

The Aggressive Logic of Singularity: Willem Frederik Hermans¹

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Abstract: Willem Frederik Hermans is considered to be one of the major Dutch authors of the twentieth century. In his novels ideals of every kind are unmasked, and his *Weltanschauung* leaves little room for pursuing a ‘good life’. Nevertheless, there seems to be one option left to him, namely literature. In his poetic essays he explains that literature has nothing to do with escapism, but offers a vital way of facing the bleak facts of life. Literary critics and scholars have commented extensively on his poetic ideas, but have never truly addressed the riddle Hermans’ œuvre confronts us with: what might be the value of writing in a world without values? In this article we will focus on this paradoxical problem, which could perhaps be characterized as one of ‘aesthetics of nihilism’. We argue that Hermans’ so-called autonomous and a-political literary position can certainly be interpreted as a form of commitment that goes far beyond literature. We will first give an overview of Hermans’ work. Subsequently we will reflect on the social and cultural status of literary autonomy. Our main aim is to analyze a critical text by Hermans which seems clear at first sight but actually is rather enigmatic: the compact, well-known essay *Antipathieke romanpersonages* (‘Unsympathetic Fictional Characters’).²

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Singularity: to Spring a Leak in the Fullness...

In his autobiographical story *Het grote medelijden* (The Great Compassion) Hermans’ alter ego Richard Simmilion says about the people who surround him, i.e. his readers:

They aren’t aware that they should humbly accept and spread the message I do not bring, in their ears the thud of the same anvil on which I hammer *without forging anything*. They don’t understand that *my empty hands* are able to release [5] them from the *terrible fullness* in which they suffocate the world. (Our emphasis).³

We could read this enigmatic, paradoxical statement as Herman’s poetic credo. As such it responds to the predicament of modernist literature. What is the point of writing in a pointless world? Of course, as a literary attitude it is rather nihilistic and desperate to ‘bring *no* message’, to ‘hammer *without* forging anything’ and to ‘show your *empty* hands’. However, the quote also tells another story. The ‘nothing’ the writer offers, is something rather positive: it releases

people from a ‘terrible fullness’ (whatever that may be). The writer is someone who performs a kind of redemption job; Hermans even calls it ‘creative nihilism’.

In this essay we will analyze this remarkable and puzzling literary attitude through the concept of singularity. In the conclusion we will take this analysis a step further, and explore Hermans’ dual position with respect to the aesthetic notions of beauty and the sublime.

... and to Create ‘Otherness’ as a Void in ‘Sameness’

Derek Attridge defines singularity as the experience of otherness or alterity, as opposed to sameness. This otherness does not have to be of a spectacular order: it may reside in small details, such as formalistic or stylistic characteristics. Otherness is that which is, at a given moment, outside the cultural horizon for thinking, understanding, imagining, feeling, perceiving. Thus, singularity is the encounter with something new and original, but new and original in a radical sense. It is radically unfamiliar because it transgresses the limits of what a subject hitherto has been able to think. At the same time, it maintains an intimate relation with the subject. Firstly, because one would not be able to experience or apprehend an absolute alterity. That would be totally beyond one’s imagination. Secondly, because the encounter with alterity remolds the self that brings the other into being as, necessarily, no longer entirely other.

For the purposes of this article, we will link Attridge’s sameness to Hermans’ fullness, and Attridge’s alterity to Hermans’ emptiness. In so doing, we wish to underline the tangent plane between Attridge’s theory and Hermans’ fiction, namely that alterity is not an alternative world view but rather that it springs a leak in the sameness, full of inherent illusionary images of the world. The fact that the sameness is full does not mean that it is consistent. On the contrary, the sameness is a disorderly whole, with fissures and contradictions that are often ‘ideologically’ concealed. Singularity is a way of letting those gaps and contradictions speak. Please note that in this interpretation singularity is not so much a way of giving voice to something that has fallen outside the system – for political or other ideological reasons – as a way of revealing tensions, fissures and contradictions within the system. [6]

For readers unfamiliar with his work, a quick portrait of Hermans as an author may be useful, followed by a description of his work and poetics in the light of the concept of singularity.

Willem Frederik Hermans

Willem Frederik Hermans (1921-1995) started writing novels, short stories and essays during World War II. During the forties and fifties, the gloomy and antagonistic character of his work gave him a questionable reputation. He was even sued for libel on account of one of his early novels *Ik heb altijd gelijk* (I’m Always Right, 1952). For several decades he worked as a lecturer in Physical Geography at the University of Groningen. After one conflict too many, Hermans left the university and settled as a full-time writer in Paris.

He succeeded in reaching a larger audience with his novel *De donkere kamer van Damokles* (The Dark Room of Damocles, 1958). The famous spy thriller author John le Carré highly admired the novel, the English translation of which was published in 1963. It seems likely that his *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1964) was greatly influenced by Hermans’ novel.⁴ In the sixties, Hermans gained a firm footing on the literary scene with his ruthlessly controversial writings (*Mandarijnen op zwavelzuur*, Mandarins on Vitriol, 1964), his brilliant

poetical essays (*Het sadistisch universum*, The Sadistic Universe, 1964) and another highly successful novel (*Nooit meer slapen*, Beyond Sleep, 1966).⁵

Hermans' work undermines every belief and seems to leave no room for solidarity: 'I feel solidarity with no one. I'm my own ally, although not even unconditionally', Hermans' alter ego character Richard Simmilion solemnly declares.⁶ As a detached physicist ('The sciences are my bad conscience'),⁷ he describes a human being as 'a stone, a molecule, an atom, that comes into being and then perishes, that connects and splits, that is all: the rest is imagination. [...] A human being is a chemical process like any other. Who or what he is, what he argues or believes only matters as long as he is alive, but not after that. Everything can happen, and everything does happen, without the sun fading or the birds stopping singing'.⁸

His favourite philosopher by far is Ludwig Wittgenstein, especially the early Wittgenstein of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Hermans translated this work into Dutch. Hermans combines his neo-positivist inclination with a deep interest in Freud's psychoanalysis and its artistic companion surrealism, in which the abysmal depth of the human psyche is probed.

Hermans has written extensively about the nature and the craft of fiction. He became famous because of his anti-realistic, anti-psychological and autonomous poetics. The 'classical' novel, favoured by Hermans, is the antithesis of realism while still giving a strong illusion of reality. In a classical novel all action is purposeful whereas in real life nothing is. It is a 'novel in which every event and every [7] description has a purpose; where so to speak no sparrow can fall from a roof without consequence. This event is only without consequence if it is the author's intention to claim that in his world falling sparrows do not have any consequence at all. But only in that case'.⁹

Singularity Turned Aggressive

During a recent debate in the Netherlands about the diminishing impact of literature, Hermans appeared as a typical example of the autonomous writer who chooses to undermine the political importance of literature. In 2005, the French critic and literary historian William Marx argued that whereas in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century literature had an unprecedented high prestige, in the second half of the twentieth century it lost itself in conceited narcissist and self-referential language games.¹⁰ In the Netherlands, Thomas Vaessens, following this lead, launched an attack on the 'ideology' of the autonomy of literature, advocating a more politically committed literature. One of his scapegoats is Willem Frederik Hermans. In the libel lawsuit mentioned earlier, Hermans defended himself by stating that he could not be held responsible for the words of a fictional character in his novel *Ik heb altijd gelijk* (I'm Always Right). With this line of defence, Hermans deprived his novel of any political effect, Vaessens argues. With his repeatedly expressed opinion about the fictional and fantastic nature of (his) literature – in short, his autonomous poetics – Hermans turns away from society, retreating into an ivory tower and making literature culturally and politically impotent.¹¹

In our opinion, equating autonomy with avoidance and escape is highly problematic. Or rather we claim that through turning away, the writer expresses a particular kind of commitment. The commitment that autonomy implies may be clarified with the help of the concept of singularity as analyzed by Attridge for instance.¹²

In *Als in een donkere spiegel* (As in a Dark Mirror, 2002) Frank vande Veire formulates this paradoxical event of singularity or alterity as follows: 'That which affects us and brings us

outside ourselves becomes a whole in which we find ourselves again: this can only reveal itself as in a dark mirror. It announces itself as something strange with which we are uncannily acquainted at the same time.¹³

This experience of otherness, albeit initially disturbing, is often interpreted as an ‘enrichment’, as emancipating ('giving voice to the marginalized'), sometimes even as morally obliging (see the highly charged encounter with the Other in Levinas). At first sight, the skeptical and nihilistic Hermans is light years away from this kind of thinking. One would think that instead of Vande Veire's dark mirror, the dispassionately detached and scientifically inclined Hermans would prefer a clear mirror with clear-cut representations, like the one advocated in his beloved *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Hermans prefers to take Wittgenstein's famous [8] proposition ('Of which one cannot speak, one should be silent') quite literally, scorning all mystically inclined interpretations of it.¹⁴ However Hermans consistently wrote, with unflagging zeal, about these very things one should be silent about, contradicting his own views on this matter. In fact, there are many more direct indications that Hermans' ideas about his art, despite his supposed nihilism, concur with the concept of singularity we have just formulated.

Before turning to Hermans' aggressive colouring of alterity, we will illustrate his fascination with the unknown by shortly commenting on two intriguing mottoes he chose for his novels. The first motto is from *Beyond Sleep*, a novel about a modern scientific version of the quest for the Holy Grail. The motto is a remarkable quote by Isaac Newton (who, incidentally, was a far less straightforward ‘modern’ scientist than the traditional narrative of scientific progress suggests):¹⁵ ‘I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.’¹⁶ At first sight this seems to be an expression of scientific modesty combined with the ultimate purpose of modern science to conquer the as yet unknown truth. But the metaphor of a child haphazardly playing at the shore of an infinite expanse of the unknown undermines this ‘optimistic’ and confident interpretation. It is not clear if the other appears here under the guise of the as yet unknown or under the guise of the unknowable. The novel as a whole can be read as an ironic comment on the scientific enterprise of discovering the truth, as the protagonist in the novel, a promising young scientist, is motivated by far more pedestrian motives than helping science progress.

The motto of another novel (*Herinneringen van een Engelbewaarder*, Memories of a Guardian Angel, 1971) seems to confirm the alterity-interpretation of the unknown: ‘We are capable of thinking that we are very far from God because of this cloud of unknowing between us and him, but it would definitely be more accurate to say that we are more removed from him when there is no cloud of forgetting between us and the entire creation.’ (The Cloud of Unknowing, Anonymous, around 1370)¹⁷

What Hermans claims for art is a kind of mysteriousness which he sees as a combination of a secret and the suggestion of significance. In the ‘Preamble’ of the collection of short stories *Paranoia* (1953), he caught this ambiguousness of the mystery in a nice pun on the word *geheimzinnigheid*, by writing it as *geheimZINnigheid*.

It can therefore be said that Hermans certainly has a well-developed antenna for alterity. All this raises the intriguing question what singularity with a nihilistic twist looks like; a singularity that relentlessly seems to question the value of alterity as such, not to mention its redemptive power. For instance in ‘Snerpende kritiek’ (Shrill Criticism), an early essay in which

he formulates his infamously polemical critical credo, he states that bad novels and poems are an insult asking for [9] a personal revenge. ‘This is the basis of all self-criticism: someone who reads something that he considers bad is confronted with something that denies his existence. He cannot have anything in common with that world, at the risk of going down himself. Self-criticism is the vigilance that can never waver, lest “the other” may prove right.’¹⁸ The Other is a direct threat to the I and consequently has to be kept away as far as possible.¹⁹

To show the fascinating intricacies of Hermans’ conception of singularity, we will now turn to one of his well-known, but only superficially analyzed, poetical essays: ‘Antipathieke romanpersonages’ (‘Unsympathetic Fictional Characters’).

