004), p. 209.

58 Rob van Erkelens, 'Toch liever een pitbull', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 26 October 1994. See André Matthijsse, 'Altijd in contact met de tijdgeest', *Haagsche Courant*, 30 October 1998 and Piet Gerbrandy, 'Klare taal om in te bijten', *De Volkskrant*, 20 July 2001.

59 Yves van Kempen, 'Zeker weten', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 19 July 1989.

60 Arnold Heumakers, 'Het cynische ziektebeeld van de postmoderne cultuur', *De Volkskrant*, 12 May 1989. See Doeschka Meijsing, 'Modern leven. De snelle, jonge mensen van Joost Zwagerman', *Elsevier*, 13 May 1989.

61 See, e.g., Joost Zwagerman, 'Drie liefdesbrieven', *Maatstaf*, 35-11/12, 1987, p. 135.

62 Ingrid Hoogervorst, '*De buitenvrouw*, roman over multiculturele samenleving', *De Telegraaf*, 14 October 1994; Jörgen Oosterwaal, 'Een grotesk gevoel van machteloosheid', *De Morgen*, 16 October 1993.

63 'Nu het wérkelijk nodig was om de burger een geweten te schoppen, legde de culturele voorhoede zich toe op slappe camp en postmoderne ironie.', Joost Zwagerman, *De buitenvrouw* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1994), pp. 258-9.

64 'een zaak van weinigen', Joost Zwagerman, *Chaos en rumoer* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1997), p. 63.

65 The protagonist blames his opponent for his 'postmoderne potsenmakerij', Ibid., p. 30.

66 Ibid., p. 126; p. 55.

67 Zwagerman in an interview (Xandra Schutte, 'Een ware fabel', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 27 August 1997): both characters are 'two nightmare-like versions of myself'.

68 See Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman. Literatuur, autoriteit en engagement*, pp. 125-50.

69 See for Zwagerman's essays on this topic, e.g., Joost Zwagerman, *Het vijfde seizoen* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2003), pp. 27-35, Zwagerman, *Het vijfde seizoen* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2003, p.114, and Zwagerman, *Tegen de literaire quarantaine. Kellendonklezing 2006* (Nijmegen, Valkhofpress, 2006) and *Transito* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2006), p. 117. Since the fifties 'the connection between literature and social life is lost', said Zwagerman in an interview (Dirk Zwart '*Paniek is mijn motor*'. *In: HN Magazine 1-7-1989*): 'literature is a pastime for the well-to-do middle class'. Zwagerman wants to see this changed. See for a reflection on writer's block novels, the position of the writer and postmodernism Green, *Late Postmodernism. American Fiction at the Millennium*.

70 'Het viel eenvoudig niet te ontkennen dat de schrijvers die hij hier in zwart-wit aan de wand had hangen, vijftien, twintig jaar geleden, toen hij [Theo zelf] voor het eerst over hen te horen had gekregen, door de leerlingen [...] misschien ook niet werden stukgelezen maar dan toch intuïtief werden herkend als eigenzinnige erflaters, terwijl zij nu voor de Nintendo-generatie even abstract waren geworden als de koningen en stadhouders uit de geschiedenislessen en uitsluitend nog werden geassocieerd met dorre plicht, overhoringen, meerkeuzevragen en roulerende uittreksels', Zwagerman, *De buitenvrouw*, p. 179.

71 M. Adriaens, 'Dit is mijn eerste boek dat helemaal bij daglicht geschreven is', *De Standaard*, 11 September 1997.

72 See, e.g., Carel Peeters, 'Mefisto Grunberg', *Vrij Nederland*, 28 April 2001 ('Grunberg is the laughing stock of postmodernism'); Gerrit Jan Zwier, 'Aan lager wal', *Leeuwarder Courant*, 29 July 1994 and J. H. Bakker, 'Arnon Grunberg zoekt de grens van het spel', *Haarlems Dagblad*, 17 March 1998.

73 See, e.g., Arnon Grunberg, *Grunberg rond de wereld* (Amsterdam, Nijgh & Van Dithmar, 2004), p. 334: 'I do not believe anything'.

74 Douglas Coupland, *Generation X. Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 69.

75 Arnon Grunberg's early work was judged as fundamentally ironical and free of (true) engagement. See e.g. Hans Werkman, 'Het begraven van hongerigheid' (in: *Nederlands dagblad* 11 March 1998). and P. Hoomans, 'Literair balletje-balletje' (in: *HP/De Tijd* 14-6-2003)

76 O. Blom, 'Mailen met Arnon Grunberg', *Trouw*, 29 December 2007.

77 Yasha (=Grunberg) in *VPRO-gids*, 6December 1999.

78 Arnon Grunberg, *Over Joodse en andere paranoia. Kellendonklezing 2007* (Nijmegen: Valkhofpress, 2007), p. 12. Grunberg's attitude to irony is ambivalent (See Dave Eggers and other New Sincerity-writers). He had been brought up a postmodernist; deconstruction had become second nature to him. He tries to overcome his own initial cynicism without falling back upon a naïve, non-ironical (pre-postmodern) attitude.

79 'het postmoderne verlangen tot ontmaskering', Hans Groenewegen, 'Overleven als schuld en boete. Over Arnon Grunberg', in Koen Hilberdink (ed.), *Jan Campertprijzen 2004* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2004), p. 81.

80 See, e.g., Mark Cloostermans, 'Waarom zou je het goede aanbidden?', *De Standaard*, 3 October 2008.

81 The reports have been brought together in Arnon Grunberg, *Kamermeisjes & soldaten. Arnon Grunberg onder de mensen* (Amsterdam: Nijgh & Van Ditmar, 2009). Of Grunberg's recent novels only the non-representative novel *The Jewish Messiah* (2004) is available in English translation (2008): this novel was rightly characterized by a Dutch reviewer as a thoroughly ironic book in which 'ideals are just a cover for selfish desires' (Bart Wallet, 'Is het tijd voor ernst? Over het probleem van distantie en engagement in de moderne cultuur', *Wapenfelt. Christelijk perspectief op geloof en cultuur*, 55-1, 2005, pp. 4-10).

82 'Ik prober zo dichtbij mogelijk te komen [...] bij het gevaar, de vernietiging, bij de dood', Arnon Grunberg, *Onze oom. Roman* (Amsterdam: Lebowski, 2008), p. 637.

83 Yra van Dijk, 'Arnon Grunberg, de uitverkoren auteur', in *Jan Campert-stichting Jaarboek 2009*, ed. by Yra van Dijk et al. (Den Haag: Jan Campert-stichting, 2010), pp. 50-1.

84 Kees 't Hart, 'O, o, o, wat is ie slecht, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 3 October 2008. See Leo Schut, 'Over leger en dood' *De Telegraaf*, 10 October 2008; Jann Ruyters, 'Een liefdesverklaring aan hemelbestormers', *Trouw*, 19 January 2008.

85 Criticism of style is 'het middel bij uitstek om de werkelijkheid te bezweren [...], om het niet over het boek en wat daarin gebeurt te hoeven hebben, om de roman op veilige

afstand van de lezer te houden opdat zijn wereldbeeld niet hoeft te kantelen. Opdat alles bij het oude blijft. Het enige wat daarvoor nodig is, is roepen: de stijl was weer briljant. Het omgekeerde werkt ook: wat een vreselijke stijl heeft die schrijver', Arnon Grunberg, 'De waakhond aan de ketting. De macht van de propaganda', in: *Vrij Nederland* December 5th 2009.

86 'door de onkunde van hen die tegen de klippen op literatuur blijven bedrijven', Arnon Grunberg, '*Aimee Bender. De mailbox van Arnon Grunberg*'. *In: Humo* 22-5-2001.

87 'Dat het park van de literatuur een paradijs is, is minder evident dan sommige bewoners van dat park schijnen te denken', Grunberg, *Kamermeisjes & soldaten. Arnon Grunberg onder de mensen*, p. 23.

88 R.V., 'De mensheid zij geprezen: Arnon Grunberg zoekt een redelijk wezen', *Humo*, 30 April 2001.

89 [http://www.arnongrunberg.com/blog/1567-censor] (blog posting, 2 October 2010).

90 Arnon Grunberg, 'Waarom ik de menselijke soort wil schaden', *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 July 1996.

91 See Yra van Dijk, 'Arnon Grunberg, de uitverkoren auteur', in *Jan Campert-stichting Jaarboek* 2009.

92 Michaël Zeeman, 'Hoe de feiten de verbeelding perverteerden', *De Volkskrant*, 14 September 2001.

93 See Vaessens, De revanche van de roman. Literatuur, autoriteit en engagement.

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Three Attempts at a Dutch Sublime

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Abstract

In this article we present three central texts from the Dutch debate on the sublime between 1750 and 1850. It is surprising that hardly any attention has been paid to these three texts – and, by extension, to the translations of international works on the sublime that preceded their publication in the Dutch-language area. These texts, however, are not the work of second-rate authors: Paulus van Hemert, Johannes Kinker and Willem Bilderdijk are leading representatives of Dutch culture in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Each of these three authors was sufficiently familiar with the international debate on the sublime, as the occasional references in their texts to the writings of fellow authors on the sublime from other countries testify. They were also familiar with the history of the sublime, to which they no doubt hoped to contribute with their own texts. We give a short outline of this historical development and then try to place the Dutch interventions within the framework of the international debate. From this it may then transpire that "Dutch attempts at sublimity" should not by definition be thought of disparagingly.

Keywords Sublime, Netherlands, Kinker, Van Hemert, Bilderdijk

In October 1798 an anonymous review of the *Lyrical Ballads*, the collection by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge which became legendary as soon as it appeared, was published in the *Critical Review*. The piece was written by the British critic and poet Robert Southey, a good friend of both authors and Coleridge's brother-in-law. Southey's views on the collection contrast with what one might expect given his friendship with both authors, and they are certainly not entirely positive. If anything Southey is most severe about Coleridge's 'The Ancient Mariner'. Nowadays this ballad is probably seen as Coleridge's most important contribution to the collection, but Southey clearly had other views on it. First and foremost he did not agree with the composition of the poem: 'Many of the stanzas are laboriously beautiful,' he wrote, 'but in connection they are absurd or unintelligible.' It is essentially his harsh conclusion about 'The Ancient Mariner' that interests us here: '[The poem] is a Dutch attempt at German sublimity. Genius has here been employed in producing a poem of little merit.'[1] 'Dutch' in this context

seems to refer to wanting to but not being able to. The 'Dutch sublime' clearly points to a pale imitation of the German original which itself is a tradition considered as the one and only true source of the sublime.

The idea that Kant's 'definitive' analysis of *das Erhabene* ultimately goes back to a considerable extent to Burke's definition of the sublime as 'delightful horror' is part and parcel of the international history of the concept. In recent decades this history has been studied extremely actively in regions surrounding Dutch-speaking areas.[2] However, until recently, scant attention has been paid to the place of the Dutch sublime in this *Begriffsgeschichte*.[3] This is partly understandable but also partly unjust. For example, we do not come across the concept in *1800: blauwdrukken voor een samenleving* (2001) (*1800: Blueprints for a Society*), the general introduction to Dutch cultural life around 1800 by Joost Kloek and Wijnand Mijnhardt which examines at length the development of philosophy. Much the same can be said of the place of the concept in the literary and poetical developments of that time: Gert-Jan Johannes and Jan Oosterholt only make indirect reference to the sublime in their respective discussions.[4] Admittedly none of the texts originally written in Dutch which take the sublime as their subject fundamentally influenced the international history of the concept. However, anyone looking for a fundamental understanding of the Dutch Enlightenment culture cannot simply ignore the debate concerning the sublime that took place between 1770 and 1830 in the Netherlands.

In this article we present three texts at the heart of that debate and the reader will see that they occupy a distinctive place in the development of the sublime between 1750 and 1850. Nevertheless, it is surprising that hardly any attention has been paid to these three texts in the Dutch-language world, and, by extension, to the translations of international works on the sublime that preceded their publication. These texts are not the work of second-rate authors: Paulus van Hemert, Johannes Kinker and Willem Bilderdijk are leading representatives of Dutch culture in the first decades of the nineteenth century. In various respects they helped shape this culture: Bilderdijk above all through his completely idiosyncratic literary exploits, and Van Hemert and Kinker as representatives of a philosophical and critical tradition that bridged Dutch culture and international developments. All three were sufficiently familiar with the international debate on the sublime, as the occasional references in their texts to the writings of fellow authors on the sublime from other countries testify. They were also familiar with the history of the sublime, to which they no doubt hoped to contribute with their own work. Below we shall give a short outline of this historical development and try to place the Dutch interventions within the framework of the international debate. From this it will emerge that Southey (who knew Bilderdijk well) was labouring under a misapprehension and that 'Dutch attempts at sublimity' should not by definition be thought of disparagingly.[5]

From 'Je ne sais quoi' To Delightful Horror

Traditionally the Greek rhetorical treatise *Peri hupsous*[6] is taken as the starting point for the history of the sublime. The text was written in the first century A.D. but until approximately one hundred years ago it was incorrectly attributed to Cassius Longinus, an orator from the third century AD. The anonymous author, however, is still referred to as Longinus or Pseudo-Longinus. For centuries this treatise remained unknown until the Italian humanist Francesco Robortello published the *editio princeps* in Basel in 1554. Soon Longinus's work was enjoying great popularity and the treatise was seen as an important poetical source for the knowledge of literature from Antiquity, at least as important as Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Ars poetica*.[7] Longinus's popularity culminated in 1674 when the French classicist Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux produced a French translation and commentary on the text. Boileau stayed reasonably faithful to the original intent of the treatise: he sees the sublime as a rhetorical effect, something marvellous in the text, a '*je ne sais quoi*', in Boileau's well-known formula, 'the extraordinary and the marvellous that resonates from within the discourse, and which ebables a work to carry us off, delight, and transport us'[8], by which the reader is taken beyond his or her everyday ability to comprehend. Longinus does not try so much to persuade his readers as to overwhelm them. Similarly, it is Boileau's ambition not so much to gratify the senses of the reader as to dumbfound them. Subsequent generations gravitated primarily towards this emotional component; the rhetorical aspect of the sublime gradually moved towards the background, but without disappearing altogether.

In the early eighteenth century the concept was picked up by a number of English Enlightenment thinkers, amongst whom John Dennis and Joseph Addison. In 1712 Addison published a series of articles in the *Spectator* on 'The Pleasures of the Imagination' in which he examined the difference between the beautiful and the great. In Addison's writings the terminology is still somewhat different, but in these texts a distinction is made for the first time between what today we call the beautiful and the sublime. Even in Longinus's treatise it was not always clear whether or not the sublime should be seen as the superlative degree of the beautiful. The difference between the beautiful and the sublime can be seen as an eighteenth-century invention. This distinction was rigorously maintained in what was to become one of the most important eighteenth-century texts in the field of aesthetics: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* by Edmund Burke (1757).

Burke's *Enquiry* fits into the British sensationalist-empiricist tradition of philosophers such as Hume and Locke. It is no wonder then that Burke bases his theory on people's emotional response to well-defined stimuli. At the most basic level, according to Burke, there are only two distinct feelings that are aroused when we perceive objects: pain and pleasure. These feelings are antithetical rather than complementary. Therefore when pain subsides this does by no means automatical-

ly lead to pleasure. However, as Burke acknowledges, when the cause of pain is removed, this undeniably results in the pain being alleviated and in a certain sense, this positive feeling is related to pleasure. Burke calls this relative pleasure 'delight'. It is in this context that he situates the sublime.

When our lives are in danger, we experience a strong feeling of pain or fear (which are seen as variations of the same feeling). Objects or situations that arouse the idea of pain and suggest danger can be sources of the sublime, writes Burke. However, a certain distance is necessary: the dangerous object must instil fear but at the same time a sense that one is not really in danger. It is the *idea* of pain and the *suggestion* of danger that push the fear towards a feeling of delight. It is this *delightful horror* that Burke calls sublime. Elements which according to Burke can contribute to the stirring of this sublime feeling are darkness, the suggestion of power and force, emptiness, silence, the suggestion of infinity, etc. In short, everything that seems to go beyond our immediate cognitive powers, everything that seems to overwhelm us, everything that presents a threat of physical pain. The sublime has moved a long way from Longinus's characterization of it as a rhetorical effect. Now it seems to have become an experience of nature: it is no longer about the great idea or the profound inspiration of an orator, but rather about the (almost physical) reaction of the observer. The sublime is therefore no longer simply a textual effect. The emotional was always an important component of the sublime, but with Burke the shift that started in the early eighteenth century with Dennis and Addison is complete: the sublime is a feeling. Furthermore, it is not so much a feeling as a mixed feeling. Herein lies precisely the difference with the beautiful: whilst the beautiful is still associated with a simple feeling of pleasure, the sublime is a feeling of delight combined with fear, and it is for this exact reason that it is such an alarmingly strong feeling. It makes us face our own mortality, yet at the same time we feel relieved because death (for now at least) can be kept at bay. Because the sublime has a place in an overarching philosophy, this sublime could be called a philosophical sublime or – because of the importance of natural phenomena such as storms or desolate mountains – a natural sublime, along with the essentially rhetorical sublime of Longinus and Boileau.

In Burke's wake, from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, a vast number of English, German and French works on the sublime appeared. These often included attempts to reconcile the rhetorical tradition of Longinus with the natural one of Burke. Interestingly it is mostly this type of text that was translated into Dutch in the last two decades of the eighteenth century. Perhaps the most important of these translations is the *Theorie der schoone kunsten en wetenschappen* (*Theory of the fine arts and sciences*) (2 volumes, 1778-1780) by Hiëronymus van Alphen. This version of the 1767 handbook by Friedrich Justus Riedel, in which there is an elaborate discussion of the sublime, is the first systematic study of aesthetics in Dutch.[9] In addition, there are translations of texts by the Scottish philosophers James Beattie and Hugh Blair[10] and, earlier on, of Moses Mendelssohn's *Betrachtun-*

gen über das Erhabene und das Naive in den schönen Wissenschaften (1758).[11] The latter translation, by Rijklof Michaël van Goens, sparked a debate in 1775-1776 on the cultural decline which the translator thought was taking place in the Netherlands.[12]

'Das Erhabene': A German Stab at the British Sublime

The text that Van Goens translated and provided with a 'Voorrede van den Vertaeler' (foreword by the translator)[13] was Mendelssohn's first work on the sublime, which underwent radical revision after his review of Burke's book in the *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften*.[14] Immanuel Kant was clearly inspired (through Mendelssohn) by Burke's insights when writing his *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, Kant's first discussion of the sublime in 1764[15], but it is of course above all the subsequent discussion of the concept in Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790) which is of pre-eminent importance in the canonical history of the sublime.

In the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781) Kant does not set about studying knowledge per se, but the preconditions for the possibility of knowledge: it is not *what* we can know, but *how* we can know as we know reality only through our senses and our knowledge of reality is shaped by our senses. According to Kant, what we perceive is formed into an image which gets meaning through the interaction between imagination and the understanding. Knowledge is the end result of that interaction. Kant's logical conclusion is that human knowledge is limited to the sensible realm, and that there is an unbridgeable gap between the sensible and the supersensible.

Yet the supersensible does play an important part in our lives. Concepts such as Divinity, Infinity and Freedom (in the sense of 'free from sensible boundaries') do not exist in the sensible reality, but we 'know' that these concepts (should) give our life direction. In his first Critique, Kant analyzes our power of reasoning; in his second Critique, the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (1788), he deals with our motive for action: our power to desire, our free will. Thanks to this free will, which in theory is guided by Reason, we participate in the supersensible world. Since free will guides our actions, this is where Kant looks for a fundamental moral principle. Our whole being strives for the supersensible ideal of Reason but we cannot know that ideal, precisely because it is supersensible. We cannot know an ultimate moral principle. However, given that our minds can think more than they can know, Kant manages to formulate a guiding principle that is at the same time impossible to prove and undisputable, the famous, infamous even, categorical imperative: act according to the maxim that can at the same time be made into a general law.

After analyzing cognitive powers and the power to desire (and the possibility of acting on that desire), Kant examines the power to make judgements. The first part of his book deals with aesthetic judgement, and more specifically with the beautiful. In fact, Kant offers an impressive analysis of the experience of the beautiful. This

experience is very similar to the process of acquiring knowledge: the aesthetic experience, too, starts with the sensible perception of an object and the image of the object sets in motion an interaction of understanding and imagination, but in this case the interaction does not result in knowledge: it remains a *play*, which gives the subject experiencing the play a feeling of pleasure or *Lust*. It is an *aesthetic* judgement because the judgement concerning the object depends solely on the pleasure that it gives us. It is worth noting that, although the object is called beautiful, this judgement is not connected in any way to the object itself. It is only a matter of our *subjective* judgement concerning the shape of the object.

However, this judgement is only concerned with what the shape of the object evokes. What if another object evokes a similar aesthetic experience, whilst seemingly completely shapeless? The aesthetic judgement begins with the perception of the shape, but what if this perception is inadequate? Some objects are simply too great to be contained within one image, others are simply too powerful to be resisted physically. In such cases too much is expected of human comprehension and this necessarily leads to a short circuit: we suddenly become aware of our own limitations. Compared with things that are too great or too powerful, humans are insignificant beings, limited by their sensible existence. Such a feeling of frustration generates a strong sense of displeasure or *Unlust*. However, over and above this limitation of sensible existence is the infinity of the supersensible and thanks to man's power of reason he participates in this too. When we appeal to our reason, according to Kant, even the greatest and most powerful things are insignificant. This is when man becomes aware of his superiority over nature, says Kant, and this leads to the greatest feeling of pleasure that we are able to experience. This complex mechanism lies at the root of the experience of the sublime.

The sublime does not allow us to apprehend the shape of the object and therefore the play cannot be set in motion. Understanding and imagination, which are both bound to the senses, therefore fall short in their combined action. At the very moment when (supersensible) Reason steps in, understanding is overtaken as it were. The imagination on the other hand does continue to be entirely involved, but cannot cope on its own with the experience evoked by the object. It is only thanks to Reason that we are able to derive any kind of pleasure at all from the object.

In every respect the sublime seems like a purely aesthetic experience (as with the beautiful), but at the same time it has a supersensible dimension that makes it analogous to the experience of the moral.[16] Kant himself points out the close relationship between the experience of the sublime and of the moral: 'Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and longer we reflect on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.*'[17] Moreover, it is unclear whether there is in fact any room in the Kantian sublime for art – normally the area par excellence for aesthetic experience. Can anything that is made by humans (and which is therefore necessarily and explicitly sensible) evoke the supersensible? What status does the sublime still have in today's secularised

world? Such questions were asked quite soon after Kant's analysis, firstly by the Romantics, later by philosophers like Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and more recently by Lyotard. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of Kant's analysis for aesthetics. Although in the early days there was already much strident opposition to Kant's analysis, there were also thinkers who very soon wanted to study, disseminate and improve on Kant's Critiques, including in the Netherlands.

Paulus van Hemert (1756-1825): The Sublime Moralized

Compared to these revolutionary new insights, the atmosphere seemed to remain perfectly calm in the Netherlands. True, the translations of Van Alphen and Van Goens did cause some commotion, but these debates did not lead to fundamental or widespread changes in the cultural landscape: common sense, domestic bliss and virtuousness were more highly thought of than the unsettling genius and spirited idealism of foreign pre-Romantic movements such as the German *Sturm und Drang*.[18] However, at the end of the eighteenth century things became livelier in the Dutch palaces of culture when a small group of fanatical Kant supporters made themselves heard. The central figure in these circles (in the initial period) was Paulus van Hemert, a theologian and Kantian from the start.[19]

Van Hemert discovered an ethical basis for his rational vision of religion in Kant's writings. Due to his wife's deteriorating health, he resigned from his position at the Remonstrant Seminary in Amsterdam in 1796 and moved to Germany, where his wife died a year later. From that moment onwards, Kant became Van Hemert's great love. He promptly returned to the Netherlands and fanatically began to disseminate this critical philosophy, first with his four-part *Beginzels der Kantiaansche Wijsgeerte (Principles of Kantian Philosophy)*,[20] and subsequently with the *Magazyn voor de critische wijsgeerte en de geschiedenis van dezelve (Magazine for Critical Philosophy and its History)*.[21] He soon gathered a small group of followers, amongst whom the poet-philosopher Johannes Kinker, but an important breakthrough for Kantianism failed to materialize. Van Hemert tried to popularize this new philosophy in the journal *Lektuur bij de ontbijt- en theetafel (Reading for the Breakfast and Tea Table)*, but even that did not to bring the hoped for success. The fact that Van Hemert was nevertheless widely read may be deduced from the many arguments that he became involved in – more than once leading to daily slanging matches – but he could not convince the public at large. In 1814 he became secretary of the Society for Benevolence and in doing so gave up his philosophical ambitions once and for all. He died on February 10th 1825.

In 1804, however, his enthusiasm for Kant's philosophy was still very much alive. On February 1st of that year, he delivered his *Redevoering over het verhevene (Address Concerning the Sublime)* in the select company of the members of the *Felix Meritis* society in Amsterdam, in the 'Temple of Enlightenment' on the Keizersgracht. In this address he emphasizes his belief in ''s Menschen voortreffelijken aanleg, zigtbaar

vooräl ook in zijne vatbaarheid voor het Verhevene', (Man's outstanding predisposition, visible above all also in his susceptibility to the Sublime) as the subtitle of the address reads. Van Hemert begins – of course – almost immediately with Kant, but he takes fully into account the fact that his public is not necessarily entirely familiar with Kant's complex philosophy.

Although at that time there was no Dutch translation of Burke's *Enquiry*, Van Hemert assumes that his audience will have heard at least of what he calls the 'schrikkelijk verhevene' (the terrible sublime), a clear reference to Burke's 'delightful horror'. Although Van Hemert does not reject this interpretation of the sublime, he emphasizes from the start that fear need not be the only reason for a sublime experience. This is where he sides more clearly with Kant than with Burke. In line with Kantian tradition, he names the too great and the too powerful as the most important sources of the sublime, referring to Kant's distinction between the mathematical and the dynamic sublime. According to him, man's outstanding predisposition is found precisely in the way in which he is able to deal with such objects. Whilst animals recoil, humans, being rational, are able to stand at a moral distance. In this experience of the sublime, humans come into contact with the supersensible and, in the wake of his master, Van Hemert emphasizes the moral character of this awareness. However, at the end of his address, he takes a direction that seems less explicitly Kantian. Van Hemert suddenly starts talking about the 'zedenlijk-verhevene' ('moral' or 'ethical' sublime). Seen from the perspective of Kant's rigid system of thinking, Van Hemert takes a sharp detour: for Kant the sublime is a purely aesthetic concept. Although Van Hemert seems to echo Kant's statement about his amazement at and respect for the starry heavens above him and the moral law inside him, at the same time he cuts across Kant's distinction between the ethical and the aesthetic. This is what we would expect: he wants to demonstrate man's excellent disposition, above all with regard to his susceptibility to the sublime. The shift from the aesthetic to the ethical is a swift one, certainly in an address which admits no systematic exposition.

Johannes Kinker (1764-1845): Beyond the Sublime

In his address, Van Hemert praises another early follower of Kant, who was moreover much more famous than he himself ever would be: Friedrich Schiller. Schiller was one of the great models for Van Hemert's good friend Johannes Kinker. Kinker was a man to be reckoned with. He was a committee member of numerous societies, a respected poet and thinker, and also a well-known playwright.[22] As a young lawyer, he had entered service in the same law firm as Willem Bilderdijk, with whom he became very friendly. Shortly after Bilderdijk left the Netherlands in 1795, Kinker became engrossed in Kant's works, much to Bilderdijk's dismay. They gradually drifted apart, and more than once would later confront each other as true rivals. Between 1799 and 1803, Kinker was one of the most important contributors

to Van Hemert's *Magazijn*, and even after that he continued to disseminate Kantian ideas whenever the occasion arose. His first explicit exposition of the sublime dates from 1805. That same year he wrote an allegorical morality play in honour of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the well-known Amsterdam actress Johanna Wattier. The play's title is revealing: *De vereeniging van het verhevene met het schoone* (*The Union of the Sublime and the Beautiful*). Kinker's text was put on stage on October 31st 1805 at the Amsterdam municipal theatre. The performance was the highlight of the celebrations marking Wattier's anniversary. At the end of the evening, Kinker went on stage and recited a 'lyrical poem' in which he praised Wattier's talent again.[23]

On account of his close relation with Paulus van Hemert, Kinker is usually seen as a Kantian, but *Iets over het schoone* (*Something about the Beautiful*) (1823) actually shows that Kinker did not refrain from criticizing Kant's work. To a certain extent this can also be deduced from the title of his play for Wattier. Kant draws a sharp distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, whilst Kinker actually tries to link both categories again. A number of aspects of Kinker's thinking suggest that he was closer to the philosopher he was in awe of, Friedrich Schiller. In his philosophical writings, Schiller also took Kant's Critiques as his starting point but he did not appropriate Kant's insights indiscriminately. Schiller's main problem with Kant's aesthetics was their purely subjective status: the work of art itself as a cause of the sublime experience was completely ignored by Kant. As a poet and playwright, Schiller wanted to know more about the object that is called beautiful or sublime than about the subjective experience that ascribes that characteristic to it. He adopted Kant's analysis but explicitly inquired about the (artistic) object that Kant neglected.

