



Autonomy, Universality and Singularity: Bourdieu, Attridge, and Hermans¹

Autonomie, universaliteit en singulariteit: Bourdieu, Attridge en Hermans

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Abstract: What is the ethical value of autonomous literary fiction? Doesn't literary autonomy lead inevitably to a powerless l'art pour l'art position? In this article we approach these questions through a discussion of Bourdieu's ideas on the autonomy of the literary field, and we map his shifting position over the years. We argue that Bourdieu's concept of autonomy may fruitfully be connected with the notion of singularity of Derek Attridge. To conclude, we illustrate the power of this singularity through the concrete literary example of the 'autonomous' author Willem Frederik Hermans.

Keywords: autonomy, singularity, ethics, W.F. Hermans / autonomie, singulariteit, ethiek, W.F. Hermans

¹ This article is part of the NWO-funded project 'The Power of Autonomous Literature: Willem Frederik Hermans'.

Introduction

Willem Frederik Hermans has become known in post-war Dutch literature for his so called 'autonomous' poetics. For Hermans, fiction is not suitable for describing reality. In sharp contrast to chaotic reality, literary fiction offers the reader a parallel world in which everything is well ordered. His famous comment that in a good novel 'no sparrow is allowed to fall from the roof without it having consequences' should be read against this background. In real life, sparrows do fall from roofs without any consequences, but they do not in novels worth their name. This implies a fundamental split between reality and fiction. In this issue, Aukje van Rooden considers this to be an ontological difference. Without going that far, it does raise the question about the ethical value of such 'unreal' fiction. Does it necessarily lead to a toothless *l'art pour l'art* position? Is it not precisely this kind of idea that has caused the cultural devaluation of literature, as William Marx argued in *L'Adieu à la littérature. Histoire d'une dévalorisation* (2005)?

In this article we will raise these questions, starting from Bourdieu's findings about the autonomy of the literary field. Bourdieu's more theoretical reflections that accompanied his research, offer an excellent way into the complexities of the issue. For our purpose, it is especially interesting that Bourdieu initially takes position sharply against Kant, the father of autonomous aesthetics, but later on seems to mitigate his criticism somewhat. We will examine Bourdieu's ideas, and map his shifting position over the years. We will argue that Bourdieu's concept of autonomy may usefully be connected with Derek Attridge's notion of singularity. By way of conclusion we will illustrate the power of singularity through the case of the 'autonomous' author Willem Frederik Hermans. Although there is no indication that Hermans was familiar with Bourdieu's work, there is reason to assume that their views on art concurred in many ways. Both were very much aware of the historical contingency and exceptionality of the contemporary cultural situation, and of the *illusio* that is a crucial part of it. In 1951, Hermans wrote an essay in which, taking up a broad historical and anthropological standpoint, he comfortably outdid Bourdieu in his most sceptical moments:

Really, painters should never have to embrace a slogan like *l'art pour l'art*, because they are certainly no longer any good for anything else. It is a great error to think that 'Man' needs art, and always has through all ages. 'Man' is a physiological rag, and always has been. 'Man' doesn't need anything, not science, not art. All culture is the product of sociological accident. In Europe and America culture doesn't stand still for five minutes, in New Guinea it hasn't changed for five thousand years. Yet human beings live both here and in New Guinea [...]. Westerners and Papuans are most definitely the same people, only their habitus is different. There is no reason whatsoever why a Papuan wouldn't be able to produce high culture. However, until now the sociological accidents that create cultures failed to happen. 'Man' has no need for culture. Culture occurs somewhere, and it is only then that 'Man' makes himself believe that he needs it. [...] For 99% of the Europeans, culture is a matter of asserting oneself, not of aesthetic

enjoyment. [...] And even the need for true art, which exists in some parts of the world, has been for 99% traditionally and sociologically determined.²

Bourdieu would certainly not qualify ‘Man’ as a ‘physiological rag’, but for the rest the similarities in outlook on art and culture are quite remarkable. Both mercilessly debunk the idealised picture of art and reduce its status in society to less lofty human motives. Hermans even uses the word *habitus*, which would become a crucial concept in Bourdieu’s theory. It is also an important concept in our discussion, as we shall see.