This essay appears to be constructed around a series of oppositions. We will comment on each of them separately and show that they all have the same structure.

Unsympathetic versus Sympathetic Fictional Characters

In the beginning of Hermans’ authorship, literary critics had no idea how to cope with the often repulsive and paranoid fictional characters in his novels and stories. They provoked moral commentaries and even rejection of his work. In ‘Unsympathetic Fictional Characters’ Hermans tries to stem this criticism by siding unreservedly with what he provocatively calls ‘unsympathetic fictional characters’. In the same breath he claims that the presence of ‘sympathetic fictional characters’ is a clear indication of inferior and non-serious literature. The affectively highly charged opposition between unsympathetic and sympathetic characters he introduces does not merely correspond to the well-known critical distinction between a-moral and moral characters fashionable in the nineteenth century. It is, rather, informed by the distinction between singularity and non-singularity, alterity and sameness.

Sympathetic characters confirm readers in what they already know and like to hear. They can identify with these characters. ‘What is a sympathetic character?’ Hermans asks. ‘It is a character the writer does not reveal more about than the masses [...] publicly want to know about themselves.’²⁰ In essence, writers who people their novels with sympathetic characters are mere journalists. And a journalist is somebody who ‘puts into words what the masses think’.²¹ Sympathetic characters do not have to be good or virtuous people though. They may be murderers, rapists or racists but one way or another the reader has to be able to identify with them because, in the end, they turn out to be just ordinary people.²² ‘The average reader demands protagonists who are good without setting too good an example. ‘Heroes of human proportions’ the journalists call them, and also “people of flesh and blood”.²³ For Hermans the alterity of unsympathetic characters thus literally resides in the fact that they belong to another dimension than the human; that they are made from other material than ‘flesh and blood’. This ‘ontological’ otherness is not primarily caused by the character’s fictionality. It is [10] from a slightly different but related otherness. ‘All true fictional heroes are gods or demi-gods, demons, heroes, chosen ones, the anointed, the enchanted or prophets.’²⁴

In short, they are of the raw material myths are made of. This is quite a sweeping statement, which seems to do little justice to the bulk of modern literature, such as for instance nineteenth-century realism. That is why Hermans quite logically claims that ‘[t]he realistic novel is also essentially a mythical novel, and its creator a magician’.²⁵ Note the equation of the writer (the genuine as well as the non-genuine) with a magician. Hermans opposes this magician to the scientist. Whereas a scientist painfully unravels the mechanism of reality, a magician merely founds his conception of reality on an imaginary mechanism. Hence Hermans’

famous aphorism: ‘Writing novels is conducting science without proof.’²⁶ We will come back later to the relation between science and literature, an important theme throughout Hermans’ work. For now we note that Hermans is of the opinion that ‘The way the writer goes about describing reality is not objective; at the very most it is conventional’.²⁷ This confronts us with a difficulty. If the novel is a myth (whether acknowledged by the writer or not), and if the genuine novel is shamelessly mythical due to its unsympathetic (that is, mythical) characters, how can Hermans assert that the novel creates a kind of disturbing alterity for the reader, as we mentioned earlier? Is a myth not *par excellence* the domain of the conventional (or that of sameness, in Attridge’s terminology)? After all, a myth is a story, or a collection of stories, that holds a community together. It is clear that Hermans, in order to remain consistent, is forced to take a next step in his argument which is to differentiate between two kinds of myths: collective myths and personal myths. That is, between myths that constitute the domain of sameness, and myths that embody alterity. We have already seen that the distinction between unsympathetic and sympathetic characters does not constitute a simple opposition, but implies a fundamental difference in nature. One may expect that the same applies to the distinction between personal and collective myths.

Personal versus Collective Myths

According to Hermans, the realistic novel is no more than a mythical novel, albeit one that is unaware of its representation of a mythical reality. ‘A realistic novel is a mythical story because reality is largely a mythical reality, made up of the general opinion of a group, who choose a few observations from all that is observable and combine them into a myth’.²⁸ Because this random combination represents the shared judgment of a group, the mythical character is obscured. It is the myth of the ‘the indoctrinated fellow marcher who loves the dictator’s whip or in whose welfare state mediocrity is sacrosanct’.²⁹ In other words, it is the realm of sameness, which is blind to alterity. In opposition to this realm, Hermans brings into play the ‘overtly’ mythical novel that is the novel of ‘personal myth’. This type of [11] novel simultaneously offers an opening to otherness whilst not claiming a direct relation with truth, which after all is reserved for science.

Nevertheless, it is strongly suggested that the mythical novel does point to a deeper kind of truth. As the opening sentence of ‘Unsympathetic Fictional Characters’ states: ‘The only writers who are true writers are those who intend to see more than the reader sees [...].’³⁰ But in fact the rest of the sentence already subtly points in quite another direction. Indeed, it is postulated that the writer must see more than the public, but this is followed by a remarkable statement, that the only true writers are those: ‘[...], who intend to recognise more than was recognised prior to them writing about it’.³¹ Hence, the writer’s privileged surplus of vision lies in recognition instead of cognition. Recognizing is a concept we would not readily associate with science. Recognizing what exactly? That we cannot know reality; that reality hides from our perception. And thus, that we live in a dream world out of sheer necessity, a random construction which is only experienced as reality thanks to endless repetition, habit and laziness. That is why ‘[o] nly the born blind can accuse the writer of lying; he never lies. He cannot lie where there is no truth’.³² This formulation implies that the writer is not a ‘person born blind’. In other words, he is a ‘seer’. But his vision is nothing more than seeing through the mythical nature of (our conception of) reality. It is definitely not the same as looking through in the sense of transcending the mythical, but only in the sense of ‘being aware of’. The difference

between a person who was born blind and a person who can see is therefore only marginal. It is the difference between someone who is not aware that he is blind and a person who is.

This apparently marginal difference is far from irrelevant. We have seen that the type of novelist Hermans favours does not so much describe reality as create a personal mythology. He does so intentionally, in contrast to the realist writer. The usual interpretation of this well-known poetical standpoint of Hermans is that a personal myth is an individualist version of the collective myth, as it were. But in our opinion this is an inaccurate interpretation. It would imply that the (genuine) writer does not really distinguish himself from collective mythmakers and storytellers, implying that he is just like a journalist. In this rather superficial interpretation, the personal myth is conceived as being of the same substance as the collective myth. This, in Attridge's terminology, would mean that it belongs to the realm of sameness. But the personal mythologist is rather a terrorist; it is by brutally posturing himself as a mythmaker that he challenges the collective myth. The personal myth is not so much a (personal) story, but an event; an event in which a 'lone wolf' undercuts the (collective) story.

The same word 'myth' (or 'mythology') is thus used in two meanings that are mutually exclusive. It signifies both myth and the unsettling of myth.³³ To complicate matters further, Hermans appears to introduce a third meaning. He argues that a writer wants the impossible, which is of a mythological nature, because 'it is immortality'.³⁴ One would not expect an allusion to immortality from a nihilistic [12] writer like Hermans. However, on closer inspection, we see that he has quite a peculiar vision of immortality. He would like to use his immortality, not to live and enjoy himself forever, but 'to put right everything that had gone wrong, to make up for all the damage done'.³⁵ But, as mentioned above, immortality is a myth, and mortality the reality. Thus, as a kind of secular redemption, the writer already seeks to prove his innocence whilst alive. He flees his direct environment (which apparently finds him irrevocably guilty) and tries 'to build up a life' in the minds of people that do not already know him. In this sense, the writer is 'a spiritual emigrant'.³⁶ From the perspective of the reader, he is of course an immigrant. The fact that the writer is going to be a peaceful immigrant, one that will assimilate easily into the life of the reader, is of course an illusion (if one remembers the opening statement of the essay). The personal myth placed in the mind of the recipient by the writer, blows up the reader's (collective) myth, and thus confronts him with his own otherness/alterity.

Player versus Spoilsport

Writing novels is just like playing, according to Hermans. Writers claim to create a game everybody is expected to go along with, implying that nobody spoils it with ticklish questions about the story's degree of truthfulness or moral rectitude. The art of the novelist is 'to create an atmosphere which excludes certain questions'.³⁷ Those who enter the game are under the illusion 'dat het klopt' ('that it fits'). Every narrator hypnotizes his public. 'When a child is told the fairy tale Puss in Boots, in which a cat uses effrontery, murder and deceit to make his owner stinking rich, he does not protest. The cat and his owner are presented as sympathetic weaklings who have to be cunning; their cunning is a virtue and virtue must be rewarded. The moral of the story is that no criminal offence is prohibited for the weak. But no one says this out loud. Anyone doing so would be a killjoy'.³⁸

Hermans extends his conception of games to life in general. ‘Life is just a game or a comedy, even death and dying are not serious. Repeating this trivial thought would be pointless if there was not always something in this life which was taken seriously all the same.

For past writers, a life after this life was serious, the hereafter. For modern writers, logic, stringent logical thinking which strictly adheres to rules laid down in advance, is serious’.³⁹

Realists and naturalists believed in the truth of their representations. This implies that the willing suspension of disbelief was not at stake because no improbabilities happened: ‘The illusion of realist and naturalist writers has been to create a game which can never end, answering all the questions. It has not been possible to create a never-ending game by sticking to reality’ [...].⁴⁰

Yet, Hermans is convinced that ‘[...] the search for a game that cannot be ended, being able to answer all questions, even by expressly not answering them, [13] is what every serious writer strives for, of every place, or every time’.⁴¹ How can this be achieved? Hermans’ lucky find is to create a play that cannot fall prey to disillusion, simply because it calculates every illusion.

What does he mean by categorically refusing to answer questions? Earlier we emphasized that the personal myth is not anything in itself, because it merely annuls something else: because it only unmasks the generally accepted description of reality as a myth. The personal myth is not an alternative myth; it is a performative event to disprove any current story. It is a game bringing out emptiness, where one believed there to be fullness.⁴² This game is the game of the spoilsport. The spoilsport is not someone who tries to get rid of his fellow players, sweep the pieces from the board or be a foul play. That is what the unsportsmanlike player does, but he is of no interest as he just annihilates the play. The spoilsport is quite different because, while conforming to the rules and playing above board, he nevertheless makes a special move. He makes his fellow players face the fact that they are only playing and also shows them that nothing exists outside the game. Therefore, the spoilsport cannot be beaten. He is always right because he denies that something like being right exists (see the title of Hermans novel *I’m Always Right, Ik heb altijd gelijk*).⁴³ One cannot be right when there is no truth: ‘Truth is nothing but a red barrier behind which uncertainty starts. Truth seekers are merely driven to uncertainty.’⁴⁴

Positive versus Negative Solidarity

Nobody can spoil a game unless he is one of the players himself. The spoilsport is a fellow player by definition. In Hermans’ conception of literature as a game, the relation between the author and his reader is not hierarchical, but symmetrical. This symmetry shows an essential aspect of what Attridge calls singularity. Hermans discerns two types of symmetry in the relation author-reader: a positive and a negative solidarity. Firstly, we will examine his view of the positive type. As Hermans states at the beginning of his essay, an author seeks to express something the readers ‘dreamed of but repressed upon awakening’. And he adds: ‘I will admit that this implies a belief that the reader has the same mental constitution as the writer deep down’. The ‘same mental constitution’ means that the author and his readers are fellow players. Fellow players moreover who know exactly when they are still in the game and when they are offside. The quote continues with: ‘Sometimes this belief is incarnated in clearly demonstrable ways, but mostly it is not. Yet, however often it is denied, it will never be rocked to the core, otherwise the writer would hold his tongue for good, and be willingly consigned to a mental asylum’.⁴⁵

In a game one can choose odd moves, but each player is aware of the limit (= the mental asylum). Although the author is a spoilsport, he sticks to the rules. If he did not, he would automatically be offside (= in the mental asylum). Then [14] nothing would be at stake any longer. It is surprising therefore that an author who published a volume of short stories under the title *Moedwil en misverstand* (Wilfulness and Misunderstanding, 1949) and whose motto is 'I feel solidarity with no one. I'm my own ally, although not even unconditionally', appears to fully acknowledge that it is impossible to communicate about reality outside the mutually accepted boundaries of the game.