With both Schiller and Kinker, the sublime gradually takes on the character of an exalted form of beauty. Moreover, in their work – just as in Van Hemert's – the sublime experience has an explicitly ethical dimension. Thus, for example, Schiller begins his essay *Über das Erhabene* with the message that everything is subject to necessity (read: primitive impulses), except humanity: man is the being that wills.[24] This free will is our highest good and only in difficult situations is our will put to the test, which is why one can appear great in fortune, but sublime only in misfortune. In his magnum opus, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*[25], he argues resolutely that beauty is a guiding principle that can put us in a position to become better people. Art (this refers above all to the theatre) is the means par excellence for exemplifying this image. Thus in his analysis Schiller goes beyond Kant: he adds an analysis of the object and gives that object a central position in his project for aesthetic education.

In his analysis of the beautiful Kinker goes one step beyond. He starts by asking what the beautiful is and at the same time deals with his understanding of the sublime, which he calls a 'sort of' beauty at the end of the text. This is where he is in direct contradiction with Kant, despite following him to a large degree in his analysis of the beautiful. He examines Kant's analysis of the beautiful point by point

and concurs completely, except with the notion of 'necessary pleasure' according to which each new object that is experienced as beautiful also is necessarily beautiful, although its beauty is not subject to general rules or laws. According to Kinker, Kant, when discussing this aspect, somewhat contradicts himself when he suggests that, although the object of beauty generates a number of feelings, it does not lead to knowledge. In rejecting this part of Kant's analysis of the beautiful, Kinker concludes that knowledge *is* involved in the experience of beauty. According to Kinker, in this experience we can actually combine the sensible with the supersensible and thus via the sensible come into contact with the supersensible. Kant considers these two areas as necessarily separated from one another: the experience of the sublime brings us face to face with this fundamental separation. For Kinker, there is in essence only one world, in which the sensible and the supersensible form a unity. This unity is pre-figured in the beautiful object.[26] In this analysis of the beautiful, the Kantian sublime is unimaginable: the absolute liminal experience in which man's dual nature is felt does not work here as it appears that this duality can be discarded.

The importance of *Over het schoone* (*About the Beautiful*)[27] cannot be overestimated in the context of Kinker's own development either. In fact this work is the final part of a series of writings on the aesthetic, the basis of which was laid down in the introductions of the three-part publication of his *Gedichten* (*Poems*).[28] Taken together, these texts reveal Kinker as a thinker inspired more by Schiller than by Kant in the development of his views on aesthetics.

Willem Bilderdijk (1756-1831): Back to the Rhetorical Sublime

As we have just seen, at the end of the eighteenth century – before he came into contact with Van Hemert and Kant – Kinker had close ties with Willem Bilderdijk. At that time, Bilderdijk was one of the leading figures in Dutch literary life, and Kinker greatly admired him. However, in 1795 Bilderdijk had to leave the Netherlands for political reasons.

The political situation in the Netherlands in those days was complicated, to say the least. In the 1780s, in the wake of the American independence, there were stirrings all over Europe. The most famous result of this was of course the French Revolution, but in the Netherlands there were hotbeds of enlightened popular resistance as well. Militias of 'patriots' were set up, the so-called 'exercitiegenootschappen' (drill companies), which rebelled against the Stadtholder, Willem V, who was accused of absolutist tendencies. However, in 1787 the Prussian army invaded the Dutch Republic – the King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm II, was the brother of Princess Wilhelmina, Willem V's wife. Many patriots fled to northern France, only to return at the end of 1794 with French revolutionary troops. In January 1795, the Batavian Republic was inaugurated, as an associate republic of France.

Bilderdijk, a confirmed Orange supporter, resolutely (and loudly) refused to take

the oath of allegiance to the new regime (which he was expected to do as a lawyer) and was forced into exile. After wandering for some time through England, where he met his second wife, and Germany, which he hated with a passion, he returned to the Netherlands in 1806. There were two reasons for his return. Not only had Willem V died in the meantime – he died on April 9th 1806, which Bilderdijk considered to release him from his oath of allegiance – but moreover it seemed that after this the political order would radically change. Indeed, on June 5th 1806, the Batavian Republic was renamed the Kingdom of Holland, and Louis Napoleon, Napoleon Bonaparte's brother, ascended the throne. In 1810, however, Napoleon set his brother aside and incorporated the Netherlands into the French Empire. The Netherlands were to stay French until the end of 1813: after their defeat at Leipzig in October 1813, Napoleon's troops were driven back behind the Rhine, the Netherlands became independent again and Willem I of Orange (the son of Stadtholder Willem V) became sovereign prince of the Netherlands and subsequently, on March 16th 1815, king of the Netherlands.

When Willem was installed as sovereign prince, Bilderdijk's hopes for the professorship which Louis Napoleon had held out before him, rekindled, but in vain. Financially too, things were not going well for him and the relatively widespread recognition which he enjoyed was not enough for him. In short, these times were not to his liking. In the 1820s, the *éminence grise* of Dutch letters was to gain a small group of fanatical followers (who would later become known as the leading lights in the 'Réveil' movement). However, during that time Bilderdijk grew even more bitter: times were bad, immoral, sinful and this was borne out in his view by the fact that his immeasurable genius was not recognized. He died, aged 75, on December 18th 1831.

Bilderdijk's *Gedachten over het verhevene en het naïve* (1821) (*Thoughts on the Sublime and the Naïve*) dates from this latter period. Despite the cultural pessimism and bitterness, this work is first and foremost an aesthetic treatise. Bilderdijk was particularly well-informed about the contemporary developments in his discipline, both in the Netherlands and abroad. The references to Dutch language writings on the sublime are implicit, but we may safely assume that his views on the beautiful and the sublime are in opposition to the Kantian tradition that both Van Hemert and Kinker tried to develop. Moreover, he conspicuously does not mention the translation that Matthijs Siegenbeek published in 1811 of the 'mother text' on the sublime, *Longinus over de verhevenheid* (*Longinus on the Sublime*). Instead of quoting from this translation, Bilderdijk translates numerous passages himself.

This clearly shows that Bilderdijk, as can be expected on the basis of his poetical views,[29] harks back to the rhetorical sublime and puts the Kantian tradition that forms the point of departure for Van Hemert and Kinker completely aside. For Bilderdijk, a return to a state of pious pre-Enlightenment thought was desirable. He considered all these new philosophies as mere delusions, inspired by the arrogance of human understanding. How can our understanding fathom the world, if

it is based on what we see and hear? Is not all perception by definition limited, even distorted? It is not understanding, but feeling that leads to wisdom; we cannot understand the true and the divine, we can only feel them. And who else but the poet has developed a more refined sensibility towards it? And which poet has a greater sensibility thanks to his unsurpassed genius? Bilderdijk.

It is in the light of this anti-rational logic that we should place Bilderdijk's association with Longinus. At first sight, Bilderdijk's text seems somewhat difficult to follow – just like Longinus's treatise in fact. This is actually intentional: a tightly structured text might suggest that we are dealing with a theoretical exposition. Bilderdijk, precisely for programmatic reasons, has in mind a series of views, comments and insights that come from the liberated mind and sensitivity of the poet. For this reason, early on in this work, Bilderdijk makes a distinction between *Poëzy* and *Dichtkunst* (both meaning poetry) that is also to be found in his *Kunst der poëzy* (*Art of Poetry*): *Poëzy* is a straightforward outpouring of the feeling experienced, whereas *Dichtkunst* is no more than this feeling moulded into a system by understanding.[30] It may be clear that the verse mongers who practise *Dichtkunst* will never attain the sublime of *Poëzy*. The products of reason (such as poetry) will always remain cold and distant; it is only when readers allow feeling to overwhelm them that they can come into direct contact with the divine. In this sense, Bilderdijk sees *Poëzy* as 'wedded to' philosophy (something Kinker also believes, albeit for different reasons), but this link was lost as a result of increasing specialization. Feeling could unite everything again, but people were not open to this.

After this anti-rationalist plea, Bilderdijk finally discusses the sublime. He repeats the familiar claim that the sublime cannot be proven as it is an 'inner feeling'. He refers to Longinus, in whose work the identification of the sublime with the feeling of self-exaltation can also be found; this has an immediate and irresistible effect and leaves a lasting impression. Bilderdijk was a man of deep faith. However, his faith was far from orthodox; he was too stubborn for that.[31] A central element in his thinking was the widespread ideal of 'harmony'. He believed that the ultimate harmony (with God) could only be attained through feeling. In poetry, harmony expresses itself through a unity of rich imagery, language, form and content. However, we should be aware that, although this unity is beautiful, it is only sublime when it is 'tremendous in richness and fullness.' Stated in terms that remind us of Longinus: the experience of the sublime leaves us dumbstruck. However, what distinguishes Bilderdijk from Longinus is the former's explicitly religious interpretation of the sublime. In his eyes, the beautiful is earthly, whilst the sublime brings man closer to the divine.

The Dutch Sublime: From Kant to Schiller?

Bilderdijk sees the sublime and the beautiful as clearly flowing into one another and, in doing so, he does not depart, ironically enough, from the position that we

have associated with Kinker and Van Hemert. Thus, in the final analysis, he appears to be closer to his 'Kantian' opponents than he himself would ever have thought possible.[32] In the three texts that we have presented here, two constant elements seem to recur and both seem to indicate a clear departure from orthodox Kantianism. What we postulated in our discussion of Kinker's text – the greatest correspondence seems to be with Schiller – is also true in a certain sense for the other texts that are examined here.

In the first place, the sublime is quite explicitly moralized. The opening paragraph of Schiller's first work on the sublime, *Vom Erhabenen (Zur weitern Ausführung einiger Kantischen Ideen)* points explicitly to the relationship with the ethical.

> We call an object sublime when, as we conceive of it, our sensible nature feels its limits, but our rational nature its superiority, its freedom from limits; in the face of this we thus derive our brevity physically, which we rise above but morally, i.e. through ideas.'[33]

In the experience of the sublime we come up against the limits of our sensible possibilities, but it is precisely as a result of this that the superiority of our moral being is emphasized. To this day, the question of whether or not there is an ethical quality to the sublime is a contentious point in the reception literature on Kant, of which Schiller's text is an early example.[34] These three Dutch authors, too, made a connection between the ethical and the aesthetic.

Secondly, the Dutch contributors to the international debate on the sublime seldom made a sharp distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. This brings us back to our starting point in this introduction. Can the sublime be thought of in a flat country, divided into plots of land, called the Netherlands? It is tempting to answer this question in the negative, especially when we bring the following passage from Schiller's second text on the sublime *Über das Erhabene* into the discussion. This passage is part of Schiller's reflection on the sublime as a natural given that troubles the human mind and literally undermines it. This undermining in turn teaches us that there are things that exceed our immediate imagination, but that we can experience with our soul: the eternal, the magnificent and the complex. 'Who does not prefer to linger in the spirited disorder of a natural landscape, than in the spiritless regularity of a French garden?' Schiller asks rhetorically:

> Who does not rather admire the wonderful struggle between fertility and destruction on Sicily's open fields? Who does not rather feast his eye on Scotland's wild waterfalls and misty mountains, Ossian's great nature, than admire the sour victory of patience over the most obstinate of elements in straight-laced Holland? No one will deny that in Batavia's pastures better care is taken of man's physical nature than beneath the treacherous crater of Vesuvius, and that understanding, which wants to comprehend and order, profits from a regular farm garden far

> more than from a wild natural landscape. But man has a need greater than merely living and ensuring his well-being, and another destiny beyond that of comprehending the phenomena round about him.[35]

Here, we seem to go back to square one with Schiller. Although the Netherlands, the flat country of straight lines, with its fields of tulip bulbs and ditches that divide up the countryside, may have an excellent chance of having a useful beauty, its landscape cannot really be called overwhelming. Perhaps, as he was writing this passage, Schiller had in mind the fragment from Kant's *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, in which he sees the ordered and earnest mentality of the typical Dutch person as a clear hindrance to experiencing sublime feelings.

> The Dutchman is of an orderly and diligent disposition and, as he looks solely to the useful, he has little feeling for what in the finer understanding is beautiful or sublime. A great man signifies exactly the same to him as a rich man, by a friend he means his correspondent, and a visit that makes him no profit is very boring to him.[36]

Schiller's History of the Revolt of the Netherlands (1788), however, shows that he was less prone than the young Kant to confuse physical landscapes with mental ones. Schiller's enthusiastic reception of the revolt as the manifestation of human freedom fits irrefutably into his vision of history as a process of sublimity to the extent that it lays bare the freedom of mankind in the face of external circumstances.37 The quoted passage from Über das Erhabene shows that, according to him, man is destined for more than mere outward appearance, by which Schiller means that the moral person can resist the overwhelming forces of nature. At the same time this must mean that the moral person can experience the sublime even in a flat landscape.

In 1825, the English poet Robert Southey, whom we discussed earlier, set off on the Grand Tour through the European mainland, including the Low Countries. At the invitation of his friend Willem Bilderdijk, he went to Leiden to recover from a foot injury sustained in Antwerp. In or around 1818, the two poets had started a correspondence as a result of the translation of one of Southey's works by Bilderdijk's wife. Southey was enthusiastic about his reception by the Bilderdijks and would later repeatedly refer to this short but happy period of his life.38

It was the very same Southey who some thirty years earlier had scornfully called Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner' a 'Dutch attempt at German sublimity'. His opinion of the poem might not have changed much in the course of time but he must clearly have reassessed his opinion of the Netherlands. The fact that the author of a vitriolic poem such as 'Zeg, Kreuple, dans ik wel; zeg, Bultnaar, ga ik recht?' ('Tell me, Cripple, am I dancing well; tell me, Hunchback, am I going straight?') – the addressees being respectively Van Hemert and Kinker39 – played an important role in this is strange, to say the least. Between Southey's reproach and his enthusiasm appeared the three

texts that we have discussed and which show that even in 'straight-laced Holland' thoughts of the sublime are in fact the most normal thing in the world.

Notes

1 The passages from the discussion that are relevant for us are quoted in Richard Holmes, *Coleridge. Early Visions* (London 1989), p. 200. The question also comes up in the most recent biography of Southey: see W.A. Speck, *Robert Southey. Entire Man of Letters* (New Haven & London 2006), p. 75-76, and in David Chandler, 'Southey's "German Sublimity" and Coleridge's "Dutch Attempt,"', *Romanticism on the Net*, 32-33 (Robert Southey-issue) (2003-2004), [http://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/2003/v/n32-33/009257ar.html]

2 For the sublime in France, see Sophie Hache, *La Langue du ciel. Le sublime en France au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2000), and Lawrence Kerslake, *Essays on the Sublime* (Bern: Peter Lang 2000). The German sublime is discussed in Carsten Zelle, *Angenehmes Grauen. Literaturhistorische Beiträge zur ästhetik des Schrecklichen im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1987), and Dietmar Till, *Das doppelte Erhabene. eine Argumentationsfigur von der Antike bis zum Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2006). Regarding England, apart from the above-mentioned compilation by Ashfield and De Bolla, see also Samuel Holt Monk, *The Sublime. A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1935; repr. 1960) and Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

3 Silvia Contarini, 'Van verhevene tot romantiek: een prijsvraag van de Hollandse Maatschappij der Wetenschappen uit 1808', in *Geschiedenis van de wijsbegeerte in Nederland* 1-2 (1990), pp. 137-151, revised as 'De Hollandsche Maatschappij der Wetenschappen als verbreider van het verhevene' in *Haarlemse kringen. Vijftien verkenningen naar het literair-culturele leven in een negentiende-eeuwse stad*, ed. by W. van den Berg, H. Eijssens and T. van Kalmthout (Hilversum: Verloren, 1993), pp. 47-58; Silvia Contarini, 'In de spiegel van de natuur. Het verhevene bij Paulus van Hemert', in *Tussen classicisme en romantiek. Esthetica in Nederland van 1770 tot 1870*, ed. by H. Krop and P. Sonderen (Rotterdam: Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 1993), pp. 97-106; André Hanou, 'Subliem? Romantisch?', in *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde*, 115-9 (1999), pp. 356-364. At Ghent University a BOF (Bijzonder Onderzoek Fonds) research project on the sublime in the Netherlands (1770-1830) has been completed recently by Christophe Madelein, under the supervision of Jürgen Pieters.

4 Gert Jan Johannes, *Geduchte verbeeldingskracht. Een onderzoek naar het literaire denken over de verbeelding – van Van Alphen tot Verwey* (Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1992); Jan Oosterholt, *De ware dichter: de vaderlandse poëticale discussie in de periode 1775-1825* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1998). The absence of the concept is not only of note in recent publications. The sublime is also absent from the classic study by De Deugd on Romantic poetics: Cornelis de Deugd, *Het metafysisch grondpatroon van het romantisch literaire*

denken; de fenomenologie van een geestesgesteldheid (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1966).

5 In addition to the three texts that are being discussed here, the *Redevoering over het gevoel van het verhevene* by Johan Frederik Lodewyk Schröder (not dated, but most likely from the first decade of the nineteenth century) and two texts by Theodorus van Swinderen, *Redevoering over het verhevene in de natuur* (1806) and *Redevoering over de afwisseling van het schoone en het verhevene in de natuur, als juist geschikt naar de behoeften van den zinnelijken en zedelijken mensch* (1810) may be of interest. Schröder and Van Swinderen were both confirmed Kantians and had contacts with Van Hemert and Kinker. Their views on the sublime are virtually identical to Van Hemert's, whose text is given priority here because of his more central position in Dutch culture at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

6 Literally: on height, but usually translated as 'on the sublime'. A notable departure from this tradition is the (very early) English translation by John Hall, *The Height of Eloquence* (1652).

7 In the Penguin Classics series the three texts are still published together as icons of 'Ancient Literary Criticism'.

8 '...cet extraordinaire et ce merveilleux qui frappe dans le discours, et qui fait qu'un ouvrage enlève, ravit, transporte', Nicolas Boileau, 'Préface' in Longin, *Traité du Sublime. Traduction de Boileau. Introduction et notes de Francis Goyet* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1995), p. 70.

9 See Hiëronymus van Alphen, *Literair-theoretische geschriften*, ed. by J. de Man, 2 vols. (The Hague; Constantijn Huygens Instituut, 1999), in particular volume 2, *Commentaar*.

10 Hugo Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), trans. by Herman Bosscha as *Lessen over de Redekunst en Fraaije Letteren, of voorschriften over taal, stijl, welsprekendheid en dichtkunst, en uitgegeven door B.H. Lulofs*, 3 vols. (Deventer: B.H. Lulofs, 1788-1790). James Beattie, *Dissertations moral and critical* (1783), trans. by Petrus Loosjes Adriaansz. as *Wijsgeerige en oordeel- en zedekundige verhandelingen*, 2 vols. (Haarlem 1785-1786), and *Elements of Moral Science* (1790-1793) as *Grondbeginzelen der zedelijke wetenschappen*, trans. by Joh. Fred. Hennert, 3 vols. (Utrecht: Willem van Yzervorst, 1791-1794).

11 An English translation of a later version of that text can be found in Moses Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. by Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

12 Moses Mendelssohn, *Verhandeling over het verhevene en naïeve in de fraeje wetenschappen*, trans. by R.M. Van Goens (Utrecht: Samuel de Waal, 1774). The first edition of 1769 had a very limited print-run.

13 See P.C.J. De Boer, *Rijklof Michael van Goens (1748-1810) en zijn verhouding tot de literatuur van West-Europa* (Amsterdam: H.J. Paris, 1938), p. 147. The aesthetics of Mendelssohn are extensively discussed in Jean-Paul Meier, *L'esthétique de Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786)*, 2 vols. (Lille: Université de Lille, 1978). For a recent biography, see Dominique Bourel, *Moses Mendelssohn. La naissance du judaïsme moderne* (Paris; Gallimard, 2004).

14 See Meier, *L'esthétique de Moses Mendelssohn*, 849. Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften. Nach*

den Originaldrucken und Handschriften herausgegeben von G.B. Mendelssohn (Hildesheim: Verlag Dr. H.A. Gerstenberg, 1843; repr. 1972), I, p. 106.

15 A Dutch translation of this work, ascribed to Hendrik Croockewit (who became President of the Dutch National Bank in the late 1850s) was published in 1804. For an English translation, see Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. by John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

16 See, amongst others, Paul Guyer, 'The Difficulty of the Sublime' and Bart Vandenabeele's response, 'The Feeling of the Sublime: Aesthetic not Ethical. Comment on Paul Guyer, "The Difficulty of the Sublime"' in *Histories of the Sublime* ed. by Christophe Madelein, Jürgen Pieters and Bart Vandenabeele (Brussels: KVAB, 2005), pp. 33-50.

17 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 133.

18 See, amongst others, Gert Jan Johannes, *De lof der aalbessen. Over Noord-Nederlandse literatuurtheorie, literatuur en de consequenties van kleinschaligheid 1770-1830* (The Hague: SdU Uitgevers, 1997) and Ellen Krol, *De smaak der natie. Opvattingen over huiselijkheid in de Noord-Nederlandse poëzie van 1800 tot 1840* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1997). Wim van den Berg names Rhynvis Feith as one of the founders of the Dutch 'bescheidenheidsdiscours' (discourse on modesty) in 'Onze poëzie is reëel en praktisch'. Het denken over de identiteit van de Nederlandse letterkunde in de eerste helft van de negentiende eeuw' in *'Typisch Nederlands' De Nederlandse identiteit in de letterkunde*, ed. by K. Enenkel, S. Onderdelinden and P. J. Smith (Voorthuizen: Florivallis, 1999), p. 153.

19 On Van Hemert: H.IJ. Groenewegen, *Paulus van Hemert, als godgeleerde en als wijsgeer* (Amsterdam 1889) and J. Plat and M.R. Wielema (eds.), *Paulus van Hemert. Gezag en grenzen van de menselijke rede* (Baarn 1987).

20 Paulus van Hemert, *Beginzels der Kantiaansche wijsgeerte, naar het Hoogduitsch vryelyk gevolgd, en met aanteekeningen, en eene voorreden uitgegeven, door Paulus van Hemert*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam: Wed. J. Doll, 1796-1798).

21 Paulus van Hemert, *Magazyn voor de critische wijsgeerte en de geschiedenis van dezelve*, 6 vols. (Amsterdam: Wed. J. Doll, 1799-1803)

22 Maurits Cornelis Van Hall, *Mr. Johannes Kinker. Bijdragen tot zijn leven, karakter en schriften* (Amsterdam: Wed. L. Van Hulst en zoon, 1850) is still the standard biography. See also, amongst others, André Hanou, *Sluiers van Isis. Johannes Kinker als voorvechter van de Verlichting, in de vrijmetselarij en andere Nederlandse genootschappen* (Deventer: Sub Rosa, 1988) and Georgius Joseph Vis, *Johannes Kinker en zijn literaire theorie* (Zwolle:Tjeenk Willink, 1967).

23 See Christophe Madelein and Jürgen Pieters, 'Het verheven theater van de filosofie: Johannes Kinker (1764-1845) bezingt Johanna Wattier (1762-1827)' in *Liber Amicorum Prof. Dr. Jaak van Schoor. Meester in vele kunsten*, ed. by S. Bussels et al. (Ghent: UGent, 2003), pp. 122-135; later revised as Christophe Madelein en Jürgen Pieters, 'Spiegel voor het peinzende verstand. Johannes Kinker (1764-1845) en het sublieme in de Nederlanden' in *Feit en fictie*, 6-2 (2005), pp. 35-51. On Wattier see Marlies Hoff, *Johanna Cornelia Ziesenis-Wattier (1762-1827). 'De grootste actrice van Europa'* (Leiden: Astraea, 1996).

24 Friedrich Schiller, 'Über das Erhabene' in: *Schillers Werke, Nationalausgabe* (Weimar 1963), II, p. 38.

25 In 1793 Schiller wrote a series of letters to the duke of Augustenburg. He published a revised version of those letters in 1795 as *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* in his journal *Die Horen*. He revised them again in 1801 for his *Kleinere prosaische Schriften*. This 1801 edition is considered to be the definitive version.

26 This makes Kinker seem like an absolute idealist like Hegel and Schelling, but actually he is not in that he does not claim the supersensible to be the only truth, but rather that the sensible and supersensible are in harmony. In fact he values the sensible more than the absolute idealists did.

27 Kinker's text was published in 1826, but it was read on June 30th 1823 at the Royal Dutch Institute for Sciences, Letters and Fine Arts by Maurits Cornelis van Hall (Kinker himself was teaching Dutch at the university of Liège at the time).

28 These introductions were published with a commentary by Gert Jan Vis in *Johannes Kinker en zijn literaire theorie.*

29 These poetic views can be found in his long poem *De kunst der poezij* of 1809 (Amsterdam: Van den Berg and Kloek, repr. 1995).

30 Note the close resemblance to Wordsworth's famous 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. It is true, however, that Bilderdijk scorned the calm reflection (of the emotion recollected in tranquility) that the English poet extolled at this time.

31 For a clear exposition of this, see Joris van Eijnatten's impressive study of the theosophical background to Bilderdijk's thinking, *Hogere sferen. De ideeënwereld van Willem Bilderdijk (1756-1831)* (Hilversum: Verloren 1998).

32 Kinker had already noticed this. In an unpublished review of Bilderdijk's *De ziekte der geleerden* (The sickness of the learned) he asserted that Bilderdijk's views often show similarities to Kant's philosophy and that he was perhaps the most Kantian poet of the Netherlands (the review was reproduced some 160 years later in Vis, *Johannes Kinker en zijn literaire theorie*, pp. 338-347).

33 Friedrich Schiller, 'Vom Erhabenen (Zur weitern Ausführung einiger Kantischen Ideen)' in *Schillers Werke. Nationalausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1962), I, p. 171.

34 See, amongst others, the above-mentioned articles by Guyer and Vandenabeele. The subtitle of Paul Crowther's *The Kantian Sublime. From Morality to Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) also points in this direction. We can find yet more recent echoes of Schiller in Allen Wood's discussion of the sublime in his introduction to the thought of Kant: 'What we experience as transcending the power of nature is not "the numinousness" of a powerful alien Being who takes some sort of sadistic pleasure in overwhelming and terrifying us, but rather the sublimity of our own moral freedom. The truly sublime object to which our aesthetic experience relates is therefore not God but our own moral disposition and vocation.' *Kant* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 164.

35 Schiller, *Über das Erhabene*, pp. 47-48.

36 Immanuel Kant, 'Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen', in

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37 Schiller, *Über das Erhabene*, p. 49.

38 'I can truly say that unpleasant as the circumstance was which brought me under their roof, no part of my life ever seemed to pass away more rapidly or more pleasantly.' R. Southey, in a letter to his daughter Kate, quoted in Speck, *Robert Southey. Entire Man of Letters*, p. 198. See also: De Deugd, 'Friendship and Romanticism: Robert Southey and Willem Bilderdijk' in *Europa Provincia Mundi. Essays in Comparative Literature and European Studies Offered to Hugo Dyserinck on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. by J. Leerssen and K.U. Syndram (Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi, 1992), pp. 369-388 and J. Wesseling, *Bilderdijk en Engeland* (Ghent: [n.pub.], 1949), pp. 166-167.

39 Bilderdijk, 'Mr. J. Kinker aan Paulus van Hemert', in *De dichtwerken* (Haarlem: A.C. Kruseman, 1859), XIII, p. 420.

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Facing it: sovereignty and how to live with theft and violence in the law – the case of Karel ende Elegast[1]

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Abstract

In what is probably the most famous medieval Dutch epic, *Karel ende Elegast* (*Charles and Elegast*), King Charlemagne is ordered by an angel, sent by God, to go out and steal. In so doing Charlemagne finds out that there is a plot against his life. His rule seems therefore to be dependent, in the final analysis, by divine support and sanction. This article argues, however, that the story depicts the constitution of Charles's rule differently. As a sovereign, he is a violent king-thief or thief-king. The story illustrate sovereignty always implies theft and violence, as being *within* the law itself. Ironically, dealing with Charlemagne as a sovereign, the story may offer not just a specifically medieval, but also a structural option for subjects living under the rule of law of a sovereign. This option allows them to accept the law in not accepting it. The extreme manifestation of this option may be that subjects allow themselves to suspend the rule of law; a possibility that runs counter to Carl Schmitt's influential definition of sovereignty.

Keywords: Sovereignty, state of exception, violence, constitution of law, irony

1. The constitution of sovereignty

The story of *Karel ende Elegast*, or *Charles and Elegast*, is probably the best-known medieval text in the Netherlands and Flanders. Yet, the text appears to have lost its scholarly appeal, despite the fact that it addresses a highly complex issue. The complexity at stake is certainly part of the text's skilfulness, and not just in terms of medieval craftsmanship.[2] *Karel ende Elegast* explores the constitution of sovereignty, in the double sense of the word 'constitution': as establishing founding act and a state of being. The exploration is both specific to medieval circumstances but also concerns structuring principles of the relation between sovereignty and the subjects living under its law.

At the very beginning of the text we learn how Karel, whom I will call Charles from here on, is explicitly depicted at the height of his power, both King and Em-

peror. Rather unexpectedly, however, he becomes an out-law. Just after falling asleep, he is enjoined by an angel, sent by God, to go out and steal. The angel has to repeat his request three times before Charles obeys. The latter gets dressed, takes his weapons, sneaks out of the castle and mounts his horse, then before plunging into the woods where he meets a dark knight. At first he thinks he has met the devil himself but Charles soon learns that his adversary is one of his own vassals, one he had expelled from his service for a trivial reason, and whose possessions he had seized. Elegast, as the vassal is called, has lived the life of a robber ever since, although it is explicitly stated that, to his honour, he only robs the wealthy. Charles is greatly relieved to have met him, for he is aware that he himself is a clumsy and inexperienced thief. Now Charles and Elegast can go out stealing together. They do so in the castle of Charles's brother-in-law, Eggeric. Stealing some valuable things from Eggeric and his wife's sleeping chamber, Elegast coincidentally learns of a plot against Charles. Being informed so unexpectedly, and clearly helped by God, Charles returns to his castle and 'welcomes' the insurgent party under Eggeric the following day. The story ends with God's verdict between Eggeric and Elegast. The latter wins and Eggeric is killed, after which his corpse is dragged away. To conclude it all, Elegast marries Eggeric's former wife, who is Charles's sister.