Bourdieu on the Value of Autonomy

Bourdieu’s position on aesthetic autonomy is far from straightforward. In his later work, Bourdieu changed from a debunking critic into a passionate defender of autonomy and, as we will show here, he even seems to have moved to a position rather similar to Derek Attridge’s in his well-known *Singularity of Literature*.³

Bourdieu framed his extensive sociological study *Distinction* (1979) explicitly as a critique of Kantian aesthetics, but it is only in the conclusion that he addresses the issue directly and presents a negative characteristic of the Kantian notions of disinterestedness and pure taste. According to Bourdieu, Kant expresses disgust of anything that is conducive to superficial sensual pleasure: ‘Kant’s principle of pure taste is nothing other than a refusal, a disgust – a disgust for objects which impose enjoyment’.⁴

This contrast between pure taste and superficial, vulgar pleasure, between cultural and bodily pleasure, is (according to Bourdieu) ‘rooted in the opposition between the cultivated bourgeois and the people, the imaginary site of uncultivated nature, barbarously wallowing in pure enjoyment’.⁵ Bourdieu continues:

Pure pleasure – ascetic, empty pleasure which implies the renunciation of pleasure, pleasure purified of pleasure – is predisposed to become a symbol of moral excellence,

² ‘Werkelijk, schilders zullen er nooit een slogan als “l’art pour l’art” op na hoeven te houden, want ze zijn waarachtig nergens anders meer goed voor. Een grote vergissing begaat men door te denken dat “de” mens behoefte heeft aan kunst, altijd en door alle eeuwen. “De” mens is een fysiologisch vod en dat is hij altijd geweest. “De” mens heeft nergens behoefte aan, niet aan wetenschap, niet aan kunst. Alle cultuur is product van sociologisch toeval. In Europa en Amerika staat de cultuur geen vijf minuten stil, in Nieuw-Guinea is zij niet veranderd in vijfduizend jaar. Toch: zowel hier als in Nieuw Guinea wonen mensen, [...] Het zijn wel degelijk dezelfde mensen, Westerlingen en Papoea’s, maar hun habitus is verschillend. Er is geen enkele reden waarom de Papoea geen hoge cultuur zou kunnen voortbrengen, alleen: de sociologische toevalligheden die cultuur scheppen zijn in Nieuw-Guinea tot dusverre uitgebleven. “De” mens heeft geen behoefte aan cultuur. Cultuur is ergens en pas daarna maakt “de” mens zich wijs, dat hij er behoefte aan heeft. [...] Cultuur in “blanke” landen buiten Europa en ook voor 99% der Europeanen is een kwestie van zich doen gelden, niet van esthetisch genot. En zelfs: de innerlijke behoefte aan “ware kunst”, die op sommige plaatsen ter wereld voorkomt, is voor 99% traditioneel en sociologisch bepaald.’ Willem Frederik Hermans, ‘De lange broek als mijlpaal in de cultuur’, in Carel Willink, *De schilderkunst in een kritiek stadium* (Amsterdam: Peter van der Haar, 1981), p. 75. All translations are ours, unless indicated otherwise.

³ See also the insightful analyses of this friction in Edwin Praat, *Verrek, het is geen kunstenaar: Gerard Reve en het schrijverschap* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of Taste* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 488.

⁵ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 490.

and the work of art a test of ethical superiority, an indisputable measure of the capacity for sublimation which defines the truly human. What is at stake in aesthetic discourse, and in the attempted imposition of a definition of the genuinely human, is nothing less than the *monopoly of humanity*. Art is called upon to mark the difference between humans and non-humans [...].⁶

So, art that is called upon to mark the difference between humans and non-humans is by no means just a decoration of the bourgeois way of life. The stakes are very high, if not the highest possible. It should not come as a surprise that Bourdieu is extremely critical about this view: '[...] Kant's analysis of the judgment of taste finds its real basis in a set of aesthetic principles which are the universalization of the disposition associated with a particular social and economic condition.'⁷

It is the particular condition of a social class that is positioned in between the dominant class and the people: that is, the position of the intellectuals. In other words, what Bourdieu calls the *nomos* of the autonomous literary field, that is, the norm of disinterestedness and pure taste⁸, is inextricably bound up with this particular social position of a specific group.⁹ The propagation of these norms is not a deliberate deception, but is the expression of an internalized habitus. A habitus that in a long learning process has been viscerally incorporated, bodily and instinctively, in such a way that agents are no longer able to consciously reflect on it.¹⁰

⁶ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 491.