It seems that the author has a *status aparte* in the play: 'The writer gives the impression that he is superior to other people precisely because he describes them, because he uses them as material in his novels, because he judges them, or at least is capable of placing them in all kinds of light and darkness he considers desirable'.⁴⁶ Yet, the writer should not value himself any higher than the masses. 'In fact, the writer despises himself for the same reasons he despises the masses. There is a deeply buried solidarity between the writer and the masses. It is a solidarity not only based on mutual hatred, but also on a corresponding self-hatred. The reader hates the writer in himself, the writer hates himself in his fictional characters'.⁴⁷

But this positive solidarity has another side, namely negative solidarity. The author uses the power of positive solidarity to launch an attack on everyone who is involved in the game; that is to say on his fellow players as well as on himself. This is the other side of the solidarity between reader and author. Positioning himself as a fellow player gives him the opportunity to reveal himself as the spoilsport. Implicitly acknowledging himself as liable to the collective myth entitles him to throw in his personal myth, whilst at the same time preventing his readers from backing out.

For Hermans it is self-evident that the author relies on positive solidarity and plays on the negative one. 'Readers who do not accept this fail to understand the essential function of the novel. Only journalism can satisfy them'.⁴⁸ Journalism (i.e. non-serious literature) is driven by positive solidarity and spreads the collective myth, which generates pleasure. The serious novel is driven by negative solidarity, disproves the collective myth and generates non-pleasure ('hatred'). At this point the distinction between sympathetic and antipathetic characters meets the one between positive and negative solidarity: 'Sympathetic protagonists are, for example, the Three Musketeers who stab people to death all over the place for a trifle, and so on, and so on. Serious novelists do not write for this kind of hedonist. They hate themselves too much for this, they hold themselves responsible for the fact that their deeds are so inferior to the mythological greatness in their imagination'.⁴⁹

So the mutual acknowledgement of a deeply felt non-pleasure, the collective feeling of a lack, is the flywheel of the communication via the serious novel, according to Hermans. It provides the author with the energy to launch his personal myth and it deprives the reader of the possibility to be deaf to the author's appeal. The unconscious acknowledgement of this collective destiny is at the core of what [15] Attridge calls 'singularity'. In Frank vande Veire's terminology, singularity is the capacity of every individual person to look in 'the dark mirror' and be able to find more or less the same.

Science versus Literature

In 'Antipathieke romanpersonages' Hermans opposes literature to science, as he frequently does. To use Vande Veire's terminology, he opposes what we see when we look in the dark

mirror to that what we see when we look in the clear mirror. In Hermans' opinion, science offers no more than a little peephole into reality, a small chance to escape the mythical image in the dark mirror:

Yet it remains impressive that our tape recorders, our telephones, our televisions and our rockets (sometimes) do what is expected of them. It is not only impressive, it is also a harmonic dissonance in our essentially fantastical, mythical disharmony. [...] It could also be possible that there is a certain ordering principle present in the cosmos and that a few individuals who will become successful mathematicians or physicists later, are partly open to the silent suggestion of this ordering principle.⁵⁰

In principle science has a certain importance for mankind, but it has a limited reach because scientists are not allowed to avail themselves of the mysterious effects of singularity. Science is bound to the opposition of singularity, that is to say to the requirements of rationality and controllability, and this is why science is such a narrow and harsh path to reality.

Hermans does not formulate this explicitly but his words seem to suggest that art provides a far more direct access to reality than science, albeit that this access generates much non-pleasure and leads to a destination beyond our powers of imagination. 'Antipathieke romanpersonages' suggests furthermore that the author, with the semblance of solidarity and symmetry, still gives the reader something unique, that is to say that he tries to do the impossible: to give shape to what, in essence, is unimaginable.

Hermans' Ideas in Literary Practice: *The Dark Room of Damocles* and *Beyond Sleep*

Bearing the analysis of 'Antipathieke romanpersonages' in mind, we will briefly look at two of Hermans' most famous novels, *The Dark Room of Damocles* (1958) and *Beyond Sleep* (1966), both recently translated and successfully published in Germany, France, the United Kingdom and the United States. Broadly speaking, it can be said that *The Dark Room of Damocles* focuses on morality and *Beyond Sleep* on science. On the one hand, 'the dark mirror' of the first novel gives us a horrifying [16] image of the Second World War, albeit in remarkably clear contours; 'the dark mirror' of the second novel, on the other hand, contains a humorous image of what we have called 'the clear mirror': science. Both novels are technical tours de force. We will start our analysis with *The Dark Room of Damocles*.

The main character, Henri Osewoudt, joins the resistance by accident and persists in carrying out underground activities, chiefly by obeying an idealized model, his look-alike Dorbeck, mainly in order to gain some affirmation of himself as a person. For Osewoudt this war existence is a personal fulfilment, through equalising the admired model Dorbeck. But, when the war is over, the nightmare begins: he is treated as one of the most infamous *V-Mann* (= German word for double spy) and is at a loss to prove his innocence. To justify his deeds, he appeals desperately to Dorbeck, but the man is never found.

At no point in the story is Osewoudt in control of his own life. At the beginning of the story, he is caught in the deadlock of his passive adolescence. Seizing the first opportunity to break free, he is at first overwhelmed, then disoriented and becomes increasingly terrified. At the end, when jailed, he reaches a deadlock again, a final one this time. He is shot, trying to escape. Osewoudt is a paragon of the subject who – by definition for Hermans – tries in vain to master

his internal and external world. His efforts to prove himself, first as a virile and then as an upright man, look like a screw gradually tightening itself.

Hermans plays a vicious game with a set of collective ideas that dominated the first two decades after 1945. According to this collective myth, the Dutch as a nation did unanimously resist German occupation, whilst many heroically joined the underground, primarily driven by national or religious feelings, or at least a sense of human dignity. In order to link in to this myth, Hermans bases his novel on many documents about resistance and collaboration, in particular on legal documents concerning notorious double espionage cases (especially the one of the V-Mann Anton van der Waals), the so called *Englandspiel* and the extensive parliamentary investigation into the policy of the Dutch government when exiled in London. On this referential level, everything in the novel fits exactly. The intrigue consists of an inextricable mix of opportunistic behaviour, misunderstanding, naiveté and wrong calculation and is in shrill contrast to this neatly constructed historical background. The intrigue, therefore, challenges the belief in the collective myth about the question of ‘Good versus Evil’ during the Second World War, a belief that was at the time, and still is, the ultimate Dutch litmus test of moral behaviour, as Ewoud Kieft’s recent study on the subject highlights.⁵¹ In this respect the novel can be interpreted as a nasty personal myth.

But this is only half of the personal myth. In the novel Hermans actually plays a double game: he doubles the thematic level of the novel on its narratological level. By consistently giving the perspective from Osewoudt, the author reduces the reader to a naive individual of good faith but also blind, as Henri Osewoudt is, albeit on another ontological level. Re-reading the novel will only strengthen this [17] *aporia*. Another aspect of this double game is that the novel simultaneously belongs to three genres: it keeps a continuous and precious balance between the conventions of the spy story, the psychological novel and the philosophical novel of ideas. (The novel contains a quotation from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophische Untersuchungen* as a postscript.⁵²) Most events figure simultaneously in at least three intrigues and these three are mutually incompatible because the underlying genre formats direct the attribution of contradicting connotations towards these events. Literary critics and scholars have interpreted Dorbeck as follows. On the level of the spy story, he is a deeply troubled double spy; on the psychological novel level, he is Osewoudt’s superego; and on the level of the philosophical novel he impersonates the undistinguishability of reality. In our opinion a fourth possibility also presents itself: Dorbeck is the personification of radical heterogeneity, of the otherness outside as well as inside ourselves, popping up from time to time, but impossible to appropriate.

By repeating this notion in the formal properties of this novel, Hermans presents the literary variant of the Escherian *impossible figure*.⁵³ That is to say, the novel appears like a very realistic story, but somewhere along the pages this changes imperceptibly, and at the end of the novel the reader completely loses all orientation and is no longer able to recognize the world he has constructed in his own imagination. In other words, at some point whilst reading, the reader has become a stranger to his own mind.⁵⁴ At the risk of sounding odd, what has happened is that he has imagined an impossible world.⁵⁵

In Beyond Sleep the main character, Alfred Issendorf, is a diligent young man who trusts his professor and cannot wait to become a professor himself. He has to stand the test of completing a geological research project in the Lapland tundra in the north of Norway, as one of four young natural scientists, three of whom are Norwegians. His aim is to prove that his Dutch professor’s hypothesis that meteorites struck Lapland long ago is correct. This

hypothesis is not taken very seriously by his Norwegian colleague, the blind professor Ornulf Nummedal, as Alfred discovers when he pays him a courtesy visit at the University of Oslo.

The fieldwork, performed on territory where nature has stopped any form of culture, confronts him with the limits of rationality, duty and ambition. At first, he does worry about the meagre results of his explorations (and therefore about his career), but at that point he still participates in student-like discussions, in the pale light of the arctic night, about topics inspired by their lonely, romantic campaign: God, the universe, science, Wittgenstein. But soon paranoia takes over: as a Dutchman among Norwegians he increasingly feels like an outsider and a clumsy one at that. He is afraid of being a millstone around the neck of his fellow researchers.

Halfway through the story, they split up in two pairs of two and he subsequently loses contact with his mate Arne. However, the sub-story shows that in a way Alfred has unconsciously freed himself of any company. He is lost now, without [18] map or a compass, but also *free* at last. Now he only has one task: to *survive*. Science and culture no longer have any impact and he is just a stray human animal, left to primitive means and guided by magical signs, painfully conscious of his nullity. Eventually, he is glad to be able to reach civilization alive. In fact, he has made a gigantic and dangerous detour to meet the point where the imagination of nature, culture and himself, briefly the imagination of anything, is defeated by what really is unthinkable: radical heterogeneity, otherness.

The meteorites, cosmic material from outside the earth, that are supposed to have struck in Lapland, are clearly the symbol of otherness. Note what happens on the last page of the novel. After returning to Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, Alfred receives a present from his mother and his little, religious sister Eva: a pair of cuff links bearing the halves of a small meteorite, bought for the seven-year-old Alfred by his father, who died years ago. Meteorite incorporated in jewellery for men: one cannot imagine a more ironical metaphor for the human attempt to domesticate otherness. ('A gift from heaven, that's what it is, Alfred, [...] truly, a gift from heaven',⁵⁶ his sister says, to make matters worse.) How painfully does this little present echo the grand statement of the conceited and condescending professor Nummedal: 'Science is the titanic endeavor of the human intellect to break out of its cosmic isolation through understanding.'⁵⁷

In *Beyond Sleep* Hermans attacks another collective myth: the belief that in their daily quest for knowledge scientists transcend the daily activities and worries of common mortals. The novel presents its readers with a story that continuously moves on the edge between rational judgment and magic belief, science and religion. The personal myth of this novel is a bittersweet, rather humorous attack on the collective myth mentioned above.