At first sight, it appears to be obvious that God sends his angel in order to warn Charles and preserve his rule. At the same time, however, when this is revealed to him so explicitly, and by implication to the audience, a certain contingent aspect of Charles's sovereignty is shown for what it is. He himself appears to be nothing without God. This poses the question of the relation between the sovereign and subjectivity, and consequently between the sovereign and his subjects. Can all of them live with a sovereign whose rule appears to be constituted in a contingent manner?; For what would have happened if God had not warned Charles? Is he, indeed, a 'nobody' without God? Such a possibility would run counter to the idea that the sovereign, as an active subject, is the ultimate embodiment of an 'I can'. To be sure, our story presents Charles as the subject who is a mighty object of aspiration, although it is one that can never be reached by the ordinary subject.[3] The story also shows Charles as being on an equal footing with his subjects, however, and as someone who 'can-not'. My question is: what are the consequences of this for the constitution of the subjects living under his rule?

The text of *Karel ende Elegast* that is now commonly used, is said to originate from around 1350 and form the basis for printed versions in the fifteenth century.[4] We know the story, however, through several different manuscripts and printed versions. Tracing these through the ages, scholars have come up with an earliest written version in the shape of a small text or *cantilene* that was probably made around the time that Charles was canonized, in 1165, and truly became Charlemagne. This written story may again have used material from oral versions that preceded it. Other oral versions would have remained alive, in different variants, throughout Europe for several centuries.[5] In terms of genre, the story has been defined as a 'pre-

courtly' knight story. However, that generic definition does not deny that the story can be read and understood in the context of the establishment of courts.

With respect to the courtly reorganization of medieval society, the genealogy of *Karel ende Elegast* reflects a long historical process, which consisted of a shift from a feudal system to a system of sovereignty. Whereas the historical Charles was a feudal king, and as such the first amongst his peers, the Charlemagne of the later middle ages was read more and more with the image of the king as a sovereign in mind, that is to say as the supreme, even ultimate political and legislative power that falls back, in the end, on God as the ultimate source of power.[6] In fact, Charles had himself been the first to mark this shift, when he was crowned Emperor by the Pope in 800. Tellingly, he made it known through his major biographer, Einhard, that he himself had had no idea that the Pope was about to crown him on Christmas Day.[7] Thus, cunningly, his sovereignty would appear to be the result of a *gift*, meaning his sovereignty's constitution was not grounded on raw power, but 'truly' had an exceptional, divine, source.[8] Indeed, although the term 'Emperor' at the time may not have had the meaning it had enjoyed previously and would acquire later, Charles must have been quite aware that the introduction into the feudal system of a sovereign implied a decisive break.

The tension between a more horizontal feudal system and a hierarchical system of sovereignty can also be detected in the first known medieval codification of laws: the *Sachsenspiegel*. To be sure, this was not a true code of law, but a transcription of customary law that served, at the time, to both underpin new forms of centralized rule and to assure subjects of the rights they had developed over time. First compiled in the early thirteenth century, the text was then widely used, translated and rewritten, throughout northern and Western Europe. Charlemagne appeared prominently in this *Sachsenspiegel*.[9] As Maria Dobozy puts it, the *Sachsenspiegel* defined 'customary law as God-given first and as a legacy of central authority traceable to Constantine and Charlemagne second'.[10]

The phrase 'God-given' may be cause for misunderstanding, because God may be 'giving' in two radically different ways here. On the one hand, the *Sachsenspiegel* presents a body of customary laws – laws that are given from the bottom up, which is to say by tradition, by nature and, by extension, from God.[11] On the other hand laws are being presented in the *Sachsenspiegel* as underpinned by an authoritative sovereign: an Emperor. The latter functions as the source of the law or as residing at the limit of the law. With respect to this, he may even operate, in a crucial sense, outside of it as the one who 'gives' the law, in the name of God. Indeed, as the ultimate, sovereign law-giver, God resides principally outside the realm of human law. To be sure, the option of a sovereign ruler was not presented straightforwardly in the *Sachsenspiegel*. It did, however, move towards presenting Charlemagne as the embodiment of divinely sanctified rule, as opposed to his being a feudal lord. As the source of the law, or the seal to it, he needed to be backed up, conceptually speaking, by a truly sovereign God. The latter exists outside of the realm of human

law yet nevertheless 'gives' that law, or his presence can still be felt through the laws of nature. This is to say that God, too, is both outside of the system, then, and in it.

Ever since the pivotal study by the legal scholar Carl Schmitt, sovereignty has been thought of in the last century as, in the end, theologically defined: falling back on an ungraspable source or origin.[12] There is a good reason that Schmitt's study from 1922 was entitled *Politische Theologie*: it defined political sovereignty through its ungraspable, theological source. This theological underpinning of sovereignty in nineteenth and twentieth century liberal democracy is one important point of connection with the medieval 'birth' of sovereignty. Moreover, Saskia Sassen has recently argued that our contemporary world of globalization is not so much the heir of Enlightenment and Romanticism, but rather, in pivotal ways, relates to the Middle Ages. Sassen focused especially on medieval conceptualizations of sovereignty in the context of the legal innovations and forms of centralization that were needed because of the economic development of medieval cities and city networks.[13]

In the twentieth century, a theologically inspired conceptualization of sovereignty, following a logic of exceptionality or un-conditionality, is at work. In the domain of law, for instance, an important issue at stake is how the sovereign – being the supreme power – can function both inside the law (conditionally) and outside of it (un-conditionally). Here, Schmitt's famous option was that sovereignty is proven by, but also depends upon, the fact that the sovereign can suspend the law. With respect to all this, *Karel ende Elegast* appears to illustrate that, indeed, the constitution of sovereignty must remain enigmatic, as a matter of exceptionality or un-conditionality. The enigma is embodied in the text by the appearance of the angel, the messenger of an outside power, who commands Karel to go out stealing. Moreover, whilst this stealing itself is clearly unlawful, the fact that Charles can get away with it proves his sovereignty. It is proof of his sovereign exceptionality and un-conditionality. Yet, there is a twist in the story that has brought me to follow a slightly different line of thought than the dominant one in the past century.

Unmistakeably, Charles is turned thief by the command of God. Although Charles himself is greatly surprised by this, it need not be strange at all. It may fit in neatly with the idea of a sovereign that stands, principally, outside of the law. Or, as the sovereign source of the law, God may put the law out of order. Being a sovereign in the imperial and theological sense of the word, Charles could have understood this rather easily. The point is, however, that he does not. He questions how it is possible that God commands him to step outside of the law. In the course of the story, Charles himself learns, and so does the audience, that he has had to step outside the law in order to preserve his rule. This is how the text, almost bluntly, addresses the question of how a lawful order can be accepted as legitimate and just when it is in fact installed or founded or preserved by acts that are themselves unlawful. To be sure, there might be an element of *kenosis* involved, here. Just as Jesus had to 'empty himself out' of deity, or had to humble himself to the extreme

in becoming human, one could argue that Charles has to do the same: empty himself out of being sovereign in order to be subject with his subjects. That leaves the problem of his becoming and acting as a thief.

By becoming a thief in order to learn that his rule is threatened, Charles illustrates how theft is essential for his rule of law. His rule is paradigmatic, here, for any rule of law. Someone has to *take* power, literally and figuratively, from somebody. It is this 'taking' that needs to be veiled or that will fall under the rubric of an un-representable gift. Yet, again, the gift is made very clear. God sent his angel, as a result of which Charles gets or gains crucial information. Although this may seem to clearly underpin Charles's rule as divine, there is a nasty twist to this gift that is being presented so clearly as a gift. For one, the implication is that it can also be taken away again. Another point of concern may be: what is someone going to (have to) give in return? Moreover, with the divine gift being shown as a gift so clearly, Charles's sovereignty loses its enigmatic, exceptional and un-conditional characteristics. In a sense, in and for itself, it has become almost nothing. From this I will distil in what follows a structural position, or the possibility of an attitude, that subjects can adopt under a law that is presented as given and supported by a sovereign.

2. The king is not a thief, yes he is

As we have seen, at the beginning of the story, Charles, the imperial icon, is brought into an embarrassing situation. He is summoned by an angel, sent by God, to become a thief. One puzzling issue may be that the angel does not specify what it is that Charles should steal. Apart from that, obviously, theft is a crime against any rule of law and against justice, so the demand of the angel is paradoxical. This may be why the Antwerp based author Jan van Boendale, in his *Layman's mirror* from around 1325, objected to the negative image of Charles that was proposed in this well-known and widely circulating story.[14] Trying to counter the negative image, Boendale stated: 'One can read that Charles went stealing. Well, I tell you, without hiding anything, that Charles never stole.'[15] Boendale's text was supposed to teach the citizens of the burgher cities in the Low Countries how to behave properly. He had every reason, therefore, to state what he did, for how can one have a rule of law (even if the concept of the law as such did not yet exist), if the seal of societal order, the king, is a thief himself? With respect to this, Boendale's assurance that he is hiding nothing is a sign. One might ask why he has to state so emphatically that he is hiding nothing, or why he has to assert that, no, Charles never actually stole. Taking Boendale as his cue, one modern reader had it that 'of course Charles is not a villain, really'. This conclusion, however, might be a bit too hasty.[16]

In the context of the assurance that Charles never stole, Boendale had already appealed to Jacob of Maerlant (ca. 1225-1300), the most encyclopaedic of all

Netherlandish medieval authors, and perhaps the highest authority to appeal to. Maerlant, too, had objected to the many lies that went around about such lofty figures as the Roman Emperor Octavian and King Charles, and that he specifically mentions these two is telling in the light of the *Sachsenspiegel*. Apparently both Van Maerlant and Boendale were involved in a battle about truth.[17] This battle was not just a literary issue, or an epistemological one. Crucially, the battle for truth was intrinsically related to the establishment of authority and, accordingly, to the political and judicial struggle to install a rule of law. In this context it is telling that Boendale argued that writing literature for an audience is a serious business. He is worried about the entrance into the public sphere of what are, in his eyes, irresponsible laymen, in other words, those who have not had a classical Latin-oriented training. It is as if they, literally, speak another language, stick to other forms of truth, and propose different forms of history – although these need not all be lies. There may also be a battle going on between different versions of history, as we will see below.[18]

The establishment of authority was also an issue of contention at a macro-political level. The stability of the feudal system was increasingly threatened, politically and judicially. The feudal system consisted of a precarious balance of mutual obligations, caught by the phrase *do ut des*: 'give so that you shall be given'. This system was not ruled by law, but by custom and by a distinct economic circularity. This all changed with the development of political forms of sovereignty and ideas on sovereignty. Rule became centralized, needing some kind of underpinning. This coincided with the growing influence of Roman law above customary law or forms of common law. In terms of our theme, Roman 'positive' law was now *given* in the sense of posited. This happened not so much in terms of economic circularity, then, but almost as 'gift' per se, and as such a sure sign of sovereignty.

With respect to this, *Karel ende Elegast* implies on the one hand a radical break with the system of customary law. Charles as a thief embodies this rupture. In the feudal system theft would have been a disruption of economic circularity. As such it would have been unacceptable. Now, however, the fact that Charles is summoned to steal by the sovereign of all sovereigns proves his exceptionality and un-conditionality. In the light of this, the story starts with a description of the rule of the lands that is telling: 'The lands were altogether his, He was Emperor and King as well' (ll. 6-7).[19] Charles is not one who exchanges lands, as would be the case in the feudal system; the lands are 'his'. Yet, there is a trace left of the feudal option. Charles is, explicitly, not 'one'. He is presented both as a ruler who exists within the feudal system, a 'king' who is the first among his equals, and one who has grown out of it, for he is also an 'emperor'. As such he is a sovereign that stands above all others, those who are 'his' – subjected to him – as are the lands, altogether.

The newly gained sovereign status is made explicit when Charles is summoned a second time and answers:

What need would I have
To steal I am so rich
There is no man on earth
Whether king or counts
Who are so rich in goods
They must to me be subjects
And be at my service
(ll. 54-60)[20]

As King, Charles may stand next to other Kings. As Emperor, Charles is sovereign. Accordingly, everyone is his subject, even Kings and Counts, and he *has* everything. When the text states so explicitly how rich in goods the subjects of Charles are, the question can be raised whether the riches and goods that these Kings and Counts have are also Charles's, ultimately? A little later this is implicitly confirmed, when Charles has described the immensity of his lands:

And still I have many more possessions
Gallicia and the Spanish lands
that I gained myself with by hand
and I drove out the heathens
that the lands remained mine only
(ll.73-76).[21]

This might not be considered illegitimate from a Christian viewpoint. The point here is the fact that Charles is an accumulator, who grabs what he can. Accordingly there is an intrinsic relation between violence, might, and rule – *Gewalt*. Still, the intrinsic relation between violence, might, and rule is thoroughly disturbed by God. It is as if God is necessary to demonstrate that Charles is not a simple, although powerful, thief. He is a thief in commission. Taken to its consequence, this means that Charles's sovereignty will in the end always remain a stolen one from God. This theft must be hidden or veiled as a gift from God.

With the indication that Charles can take, and has taken, many possessions from others, the theme of thievery with which the text began, is reinforced. This becomes almost compulsive once Charles enters the nocturnal woods. First he reflects on how he used to chase after thieves mercilessly. Now, suddenly, he understands them. He promises himself that he will not punish them any more by pain of death if they have committed small crimes. This brings him back to his own thievery, but in a different way. He remembers that it was due to a small matter that he had banned Elegast (ll. 219-220). This might have been legitimate, but then Charles admits to himself, and thereby to the audience, that he *took* the lands that Elegast ruled, including the castle he possessed (ll. 228-230). Obviously, banning someone does not mean that his possessions are yours. Yet worse is to come: Charles has also

taken the lands and possessions of all the knights and servants that served under Elegast (ll. 235- 236). Anyone who helps them now awaits the same fate (ll. 239-240). To be sure, in the lines that follow, Elegast is described as a thief as well, but as a noble one that steals from sheer necessity, taking only from the rich and leaving the poor and merchants in peace (ll. 247-266).

The point is repeated once more when Charles and Elegast meet one another in the woods. Initially they start a fight because neither of them wants to admit what brought them there. Charles wins the fight by a fraction, and it is then that they begin to talk. Elegast confirms that he, as was already indicated, only robs the wealthy. In a sense he is the opposite here of Charles. The latter is the cause of the fact that Elegast has to steal through necessity, as Elegast explicitly indicates:

> And me the king had driven,
> Charles, out of my lands
> I will tell it although it is a shame
> (ll 519-521)[22]

The last line is ambiguous and crucially so. It may indicate that it is a shame that Elegast now has to steal because of all this, or it may equally well mean that Charles's act was shameful. Perhaps the most straightforward meaning is that it may be a shameful thing to *reveal* this since it concerns the king, but that Elegast will do it nevertheless. This is put differently, later in the story, when Elegast refuses to go stealing in the King's castle. He will not do him any harm 'even if he me by evil advice / has taken my possessions and driven out' (ll. 660-661).[23] In both cases, the shame is not so much Elegast's, but Charles's. That shame is not just related to this individual case, as will become clear from what follows. Charles as a sovereign will be proven to be a thief to the core, constantly in need of covering up his shameful actions.

When Charles has to tell who he is and what he has done, he first reflects in silence on how God has clearly helped him by sending Elegast. He decides, then, that he will lie about who he is. The question, however, is whether what he says is, indeed, a lie:

> I will tell you my habits/norms
> What help to hide it from friends
> I have stolen so many goods
> Had I been caught with half
> They would not have let me go, truly
> (ll. 568-572)[24]

The word 'sede' in l. 568 (see original text in endnotes) is telling because it can both mean 'habit', 'way of behaving' and morally speaking 'norm'. As for norms:

someone is speaking who appears to be a thief with almost no limit. In this context it is telling that he is not confessing, as a result of which he could show himself to be repentant and could be absolved for his sins. On the contrary, he is talking as if he is amongst friends and is just about to start bragging about his limitless thievery:

> I steal all kinds of things
> And leave nobody in peace
> The rich and the poor
> I do not care for their moaning
> I know not one man
> Where I know there is gain
> I would rather take his goods
> Than that I gave him mine.
> (ll. 573-580)[25]

This is a rather good description of what any despot king will do, and a rather good description of what any king or state might do when in need of money. The rule of law will never allow subjects to take the possessions of the sovereign, whereas the latter is allowed to do the reverse (even if it takes the form of taxes). In this context it is relevant to note that a prominent idea behind the *Sachsenspiegel* – and an idea developed in all sorts of literary genres – was to appeal to rulers not to behave like despots. However, the principal point, again, is that the rule of law must imply that a sovereign power will always have the right to take the possessions of subjects if the circumstances so require. This is what makes him sovereign. Yet, this is also that which needs to be veiled or hidden time and again since it is, in a distinct sense, something shameful.

To top it all off, Charles proposes to rob his own castle where he knows there is a vast treasure:

> This treasure has been gained badly/dishonestly
> God would not shame it on us
> If we would take a part of it.
> (ll. 589-591)[26]

Had he been speaking unmasked, here, as a king, then this could have been in confessional mode, with the king being repentant. However, he is speaking from behind a mask. As a result the king-who-is-not-the-king states of his own possessions and treasure that it was begotten 'qualic' (badly or dishonestly). Either the entire scene is abundantly clear in terms of *Realpolitik*, or it is ironic. The irony is produced because Charles is clearly Charles in the eyes of the audience and somebody else in the eyes of Elegast. The latter, however, is the focalizer with whom the audience is able to identify. As a result we hear Charles speaking in a masked way,

but the question has become: what is the mask masking? Charles is only able to speak the truth by dissimulation, carrying the mask of a thief. Or he is a real thief whose image is blurred because of the mask of Charles the king.

With his literary mask, and masked as a thief in the text, the audience gets to see the sovereign for what he is: both a thief *and* the seal to societal, lawful order. Thus *Karel ende Elegast* allows irony to happen, for irony is indeed something that cannot be enforced, since 'the final responsibility for deciding whether irony actually happens in an utterance or not [...] rests, in the end, with the interpreter'.[27] Let me consider in more detail what kind of irony this is, in order to see how it might ultimately help us to look on the constitution of subjects in a different way – as the ones that allow irony to happen – in relation to sovereignty.

3. Facing theft (and violence) in the law

There may be an uneasy, dangerous effect involved with irony. Linda Hutcheon's famous study on irony derived her qualification of irony's *edge* from this.[28] The edge can be felt distinctly in the case of *Karel ende Elegast*, but in two ways that differ in intensity. With regard to both ways, two meanings are in play, that are not equally expressible on the plane of power. In terms of the first, throughout the story Charles is indicated many times as 'that noble man' or 'the noble king'. Supposing that Charles is, in historical fact (or as a paradigm for many lords or sovereigns), more of a usurper and a thief, we can consider this qualification of Charles as one that connects in a disparate way to what he really is. In fact this is the classical definition of irony. First of all, there is a disjunction between two mutually exclusive signifiers: 'noble king' and 'thief'. More importantly, one of the two cannot be expressed so easily in the domain of power. In order to protect themselves, subjects *must* qualify their lord as noble in order to survive even if they know the qualification is not apt. The sovereign himself, in contrast, need not say this. In fact, his not saying it will make it appear self-evident. As a consequence, this disjunctive form of irony has a disjunctive *effect*. It does not threaten the status quo in any real sense of the word.

The disjunction at stake is addressed in other terms by Terry Eagleton in *Holy Terror* (2005). In order to protect the weak, which is an aim that can be qualified as 'kind', the law has to show its ugly face, which is the face of force. Eagleton's argument is that this duality finds its origin in a sublimation of original violence.

> The law is the place where the revolutionary wrath which brought society to birth finally takes up its home. Like Oedipus, then, it is sovereign and outlaw together. The forces which overthrew a previous form of life are now dedicated to the defence of a new one. The Furies are enshrined at the heart of the city. The criminal has become the cop.[29]

Eagleton is considering a kind of sublimation, in the sense that the reality of founding or preserving violence can never be seen up front for what it is. The criminal, having become cop, can no longer show the face of the criminal anymore. He has *become* the cop.

With respect to this, *Karel ende Elegast* offers another possibility. An angel-sent-by-God first says: 'King, you should be a thief.' Via the response of Charles, the narrator is able to describe King Charles as a usurper who accumulates possessions. A little later a masked Charles confirms: 'Yes, the king is a thief who begot his possessions badly.' The text allows all his subjects to know it and see it, then, but not in a strictly serious way. The angel, Charles himself, the narrator, and by consequence any part of the audience, are allowed to say or think that what should not be said. It does not lead to Charles's disqualification, however, because everybody knows he is also the King. Or better: Charles is a King *because* he is a thief, whereas he cannot be *because* he is King. He is a thief-King or a king-thief. Charles is not split up, then, in two different, disjunctive manifestations, one of which must hide or veil the other ('Yes, he may be a thief but he is a noble king'). Here, the two part and connect at the same time. Because of the conjunction between the things that Charles really is, namely *both thief and king*, I would like to call this copulative irony.[30]

This copulative form of irony has its historical echoes. The history of the *Karel ende Elegast* story from 1350 may start, as was indicated, with a small text or *cantilene* that was probably made around the time that Charles was canonized, in 1165. The effect of the canonization was that he was now declared to be 'Holy' Roman Emperor. His holiness was clearly fabricated. Charlemagne's canonization was a bid for support by the anti-Pope Paschall III, who tried to gain support with Roman Emperor Frederik I Barbarossa. Needless to say, this bid had its advantages for the latter as well. Meanwhile, Paschall III's qualification as an anti-Pope is a clear sign. The so-called Investiture Controversy – the vehement battle between the Roman Catholic Church and the different kings in Europe about the issue who had supreme power – also led to internal strife in the Church. It surely is ironic, yet also telling, in the context of my argument, that the first text we know of where we encounter Charles performing as a thief, originates precisely at a time that he was declared to be holy for political reasons in the context of a battle for power and for installing a distinct political order in Europe.[31]

As the example of Charles proves, his canonization is not the final result of an indisputable sequence of independent evaluations. Rather, the canonization has to put the lid on discomforting historical information. This is something that the cantilena from the twelfth century refuses to do, or that it deals with ironically. With respect to Charles's canonization it is not coincidental that immediately after Boendale's assurance, in his *Layman's mirror*, that Charles never stole, he reproaches those who state that the name Charles was given to him because his father begot him on a *cart* ('kar', hence 'Kar-el') and that Charles's mother was supposed to have been a servant maid, which would suggest that Charles was a bastard. This is cer-

tainly not the case, says Boendale, 'because Peppin, his father was / a holy man, be sure of this'.[32] The canonization is made explicit here: Pippin III, nicknamed 'the short', was a holy man, 'sure'. In addition, Boendale tells us how Pippin was married to his wife loyally and faithfully.

Historically speaking, Boendale was very much beside the point here, though, and there were medieval sources to tell him so, such as the different versions of the *Annales regni francorum*.[33] Pippin was already married when he met Bertrada (also known as Bertha Broadfoot). He took her as a mistress and in doing so he was not an exception in the house of Carolingians. All of them, including Charlemagne, had other wives in addition to their spouses. As the sources testify, Charlemagne had nineteen children in all. As for the so-called Holy Pippin, he had his lawful daughter disinherited once Bertrada had begotten Charles, in 742. He would only marry Bertrada in 749. Apart from the dubious loyalty of the Carolingians to their wives, there was more to be doubted in terms of their lawful or unlawful actions.

Pippin's father Charles Martel had been a king's mayor (from *maior domus*) but had clearly been acting as king. This was then finalized by Pippin, who simply had the king removed. To that end, he had sent envoys to Pope Zacharias, asking the latter whether it was wise to have kings who hold no power of control. In his wisdom, Pope Zacharias had answered that an able king was better. And speaking of this, and in the name of his apostolic authority, he asked Pippin to be king of the Franks. Exit the official and legitimate king, Childeric III. Pippin had himself and Bertrada anointed in 751, by Bishop Boniface.[34]

The case of Pippin is just one historical example of a quasi-legal transition of power, with the threat of violence hardly veiled. The history of Charlemagne is even more paradigmatic. Historically, Charles was far from holy. In historical reality Charles was a violent usurper and a highly skilled political thief, whether one would want to call this a lie or not.[35] There were many ugly traces to be covered, hence the need for canonization. Such canonization can never be final, however, despite Boendale's desperate attempts. Or, canonization can never cover the ugly traces entirely. As a consequence, the question principally is how subjects can accept the rule of law, with its prohibition of theft, when there is theft and violence involved in the installation of the rule of law. Is the only option to define sovereignty in terms of its exceptionality and un-conditionality; or is *Karel ende Elegast* showing us another possibility?

Let me deal with this exceptionality and un-conditionality first. In the words of Austin Sarat, violence is integral to the law in three senses:

> [...] it provides the occasion and method for founding legal orders, it gives law (as a regulator of force and coercion) a reason for being, and it provides a means through which law acts.[36]

As boldly and seemingly unproblematic as it is stated here, so desperate are the

efforts by many others to assess the legitimacy of this dynamic. In his much studied essay *Kritik zur Gewalt* from 1921, for instance, Benjamin took a radical stance in stating that any rule of law that constitutes itself through violence and that maintains itself through violence, will always be unjust and miss a fundamental form of legitimacy because violence is intrinsically used, instrumentally, as a *means*:

> All violence as a means is either lawmaking or law-preserving. If it lays claim to neither of these predicates, it forfeits all validity. It follows, however, that all violence as a means, even in the most favourable case, is implicated in the problematic nature of the law itself.[37]

According to Benjamin, then, the problematic nature of the law itself is caused by its inherent and instrumental violence, and that violence can never be entirely legitimate or justified, not even as the necessary means to a noble end. The only violence that Benjamin could accept was violence that was not instrumental, but that could break open the prison of order without purpose. This violence, that had turned into a *pure* means, or medium in and for itself, is the one Benjamin called divine.[38]

This pure or divine violence was, in turn, a matter of great concern to Jacques Derrida. In an article entitled 'Force of law: the "mystical foundation of authority" ', Derrida makes two moves that involve different aspects of the question of whether violence can be the foundation of a just order. In the first part, Derrida develops his thoughts on the basis of Pascal and Montaigne, expanding on the fictionality of what underpins the law. In the second part he explores Benjamin's *Kritik zur Gewalt*. Seemingly following Benjamin until the very end, Derrida first acknowledges the unavoidability of founding violence, and he consequently understands the need for a liberating violence – the one that Benjamin defined as divine. Then, however, there is a 'post-scriptum' in which Derrida worries about how small the difference may be between this 'pure' divine violence and total annihilating violence that was set loose by the Nazis. With hindsight, his desire to develop thoughts on the mystical foundation of the law begins to develop a different sense, here. One cannot deconstruct violence. One can, however, deconstruct a law that finds a ground defined by a limit. When Derrida considers the system of law to have a limit, and by implication, to have a 'beyond', it is this very limit that can be questioned time and again, although it will never give us access to the mystical beyond.

Still, with the veil of fiction in place, the cruelty, immensity, and unacceptability of founding violence, or the theft in law, becomes veiled as well.[39] Paradoxically it is a work of fiction, *Karel ende Elegast*, that offers us another possibility with respect to this, by showing the king as a thief and the thief as a king. Here, the rule of law can be accepted by the subjects because *they* are able to face its irresolvable tensions. With Derrida the sovereign will always have to establish itself by excessive, exceptional means whereas these very means also threaten his existence: the sovereign's madness. In our medieval story, in allowing copulative irony to happen or to take

place, subjects deal with irresolvable tensions by accepting and resisting the sovereign/thief. To be sure, there is risk involved, for the irony can easily regress into cynicism: the mode of *Realpolitik*. Or the irony involved can shift into a serious expression of power, when the ruler decides to show himself as a despot that can do anything he likes (by, for instance, killing anybody that dared to laugh). As long, however, as irony is in play, the situation is principally *provisional* because there is nothing to hide. All participants accept the order that is, whilst facing its nasty origin and operation, and never fully accepting it.

In a comparable way, this point was at stake when the American lawyer Robert Cover stated, in his pivotal essay 'Violence and the Word' from 1986, that anyone who wants to consider law only as a matter of language or interpretation, misses its fundamentally violent nature:

> Legal interpretation takes place in a field of pain and death. This is true in several senses. Legal interpretive acts signal and occasion the imposition of violence upon others: A judge articulates her understanding of a text, and as a result, somebody loses his freedom, his property, his children, even his life. Interpretations in law also constitute justifications for violence which has already occurred or which is about to occur.[40]

The basic point remains that law cannot exist without the threat of violence, and its underpinning by violence. The fact that most people 'behave' when they have heard their verdict and sentence, is not the result of mere decency, so Cover argues. They are well aware that if they will not walk away, they will be dragged. This does not mean that this should be accepted in terms of means and ends, however. Cover asks us to face it, which is not to say *accept* it, as if it could be somehow morally good or correct.

Since violence is derived from Latin *violentia*, from *violare* (to violate, rape, impinge, break) it can never be fully reconciled with a legitimate or just order. The structural disadvantage of the option of veiling or hiding founding and preserving violence is that violence can then, almost as a consequence, recur as somehow legitimate *because* it can always be veiled, mystified, canonized or hidden in the mist of myth. Or, the violence has become something impossible to *face* since the subjects are totally subjected to it. Consequently they can only respond to it by breaking, rupturing, tearing apart this total subjection, that is: by acting just as violently. To put this differently: because of the totality of subjection concerned, this mode of subjection answers dialectically to the logic of supremacy and victory.