⁷ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 491

⁸ Kant-scholar Paul Crowther is highly critical of Bourdieu's interpretation of Kant: 'In substantial terms all this is bunk.' ('Sociological Imperialism and the Field of Cultural Production: The Case of Bourdieu', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 11 (1994), 155-69 (p. 165). Kant, says Crowther, does not link disinterestedness with art. Disinterestedness is reserved for natural beauty. Art is the embodiment of 'aesthetic ideas', and these are not disinterested, not even in appearance. The struggle in modern art is about these 'aesthetic ideas'. We would add that this is something that Bourdieu himself acknowledges: 'Specifically aesthetic conflicts about the legitimate vision of the world – in the last resort, about what deserves to be represented and the right way to represent – are political conflicts (appearing in their most euphemized forms) for the power to impose the dominant definition of reality, and social reality in particular.' (Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), pp. 101-02). This view reminds one of Rancière's 'distribution of the sensible'. For the relation between Rancière and Bourdieu, see Jens Kastner, *Der Streit um den ästhetischen Blick: Kunst und Politik zwischen Pierre Bourdieu und Jacques Rancière* (Vienna: Turia und Kant Verlag, 2012).

⁹ In 1994 Bourdieu phrases his critique significantly in a more lenient way: 'I am ready to concede that Kant's aesthetic is true, but only as a phenomenology of the aesthetic experiences of all those people who are the product of *skholè*. That is to say that the experience of the beautiful of which Kant offers us a rigorous description has definite economic and social conditions of possibility that are ignored by Kant, and that the anthropological possibility of which Kant sketches an analysis could become *truly universal* only if those economic and social conditions were universally distributed.' (Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 135).

¹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 102: 'Illusio does not belong to the order of explicit principles, theses that are put forward and defended, but of action, routine, things that are done, and that are done because they are things that one does and that have always been done that way. [...] Participants have ultimately no answer to questions about the reasons for their membership in the game, their visceral commitment to it: and the principles which may be invoked in such a case are merely post festum rationalizations intended to justify an unjustifiable investment, to themselves as much as to others.'

This critique of Kant's idea of aesthetic judgment acquires a different aspect when one realises that Bourdieu's own habitus concept – which may be regarded as the cornerstone of his theory – is indebted precisely to this criticised judgment, as has been pointed out by some commentators. In his elaboration of the habitus concept Bourdieu relies heavily on the Kantian reflexive judgment.¹¹ As is well known, Kant makes a distinction between reflexive judgment and definitive judgment. Definitive judgment claims to be based on knowledge: it implies judging by following a rule. Reflexive judgment proceeds without a rule, it concerns the aesthetic. Judgments made by habitus are more akin to the second than to the first type of judgment.

An agent's habitus ensures that his behaviour, his knowledge and his competencies are effectively geared to the game that is played in the field in which he operates. By way of the habitus, the field's objective and immanent structures are being incorporated. In this way, both the perception of the agent and his conduct are being structured. This happens, so to speak, on a pre-rational and pre-conscious level, that is: on a pre-predicative level. Agents pursue their own interests, and thus do not act disinterestedly, not even in the fields that consider disinterestedness of paramount importance, such as the fields of science, literature and art. However, whilst looking after their own interests, agents do not map out a route towards a well-defined goal. That would be a cynical interpretation of the habitus concept, which states that agents are coldblooded calculators of their own profit. Every person is a small Machiavelli. Bourdieu has always fiercely opposed this narrowly 'economistic' misrepresentation of his ideas.¹² He is interested in how people develop a knack or a feel for the game. A knack or a feel is not the same as deliberate calculation. With the frequently used metaphor of the game (with its implicit Kantian connotations), Bourdieu positions acting precisely between mechanical causality and rational conduct. Between nature and freedom, as Kant would have it.

