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IN SEARCH OF A CRITICAL FORM: POSTMODERN FICTION IN FLANDERS

In June 1994 the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* devoted a special issue to 'New Flemish Fiction'. It presented translations of thirteen novelists, ranging from the well-established Hugo Claus to the upcoming young talent Koen Peeters. The introduction by Hugo Bousset set out to unite this heterogeneous group by aligning each and all of its members with postmodernism. In the process he suggested that in Flemish fiction postmodernism had become the accepted norm and mainstream, whereas in the Netherlands postmodern writers were regarded as 'un-Dutch'.¹ Bousset begins his introduction with a question: 'Does recent Flemish literary prose tend to be "postmodern" and its Dutch counterpart more "classical"?'² Although he does not answer this with a resounding 'yes', he states: 'In Flanders even the critics consider the postmodern novel (as I defined it here) as part of the literary mainstream.'³

It is no coincidence that Bousset's attempt to define postmodernism as the mainstream of Flemish fiction dates from 1994. In the early 1990s postmodernism had become a buzzword in Flemish (and also Dutch) critical reviews, as I hope to show presently. In Bousset's view Flemish fiction is more experimental than its Dutch counterpart—a myth about Flemish literature that is resuscitated with every literary innovation in Flanders and the Netherlands. This critical position assumes three waves of innovation in post-war Dutch and Flemish fiction: the modernist phase of the 1950s and 1960s, the neo-avant-garde phase of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and finally the postmodern phase of the 1980s.⁴ Yet the contrast posited both by Dutch⁵ and by Flemish⁶ critics does not reflect reality in any of these three innovative phases.

The modernist phase is epitomized in the Netherlands by the 'Big Three', Gerard Reve, Harry Mulisch, and Willem Frederik Hermans. In Flanders it is represented by Louis Paul Boon and Hugo Claus. Together, these five writers

¹ Hugo Bousset, 'The Far North and the Deep South: Contemporary Fiction in the Netherlands and Flanders', *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 14.2 (Summer 1994), 8–23 (pp. 12–15).

² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 15. His definition of postmodernism implies: fictionalization of reality, tension between language and the real, giving up the authorial voice and intention, underscoring fragmentation, preferring hybrid forms, and relying heavily on the reader's creativity.

⁴ A short anthology of some of the authors representing these phases can be found in Jaap Goedegebuure and Anne Marie Musschoot, *Contemporary Fiction of the Low Countries* (Rekkem: Stichting Ons Erfdeel, 1991).

⁵ See e.g. J. J. Wesselo, *Vlaamse wegen: het vernieuwende proza in Vlaanderen tussen 1960 & 1980* (Antwerp: Manteau, 1983), pp. 9–45.

⁶ See e.g. Hugo Bousset, *Grenzen verleggen: de Vlaamse prozaliteratuur 1970–1986*, 1: *Trends* (Antwerp: Houtekiet, 1988), pp. 9–10; *id.*, *De gulden snede: over Nederlands proza na 1980* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1993), pp. 11–36.

form the canon of post-war literature in the Dutch language. Traditional historiography, as represented in the recent *Literary History of the Low Countries*, has it that there is 'an interesting difference between the Netherlands and Flanders'. This is explained as follows:

In the Netherlands the postwar novel was initially dominated by the grim prose of disillusionment, as seen in the work of Anna Blaman, Gerard Reve, and Willem Frederik Hermans, a type of fiction that stuck firmly to the realist tradition so typical of Holland. In Flanders these postwar years already witnessed the first explosion of formally innovative work with Louis Paul Boon, whose subject matter and nihilistic worldview were similar to those of Hermans, but who employed filmic collage techniques and a kaleidoscopic structure. By the time the first wave of formal innovation reached the Netherlands in the 1960s, experimental fiction was well established in Flanders, as Hugo Claus and Ivo Michiels demonstrated.⁷

While it is true that the Dutch 'Big Three' published some classically modernist novels, Hermans also wrote surrealistic novels that are far more experimental than virtually anything written by Boon and Claus: for example, *De God Denkbaar Denkbaar de God* [*The God Thinkable Thinkable the God*], published as early as 1956. The same goes for Mulisch, whose debut novel *archibald strohalm* (1952) is a far-reaching experiment in the representation of consciousness. Only Reve never wrote experimental fiction.

In the second phase of post-war innovation, fuelled this time by the historical avant-garde and the contemporary experiments of the *nouveau roman*, there is similarly no binary contrast. The Flemish novelist Ivo Michiels, mentioned in the quotation above, is often represented as the first Flemish experimental writer. *Het boek alfa*, translated as *Book Alpha*,⁸ dates from 1963 and is invariably called his first fully fledged experimental narrative work, but it comes more than a decade after the first Dutch experimental novel and indeed alludes to its title: *Het boek ik* [*The Book I*] by Bert Schierbeek had already appeared in 1951. These early experiments introduced a flood of formally innovative novels both in the Netherlands—where they were usually grouped under the heading of 'Other Prose'—and in Flanders. For every Flemish experimental novelist in the 1960s, for example Daniël Robberechts and Willy Roggeman, there was at least one such novelist from the Netherlands, for example Sybren Polet (who coined the term 'Other Prose') and J. F. Vogelaar.

The third phase is even more problematic with respect to the status of Flemish novelists as early exponents of experimental fiction, since the Flemish postmodern novel actually lagged behind the Dutch. In the mid-1970s the first postmodern novels by Willem Brakman and Louis Ferron appeared in

⁷ Anne Marie Musschoot, 'The Revolution of the Sixties, 1960–1970', in *A Literary History of the Low Countries*, ed. by Theo Hermans (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009), pp. 603–23 (p. 612).