Karel ende Elegast follows a different logic. The story makes it possible to look unlawful acts in the constitution of sovereignty in the face. Or, copulative irony allows subjects to face *Gewalt* as violence-might-rule in accepting-it-in-not-accepting it. This is to say not only do subjects see the cop for the criminal that he once was, still is and is-not, but they see themselves as participating in this dynamic,

allowing it to happen ironically. Cover's point was that people will only be able to live well within the confines of a rule of law because they are able and willing to *face* its unlawful founding and subsequent intrinsic and structural violence. Another way of saying this is that the ones subjected face their position for what it is.

One can imagine a ruler and his (court) subjects all laughing about the fact that the king is called a thief because that is what he is. If irony is in play, they will never laugh fully, however. They are with one another whilst apart, because the laughter is underpinned differently for the sovereign on the one hand, to that of his subjects on the other. Subjects can say to the king 'you thief' ironically, keeping that qualification 'pointed', in a sense that is both ludicrous and painful. Or all participants in the ironic happening are kept 'on edge', as if the qualification can turn from irony into serious accusation. On a more general level, this might mean that subjects have the option of pointedly accepting-whilst-resisting an installed rule of law. With respect to this, copulative irony can have a copulative *effect*. It couples subjects to the rule of law, which is decisively different from their being completely subjected to it. If we take this copulation of subjects to the rule of law to its extreme, then irony falls just short of getting to the limit of *suspending* the law, this time from the perspective of the ones subjected, however. For them the law will never be *fully* accepted. Taken to its extreme this means that there can come a moment when they may fully *not* accept it.

Again, this is not to support cynicism. Cynicism answers to the logic of defeat, as does indifference. The choice for copulative irony answers to the logic of surrender, in the sense that it implies a provisional situation, of which, indeed, the extreme is suspension. Only surrender can be a 'pure' answer to the unlawfulness of the law, because the 'I surrender' is not strategic whilst it carries the potential of a 'for now'. In qualifying this possibility as 'pure', I borrow Benjamin's qualification of divine violence, in placing it elsewhere. According to Samuel Weber, Benjamin defined 'purity' as follows: 'in the constitutive immediacy of its "-ability" to stay *with* that from which it parts'.[41] If I translate this to my theme, it would concern irony's capacity, or ability, to allow the ones subjected to the law to distance themselves from it whilst remaining within it.

Notes

1 This text could not have been written without the thorough readings and comments of Joost de Bloois, Maria Boletsi, Sascha Bru, Yasco Horsman and the editors and peer reviewers of JDL. I thank them all, whilst knowing that some of them will still disagree with some of the points put forward.

2 For the story's 'skilfulness' in terms of medieval craftsmanship, see H.W.J. Vekeman, 'De verhaaltechniek in "Karel ende Elegast"', in: *Spiegel der Letteren* 13 (1970-1971), pp. 1-9.

3 I am referring here to Jacques Derrida for whom 'the sovereign is both the meaning

and aspiration of the individual subject on the one hand, and the cause of its frustration and failure on the other'; see Nick Mansfield, *The God Who Deconstructs Himself; Sovereignty and Subjectivity Between Freud, Bataille and Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp 5-8.

4 See A.M. Duinhoven, *Karel ende Elegast. Diplomatische uitgave van de Middelnederlandse teksten en de tekst uit de Karlmeinet-compilatie*. Dl. 1 (Zwolle: Tjeenk Willink, 1969). This text is best accessible for an international audience via [http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_kar001kare01_01/colofon.htm]. A reworked version was published by Duinhoven in 1998, based on the latest insights and with a translation into modern Dutch by Karel Eykman: *Karel ende Elegast – Het mooiste Nederlandse ridderverhaal uit de Middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam: Prometheus/Bert Bakker, 1998).

5 For versions of the story in other countries and regions, see, for instance, M.C.A. Brongers, '*Karel ende Elegast* en de Oudnoorse *Karlmagnûs saga*' in *Nieuwe taalgids* 65 (1972), pp. 161-180; or E. van den Berg, 'De omzwervingen van *Karel ende Elegast*', *Rapiarijs:Een afscheidsbundel voor Hans van Dijk* (Utrecht: Instituut de Vooys, 1987), pp. 9-11. A.M. van Duinhoven offers an overview in the 1998 edition, pp. 13-15.

6 This shift was a point of concern in Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

7 For Einhard's description, see [http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/einhard.html#Charlemagne%20Crowned%20Emperor]. Accessed February 26, 2011.

8 On the relation between sovereignty and the 'gift', see Nick Mansfield, *The God Who Deconstructs Himself; Sovereignty and Subjectivity Between Freud, Bataille and Derrida*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2010.

9 I am much indebted here to Geert Warnar, who introduced me to the relation between Charlemagne and the *Sachsenspiegel*, September 2010.

10 Maria Dobozy *The Saxon Mirror: a "Sachsenspiegel" of the fourteenth century*, intr. and trans. Maria Dobozy (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 31.

11 For the status of natural law as an intermediary between human rule and divine law, Aquinas is the major point of reference, see [http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/natural-law-ethics/].

12 Major texts in this debate are: Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2003); Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, intr. George Steiner, trans. John Osborne (London/New York: Verso, 2003); Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005); Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2005).

13 Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights*, see note 6.

14 Jan van Boendale, *Der leken spieghel. Leerdicht van den jare 1330*, ed. Matthias de Vries (Leiden: Du Mortier en Zoon, 1844-1848); The dbnl-version has been used here:[http://www.dbnl.org/auteurs/auteur.php?id=boen001].

15 Boendale is dealing here with what poets should and should not do. The quote in the original is: 'Men leest dat Kaerle voer stelen: Ic segt u, al zonder helen, Dat Kaerl noit

en stal...' *Der leken spieghel*, III. ch. 15, ll. 133-135.

16 I am referring here to Martijn Meijer, who stated in a review of the 1998 edition: 'Karel en Elegast zijn natuurlijk geen echte schurken' ('Charles and Elegast are, of course, not real villains'); Martijn Meijer, 'Oud geweld doet nog steeds pijn', *NRC-Handelsblad*, June 19, 1998.

17 See Wim P. Gerritsen, , in: *Colloquium Neerlandicum* 11 (1991-1992), pp. 11-23. Or see Orlanda S.H. Lie, 'What is Truth? The Verse-Prose Debate in Medieval Dutch Literature', in *Queeste* 1 (1994), pp. 34-65.

18 On Boendale's literary milieu, see Geert Warnar, 'Dubbelster of tegenpolen? Boendale en Ruusbroec in de Middelnederlandse letterkunde van de veertiende eeuw', in Wim van Anrooij (ed.), Al t'Antwerpen in die stad. Jan van Boendale (1280/90-1351) en de literaire cultuur van zijn tijd (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2002), pp 31-44. On Boendale's worries about uneducated writers, see Gerritsen 'Openingslezing', pp. 17-19.

19 All translations are the author's own unless otherwise stated. **'**Dlant was alle gader sijn. / Hi was keyser ende coninc mede' (dbnl, ll 6-7).

20 'Wat node soude mij sijn / Te stelen ic ben so rike / En is man in aertrijcke. / Weder coninc noch grauen: / Die so rijc sijn van hauen / Si moeten mi sijn onderdaen / Ende te minen diensten staen' (dbnl, ll. 54-60).

21 'Nochtans heb ic goeds veel meer / Galissien ende spandien lant / dat ik selue wan mitter hant / Ende ic die heydene verdreef / Dat mi tlant aleen bleef' (dbnl, ll. 73-76).

22 'Ende mi di coninc had verdreuen / Karel vut minen lande / Ic salt seggen al ist scande' (dbnl, ll. 512-514).

23 'Al heft hi mi bi quaden rade. / Mijn goet ghenomen ende verdreuen... (dbnl, ll. 619-620).

24 'Ic sel v seggen mine sede. / Wat helpt vrienden verholen / Ic hebbe so veel goets gestolen / Waer ic mitter helft gheuaen / men liet mi waerlic niet ontgaen' (dbnl, ll. 558-563).

25 'Ic stele alderhande saken / En late niemant met ghemaken: / Den rijcken ende den armen / Ic en achte niet op hoer carmen. / En weet gheenen armen man / Daer ic mijn ghewin weet an / En naem hem lieuer sine haue / Dan ic hem die mine gaue' (dbnl, ll. 573-580).

26 'Die scat is qualic ghewonnen. / God en souts ons niet vergonnen / Al hadden wijs een deel' (dbnl. ll. 598-591).

27 As Linda Hutcheon pointed out, irony is not a textual attribute but something that happens in relation to an audience. See, *Irony's edge: The theory and politics of irony* (London/ New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 45.

28 See Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, especially pp. 59-66.

29 Terry Eagleton, *Holy Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 53.

30 I am much indebted here to Maria Boletsi for the terms disjunctive and copulative irony, suggested to me in personal communication. With respect to both forms of irony it would be worthwhile studying Akira Kurosawa's film *Kagemusha*, where someone who strongly resembles the King, and who will be used as his double, is a petty

thief, and accuses the King himself of being a much bigger thief. Not only is this openly admitted by the King, the petty thief will have to really act as a King, later in the story, when the real King has been killed by a sniper.

31 As for the principal issues at stake in the struggle between earthly and religious powers, the radical work of Marsilius of Padua is a watershed in the thirteenth century, and in European history; see Marcilius of Padua, *The Defender of the Peace*, ed. and trans. Annabel Brett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). In the context of Charles's canonization it is of relevance that, in France, under king Louis VI in the early twelfth century, the *oriflamme* became an official symbol. The symbol, originating in the monastery of St. Denis, was said to have been carried to Jerusalem by Charlemagne as his flag of battle. Two centuries later Charlemagne would become patron of France next to Saint Denis.

32 'Want Puppijn, sijn vader, was / Een heilich man, sijt zeker das' (*Der leken spieghel*, III. ch. 15, ll. 143-144).

33 I agree here with Wim Gerritsen who described Boendale as a scholar who was able to study the Latin sources as opposed to his laymen competitors. However, that Boendale, as a consequence, should be entitled to have true historical knowledge is doubtful (Gerritsen, 'Openingslezing', p. 19). Rather there appears to be a battle going on between different versions of truth.

34 For the history of the Merovingian kings and mayors, see Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms* (London: Pearson, 1994), or Paul Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel* (Harlow: Longman, 2000). For Charles' contribution, see Rosamund McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 78-79.

35 As has been argued, the theme of a plot against Charles in *Karel ende Elegast* connects historically to a treasonous act by Charles himself. In the story Eggeric's treason with regard to Charles can be seen as a fictional negative to the history of Charlemagne's treasonous behaviour against his most powerful liegeman Tassilo in 788. At the time, Charles had asked Tassilo to come to his court in Ingelheim and had him captured and then sent to a convent. See A.M. Duinhoven, *Karel ende Elegast* (1998), pp 19-25. On Tassilo, see also McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity*, pp. 118-127. On my dealing with this historical reality behind *Karel ende Elegast*, see Frans-Willem Korsten, 'Moments of Indecision, Sovereign Possibilities – Notes on the Tableau Vivant', in Willemien Otten, Arjo Vanderjagt, Hent de Vries (eds.), How the West Was Won. Essays on Literary Imagination, the Canon, and the Christian Middle Ages for Burcht Pranger (Leiden: Brill), pp. 17-38.

36 Austin Sarat, 'Situating Law Between the Realities of Violence and the Claims of Justice', in Austin Sarat (ed.), *Law, Violence and the Possibility of Justice* (Princeton: Princeton university Press, 2001), p. 5.

37 Walter Benjamin, 'The Critique of Violence', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, volume 1 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass./London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 236-53.

38 Both in *State of Exception* and in *Means without End*, Giorgio Agamben deals with Benjamin's notion of purity, not as something that can exist in itself but that is intrinsically relational. See especially Giorgio Agamben, Means without End: Notes on Politics, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000). A close analysis of the purity in this particular essay by Benjamin and its importance for Agamben is provided by Samuel Weber, 'Violence and Gesture: Agamben Reading Benjamin Reading Kafka Reading Cervantes', in his study entitled *Benjamin's – abilities* (Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 195-211. A critical reflection on the idea of purity in relation to violence is offered by Beatrice Hanssen, *Critique of violence: between poststructuralism and critical theory* (London/New York: Routledge, 2000), especially pp. 16-30. Finally a pivotal reflection is provided by Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', *Acts of Religion* (London/New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 228-298.

39 As some have argued, Derrida's fascination with violence may well veil the intrinsically violent aspect of deconstruction itself. On this see Dominique LaCapra, 'Violence, Justice, and the Force of Law', in *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1989-1990), pp. 1065-1078; or Drucilla Cornell, 'The Violence of the Masquerade: Law Dressed up as Justice', in *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1989-1990), pp. 1047-1064.

40 Robert Cover, 'Violence and the Word', in Martha Minow e.a. (eds), *Narrative, Violence, and the Law: The Essays of Robert Cover* (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press), pp. 203-238; quote on p. 203.

41 Samuel Weber, 'Violence and gesture', p. 197.

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Literature after Radio: Tuning in to Ivo Michiels's Alfacyclus

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Abstract

This essay analyzes Belgian author Ivo Michiels's works for radio (collected in *Samuel, o Samuel* (1973)), as well as his prose writings of the 1970s (the *Alfa Cycle* (1969-1979)). Taking its cue from media theorist Friedrich Kittler's suggestion that the introduction of new analogue media such as the gramophone and the radio had a profound influence on modernism's relation to language, the essay argues that the stylistic rupture in the development of Michiels's oeuvre that occurred in the late 1960s should be understood in relation to the author's preoccupation with the medium of radio. By the 1970s, the radio play became for Michiels the *paragone* art form - the art that served as a model for his own writing – because radio captures and broadcasts disembodied yet corporeal voices. It is precisely the *voice* (rather than *language*) that became the central concern of Michiels's *Alfacyclus* [*The Alfa Cycle*], and that plays a crucial role in the author's understanding of militarism and fascism.

Keywords: Ivo Michiels, Modernism, Media Theory, *Alfa-Cycle*, Radio, Radiophonics, Voice, Fascism, Intermediality. Literature and Psychoanalysis.

> *No one listens to the radio – what loudspeaker or headsets provide for is always programming – never radio itself.*[1]
> Friedrich Kittler

> *Rhythmos denotes form at the moment it is assumed by that which is moving, mobile, fluid – the form of something that does not have organic form.*
> Émile Benveniste

> *[...] and in the scorching sun the cold impersonal voice from the radio, the millions of voices (including the hoarse, the brave, the untiring God-and-fatherland-voices) from the millions of radios with which the ether was filled – and the air filled with the left right left right left right within the walls behind him [...]*[2]
> Ivo Michiels

In an essay published in 1958, Paul Rodenko makes the remarkable statement that radio was invented by the literary avant-garde of the 1920s.[3] Or, to do more justice

to his enigmatic claim, he predicts that in an unspecified future, radio *will turn out to have been* invented by the writings of the avant-garde since, he adds, *true* radio does not yet exist. By the end of the 1950s, Rodenko maintains, radio existed merely as a technical medium to broadcast information or entertainment. An authentic form of radio *art* had yet to be discovered. Rodenko writes:

> What we call 'radio' is currently nothing more than a technical apparatus that broadcasts sounds; as a form of art, it remains in transit. In France and Germany, there are some attempts to create authentic forms of radio art, in the area of music (as radiophonic music) as well as in the area of spoken word (the radio play), but these experiments are largely conducted by technicians, sociologists and psychologists. As of yet, no Pudovkin or Eisenstein of radio has presented himself.[4]

Rodenko goes on to assert that even though a true 'radio art' had not yet (in 1958) come to be, its arrival had been announced by the writings of Van Ostaijen, Bonset, Tzara and Chlebnikov, whose poetic explorations of the materiality of language unwittingly anticipate the future discovery of radio's potential to create an art of pure sound. When that moment (i.e. the emergence of a true Radio Art) arrives, Rodenko muses, it will become clear that the experiments of the avant-garde had testified to poetry's desire to become *radiophonic*. Avant-garde poetry, Rodenko seems to suggest, has dreamed of radio, and this dream has pushed it forward into new experiments, new domains and new forms.

In this essay I will follow up on Rodenko's suggestion that experimental modernist writing can (and perhaps should) be understood in relation to radio.[5] Rodenko's claim, I contend, may have seemed idiosyncratic in 1958, but it has gained a new relevance in light of recent developments in media theory. Critics inspired by Friedrich Kittler (and before him Marshall McLuhan) have become attentive to the ways the break between modernism and the literature preceding it can be understood in relation to developments in media technology.[6] In a series of books, Kittler has argued that the emergence of new means to capture and disseminate vocal sounds in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had a profound impact on the understanding of language and communication.[7] Technological media such as radio, the phonograph and the telephone confront us with disembodied voices and highlight what in communication theory is called *noise* - the sounds of the apparatus of transmission itself - and with the bodily, noisy nature of the voice. Kittler suggests that this emphasis stimulated new forms of literature in which writing is not considered to be the representation of a voice in which an individual expresses his thoughts, spontaneous feelings or inner self. Language is now seen as something material – a sequence of sounds – and writing becomes a manipulation of the noises that are inherent in language itself.

I propose to test Rodenko's suggestion that modernist experimental literature is haunted by the spectre of radio in an explorative reading of Belgian author Ivo Michiels (born in 1923 as Rik Ceuppens). As many critics have pointed out, Michiels (albeit of a different generation than the writers mentioned by Rodenko) is an author whose œuvre is organized around a break between a series of realistic, often confessional pseudo-autobiographical novels, in which language is largely used for expressive purposes, and a series of experimental texts in which the author is mainly preoccupied by the materiality of language. It has become a commonplace in Michiels criticism to understand this rupture in Greenbergian terms as a purification, in which the author liberates himself from non-literary (ethical and moral) concerns, in order to focus on the medium of literature itself.[8] As Michiels has acknowledged in an often quoted remark, in his later works literature *itself* has become his main subject.[9] I do not disagree with this interpretation as such; but here I will embark on a reading that is attuned to how the rupture in Michiels's work can be understood in relation to his preoccupation with radio. Radio, I contend, is crucial to an understanding of Michiels, not only because he is one of the few writers in Dutch who has written original work for radio but, I argue, because his later writings aspire to become what I will call 'radiophonic', to use Rodenko's term. To put it in an old-fashioned way: in the 1960s and 1970s radio became, for Michiels, the *paragone* art form, the art that served as a model for his own writing.[10] Radio became the prism through which he understood language and literature. I will suggest that this radiophonic dimension is crucial, not only to properly assess his development as an author but also - and perhaps more importantly - to understand the issue that is central to his œuvre, namely the aftermath of World War II. The 'rupture' in Michiels' œuvre, I propose, coincides with a new understanding of what a 'coming to terms with the past' entails. It implies a transition from a model in which the past is confronted in a confessional setting, in which feelings of guilt and shame are expiated, to a paradigm in which literature works through the haunting *radiophonic* nature of fascism.

In what follows I will first discuss the *Alfacyclus* [*The Alfa Cycle*], the series of five experimental books written from 1963 to 1981, and then turn to what I take to be his most important piece of radio art, 'Hoe Laat is Het?', broadcast by Dutch and German radio in 1972, in order to raise the question of how we can understand his literary production as a writing *after* radio – that is, modelled on radio and preoccupied with the voice as transmitted by radio.[11]

Hearing Voices in the *Alfacyclus*

Everyone knows that the most daring soldiers go no faster than the music.
Michel Serres, Genesis

The publication of the first volume of the *Alfacyclus*, *Het boek Alfa* (1963), created a stir among critics, not only because it was experienced as 'difficult' but also because it was largely seen as a radical departure from Michiels's earlier works. In the 1940s and 1950s Michiels had established his reputation with a series of semi-autobiographical novels (*Het Vonnis* (1949) and *Kruistocht der Jongelingen* (1951)) that were seen as a reckoning with the ideals of his conservative background (Michiels had been involved with Catholic Flemish-nationalist youth movements), and a reflection on his wartime experiences (Michiels was sent to work as a nurse in a military hospital in Lübeck).[12] By the end of the 1950s, however, Michiels's writing had become increasingly less realistic and more allegorical, culminating in *Het Afscheid* (1957), a novel about the crew of a ship, *The Gambetta*, that lies docked at Antwerp before embarking on a secret mission while the crew are not sure of the exact date of departure.[13] Each morning the crew members leave the ship for twenty-four hours and when they return they do not know whether they have left their families temporarily or for good. Departure becomes for them a permanent state, or (as it was put at the time) an existential situation that is explored in the novel.

Like its predecessor, *Het boek Alfa* also revolves around a temporal experience rendered as something permanent. This time, the experience of waiting is central as the book is about a soldier who stands guard outside a military barracks in the war's final days. Rather than using this situation as a starting point for a string of events, the book presents us with a montage of voices, sounds and sights coming from the street and the barracks, interspersed with flashbacks, fantasies and anticipations that are not set apart by textual markers but are rendered in solid blocks of text.

Upon its publication, *Het boek Alfa* was widely interpreted as a stream-of-consciousness-novel in the vein of Faulkner, Joyce or Woolf.[14] This reading, however, became harder to sustain with the publication of later installments of the series. As Cyrille Offermans observes, *Orchis Militaris* (1968) and *Exit* (1971) offer, like *Het boek Alfa*, 'streams' of impressions but they are no longer anchored in the consciousness of one central character.[15] In *Orchis Militaris* - the title refers to the Latin name of an orchid, known in Dutch as '*Soldaatje*' (little soldier) -, only the opening pages contain hints of a narrative about a central character, a 'he' who travels by train into enemy territory, deported to work in a military hospital. The novel subsequently evolves into a montage of different impressions, voices and, most crucially, fragments of dialogue that can neither be easily located within a chronological sequence of events nor always be attributed to specific characters. These dialogues are uncannily repetitive, as seen in a six-page page sequence where a soldier's words (a description

of his hometown) are followed by an almost verbatim reiteration of these words by a second soldier, or in recurring scenes where various authority figures deliver very long strings of short authoritative declarations, each time followed by a 'yes' of a second speaker: ja dokter, ja zuster, ja generaal, ja mevrouw de barones' ('yes doctor, yes sister, yes general, yes madam baroness'). A similar, exhaustive repetitiveness typifies the long mantra-like monologues in the second half of the book, in which a speaker testifies to a series of beliefs and utters a large number of promises and oaths, phrased in sentences with a similar syntax and wording, each of which is rendered *twice*. This leaves the impression that these passages should not be understood as fragments of a *monologue intérieur*, since they do not seem to follow the logic of a thought process (or a series of sensations) but adhere strictly to a formal linguistic pattern that is pursued in a mechanical, machinelike way, perhaps as a response to a series of dictations and injunctions.

At first sight it seems that the text's radical fragmentation and its impersonal use of language should be understood in relation to the theme announced by the novel's title. *Orchis Militaris* would then be an exploration of the experience of depersonalization that results from being subjected to a strict hierarchical order of which the soldier's experience would be the paradigmatic case. This reading is indeed confirmed in the opening pages, which describe in long meandering sentences the experience of being locked inside a packed train – perhaps during a bomb scare – as the constitution of a new collective body that consists of an assemblage of various openings and limbs touching one another. This description segues mid-sentence into a succession of different scenes, set within the army, in hospital and in church. In each case, the subject is integrated into a larger body by being on the receiving end of a mind-numbing series of directives and orders (sometimes bordering on the nonsensical) that always demand a response – a yes. The automatism with which this 'yes' is delivered suggests that what is demanded is not so much an expression of an agreement as a vocal, *bodily* sound. What seemed like a dialogue is in fact closer to a call-and-response routine, a rhythmic chant.[16]

In these passages, Michiels seems to be evoking the experience of what Henri Lefebvre would later call - in a metaphor derived from animal training - undergoing *dressage*.[17] Lefebvre uses this word to explain how techniques such as military drilling employ repetition to transform a group of individuals into a collective body.[18] By subjecting someone to a steady, monotonous drill, one imposes a new rhythm upon the biological rhythms of the body, effecting an automatic, semi-conscious pattern of behaviour, a habit.[19] Repetition, as any animal trainer knows, allows one to 'break into the bodies' of individuals and to reconstitute them as a part of a new, collective body that has a *rhythmic consistency*.[20]

Orchis Militaris highlights that *dressage* leaves traces in the body in the form of an internalized voice that imposes a certain pace on the subject, a pulsating beat that pushes him forward and urges him to commit acts of violence. This is made plain in a long and remarkable passage at the heart of the novel where the description of

a series of violent events (a fistfight, a punishment, an interrogation and a scene of sexual violence) are rhythmically interjected by repeated exclamations such as 'komt dat zien, komt dat zien, hier worden klappen uitgedeeld' ('roll up, roll up, this is where he action is')), 'op en neer, op en neer' ('up down, up down') and 'de hand, de arm, de hand aan de arm, de arm aan de hand' ('the hand, the arm, the hand and arm, the arm on the hand'), which string the various incidents together and give these pages a certain cadence. These phrases, referred to in the novel as a refrain, cannot easily be attributed to any of the characters.[21] At times they seem to come from a crowd of bystanders that emerges out of nowhere to watch and cheer on the violence. At other times they come from within the subject engaged in violence. More frequently, though, they are inserted into the text as free-floating melodic phrases that have no clear source but seem to resound *between* the various subjects (perpetrators, victims and bystanders) as a haunting melody that each can tune in to and that gives the crowd its 'rhythmic consistency'.

This refrain offers a protective shield that desensitizes the subject and allows him to hit and be hit (and to shoot and be shot) *without thinking*, as the novel puts it repeatedly. It brings about an emotional numbness that is perhaps necessary to fulfil one's duty as a soldier, nurse or member of a church, and to blend into the drone of a praying, fighting or nursing collective. Yet, despite these passages – that clearly contain an implicit critique of militarism – the text as a whole should not be understood as a humanist defence of the individual since – and this is crucial – the book does not include an authentic voice as a counterpoint to the drilling and drilled voices. Nowhere in the novel do we witness the events from the perspective of someone capable of resisting the drilling experience. Each voice in the text seems to be traversed by a similar rhythmic pulse, and thus the reader is left feeling that no escape is possible: perhaps the subject itself is formed by the various injunctions, interpellations and drills that besiege him.

This claustrophobic feeling is even more intense in the next novel in the series, *Exit* (1971). As the title indicates, this novel deals with the desire *and* impossibility of departing and is more or less set in a military barracks. It consists again of a series of pseudo-dialogues and speeches, now intermingled with detailed reports about card games, long discourses about the rules of discourse, senseless alphabetical lists (such as a nine-page inventory of everything that could possibly be made from paper) and exhaustive annotations of small talk between soldiers, referred to by their military numbers. Within the context of the novel, the focus on games, rules and symbolic systems can be read as a metaphor for the experience of a subject in the grip of an administrative apparatus from which there is indeed no exit. The opening phrase of the novel - 'ik pas' ('I pass') - a phrase derived from a card game, appears throughout the novel to indicate a desire to step out which is, however, never a step outside the coordinates set by the game itself. As a result, the difference between 'passing' and being 'in de pas' ('in step') is blurred.

Hence the *Alfacyclus* (and in particular its first three parts) explores the relation between the body, its training (*dressage*) and language. In other words, to repeat what has become a cliché in Michiels criticism, the novel highlights the relation between violence and language. Language, however, is understood not as a formal system of signifiers that structures the way we experience reality, but rather as something uttered by numerous *voices* which, as the novel puts it, seem to come from everywhere, descending upon the subject and transforming him into someone who is in the first place a *receiver*.[22] These voices invariably do something in excess of signification. They call upon the subject, break into his body and leave a trace in the form of a haunting, rhythmic melody that seems to be permeated by a violent sadistic enjoyment. The sexual dimension of these internalized voices becomes clear not only from the joyful cheers of the crowd of bystanders at a beating but also from the same free-floating yells ('op en neer, op en neer') repeated in scenes of violence as well as those of a sexual nature.[23] Military drilling, as Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, is always more than the imposition of bodily discipline; the drill itself is saturated by a blend of sexualization and a humiliating display of power.[24] It is the same melody, therefore, that binds the subject to the collective, that allows him to resonate with a collective body and that seems to embody the surplus enjoyment the subject derives from his joining the collective.

Saying 'b': Michiels's Works for Radio

The voice is that which, within the signifier, resists meaning.
Slavoj Žižek, Gaze and Voice as Love Objects

The relation between voice and violence is further explored in the scripts Michiels wrote for radio in the early 1970s, published under the title *Samuel, o Samuel*. These were later added to the *Alfacyclus* as part 3 ½ – that is, as an interruption into the 'proper' series. Although only two of the book's four texts were used as radio plays (broadcast by Dutch, Flemish and German radio), all four should be understood as inherently 'radiophonic', since they are all *texts for voices*, as the postscript to the book points out.[25] Formally, they radicalize the previous instalments of the cycle. *Orchis Militaris* and *Het boek Alfa* still contained hints of character, setting and plot. These categories are largely absent in *Samuel, o Samuel*. What remains is a series of dialogues between disembodied, *acousmatic* voices, to use Michel Chion's term: voices that are not anchored in particular bodies and therefore exist only as spectral, shadowlike beings, absent in their very presence, hovering in some indeterminate space.[26]

Of all the voices collected in *Samuel, o Samuel*, those of 'Hoe laat is het?' (broadcast by the Dutch KRO and the German Süddeutscher Rundfunk in 1972) are perhaps the most spectral and therefore inherently radiophonic.[27] Devoid of plot, character and development, 'Hoe laat is het?' is best understood as a composition for voices,

a series of 'movements' in which different modalities of language are examined in various tempos. Opening with a dialogue on writing, notating and registering, it continues to probe the ways words can be used to think, anticipate, imagine, doubt, plan and, in a final scene (which renders the nonsensical dialogues between three 'radio-cars' and a 'central station'), to establish contact. These movements do not offer dramatic dialogues but rather careful and systematic examinations of the conventional phrases we use to think, plan, doubt, etc. The very exhaustiveness of the lists of phrases spoken gives the impression that they should not be understood as the vehicles we use to express ourselves; rather, our conventions form a rigid framework that delimits what can be thought, doubted or planned.