As such, each practice possesses 'a certain purposefulness without conscious purpose', an intentionality without deliberate intention,

[obeying] the logic of all actions that are reasonable without being the product of a reasoned design, still less of rational calculation; informed by a kind of objective finality without being consciously organized in relation to an explicitly constituted end: intelligible and coherent without springing from an intention of coherence and a deliberate decision; adjusted to the future without being the product of a project or plan.¹³

According to Kant, this is precisely what artists do: being purposeful without a conscious purpose. Thus, Bourdieu does not reduce so much the aesthetic field to more 'general' social

¹¹ See about this, Jonathan Loesberg, 'Bourdieu and the Sociology of Aesthetics', *English Literary History*, 60 (1993), 1033-56 (p. 1044) and *A Return to Aesthetics, Autonomy, Indifference and Postmodernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

¹² See for instance Pierre Bourdieu, 'Marginalia', in *The Logic of the Gift: Towards an Ethic of Generosity*, ed. by Alan D. Schrift (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 231-41.

¹³ Bourdieu as quoted in Jeffrey Lane, 'Pierre Bourdieu's Forgotten Aesthetic: The Politics and Poetics of Practice', *Paragraph*, 27.3 (2004), 82-99 (p.90). See also Jeffrey Lane, *Pierre Bourdieu: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), and *Bourdieu's Politics: Problems and Possibilities* (London/New York: Routledge, 2006).

processes, processes in which agents just fight for the most favourable positions in their field. Rather it is the other way around. Bourdieu frames the practice of social processes as such in terms very reminiscent of Kantian aesthetics. This aesthetic interpretation of the habitus concept as such has, of course, in the first place a conservative effect, socially and politically.¹⁴ ‘An internalized feel for the game’ produces the *amor fati* that agents harbour for their situation, which is often a situation of symbolic domination.

However, there is also another side to this because one can expect that, potentially at least, art may have an important role. In art the conventional casualness with which the world is being ordered is becoming unsettled.¹⁵ That is exactly why the aesthetic is political, as Bourdieu but also Rancière argues. Rancière opposes police (French: *police*) and politics (French: *politique*). He uses these terms rather idiosyncratically. Both are directly linked to the distribution of the sensible. This distribution of the sensible sets the divisions between what is visible and what is invisible, sayable and unsayable, audible and inaudible. Distribution implies both inclusion and exclusion. ‘Police’ affirms the dominating distribution; ‘politics’ subtly unsettles it. In this vision, power (in the guise of police and politics) and aesthetics are closely related. If we transpose this to Bourdieu, one can indeed imagine how the instilled habitus of agents that reproduce power-relations is slightly thrown off balance by art. Again: potentially.

Bourdieu and the Universal

It seems that in *Rules of Art* Bourdieu has taken the step to valuing the aesthetic precisely because of this potentiality. The book concludes with a remarkable post scriptum, *A Plea for a Corporatism of the Universal*. Here Bourdieu passionately argues in favour of the autonomy of the intellectual field with its central value of disinterestedness. It is only capable of exerting political influence, that is: to act heteronomously, if it is autonomous. He argues for ‘privileged social universes where the material and intellectual instruments of what we call Reason are being produced’.¹⁶ This outwardly unambiguous appeal to Reason - with its universalistic implications about which Bourdieu had always been very critical - is remarkable. But this

¹⁴ See about this for example Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Fin de Siècle Social Theory. Relativism, Reductionism, and the Problem of Reason* (London/New York: Verso, 1995), and Richard Jenkins, ‘Pierre Bourdieu and the Reproduction of Determinism’, *Sociology*, 16.2 (1982), 271-81.

¹⁵ See also Jeremy Lane: ‘The centrality of the aesthetic to Bourdieu’s understanding of the working of habitus, practice and symbolic domination might lead us to presume that he attributes an equally central role to the aesthetic when theorizing the conditions of possibility of significant social or political change.’ (Jeffrey Lane, *Bourdieu’s Politics: Problems and Possibilities* (London/New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 93-4). But in the rest of his article Lane argues that this assumption has not been met, and that Bourdieu makes social change primarily dependent on consciousness-raising criticism (by way of the social sciences) and not on aesthetic changes in the artistic field. Our argument aims to articulate more clearly the possibility of criticism from the artistic field, which Bourdieu keeps rather implicit.