⁸ The translation by Adrienne Dixon appeared in 1979 (Boston: Twayne) and combined *Book Alpha* with *Orchis Militaris*, the second volume of the five-part *Alpha Cycle*.

the Netherlands. They exhibited all the characteristics of postmodernism: parody and rewriting (e.g. of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in Brakman's *Het zwart uit de mond van Madame Bovary* [*The Black from Madame Bovary's Mouth*] (1974)), counterfactual history, e.g. in Ferron's *Turkenvespers* [*Turkish Vespers*] (1977), self-conscious and explicit discussion of fictional strategies, depiction of reality as just another story. Contrary to the Other Prose novelists, they reinstated the story—which had there been replaced by collage techniques and documentary forms—to such an extent that everything, including identity and reality, became a story.

Brakman and Ferron did not call themselves postmodern, nor were they regarded as such by the critics, who were probably in any case unfamiliar with the term at that time. In general, they were seen as highly un-Dutch (Bousset is right in this respect), but as worthwhile authors. The critics placed Gerrit Krol in the vicinity of these two early postmodern novelists: he brought his knowledge of natural sciences to the art of narration, and unlike Brakman and Ferron, designated himself a postmodern novelist—albeit only later and somewhat ironically in a lecture given in 1984.⁹ In 1975 Willem Jan Otten judged the work of Krol and Brakman to be of exceptional quality and added that these writers could not be placed in an existing tradition.¹⁰ The postmodern novel was thus signalled as a budding phenomenon in all but name in the Netherlands; in Flanders meanwhile it was not in evidence between 1975 and 1985.¹¹ It is surprising, then, that traditional literary historiography insists on the early link between 'international postmodernism' and 'Flanders, where formal innovation in prose had announced itself much earlier [than in the Netherlands], in the 1950s, with the early work of Louis Paul Boon'.¹² A glance at the evolution of Flemish postmodern fiction confirms the inappropriateness of this assumed distinction.

A Very Short History of Dutch and Flemish Postmodern Fiction

One way to look at the history of Flemish postmodern fiction is to use the eyes of the critics. Unfortunately, they seemed to turn a blind eye to the phenomenon for a very long time, and the term 'postmodern' was not in fact used by critics or writers until the early 1980s. From 1981 onwards, one

⁹ Gerrit Krol, 'De abstracte roman: een beschouwing over postmoderne literatuur', in *De schriftelijke natuur* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1985), pp. 92–109.

¹⁰ Willem Jan Otten, 'Letterkunde: Nederland', in *Het jaar in woord en beeld: Winkler Prins Jaarboek 1975* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1975), pp. 180–81.

¹¹ Bart Vervaeck, 'De kleine Postmodernsky: ontwikkelingen in de (verhalen over de) postmoderne roman', in *Achter de verhalen: over de Nederlandse literatuur van de twintigste eeuw*, ed. by Elke Brems and others (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), pp. 133–65 (pp. 153–54).

¹² Musschoot, 'The Imagination Seizes Power, 1970–1980', in *A Literary History of the Low Countries*, ed. by Hermans, pp. 623–44 (p. 632).

can report some very occasional sightings of the term, used mostly by Dutch critics and usually in the negative sense of a fashionable feeling of malaise and arbitrariness.¹³ In the second part of that decade the term became more popular and the critical divide between Flanders and the Netherlands more obvious. Whereas the Dutch critical use tended to focus on playful postmodernism linked to the 'anything goes' mentality, Flemish reviewers and essayists homed in on the more serious variety of postmodernism and its link with cultural critique. While there were some exceptions, this usually coincided with a more positive attitude on the part of Flemish critics.

From an international viewpoint, the Flemish and Dutch reception of postmodernism must seem a late entry, both in terms of literary works and in terms of the critical response. As is evident from Hans Bertens's historical overview *The Idea of the Postmodern*,¹⁴ the term had been associated internationally with counterculture (including pop art and various kinds of accessible, even lowbrow forms of culture). In the early 1970s it was linked with existentialism, and in the late 1970s with deconstructionism, subsequently evolving into postmodernity as a self-critical form of modernism (by analogy with poststructuralism being regarded as a self-reflective critique of structuralism). The first Dutch postmodern novels, written by Brakman, Ferron, and Krol, can certainly be aligned with Bertens's postmodernity, that is with a 'radicalized' and self-reflective form of modernism 'that has come to question modernity at large' as it realizes that there is no ground on which the modernist critique can be built.¹⁵ Indeed, the essays of the three authors clearly exhibit Bertens's radicalization of serious modernism. For instance, Brakman regarded himself as heir to the modernism of Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, and Thomas Mann. Ferron aligned himself with the modernist tradition of 'evil' in the works of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Ernst Jünger, and Klaus Mann, and Krol comments that he came to write postmodern narratives by simply pushing the modern, rational order to its limits:

Toen ik acausaal, irrationeel etc. ben gaan schrijven, via de filosofie daartoe gebracht, kon ik dat doen omdat ik door een rationeel ingerichte, causaal gestuurde filosofie uitkwam bij wat de eindelijke *consequentie* van deze filosofie bleek te zijn: dat er geen algemene waarheid te vinden is, tenminste niet op papier en dat je dus kunt schrijven wat je wilt.¹⁶

¹³ The Literom database, which covers a vast selection of literary reviews in newspapers (<http://www.knipselkranten.nl/literom>), has entries for 'postmodern' from 1981 onwards. Until 1985 the term invariably has negative connotations, usually denoting a superficial lifestyle and insubstantiality. Significantly, these reviews deal with Dutch fiction, not with Flemish.

¹⁴ Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 247. Perhaps the link between postmodernity and the three early postmodernist novelists explains why they were not perceived as postmodern. At the time (the late 1970s), the term 'postmodern', if used at all, was associated with 'anything goes', an association that would be wholly inappropriate for the works of these three early exponents.

¹⁶ Krol, 'De abstracte roman', p. 102. For Brakman's and Krol's alliances see Bart Vervaeck,

When I began to write acausally, irrationally, etc., under the influence of philosophy, I was able to do so because a rationally and causally structured philosophy led me to its ultimate *consequence*: that there is no general truth, at least not on paper, and that you can therefore write what you like.