The second movement, for example, is a montage of a recorded voice that reads (in what sounds like a lecture hall) a dictionary definition of the philosophical meanings of the word 'idea' as a platonic eternal truth, an opinion or a conception of something. This recording is played seven times, and each playback is followed by a dialogue that undermines precisely the notion that an idea can be defined solely by its content. Ideas, these dialogues suggest, are not abstract; they arise in specific contexts that stipulate genres of speech relying on conventional phrases. 'Ideas' to seduce someone, to engage in political action, to embark on a journey or to plan to make a film are all articulated in idiomatic expressions that have the ring of clichés. As the movement progresses, these preconceived phrases become shorter and more formulaic until, finally, the dialogue is transformed into a cut-up of recorded fragments of sentences – from which the content of the 'idea' gradually disappears, leaving only the formal and socially acceptable linguistic form.[28] The scene ends in a series of disjunctive jump-cuts of empty phrases, which transforms the voice that utters them into a stuttering, mechanical-sounding mouthpiece for a series of conventions devoid, precisely, of ideas.[29]

A similar almost violent assault on the voice takes place in the following scene, that starts as a long, repetitive monologue in which a voice, speaking with the terse slowness and reasonableness of authority, addresses someone to remind him of 'the rule' that the person who says 'a' should also say 'b'.[30] This saying of 'a', which the voice insists has taken place, is defined in a purely physical way as an opening of the mouth, a lowering of the chin and a movement within the throat.[31] The rule stipulates that this be followed by a sound issuing from the same bodily opening (and not, as the voice patiently spells out, by a sound from an opening down below). The speaker continues to make this demand in an increasingly pressing way, until the piece cuts to a montage of a series of vocal sounds issuing from different throats that scream, sing, chant, beg, stutter and cry in a rhythmic way.

The piece, then, plays with the tension between language and voice – or rather with a tension *within* the voice as, on the one hand, a transmitter of signs and phrases and, on the other hand, a purely bodily sound.[32] However, the physical vocal sounds in 'Hoe laat is het?' are not metonyms that stand for the uniqueness of the speaking individuals, nor do they simply highlight what Roland Barthes calls

'the grain of the voice', 'the vibrating of the cavities, muscles and membranes of a *singular* body'.[33] The voice, in Michiels's radioplay, and the pre-linguistic utterances it emits, is 'cut up' and streamlined by power relations. Emitting an 'a' is in itself already a 'saying b,' a response to an injunction or demand. The voice is therefore always already 'drilled'. This is made clear, not only in the passages discussed above, but more generally by the fact that all dialogues start with the question 'what time is it?' This question does not ask for information, but it is invariably taken as a call to align oneself with a socially imposed tempo. This is illustrated by a dialogue that starts with 'what time is it – you'd better hurry', to which several exasperated voices respond by listing an extensive series of speech-acts they have uttered, ranging from opening a meeting to praising, dreaming, swearing and promising, and which ends in a cacophony out of which one voice emerges that says, in an exhausted way (and closer to the microphone), 'I have used signs, numbers, the alphabet, words, concepts, slogans, prayers. I have used obscenities.... I have used my tongue. Without pause, I have used my tongue. And you thought I didn't hurry?'[34]

'*Hop-hop-hop*': haunted by voices

Writing is also, very literally and even in the sense of an archi-écriture, a voice that resounds.
Jean-Luc Nancy

Samuel, o Samuel uses radio – a medium of the voice – to emphasize an insight central to the *Alfacyclus*, namely that we are not only drilled *by* voices, but that such drillings also have an impact on the way we use our voices. The speaking voice, as Mladen Dolar reminds us, is located precisely at the intersection of the cultural and the physical; as he puts it, the voice ties language to the body.[35] Vocal tics and automatisms make audible how the body has been broken into by force. As Michiels states in an interview, the ritualized use of repetitive language in 'psalms, songs and litanies in church impose a rhythm that continues to hold a grip on those who have soaked them up'. The *rhythm* of those phrases, more than their actual content, Michiels explains, have an afterlife in the subject who has absorbed them.[36] Traces of liturgical and militaristic rhythms are present in every single sentence of *Orchis Militaris* and *Het boek Alfa*, he explains, but they remain *under the skin* of the text.[37] Hence, the voices of church, army and hospital resonate in Michiels's books, but not on the level of content. They become audible as an underlying beat, a bass line that propels the text forward.

In *Het boek Alfa* this underlying pulse sometimes reaches the surface when it is rendered by a specific nonsensical word, a 'hop' that accompanies the orders given to the protagonist. These orders are not made by concrete individuals, but issue from autonomous voices that seem to come from everywhere:

> [...] the harder he tried to close his ears, the more numerous they became; they streamed towards him from the windows of classrooms, they sounded from the kitchen and bedroom, and from the church and on the street and they were at the playground, and there was hardly a minute of the day without orders, and it started early with hop out of bed and hop pray and hop go and have a wee and continued with hop pray and hop kiss your father who leaves and hop your mother who stays at home and hop your bag and hop your brother and hop straight to school with your hand holding your bag and your brother and hop pray hop be silent [...][38]

'Of crucial importance [to the books] are the "Links-rechts-links-rechts" and the "hop-hop-hop-hop"', Michiels explains in an interview with Lidy van Marissing, 'a rhythm of orders that speaks from within but is dictated by education, conscience, etc.'.[39] Writing for Michiels is a listening to these intruding voices that are parasitic towards our own words and hold authority over us, and that Michiels likens to the voices of conscience. To use psychoanalytic terminology, Michiels is interested in the voice of the *superego* that, as Mladen Dolar explains, comes *both* from within *and* seems to address us as an alien, commanding voice from the outside.[40] The superegoic voice issues from a zone situated at the 'junction between self and Other', as Dolar puts it, but belonging to neither.[41] It binds the subject to the Law. Yet, as he emphasizes, according to Lacanian theory, this voice should not be confused with the Law itself. The Law, for Lacan, is articulated symbolically; it is a pact that assigns positions and provides stability. The superegoic voice, however, is an insatiable, demanding voice. It is a pure vocal imperative that makes claims upon the subject without imposing specific orders. It makes a call without communicating anything. It is a voice that addresses but does not speak. Therefore, Dolar concludes, 'The surplus of the superego over the Law is precisely the surplus of the voice; the superego has a voice, the Law is stuck with the letter.'[42]

The superegoic voice therefore does not speak our language. It speaks in a nonsensical series of injunctions, a 'hop-hop-hop', a 'links-rechts-links-rechts', or an 'op-en-neer, op-en-neer'. As Slavoj Žižek writes, 'It is this very exteriority which, according to Lacan, defines the status of the superego: the superego is a Law in so far as it is *not* integrated into the subject's symbolic universe, in so far as it functions as an incomprehensible, nonsensical, traumatic injunction.'[43]

I would like to propose that this nonsensical commanding voice is at the heart of Michiels's later works. *Het boek Alfa* marks a departure from his earlier books since it emerges from the insight that coming to terms with the past involves coping with the persistence of a demanding voice that is not integrated into a symbolic universe of beliefs, ideas and ideologies, and which continues to haunt the subject even after a full symbolic reckoning of the past has taken place. The transition from the earlier allegorical or realistic narratives about the war to his later 'texts for voices' implies

a new understanding of what 'working through' the past entails. In the *Alfacyclus* the past is no longer confronted in a quasi-confessional setting, in which issues of guilt and debt are resolved, but it appears as a series of voices, injunctions and calls that continue to affect the innermost aspect of our speech.

The persistence of these voices is made plain on the final pages of *Exit*. The book ends in a quasi-testament which consists of a long list of items the speaker seeks to leave behind, ranging from the ground on which he stands to the colours he has seen, the hours he has lived and the words, numbers and phrases he has used. One thing, however, is bound to remain as the text states enigmatically: the fifteenth letter of the alphabet, the 'o', which is printed on the otherwise empty final page of the book. This 'o' is, as many critics have pointed out, similar in shape to a '0' – a zero. Its lingering may testify to a desire for a language emptied of meaning. But it is also the conventional letter of the vocative, the sign of the rhetorical figure of the apostrophe, as in the title of *Samuel, o Samuel*. Therefore, the 'o/0', I believe, stands for the excess of address over signification. It refers to the afterlife of a call. And since the title *Samuel, o Samuel* should also be read, as the postscript to the book spells out, as the acronym for SOS, an appeal transmitted over radio waves, the call of the 'o' can perhaps also be understood as something profoundly radiophonic, as a disembodied apostrophe, a free-floating address, cut loose from the body that uttered it yet lingering as a spectre.

Conclusion: Literature after Radio

In the wake of Paul Rodenko, who speaks of 'radiophonic poetry', I would like to call Michiels's later works examples of 'radiophonic prose': texts no longer structured as narratives with embedded narrators and vocalizers but as montages of acousmatic, disembodied, radiophonic voices. The shift in the formal organization of his work coincides with a different use of language. In the 'radiophonic' prose pieces, language is no longer used for referential purposes nor does it function as a medium to express ideas or to render symbols whose meanings lie *behind* the words used. Language for Michiels has become something material. This shift in Michiels's œuvre is analogous to the one Kittler detects in the transition from works written before and after the introduction of new technological media from the late nineteenth century onwards. But whereas Kittler argues that the writings produced after 1900 tend to detach language from its reliance upon the voice, Michiels's work is characterized by a renewed interest in the voice. For Michiels, however, vocal sounds are not the unique, spontaneous expressions of an individual. The voice is rather the location where power is registered within the body. Vocal patterns bear traces of the drills and the calls that figures of authority make upon the subject. Insofar as radio is the medium that broadcasts bodily voices, Michiels's writings testify to a desire to become *like* radio. Radio became the model for his writings –

even prior to his actual engagement with radio.

Michiels's interest in the voice as it comes to us through radio, I would like to suggest in conclusion, is related to his thematic preoccupation with the Second World War. As Alice Yaeger Kaplan has argued, radio was instrumental in the Nazi restructuring of the public sphere after taking power in Germany in 1933.[44] The fascists, Kaplan contends, used radio to broadcast not only speeches and political propaganda but also a series of programmes (ranging from breakfast programmes and broadcasts of physical exercises to evening entertainment) that sought to impose certain rhythms upon the nation and to continuously remind its people, to use Michiels's phrase, *what time it is*.[45] Through the use of radio a new type of community was constituted, an imaginary 'Radio Crowd' as Kaplan calls it.[46]

In a series of essays that partly elaborate on Kaplan's observations, Juliet Flower MacCannell points out that the fascist usage of radio coincides with a legal shift in Nazi Germany that had a profound impact on the way its citizens related to authority.[47] Under Hitler, the will of the Führer, as expressed by his voice, replaced the law books as the ultimate source of legal authority. Fascism, Flower MacCannell concludes, is therefore characterized by a vocal imperative usurping the place of written law. It posits a superegoic voice as an authority beyond the law. 'In short, fascism submits itself to what Lacan called the "invocatory drive" and its object', she writes, and this explains fascism's grip on its subjects.[48]

Fascism not only made use of the radio – it was inherently radiophonic in that it sought to constitute the nation as a nation of *listeners*, to use Kaplan's phrase. Hence, Michiels's *Alfacyclus* is not only written *after* radio (as in *modelled upon* radio) but perhaps also *against* radio, in an attempt to exorcise the radiophonic voices that continue to haunt the author. This attempt at exorcism gives his work a political dimension. This is at any rate what Michiels may have meant in a short essay written in 2008 in which he recalls a visit from a Flemish minister of culture to whom Michiels, to his own surprise, confessed that *all* his books should be seen as inherently political.[49] Reflecting back on the encounter with the minister, Michiels adds that his books may not be the product of a political *engagement* in the Sartrean sense of the word: in his writings, he does not commit himself to any political ideas nor does he offer a critique of ideas. His writings are aimed at something different, at the rhythmical patterns, injunctions and senseless melodies that sustain political ideologies.

Notes

1 Friedrich Kittler, "Die letzte Radiosendung." *On the Air: Kunst im öffentlichen Datenraum*, ed. Heidi Grundmann (Innsbruck: Transit, 1993), p. 72.

2 All tranlsations are the author's own unless otherwise stated. '[...] en in de blakende zon de koude onpersoonlijke stem uit de radio, de miljoenen stemmen (ook de hese, de dappere, de nooit vermoeide God-en-vaderland-stemmen) uit miljoenen radio's

waarmee de ether was gevsuld – en de lucht gevuld met het links-rechts links rechts links rechts binnen de muren achter zijn rug [...]' Ivo Michiels, *Het Boek Alfa* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1982 [1963]), p. 143.

3 Paul Rodenko, 'Het radiofonische gedicht.' *De Sprong van Münchhausen* (Den Haag: Bert Bakker, 1959), pp. 31-35.

4 'Wat wij "radio" noemen is voorlopig alleen maar een technisch systeem tot overbrenging van geluid; voorzover de radio met kunst te maken heeft is zij transito gebied. Er worden, met name in Frankrijk en Duitsland, pogingen ondernomen om tot een authentieke radiokunstvorm te komen, zowel op het gebied van de pure klank (radiofonische muziek) als op het gebied van het gesproken woord (het hoorspel); maar het merkwaardige is dat het vooral technici, sociologen, psychologen e.d. zijn die zich met het probleem bezighouden: vooralsnog hebben zich geen Eisensteins en Poedowkins van de radio als authentieke kunstvorm gemanifesteerd.', Rodenko, p.31.

5 I use the word 'modernism' in a broad sense, to include the works of the historical avant-garde.

6 See Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. by Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); *Grammophon, Film, Typewriter* (Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, 1986); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964; repr. London: Ark, 1987); Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

7 Kittler distinguishes two 'discourse networks': that of 1800 and that of 1900. Each is dominated by a set of ideas about language and communication. See *Discourse Networks*.

8 This reading of Michiels became canonical through the essays of Hugo Bousset. Bousset suggests that in Michiels's works Jakobson's *poetical function* is dominant. 'Taalkritiek en taalcreatie: het "opus" in de hedendaagse Vlaamse prozaliteratuur' in *Schrijven aan een Opus. Gesprekken met 9 Vlaamse Auteurs* (Antwerpen: Manteau, 1982), p. 11. See also Anne Marie Musschoot, 'Michiels, Postmodern' in *Modern, Postmodern: over auteurs en hun romans*, ed. by Roland Duhamel and Jaak de Vos (Apeldoorn/Leuven: Garant, 1990), pp. 23-32. For Clement Greenberg's definition of modernism as purification see, amongst numerous other publications, 'Towards a Newer Laocoön' [1940] in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: an Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 562-568.

9 'Mijn obsessie is de literatuur als onderwerp van mijn literatuur' quoted in Cyrille Offermans, 'Herhaling, Onderbreking: Beckett, Michiels. Notities over techniek en kritiek in de Alfacyclus' in *Ivo Michiels: een letterwerker aan het woord*, ed. by Luk de Vos, Jaki Louage and Jean-Marie Maes (Hasselt: Heideland-Orbis, 1980), p. 104.

10 See Greenberg, 'Towards a Newer Laocoön', for a contemporary usage of the term 'paragone'.

11 The *Alfacyclus* consists of *Het boek Alfa* (Antwerpen: Contact, 1963; repr. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1982); *Orchis Militaris* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1968; repr. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1974); *Exit* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1971); *Samuel, o Samuel* (Amster-

dam: De Bezige Bij, 1973) and *Dixi(t)* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1979).

12 *Het Vonnis* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1969); *Kruistocht der Jongelingen* (Leuven: Boekengilde de Clauwert, 1961).

13 *Het Afscheid* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1969).

14 Paul de Wispelaere, for example, writes: '*Het boek Alfa* is een stream-of-consciousness-roman in de zuiverste betekenis van deze term: het geestelijk drama ervan speelt zich uitsluitend af in de verschuivende bewustzijnslagen van één enkel personage.' English translation (unless otherwise stated all translations are the author's own): '*Het Boek Alfa* is a stream-of-consciousness novel in the strictest sense of the term: the psychological drama takes place exclusively within shifting layers of consciousness of a single character', ('Van Belijdenis tot Creatie' in *Het Perzisch Tapijt* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1966) p. 40.

15 'Aan elke indruk als zou de structurering van de tekst uitgaan van een "ik", van een (roman-) personage is een eind gemaakt door een radicale formalisering van de schriftuur.' English translation: 'The radically formal nature of the writing forecloses the possibility of reading the text as structured around the impressions of an "I".' *Herhaling, Onderbreking*, p. 114.

16 See for example 'Antwoordt / Jawel, meneer / Jawel is geen antwoord / U hebt gelijk / Meneer! / Meneer'. English translation: 'Respond / Yes, sir /Yes is not an answer / You are right / Sir! / Sir', *Exit*, p. 24.

17 Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time, and Everyday Life*, trans. by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London: Continuum, 2004).

18 'To enter into a society, group or nationality is to accept values (that are taught), to learn a trade by following the right channels, but also to bend oneself (to be bent) to its ways. Which means to say: dressage. Humans break themselves in [*se dressent*] like animals. They learn to hold themselves. Dressage can go a long way: as far as breathing, movements, sex. It bases itself on repetition. One breaks in another human living being by making them repeat a certain act, a certain gesture or movement. Horses, dogs are broken in through repetition, though it is necessary to give them rewards. One presents them with the same situation, prepares them to encounter the same state of things and people. Repetition, perhaps mechanical in (simply behavioural) animals is ritualized in humans. Thus, in us, *presenting ourselves* or *presenting another* entails operations that are not only stereotypes but also consecrated: rites. In the course of which interested parties can imagine themselves elsewhere: as being *absent*, not present in the presentation.' *Rhythmanalysis, p.* 39.

19 'Rhythm appears as regulated time, governed by rational laws, but in contact with what is least rational in human being: the lived, the carnal, the body. Rational, numerical, quantitative and qualitative rhythms super-impose themselves on the multiple *natural* rhythms of the body (respiration, the heart, hunger and thirst, enzovoort) though not without changing them.' *Rhythmanalysis, p.* 9.

20 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari employ the phrase 'rhythmic consistency' to refer to collective bodies that do not have a substantial consistency but cohere rhythmically.

See *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 1987) pp. 363- 371.

21 Michiels, *Orchis Militaris* 67.

22 '[...] sedert hij het zich had aangewend spaarzaam en oplettend te zijn met woorden en met antwoorden op de woorden die uit de baden en de bedden en van de tafels naar hem opstegen en vanuit de hoogte op hem neerkwamen [...]'. English translation: '[...] since he had learned to be careful and sparing with words and with answers to the words that rose towards him from the baths and beds and tables, and descended upon him from great heights [...]' *Orchis*, p.23.

23 A scene of telephone sex in which the general orders someone to undress and engage in sexual activities follows the exact same pattern as the aforementioned dialogues. Each order is followed by a 'yes'. Subjection and sexual subjection are thus presented as comparable activities. See *Orchis*, pp. 33-36.

24 See "I Hear You With My Eyes..." in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. by Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 101. See also *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997) p. 20.

25 *Samuel, o Samuel* was broadcast by the BRT3 (Belgian radio) in 1973. 'De madeliefjes, de madeliefjes' and 'Het Laatste Avondmaal' are both plays for voices. The latter piece was meant to be performed on a pitch-dark stage, so that the audience could only hear voices.

26 See *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). Chion writes: 'It should be evident that the radio is acousmatic by nature. People speaking on the radio are acousmêtres in that there's no possibility of seeing them.' p. 21.

27 I would like to thank the Instituut for Beeld en Geluid in Hilversum for making available a recording of 'Hoe laat is het?'

28 'Dat we de dingen behoorlijk aanpakken / dat we de regels vastleggen / dat we een lijst opstellen / dat we de juiste methode volgen.' English translation: 'That we deal with things properly / that we formulate a set of rules / that we make a list / that we follow a method.' *Samuel*, p. 28.

29 'Dat we alles bij elkaar / dat we op de keper beschouwd / dat we goed bekeken / dat we ronduit gezegd / dat we bij nader inzien / dat we uit de aard van de zaak / dat we de omstandigheden in acht genomen / dat we welgeteld / dat we hooguit / dat we op z'n minst / dat we noodzakelijkerwijs'. English translation:'That we in sum / that we , all things considered / that we all in all / that we generally speaking / that we on closer inspection / that we – to put it plainly – / that we in retrospect / that we – in view of circumstances / that we – when we add it all up / that we largely / that we at least / that we neccesarily', *Samuel*, p. 29.

30 The Dutch expression 'wie a zegt moet ook b zeggen' (if you say a, you also have to say b) means that one has to draw the consequences from one's words.

31 'Je geeft toch toe dat je a hebt gezegd? Een beetje aarzelend weliswaar, dat willen we in aanmerking nemen, maar niettemin, je mond is opengegaan, je kin is plus minus twee

centimeter naar beneden gezakt, het lelletje achter in je keel heeft zich opgetrokken, je tanden hebben zich behoorlijk van elkaar verwijderd – links vooraan is er een kies die nodig moet worden behandeld, een bewijs temeer dat je mond wel degelijk is opengegaan.' English translation: 'You admit to having said, a? Perhaps, hesitatingly, and we are willing to take that into account, but still, you did open your mouth, you did lower your chin roughly two centimetres, the lobe in the back of your throat moved up, your teeth separated from each other considerably, revealing a tooth that needs to be seen to, which proves that you really did open your mouth.' *Samuel*, p. 36.

32 In his book about the voice, Mladen Dolar argues that there is a fundamental division within the voice. On the one hand it conveys signifiers, on the other hand it is an object. *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, 2006), p. 98.

33 'The Grain of the Voice' in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 181.

34 '[...] ik heb tekens gebruikt, cijfers, het alfabet, woorden, termen, leuzen, gebeden. Ik heb obsceniteiten gebruikt [...] ik heb mijn tong gebruikt, zonder ophouden heb ik mijn tong gebruikt. Dacht je dat ik niet opschoot?' English translation: '[...] I have used signs, numbers, the alphabet, words, slogans, prayers. I have used obscenities [...] I have used my tongue, without cease I have used my tongue. And you thought I didn't hurry? ' *Samuel*, p. 43.

35 *A Voice*, p. 32-33.

36 'En er zijn de psalmen, de gezangen, de litanien in onze kerken, een ritme dat je niet meer loslaat wanneer je er eenmaal van doordrongen bent geweest. Meer het ritme blijft nawerken dan de woorden...' English translation: 'And there are the psalms, the chants, the litanies in our churches, a rhythm that doesn't leave you once you have been penetrated by it. The rhythm lingers on more than the words...', Fernand Auwera, 'Ivo Michiels' in *Schrijven of schieten: interviews* (Antwerpen: Standaard Uitgeverij, 1969), p. 248.

37 'In "Het boek Alfa" en in "Orchis Militaris" is die ritus soms zeer expliciet verwoord, zoals in de litanie-fragmenten bijvoorbeeld, maar hij is ook wel onderhuids aanwezig, alle bladzijden zijn ervan doortrokken.' English translation: 'In "Het boek Alfa" and in "Orchis Militaris," certain rites are literally cited, as in the litany fragments for example. But it also remains present under the surface of the text, seeping into every page.' Auwera, *Schrijven*, p. 248.

38 Author's translation. Original text: '[...] hoe harder hij de oren dichtkneep hoe veelvuldiger ze werden; ze stroomden op hem toe uit de vensters van de klassen en ze klonken op uit de keuken en de slaapkamer en ook uit de kerk en op straat en op de speelplaats waren ze en er was haast geen minuut op de dag die zonder bevelen was en het begon al vroeg met hop uit bed en hop bidden en hop een plasje doen en ging voort met hop bidden en hop een kus aan je vader die opstapt en hop een kus aan je moeder die thuisblijft en hop je tas en hop je broer en hop recht naar school met aan de hand je tas en je broer en voort met hop bidden en hop zwijgen enz.' *Alfa*, pp. 25-26.

39 '"Het boek Alfa" [is] opgebouwd op tegenstellingen, die onder meer tot uitdrukking

komen in het ritme van het boek. "Links-rechts-links-rechts" en "hop-hop-hop-hop" [...] een ritme dat ons van buitenaf wordt opgedrongen door opvoeding, geweten, enzovoort.', Ivo Michiels: "Mijn obsessie is de literatuur als onderwerp van mijn literatuur."' in *28 Interviews* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1971) p. 151.

40 'The Ethics of the Voice' in *A Voice*, pp. 83-103.

41 *A Voice*, p. 103.

42 'The Object Voice', in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, p. 14.

43 *Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 2005). (Emphasis mine)

44 Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

45 'The administrators of fascist radio stations sometimes connected their broadcasting success to real crowd-gathering. In the Italy of the 1930s, Mussolini organized a radio show called the 'Workers, Ten Minutes' that interrupted all activity in factories [...] As of 1933 [...] Le Poste Parisien [...] initiated the first daily "wake-up" weather and news program directed at the private listener [...]' Kaplan concludes that '(t)he tension between the radio experience as a private experience and a public one is at the heart of radio ideology', *Reproductions*, pp. 135-6.

46 'The fascist position on radio was figuratively, not literally, collective: the ideal fascist broadcast, whether monitored individually or in a crowd, should extend the listener into an imaginary crowd spirit.' *Reproductions*, pp. 135-136.

47 Juliet Flower MacCannell, 'Facing Fascism: A Feminine Politics of Jouissance' in *Lacan, Politics, Aesthetics*, ed. by Willy Apollon and Richard Feldstein (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), pp. 65-100; and 'Fascism and the Voice of Conscience' in *Radical Evil*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 46-73.

48 'Fascism and the Voice of Conscience' pp. 50-51.

49 'Wie schrijft, die kiest', *DWB* 4 (2008).

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Images of Europe

The (de)construction of European identity in contemporary fiction

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Abstract

In recent years the problem of European identity has become increasingly urgent. The Dutch and French voters rejected the EU's Constitutional Treaty in 2005 and the debate about EU membership for Turkey threatens to cause a rift in the European community. What do Europeans have in common and what is typically European about Europe's history and culture? This article wants to tackle that question from a literary perspective, arguing that literary texts contribute to the construction of a shared sense of belonging among European readers. It examines in what way novels by Koen Peeters, Christoph Ransmayr and Michel Houellebecq help shape a collective European identity by negotiating a shared historical narrative and a shared cultural and philosophical heritage. The main thesis of this article is that European identity in these novels is constructed in a critical and self-reflexive manner: European identity is as much deconstructed as it is constructed. The destructive flip side of European modernity informs that identity as much as its social and cultural successes. European identity, these novels also suggest, is always the combined effect of national and transnational modes of identification.

Keywords: European identity, contemporary European fiction, collective memory

Introduction

Robin, an employee in a public relations company, is enjoying a stroll in the heart of Brussels, the capital of Europe. Brussels's most famous (and most overrated) tourist attraction, a small statue of a urinating child the Belgians call 'Manneken Pis', is being dressed up in a folkloristic suit. It takes Robin a few minutes to realize this is done in honour of a Romanian delegation. It takes four glasses of gin for this realization to develop into a true epiphany:

> It's hanging even above and between us: the detached, voluntary European civilization. Europe is a thing of flags, hats, ribbons. The language of the people mixed with the language of the authorities, and all that nourished by local

dishes and baptized with water from Manneken Pis. Suddenly my whole life seems simple.[1]

This is a scene from Flemish novelist Koen Peeters's *Grote Europese roman* (*Great European novel*), a novel exploring the topic of European identity from the perspective of a business clerk from Brussels travelling all around Europe. But is life really that simple? Does Europe rely on food and folklore?

The date in the novel is '9 September' and in New York 'two towers are on fire'.[2] In real world politics, the aftermath of this event – however inaccurately referred to in the novel – served to divide rather than unify the European Union. As political scientist Thomas Risse remarks, 'the fight over European contributions to the U.S.-led "coalition of the willing" in Iraq' sharpened the debates about European identity and more specifically 'about Eastern Europe's place in the "new Europe"'.[3] The problem became even more urgent when the Dutch and French voters rejected the Constitutional Treaty for the European Union, which was 'full of identity talk and symbols'.[4] Moreover, the question whether or not Turkey should be allowed to join the EU is threatening to split the European community. Apparently, things are not as simple as they might seem to a slightly intoxicated public relations officer and it really is complicated to define what it means to be 'European'. What are the images of Europe (de)constructed in contemporary fiction?

Being European – or not?

In this article the signifier 'Europe' will refer both to a cultural-historical entity – as in European political history, European cultural and scientific heritage – and to a political construction, the EU as a phase in the ongoing economic and political integration of European states. Both conceptions of Europe, although conceptually different, are inextricably connected. The question of European identity – what is distinctly European? – arises from the process of European integration, yet the answer relies on Europe's cultural-historical heritage. People who identify with (an image of) Europe's cultural-historical heritage may more readily identify with the EU's political institutions if these are presented as the embodiment and guardian of that heritage.