In this novel, Hermans plays a double game as well, rhyming the formal level of his novel with its thematic one. The game consists in creating a remarkable species of the first-person novel in the present tense, brilliantly suggesting Alfred's moment by moment experience and, at the same time, meticulously hiding the firm hand of the sovereign author. By subtly managing this kind of present tense first-person narration, Hermans vividly shows what it means to be a subject: to be in a vulnerable and eventually incomprehensible state of existence. As in *The Dark Room of Damocles*, every event in this story appears in at least three intrigues, whilst being governed by the format of a Jules Verne-like voyage of discovery report, a quest of the Self through a paranoid and adventurous survival story. Again, ultimate meanings of any kind are definitively out of reach.

Dutch Hermans scholars created a real tradition of literary research into the intriguing content and formal subtleties of both novels.⁵⁸ [19]

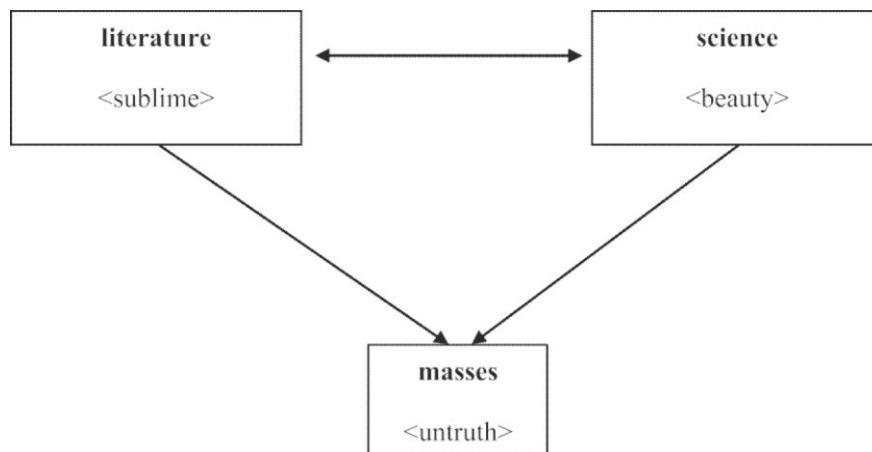
Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we would like to return to the question about the kind of autonomy represented by Hermans' authorship. It is possible to discern commitment in this autonomy? First of all, we assert that the metaphor of the ivory tower is rather unsuitable for a definition of this type of autonomy. The metaphor alludes to a situation in which the writer, as the spokesman of something Higher, turns away from the vulgar masses. We have seen that Hermans does not think much of the masses. However, it is also true that he reluctantly realizes that he is inextricably connected with it. Deep down he is of the very same constitution: for the writer, too, there is no escaping the mythological, delusive world in which the masses live. Moreover, Hermans explicitly thinks that the value of his work lies in the effects it has on his readers. To him, these readers are definitely not a select company of kindred spirits. On the contrary, the writer and his readers are more like opponents: through his novels and stories the writer confronts his readers, against their will, with something unpleasant and disorderly. This may be considered as the outspoken modernist and avant-garde side of Hermans' poetics. The aggressiveness of the logic of singularity is engendered by the fact that of the series of oppositions which are mobilized in 'Antipathieke romanspersonages' (such as antipathetic character/sympathetic character, personal myth/collective myth, negative solidarity/positive solidarity, spoilsport/player) the first term of the opposition is violently opposed to the second, but in each case without offering a concrete alternative. The game the oppositions produce is, as it were, an aggressiveness of emptiness; they represent a 'creative nihilism' as Hermans calls it. This is the meaning of the enigmatic quote at the beginning of the story 'Het grote medelijden' ('The Great Compassion'): it refers to the message the I does not bring, an anvil on which he hammers without forging anything, and the empty hands with which he lets the reader go.

There is one important opposition in 'Antipathieke romanspersonages' which does not fit this overall scheme, and that is the opposition between literature and science. This seems to be of a different nature. One of the fascinating aspects of Hermans' intellectual views is that he reserves a special place for science alongside literature.

To shed light on the rather unusual dynamics this creates, it is helpful to contrast Hermans with equally pessimistic and uncompromising thinkers such as Adorno and Heidegger. They too conceived art in terms of singularity, and their singularity is in fact as empty as Hermans'. Art's contribution to society emphatically escapes every concrete articulation. Any such articulation is conceived as a kind of hostile domestication by a thoroughly false world: it betrays art's (impossible and self-contradictory) aspiration to point beyond this false world. Like Hermans, they mobilized this empty singularity against the sameness of the masses. But unlike Hermans, they both took science to be an integral part of this overall [20] and hermetically closed sphere of sameness, a sphere which is subjected to the equalizing force of concepts, the *Verblendungszusammenhang* (Adorno) or *Gestell* (Heidegger). Consequently, both thinkers formulated aesthetics of the sublime: the other (or singularity) cannot be presented.⁵⁹ It could be argued that Hermans' poetics also implies an aesthetic of the sublime, namely of the unrepresentable. The personal mythology is not a concrete myth, the spoilsport does not play a concrete move, and solidarity consists of hate. But, remarkably, science seems to be exempt from this aggressive logic of singularity. Those novels that are situated in the

academic milieu – such as *Nooit meer slapen* (Beyond Sleep, 1966), *Onder professoren* (Among Professors, 1975), *Uit talloos veel miljoenen* (Out of Countless Many Millions, 1980) – do not so much satirize science as such, but the scientific endeavour as an almost always all too human activity.



If we examine the ways in which Hermans describes science, he appears to situate beauty in the realm of science: science is a *harmonic dissonant*. For Hermans, science represents the suggestion that the world is orderly, that is, purposeful, constructed after all. This is not just a neutral or objective observation for Hermans: countless instances in his work show that his relation to science, technique, machines and logic is affectively highly charged, for instance his short treatise containing a declaration of love for a specific type of machine, published under the funny title *Machines in bikini* (*Machines in Bikini*, 1974).⁶⁰

The sublimity of literature lies in the fact that a blind man (with a little help from an equally blind writer) can see that he is blind after all. In our opinion, this summarises Hermans' aesthetics of nihilism in a nutshell.⁶¹ But in his nihilistic worldview there is always the suggestion of beauty as well. That is what gives his work its unique dynamism. And maybe in the end this unique dynamism can be identified as his personal mythology. [21]

Notes

1. This article is part of the NWO research programme ‘The Power of Autonomous Literature: Willem Frederik Hermans.’ This article would not have been possible without the discussions in the research team (Geert Buelens, Laurens Ham, Ewoud Kieft, Aukje van Rooden and Daan Rutten).
2. The English translation of ‘Antipathieke romanspersonages’ (‘Unsympathetic Fictional Characters’) is appended to this article.
3. ‘Ze weten niet dat ze de boodschap die ik niet breng nederig hebben te aanvaarden en gedienstig moeten verbreiden, in hun oren het gedreun van altijd hetzelfde aambeeld waarop ik hamer zonder iets te smeden. Ze begrijpen niet dat de lege handen waarmee ik bij ze binnenkom, hen kunnen verlossen van de verschrikkelijke volte waarin zij de wereld laten stikken.’, Een wonderkind of een total loss (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1977), p. 177. Unless indicated otherwise, translations are ours.
4. See the interview with Hermans in *Scheppend nihilisme*, ed. by Frans A. Janssen (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam 1979), pp. 105–6.

5. In the US, this ‘novel of worldly disengagement trembling on the edge of tragedy, all the more comic for being related in Hermans’ best poker-faced manner’ (Coetzee) was compared with the work of Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut.
6. ‘Ik ben met niemand solidair. Ik ben alleen mijn eigen bondgenoot en niet eens door dik en dun.’, Een wonderkind of een total loss, pp. 223-4.
7. ‘De bêta-wetenschappen zijn mijn kwade geweten’, *Soma* 2 (1970), no. 10-11, p. 17.
8. ‘De mens is een chemisch proces als een ander. Wie of wat hij is, beweert, gelooft, doet alleen ter zake zolang hij leeft, maar dan niet meer. Alles kan gebeuren en alles gebeurt, zonder dat de zon verbleekt of de vogeltjes ophouden te zingen.’, *Volledige werken* 11 (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2011), pp. 32-3.
9. ‘Een roman waarin alles wat gebeurt en alles wat beschreven wordt, doelgericht is; waarin bij wijze van spreken geen mus van het dak valt, zonder dat het een gevolg heeft en waarin dit alleen geen gevolg mag hebben, wanneer het de bedoeling van de auteur geweest is, te betogen dat het in zijn wereld geen gevolg heeft als er mussen van daken vallen. Maar alleen dan.’, *Volledige werken* 11, p. 125.
10. William Marx, *L'Adieu à la littérature. Histoire d'une dévalorisation (XVIIIe-XXe siècle)* (Paris: Minuit, 2005).
11. See Thomas Vaessens, *Het boek was beter: literatuur tussen autonomie en massificatie* (Inaugural lecture) (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006) and Thomas Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman. Literatuur, autoriteit en engagement* (Vantilt: Nijmegen, 2009).
12. Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004). Attridge presents an interesting discussion of the concept of singularity without delving too deeply into the philosophical intricacies. For anyone interested in these, Timothy Clark’s *The Poetics of Singularity: The Counter-Culturalists Turn in Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot and the later Gadamer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005) offers a good introduction.
13. ‘Hoe datgene wat ons raakt en ons buiten onszelf brengt een geheel wordt waarin wij onszelf terugvinden, dat kan zich enkel openbaren als in een donkere spiegel. Het dient [22] zich aan als iets vreemds dat ons tegelijk unheimlich vertrouwd is.’, Frank vande Veire, *Als in een donkere spiegel. De kunst in de moderne filosofie* (Nijmegen: Sun, 2002, p. 356).
14. Wittgenstein’s first book *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* (1921) ends with the words: ‘Of which one cannot speak, one should be silent’. Wittgenstein did remain silent for some eight years after this but, although he eventually abandoned some of the views expressed in his first book, it seems that *Philosophische Untersuchungen* are not devoted to what can be said but rather to what cannot be said; to what is said but it can be doubted, to say the least, whether there was any point in saying it. [...] Wittgenstein takes the view that god is an assumption about which, with or without logic, nothing meaningful can be said. Nor can logic say anything meaningful about life’s problems (*Why am I alive? Why here, now? Who am I? Why do we die?*), *Volledige Werken* 11, pp. 189 ff.
15. See for instance Floris Cohen, *How Modern Science Came into the World* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).
16. Beyond Sleep, trans. by Ina Rilke (New York: The Overlook Press, 2006).