So far I have not mentioned a single Flemish postmodern novelist writing in the 1960s, 1970s, or early 1980s. This is because there is no Flemish novelist whose work at that time is characterized by features commonly associated with postmodernism. The link was only established once the term had caught on around 1990. Numerous revisionist articles then appeared which reinterpreted the canonized modernist and neo-avant-garde figures as precursors of the postmodern novelist. Thus Ivo Michiels's *Book Alpha* was now considered an early postmodern novel, and the same holds true for Louis Paul Boon's *De Kapellekensbaan* (1953, translated in 1972 in its incomplete version as *Chapel Road*) and Hugo Claus's *De verwondering* (1962, translated in 2009 as *Wonder*).¹⁷ In this way, Flemish postmodernism invented its own canonized ancestors, disregarding certain crucial differences between these works and the flood of postmodern novels that appeared around 1990. To mention just a few of these differences: Claus, Boon, and Michiels depict a search for a deeper truth, a way out and a new beginning, whereas these have been left behind in postmodernism; intertextuality still offers valuable clues to a (fairly) coherent interpretation, whereas postmodern intertextual play may send readers along the wrong path; fragmentation, dissociation, and the ungraspability of final meanings are represented as unfortunate conditions that should be challenged, and not—as they tend to be in the postmodern novel—as preconditions of all forms of living and meaning.

As suggested, the postmodern narrative mode became fashionable around 1990. Even then, however, the trend was more marked in the Netherlands than in Flanders. A considerable number of young Dutch novelists started writing in the postmodern vein, including Huub Beurskens, Charlotte Mutsaers, and Gijs IJlander; some made their debut, notably Désanne van Brederode, M. Februari, Atte Jongstra, Kees 't Hart, P. F. Thomése, Dirk van Weelden. Many of these openly aligned themselves with poststructuralism. In her novel *Rachels rokje* [*Rachel's Skirt*] (1994), Mutsaers explicitly acknowledges Gilles Deleuze as one of her teachers. Kees 't Hart turns Louis Althusser into a central character in the novel *De neus van Pinokkio* [*Pinocchio's Nose*] (1990). Van Weelden and Februari wrote essayistic novels that elaborated themes and

'Die philosophische Familie des Postmodernisten: Das Album von Brakman und Krol', in *An der Schwelle: 'Eigen' und 'fremd' in der niederländischen Literatur*, ed. by Herbert Van Uffelen and others (Vienna: Praesens, 2010), pp. 103–44. Ferron discusses his literary influences in *De hemelvaart van Wammes Waggel* [*The Ascension of Wammes Waggel*] (Amsterdam: Bezige Bij, 1978).

¹⁷ Musschoot, 'The Revolution of the Sixties', pp. 614–18.

ideas popular in French poststructuralist thinking, and in 2000 Februari published a book that sets a historical novel on the odd pages alongside a Ph.D. dissertation on Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, and the like printed on the even pages (*Een pruik van paardenhaar* [A Wig of Horsehair] (2000)).

However, there were also Dutch novels in a less intellectually ambitious vein in the early 1990s. Around 1994, a more down-to-earth, popular, and approachable form of fiction appeared, orbiting around the Dutch journal *Zoetermeer* (the name of a town close to The Hague). Novelists such as Ronald Giphart and Joost Zwagerman epitomized this playful version of postmodernism that stressed the pointlessness of life, a futile escape into alcohol and sex, and the complete failure of all attempts to create meaningful relationships. The novels take their cue from the tradition of Jay McInerney, Bret Easton Ellis, and Douglas Coupland. Indeed, this group became famous as *Generatie Nix*, referring to Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991) and hinting at the void of life ('Nix' refers to Dutch 'niks', meaning 'nothing'). One might argue that this has very little to do with postmodernism as initiated by Brakman, Ferron, and Krol: reality is not fictionalized, intertextuality is rarely exploited, and metafiction plays only a minor part in these stories and novels. In spite of these differences, the term 'postmodernism' had become so fashionable that prominent Dutch critics such as Onno Blom and Jeroen Vullings used it for any form of fiction allegedly characterized by complete relativism.¹⁸ In an important study on Dutch modernism and postmodernism the literary historians Frans Ruiter and Wilbert Smulders distinguish between two Dutch varieties of postmodernism in the mid-1990s: 'literary pop art' and 'rewriting'. The former is accessible and playful, and includes authors such as Zwagerman and Giphart; the latter is more experimental and complex, and includes what used to be called 'Other Prose' in the 1970s.¹⁹

Compared with the Dutch postmodern novel, the Flemish harvest seems rather humble, and the more popular variety of postmodernism underdeveloped. The novelist Paul Mennes is sometimes linked with it, and the popular Herman Brusselmans is exceptionally labelled postmodern in that sense, but in general terms the more serious approach to postmodern fiction tended to prevail in Flemish production and reception alike. Flemish postmodern fiction gets underway only around 1990—more than ten years after it had become established in the Netherlands—and even then, the output is more modest, at least numerically, than in the Netherlands. From 1988 onwards,

¹⁸ See e.g. Onno Blom's review of Giphart's novel *Het feest der liefde* [The Party of Love] (1995): 'Wee wie geen ontzag voor Giphart toont', *Trouw*, 14 May 1995. Blom explicitly links postmodernism with Nix. See also Jeroen Vullings, who criticizes 'the postmodern conjuring tricks' of Zwagerman in 'De moord op Joost Zwagerman', *De Standaard*, 2 October 1997.

¹⁹ Frans Ruiter and Wilbert Smulders, *Literatuur en moderniteit in Nederland 1840-1990* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1996), pp. 310-30.

Koen Peeters published mildly postmodern novels ironically exhibiting the Belgian colonial and postcolonial heritage. Stefan Hertmans, whose poetry was originally placed in the tradition of German Expressionism (Gottfried Benn, Georg Trakl), published grotesque stories in the 1980s, situating himself in the traditions of Franz Kafka and Paul van Ostaijen and experimenting with postmodern techniques such as intertextual rewriting and explicit fictionalization of the depicted reality. Only in 1994 did he publish a book that might be termed postmodern, his first novel *Naar Merelbeke* [*To Merelbeke*] (the title refers to a small town in the vicinity of Ghent). By that time he had been joined by Peter Verhelst, whose novel *Het spierenalfabet* [*The Alphabet of Muscles*] appeared in 1995, and by Pol Hoste, who presented the public with the virtuosic polyphonic novel *High Key* in the same year. When Paul Verhaeghen published *Lichtenberg* in 1996, Flemish fiction could finally be said to have developed its own postmodern brand of fiction. All these novels share an ironic and implicit critique of society and language, as I show in the final part of this article.

