



Preface¹

Frans Ruiter and Wilbert Smulders, Utrecht University

It is a universally acknowledged truth that many great novels that made their way into the canon, from the Romantic period to our postmodern present, are preoccupied with moral and ethical issues. However, readers of these novels would be hard put to extract concrete moral maxims or lessons from them. Strangely enough, the kind of novels that propagate such maxims and lessons are usually doomed to oblivion, or, if not, ranked as second rate in the canon. One reason for this is that readers who are familiar with the Christian-humanist tradition know these morals inside out. That is why, according to one of the contributors to this issue “novels with an explicit moral message invariably bring about such boundless boredom”.² This casts a peculiar light on the functioning of literary institutions and practices in modern society. Outside the literary field, in the day-to-day business of society, moral ambiguity (not to speak of sheer amorality) is not something to be aspired to. Yet, in the literary domain, the reverse seems to apply.

So there would appear to be a contradiction between the values adhered to in literature and outside of it. Is it not surprising that despite this, society holds this morally fuzzy literature in such high esteem? That this literature is being awarded prestigious literary prizes, and taught in high school and at universities?

In this special issue of the *Journal of Dutch Literature* all contributions are devoted to this rather paradoxical situation of what is sometimes called “autonomous” literature. All the authors agree that autonomous literature does have a certain ethical commitment, a commitment not despite but thanks to its autonomous character. The eight contributors take the Dutch author Willem Frederik Hermans (1921-1995) as their point of reference. This author was chosen because he is a telling embodiment of this paradox. Together with Gerard Reve and Harry Mulisch, Willem Frederik Hermans was one of the “Three Grandees” of Postwar Dutch literature. Yet, he was always considered controversial. His literary work was highly praised, while his public image was far from favorable. His novels were admired, but his polemics evoked fear and rejection. He fought for truth, but was highly skeptical that there was a truth

¹ First drafts of the articles in this issue were discussed during a symposium on The Ethics of Autonomy (Utrecht, February 2014). This symposium was part of a research project “The Power of Autonomous Literature”, financed by NWO (Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research).

² Arnold Heumakers, *Onleefbare waarheden: Drie lezingen over literatuur en literaire kritiek* (Baarn: De Prom, 1990), p. 16.

that could be shared at all. His novels are swarming with morally derailed characters, yet this thoroughly ambiguous authorship was assigned ethical relevance and moral authority.

While all contributors to this volume tackle Hermans's work, each of them approaches the problem of the ethics of literary autonomy from a different angle. In the first contribution, **Andrew Goldstone** presents a survey of the arguments put forward in the other articles. His conclusion: "autonomy is many things, but is not *easy*: it is not a simple starting axiom but a matter of struggle". He lucidly situates the articles in the international modernism debate and sketches possibilities for further investigation. **Derek Attridge** writes about the concepts of literary autonomy and singularity. He holds the latter more appropriate to address the question of the ethics of the literary. **Frans Ruiter and Wilbert Smulders** analyse Bourdieu's view on autonomy and connect it with the concept of singularity as developed by Derek Attridge. **Thomas Vaessens** replies to Ruiter & Smulders and develops an alternative view of literary commitment. **Aukje van Rooden** argues that literature's ethical dimension lies primarily in the mode of being, in the ontology of works that we call literary. **Laurens Ham** introduces the concept of attitude into the debate on literary autonomy. He argues that the typical posture of autonomy is not one of detachment and demarcation, but of a lack of specialization. **Marc de Kesel** ventures an interpretation of Hermans's highly amoral short story 'An Emancipation' and discusses the significance of the imagination of Evil, referring to the theory of the gift. Finally, **Arnold Heumakers** takes a closer look at the infamous case of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, arguing that the work of this controversial author is undeniably committed, while pointing out how it is highly problematic from an ethical and political point of view. Heumakers connects this commitment to the romantic paradigm and to the work of Hermans, who was a great admirer of Céline's early work.

Several contributions refer to Hermans's essay 'Unsympathetic Fictional Characters' from 1960, while Marc de Kesel offers an interpretation of Hermans's first story 'An Emancipation' (1941). The English translation of both texts can be found in the appendix.