17. In Herinneringen van een Engelbewaarder. ('We zijn in staat te denken dat we zeer verre van God zijn, wegens deze wolk van niet weten tussen ons en hem, maar het zou stellig juister zijn te zeggen dat wij veel verder van hem zijn als er geen wolk van vergeten is tussen ons en de gehele schepping'.)
18. 'Dit is ook de basis van alle zelfkritiek: wie iets leest dat hij slecht vindt, wordt geconfronteerd met een wereld die zijn bestaan ontkent. Met die wereld mag hij niets gemeen hebben, op gevaar zelf ten onder te gaan. Zelfkritiek is de waakzaamheid die nimmer verslappen mag, dat de "anderen" eens gelijk mochten hebben.', *Mandarijnen op zwavelzuur* (Paris: De Mandarijnenpers, 1983), p. 11.
19. At first sight, this seems radically opposed to the view expressed by Levinas for example, for whom the 'I' is morally summoned by the Other. This requires a more detailed discussion but we feel that things are not as straightforward as they seem. For Levinas, the Other should be recognized in his uniqueness, and it is precisely the lack of uniqueness (or, to put it differently, the mediocrity of sameness) that Hermans considers a lethal threat to the uniqueness of his 'I'. Therefore the enemy is not so much the Other as the sameness of all the others (who may be right after all).
20. 'Wat is een sympathiek romanpersonage? Het is een personage waarover de schrijver niet meer bekend maakt dan de massa, in zijn op schijnwaarden gebaseerde onderlinge verkeer, in het openbaar over zichzelf wil weten', *Volledige werken* 11, p. 131.
21. 'De journalist formuleert wat de massa denkt, de schrijver bestrijdt wat de massa denkt en brengt aan het licht wat de massa niet durft te denken.', ibidem, p. 130.
22. Ibidem, p. 131.
23. 'Het gemiddelde publiek eist romanhelden die braaf zijn zonder een al te goed voorbeeld te geven. Helden van menselijk formaat, noemen de journalisten dat; ook wel: mensen van vlees en bloed.', ibidem, p. 132.
24. 'De held van wat ik gemakshalve maar de serieuze roman zal noemen, heeft andere dimensies dan de 'menselijke', hij is van andere materie gemaakt dan 'vlees en bloed'. Alle ware romanhelden zijn goden of halfgoden, demonen, heroën, uitverkorenen, gezalfden, betoverden of profeten.', ibidem, p. 133. [23]
25. 'Ook de realistische roman is in wezen een mythische roman en zijn maker is een magiër.', ibidem, p. 126.
26. 'Romanschrijven is wetenschap bedrijven zonder bewijs.', ibidem, p. 133.
27. 'De werkelijkheidsbeschrijving die hij beoefent, is niet objectief, maar hoogstens conventioneel.', ibidem, p. 134.
28. 'De realistische roman is een mythisch verhaal, omdat de realiteit grotendeels een mythische realiteit is, geconstitueerd door de algemene opinie van een groep, die uit al het waarneembare een aantal waarnemingen uitkiest en combineert tot een mythe.', ibidem, p. 136.
29. 'Alleen verkochte journalisten kunnen het mythische karakter van de roman verwerpen uit naam van de maatschappelijke d.w.z. commerciële mythen die zij in hun kranten voor de alleen zaligmakende werkelijkheid uitgeven: de werkelijkheid van de voorgoed gedresseerde mee marcheerder wie de zweep van een dictator als muziek in de oren klinkt of in wiens welvaartstaat middelmatigheid het sacrosancte criterium is.', ibidem, p. 136.

30. ‘Alleen dan is het voor een schrijver de moeite waard geschreven te hebben, als hij de zekerheid heeft hardop uit te spreken, wat zijn publiek wel heeft geweten, maar altijd heeft verzwegen; wat het gedroomd heeft, maar bij het ontwaken verdrongen.’, *ibidem*, p. 129.
31. ‘Alleen die schrijvers zijn werkelijk schrijvers, die de bedoeling hebben meer te zien dan het publiek ziet, die meer willen erkennen dan er tot zij geschreven hadden, was erkend.’, *ibidem*, p. 129.
32. ‘Alleen blindgeborenen kunnen de schrijver verwijten dat hij liegt; hij liegt nooit. Hij kan niet liegen waar geen waarheid is.’, *ibidem*, p. 136.
33. One could also claim that the one implies the other, as Aukje van Rooden does in *L’Intrigue dénouée* (Plot Unravelled): ‘en ceci réside l’ambiguïté inhérente à la structure du mythe: la puissance particulière du mythe est proportionnelle à son impuissance. Le mythe est aussi ce qui révèle qu'il n'y a pas d'origine, de développement ou de destin si ce n'est pas récité, composé, noué.’, Aukje van Rooden, *L’Intrigue dénouée. Politique et littérature dans une communauté sans mythes*, (unpublished PhD thesis, Tilburg University: 2010), p. 93.
34. ‘Van welke aard is het onmogelijke dat de schrijver wil? Het is van mythologische aard, want het is de onsterfelijkheid.’, *ibidem*, p. 140.
35. ‘Werkelijke onsterfelijkheid zou hem in staat moeten stellen eenmaal alles wat verkeerd gegaan is goed te maken, eenmaal alle schade in te halen.’, *ibidem*, p. 141.
36. ‘Daarom probeert hij zich een nieuw bestaan op te bouwen in een nieuwe omgeving. Hij is een geestelijke emigrant.’, *ibidem*, p. 141.
37. ‘Zijn kunst is het scheppen van een sfeer waarin bepaalde vragen niet passen. Iedere verteller hypnotiseert zijn publiek.’, *ibidem*, p. 137.
38. ‘Het kind dat het sprookje van de Gelaarsde Kat krijgt te horen, waarin een kat zijn eigenaar met brutaliteit moord en bedrog schatrijk maakt, protesteert niet. De kat en zijn baas worden voorgesteld als sympathieke niet-sterken die slim moeten zijn; hun slimheid is een deugd en de deugd wordt beloond. Moraal: geen misdaad is de zwakke ongeoorloofd. Maar deze moraal formuleert niemand hardop. Wie het toch zou doen is een spelbreker.’, *ibidem*, p. 137. [24]
39. ‘Ons leven is maar een spel of een komedie, ook doden en doodgaan is geen ernst. Het herhalen van deze triviale opvatting zou geen zin hebben, als er in dit leven niet altijd toch iets serieus werd genomen. Ernst was voor de oude schrijvers het leven na dit leven, het hiernamaals. Ernst is voor de modernen de logica, het strikt logische denken dat zich strikt aan tevoren opgestelde regels houdt.’, *ibidem*, p. 146.
40. ‘De illusie van de realistische en naturalistische schrijvers is geweest een spel te willen scheppen dat nooit uit zou kunnen raken, antwoord te geven op alle vragen. Het is niet mogelijk gebleken een onbeëindigbaar spel te scheppen door zich te houden aan de realiteit [...].’, *ibidem*, p. 137.
41. ‘Het is niet mogelijk gebleken een onbeëindigbaar spel te spelen door zich te houden aan ‘de realiteit’, maar het zoeken naar een spel dat niet gebroken kan worden, het antwoord geven op alle vragen, zelfs door ze nadrukkelijk niet te beantwoorden, is het streven van elke serieuzer schrijver, altijd, overal.’, *ibidem*, p. 137.
42. Referring to Jean-Luc Nancy, one could say that the aim of the literary, personal myth is to ‘rejouer hors des mythologies éteintes toute la puissance du mythe, de la ressaisir dans la règle d'un autre jeu.’ (Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Compagnie de Blanchot’, in *Revue des sciences humaines* 253 (1999), 241.) One

could also say that the aim of the personal myth is to deprive collective mythology of its logos, as Van Rooden has it: ‘une mytho-logie proprement dite [est] une jonction de muthos et de logos. Le mythe, nous l'avons vu, ce n'est pas seulement ce qui apporte une certaine ordonnance par la parole, mais aussi ce qui donne par cela même une certaine constellation de sens qui à la fois le légitime et le conserve comme ordre nécessaire.’, *L'Intrigue dénouée. Politique et littérature dans une communauté sans mythes*, p. 95.

43. See Aukje van Rooden ‘Het gelijk van de schrijver. Willem Frederik Hermans’ fictieve discussie met Jean-Paul Sartre’, in *Nederlandse Letterkunde* 17 (2012), 3.
44. ‘Waarheid is niets anders dan een rode slagboom waarachter de onzekerheid begint. Waaheidzoekers zijn niets anders dan gedrevenen tot de onzekerheid!’, *Ik heb altijd gelijk*, Volledige werken 2, p. 209.
45. ‘Soms wordt dit geloof op aantoonbare wijze bewaarheid, maar meestal niet. Toch, hoe vaak het ook gelogenstraf wordt, tot in zijn kern geschockt wordt het nooit, want anders zou de schrijver voorgoed zijn mond houden en zich gewillig laten opluiten in een krankzinnigengesticht.’, *ibidem*, p. 129.
46. ‘De schrijver geeft de indruk boven andere mensen te staan, juist omdat hij ze beschrijft, omdat hij ze in zijn roman als materiaal hanteert, omdat hij ze beoordeelt, of, ten minste, in staat is ze in alle soorten licht en duisternis te plaatsen die hij gewenst acht.’, *Volledige werken* 11, p. 131.
47. ‘In feite veracht de schrijver zichzelf om dezelfde reden waarom hij de massa veracht. Tussen de schrijver en de massa bestaat een diepverborgen solidariteit. Een solidariteit niet alleen op wederzijdse haat gebaseerd, maar ook op overeenkomstige zelfhaat. De lezer haat in de schrijver zichzelf, de schrijver haat zichzelf in zijn personages.’, *ibidem*, p. 131.
48. ‘Lezers die dit niet aanvaarden, begrijpen de wezenlijke functie van de roman niet. Zij worden alleen tevreden gesteld door journalistiek.’, *ibidem*, p. 131.
49. ‘Sympathieke romanhelden zijn De Drie Musketers die links en rechts andere mensen overhoop steken voor niemandal. Enz. enz. Serieuze romanschrijvers schrijven niet [25] voor zulke genieters. Daarvoor haten zij zichzelf te veel, daarvoor nemen zij zichzelf teveel kwalijk dat hun daden zoveel achtergebleven zijn bij de mythologische grootheid van hun fantasie.’, *ibidem*, p. 139.
50. ‘Toch blijft het indrukwekkend dat onze bandopnemer, onze telefoon, onze T.V. en onze raketten (soms) ten uitvoer brengen wat er van ze verwacht wordt. Het is niet alleen indrukwekkend, maar het is ook een harmonische dissonant in onze essentieel fantastische, mythische disharmonie. [...] Het zou ook kunnen zijn dat in de kosmos een bepaald ordeningsprincipe aanwezig is en dat enige enkelingen die later succesrijke wisoof natuurkundigen worden, gedeeltelijk toegankelijk zijn voor de stille suggestie van dit ordenend principe.’, *ibidem*, p. 146.
51. Ewoud Kieft, *Oorlogsmythen. Willem Fredrik Hermans en de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2012).
52. ‘Ik kan hem zoeken als hij er niet is, maar hem niet ophangen als hij er niet is. / Men zou kunnen willen zeggen: “Dan moet hij er toch ook zijn als ik hem zoek.” / – Dan moet hij er ook zijn als ik hem niet vind, en ook als hij helemaal niet bestaat.’, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Filosofische onderzoeken*, trans. by Hans W. Bakx (Meppel: Boom, 1976), p. 186.
53. See L.S. and R. Penrose, ‘Impossible Objects: a Special Type of Visual Illusion’, in *British Journal of Psychology* 49 (1958), 31-3. See also Oscar Reutersvärd, *Onmogelijke figuren* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff / Landshoff, 1983) and Bruno Ernst, *Avonturen met onmogelijke figuren* (Amsterdam: Aramith, 1985).