In the Netherlands, meanwhile, the Dutch postmodern novel showed signs of relenting around the turn of the millennium. Although some novelists, such as Februari and Brakman, continued to write highly experimental novels, the general trend was towards less overt and less frequent disruptions of the narrative, and a more traditional form of psychology was reintroduced. Atte Jongstra, who had baffled readers and critics alike with capricious encyclopedic novels and anti-detectives in the early 1990s, started writing more approachable novels that contained characters with a recognizable psychology. In general, the Dutch postmodern novel became more 'usual' around 2000:²⁰ while on the one hand the techniques lost their radical edge, on the other there was greater understanding on the part of the reading public, and a fairly widespread cultural acceptance—even absorption—of postmodern perspectives.

Again, the Flemish context shows a different picture. There is no relenting here. In 1999 Peter Verhelst published *Tongkat* (translated as *Tonguecat* in 2003), a kaleidoscopic novel that transforms factual history and politics into mythology while experimenting extensively with postmodern techniques. In retrospect, this seems a foretaste of the encyclopedic postmodern historical novels that appeared around 2005: Paul Verhaeghen's *Omega minor* (2004—translated as *Omega Minor* in 2007), Peter Verhelst's *Zwerm* [*Swarm*] (2005), and Koen Peeters's *Grote Europese Roman* [*Great European Novel*] (2007). It seemed as if the Flemish novel had finally digested Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* and the all-encompassing tradition of the Great American Novel. It is safe to say that Pynchon was never absorbed in the Dutch variant of postmodern fiction.

²⁰ See Vervaeck, 'De kleine Postmodernsky', pp. 158–61.

In this recent assimilation of Pynchonian postmodernism, Flemish postmodern fiction foregrounded the cultural and social critique that had been implicitly present from the outset, explicitly throwing it in the reader's face, and combined it with an encyclopedic narrative. In this way, Flemish postmodern fiction cut all ties with postmodern disengagement, having already barely pursued the popular, playful type of postmodernism that had become established in the Netherlands from the late 1980s onwards.

If one were to include Flemish poetry, the overall story would be somewhat different since it reveals a more marked postmodern profile. This was established when the Flemish literary review *yang* published a special issue with 'seven manifestos' in 1990. In the introduction Hans Vandevoorde links the essays with postmodern interpretations of Walter Benjamin, thus squarely anchoring Flemish postmodernism in the tradition of social and cultural critique, as is evident from the contributions by Stefan Hertmans, Dirk van Bastelaere, and Erik Spinoy. Hertmans remains closest to the modernist interpretation of Benjamin initiated by Theodor Adorno. Only later would he draw on poststructuralist thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Žižek, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard to construct his theoretical and literary framework. Van Bastelaere explicitly links his poetics to the Yale critics (e.g. Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller), while Spinoy implies an allegiance to the poststructuralist stance of Jacques Derrida. In later essays, Van Bastelaere and Spinoy often point to postmodern sources such as Jean-François Lyotard and Slavoj Žižek, and indeed they are regularly classified as postmodern by the critics. They published their manifestos when the term was in the foreground, they were labelled as such in the introduction of the *yang* issue, and they continued to use poststructuralist references.²¹

The clear postmodern profile of Flemish poetry around 1990 was not matched by narrative fiction, not least because there was never a postmodern manifesto by Flemish novelists. From around 1995 Koen Peeters, Stefan Hertmans, Pol Hoste, Paul Verhaeghen, and Peter Verhelst were regularly associated with postmodernism by the critics, but they were not described as a unified movement or group and did not see themselves as such. 'Postmodern fiction in Flanders' is a construction by critics rather than a concept advanced by Flemish writers.

²¹ For a very short overview see Musschoot, 'The Revolution of the Sixties', p. 654. A more detailed account is given by Hugo Brems, *Altijd weer vogels die nesten beginnen: geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1945-2005* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2006), pp. 525-32.

Postmodern Novelists in Flanders

STEFAN HERTMANS

Flemish postmodern novelists do not emanate from a single tradition. As indicated, Stefan Hertmans's first literary efforts can be situated in the tradition of the Expressionist avant-garde and the grotesque. The shift towards more postmodern writing can be seen both in his essays (compare, for example, *Oorverdovende steen* [*Deafening Stone*] from 1988 with *Fuga's en pimpelmezen* [*Fugues and Blue Tits*] from 1995)²² and in his narrative texts. *Naar Merelbeke* (1994) is an ironic rewriting of the typically Flemish 'root novel'—a novel depicting the return to a supposedly paradisiacal, natural life, which leads to the (re)discovery and acceptance of genealogical belonging. The story is about a boy who seems to have lost one leg. For the greatest part of the novel the characters play along with him, and the reader is inclined to believe that the boy is indeed handicapped. However, in the closing pages it becomes clear that the story was a lie and that the lost leg is an ironic reference to the postmodern state of having no roots. The text contains intricate intertextual play with works by Raymond Roussel, Gustave Flaubert, Julian Barnes, and the Flemish modernist writer Maurice Gilliams. All references centre on the tension between the realm of the imagination (the air, symbolized in the 'merel' (blackbird) of the title and in a host of story elements, such as a talking parrot and flying chestnut seed) and reality (the water, symbolized in the 'beek' (brook) of the title and in a host of related elements, such as eels and a flood). This tension is subtly linked with Derrida's dissemination (air/seed) and Lacan's *glissement* (water/flood).²³ The poetic power of the narrative conceals the intricate construction and results in a highly readable novel with a light touch. It was generally welcomed in the press—and in fact categorized as postmodern only much later.²⁴ The author himself situated the work in the tradition of Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* (1937), a novel about a man who turns into an adolescent. Both Hertmans and Gombrowicz deal with the immature and inchoate nature of man's identity.