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 348. In *Practical Reason* Bourdieu argues that the observation that certain universal anthropological possibilities are realised only in very specific circumstances and are unequally distributed across civilisations, ‘leads us to an ethical or political program that is itself simple: we can escape the alternative of populism and conservatism, two forms of essentialism which tend to consecrate the status quo, only by *working to universalize the conditions of access to universality*’ (p. 137, emphasis in the original). But if this is true, one will have to preserve this potentially universal culture, and not, as suggested by Hugo Verdaasdonk for instance, abolish literary education in secondary schools. See Hugo Verdaasdonk, *Snijvlakken van de literatuurwetenschap* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2008), p. 77-8.

appeal to reason is less unambiguous than it seems. The manifest ends with an ambiguity typical of Bourdieu when he remarks:

Without a doubt, such a Realpolitik of Reason will be under suspicion of corporatism. But it will be part of its task to prove, by the ends to which it puts the sorely won means of its autonomy, that it is a corporatism of the universal.¹⁷

Corporatism points to a promotion of self-interest, Realpolitik even to a cynical promotion of self-interest. But with a Hegelian twist this self-interest appears to encourage some universal value. At the very least, this seems to be a complicated and possibly indefensible argument.

The fact that Bourdieu is nevertheless very serious about this can be inferred from a public talk delivered in 2000, with the title ‘Culture is in Danger’. This talk is an indictment of the pervasive influence of neo-liberalism, which subordinates everything to economic criteria, and which ultimately boils down to a plain exercise of power. This threatens to annihilate the autonomous cultural field. ‘Why would that be a problem?’, one is inclined to ask, considering Bourdieu’s own sociological theory in which the stakes played for in the cultural game are considered to be an *illusio*. Bourdieu defines *illusio* as an irrational or at least unfounded investment in the game that is played in the field. But, illusion or not, in ‘Culture is in Danger’ Bourdieu speaks in no uncertain terms:

Oddly, the ‘purest’, most disinterested, most ‘formal’ producers of culture thus find themselves, often unwittingly, at the forefront of the struggle for the defence of the highest values of humanity. By defending their singularity, they are defending the most universal values of all.¹⁸

This is no small matter. Culture defends the highest values of humanity and this happens by way of pure, disinterested and formalistic culture. Moreover, it is interesting that Bourdieu directly connects singularity and universality here. This certainly would have pleased Kant, after the rebuke he received in *Distinction*. Kant would be pleased not only with the reference to the highest values of humanity, but also with the connection made between the singular and the universal. For him, after all, the aesthetic judgment is both subjective and objective, both singular and universal.

Of course, the question arises as to how this notion of singularity fits into the framework of Bourdieu’s own theory: his field and habitus concepts. When he speaks of singularity, does he mean the same as Attridge? We will return to this in a moment.

Pascalian Meditations (1997) gives us an idea why – within his critical framework – autonomy is so crucial for Bourdieu. In *Pascalian Meditations* Bourdieu endorses Pascal’s vision that no justification can be given (for instance a justification on the grounds of justice) for the law to which one is subjected in society. The Law is the Law, and the Law is arbitrary and without foundation. For the Law we could read the Symbolic Order. Ultimately, at the basis of the Law or Symbolic Order we find the naked exercise of power. But this exercise of power has to be masked to be effective and to be able to reproduce itself. It must at least have the

¹⁷ Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 348.

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market 2* (London and New York: Verso, 2003), pp. 66-81.

appearance of legitimacy. One has to believe in it. The tyrannical exercise of power evokes resistance, and makes reproduction processes go wrong.

[F]orce cannot assert itself as such, as brute violence, an arbitrariness that is what it is, without justification: and it is a fact of experience that it can only perpetuate itself under the colors of legitimacy, and that domination succeeds in imposing itself durably only in so far as it manages to secure recognition, which is nothing other than misrecognition of the arbitrariness of its principle.¹⁹

At the same time, however, the fact that power needs legitimacy creates an opportunity to restrain that power. Legitimacy is only convincing if given by an external party. Moreover: this external party has to be autonomous to a certain extent. It will not have the slightest semblance of legitimacy if it is merely the executor or messenger boy of power.