54. In 1978 Umberto Eco pointed out that Alphonse Allais' short story 'Un drame bien parisien' (1890) contains an impossible figure, in this case: producing an impossible reading. Eco published an extensive analysis of this story as 'Possible Worlds and Text Pragmatics: "Un drame bien parisien"', in Versus. Quaderni di studi semiotici, no. 19/20 (gennaio-agosto 1978), 5-72, which was later reprinted as 'Chapter Eight. Lector in Fabula: Pragmatic Strategy in a Metanarrative Text' in Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington / London: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 200-66. In this context it is remarkable that Willem Frederik Hermans opened his first essay on Wittgenstein ('Wittgenstein's levensvorm' in 1964) with the words: 'Wittgenstein's Philosophische Untersuchungen is een boek om nagelbijter bij te worden. Wittgenstein zal erin slagen taalgebruikers hetzelfde gevoel te geven dat iemand krijgen zou die, bij het open afdraven van trappen ertoe zou komen na te denken over elke stap, voordat hij zijn voet durft neer te zetten. Er is kans dat het de Wittgenstein-lezer zal vergaan als de man met de bijzonder mooie baard uit het verhaal La Barbe van Alphonse Allais.', Volledige Werken 11, p. 189.
55. Using the semantics of the modal logic, the so-called possible world semantics, Wilbert Smulders gives in his dissertation a detailed description of the illusion/delusion in Hermans' *The Dark Room of Damocles*. See W.H.M. Smulders, *Literaire misleiding in De donkere kamer van Damokles* (Utrecht: HES uitgevers, 1983).
56. 'Een geschenk van de hemel is het, Alfred zegt Eva, echt een geschenk van de hemel', Volledige werken 3, p. 711, translation by Ina Rilke in *Beyond Sleep*, p. 308.
57. 'Wetenschap is de titanische poging van het menselijke intellect zich uit zijn kosmische isolement te verlossen door te begrijpen!', Volledige werken 3, p. 418, translation by Ina Rilke in *Beyond Sleep*, p. 8. [26]
58. About *The Dark Room of Damocles*, a selection:
D. Betlem, 'De geboorte van een dubbelganger', Merlyn 3 (1966), no. 4, 276-90; Idem, 'Van Jean Paul tot Van der Waals. Nogmaals "De geboorte van een dubbelganger"', Raster 1 (1967-1968), no. 1, 71-93; G.J.P. van Hoek en C.B.M. Wingen, 'De donkere kamer: perspectief en interpretatie van het gebeuren in "De donkere kamer van Damokles" van Willem Frederik Hermans', De nieuwe taalgids 67 (1974), no. 2, 89-118; Frans Janssen, Over 'De donkere kamer van Damokles' van Willem Frederik Hermans (Amsterdam: Wetenschappelijke Uitgeverij, 1983); Michel Dupuis, Eenheid en versplintering van het ik. Een onderzoek naar thema's, motieven en vormen in verband met de problematiek van de enkeling in het verhalend werk van Willem Frederik Hermans (Hasselt: Uitgeverij Heideland-Orbis, 1976); W.H.M. Smulders, *Literaire misleiding in 'De donkere kamer van Damokles'*; Ton Anbeek, 'Een romanschrijver zet zich af: W.F. Hermans en de naoorlogse literatuur', Maatstaf 31 (1983), no. 12, 73-82; Arthur Kooyman, "'De donkere kamer van Damokles': een constructie-analyse", Forum der letteren 29 (1988), no. 2 (juni), 116-23; Wilbert Smulders, 'Willem Frederik Hermans. De donkere kamer van Damokles', in Lexicon van Literaire werken, ed. by Ton Anbeek, Jaap Goedegebuure and Bart Vervaeck (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1989); Michel Dupuis, 'De donkere kamer van Damokles als "psychomachie"', in Verboden toegang. Essays over het werk van Willem Frederik Hermans, gevuld door een vraaggesprek met de schrijver, ed. by Wilbert Smulders (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1989), pp. 155-69; Ineke Bulte, 'Lezen in een donkere kamer', in Een halve eeuw geleden. De verwerking van de Tweede Wereldoorlog in de literatuur, ed. by Hans Ester and Wim de Moor (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1994), pp. 222-9; René Marres, Over de interpretatie van 'De donkere kamer van Damokles' van Willem Frederik Hermans (Leiden: Dimensie Boeken, 1996); Joke Holwerda, Andere tijden, andere visies. De oorlogsromans van W.F. Hermans (Groningen: Passage, 1997);

Maaike Meijer, ‘Voor altijd in een donkere kamer: een literaire anatomie van de mannelijkheidswaan’, *Armada* 13 (2007), 46, 95-107; Tonnus Oosterhoff. ‘Een ijlrroman’, *Revisor* 32 (2005), 5, 4-19; Sonja Pos, Dorbeck is alles! Thema’s, motieven en compositie in enkele romans en verhalen van W.F. Hermans, bezien vanuit de theorie van René Girard over navolging, rivaliteit en zondebokmechanisme (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).

About Beyond Sleep, a selection:

J. Fontijn, ‘Nooit meer slapen of naar het middelpunt der aarde’, *Tirade* 14 (1970), no. 160, 474-93; Hella S. Haasse, ‘Doodijs en hemelsteen (op het spoor van een woeste wandeling)’, *Raster* 5 (1970), no. 2, 177-206; August Hans den Boef, *Over Nooit meer slapen van Willem Frederik Hermans* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1984); G.F.H. Raat, ‘Alfred en zijn spiegelbeeld. Over de vertelsituatie in “Nooit meer slapen”’, in *Verboden toegang. Essays over het werk van Willem Frederik Hermans*, gevolgd door een vraaggesprek met de schrijver, ed. by Wilbert Smulders (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1989), pp. 204-28 ; Rudi van der Paardt, ‘Sporen van de Mantuaan: Vergilius bij W.F. Hermans en Hella S. Haasse’, in *Zoals de ouden zongen*, ed. by Karl Enenkel, Paul van Heck and Rudi van der Paardt (Emmeloord: Hermaion, 1998), pp. 141-58; August Hans den Boef, ‘Willem Frederik Hermans. Nooit meer slapen’, *Lexicon van Literaire werken*, ed. by Ton Anbeek, Jaap Goedegebuure and Bart Vervaeck (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1989); Jeroen Paalvast, ‘Erosie in “Nooit meer slapen”’, in *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse taalen letterkunde* 118 (2002), no. 3, pp. 177-83; Karina van Dalen-Oskam, ‘Professor Nummedal is niet alleen: [27] een analyse van de namen in Willem Frederik Hermans’ “Nooit meer slapen”’, *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse taalen letterkunde* 125 (2009), no. 4, pp. 419-49.

About Hermans en Wittgenstein: Koen Vermeiren, *Willem Frederik Hermans en Ludwig Wittgenstein. Een taalspelen-analyse van het prozawerk van Willem Frederik Hermans*, uitgaande van de levensvorm van het sadistische en chaotische universum (Utrecht: HES uitgevers, 1986).

59. See Frans van Peperstraten, ‘Zag Heidegger het sublieme over het hoofd?’, *Esthetica*, tijdschrift voor kunst en filosofie (<http://www.estheticatijdschrift.nl>) and Peter V. Zima, *Ästhetische Negation. Das Subjekt, das Schöne und das Erhabene von Mallarmé und Valéry zu Adorno und Lyotard* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2005).
60. Volledige werken 11, pp. 749-63. In fact, Hermans’ position is slightly more complicated than sketched here. The way in which Hermans attempts to get his typical modernist ‘sublime singularity’ across to his reader constitutes a literary form that is highly purposeful, and is thus more reminiscent of the concept of beauty. Time and again Hermans stresses that in a literary work every detail must have a meaning and that chance should be ruled out. His polemics against the experimental novel and his defense of the classical novel point in the same direction. But this is less straightforward than it seems as he intends to turn his novels into highly purposeful machines that undo themselves (like *The Dark Room of Damocles*), and so unmask the utter purposelessness of reality. In Hermans’ view of science, we may observe similar double aspects. Apart from having an element of beauty, science also has a tinge of the sublime. Professor Nummedal’s somewhat bombastic exclamation in *Beyond Sleep* we already quoted above, beautifully expresses that sentiment: “What is science? Science is the titanic endeavor of the human intellect to break out of its cosmic isolation through understanding”, *Beyond Sleep*, p. 8. One could describe this highly complex and paradoxical tension in Hermans’ worldview by saying that literature gets the sublime across by way of the beautiful, whereas science achieves beauty by way of the sublime. For Hermans’s view on science see also Frans Ruiter, ‘Vrolijke en

minder vrolijke wetenschap: een confrontatie tussen Gerrit Krol en Willem Frederik Hermans’, *Gewina*, 29 (2006) 4, 230-9.

61. See about this concept in the German context: Bruno Hillebrand, *Ästhetik des Nihilismus. Von der Romantik zum Modernismus* (Stuttgart: Metzlerische Verlagbuchhandlung, 1991).

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Appendix

(Translation by Michele Hutchison; Translation supported by the Letterenfonds, Amsterdam)

Unsympathetic Fictional Characters by W.F. Hermans

1. The only writers who are true writers are those who intend to see more than the reader sees, who mean to recognise more than was recognised prior to them writing about it. Every reader forms an enormous obstacle to the writer in this, all thoughts of an actually existing readership inhibit and, in so doing, pervert the writer's pronouncements.

It is therefore only worth having written when the writer is certain he has expressed what his reader knew but remained silent about; what his reader dreamed of but repressed upon awakening.

I will admit that this implies a belief that the reader has the same mental constitution as the writer deep down.

Sometimes this belief is incarnated in clearly demonstrable ways, but mostly it is not.

Yet, however often it is denied, it will never be rocked to the core, otherwise the writer would hold his tongue for good, and be willingly consigned to a mental asylum. The writer only earns his freedom of movement by continually convincing his enemies that they have no right to accuse him of anything, that it is them, their mendacious society (every society is mendacious, whenever, wherever it is), their absurd knowledge, their stupid ignorance, their hypocritical forgetfulness, their unfounded laws, their corrupt beliefs, their futile striving for self-preservation or even success, their temporary nature, their irrelevancy, as despised as his own. Hammering it into their heads that they have no right to judge him, that they do not even have that spurious right they call right. (Anyway, is there any other kind of right? Anyone believing that a 'true' right exists or is even thinkable becomes a journalist before he knows it. A journalist formulates what the masses think and the writer disputes what the masses think and reveals what they do not dare to think.)

2. A novel is a book about people. There are also novels which are not about people; novels primarily featuring landscapes, beautiful scenery, conditions or [32] cities. There are countless examples of this latter type, particularly in Dutch literature. These novels are boring. Why are there so many of them in Dutch literature and why are they boring?

I cannot address these questions here.

I will limit myself to the people written about in novels about people. What kind of people?

Are they really people?

How do novels differ from other books about people, such as sociological and psychological studies or historical treatises?

3. Readers divide the people dealt with in novels into sympathetic and unsympathetic characters.

The sympathy or the antipathy that a fictional character arouses is rarely or never limited to just these characters but will extend to the writer of the novel, even though the latter does not feature in the book at all.

Many readers have the impression and many writers give that impression that writers consider themselves better than the non-writing masses.

The writer gives the impression that he is superior to other people precisely because he describes them, because he uses them as material in his novels, because he judges them, or at least is capable of placing them in all kinds of light and darkness he considers desirable.

Yet, this is not a reason for placing himself above the masses. In fact, the writer despises himself for the same reasons he despises the masses. There is a deeply buried solidarity between the writer and the masses. It is a solidarity not only based on mutual hatred, but also on a corresponding self-hatred. The reader hates the writer in himself, the writer hates himself in his fictional characters.