In his second novel, *Als op de eerste dag* [*As on the First Day*] (2001), Hertmans interweaves nine stories about the unfulfilled longing for a pure beginning that would be experienced with full consciousness. The first story sets the tone, showing that the paradisiacal beginning represented on a painting is really a forgery of another painting: there is no original paradise, no reality, there are only fakes and fictions. Again, one can detect deconstructive

²² Stefan Hertmans, *Oorverdovende steen: essays over literatuur* (Antwerp: Manteau, 1988); id., *Fuga's en pimpelmezen: over actualiteit, kunst en kritiek* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1995).

²³ Bart Vervaeck, 'Franse gasten in Merelbeke: Stefan Hertmans en het poststructuralisme', in *Nieuw Tijdschrift van de Vrije Universiteit Brussel*, 1 (1999), 39–64.

²⁴ None of the original reviews of the novel called it 'postmodern'. The designation was introduced in 2001 by Koen van Balen, 'Naar Merelbeke', in *Open boeken*, 1 (November 2001).

philosophers in the background of the narrative, especially Slavoj Žižek with his Lacanian analysis of the sublime object of desire. The confrontation of the sublime with the down-to-earth was picked up by the generally appreciative reviewers, who did not need the postmodern frame to position Hertmans's book. Only the Dutch critic Annemiek Neefjes mentioned the postmodern tradition in passing in her review for the weekly magazine *Vrij Nederland*.²⁵ It is therefore fair to say that Hertmans has never been seen as a hard-core postmodernist.

Whereas his essays continued to make use of poststructuralist thinkers, his narrative texts after *Als op de eerste dag* tended to become less strikingly postmodern and more focused on the (poetic) analysis of a psychological state of mind. That was the case with the paranoia novel *Harder dan sneeuw* [*Tougher than Snow*] (2004), called 'blood-curdling and unsettling' on the back cover. While the blurb may have induced the rare categorization of the book as a postmodern pastiche of the crime novel, it displays very few postmodern characteristics.²⁶ In spite of this relaxation of postmodern techniques, the reception was far from positive: the storylines were considered too far-fetched, there were too many unconvincing coincidences, and the plot was deemed unsuccessful in narrative terms. The novel *Het verborgen weefsel* [*The Hidden Fabric*] (2008) is an intimate psychological study in the tradition of Ingeborg Bachmann, and it met with a somewhat more positive response. Just one critic suggested an association with postmodernism, claiming that the book portrayed a 'slightly neurotic, postmodern woman'.²⁷ In this novel there is no evidence of formal aspects of postmodern fiction.

On the whole, one could say that Hertmans has moved away from postmodern techniques, although his world-view is still infused with poststructuralist ideas. His novels rarely present an explicit cultural and social critique—though the global paranoia in *Harder dan sneeuw* sometimes comes close—as they tend to zoom in on concrete, small-scale relations between self and other. By contrast, the three postmodern novelists discussed in the following pages offer large-scale social analyses in their works, and are in that respect more typical of Flemish postmodern fiction.

POL HOSTE

Whereas Hertmans's work sprang from an allegiance to Expressionist writing and draws on the tradition of the grotesque, Pol Hoste made his debut in the critical neo-avant-garde tradition of Daniël Robberechts (1937–1992). The

²⁵ Annemiek Neefjes, 'Verlangen naar de sacrale kick', *Vrij Nederland*, 14 April 2001.

²⁶ Two reviews linked the novel to postmodernism: T. van Deel, 'Afgehakte handjes als leidmotief', *Trouw*, 16 October 2004; and Pieter Steinz, 'Het leven is een B-boek', *NRC Handelsblad*, 8 October 2004. The latter regards the novel as a postmodern pastiche.

²⁷ Geert van der Speeten, 'Portret van een geluksneurose', *De Standaard*, 26 September 2008.

latter strove for Barthesian ‘writing degree zero’: he sought to strip language from its ideological devices, which unavoidably acted as a form of violence. His highly self-conscious and critical texts expose and discard the rhetorical tools typical of fiction, such as suspense and psychologically plausible characterization. In his earliest novels the young Pol Hoste combined this critical attitude towards language with Marxist analysis. The main character of his debut *De veranderingen* [*The Changes*] (1979) is described as ‘links revisionistisch kleinburgerlijk intellectueel’²⁸ (‘left revisionist petit bourgeois intellectual’). The man is called Achternet, and tries to connect with the working classes but fails to do so because of the language he uses (in Dutch ‘achter het net wissen’ means ‘fail to reach your goal’). He speaks and writes like a petit bourgeois, and the standard language he tries to master reduces reality to stereotypes, thereby widening the gulf between the classes. The same goes for the characters of the novel: they become flat, impersonal, and empty. People are turned into commodities. A possible antidote, the novel suggests, is a personal type of language, infused with dialect.

When one compares this debut with Hoste’s first fully fledged postmodern novel, *High Key* of 1995,²⁹ one detects similar concerns but different narrative techniques. The characters are once again vague, but they have become more agile and more dynamic. Language is still a vehicle for social inequality and ideological violence, but this is shown indirectly via puns, wordplay, and sound associations. Language seems to be dancing in *High Key* as the novel enacts a linguistic choreography. Instead of a central story, we encounter a myriad of storytellers. The book is like a symphony of voices harmonically and contrapuntally interacting with one another. The voice that speaks most often is that of a female writer, who asks herself: ‘Waarom wordt men in de taal van anderen geboren?’ (p. 128: ‘Why is one born in the language of others?’), and who does her utmost to construct a language that is completely her own. Hoste succeeds in dismantling stereotypes and breaking up frozen standard language; however, his novel arguably becomes so personal and so imbued with linguistic experimentation that it seems devoid of thematic content and tends to become undecipherable. Truly personal communication may end up as no communication at all.