Identity and identification are also inextricably connected: European identity relies on citizens identifying with Europe – i.e. integrating a European dimension, besides a national and/or regional dimension, into their personal identity constructions – while this identification presupposes the construction of a recognizable European identity. European identity, in fact, refers precisely to this complex process of identity construction on a European level. In the first part of the article I will discuss the question of European identity and identification with Europe as a primarily political problem, arising from problems facing the EU as a political con-

struction. In the second part I will discuss three literary case studies.

The problem of European identity

As the European Union expands and deepens, the problem of European identity becomes increasingly urgent. From the 1970s onwards the European institutions have shown great concern about the question of identity construction[5]. What do the member states of the EU have in common apart from their membership? What distinguishes Europe as a cultural-historical zone from other, non-European parts of the world? The public debates about the European Constitution and about Turkey's possible entry into the EU have, to a great extent, revolved around identity questions: what cultural, political and religious values could be considered as typically and/or specifically European?

This concern about identity is reflected by the official EU discourse on European cultural heritage. According to the European Commission, European identity is to be found, paradoxically, in Europe's rich cultural diversity[6]. Cultural policy in the EU should therefore promote the diversity of Europe's cultural heritage as the key to a shared sense of belonging. As diverse as that heritage may be, it is nevertheless a heritage all members of the EU share, so the argument goes. From the 1992 Maastricht Treaty onwards, 'culture' has become an important issue in the official EU discourse.[7]

This concern about European identity is related to a more general reflection on the EU's (diminishing) status as a geopolitical and economic power, but it is also motivated by the EU's internal political problems. According to Cris Shore, the focus on European identity is primarily driven by political concerns. The main problem facing the European Union in recent years is the lack of public legitimacy of its political institutions. In order for there to be a legitimate European democracy, there has to be a European *demos* that recognises itself as a transnational 'people' and identifies with the transnational institutions that claim to represent it. As Shore indicates, the fundamental problem of the EU 'lies in the fact that the "European public", or *demos*, barely exists as a recognisable category, and hardly at all as a subjective or *self-recognising* category'.[8] Contrary to the neo-functionalist assumptions guiding the process of European integration in its early decades, public identification with and attachment to the European institutions has not emerged as a simple by-product of the creation of a unified European market for goods and people.

Facing the nonexistence of a European *demos* in a rapidly expanding transnational community, the European Union has shifted its attention from merely economic integration to the increasingly urgent problem of European identity and the construction of a common sense of belonging among the citizens of its member states. This shift was spurred on by the growing awareness that the Union's economic

prosperity might suffer from a chronic lack of public allegiance to its institutions. 'Identity-formation and "culture-building" have thus become explicit political objectives in the campaign to promote what EU officials and politicians call *l'idée européenne*'.[9] Culture can contribute to the construction of this collective identity.

Collective identity

Collective identities or group identities can be found on many different levels, among the members of a region, a nation or a linguistic group, or among people sharing a religious or political conviction. Collective identity could be broadly defined as a shared sense of belonging to a group: the members of the in-group feel that they have something in common which sets them apart from the out-group. The people belonging to the in-group identify with the group and its members (even if they do not know them personally), which means that their membership of the in-group is part of their sense of who they are. People may simultaneously identify with different groups, which may or may not intersect, and they may have stronger feelings about one level of identification than about another.[10] Collective identity on a European level, therefore, implies the sense of belonging to a European 'people'.

Collective identity, be it regional, national or transnational, is never a given: it is always a social, cultural and political construction. It is the outcome of a process of negotiation. In order for a collective European identity to arise, citizens of European states need to experience Europe as an in-group, and this experience can be constructed or reinforced by political discourse, cultural artefacts, public debate et cetera. Wilfried Spohn distinguishes between two levels of European identity: a 'European civilizational identity' and a 'European integrational identity'.[11] The former implies identification with 'Europe as a geographical culture area', with a common European political and cultural history 'separating [Europe] from non-European civilizations'.[12] The latter refers to the process of political and economic unification, 'the attachment, loyalty and identification with the European integration'.[13] Needless to say, civilizational identity refers to Europe as a cultural-historical entity, whereas integrational identity refers to the EU as a political construction.

European identity, according to Spohn, should be envisioned as a variable combination of the various national identities, which are transformed but not superseded by transnational identity, and both civilizational and integrational European identity. As Thomas Risse observes, European identity does not need to be a strong, homogeneous collective identity. More important is the 'Europeanization of (national) identities', which implies that 'references to Europe and the EU have been incorporated into national and other identity constructions'.[14] This process of Europeanization will result in multiple transnational identity constructions across the EU. European identity, therefore, could be seen as the continuous process of interaction between, on the one hand, various attempts by political or cultural

authorities to define what is distinctly European, and, on the other hand, the immensely variable levels of identification of European citizens with a European in-group, with Europe as a political construction and/or Europe as a cultural-historical entity.

This concept of collective identity – European or otherwise – is not without its opponents. From a broadly poststructuralist and postcolonial perspective the attribution of (cultural, national, ethnic) identity has been both deconstructed as an essentialist illusion and attacked as a political and ideological recipe for exclusion and violence. Hayden White, commenting on the EU's quest for a European identity, summarizes these reservations neatly. 'The error, less cognitive than moral, lies in the ascription to the in-group of an identity, a self-sameness that is always inflected in the direction of belief in an essence'.[15] The error is moral, moreover, 'because essentialism is always elaborated in the mode of exclusion rather than of inclusion'.[16]

White is wary of the superiority claims which inevitably seem to accompany the notion of European identity. Europe's self-definition as a cultural-historical entity implies that European culture 'in contrast to its less fortunate counterparts elsewhere and in other times, "has a history" or is "historical" in nature'.[17] White, therefore, welcomes the questioning of the concept of (cultural, national) tradition which has traditionally supported identity construction. Bo Stråth complements White's remarks with a discursive analysis – inspired by Edward Saïd – of Europe's efforts at self-definition in the past few centuries. The discourse regarding European identity 'has had the demarcation of the Other in terms of "Us" and "Them" as an important point of departure'.[18] Historically, Europe has always seen itself in the mirror of the Other (to borrow Stråth's phrase), be it the Orient, the New World (America) or Eastern Europe.

Collective memory

A crucial factor in the construction of collective identity is collective memory: people identify with those with whom they share a narrative about past events. In the case of Europe this shared historical narrative is strongly informed by the twentieth century history of war, genocide and ideological strife, a past which European integration is said to have overcome. However, the struggle between competing historical narratives (for instance about the division of Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War) can disrupt the construction of collective identity. As Klaus Eder remarks, collective identity and collective memory are the outcome of 'a permanent struggle of naming'.[19]

The EU supports the development of a collective identity based upon powerful collective memories. Shore argues that 'the absence of a sense of common historical experience or shared memory'[20] is an impediment to sustainable European integration. Symbolic and cultural representations of what the members of a group

have in common become all the more important as those members engage less in direct social relations. As Benedict Anderson (1983) demonstrated in his seminal work on 'imagined communities', cultural artefacts such as newspapers and novels can give members of a nation or an empire, living thousands of miles apart in often considerably differing circumstances, the sense that they belong to one and the same community, and share a common outlook on life. The EU, according to Eder, is a transnational society in need of symbolic mediation if ever there was one: it is 'a society dependent upon cultural techniques such as symbolically-mediated representations of what a people have in common'.[21]

How can this need be met? Eder suggests we dismiss traditional modes of identity construction in which unity is based on mythical symbols or the glorification of a shared heroic past. More sustainable results are to be expected from what he calls 'the reflexive mode'[22] of relating to European history: a collective reconstruction of the past with an eye both to Europe's civilizational achievements and to the traumatic past of perpetrators and victims of crimes against humanity. It is a way of coming to terms with the past while simultaneously constructing collective memories. According to Hayden White, part of European identity should be the acknowledgment that 'anti-Semitism has been a component of Europe's own efforts at self-identification since its beginnings'.[23]

Eder points out that this long-term collective process requires 'a European public space, which provides an arena for communicating the past to European citizens'.[24] Given the linguistic and political obstacles barring the creation of a European public space – implying transnational media and public debate – it seems necessary to explore alternative means for symbolic mediation. Literature on European cultural policy focuses on the deliberate efforts on the part of the European institutions to construct Europe as a political community.[25] Symbolic mediation, however, does not necessarily have to be the result of deliberate policy. Cultural artefacts, such as literary texts, that have not been created for this purpose can contribute to the shaping of a common European consciousness, to a collective European identity based upon a collective European memory.

Literature and European identity

This is exactly what this article wants to investigate: it aims to explore the ways in which literary texts contribute to the construction of collective identity and collective memory on a transnational, European level. In other words, what images of Europe, European history and European cultural heritage are constructed or possibly deconstructed in literary fiction? And in what ways do literary texts help shape a multi-layered system of identification, which is capable of addressing and mobilizing both national (or regional) and transnational feelings of belonging? These are the questions that this article will try to answer.

In its focus on collective memory and collective identity this article links up with cultural memory studies. The notion of collective memory – introduced by Maurice Halbwachs – implies that 'no memory is ever purely individual, but always inherently shaped by collective contexts'.[26] These socio-cultural contexts include the community in which we live and the (narrative) conventions this community uses to construct its shared past, but also the media, institutions and cultural artefacts in which this shared past is embodied. Collective memory arises from the interplay of 'individual memories' and cultural memory 'which is represented by media and institutions'.[27] The narrative construction (or performance) of memory is of vital importance to the construction of identity. As Astrid Erll observes, '[t]he concept of cultural memory has opened the way to studying these processes at a collective level'.[28]

Commenting on Halbwachs's concept of collective memory, Jan Assmann distinguishes between two types of collective memory: 'communicative memory' and 'cultural memory'. Assmann terms 'communicative memory' what Haldwachs called collective memory: a non-institutional memory which 'lives in everyday interaction and communication' without being 'formalized and stabilized by any forms of material symbolization'.[29] Cultural memory, however, is not restricted to oral history: 'It is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms'.[30] The literary text is such a symbolic form which can be studied as a repository of cultural memory. As Birgit Neumann points out, literary texts, by suggesting 'interpretations of the past', may 'influence how we, as readers, narrate our pasts and ourselves into existence'.[31]

This article concentrates on a literary form of cultural memory: collective memory as it is embodied and mediated by literary texts, which in this way contribute to the construction of collective identity. It discusses three novels written in three different languages (Dutch, French and German – the English translations are mine). The novels are *Grote Europese roman* by the Belgian/Flemish novelist Koen Peeters (*Great European Novel*),[32] *Die letzte Welt* by the Austrian novelist Christoph Ransmayr (*The Last World*)[33] and *Les Particules Elémentaires* by the French novelist Michel Houellebecq (*Atomised*).[34] The novels are selected because they demonstrate in what way literature can contribute to the shaping of European identity by tackling issues of European history and shared heritage. However, only one of the novels, Peeters's *Grote Europese roman*, explicitly foregrounds Europe as a central theme.

The selection of novels also takes into account poetical diversity. Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt* can be considered as a text-book example of postmodern historical fiction: it is a self-reflexive, meta-fictional novel blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, past and present. Houellebecq's *Les Particules Elémentaires* can be read as a critique of European modernity, and more specifically of the Enlightenment's 'grand narrative' of emancipation and moral progress. Although not without its ideological and narrative ambiguities, it does so, however, in an anti-poststructuralist vein, rejecting the neo-Nietzschean deconstruction of metaphysics as much as

1960s libertarianism. Koen Peeters's *Grote Europese roman* offers a postmodern, ironic response to the tradition of the *Great American Novel*. Its deep concern with issues of community, mutual understanding and authenticity is both thwarted and sharpened by its reluctance or inability to move beyond narrative irony.

Different as they are, what these novels do share is a highly critical attitude towards European history and its cultural and philosophical heritage. I want to analyse to what extent these novels *de*construct as well as construct historical narratives and conceptions of cultural heritage on which collective memory and collective identity are founded. To what extent do these novels contribute to the deconstruction of nationalist or Eurocentric mythology and to the construction of a more open, heterogeneous and self-reflexive conception of collective, transnational belonging?

In my analysis of these novels I want to give the abstract notion of (the construction of) collective identity a concrete form, by focusing on three aspects of literary fiction which help shape a sense of belonging to a European *demos* or community. Literary fiction can contribute to the recognition or construction of, on the one hand, a shared historical narrative and, on the other hand, a shared cultural heritage. A third aspect I will be discussing is that of shared philosophical concerns, an aspect closely related to that of shared cultural heritage. In the next section I will focus on memories of a shared history in Peeters's *Grote Europese roman*. In the section following the next I will discuss traces of a shared cultural heritage in Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt*. In the final section before the conclusion I will look into the philosophical concerns developed in Houellebecq's *Les Particules Elémentaires*.

Memories of a shared history

As indicated in the previous section s, the formation of a collective identity implies the construction and recognition of a shared history – collective identity rests on collective memory. Literary fiction contributes to the construction of collective memory by offering (parts of) a historical narrative that can be shared among the members of a transnational community of readers. The memories of the Second World War are of vital importance to the construction of European identity. The memory of war in itself serves to legitimize the project of European integration – the EU's official discourse relies heavily on the shared experience of war – while at the same time inspiring the deconstruction of Europe's self-definition as beacon of civilization. More distant memories, however, also come into play: memories going back to the so-called origin of European civilization in classical antiquity, as in Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt*, which I will be discussing in the next section.

As Koen Peeters's *Grote Europese roman* demonstrates, it is the history of war and large-scale destruction, perhaps more than anything else, that informs European identity. The novel is preceded by a 'Dedication' which explicitly refers to the Great

American Novel: 'I want to write a book like a Great American Novel, disguised as a Great European Novel.'[35] This novel should present 'the history of European mankind'[36] in a grand and epic form, yet from the limited perspective of an employee working and living in Brussels.

Needless to say, the Great European Novel turns out to be a *petite histoire* rather than a grand narrative: its panoramic European grasp of thirty-six European capitals is a self-reflexive linguistic construction and its protagonist's European experience lacks epic grandeur as well as deep intellectual and emotional understanding. As Bart Vervaeck remarks, the wider the encyclopaedic panorama of Europe becomes, the more its structure disintegrates into a disseminated network of fragments.[37] Aiming to be American, this Great Novel turns out to be deeply European: thoroughly aware of its own limitations and of the traumatic failures of European history.

At the request of his boss Theo, a self-made businessman of Jewish-Lithuanian descent, Robin travels around Europe to write a report on new prospects for the advertising industry and, more importantly, on the issue of European identity. Theo has a rather grim view on Europe's historical foundations. 'Europe is that disorderly lot that for centuries has been conquering, loving and murdering one another in campaigns with flags.'[38] Europe is 'Goethe and Virgil', but also 'Napoleon and Hitler'.[39] It is simply not possible to imagine the one without the other. On his visit to Berlin Robin shares Theo's views with his colleague Diana: 'We have to remember the names of Europe's dead', Theo once told him, 'because they are the essence of Europe.'[40]

Robin is encouraged by Theo to read the stories, novels and poems written by holocaust survivors such as Primo Levi and Paul Celan. His thoughts on Europe – compiled in his notepad, ironically entitled 'Great European Notebook'[41] – are structured along the lines of Levi's book *The Periodical System*: every chapter in Robin's notebook is named after one of Europe's capitals. He has written down his observations on Europe, 'capital after capital, chapter after chapter',[42] resulting in 'the periodical system of Europe'.[43]

This suggests that Robin's finished report is the *Grote Europese roman* itself, which has a similar structure. All chapters are named after European capitals, although Robin only visits some of those cities. Other capitals are only mentioned in passing. Oslo, for instance, is mentioned in an e-mail sent by Oscar – also known as 'Oslo' – the resigning security agent in Robin's company. Sofia, as it happens, is the destination of a cheap flight – even cheaper, so the advertisement says, than 'Sabrina', suggesting that 'Bulgarian girls are for sale and are prostitutes'.[44] The periodical system of Europe, knit by a minor public relations officer, is a rather loose bag, which can be held together by any piece of string. The system does not pretend to be all-encompassing: it is a limited system, ironically signalling its artificial construction and its inability to achieve completeness. Perhaps the capitals are not even always the prime sites of history. Haunted by 'stories about executions, disappear-

ances, suicide' Robin looks for Auschwitz on a map: 'No, that is not a European capital.'[45]

Whereas in the earlier parts of the novel Robin is primarily concerned with the problem of communication and mutual understanding in a world of superficial acquaintances and empty business talks, he gradually grows more sensitive to Europe's shared memories. In Warsaw he visits the Jewish ghetto, but he is equally susceptible to traces of the communist regime and the ensuing capitalist take-over. Warsaw was bombed once and is now 'spread evenly in communist or capitalist fashion, that doesn't make a difference'.[46] Usually he doesn't get to see much of 'the big history from the booklets',[47] but in palimpsests of European history such as Warsaw or Berlin 'big history' has a tendency to shimmer beneath the surface of casual walks and talks. Even a light-hearted dinner party in a trendy Berlin neighbourhood is invested with memories of Kristallnacht, which saw the burning of a synagogue next to the restaurant. Nevertheless, that 'tragic history is not on the agenda tonight',[48] Robin wryly remarks – or is he really embarrassed?

Back in the Brussels office Robin even hints at a painful, highly inconvenient character trait common to ruthless capitalism and fascism: the tendency to dismiss people. However, he is soon to dismiss this train of thought: 'Unbecoming, absolute improper it is to link a business reorganization to that type of history'.[49] The link between transnational capitalism and the Second World War is significant, nonetheless: whereas the process of integration propelled by capitalist economy creates a transnational community reduced to financial statistics and business chatter, a genuine sense of common belonging can only be founded on the shared memories of war.

Not only does this novel honour the memory of those deceased and murdered in the Second World War, it also tries to uncover the cultural and linguistic diversity Europe hides beneath its unified economic market. On his travels to a number of European countries Robin collects linguistic souvenirs, words and phrases in the various national languages, which he gathers in his notebook. His souvenir from Ljubljana is the so-called 'dual form', in addition to the singular and plural form, a grammatical feature which apparently is unique to the Slovenian language and which kindles Robin's romantic longing for a companion.

To a group of collectors he meets in Berlin, Robin reveals a specific linguistic interest: words that are known to many people in Europe, 'but that in one language indicate an animal'[50]. His focus on the names of animals is possibly a tribute to Theo, whose past Robin imaginatively (re)constructs on the basis of personal documents he finds in Theo's office. In Robin's account, Theo, as a true European, studied languages obsessively and compiled lists of words, with a particular love for birds. As a child, Theo 'learned – very uselessly – the names of birds in four widely used languages and Latin by heart'.[51] More than anyone else, Theo is 'international, European' – as a multilingual war victim, he quite simply embodies Europe.

Robin's notebook, for that matter, is a fragmented and scrappy monument to Europe's (linguistic and cultural) unity in diversity, which is threatened by global monolingual capitalism and the general tendency towards the levelling of differences. 'Languages die',[52] Robin muses. 'In two thousand years we will all speak the same language. Will we understand one another then?'[53] It is precisely that longing for community and for mutual belonging which spurs on Robin's trips across the European Union. This longing for community, the novel suggests, is not satisfied by the surface appearance of similarity and homogeneity offered by international airports and corporate office buildings. To the travelling business agent every corner of Europe looks alike, and so do all Europeans. 'We are so even-tempered, so similar, we are empty and generic.'[54] This type of unification, Robin observes, is an obstacle to community building rather than a sign of its success. Nevertheless, this is the material anyone trying to uncover or construct that community will have to work with.

His understanding of Europe's capitals and languages is as superficial as his acquaintances with foreign colleagues. Having raised the question 'do you have to know a city thoroughly' he confidently replies no: 'one visit is sufficient, and a few notes in a travel diary'.[55] This is cosmopolitanism in the age of multinational capitalism. Robin feels connected to the capitals he visits in the same way as one feels connected to a person sitting next to you in a bus: 'if you leave, you don't greet. Two days later you have forgotten one another'.[56]

The construction of an imagined European community is a job for clever copywriters and public relations agencies. In Luxemburg Robin meets an energetic marketer who has come up with a way to exploit Europe's need for a shared sense of belonging: he has developed a round game based on European mountains, 'Montepolis'.[57] Not only do mountains appeal to the imagination, the mountain game, moreover, will provide Europe with 'a system' which will bring together all countries in 'a table'.[58] Robin's meeting with the Berlin collectors, however, suggests that arbitrary collections of any traces of human existence, unable as they are to capture the true meaning of being European, come as near to a genuine European '*folksonomy*' as any ethnographical account. 'This is the new, unfinished museum of the true international ethnology.'[59]

These arbitrary collections could be seen as so many attempts to construct a network, to find an arbitrary relationship in a seemingly fragmented heap of unqualified data. In a society in which relations of reciprocity have gradually been erased, these random collections – the more so if they can be shared between people – might be the stepping stones to a new sense of community and (shared) belonging.

Koen Peeters's *Grote Europese roman* contributes to the shaping of a transnational, European identity and to the construction of European 'imagined community' – although that community is arguably deconstructed as much as it is constructed. For Robin, however, as for (some of) the Belgian readers, this identity is a multiple

identity, both national and transnational: the novel is both about Brussels and Belgian identity and about the European Union. Brussels figures prominently in the novel – with detailed references to streets and museums – and Belgian identity is quite favourably presented by the narrator. The citizens of this country are 'polite and always a bit boring. [...] Nobody loves them, but nobody hates them either. This country is the ultimate self-mockery, the teasing, non-passionate love, a language game'.[60] This focus on national, Belgian identity – as opposed to regional, Flemish identity – is in itself a political statement.

Traces of a shared cultural heritage

European identity is not only based upon memories of a shared history, it is also believed to rely on so-called 'civilizational' identification: that which distinguishes Europe from the rest of the world is its particular cultural heritage. Nowadays few leading intellectuals or politicians would openly claim that this heritage is superior to that of other parts of the world – though some do – but the construction of European identity implies the need to stress the uniqueness and specificity of this shared heritage. The 'other', so often (implicitly) invoked in identity constructions, need not be the 'other without', it might as well be the 'other within': a traumatic core at the heart of this identity.

Christoph Ransmayr's novel *Die letzte Welt* indulges in raking up Europe's literary heritage. The novel resurrects the mythical world of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Half historical fiction, half fictional history, *Die letzte Welt* presents both characters culled from the history of Rome and characters inspired by Ovid's mythological poetry. The protagonist Cotta, an avid reader of Ovid's poetry, sets sail for the village of Tomi, on the outskirts of the Roman Empire, in search of the great poet. On the emperor's orders Ovid had to leave Rome and rumour has it that he spent the last years of his life as a reclusive in Trachila, a primitive settlement near Tomi, in the sole company of his assistant Pythagoras, anachronistically culled from Greek antiquity. As Thomas Anz remarks, however, 'Der Autor Ovid ist und bleibt verschwunden', a central issue in Anz's reading of *Die letzte Welt* as a prime example of postmodern fiction.[61]

In a typically postmodern way, *Die letzte Welt* blurs the distinction between reality and fiction. Tomi's inhabitants all share names with characters from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Moreover, they seem to shift shapes in ways prescribed by the Roman poet. The rope maker Lycaon wanders around at night in the guise of a wolf;[62] his name-sake in Ovid's poem, the tyrant Lycaon, eventually morphs into a wolf. Battus, the shopkeeper's son, at the end of his life turns into stone,[63] sharing his fate with the shepherd of the same name in the *Metamorphoses*.

Die letzte Welt also blurs the distinction between past and present, a technique typical of Ransmayr's historical fiction which Jutta Landa succinctly refers to as its

unsettling 'historical promiscuousness'.[64] Cotta's world is the world of imperial Rome, despotically ruled and toughly policed by the emperor, yet at the same time it is twentieth century Europe. The text abounds with anachronisms – ranging from Tomi's 'bus-stop'[65] and an 'electrical appliance' feeding 'bulbs'[66] to Naso's pictures in the newspapers, showing the poet delivering a speech[67] – which make it very clear that Roman antiquity is depicted from a twentieth century perspective. In the postmodern historical novel, according to Linda Hutcheon, 'the events [...] are shown to be consciously composed into a narrative, whose constructed [...] order is imposed upon them'.[68] The metahistorical analysis, focusing on the self-reflexive narrative construction of past events, clearly applies to Ransmayr's novel too. Moreover, these anachronisms remind the reader that this novel is as much concerned with twentieth century political issues – fascism and communism in particular – as it is with Roman antiquity.

The shared history of war, oppression and resistance is crucial to the novel – more specifically the history of fascist and communist dictatorship, and politically motivated terrorism. Because of its anachronisms the novel is reminiscent of both Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany. *Die letzte Welt* revives the classical origin of European civilization, but not without suggesting that classical antiquity shares traits with one of the darkest periods in European history. Pictures showing dissidents are 'retouched' in a conscious effort to erase dissidents from history.[69] Following the banishment of the dissident poet, libraries 'purified' their collections and academies amended their doctrines.[70] In an analysis of Ransmayr's depiction of Rome, Ralf-Peter Märtin concludes that the novel's chief aim is 'dem Leser eine einzige Erfahrung, die aber mit frappierender Intensität zu vermitteln: die des Dichters in einer Diktatur'.[71]

Thies, the village's undertaker, arrived in Tomi after deserting from a defeated and disintegrated army which had destroyed 'the most flourishing cities of the Black Sea'.[72] He still suffers from nightmares which are reminiscent of the Nazi camps and the gas chambers: he sees 'people gasping for breath' and the strong treading on the corpses of the weak to reach the last remnants of unpolluted air.[73] Although Thies receives money from a disability fund he refuses to return to his homeland or to visit Rome. The war has destroyed the way back to the so-called civilized world and has spoilt all chances of redemption for those surviving – 'man is a wolf to man'.[74]

Ransmayr's Rome resembles communist and fascist totalitarianism, yet its dissidents bring to mind anti-capitalist activism. Emperor August's Rome is presented as a ruthless police-state violently suppressing dissident voices. Sometimes a resistance fighter, however, manages to shoot 'a head of the authorities, the senate or the army'.[75] Cotta secretly sympathizes with those subversive, terrorist activities, which may remind the readers of the Italian Red Brigades or similar activist groups resorting to extreme violence. Naso gradually turns into a martyr of the revolution. As 'a famous, broken victim of dictatorial harshness', the banished

poet is hailed as a hero of 'the resistance' against the imperial state.[76] When nine years after his banishment, the rumour of Naso's death is spread in Rome, the poet's status has acquired mythical proportions. More than ever he is a danger to society: 'every posthumous word of the exile' could spark the 'uprising'.[77] The image of the dissident in exile is reminiscent of both Leon Trotsky – banished and subsequently murdered by Stalin – and Wolf Biermann, the writer and folk singer expelled from the GDR in 1976.

Read anachronistically, *Die letzte Welt* offers a nightmarish vision of the contemporary world. There is not a single spot in the Empire where the banished dissident cannot be traced, because all inhabitants of the Empire are duty bound to spy for the emperor. Wherever the fugitive wants to hide, 'eventually every eye, every ear in his neighbourhood started to change into the eyes and ears of Rome'.[78] This does not stop people from fleeing Rome: under August's reign more and more citizens try to break free from 'an ordered life' and to escape permanent state supervision.[79] These 'state deserters', not unlike modern political refugees, gather in 'port towns' and are constantly 'on the run from the authorities and police patrols'.[80] The novel not only tackles the problem of political refugees but also that of human trafficking and economic migration: a sailor called Iason uses his ship – the Argo, as in Greek mythology – to bring the unemployed and impoverished from all over the empire to Tomi, promising them 'a golden future' and stripping them of their last possessions.[81]

In a poststructuralist, Foucauldian vein, this novel also calls into question the Western rational mode of thought and brings to the fore its (mythical) 'excluded other'. Cotta's journey to Tomi is not only a journey to the outer reaches of the Roman Empire; it is, moreover, a journey to the periphery of reason and logical thinking. 'Rom', Anz argues, 'repräsentiert die moderne, zentralistische Vernunft, Tomi (und Trachila) dagegen das Andere der Vernunft: Mythos, Phantasie, Wahnsinn, Wildnis, Natur'.[82] Battus's petrifaction breaks the spell of this enchanting town and makes Cotta realize the thread by which he holds on to reason has already been cut. He has gradually grown accustomed to 'a world in between [...], where the laws of logic no longer seem to hold'.[83] Battus's fate is 'ungraspable in Rome's rational thinking'.[84] The forces of reason are clearly understood as political and even totalitarian forces, since reason is confirmed by 'every palace' and 'every battle line'.[85] No wonder then that Tomi is populated by outcasts and refugees from all corners of the Empire, escaping the empire's rational cruelty.

The last resort of reason at the borders of the Black Sea is the poet Naso, or so Cotta likes to believe. He clings to the idea of reason Naso represents: only Naso might be able to restore 'the clear-cut lucidity of Roman reasonable thinking'.[86] Naso, however, is nowhere to be found, his house in Trachila is in ruins, and his literary inheritance is scattered over shreds of cloth. In Trachila, Cotta finally gives in, easing the 'vexing contradiction between Rome's reasonable thinking and the

incomprehensible facts of the Black Sea'.[87] In this world apart, the firm grip of rational thought and political authority no longer holds.