Readers who do not accept this fail to understand the essential function of the novel. Only journalism satisfies them.

Writers who do not understand this are not writers but journalists. Only these kinds of writers, who are in fact journalists, can bring sympathetic characters into existence.

What is a sympathetic fictional character?

It is a character the writer does not reveal more about than the masses, in their interactions based on spurious values, publicly want to know about themselves.

Anyway, as strange as this may seem, the sympathy or antipathy roused by a character has nothing to do with the virtue or vice, as measured by the generally-recognised criteria, which he displays, or the degree to which he appears to share the widespread conditioned responses. He can commit a murder every day and rape a different sister every night, he can turn out to be a racist or an anti-Semite, and yet the audience can still find him sympathetic – as long as at the end of the book the sister turns out to be a changeling so that the universal innate taboo is not broken, as long as the murders are presented as heroic deeds, as long as he [33] allows himself an otherwise contemptuous act of friendliness towards a Jew, and he gives his faithful black driver a generous tip at the end of the year and sends him to church at Christmas.

How sympathetic he is, as long as nothing is examined too deeply, as long as nothing is delved into!

Sympathy or antipathy is not a question of virtuousness, but purely of dimensions.

For years I have been planning to write a book with a protagonist whose character is as pure as snow: someone with an unbelievable amount of love for his fellow men, someone who never gets rich at the cost of others, a Jain monk who wears a cloth in front of his mouth so as not to inhale a single innocent fly, and sweeps the ground in front of his feet so as never step to on a worm. A monster of saintliness! I have only consigned this project to the backburner because of the risk that his monstrous saintliness won't turn out to be big or overwhelming enough and that the average reader will believe himself or his grandmother portrayed and flattered.

But it remains one of my greatest worries. The masses want goodness in a novel's hero, but it has to be the kind of goodness with which mediocrity can strike a compromise. A goodness which compared to the goodness of the average tax payer or what he considers this to be, is not made to look criminal. 'Setting too good an example is a kind of slander seldom forgiven,' Benjamin Franklin said.

The average reader demands protagonists who are good without setting too good an example. 'Heroes of human proportions' the journalists call that, and also 'people of flesh and blood.' They mean weak flesh and the blood of bloodsuckers. But no one will notice this, as long as the protagonist (just like the average citizen in daily life) does not express any subversive

thoughts. Criminal or ignominious deeds are much less noticeable than an acerbic tongue or a so-called ‘negative’ outlook on life. The judging of actions and deeds, requires the reader to possess power of judgement, but a judgement is often already worked into the protagonist’s verbal utterances. This makes nothing so difficult as having the character of a novel say something which the writer intends ironically, nothing leads to so many misunderstandings.

The hero of what I will call for convenience the serious novel, has different dimensions from the ‘human’, he is made from something other than ‘flesh and blood’. All true fictional heroes are gods or demi-gods, demons, heroes, chosen ones, the anointed, the enchanted or prophets.

It is possible that when Flaubert wrote *Un Cœur simple*, he thought that his simple heroine represented nothing more than a portrait of the average uneducated servant. And yet she is much more. She stands up to the idea that the Holy Ghost is a dove, since a dove cannot speak, and in so doing becomes the prophet of a new religion in which a stuffed parrot is worshiped as a fetish. [34]

4. The realistic novel is also essentially a mythical novel, and its creator a magician. Not a psychologist, not a sociologist, not a biologist, but a magician who keeps his own personal natural science alive.

Realism is intrinsically a mythical discipline. It supposes that the everyday reality of life, birth, love, aggression, fear and death is knowable to the same degree of perfection that physics knows physical reality, if physics can be perfect.

Anyone considering everyday reality scientifically: sociologists, psychologists, even economists, know that this is not the case.

To write a realistic novel, to recreate reality, presupposes that the writer knows and has a command of the mechanisms of reality in the same way a technician has mastered the mechanisms of a calculator.

However, the realist writer has not mastered the mechanisms of his reality, he knows only, like every novelist, every fantasist, the mechanics he has invented himself. The realist novelist is a magician too, his story is not an objective account either, but a legend. His objectivity is a method, nothing more. The way he goes about describing reality is not objective; at the very most, it is conventional.

Now the proposition that the natural laws of inanimate matter are nothing but conventions is easy to defend. But these are a different kind of conventions from the unwritten conventions of reality which the historian, the journalist and the realistic novelist must adhere to.

If, as sometimes happens, novels give many readers the impression of rendering ‘reality’, of being nothing other than ‘reality’, this is only because the writer has succeeded in conveying his mythical reality to the reader by suggestion; exactly as the writer of fairytales conveys his fairytale world to readers who know objectively that the things he is recounting cannot have happened. The only difference is that, in the first example, the difference between the writer’s mythical reality and ‘real’ reality is difficult to demonstrate. Usually it only becomes apparent with the passing of the years on account of the fact that ‘real’ reality is only barely known and can only be barely known. (Descriptions of reality are subject to trends.)

Another, second reason, is that, apart from the fact that he does not reproduce the everyday, barely-known reality with pretensions of realism, the writer of fairytales (fantasist, science fiction writer etc.) subjects the physical, accurately known reality to his own fantasy: he turns a mouse into a lion, he allows hands to break iron, he places a tropical jungle in

Antarctica and palaces on the planet Saturn. Space, time and identity impose no limits on him. (To offset this, fairytales and fantastical stories do not deviate from the generally accepted morals: evil is punished, virtue is rewarded, the characters remain schematic.)

But the only primary difference between realist and fairytale writers can be found in these different attitudes towards the natural laws, in as much as it is a difference in practice. Most readers are not physicists and cannot pinpoint the places where the writer's propositions match those of physics and where they do [35] not. (For example, Jules Verne's reputation as a prophesier of scientific discoveries is based on this, even though his cannonball could never have found its way to the moon, and it will be a long time before a nuclear submarine is as good as Captain Nemo's.)

If then a story wants to be a fairytale or a fantastical tale, its 'untruthfulness' must have an unusually bold shape.

The same goes for the novel's confrontation with geographical and historical realities. If I publish a novel in the Netherlands in which I say that the Champlain Hotel on the corner of Dufferin and Main Street in Caraquet (Canada) was burned down in 1867 – how many readers can find out whether my statement is true, who will know whether Dufferin Street and Main Street intersected in Caraquet in 1868 [sic] and whether there was a hotel that... and so on. Who will know whether I am a realist or a fantasist by claiming this?

And yet, you could still investigate it. (Though nobody will.)

In terms of sociological and psychological realities, it is impossible to check the facts.

If, in 1930, someone had written about a doctor incarcerated in Leeuwarden for committing a murder with cyanide, who went on to commit a second cyanide murder in prison, they would have been considered a fantasist. But now, in 1960, something like that seems to have actually happened, so the incident could be the subject of a realistic story, even though a thorough police, psychiatric etc., investigation has not succeeded in making the incident probable. The judges, who are charged with determining reality and may not choose, will choose.

The realist novel is a mythical story because its reality is largely a mythical reality, made up of the general opinion of a group, who take a few observations from all that is observable and put them together to create a myth. Ninety-nine out of one hundred judgements are preconceptions, however commonly stated and shared.

The realist writer thinks he doesn't choose, but he does choose (in the way of a non-chooser) and his choosing is nothing less than a magical act.

Only the born blind can accuse the writer of lying; he never lies. He cannot lie where there is no truth. Only slavish journalists can reject the mythical character of the novel in the name of the social, i.e. commercial, myths which they publish in their newspapers as nothing but sanctifying reality: the reality of the indoctrinated fellow marcher who loves the dictator's whip, or in whose welfare state mediocrity is sacrosanct.

5. No single story, however realistic, can answer all the questions that could be asked of it. The art of the realist writer is to avoid overly crass objections, his powers of observation should not be inferior to those of the average observer. In short, he knows how to give the impression that everything tallies. And yet he [36] doesn't answer simple questions. His art is to create an atmosphere which excludes certain questions.

Every storyteller hypnotises his readers. When a child is told the fairytale *Puss in Boots*, in which a cat uses effrontery, murder and deceit to make his owner stinking rich, he does not protest. The cat and his owner are presented as sympathetic weaklings who have to be cunning;

their cunningness is a virtue and virtue must be rewarded. The moral of the story is that no criminal offence is prohibited for the weak. But no one says this out loud. Anyone doing so would be a killjoy.

Morals are harder to sidestep in realistic stories than in fairytales. But even in the most realistic play, the rocks are made of cardboard and the bathroom door actually opens onto the dark rear of the stage.

The realistic play or story is just a game that no one wants to break up – none of the realists in any case.

What does a child do when she no longer believes in fairytales? She will ask questions which the fairytales cannot answer. How can Santa's reindeers fly? As soon as the questions are asked, the game is over.

The illusion of realist and naturalist writers has been to create a game which can never end, answering all the questions.

It has not been possible to create a never-ending game by sticking to 'reality', but the search for a game that cannot be ended, being able to answer all questions, even by expressly not answering them, is what every serious writer strives for, of every place, or every time.

6. The art of novel writing would have ceased needing to exist if writers had succeeded in producing nothing but reality. Descriptions of reality are best left to sociologists and psychologists, after all.

Literature has a different function. The novelist I am talking about does not describe reality but creates a personal mythology and he does this deliberately, unlike the realist. His heroes are not 'people of flesh and blood' but personifications.

He can disguise them as he likes: as long dead rulers and generals, or as labourers and soldiers, or as farmers and the petty bourgeois, the kind we are all surrounded with all the time.

In the first case, the mythological hero is barely disguised as a being of flesh and blood: rulers and generals, as long as they have been dead for a while, are supreme mythical figures. This is why the general public has a clear preference for historical novels. They think they like historical novels because what is in them really happened, but that is not the real reason. The real reason is that the reader's subconscious experiences these novels as the language of the subconscious, as mythology, while his conscious mind suspects nothing.

The reader recognises in the heroes and princes beings of a different order from himself, he puts them into categories and renders them harmless, he accepts [37] them as phenomena which cannot hurt him. After all, he was not born 1900 years ago as a Roman Emperor, he does not have anything to do with Nero's or Caligula's atrocities. This is why he can secretly dream: if I'd been born 1900 years ago in Rome and crowned Holy Emperor, I could have taught Nero and Caligula a lesson or two about lascivious behaviour! Or he thinks: in Nero's place, I would have sent the lions back to their cages with a powerful wave of the hand and been generous enough to release the poor Christian prisoners from the arena. After reading this kind of novel, he feels like a better person. When he closes the book, he is forgiven all the failures and setbacks in his own life for a few moments, because he was born in the twentieth century. Until he feels the need to read another such novel, he is granted absolution to sleep in his own inferiority like in a soft bed of warm bodies and it does not cost him a thing.

Even the most terrible crimes are splendid, as long as they are committed by a historical figure and written with the inaccuracy common to every writer of history (let alone the writer of historical novels), just like the heroic deeds of Puss in Boots for a child.

Sympathetic protagonists are, for example, the Three Musketeers who stab people to death all over the place for a trifle, and so on, and so on.

Serious novelists do not write for this kind of hedonist. They hate themselves too much for this, they hold themselves responsible for the fact that their deeds are so inferior to the mythological greatness in their imagination. This is why the serious writer will not deal in murder and bagatelles, he will publish no deception as praiseworthy guile. Even though he is always the weakling, he will not always be clever.

Wanting the impossible, a sure sign of lunacy in the eyes of the non-writer, is at the centre of the writer's art and the only thing which makes his life worthwhile.