High Key is an extreme example of what has come to seem typical of the postmodern Flemish novel: it seeks to combine formal experiment with social and cultural critique.³⁰ The critique is vested in its newly found form

²⁸ Pol Hoste, *De veranderingen* (Brussels: Manteau, 1979), p. 28.

²⁹ Pol Hoste, *High Key* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1995).

³⁰ This constellation is not, of course, confined to postmodernism, but also evident in some modernist and avant-garde experiments. The difference between these traditions and postmodernism resides in the aforementioned characteristics of turning reality into a story, making extravagant use of intertextuality, metafiction, and so on.

rather than in the well-established themes of estrangement, isolation, oppression. The post-Marxist view (propounded in the tradition of Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno) of the form as the only truly revolutionary type of critique is put into practice in *High Key*—as indeed in the encyclopedic novels of Verhelst and Verhaeghen discussed below. Hoste combines this with a postmodern rejection of traditional logic and definite meaning: ‘Luister naar wat buiten de logica leeft’ (p. 207: ‘Listen to what lives outside logic’), says one voice in *High Key*, and elsewhere another voice comments: ‘Het gaat om geluidsniveau, niet om woordbetekenis’ (p. 117: ‘What matters is sound level, not word meaning’). The reader’s search for sense is continually ridiculed, for example when one of the voices asks in French: ‘Qu’est-ce qu’ils veulent dire, finalement, tous les mots du monde?’ (p. 204).

Though the novel brims with references to political events (and parties such as the right-wing ‘Vlaams Blok’, now ‘Vlaams Belang’), these references are rarely of the traditional thematic type. As a result, they defy easy comprehension and assimilation to what is generally expected of politically oriented literature. Hoste’s recent works have received few reviews, and though these are mostly respectful, they regularly suggest that the playful form reduces the thematic content to the point of making the work incomprehensible. After *High Key*, Hoste embarked on a series of *Carnets* [*Notebooks*] with the prototypical characters of *Passant* [‘Passenger’] and *Traveller*. These postmodern figures are always on the move and never arrive at any fixed place or position. They are in fact hurried on by language itself. For instance, in *Montréal* (2003) their search for reality leads them to Montreal, as this is formally close to ‘mon réel’ and ‘my realm’. For some Dutch and Flemish critics this was one step too far, and they accused Hoste of playing nonsensical games. In the weekly magazine *Elsevier* Thomas van den Bergh concludes his rejection of Hoste’s ‘chaotic’ wordplay with the remark: ‘That is what we call a postmodern view of literature.’³¹ Novels that give up storytelling and display capricious linguistic acrobatics are not accepted by the majority of readers.

Somewhat greater critical acclaim has been accorded to two postmodern writers who remain committed to telling stories filled with action and events, though here, too, the tolerance of critics towards postmodern techniques has proved limited.

PETER VERHELST

Of all novelists in Flanders commonly associated with postmodernism, Verhelst is undeniably the most famous and most successful. Though his novels and poetry initially had little public impact, that changed once he had been awarded the prestigious Golden Owl Award (‘Gouden Uil’) in 2000. His novel

³¹ Thomas van den Bergh, ‘Verbale gymnastiek’, *Elsevier*, 12 July 2003.

Tongkat (1999) became a best-seller and appeared in English translation as *Tonguecat* in 2003.³² Verhelst in fact never made any concessions to his audience, and his novels are highly complex networks of stories that intersect with one another. Regarding his artistic roots, Verhelst is not so much influenced by a literary tradition as by (postmodern) visual arts, including video art and choreography. His style is highly lyrical and corporeal, but at the same time (and this sets him apart from Pol Hoste) he tells stories, which often have mythological roots. Thus he composed various texts (poetry, drama, and fiction) around the Icarus figure, who, in his postmodern reinterpretation, flies to the sun in order to fall down. The failure is not an undesired side effect, but the aim of the artistic endeavour.

This epitomizes Verhelst's deconstructionist poetics. Literature exists only to the extent that it destroys what it describes: the body, characters, meaningful worlds. Writing is an erotic act of erasure. Verhelst, who published his first novel *Vloeibaar harnas* [*Liquid Harness*] in 1993, has always been obsessed by the creative and destructive interactions between language and the body. As suggested by the title of his second novel, *Het spierenalfabet* of 1995, the book wants to combine the alphabet with the muscles of the body. Significantly, it starts with the following question: 'Hoe kan een beschreven blad opnieuw maagdelijk wit worden?' ('How can a written page become virginally white again?').³³ The intricate story of the cyborg René and the dancer Lore explores many paths towards self-destruction. They all use the same logic, applying a basic pattern ad nauseam until the pattern turns against itself. Lore states this explicitly: 'Elke structuur die gesloten is, is per definitie suicidaal, zelfvernietigend en dus ook labiel' (p. 60: 'Every structure that is closed is by definition suicidal, self-destructive, and therefore unstable'). Logic if applied obsessively turns into chaos.

All Verhelst's novels show this process. It is also his way of approaching our society: his novels depict the chaos that is inherent in what we think of as logic. Thus *Tonguecat* deconstructs the traditional dualistic logic of state versus revolutionaries by showing that the two parties use the same logic and are, in fact, often interchangeable. The state exists and persists thanks to the revolutionaries that supposedly endanger its existence. Throughout the narrative we encounter references to the German terrorist group Rote Armee Fraktion, active in the 1970s. The main characters have names of group members, such as Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof. But the story of the battle between terrorists and state does away with chronology. It mixes various phases and thereby blurs the distinction between those who hold power and those who seek to wrest it from them. *Tonguecat* undermines the socially

³² Peter Verhelst, *Tonguecat*, trans. by Sherry Marx (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003).

³³ Peter Verhelst, *Het spierenalfabet* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 1993), p. 9.

accepted foundations of authority and power, and though the mythological elements of the narrative make it seem fantastic (notably in the references to Prometheus and the Titans), it contains many realistic elements, including the death of the Belgian King Boudewijn in 1993. As a result, the novel continually blends reality with fantasy and mythology, thereby making it difficult for the reader to decide what is real and what is false or imagined.