It follows that powers based on (physical or economic) force can only obtain their legitimation through powers that cannot be suspected of obeying force; and that the legitimating efficacy of an act of recognition (homage, a mark of deference, a token of respect) varies with the degree of independence of the agent or institution that grants it (and also with the recognition that he or it enjoys).²⁰

Seen in this light autonomy poses certain risks for power or the symbolic order, for it can become a critical counter power. For this reason Bourdieu sees the differentiation within the totality of society as a potentially positive development.

It is precisely in these autonomic fields that universality is a key concept. In a way, universality is a double-edged sword for power. Power can only be effectively legitimated if it appeals to universality (otherwise it lapses into a mere exercise of power), but at the same time this universality is the ideal instrument to criticise power.

It is precisely this ambiguity, which emerges from Bourdieu's approach of the universal. On the one hand, he criticises it, as we have seen earlier in relation to the universality of the aesthetic judgment. For Bourdieu, universality is only a partial interest, which merely poses as universal to mask its partiality. By recognising universality one voluntarily submits oneself to a particular symbolic exercise of power. Unmasking the fake universality is thus the first step to bringing to the surface the arbitrariness of symbolic power, and to open the possibilities of change through political action.

But then, of course, where does this criticism itself find its foundation? Bourdieu's answer: in the universal! This is the other side. As we have seen, Bourdieu argues for a corporatism of the universal. One could ask whether this universality is fundamentally different from the Kantian universal. To a certain extent it certainly is: for Bourdieu the universal is historically and empirically contingent, for Kant it is transcendental and rationally necessary. Bourdieu describes the universal as a thoroughly historical and social phenomenon. Something may be labelled universal if it transcends private interest and applies to a group as a whole. Shared values are vital for the survival of the group. That is why complying with these values yields a

¹⁹ Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, p. 104.

²⁰ Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, p. 104.

social bonus. Whether one complies candidly or only in a hypocritically adaptive way is not an issue here, something which Kant certainly would not have agreed with. For Bourdieu this is the empirical explanation of morals and ethics. Yet how can one proceed from clearly partial and group-bound empirical practices, which sometimes do and sometimes do not occur under the veil of universality, to real universal practices? Surprisingly, to this end Bourdieu invokes the Kantian universality test.

Kant's test of universalizability is the universal strategy of the rational critique of ethical claims (those who assert that others can be treated badly on a particular property, for example skin color, can be questioned with their own disposition to accept similar maltreatment if their skin were the same color).²¹

And this is not just a theoretical notion but something that, as far as Bourdieu is concerned, should be implemented in practice:

[W]e must consider in practical terms the conditions that would need to be fulfilled to keep political practices *permanently subjected to a test of universalizability*, so that the very workings of the political field force its actors into *real universalization strategies*.²² [our italics]

This is exactly why he thinks that the development of the autonomous intellectual fields, which have emerged by sheer miracle, is so important. These fields show at least glimpses of reason (that is, of universality).²³ This is because standards have been developed in these fields by which the most pathological forms of promoting self-interest are steered into the right direction.²⁴ That is why Bourdieu speaks of a realpolitik of reason that may be applied from these fields where certain new and, in a way, improbable anthropological potentialities are being realised, according to Bourdieu.

We suspect that from a philosophical perspective this is a rather problematic argument, but we will innocently follow Bourdieu's argument. However, if we do that, the following question arises: what kind of contribution to reason, or to the universal, proceeds from the aesthetic field? What kind of anthropological potentiality is realised there? In what sense is this universal? For intellectual matters, such as science and law, one can easily imagine an answer. To put it simply: science is about excluding untruth by way of rigorous procedures and mutual control, in law it is about excluding biased laws. In this way matters are steadily but progressively purged from their particularity, and thus acquire more universal power. What this means for the aesthetic domain, unfortunately, is not as clear.

²¹ Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, p. 144.

²² Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, p. 144.

²³ Bourdieu seems slightly ambiguous on the notion of reason. On the one hand he clearly asserts that '[r]eason is historical through and through' only to add that this 'does not mean that it is on that account relative and reducible to history', which suggests that reason is transcendental to history. (*Practical Reason*, p. 138).

²⁴ See Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, p. 138: 'in effect, the tacitly or explicitly imposed rules of competition in them are such that the most "pathological" functions are obliged to mold themselves into social forms and social formalisms, to submit themselves to regulated procedures and processes, notably in matters of discussion and confrontation, to obey standards that accord with what is seen, at each moment in history, as reason.'

