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**On the role of Dorbeck in Willem Frederik Hermans'  
*De donkere kamer van Damokles***

Ever since the initial publication in 1958 of the late W.F. Hermans' *De donkere kamer van Damokles*, critics have wrestled with the question of whether the character Dorbeck really exists or is merely a fantasy in the mind of Henri Osewoudt, the main character, as Osewoudt's psychiatrist, Dr. Lichtenau, tends to believe. The critics have reached very varied conclusions about this.

In his essay *De Geboorte van een Dubbelganger*, Betlem (1966) offers the interpretation that the figure of Dorbeck represents a pure ego ideal, constructed by Osewoudt: "Ik concludeer daaruit dat Dorbeck een psychologische dubbelganger is, dat hij niet 'een ander' is, maar een deel van Osewoudts eigen Ik: zijn ik-ideaal." [286] According to Betlem, Osewoudt needs this ideal or alter ego in order to compensate for his complete isolation from the outside world, already visible in his early childhood and resulting in an absolute loss of objectivity and reality. Raat (1988) also speaks of the extreme solitude of the protagonist Osewoudt but does not expand upon this observation.

Janssen (1976) and Smulders (1983), however, both deny the need to supply an unequivocal answer to the question of Dorbeck's existence. Smulders sees the question as generally irrelevant:

Resultaat van deze studie zal derhalve niet zijn een uitspraak als: 'Dorbeck bestaat' of 'Dorbeck bestaat niet.' Wat men wel kan verwachten is een uitspraak die, kort geformuleerd, de vorm heeft: 'Om deze redenen stelt de lezer van deze roman zich op een gegeven moment noodzakelijkerwijs de vraag: 'Bestaat Dorbeck nu wel of niet?' en om dezelfde redenen blijft het antwoord op die vraag noodzakelijkerwijs uit.

Thus, a shift becomes apparent in the understanding of the function of literary texts that reflect upon

their own fictional nature and consciously steer the reader in his or her potential interpretations.

Weilnböck (1989), who in principle does not doubt the existence of Dorbeck, also sees the text as aimed more at an audience with whose psychic disposition it plays:

The novel can be read as an attempt to set up a kind of psychological entrapment which appeals to a particular disposition of its audience, namely the disposition for a *Doppelgänger*-identification or alter-ego identification. This disposition marks the core of civilization's everyday pathology. [111]

The basic hypothesis of this paper is that Dorbeck himself is not a phantom of Osewoudt's imagination, but that the significance of Dorbeck for Osewoudt is interpreted entirely in terms of the background of his own personality structure. However, in deviation from the observations of other critics, I will argue that it is not a social isolation from which the protagonist so acutely suffers, rather it is a climate of silence and inability to question that determines the behavior of the adult Osewoudt. His solitude is merely a result of this climate, because he receives no responses and is surrounded by a constant silence (both literal and figurative). At the conclusion of the paper, I will discuss the extent to which this analysis is applicable to the entire Dutch society of the time, viewing it as a discursive element of the psychic disposition of the society of that period.

Methodologically it seems reasonable to distinguish first of all between two separate levels of text: that which reports the (apparently) real encounters with Dorbeck and that which suggests that Dorbeck never existed. Both groups of examples will be examined closely with consideration of their expressive content. Only then

will it be possible to draw conclusions.

First, I would like briefly to discuss the mood in Osewoudt's family household and in that of his uncle, which in my view shapes the foundation for Henri's behavior towards his environment. Already in early childhood, when two traumatic experiences - the murder of his father by his mother and her commitment to a psychiatric institution - deprive him of his family, the attitude of silence becomes the fundamental constellation of his relationship to the uncle's family. One had better not ask, or if one asks, there will be no answer. The suggestion is made that things can (apparently) make sense without answers. Hence, Osewoudt is prepared in a very specific way for the meeting with Dorbeck, and it is solely because Osewoudt never questions or doubts Dorbeck that he sinks into the personal tragedy that costs him his sanity and eventually his life.

### I Osewoudt's encounters with Dorbeck

Osewoudt's first contact with Dorbeck occurs on the first day of the war and appears entirely realistic to the reader: Within a group of soldiers, one man comes forward and asks Osewoudt, who has a photo finishing business, to develop a roll of film for him. Indeed, reference is already made here to the mirroring effect of the two physiognomies:

De officier gaf Osewoudt een hand en keek hem in zijn ogen. Osewoudt zag dat de ogen van de luitenant op precies dezelfde hoogte als de zijne lagen. Het waren grijsgroene ogen, die hem aankeken of zij iets bijzonders in hem zagen. Nog nooit hadden ogen hem aangekeken op zo'n manier, behalve als hij zichzelf in de spiegel zag.[21]

The character of both figures becomes evident through a comparable situation that both master differently. Dorbeck is accepted into the military because he stretches himself a bit when he is measured, while Osewoudt, who is the same size as Dorbeck, simply accepts the fact that he is too small for the military. This acceptance of all events that influence his life becomes a continual motif for Osewoudt. The alter-ego, who at this first meeting is purely external, will change Osewoudt's attitude

towards life. Ria, Osewoudt's wife, also meets Dorbeck on this first occasion - there is no indication that Dorbeck is a mere invention. Indeed, only Osewoudt's own interpretation of the figure of Dorbeck suggests that he is an alter ego.