Such extreme combinations of fantasy and reality, logic and chaos, are present in all Verhelst's works. One might say that his early novels tend to underscore the fantastic, whereas his more recent ones are imbued with realistic references—which then become fantastic as they are taken up in the self-destructive logic and network of mythological stories. The apex of this technique is the encyclopedic novel *Zwerm* of 2005.³⁴ As the title suggests, the reader is presented with a 'swarm' of stories and characters that intermingle and suddenly change course—just as a swarm of bees might do. The metaphor is explicitly used and endlessly transformed throughout the book. The main characters are the twins Angel and Abel, who cannot be kept apart as they become involved in ever-changing war stories, ranging from the Second World War (with Mengele's experiments on twins) via Vietnam to 11 September. All these stories answer to the same logic: they want to reach complete destruction, but alas, every destruction is followed by a new construction. The novel suggests that this pattern is the inversion and real logic of our so-called constructive world-view. Capitalist production is always overproduction and therefore thrives on destruction. The book starts on page 666 (the number of the Devil) and counts backwards to zero. Fittingly, there is no closure, and the story goes on until page minus 6, with its final sentence: 'Dit is het begin' (p. -6: 'This is the beginning').

The explicit social and cultural critique in the novel should be seen from this inverted viewpoint. It can therefore only be grasped through the complex form of stories told backwards. Again, the complex form contains the critical message. This is ironically stated in the middle of the book (literally the 'core' of the novel): white letters on black pages (again an inversion) spell out the logic of the virus as a utopia of complete destruction. The author himself becomes part of this logic. His face, which is printed in black and white on the cover of the book, is transformed in these black pages until it becomes a symbol of the HIV virus, read as 'Homo Invictus Viralis'. Man should not pretend that destruction and violence are 'out there', 'exceptional', and 'for others'; they are part and parcel of mankind. The new, viral human being, ironically advocated in the black pages, is someone who has incorporated and recognized violence as an integral part of his being and productivity.

Phrased in this way, the message becomes simple and almost one-

³⁴ Peter Verhelst, *Zwerm* [*Swarm*] (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2005).

dimensional. In the story world itself, however, it remains multi-dimensional and elusive. Only in the aesthetic construction of the novel is the ethical tendency present. This enacts the integration of meaning and form, and shows how paraphrase may turn the most complex construction into a simple statement. Verhelst's refusal to simplify storylines and to give in to his readers' longing for chronological order may be a way of resisting such simplification. However, in journalistic reviews it is regularly seen as a form of arrogance. *Tonguecat* flirted with the limits of comprehensible meaning, but *Zwerm* crossed the boundary of paraphrasability and consequently received a very cold response in many quarters. The 'swarm' of stories and the plethora of references to historical events were often seen as excessive, and only rarely as a way of writing the kind of politically relevant fiction that was expected. The last decade has seen a return to recognizable, realistic narratives that phrase their political messages explicitly; it proved an unfavourable climate for complex novels such as *Zwerm*.³⁵

Tolerance for complexity among critics has certainly not increased following Verhelst's most recent novel, *Huis van de Aanrakingen* [*House of Touches*] (2010). This was criticized for its overt lack of coherence, which actually, and typically, resulted from an exaggerated form of coherence, all stories being somehow related to the year 1633. Wherever postmodern narrative techniques conflict with the reader's desire for overview and coherence, no amount of political critique or suspense will provide sufficient compensation in the eyes of the critics. A running theme in the response to this novel is that postmodern fiction has become hackneyed and that Verhelst is repeating himself. Still, *Zwerm* is far more complex and political than *Tonguecat*, and *Huis van de Aanrakingen* is far more poetic and philosophical than either of those two titles. The accusation of repetitiveness would appear to be founded on inattentive reading.

PAUL VERHAEGHEN

Verhaeghen—a cognitive psychologist who lives in the United States—is something of an outsider in the Flemish literary world. He has written two postmodern novels, *Lichtenberg* and *Omega Minor*,³⁶ and is, by his own admission, heavily indebted to Thomas Pynchon. This is evident especially in the extensive use of science, in the raucous humour full of sexual innuendoes, and in the encyclopedic complexity of his works.

³⁵ For the best-known study and defence of this return of the real see Thomas Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman: literatuur, autoriteit en engagement* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2009). Vaessens claims that recent fiction has turned away from postmodern fabulation and returned to what is 'urgent' in present-day society.

³⁶ Paul Verhaeghen, *Lichtenberg* (Antwerp: Manteau, 1996); *Omega Minor* (Antwerp: Manteau, 2004).

Lichtenberg is not unlike *Zwerm* in its construction. The story is told while the protagonist, Tom, is falling from a tower. He remembers and imagines all sorts of narratives that talk about some form of fall and/or decline. These stories involve a vast number of vague characters and are intertwined to such an extent that the reader can hardly distinguish the narrative strands. The energy that sets the stories going is compared to forms of lightning or electrical discharge.³⁷ These are present in various forms, ranging from the stereotypical *coup de foudre* (for a girl called Her Majesty, alluding to the Beatles song) to a highly intricate scientific experiment involving (again as with Verhelst) a new kind of man, the Persona Computata. All these types of lightning speak of desire and ambition—that is, of upward movement. But the stories show that they are in fact forms of falling. Once more this looks like Verhelst, more specifically like his logic of inversion.

The novel weaves an elaborate network of references to other texts, e.g. by Nietzsche, Sloterdijk, Foucault, and Joyce, but also by Bob Dylan and the Flemish crooner Eddy Wally. These thematic references imply formal complexity: the registers and styles of the novel continually adapt themselves to the intertextual reference at hand. Thus one can detect stylistic pastiches on postmodern essays, but also on lifestyle magazines and pop songs. The novel hardly attracted critical attention, but the handful of critics who did review the book called it an exceptionally convincing debut.