Singularity: Bourdieu and Attridge

The universal of the aesthetic domain seems to lie in the fact that the singular is recognised precisely in its singularity. And, indeed, it seems that symbolic revolutions, which occur in the fields of art and literature, as described by Bourdieu, turn around a notion of singularity. What the originators or instigators of symbolic revolutions have in common, Bourdieu claims, is:

that they find themselves placed before a space of already made possibles, which, for them and them alone, designates in advance a *possible to be made*. This impossible possible, both rejected and called for by the space which defines it, but as a void, a lack, is what they then strive to bring into existence, against and despite all the resistances which the emergence of this structurally excluded possible induces in the structure which excludes it and in the comfortably installed occupants of all the positions constitutive of that structure.²⁵

Bourdieu refers to an ‘impossible possible’, something that is ‘rejected and called for, a void, a lack’. Bourdieu has been criticised for being blind, as a social scientist, to the singularity of the artwork. However, it seems that this is jumping to conclusions. For him, the singularity only comes into view if you place the artwork in the field of possibilities of a specific historical constellation. In this respect his concept of singularity is very similar to the concept of singularity as developed by Derek Attridge. Bourdieu’s impossible possible and Attridge’s otherness appear to have some common ground.

For Attridge too, the singular is only comprehensible against a well-defined social cultural background. The singular is that which is, at a given moment, outside the cultural horizon of thinking, understanding, imagining, feeling, perceiving of certain agents. It is radically unfamiliar because it transgresses the limits of what a subject was able to think hitherto. At the same time, it maintains an intimate relationship with the subject. First, because one would not be able to experience or apprehend an absolute alterity – this would be totally beyond one’s imagination; second, because the encounter with alterity remoulds the self that brings the other into being as, necessarily, something no longer entirely other. Now we can understand why Bourdieu could argue that ‘by defending their singularity [of the artists and writers] [we] are defending the most universal values of all’.²⁶ This most universal value of all seems to hint at a certain release from determinism. It keeps open the impossible possibility of the other within the endless reproduction of the same.

By way of conclusion to this very general argument about the social role of autonomous literature, we would like to illustrate this with the example of Willem Frederik Hermans’s singularity. To this end, we will use a distinction, which Attridge does but Bourdieu does not make. Attridge distinguishes between originality and inventiveness. Originality is about the creation of the work of art in its own time, inventiveness about a continued effect later on. Originality refers ‘to the opening up of new possibilities achieved by the work of art in its own time and accessible via a process of historical reconstruction’.²⁷ Inventiveness, on the other

²⁵ Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, p. 92.

²⁶ Bourdieu, *Firing Back*, p. 81.

²⁷ Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, p. 45.

hand, refers to ‘the quality of innovation which is directly sensed in the present’.²⁸ ‘Whereas the experience of originality in art, as in other fields, is a matter of re-creating the past, artistic inventiveness [...] bridges past and present. An artistic invention is inventive now.’²⁹ We can more or less objectively reconstruct and understand Van Gogh’s innovative artistic impact in his own time. But we can only experience for ourselves, subjectively, the fact that he still speaks to us now. ‘The singularity of the work [...] speaks to my own singularity’, says Attridge.³⁰ To us, this distinction seems very relevant. Moreover, we are inclined to add that it is a shortcoming of Bourdieu’s hermeneutics that it restricts itself to the originality aspect of singularity without appearing to accept the inventiveness aspect.

Hermans: Originality and Inventiveness

Wherein lies Hermans’s originality? Or, in Bourdieu’s terms, what is the impossible that Hermans made possible? And what would be his inventiveness?