He does not have anything to do with 'realities' or with 'possibilities', in the way that politicians and journalists do. He does not have to tackle the question of whether his ideas are good for public spiritual health, like clergymen or healers do. The writer who concerns himself with what is possible and desirable is at most a pedagogue. Multatuli, Dostoyevsky and Zola were pedagogues, Henry Miller, Sartre and Kerouac were pedagogues. But luckily not all of the time, and not in all earnestness, even though they may have been ignorant of this themselves.

The writer who concerns himself with what is possible will limit his readership to those unimaginative creatures who know exactly what is possible and what is not.

A novelist's art, or any other kind of art, which limits itself to a certain audience has as little to do with art as science, which limits itself to a certain audience, is science (e.g. astrology). [38]

Scientific truths are applicable to every audience. They are universal and fundamental (as long as further developments have not proven the opposite, of course). Science which limits itself to a certain audience, for example school children, is not science, but a teaching method, pedagogy. No one would contest this.

In literature too, the difference between pedagogues and pioneers should be clear enough, but the newspaper reviewers, preachers, quacks, bellyachers and media magnates gloss over this as much as possible. They refuse to see the difference between Koestler and Kafka, between Harry Mulisch and Gerard Reve.

7. What is the nature of the impossible thing the writer wants? It is of a mythological nature, because it is immortality.

The longing for immortality is more complicated than believers realise. Man's attitude to the idea of immortality is ambivalent, to say the least.

On the one hand, man can only live as though he will still be alive tomorrow, i.e. tomorrow as well, and thereafter, eternally. On the other hand, which man of forty does not think with some regularity: another forty or fifty years at the most and thank god, it will all be over?

If he really wanted to be immortal, he would not think this. Real immortality would give him the opportunity to put right everything that had gone wrong, to make up for all damage done.

The writer is not this patient. He does not have enough time. He wants to make up for all the damage right now, prove his innocence, once and for all.

Whose life is free of deceit? Who has never been deceived? Are peace, friendship and love conceivable without deceit?

Who really does not get attached to anything? Not to the opinion others form of him and not to the opinion he has of himself?

While the non-writer only exists in the consciousnesses of the few people he knows personally and can only be judged by them, the writer steps right into the minds of thousands of strangers.

It is possible that there is no other psychiatric explanation for this remarkable behaviour than this: the writer is a person who cannot accept the image that he thinks the people around him have formed of him. This is why he tries to create a new existence in new surroundings. He is a spiritual emigrant.

8. There are two kinds of writers.

The first kind want to justify *themselves* as people.

The second kind want to justify themselves as writers.

The first kind are memoirists, in a more or less disguised form. They publish diaries, autobiographies, pseudo-autobiographies or novels in the first person.

Since they want to justify themselves as people, they will claim to stick to reality as much as possible, because otherwise, if they are caught out lying or fantasizing, they run the risk that the rest will not be believed. They want to justify themselves, [39] if necessary as monsters, their confession implies the statement: right, I'm a monster, but you, dear reader, are a monster too in your way.

'Pour moi, je le déclare hautement en sans crainte, quiconque, même sans avoir lu mes écrits, examinera par ses propres yeux mon naturel, mon caractère, mes mœurs, mes penchants, mes plaisirs, mes habitudes, et pourra me croire un malhonnête homme, est lui-même un homme à étouffer.' Rousseau

There is an unvoiced assumption that sincerity and having the courage to confess are virtues, eclipsing any sins confessed.

Readers value confessional writers when they think: 'I'm a monster, but luckily I'm not the only monster; the writer was a monster too and dared to openly admit it.'

The second kind of writer is much less afraid of being taken for a fantasist. He does not insist that his fantasies be believed, but claims that they contain a deeper form of reality and longs for this deeper reality to be justified. Freud wrote that the conscious content of a novel acts as bait for the unconscious content.

As every fisherman knows, the bait is no less important than the hook. Psychologically-minded newspaper critics, most of them shouting out that they won't be fooled, invariably claim that they can find the unconscious content, the 'hook', immediately. This leads to a lot of pointless writing, mainly of a defamatory nature. What the 'hook' is, the unconscious magnet in the consciously written whole, does not only depend on the writer's unconscious, but also on that of the reader not trained in psychoanalysis.

The deeper reality of the second kind of writer is immediately conceived as a mythological reality. He is no realist and does not believe in 'reality'.

His novel characters are not self-portraits or portraits of people the writer has met. They are incarnations of the wild jungle animals which live under the double bottom of the human soul.

The way they are presented, their location in time and space, in actually existing or previously having existed situations, are only secondary when it comes to arguing that the characters in a realist novel or historical account are as mythical as those in a fairytale. Presentation, identity, location in time and space etc. are not secondary when the writer has

come to realise that the difference or rather, the boundary, between the ‘real world’ and the mythical world is not clear, and that, in daily life, everybody creates in his mind his wife, his friends and his enemies – when he recognises just one world: precisely that of the mythical.

– When he has understood the consequences of reputations being made in the ‘real world’ and broken on the grounds of myth, when he has experienced the fact that millions have died in wars and concentration camps in the name of myth.

– When he has appreciated that the decisions taken even in the most simple of human lives are based partly on chance and partly on mistakes, and that the small [40] number we consider reasonable only have a lack of knowledge of the facts to thank for this.

X married the wrong woman. His family had all predicted this. Of course, thousands of women would have been better for X than the one he chose. But one forgets that X never had the opportunity to meet thousands of women. He could have chosen between perhaps two or three and even these two or three were spread over a ten-year period. *Not one* of these two or three happened (and no wonder!) to be suitable. What were his options? Would X have been better off remaining unmarried? In retrospect, yes, but if he had taken this course, he probably would have spent the rest of his unhappy, lonely life blaming himself for not marrying the woman who was now making him unhappy.

Y₁ has the same name as Y₂, who was a communist in his youth. Y₁’s name ends up in a secret dossier. Y₁ never gets promoted at work. Y₁ spends his whole life wondering where he went wrong. He goes to evening classes to retrain for a new career! He looks for the problem everywhere it isn’t and, here is the humorous climax, perhaps he dies thinking he finally discovered the cause. A knowing, acquiescent end, the family calls it. Who can count the truths that never come to light? In any case, Y₁’s life took an irreversibly and radically different course than it would have if an anonymous secret official had not confused him with Y₂.

Z is tried for an offence against the press code. Z is acquitted but becomes known as ‘the man from that trial’. In any situation where committees are charged with compiling lists of candidates, granting subsidies and more, somebody always remarks casually that Z is ‘the man from that trial.’ It is astonishing that the committees never put Z forward out of all the candidates they consider, and yet, nobody can say, let alone prove, that Z is being discriminated against.

In one country, three hundred years ago, an admiral almost captured the capital of an enemy island with his fleet. Three hundred years later, the country’s forces are so reduced that it has no chance of capturing a single enemy capital.

Nevertheless, it pays millions of guilders to keep an old, patched-up aircraft carrier in the fleet. But naturally no one talks about the admiral anymore.

9. Freud’s discovery of an unconscious beyond the reach of the rational will has become an integral aspect in judging human behaviour.

The influence of a person’s physical condition or his diet on his humour, his decisions, his life’s course has become a banal science.

Yet, the opinion that he is a rational being has not been hampered by these facts, nor by what has been learned about the deliberate or otherwise suggestions which he is exposed to on a daily basis.

If we dismiss all the other causes in which behaviour and ways of being (i.e. the average of all behaviours, rare partly-rational behaviour, and an enormous amount of irrational behaviour) escape the conscious rational control of the individual, we also dismiss the fact that

nobody knows where they are headed in the [41] long term, and so it could very well turn out that we are constantly hypnotized: intermittently by targeted advertising, press, television and radio, and permanently by everything that happens to us, everything we have experienced since birth and perhaps even before that.

Even resistance to this ‘post-hypnotic influence’ is a compulsion, as a rapid survey of alcoholics, vegetarians, teetotallers, idealisms, criminals and artists demonstrates.

There is not a single eccentric who can come up with something entirely new, and, in any case, who would appreciate it?

Resistance is accepted within the context of the subservient whole. Traditional society bears the society of artists like some skyscrapers bear a baroque tower or a Moorish villa on their roofs.

10. Life is just a game or a comedy, even death and dying are not serious. Repeating this trivial thought would be pointless if there was not always something in this life which was taken seriously all the same.

For past writers, a life after this life was serious, the hereafter.

For modern writers, logic, stringent logical thinking which stringently adheres to rules laid down in advance, is serious.

However, in order to remain stringently logical, this way of thinking is only suitable for concepts which were tailored to fit this kind of logical thought beforehand. Mathematical computations, for example.

Outside of mathematics, in physics, for instance, logic and truth become much more problematic.

Yet it remains impressive that our tape recorders, our telephones, our televisions and our rockets (sometimes) do what is expected of them. It is not only impressive, it is also a harmonic dissonance in our essentially fantastical, mythical disharmony. It proves to wit that unstable, hypnotized, obsessed, crazy human beings in certain instances and in certain very restricted conditions are capable of rational, or at least functional, decision-making.

At least that is how it looks. It does not have to be true at all. It could also be possible that there is a certain ordering principle present in the cosmos and that a few individuals who will become successful mathematicians or physicists later, are partly open to the silent suggestion of this ordering principle. (This idea explains the fact that even though each religion is chaos and myth in a Petri dish, some mathematicians and physicists are religious.)

Even the most intellectually gifted are only partly and temporarily capable of rational acts. The idea that scholars and chess masters are more rational outside of their areas of expertise than non-scholars, in their marriages, in their political, religious, ethical convictions, in their contact with other human beings and so is a common error. The best we can speak of in these areas is phony logic. [42]

Partly and temporarily: the number of minutes, even seconds each day that a scholar’s brain thinks rationally is negligible. He comes up with solutions in a flash: the rest of his thought is chaotic, even flawed. Chaotic, random, in short: mythical.

Sometimes these brains’ thoughts in other areas will be all the more mythical because the brain’s carrier does not recognize the mythical character of its thought, fixated as it is by the flashing by of the few seconds in which he actually thinks.

The great scholar A is anti-Semitic, the great scholar B is a communist sympathizer, the great scholar C sees communist spies everywhere, the great scholar D is a misogynist. They

carry out the same mathematical calculations with the same results but wear different ties and become excited about radically different outlooks on life.

Beyond their mathematics they are not very different from most imaginative writers, beyond their logic everything is paranoia, like it is with everyone.

In order to cope with this existence, they do not attempt to know reality, but the reality that their environment (i.e. the part of their environment that can help or damage them) holds up as reality, or else can be held up as reality – just like everyone.

11. In a world which no longer believes in immortality, a conduit can only be found in what, in old-fashioned terms, should be called a mythology of Evil.

This Evil is Death.

‘Death, where is your victory?’ the Christians ask. They look for the familiar path. The non-Christians see Death’s victory hour after hour, day after day, year in year out. Death does not only mean dying, the end of an organism, but the broader meaning of the end of every existent situation, the end of every instance.

Death does not only mean perishing, but also being forgotten, disappearing; death is not only killing and destroying, but also cheating and betraying.

The presence of a memory is not limited to humans. Inanimate matter has a memory too. But what is unique to people is that this memory is never completely available at any desired moment. This means that nobody knows the extent of what he remembers and what he does not. In this endless land of darkness, in which it is impossible to be in two places at the same time, which sometimes seems to move around in our bodies like a ribbon or a stream (we can cry with our eyes and then smile with our mouths when influenced by two memories), death constantly finds new prey.

(1960)