This unsettling of the forces of reason was in a way Naso's ultimate political move: before he died he 'finally freed his world of the people and their ordering by telling *every* story to the end'.[88] Cotta realizes that the pieces of cloth he found in Trachila contain the life stories of all Tomi's inhabitants, including the story of their deaths, e.g. Procne's and Philomela's transformation into birds. At the Black Sea, life unfolds along the lines of his *Metamorphoses*,[89] but the poet's victory over repressive reason appears to imply the disappearance of mankind. Nature seems to side with art in this battle: Tomi suffers from severe climate change and is gradually overgrown with excessive vegetation. This leads Henk Harbers to this somewhat bleak conclusion: 'Zerstörung und Untergang werden nicht nur dargestellt, sie werden im Grunde auch gerechtfertigt und bejaht.'[90]

Die letzte Welt reaches for the roots of European culture in a highly ambiguous move. On the one hand, by way of its technique of anachronistic collage, it offers a bleak picture of war, oppression and political conflict across the ages, suggesting that the classical origin of European culture suffers from the same traumas as contemporary society. On the other hand, it welcomes the literary imagination of one of Europe's greatest poets, Ovid Naso, as a force capable of destabilizing the potentially totalitarian forces of reason. In a highly self-reflexive manner the novels offers a model for remembering both the distant past of classical antiquity and the recent past of Europe's involvement in fascism and in Cold War politics.

Philosophical concerns

The novels discussed in this article explicitly or implicitly tackle philosophical problems which have been or still are vital to the development of European culture and its growing awareness of the tensions governing it. Particularly striking in this respect is *Les Particules Elémentaires* by Michel Houellebecq. The publication of this novel created a stir in the European literary and cultural scene, not in the least because of its scathing and far-reaching critique of cultural liberalism and the sexual liberation championed by the generation of 1968. As Wendy Michallat observes in an article examining the novel's references to the popular youth press of the 1960s and 1970s, *Les Particules Elémentaires* represents 'the liberal vision of the '68 generation' as 'a ruinous extension of capitalist ethics into the erstwhile sheltered domain of sexual intimacy'.[91]

Although the story of the half-brothers Bruno and Michel is set in France and the criticism is primarily aimed at the French post-1968 cultural and intellectual climate, the novel's philosophical implications apply not only to French society but to Western European society in general. As the narrator explicitly points out, the novel is concerned with the 'European malaise',[92] and the libertarian, new age

holiday resort Bruno visits is similar in conception to 'so many other places in France or Western Europe'.[93] Implicitly, the novel even sets up a binary opposition between Europe and the United States, the latter being considered as the source of the wave of permissiveness and destructive libertarianism flooding Western Europe from the late 1960s onwards. As Bruno remarks, '[t]here is not a single example of a American fashion that has not succeeded in flooding Western Europe a few years later'.[94]

In the same way as Koen Peeters's *Grote Europese roman*, this novel contributes to the shaping of a multiple identity, in this case both a national, French identity and a transnational, European identity. It does so, moreover, in a highly critical and provocative manner. It is tempting to read *Les Particules Elémentaires* as a revisionist interpretation of European modernity in general and Western European post-war history in particular. One should, however, take into account the perspective from which this history is (re)told: the narrator, speaking as 'we', is presented as a post-human creature living in an age which witnesses the extinction of mankind's 'last representatives'.[95] Living in the year 2079, the narrator looks back upon the social and scientific developments leading up to the 'metaphysical revolution' which gave rise to the utopian new world he inhabits.

As Liesbeth Korthals Altes has clearly demonstrated, the ambiguous and polyphonous nature of this narrative voice subtly undercuts the credibility of its gloomy socio-cultural analysis. The narrative voice appears to waver between clinical distance and empathy, between scientific authority and parody.[96] The narrator's reliability also suffers from his tendency to signal the rift between his post-human world and the world of misery the two main characters of his story live in.

In the text several words referring to old world concepts – such as 'democracy'[97] or 'the concepts of individual freedom, human dignity and progress'[98] – are italicized, suggesting that these notions are hard to understand for post-human beings. The style of narration often suggests an archaeological exploration of a primitive society, betraying the perspective from which this past is constructed. The narrator's tendency to compare human behaviour with animal behaviour – he likens Michel's social inadequacy to the behaviour of a male rat deprived of physical contact with the mother rat,[99] to give but one example – indicates that twentieth century history is dismissed as post-human civilization's prehistory. It is not hard to understand, then, why this narrator, constructing his culture's prehistory, falls into the trap of describing the past as a sequence of events logically resulting in the present.

One has to take this narrative perspective into account in order to appreciate and qualify the often one-sided view of European history this novel offers and which has alienated some of its readers.[100] In the epilogue, the narrator depicts 'human history from the fifteenth till the twentieth century' – also referred to as the materialist era – as a 'history of gradual dissolution and disintegration'.[101] This history left behind a society fractured into isolated 'elementary parts', without the comfort of

any social bond whatsoever. This materialist age roughly coincides with the history of physics from Galileo to quantum physics. In a first phase, European physics, according to Michel's Irish colleague Walcott, had taken 'a first barrier'[102] and succeeded in dethroning God. Bohr's seminal contribution to the study of the atom removed 'a second barrier', which was 'the idea of an underlying reality', an ontology which provides the foundation for human thought and action.[103]

At first Michel does not compare favourably with the Danish physician, whose Institute of Theoretical Physics in Copenhagen, so the narrator informs us, unsettled 'the old categories of space, causality and time'.[104] In Michel's Parisian institute of molecular biology, the sparks of creativity are few and far between. In his later, Irish period, however, Michel lays the foundations for a metaphysical revolution based on cloning, biology's victory over death and over (inefficient) sexual reproduction. This metaphysical revolution is expected to create a new ontology, based on the interconnectedness of parts, and to restore 'the sense of community' and a feel for 'the holy', while bringing the Nietzschean generation of 'Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and Deleuze' into disrepute.[105]

Les Particules Elémentaires conjures up a bleak and dystopian image of European intellectual history in order to prepare the ground for its own dialectical twist. In that sense it still very much belongs to that history. As a dystopian critique it wages a campaign against the materialist excesses of European modernity. If the novel enters into dialogue with Europe's cultural, more specifically philosophical and scientific heritage, it does so in order to challenge its critique of traditional morality. This argument, however, relies on a rather one-dimensional causality lacking in nuance and subtlety. According to Jean Cohen, chief supervisor in the boarding school where Bruno was tortured by his fellow pupils, there was a clear link between Nietzsche's philosophy and Nazism, because that philosophy denied compassion and raised itself above the moral law, thereby unleashing the destructive forces of desire and lust.[106] This and similar statements by Bruno and Michel set up a crude binary opposition between Nietzsche and Kant, the latter representing, in Michel's view, universal and absolute morality.[107]

This one-sided causality is also clearly at work in Bruno's long monologue on sadism, in which he discusses a book by Daniel Macmillan. The most radical advocate of the unrestrained exercise of lust was, of course, Marquis De Sade, whose visions of lust and cruelty could be seen as the obscene flip side of modernity's critique of morality. According to Macmillan, De Sade's fantasies were enacted by the former hippie David di Meola and his criminal gang of sadists and snuff movie enthusiasts. Pretending to be Satanists they were actually 'absolute materialists',[108] whom conventional sexual pleasure no longer satisfied. Macmillan considers these torturers and killers as 'the illegitimate children of the hippies',[109] suggesting a causal relationship between sexual and moral liberation and excesses of (sexual) violence and cruelty. The avant-garde performance artists gathered under the label

of *Wiener Aktionismus* – Hermann Nitsch chief among them – are also guilty by association: their extreme, libertarian individualism, their violent rejection of social and moral conventions supposedly paved the way, according to Macmillan, for David di Meola's criminal excesses.[110]

Similarly, the narrator sees a clear link between women's liberation and the dissolution of society. The widespread use of efficient contraceptives, spurring on the sexual liberation of the 1960s, introduces a new phase in that ongoing process of dissolution, 'a new phase in the historical development of individualism'.[111] What was celebrated as a giant step in the emancipation of Western women, according to the narrator, ended up destroying family ties and thus eradicating the last remnant of collectivism in liberal capitalist society. Without the protection of these traditional bonds, the individual was now at the mercy of ruthless market competition, in the sexual as well as in the economic arena. This is exactly the social mechanism that the story of the two brothers sets out to illustrate. They are both victims and products of that development: whereas Michel abstains from sexual intimacy, Bruno desperately tries to participate in this vicious sexual competition.

The post-human world of the narrator claims to have solved this problem, taking its cue from Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which is praised by the novel's protagonists as a utopian rather than dystopian model. (The situation is more complex, though: Huxley is also presented as one of the instigators of the hippie movement which is severely attacked in the novel. Moreover, it is precisely this hippie element in his thinking – the focus on sexual freedom and communal living – which attracts the protagonists to his writings.) As Sabine van Wesemael suggests, this alarming reference to *Brave New World* could be interpreted as a warning against the pitfalls of utopian thinking rather than as a plea for unrestricted human cloning.[112]

In the last resort, all the problems facing European society in the late twentieth century can be traced back to the advent of modern science, a metaphysical revolution undercutting the Christian foundations of European civilization. In Michel's view, individualisation, hatred and lust were the necessary outcome of that revolution,[113] and so are the disintegration of society and the dissolution of its traditional religious and familial ties. '[H]ow could a society live on without religion',[114] he asks himself, a concern he shares with Julian Huxley, Aldous's older brother. Michel informs Bruno about Huxley's attempt to found a religion which is compatible with contemporary scientific knowledge.[115] A society, in Michel's view, which gives up religion in favour of materialism and individualism is bound to fall apart and abandon its citizens to base sexual strife.[116] In a dialectical twist, however, it is science which eventually opens up the possibility of a utopian community.

Les Particules Elémentaires is a scathing critique of the idealism of the 1960s in particular and on European modernity in general, compensating in clarity for what it lacks in subtlety. The freethinking liberated youths of the 1960s in the following decades gradually turn into decaying bodies, witnessing the commercial exploitation of their ideals and vainly attempting to restore the social bonds they once longed

to get rid of. This philosophical critique offers possibilities for identification across Europe, although it is likely to speak to Western Europeans in particular. As a philosophical critique, moreover, the novel also suggests a revisionist construction of Europe's past and offers a historical narrative embodying and structuring memories of that shared past.

Conclusion

The novels discussed in this article offer images of Europe, of its history, its cultural heritage and its philosophical concerns. These are images the reader might identify with, might reject or might want to modify, but all three project a European dimension and a European frame of reference. In that way they contribute to the construction of a European 'imagined community' and open up possibilities for identity formation on a transnational, European level. Quite clearly, none of these novels turn a blind eye to the downside of Europe's history and culture, which, as these novels suggest, are deeply marked by warfare, genocide, political and ideological oppression and the dissolution of communities. A first step towards the construction of European identity is the deconstruction of Europe's complacent self-definition as a beacon of peace, rationality and civilization.

In Koen Peeters's *Grote Europese roman*, the protagonist and narrator Robin discovers that Europe is more than flags and ribbons, that European community takes more than casual talks in hotel lobbies. More than anything else the signifier 'Europe' refers to a shared historical narrative and a shared understanding of the complexities and horrors of the twentieth century, a century of war and totalitarianism. Apart from an evaluation of Europe's past, this novel is a critique of Europe's limited focus on economic integration and competition, which will never generate a genuine sense of community. It seems that a European cultural identity is not readily available and has to be built from scratch, and from below: the path to a shared identity is scattered with seemingly arbitrary collections of words and images. A coherent and homogeneous identity seems both unwanted and impossible.

Christoph Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt* revitalizes an important source of European cultural heritage: Roman antiquity and, more specifically, Ovid Naso's *Metamorphoses*. It does so, however, in an anachronistic historical collage, combining the world of Naso and emperor August with elements from twentieth century political history. This technique allows for identification with Europe's cultural heritage while at the same time deconstructing the moral purity of both that heritage and Europe's present. Ransmayr's novel can be read as a fundamental critique of Europe's conception of rationality and civilization. Europe, so it seems, needs to re-evaluate its self-definition and face the violent excrescences of the cultural-historical and political heritage it holds so dear.

European identity can only be convincingly constructed in the reflexive mode,

paying critical attention to both the successes and the failures of Europe's heritage. This is a point well made by Michel Houllebecq's *Les Particules Elémentaires*. The novel integrates an overall critique of European modernity in general and post-war liberalism in particular into a story of two brothers who embody the problems of contemporary French society. The scope of this philosophical critique is not restricted to France; the disintegration of French society is part of a more encompassing European and more specifically Western European malaise.

Of the three novels discussed in this article, Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt* is most clearly oriented towards postmodern deconstruction: its anachronistic collage undercuts Europe's confidence in its tradition of rational thought and enlightened politics. Peeters's *Grote Europese roman* could be read as an attempt – at the same time ironic and deeply sincere – to pick up the pieces and to construct a sense of community and a shared geographical and historical frame of reference out of the fragments available to the postmodern observer. Houellebecq's *Les Particules Elémentaires* is an ambiguous re-evaluation of European modernity and liberalism: the historical narrative offered by its narrator is a provocative rewriting of history from the fictional perspective of a self-confident, post-human future society.

It is clear that none of these novels construct congenial and unproblematic images of European history and European heritage. Europeans share a history and a heritage made up of both successes and failures, and the process of European identity will probably have to rely on the former to come to terms with the latter, and come to terms with the latter to deconstruct the former. As a cultural force of mediation, literature can play an important part in that process.

Notes

1 All translations are the author's own unless otherwise stated. 'Het hangt zelfs boven en tussen ons: de onthechte, vrijwillige Europese beschaving. Europa is iets van vlagjes, mutsjes, linten. De taal van het volk gemengd met de taal van gezagsdragers, en dat gevoed door streekgerechten en gedoopt met het water van Manneken Pis. Ineens lijkt mijn hele leven eenvoudig', Koen Peeters, *Grote Europese roman* (Antwerpen: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2007), p. 44.

2 Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 45.

3 Thomas Risse, *A community of Europeans? Transnational identities and public spheres* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 2-3.

4 Risse, *A community of Europeans?*, p. 2-3.

5 According to Bo Stråth '[t]he concept of a European identity was launched in 1973, at the European Community summit in Copenhagen'. Bo Stråth, 'Multiple Europes: integration, identity and demarcation to the Other', in *Europe and the Other and Europe as the Other* ed. by Bo Stråth (Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2000), p. 385. In response to the economic crisis the EC tried to re-establish Europe's place in the geopolitical order and to reinforce the public legitimacy of the European project: 'identity replaced integra-

tion as the buzzword for the European unification project at a time when the project was experiencing severe strains. The concept emerged in a situation where the very legitimacy of the European integration project was at stake'. Stråth, 'Multiple Europes', p. 385-6.

6 See Deborah Parsons, 'Nationalism or continentalism. Representing heritage culture for a New Europe', in *Beyond boundaries. Textual representations of European identity* ed. by Andy Hollis (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), p. 1.

7 See Lisa Tsaliki, 'The construction of European identity and citizenship through cultural policy' in *Media and cultural policy in the European Union* ed. by Katharine Sarikakis (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p. 159. The Treaty calls for the protection of and sustained support for 'the cultures of the member states', which implies both 'respecting their national and regional diversity' and 'bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore', quoted in Tsaliki, 'The construction of European identity', p. 159.

8 Cris Shore, *Building Europe. The cultural politics of European integration* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 19.

9 Shore, *Building Europe*, p. 26

10 See Risse, *A community of Europeans?*, pp. 19-36 for a detailed analysis.

11 Wilfried Spohn, 'National identities and collective memory in an enlarged Europe' in *Collective memory and European identity. The effects of integration and enlargement* ed. by Klaus Eder & Wilfried Spohn (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 3.

12 Spohn, 'National identities and collective memory', p. 4.

13 Spohn, 'National identities and collective memory', p. 3.

14 Risse, *A community of Europeans?*, p. 9.

15 Hayden White, 'The discourse of Europe and the search for a European identity' in *Europe and the Other and Europe as the Other* ed. by Bo Stråth (Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2000), p. 70.

16 White, 'The discourse of Europe', p. 70.

17 White, 'The discourse of Europe', p. 77.

18 Stråth, 'Multiple Europes', p. 420.

19 Klaus Eder, 'Remembering national memories together: the formation of a transnational identity in Europe' in *Collective memory and European identity. The effects of integration and enlargement* ed. by Klaus Eder & Wilfried Spohn (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 207.

20 Shore, *Building Europe*, p. 35.

21 Eder, 'Remembering national memories together', p. 205. If the EU does not succeed in constructing this 'imagined European community', Liza Tsaliki argues, it 'will be at risk of being reduced to a purely economic entity – something the EU has been trying vividly to avoid', Tsaliki, 'The construction of European identity', p. 159.

22 Eder, 'Remembering national memories together', p. 216.

23 White, 'The discourse of Europe', p. 85.

24 Eder, 'Remembering national memories together', p. 216-7.

25 Shore investigates the role that European symbols (such as the flag or the anthem) play in the creation of a shared European consciousness, while pointing out the communi-

ty-building effects of seemingly bureaucratic instruments such as *Eurostat* and *Eurobarometer* (see Shore, *Building Europe*). See *Media and cultural policy in the European Union* ed. by Katharine Sarikakis (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) for a discussion of European media policy, involving among other initiatives the construction of a European audiovisual space.

26 Astrid Erll, 'Cultural memory studies: an introduction' in *Cultural memory studies. An international and interdisciplinary handbook* ed. by Astrid Erll & A. Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), p. 5.

27 Erll, 'Cultural memory studies', p. 5.

28 Erll, 'Cultural memory studies', p. 6.

29 Jan Assmann, 'Communicative and cultural memory' in *Cultural memory studies. An international and interdisciplinary handbook* ed. by Astrid Erll & A. Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), p. 111.

30 Assmann, 'Communicative and cultural memory', p. 110.

31 Birgit Neumann, 'The literary representation of memory' in *Cultural memory studies. An international and interdisciplinary handbook* ed. by Astrid Erll & A. Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), p. 341.

32 Koen Peeters, *Grote Europese roman* (Antwerpen: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2007)

33 Christoph Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt* (Nördlingen: Greno, 1988)

34 Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998)

35 'Ik wil een boek schrijven als een Great American Novel, vermomd als een Grote Europese Roman.' Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 4.

36 'de geschiedenis van de Europese mensheid', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 4.

37 Bart Vervaeck, 'Werken aan de toekomst: de historische roman van onze tijd', *Nederlandse letterkunde* 14 (2009), nr. 1, p. 33.

38 'Europa is dat zootje ongeregeld dat elkaar sinds eeuwen verovert, liefheeft en vermoordt in campagnes met vlaggen.' Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 124.

39 'Goethe en Vergilius', 'Napoleon en Hitler', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 124.

40 'We moeten de namen van de doden van Europa herdenken, omdat ze de essentie van Europa zijn.' Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 231.

41 'Groot Europees Schriftje', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 263.

42 'hoofdstad na hoofdstad, hoofdstuk na hoofdstuk', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 263.

43 'het periodiek systeem van Europa', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 264.

44 'Dat Bulgaarse meisjes te koop zijn en dat zij hoertjes zijn', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 239.

45 'Verhalen over executies, verdwijningen, zelfmoord.' 'Nee, dat is geen Europese hoofdstad.' Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 266.

46 'breed uitgesmeerd op communistische of kapitalistische wijze, dat maakt geen verschil', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 194.

47 'de grote geschiedenis uit de boekjes', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 230.

48 'tragische geschiedenis staat vanavond niet op de agenda', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*,

p. 232.

49 'Ongepast, absoluut misplaatst is dat, om een bedrijfssanering te verbinden met dat soort geschiedenis', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 282.

50 'maar die in één taal een dier aanduiden', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 235.

51 'leerde – zeer nutteloos – de vogelnamen uit het hoofd in vier courante talen en het Latijn', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 127.

52 'Talen sterven toch uit', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 153.

53 'Binnen tweeduizend jaar spreken we allemaal dezelfde taal. Zullen we elkaar dan begrijpen?' Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 153.

54 'We zijn zo gelijkmoedig, gelijksoortig, wij zijn leeg en generiek.' Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 109.

55 'moet je een stad grondig kennen', 'één bezoekje volstaat, en wat notities in een reisdagboek', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 88.

56 'als je weggaat, groet je elkaar niet. Twee dagen later ben je elkaar vergeten', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 89.

57 'Montepolis', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 114.

58 'een systeem', 'een tabel', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 115-116.

59 'Dit is het nieuwe, onaffe museum van de ware internationale volkskunde.' Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 235.

60 'beleefd en altijd een beetje saai. [...] Niemand houdt van hen, maar er is ook niemand die hen haat. Dit land is de ultieme zelfspot, de plagende, niet-passionele liefde, een taalspel.' Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 258.

61 [The author Ovid is and remains missing]Thomas Anz, 'Spiel mit Überlieferung. Aspekte der Postmoderne in Ransmayrs *Die letzte Welt*' in *Die Erfindung der Welt. Zum Werk von Christoph Ransmayr* ed. by Uwe Wittstock (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), p. 122. In Ransmayr's novel, Anz argues, not only the author disappears, but also the work. Cotta not only sets out to find Naso, he also hopes to retrieve the work, the mere title of which led to Naso's banishment: the *Metamorphoses* (in a totalitarian society such as Naso's Rome, nothing is more disturbing than the idea of transformation). In Tomi and Trachila Cotta finds traces of this work in 'diverse Bruchstücke, Gedächtnisspuren, mündliche Wiedergaben oder karnaveleske Inszenierungen' – analogous to the way myths survive – but the unity of the work is irremediably destroyed [several fragments, traces of memory, oral representations or carnivalesque performances]. Cotta's efforts allegorically depict the process of textual interpretation: 'Cottas Versuche, aus den Bruchstücken einen ganzen und einheitlichen Text zu rekonstruieren, schlagen in ähnlicher Weise fehl wie jene Anstrengungen hermeneutischer Interpretation, die der postmodernen Text- und Lektüretheorie suspect geworden sind' [Cotta's attempts to reconstruct a complete and unified text from fragments fail in a way similar to those efforts at hermeneutical interpretation, which have become suspicious for the postmodern theory of text and reading], Anz, 'Spiel mit Überlieferung', p. 122 & 124.

62 Christoph Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt* (Nördlingen: Greno, 1988), p. 84-85.

63 Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 214.
64 Jutta Landa, 'Fractured Vision in Christoph Ransmayr's *Morbus Kitahara*', *The German Quarterly*, 1998, 71 (1998), nr. 2, p. 141.
65 'Bushaltestelle', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 9.
66 'einen elektrische Apparat', Glühlampen', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 91.
67 Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 109.
68 Linda Hutcheon, *The politics of postmodernism* (London/New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 66.
69 'wegretuschiert', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 110.
70 'saüberten', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 126.
71 [to convey to the reader, with striking intensity, a single experience: that of the poet under dictatorship] Ralf-Peter Märtin, 'Ransmayrs Rom. Der Poet als Historiker', in *Die Erfindung der Welt. Zum Werk von Christoph Ransmayr* ed. by Uwe Wittstock (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), p. 117.
72 'die blühendsten Städte des Schwarzen Meeres', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 261.
73 'um Atem ringender Menschen', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 261.
74 'der Mensch is dem Menschen ein Wolf', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 266.
75 'einen Großen der Behörde, des Senats oder der Armee', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 144.
76 'Ein berühmtes, gebrochenes Opfer diktatorischer Härte', 'des Widerstandes', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 128.
77 'jedes hinterlassene Wort des Verbannten', 'des Aufruhrs', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 138.
78 'irgendwann begann sich doch jedes Auge, jedes Ohr in seiner Nähe in die Augen und Ohren Roms zu verwandeln', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 186.
79 'eines geordneten Leben', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 125.
80 'Staatsflüchtige', 'Hafenstädte', 'auf der Flucht vor Behörden und Polizeistreifen', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 125.
81 'eine goldene Zukunft', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 204.
82 [Rome ... represents modern, centralist reason, Tomi (and Trachila) on the other hand represent the other of reason: mythology, fantasy, madness, wilderness, nature] Anz, 'Spiel mit Überlieferung', p. 127.
83 'eine Zwischenwelt [...] in der die Gesetze der Logik keine Gültigkeit mehr zu haben schienen', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 220.
84 'unfaßbar in die römische Vernunft', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 220.
85 'jedem Palast', 'jeder Schlachtreihe', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 220.
86 'die festgefügte Klarheit der römischen Vernunft', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 223.
87 'der quälende Widerspruch zwischen der Vernunft Roms und den unbegreiflichen Tatsachen des Schwarzen Meeres', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 241.
88 'Naso hatte schließlich seine Welt von den Menschen und ihren Ordnungen befreit, indem er *jede* Geschichte bis an ihr Ende erzählte, Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 287.
89 As Lynne Cook remarks, 'what occurs is an accelerating rate of transformation and

upheaval', in which 'text and reality become one and the same', Lynne Cook, 'The novels of Christoph Ransmayr: Towards a final myth', *Modern Austrian Literature* 31 (1998), nr. 3-4, p. 233. Naso frees his world from humankind's instrumentalized reason, but 'in doing so he must relinquish his own autonomy' and 'disappear into a world he no longer controls', Cook, 'The novels of Christoph Ransmayr', p. 233. According to Cook, the novel demonstrates that social relations of power and domination can only be overcome 'by the elimination and transformation of the autonomous individual' and by the development of a new relationship with the natural world, Cook, 'The novels of Christoph Ransmayr', p. 237.

90 [Destruction and downfall are not only depicted, they are basically also justified and affirmed] Henk Harbers, '"Die Erfindung der Wirklichkeit": Zu Christoph Ransmayrs *Die letzte Welt*', *The German Quarterly*, 67 (1994), nr. 1, p. 67. According to Harbers this is a recurrent motif in Ransmayr's apocalyptical fiction: confronted with civilization's repressive rational order, the subject finds its true identity in disappearing. Discussing Ransmayr's story *Strahlender Untergang*, Harbers writes: 'Denn, so laüft die Argumentation, wenn das Verschwinden des Menschen das Wesentliche ist, dann findet der Mensch seine wahre Identität erst im Verschwinden' [Because, so the argument goes, if the disappearance of man is fundamental, then man finds his true identity only in disappearance], Harbers, '"Die Erfindung der Wirklichkeit"', p. 65. The typical storyline of a Ransmayr text goes like this: the protagonist leaves rational civilization behind, 'um schließlich im Untergang, im Verschwinden zu so etwas wie Selbstverwirklichung zu gelangen' [finally to attain self-realization in destruction and disappearance], Harbers, '"Die Erfindung der Wirklichkeit"', p. 66.

91 Wendy Michallat, 'Modern life is still rubbish. Houellebecq and the refiguring of "reactionary" retro', *Journal of European studies* 37 (2007), nr. 3, p. 314.

92 All translations are mine. 'malaise européen', Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), p. 153.

93 'tant d'autres lieux en France ou en Europe occidentale', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 135.

94 'Il n'y a aucun exemple qu'une mode venue des États-Unis n'ait pas réussi à submerger l'Europe occidentale quelques années plus tard', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 93.

95 'ses derniers représentants', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 394.

96 Liesbeth Korthals Altes, 'Persuasion et ambiguïté dans un roman à thèse postmoderne (*Les Particules Elémentaires*)' in *Michel Houellebecq* ed. by Sabine Van Wesemael (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004). Korthals Altes analyses the multiplicity of the narrative voice in Houellebecq's novel. The narrator speaks with multiple and seemingly incompatible voices. He speaks with the voice of the post-human clone, who does not share his human predecessors' emotional and spiritual malaise. In some parts of the novel, however, the narrator speaks with a contemporary – i.e. late twentieth century – voice, and quite often the narrator appears to empathise with the characters or demonstrate a level of emotional and ideological involvement which clashes with the late twenty-first

century perspective of the clone. 'Ainsi se constitue une "voix narrative" complexe, dessinant tantôt la perspective distancée du clone ou du chercheur scientifique, pour qui les personnages sont déterminés jusque dans leurs émotions et aspirations les plus intimes, et pour qui l'individualisme est une illusion; tantôt celle d'un narrateur qui se met dans le peau de ses protagonistes, et amène par le pathos le lecteur à croire dans le valeur de leur perspective individuelle' [Thus a complex "narrative voice" is constituted, sometimes drawing the distanced perspective of the clone or the scientific researcher, for whom the characters are determined even in their emotions and most intimate aspirations, and for whom individualism is an illusion; sometimes, however, that of a narrator who gets into the skin of his protagonists, and by way of pathos leads the reader into believing in the value of their individual perspective], Korthals Altes, 'Persuasion et ambiguïté', p. 37.

97 'démocratie', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 98.

98 'les concepts de *liberté individuelle*, de *dignité humaine* et de *progrès*', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 385.

99 Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 76.

100 In a highly critical article Jerry Andrew Varsava rejects Houellebecq's 'one-sided portrayal of a post-war France in which the expression of individual freedoms and the satisfying of individual appetites have become [...] hypertrophied and socially self-defeating', Jerry Andrew Varsava, 'Utopian yearnings, dystopian thoughts: Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles* and the problem of scientific communitarianism', *College literature*, 2005, 32 (4), p. 148). Varsava criticizes the novel for offering 'a very incomplete rendering of the contemporary epoch', and for suggesting a new utopian 'communitarianism', as the solution to the problems of liberal society, Varsava, 'Utopian yearnings', p. 163 & 157. While focusing on social problems involving sex, drugs and violence, the novel 'ignores entirely noteworthy advances in French society, things like rising standards of living and increased social welfare programs', Varsava, 'Utopian yearnings', p. 151.

101 'l'histoire humaine, du XVe au XXe siècle', 'celle d'une dissolution et d'une désagrégation progressives', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 386.

102 'une première barrière', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 373.

103 'une deuxième barrière', 'l'idée d'une réalité sous-jacente', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 373.

104 'les categories antérieures de l'espace, de la causalité et du temps', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 23.