We believe that Hermans held such a prominent position in the post World War II period in the Netherlands because he combined a range of seemingly incompatible and improbable ideas, sympathies and dislikes. Using these he distinguished himself from what was happening elsewhere in Dutch literature. With his nihilistic and amoral view on society, he stood out against the strong moralising tendency, which dominated the reconstruction period of the post-war years. Hermans made a name for himself as a ruthless exposé of the meaninglessness and futility of human existence. It stands to reason that he greatly admired Céline (see Arnold Heumakers in this issue). A brief sentence from ‘Preamble’ (Preamble) states: ‘there is only one word: chaos’.³¹ This sentence did not fall on deaf ears. It became a convenient summary of his extensive oeuvre: his novels and stories were read as illustrations of this basic chaos. With this bleak outlook, his novels constituted a powerful counter-voice of the communitarian personalistic ideas that were prevalent in the social sciences and politics in the post-war era. Personalism was a kind of *third way philosophy* between the individualism of capitalism and the collectivity of communism. The central idea of personalism is that, starting from a ‘responsible’ person, one can build a harmonious society. This by no means fits into the image of a sadistic universe, which Hermans observed in society and nature. A universe that derived its dynamic from spite and misunderstanding.

More than with communitarian personalism, Hermans had a clear affinity with surrealism and psychoanalysis. But unlike the Dutch experimental poets’ movement in the fifties, who also were strongly inspired by surrealism, surrealism for Hermans did not carry with it a promise of liberation, of a power, which released man from the chains of the societal discipline of the super-ego. As ‘Preamble’ shows, he was very critical of the surrealist belief in spontaneity. Whilst dismissing trust in sense and significance as a collective myth, he did not however sympathise with the other extreme: with the total insignificance of the *écriture* or *peinture automatique*.

²⁸ Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, p. 45.

²⁹ Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, p. 45.

³⁰ Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, p. 78.

³¹ Willem Frederik Hermans, *Volledige Werken*: Deel 7 (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2006), p. 218.

At the same time he didn't concur with the more disillusioned existentialism, which was *en vogue* in those days in more artistic circles, although he certainly had a certain affinity with the existentialist absurd stance on life. For Hermans, there was no such thing as personal choice. In his view, an ultimately free and sovereign subject was an illusion. The personal myth about which he writes in *Unsympathetic Fictional Characters* (Antipathieke romanpersonages) is definitely not a personal project chosen in freedom in the existentialist sense. It rather spoils the game, which disrupts the public's collective myth.³²

He managed to combine all these ideas with a very sobering scientific and neo-positivist view on the world. Both *Behind the Signpost no Admittance* (Achter borden Verboden Toegang) and in *Unsympathetic Fictional Characters* contain clear references to this view.

To put it briefly: Hermans could not be pigeonholed. Neither was he a total outsider due to his ideas, isolated and out of tune. His worldview and literary practice were in innumerable ways connected with the intellectual developments of his time. Added to this he practised an utterly successful 'literary politics', which perfectly matched that of Bourdieu's field theory. By employing devastating catchphrases and merciless polemical attacks on colleagues, he reached a dominant position in the field of Dutch literature.

A few words about Hermans's inventiveness. Why does he (potentially at least) still speak to us? The fact that he continues to be an important author is at the root of a project to produce a scholarly edition of his Collected Works. This project has been estimated to take 15 years and is being conducted at the prestigious Huygens Institute (although Bourdieu would probably characterise such a project as a clear example of cultural fetishism).

In relation to inventiveness it is best, we feel, to refer to an intriguing quote from Hermans's story 'The Great Compassion' ('Het Grote Medelijden'):

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 them from the *terrible fullness* in which they suffocate the world. ³³ (our emphasis)

This is, at the very least, a rather paradoxical and enigmatic statement. In a prophetic register which would not have been out of place in *Also sprach Zarathustra*, and which is therefore without any doubt also slightly ironic.

A writer with no message, yet this message should be accepted humbly. A writer who forges without forging anything. Who comes with empty hands. It remains a fascinating image. This passage has drawn significantly less attention than the poetical and philosophical catchphrases, which have made Hermans famous. Yet Hermans's grim and tarnished view on life has, in fact, also a liberating potential: it tries to free the reader from the suffocating sameness in which he finds himself without necessarily offering something else instead. This pure and, strangely enough, vital negativity could be considered to be the singularity of Hermans's authorship, and it seems to have the power to attract many readers of many different generations and backgrounds.

³² See about this Frans Ruiters and Wilbert Smulders, 'The Aggressive Logic of Singularity: Willem Frederik Hermans', *Journal of Dutch Literature*, 4.1 (2013), 4-42.

³³ Willem Frederik Hermans, *Een wonderkind of een total loss*. (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1977), p. 177.

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