Omega Minor received far more critical attention and was hailed almost ecstatically as the Great Flemish Novel, ‘the major novel that the twentieth century still owed us’ (in the Flemish newspaper *De Standaard*), as ‘a tremendous epic’ (in the Dutch paper *De Groene Amsterdammer*), and as ‘an event, overwhelming and ingenious’ (in the Flemish paper *De Morgen*).³⁸ The English translation received mostly positive reviews and was endorsed by Richard Powers, and a translation into French published in 2010 similarly met with acclaim.³⁹ This may be the single instance of a postmodern Flemish novel actually making waves internationally (*Tonguecat* was hardly noticed on the English and American literary scene).

Compared with *Lichtenberg*, the novel contains far more reference to historical facts. Again, social reality is explicitly incorporated. *Omega Minor* tells

³⁷ See Verhaeghen, *Lichtenberg*, p. 225.

³⁸ Bert Bultinck, ‘De guldende guirlande van de twintigste eeuw’, *De Morgen*, 5 May 2004; Kees ’t Hart, ‘Auschwitz-kitsch’, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 14 August 2004; Herman Jacobs, ‘Miljarden laatste ogenblikken’, *De Standaard*, 21 May 2004.

³⁹ Paul Verhaeghen, *Omega Minor* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007), translated by the author. Powers’s endorsement is used by the publisher to promote the book: ‘It is an amazing book. Verhaeghen takes on the whole twentieth century in a single novel. He doesn’t go for less, and that’s why he is a writer after my own heart’ <<http://www.wpg.be/foreignrights/books/paulverhaeghen/9789085421535>> [accessed 19 April 2011]. French translation: Paul Verhaeghen, *Oméga mineur*, trans. by [Christophe] Claro (Paris: Le Cherche Midi, 2010).

the story of a Nazi officer, Helmut Hinkel, who impersonates one of his Jewish victims, Jozef de Heer. The Flemish Paul Andermans writes down De Heer's story in Berlin, where the Jewish astrophysicist Goldfarb prepares a bomb that will turn Berlin into a new Hiroshima. During the Second World War Goldfarb worked for Oppenheimer in Los Alamos, developing the first atomic bomb, which was tested in 1945. The fireball of the first explosion took the form of an omega. In the end, Berlin explodes and De Heer is revealed to be Hinkel. *Omega Minor* combines historical scenes and scientific exposés with a thriller-like plot and sensual, even pornographic passages. This results in an encyclopedic novel that is not unlike Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and Don De Lillo's *Underworld* (1997). The story about the first atomic bomb is at times reminiscent of Richard Rhodes's *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (1995). The theme is also taken up in John Adams's opera *Doctor Atomic* (2005), based on a libretto by Peter Sellars.

The manifold stories combined in the novel all revolve around (mis)identifications. The Nazi history is based on the identification of a people with its leader; the story of De Heer identifies the torturer with his victim; and the Communist story of the German Democratic Republic shows the identification of the individual with the impersonal state. The GDR leader turns out to be an ordinary man, and this is precisely what all these identifications and masquerades show: that the forces of evil and destruction are average, ordinary, and common. Even Hitler is shown to be an average man. Like *Zwerm*, *Omega Minor* induces readers to identify with the violence and evil that they prefer to regard as abnormal and not human. Turned into a simple message, the multi-layered story depicts a new type of person who is not blind to his or her own violence and who no longer projects his or her own evil into 'the other'. This can be linked with Frank Ankersmit's discussion of attempts to overcome trauma by internalizing it, thereby producing a new kind of identity.⁴⁰

On the level of form, this identification is hinted at via ingenious intertextual play. Verhaeghen plunders Jewish Holocaust literature, yet it is a Nazi criminal who makes this literature his own. His story is an encyclopedic compilation of Jewish sources, which may be seen as provocative tastelessness and outrageous blasphemy, but also as a weird way in which a criminal brings his victims back to life. It forms part of the general tension between fusion (unity) and fission (breach). Thus there are the tensions between victim and torturer, Jew and Nazi, scientist and soldier. Sometimes the opposites are wide apart in accordance with expectation, while at other times they overlap. The title of the novel refers to the formula of atomic fission, but the omega receives

⁴⁰ Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 350–54.

different and sometimes contradictory meanings in the different stories. This typically postmodern form of 'overloading' a symbol is very close to Verhelst's technique in *Zwerm*. However, Verhaeghen is more reticent, and as a result his novel seems less chaotic than Verhelst's. In general, the press has rewarded him for that. Postmodern narratives that still give some impression of control and overview are more popular than those that challenge reading habits too radically.

Conclusion

If there is a general tendency in Flemish postmodern fiction, it is the search for a critical form that one might call performative in that it actually does what it says. Peter Verhelst's novel *Zwerm* is not just about viral destruction, its form acts as a virus contaminating a wide range of stories and references. The book is not merely a critique that inverts the capitalist logic of production in order to bring forth destruction, its form is an inversion of stories, counting backwards until zero is reached—and surpassed. The same goes for Pol Hoste's playful narratives and Paul Verhaeghen's encyclopedic forms: they stage and perform what is conveyed in the story. Looked at in this way, Flemish postmodern novels turn words into deeds.

A general development in Flemish postmodern fiction may be found in the gradual thematization and eventual incorporation of social reality in its historical, political, and economic compass. This is obvious in the recent work of Verhelst and Verhaeghen. It was always obvious in the novels of Hoste, even before he turned to postmodern techniques. It can also be seen in the work of Koen Peeters. His *Grote Europese Roman* of 2007 comes close to *Zwerm* and *Omega Minor* in that it deals with the trauma of 11 September in an encyclopedic way.⁴¹ The critical form Peeters uses in that novel is inspired by Primo Levi's periodic system and arranges European capitals as if they were chemical elements, combining to make an explosive cocktail. Again, the form carries the political and economic analysis, and again the critical ambition is high. All in all, there seems to be plenty of life left in the postmodern Flemish novel.

UNIVERSITY OF GHENT

BART VERVAECK

⁴¹ Koen Peeters, *Grote Europese Roman* (Antwerp: Manteau, 2007).