105 'le sens de la collectivité', 'du sacré', 'de Foucault, de Lacan, de Derrida et de Deleuze', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 391.

106 Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 60.

107 Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 46.

108 'des materialists absoluts', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 260.

109 'les enfants naturels des *hippies*', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 261.

110 Murielle Lucie Clément convincingly demonstrates that the abject has a great fascina-

tion for Houellebecq. Her analysis of *Les Particules Elémentaires* reveals many references to blood, physical decay, to death and to the disintegration of dead bodies. In some excerpts, Clément claims, 'la poésie se substitue partiellement à l'abject', as in the almost clinical description of the decomposition of the animal carcass, occasioned by the death of Bruno's grandfather [the abject is partially substituted by poetry], Murielle Lucie Clément, *Houellebecq. Sperme et sang* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), p. 54. In many other instances, however, this is hardly the case. Clément concludes that in Houellebecq's novels what the characters see, '(q)ue ce soit dans des descriptions oniriques ou littéraires (...), inondée de sang, louvoie aux limites de l'abjection' [whether it is in descriptions of dreams or literary desciptions (...), flooded by blood, tacks towards the limits of abjection], Clément, *Houellebecq*, p. 73.

111 'un nouveau palier dans la montée historique de l'individualisme', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 144.

112 Sabine Van Wesemael, *Michel Houellebecq. Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005). Van Wesemael reads *Les Particules Elémentaires* as a decidedly anti-utopian novel, in which the reference to utopian models merely serves to question our contemporary society. According to Wesemael, the description of the post-human utopia abounds with ironical and satirical elements severely undercutting the utopian appeal. The readers of the novel, she claims, 'seront plutôt terrifiés par la révolution scientifique envisagée par Houellebecq tout comme ils étaient effrayés des spectres qui hantent les récits utopiques de Huxley' [will rather be terrified by the scientific revolution considered by Houellebecq just as they will be frightened by the spectres haunting Huxley's utopian narratives], Van Wesemael, *Michel Houellebecq*, p. 91. Houellebecq's novels should then be interpreted as anti-utopian novels, pointing out the failure of utopian thinking: 'il est impossible d'imaginer un monde ideal, à la fois realisable et plus desirable que celui dans lequel nous vivons' [it is impossible to imagine an ideal world, which is at the same time feasible and more desirable than the one in which we live], Van Wesemael, Michel Houellebecq, p. 97. Houellebecq's novel *La possibilité d'une île* (Paris: Fayard, 2005) seems to confirm this anti-utopian reading: like *Les Particules Elémentaires*, this novel tells the story of a 'new man', a modified version of mankind which has succeeded mankind as we know it and which is freed from all too human emotions such as love and fear. The novel focuses on one of those 'new men' who is unhappy in this supposedly utopian future and who eventually leaves his society behind.

113 Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 200.

114 'comment une société pourrait-elle subsister sans religion', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 202.

115 Houellebecq, *Les Particules Elémentaires*, p. 201.

116 Vincent Lloyd argues that Houllebecq's novels, although 'traditional religious beliefs are consistently described and portrayed as "stupid"', are 'explicitly concerned with faith, hope and love', Vincent Lloyd, 'Michel Houellebecq and the theological virtues', *Literature and theology* 23 (2009), nr. 1, p. 85. In these novels Lloyd finds traces of 'a post-secular and post-capitalist account' (idem) of those theological virtues. He reads

Les Particules Elémentaires as a novel criticizing a materialist 'world, stricken of rituals', and longing for islands of love in a barbarous world devoid of social bonds, Lloyd, 'Theological virtue', p. 94.

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A literary history for international students of Dutch

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Judit Gera and A. Agnes Sneller's *Inleiding literatuurgeschiedenis voor de internationale neerlandistiek* aims to supply non-native speakers of Dutch with an introduction to the history of Dutch literature. With a view to this, the authors provide their readers with a succinct chronological overview of this literature from its beginnings in the Middle Ages until the present. This results in seven chapters, each of which is also used to present and demonstrate – through the analysis of one or more sample texts chosen from the period under discussion – a recent approach to literature.

Gera and Sneller's initiative is a highly laudable one. Non-native students of Dutch, who as a rule do not take part in the social and cultural/literary life of the Dutch language area, are – to a considerably greater extent than their native counterparts – initially unfamiliar with the cultural and literary canon of this area, in other words with a host of names and titles and with the frames of reference these are generally embedded in. These students should of course be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills for them to be able to credibly take part in discussions of Dutch literature – and obviously, this will require an effort greater than the one needed to bring native students 'up to speed'.

As Gera and Sneller indicate, the thing to do, then, is to offer this specific audience a 'survey [...] of the literature'[1] in the various periods of its existence. This book's primary ambition being to offer a first introduction to Dutch literary history, one can readily understand that it 'does not aim for completeness'.[2] Still, one can ask if it really succeeds in attaining the objective it sets out to achieve. After all, it counts a mere 168 pages, a considerable portion of which are devoted to bringing various theoretical approaches into practice – and therefore *not* to the announced survey. I believe, therefore, that this *Inleiding literatuurgeschiedenis voor de internationale neerlandistiek* could have done a better job at familiarizing non-native students with the canon of Dutch literature.

Let us take as an example the way the book treats the 1660-1790 period, to which the third chapter is devoted. In this chapter, Gera and Sneller focus on travel stories and libertine novels, spectatorial literature, the satirist Jacob Campo Weyerman, the epistolary novel (*Sara Burgerhart*), Van Alphen's poetry for children, and classicist tragedy (Huydecoper) versus Langendijk's comedies. No mention is made of the paradigmatic struggle between ('classicist') societies and ('romantic') geniuses and of the part played in this conflict by poets such as Bellamy, Bilderdijk and Van

Alphen,[3] nor of the equally paradigmatic rise of Sentimentalism or early Romanticism (Rhijnvis Feith). Literature in Dutch outside the Republic is ignored entirely. It could, I believe, have been most instructive to discuss the temporary persistence of Dutch literature in the north of France (Michiel de Swaen), as it offers a fine example of the fact that the frontiers of a literature are not transhistorical or beyond discussion. A brief sketch of the situation in the Spanish/Austrian Netherlands would have been useful to show how literature in Dutch survived here in the chambers of rhetoric and in a Catholic context – circuits which would go on to contribute to the reconstruction of Dutch literature in the decades following Belgian independence in 1830. And a discussion of the well-known 1788 treatise by Brussels lawyer J.B.C. Verlooy would have illustrated how international Enlightenment views regarding national identity anticipated the overwhelming importance of language in nineteenth-century Flemish nationalist discourse. The case of Verlooy also offers an interesting illustration of how literary history is written – in this case: how Flemish nationalist literary historiography would go on to frame this author as a herald of the 'Flemish renascence' at the end of the 'dark' eighteenth century.

Not only is the way the canon of the period under discussion is laid out here somewhat erratic and summary, Gera and Sneller also present their readership with a mix of various stages of the canon of Dutch literature. This is made especially clear by the fact that they open their discussion of the 1660-1790 period by bestowing ample attention upon travel stories and libertine novels. Their doing so is clearly influenced by recent rewritings of the literary canon of the period. It is true that these texts were popular in their own time, but they enjoyed little respectability and were therefore initially excluded from the canon, as preference was given to 'serious' and edifying literature. This should have been mentioned,4 as an introduction to the canon of a literature should include important rewritings of this canon under the impulse of (in the broadest sense) ideological debates in literature and in literary historiography.

Another problem with Gera and Sneller's choices is that they are made at the expense of a properly historical approach of literature. This comes, I believe, as a corollary of their decision to use this volume as an introduction not only to the history of Dutch literature, but to various theoretical approaches for reading and analysing literary texts as well. In making this choice, Gera and Sneller remain, it would seem, tributary to the 'synchronic', text-centred approaches that dominated the greater part of literary studies in the twentieth century at the expense of literary historiography ('diachrony') proper. This is at least suggested by their introductory remark that, '[i]n the discussion of literature, [...] we believe the text has to be the main focus of attention'.[5]

Which, then, would be specifically historical questions the present volume could have familiarized its readership with? This is of course not the place to go into a lengthy theoretical discussion of the problems involving literary historiography. I

will therefore restrict myself to advancing a few suggestions as to which questions could be addressed in presenting a historical introduction.

One salient feature of history in general and of literary history in particular is its *contingency*. The history of a given period is always and genuinely open: it is the product of a struggle of which the outcome is not predetermined, but the result of a battle between historical agents and the discourses they identify with. This does not amount to saying that historical processes take place randomly and accidentally (although chance is definitely a historical factor): in general, they can be linked to real, 'traumatic' events taking place and, more specifically, to the competing ways in which these events are discursively framed. Historical struggle, then, is a 'political' struggle between competing symbolic formations interpellating – offering themselves as surfaces of inscription to – historical subjects. This would be a way to account for the precise nature of the relationship between literature and its context and, in doing so, to address the problem of 'causality' in literary history: literature does react to historical events and their discursive constructions, but not along the lines of simple cause-and-effect relations. Its causes are to be understood retroactively, after the historical process has taken place. Put differently: we can explain why, for instance, naturalism in the Netherlands manifested itself as it did, but it would be an illusion to believe that the factors identified in the process *necessarily* led up to the outcome that prevailed in historical reality.

If literary history really is the result of a competition between agents and discourses, which then are the factors that can help explain historical success? Discourses are most likely to become influential if they are apt to *forge a collective will*, which implies – more often than not – the identification of a common enemy, who is supposed to hinder the full unfolding of 'our' identities.[6] The success of a discourse can also be furthered by the fact that other, competing, discourses are *dislocated* (robbed of their legitimacy and credibility) by historical events they are unable to integrate and account for. And another factor conducive to success is *repetition*: the more vigorously views are brought into circulation, the more likely they are to become accepted – to the extent even that they can become sedimented, in other words, transmitted over a period of time exceeding the success of the discourse of which they were originally a part.

The success and even hegemony of a discourse does not preclude historical change. This is, among others, due to what Derrida calls *iterability*: in being reproduced, discourses are always also displaced and therefore (sometimes drastically) modified. The unpredictable effects of the 'sliding of the signifier' usually come on top of those caused by *individual agency*: discourses often get a particular slant as they are wielded by individuals. These particularisms can become influential if the subjects in question acquire key positions in social – in our case: literary – institutions. This being so is sometimes a matter of pure chance (one can, as a matter of fact, happen to be 'the right person in the right place'), but it is more often than not furthered by various factors, such as the membership of powerful social networks

or the disposal of technical and/or rhetorical skills.

The reason why I discuss these historical mechanisms at such length in what is, after all, no more than a book review, is that they are crucial for an adequate description of literary movements, the succession of which is used as the backbone of this book. Gera and Sneller describe these movements as international phenomena defined by a limited set of characteristics, which usually, in one way or another, emanate from a wider historical context. Romanticism, for instance, has 'in the whole of Europe common features',[7] and 'possibly finds its origin in the disappointment over the European powers' restoration politics'.[8] Dutch romanticism, then, would merely be a local variant of the international phenomenon.

This can, unfortunately, hardly be accepted as an adequate representation of historical reality. To begin with, it would have been useful to point out that romantic discourse was articulated in competition with other discourses, among others those of Enlightenment and of Classicism, and constituted one of various possible reactions to historic events as well as discursive constructions these events give rise to – a reaction that, in retrospect, proves to have conquered the hearts and minds of many cultural and literary actors in Europe. In other words, Romanticism and other literary movements are by no means clear-cut phenomena with a solid, stable essence that are mysteriously and irresistibly triggered by what happens in the 'wider historical context'. They are discursive constructions and, as such, partially stable, but always also undergoing processes of displacement and change (cf. early, high and late romanticism). They are, moreover, always 'localized'.

Dutch Romanticism offers an excellent example of this, as it differs considerably from Romanticism in the larger European literatures. This most certainly constituted an important source of inspiration, but its input underwent important changes in the process of its appropriation by the Dutch literary system. As a matter of fact, some characteristics of international romanticism met with such strong resistance that they became virtually suppressed, narrowing Dutch Romanticism down to a nationalist bourgeois Romanticism. In describing this process, one should do justice to influential interventions by individual agents such as Potgieter and Jacob Geel.

Dutch Romanticism is, for that matter, also very different from its Flemish counterpart. In the 1830s, the earliest Flemish Romantics (Willems and his 'language lovers') were, in the context of a budding Belgian state in which French was, in all respects, the dominant language, mainly preoccupied with the legitimation and codification of Dutch language and literature – which was of course not necessary at all in the Netherlands. Another important difference was the rise, in the wake of Gezelle's literary activity, of a conservative Catholic ('neogothic') strain of Romanticism, which also existed in the Netherlands, but never acquired the same influence there.

As one can infer from the above, this *Inleiding literatuurgeschiedenis voor de internationale neerlandistiek* seems strikingly reluctant to account for power struggles and

competition as driving forces of literary evolution. This may be connected with the authors' theoretical and ideological position, which can be seen transpiring in their remarkable discussion of two romantic historical novels, *The House of Lauernesse* by Dutch female writer A.L.G. Bosboom-Toussaint and *The Lion of Flanders* by the Fleming Hendrik Conscience. Their judgement of the latter novel is, all in all, negative: they hold the *The Lion of Flanders* to be too partial and one-sided (pro-Flemish, anti-French), whereas *The House of Lauernesse* allows, in their view, 'a plurality of living and thinking strategies'[9] to be expressed, and thus pleads the case of 'tolerance for dissidents'.[10] It is not without frustration, then, that they have to admit that Conscience's novel was by far the more politically effective one: 'it has become a real myth in Flanders, a canonized monument of national romanticism, which is being appealed to even today'.[11] In light of the above, the divergent reception of these novels is not so hard to explain. As we said, a discourse is especially apt to function as a surface of inscription when it attempts to forge a collective will by identifying an oppressive force, against which all 'popular' groups must unite. In the case of Conscience's novel, the representatives of this generalized evil are of course the French-speaking foreigners, who are supposedly trying to rob the Flemings of their national 'Thing'.

This being as it may, it is obvious that Gera and Sneller's sympathies lie with a position advocating, as they believe Bosboom-Toussaint does, the peaceful co-existence of divergent views of reality. This may explain why the more belligerent moments of Dutch literature (the coup by the 1880 generation, the polemic between 'vorm' (form) and 'vent' (authorial personality) in the 1930s, the publication of the 'NRP' manifest in post-war Flemish poetry) are generally passed over in silence. Could it be that this 'pluralist' position also underlies the general concept of this book, which – as we pointed out earlier – also aims to familiarize the reader with a small range of theoretical approaches? These approaches are, to be precise: the study of literature as an integral part of the process of representation of reality, the study of literature as a form of mimesis, a rhetorical-pragmatic approach, the criticism of ideology, narratology, the role of visuality in literature and postcolonialism.[12] They are presented here side by side, and a consistent effort is made to show the revelatory force of each approach.

In fact, what Gera and Sneller present their readers with is, roughly speaking, an image of the present consensus in the study of Dutch literature. In other words, an inventory of recent approaches that have acquired legitimacy as ways of eliciting meaning from literary texts. This 'canon' of theoretical approaches is, of course, itself an image of a historical state of affairs in the study of Dutch literature – and each of these approaches would therefore have deserved a more lengthy theorization of its respective place in the development of literary and cultural theory in general and in the Dutch/Flemish context in particular. Gera and Sneller's apparent predilection for theoretical 'multiculturalism' may, for that matter, also explain why approaches centring on 'political' struggle and (more often than not) ruthless

competition between historical subjects, social networks and surfaces of inscription – such as marxism and its recent postmarxist derivatives, literary sociology, discourse theory and recent psychoanalytic cultural analysis – are remarkably absent.

In conclusion, Gera and Sneller's *Inleiding literatuurgeschiedenis voor de internationale neerlandistiek* has to be applauded as a courageous and much-needed attempt to fill a gap in the textbooks available to non-native students of Dutch literature.[13] However, for the authors to fully succeed in the mission they had set out for themselves, they should have painted a more complete image of the canon of Dutch literature and its various rewritings. In addition, it would have been commendable to use the limited space available for expounding the problems specific to literary history and not for briefly demonstrating the scope and usefulness of various theoretical approaches for interpreting literary texts. Useful and necessary as this may be, it is better reserved for classes dealing with literary and cultural theory and/or literary analysis.

Notes

1 Judit Gera and A. Agnes Sneller *Inleiding literatuurgeschiedenis voor de internationale neerlandistiek* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2010), p.10.

2 Gera and Sneller, *Inleiding*, p. 10.

3 Bilderdijk, whose work constitutes an important link between Classicism and Romanticism and whose views fiercely resist Enlightenment hegemony, is not discussed at all. Van Alphen is – as we mentioned – merely touched upon for his children's poetry and the enlightened pedagogical ideas supporting it.

4 This not being done is all the more surprising as Gera and Sneller themselves point out that 'the valuation of certain works at the time of their creation does not necessarily correspond with what later literary historians focus on', Gera and Sneller, *Inleiding*, p. 10.

5 Gera and Sneller, *Inleiding*, p. 10.

6 A good example of this is given where Gera and Sneller correctly point out that medieval Christian identity established itself through its antagonism with Islam and Judaism, Gera and Sneller, *Inleiding*, p. 13.

7 Gera and Sneller, *Inleiding*, p. 89.

8 Ibidem.

9 Ibid., p. 102.

10 Ibid., p. 102.

11 Ibid., p. 103.

12 Other approaches are discussed in passing, with especially the inspiration by gender studies constituting a leitmotiv in the book.

13 This is not to say that what is offered is non-existent. One can refer, in this context, to

Niederländische Literaturgeschichte, ed. by R. Grüttemeier and M. Leuker (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2006); and to *A Literary History of the Low Countries*, ed. by Th. Hermans (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009). It is, however, the first book in its kind to be published in Dutch.

(International?) Literary History and Women's Writing

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Keywords: Dutch literature, Flemish literature, women's writing in Dutch, international Dutch studies, Dutch literary history, Flemish literary history

The task of constructing a tradition of women's writing where none had been visible before is vitally important for creating a full picture of any literature. Decades of feminist literary criticism have shown us that conventional literary history is not the right place to do this. Even now, when the field has opened up to writing from what used to be the margins, or perhaps because it has, there is still not enough room to do justice to the wealth of women's literary production. So what should the picture of women's writing through the ages look like? Not an authoritative narrative, since that would employ the very means through which women and others have been excluded in the past: selection by those whose power is to canonise and to speak about, or possibly for, those included. While I have no objection to some kind of chronology, this does not need to take the form of a linear narrative. I favour the use of juxtaposition whereby a complex picture can emerge that is as much in the reader's mind as emanating from the historian's pen. Of course selection is necessary, but the best guide for that is the history's intended audience rather than the voice of authority. With the new web tools for collaborative working, I would even suggest that it is no longer possible to exclude the audience on grounds of impracticability.

These reflections stem from my work on Making the Personal Political. Dutch Women Writers 1919-1970, though I confess that at the time I did not consider involving the potential readership in the choice of writers to be discussed.1 There are a number of reasons for bringing in the audience as a structuring element. In the context of Dutch Studies as an international field, many colleagues who teach Dutch beyond the Netherlands and Flanders object to the methodological nationalism which forms the implicit basis of many of the literary histories published within the Low Countries and even outside this territory.2 The new multi-volume Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Letterkunde, funded by the Nederlandse Taalunie, has a clear political cultural function: to represent the literature of the Dutch language area. While this is a perfectly legitimate undertaking, the main criticism, as, for instance, recently expressed by Arie Pos3, is that those teaching and learning Dutch literature outside the main language area who favour an intercultural ap-

proach relate to different writers than scholars steeped in the national canon. In the discussion which follows I will bear in mind these two dimensions: how best to represent the body of writing produced by women writing in Dutch; and how to do this for an international audience.

Amsterdam University Press has published two volumes in English of Women's Writing from the Low Countries. The first, edited by Lia van Gemert, Hermina Joldersma, Olga van Marion, Dieuwke van der Poel and Riet Schenkeveld-Van der Dussen, with contributions from others, covers the period 1200-1875, while the second volume, edited by Jacqueline Bel and Thomas Vaessens, spans the years 1880-2010. Given the timespan, and the shifting political boundaries that go with it, the regional designation of 'the Low Countries' is appropriate, and it has the added advantage of being a way of referring to the area where Dutch is spoken that does not set up confusing terminological cross-currents in English. These two volumes have been beautifully produced and timed to appear together with the result that they do make a symbolic statement. The covers alone convey the idea that there is a serious body of work in Dutch by women writers spanning the entire history of Dutch literature; a welcome undertaking and as far as I know the first on such a comprehensive scale. Despite their titles which are the same except for the dates, and designation as anthologies, the two volumes are actually rather different in the way they go about representing Dutch women writers to the outside world.

The most obvious difference is that Women's Writing from the Low Countries 1200-1875 is a bilingual anthology whereas its sequel does not present separate samples of the writing in either language. The informative and substantial introduction to the first volume places the writing in its social and cultural context; the anthology which follows presents over fifty women and their work. Most of them are allotted around ten pages. A short introductory piece incorporates biographical information and characterises the work before examples of the writing itself are given, Dutch text on the left, English text on the right, printed in parallel. The collection opens with Beatrice and Hadewijch, two medieval mystics whose writings are known and studied in the English-speaking world: they were first presented in English translation in the pioneering Bibliotheca Neerlandica4 and later in the anthology Women Writing in Dutch5 in 1994. That anthology was edited by Kristiaan Aercke who has contributed the section on the sixteenth-century catholic poet Anna Bijns to this one.

Since the point of an anthology is that it enables the user to dip into it, I propose to do just that, homing in on one woman I know nothing about. This takes me to Berta Jacobs, or Sister Bertken, who lived in self-chosen confinement as an anchoress in Utrecht in the fifteenth century. Her devotional account of the birth of Jesus conveys spiritual delights, but it also celebrates the female body and succeeds in uniting the two: '[...] the divine radiance shone so powerfully in her heart that she grew warm and translucent, she immediately stood up and removed all her clothing from head to toe, leaving only the garment closest to her body.' Bodily

functions are present, but transformed into something beautiful. 'This moisture was not pressed out of her precious body by the violence of immense strain, but flowed from it sweetly out of exceeding jubilance.' (pp. 101 & 103) Nor does the text shy away from breastfeeding: when the child cries, 'the pure virgin and mother immediately, with great love, gave her beloved son her virgin breast.' (p. 105) One of the great strengths of an anthology like this is the unexpected glimpse of a singular woman's mind and life, a voice heard across centuries that is both alien and familiar.

The anthology includes translations of female 'wisdom' and women's writing by male translators. These are important for our appreciation of women's contribution to knowledge and understanding in the Low Countries across cultural boundaries. Interesting and not altogether surprising are the obvious tensions between female originators and male reproducers of texts, so much so that the translator of the Flemish version of Christine de Pisan's City of Ladies adds a chapter of his own which mimics and seeks to undermine the main text.

The second section of the introduction by Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen which deals with the period 1575-1875 explains how exceptional women gradually pushed back the boundaries of the literary field by taking on male roles as translators, publishers, or commentators. Before this, however, work like the poetry of the sisters Anna Roemers Visscher (1583-1651) and Maria Tesselschade (1594-1649) was not published until some time after their deaths, despite their accomplishments being accorded recognition during their lifetime. As Schenkeveld-van der Dussen points out, this prevented them from serving as role models for other women.

The excerpts from the writings of all these extraordinary women illustrate their literary talent and spirited view of men. Juliana Cornelia de Lamay's poem 'The Perfect Man' [De volmaakte man] is urbane, witty and self-confident. Writing as a woman about women's ways in 'To My Intellect' [Aan myn geest], De Lamay both represents the development of women's culture since the religious women of the middle ages and shows how far there is still to go in the process of women carving out a place for themselves in the society and culture of the Low Countries.

Everything in this impressive and substantial volume leads towards the bilingual samples of writing, most of them originating from what is now the Netherlands and Flanders, some of them religious, some secular, revealing a witty, acerbic or polemical spirit. They practise many genres and styles of writing; some of these are literary, some scientific or medical, others devotional or epistolary. And the range of the topics covered in the writing is wonderful: agriculture, cowpox inoculation, girls' education, love between women, ecstasy, Queen Elizabeth I, girls behaving badly and more. All this richness is made available together with enough background information about the author for readers to get a handle on the work. In my experience of teaching Dutch at Bachelor's level in London, students will use the Dutch and English versions in a variety of ways, moving happily between the two.

By their fourth year, particularly if they are also studying translation as an intercultural process, they will also take a critical interest in the rendering of a Dutch literary text in English. In this way the anthology tradition as we know it in English is upheld: it provides a first engagement with a particular writer's work, possibly starting with the English version, but soon moving back and forth. And success is when students are motivated to want to read more in Dutch.

I wonder whether Women Writing's from the Low Countries 1880-2010 is aiming at a wider audience, and if so, who this audience might be. There are two significant differences from the first volume: the entire text is in English, and although it calls itself an anthology, it does not correspond to expectations, by which I mean that it does not present free-standing examples of the writing. However, there is sampling incorporated in the excellent portraits of women writers. The editors explain their approach in the introduction, pointing out that they have deliberately not privileged any particular literary movement or genre. 'On the contrary, our aim was to show the wide variety of roles played by female authors in the last hundred and fifty years, in literature and as public intellectuals, in social debate.' (p. 13) I feel strongly that this is the most appropriate way to present women's writing and there is no doubt that the volume succeeds in its aim. But before going on to give a flavour of one or two of the portraits, it is worth noting that the first paragraph of the introduction betrays a perspective located within the Low Countries. Comments like 'Besides well-known names such as Carry van Bruggen [...] there are authors who are less familiar (today)' do exclude the vast majority of readers outside the Low Countries, even those with some knowledge of Dutch culture. This perspective is also found in the portraits, such as that of Anne Frank by Bel, which does lead me to conclude that the primary audience for the volume may even be a Dutch-speaking one, because the dedicated bibliography consists only of works in Dutch. For example, when Bel refers in the portrait to the Kitty figure (the addressee of the entries in Anne's revised version), there is a good article in English on the subject by Berteke Waaldijk which could be included.6 And why, when there is an English version of the complete, comparative edition of the diaries, does the bibliography give the Dutch version? Clearly there is something of a mismatch between my expectations and those of the editors, probably due to intercultural factors of which we are still largely unaware.

It is not possible to discuss in detail the fifty portraits in this book, so in the end I picked just one for purely personal reasons: that of the feminist writer Anja Meulenbelt. I read The Shame is Over/De schaamte voorbij around the time it appeared, and remember the shock of the personal, having been brought up in a very male English literary tradition where writing frankly about the self was considered to be in poor taste. Standing up for Anja Meulenbelt in discussion with male teachers and colleagues became something of a consciousness-raiser. Or, as Maaike Meijer puts it: 'Politically the book represented an important step towards the visibility and legitimization of feminism as a social movement.' (p. 175) As the Dutch

version was not published until 1976, this statement must refer to the Netherlands, since Germaine Greer had fulfilled a similar role in the UK in the early seventies and Betty Friedan in the US in the sixties. Meijer quite rightly compares The Shame is Over with other 'fictional autobiographies' from the US, Germany, France, England and Turkey, such as Erica Jong's Fear of Flying or the work of Doris Lessing and explicitly situates it as part of an international surge of women's writing. Using substantial quotations, Meijer gives a vivid impression of Meulenbelt's seminal text.

Despite the misgivings about the intended audience of the second volume, these two books will certainly find a place in the University College Library alongside Met en zonder lauwerkrans (With and without laurels) of which the first volume considers itself to be an updated English-language version, and the second a 'concise sequel', and other short portraits of women, such as those in Prinssen and Vermij's Schrijfsters in de jaren vijftig which has a similar format to the second volume with photographic portraits as well as a sketch of the writers' life and work. First- and second-year students just setting out on their study of Dutch literature may well use Women's Writing from the Low Countries to identify writers for more in-depth study in individual project work. The fact that the two books are in English clearly increases accessibility to the literature in Dutch for this group, engagement with Dutch texts being the main aim for international students of the Dutch language and culture. It must be said that the books themselves are beautifully produced and all the portraits are written in a lively engaging style, covering in few words the plurality and the particularity of each woman's writing. They also demonstrate a willingness on the part of literary scholars in the Low Countries to break out beyond the dikes and borders and claim a rightful place on the international stage. Women's Writing from the Low Countries is definitely a step in the right direction.

Notes

1 Jane Fenoulhet, Oxford: Legenda, 2007.

2 See Jeroen Dewulf, 'Over vogels zonder nesten. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur en de internationale neerlandistiek', *Internationale Neerlandistiek* 48/3, oktober 2010, pp. 76-80. For a more general critique of methodological nationalism, see Rosi Braidotti, 'Nomadism: against methodological nationalism' in *Journal of Policy Futures in Education* 8/3 & 4, 2010, pp. 408-418.

3 Arie Pos, 'Intercultureel vertalen. Een multiculturele kijk op de Nederlandse literatuur' in Jane Fenoulhet & Jan Renkema (eds.), *Internationale neerlandistiek: een vak in beweging*, Lage Landen Studies 1, Gent: Academia Press, 2010, pp. 123-146.

4 It described itself as 'A Library of Classics of Dutch and Flemish Literature', published jointly in Leiden, London and New York by Sythoff, Heinemann and London House respectively during the 1960s.

5 KristiaanAercke et al, *Women Writing in Dutch* (New York/London: Garland, 1994).

6 Berteke Waaldijk, 'Reading Anne Frank as a Woman' in *Women's Studies International Forum*, 16/4, 1993, pp. 327-35.

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Colophon

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