Two days later, Dorbeck reappears in Osewoudt's photo lab, where he acts quite mysteriously, asks to borrow clothing from Henri, hides his uniform there and gives a brief report of his activities. Henri asks no questions, instead reacting only to Dorbeck's instructions.[23-24] On another day, Dorbeck again appears suddenly, without warning, and leaves the store just as suddenly: "Maar toen hij met het uniform over de arm terugkwam was Dorbeck verdwenen. De deur stond nog open." [26] Dorbeck leaves behind the first written orders. As Osewoudt believes the film he was to develop must be important material, but accidentally destroys it in the developing process, he takes it upon himself to take photographs that could be interesting for the Dutch resistance. This is the first time that he constructs a "reality" based on his own interpretation, since of course he does not know what was on the original film.[27-29] He also continues to act frequently upon his own conceptions of what seems to be demanded of him, without bothering to verify them.[28]

One day, Dorbeck reappears in a rush and does not allow any questions from Osewoudt: "Ik heb weinig tijd. Ik heb je nodig..." [30] He supplies Osewoudt with a weapon, which Osewoudt accepts without comment. Again, Dorbeck flees without a trace. The next time they meet, Osewoudt receives the order to commit a murder, and he does so without asking any questions, even of himself.[33ff.] After a time, he remembers an undeveloped film of Dorbeck's, develops it and thus actually has a photo of him, but his mother unexpectedly enters the darkroom and destroys this material proof of Dorbeck's existence. Soon, he is speaking of Dorbeck as the only man he has ever admired. He receives one more written message, apparently from Dorbeck, but then hears nothing more from him for four years. Being abandoned by this figure he had so valorized causes him to deteriorate into deep self-doubt and inactivity:

Onder de toonbank liggen een Leica en een pistool. Maar ik weet niet wat ik

fotograferen moet en niemand zegt mij meer wie ik dood moet schieten. Alles gaat vanzelf, alles is al gebeurd. Alles wat ik onderneem blijft zonder gevolgen. Vier jaar heeft Dorbeck niets meer van zich laten horen en ook nu blijft hij onzichtbaar...[44]

More time passes before he receives another message, apparently from Dorbeck, that tells him to dial a certain number. The phone rings, but on subsequent attempts, it does not. Osewoudt simply doubts his own memory. When he is forced to alter his outward appearance and dyes his hair, he becomes conscious of the striking similarity between Dorbeck and himself. Indeed, he believes - again it is his own interpretation - that this appearance could have had a drastic effect on his life:

Ineens zag hij het: Dorbeck! Niet te onderscheiden van Dorbeck was hij! Hetzelfde zwarte haar, hetzelfde witte gezicht met rode konen. Had ik altijd zwart haar gehad, dan zou mijn hele leven anders geweest zijn[...] Een man die verschnijnt en verdwijnt wanneer hij wil, aan niets anders gebonden dan zijn eigen wil, een man voor wie de wereld zich buigt.[76]

These illusions of omnipotence are attempts at compensations made by a self that thus expresses a fundamental lack of control and "mastery of the environment." However, as I already remarked, it remains important to understand these as Osewoudt's interpretations of his world. In my view, he does have these encounters with Dorbeck - but what is decisive for Osewoudt is how he interprets them.

On the basis of his appearance, his mood, his feelings about life and his relations with women (Marianne) change: "Dorbeck heeft een ander mens van mij gemaakt, dacht hij." He does not heed the voices that challenge him to reflect critically upon his situation, like Marianne's: "Wie weet nu wel waarvoor hij tegen de Duitsers werkt..."[77]

He reacts with lack of interest to the arrest of his mother and his wife, at the same time demonstrating more of a commitment to the resistance and identifying himself with it uncritically.[98-99] He

no longer has any sense of self whatsoever, but rather derives his entire personality from Dorbeck: "Maar, als ik het niet gedaan had, dan was ik nu waarschijnlijk helemaal afhankelijk geweest van oom Bart. In geen geval zou ik Dorbeck hebben ontmoet! Dorbeck!"[101] He sees himself as Dorbeck's twin.

However, the difference between himself and Dorbeck always remains clear to Osewoudt, as his comparison of both with industrial products and factory prototypes expresses in a striking manner:

Begrijp je, het is een beetje moeilijk om het uit te drukken, maar ik bedoel zo ongeveer als in een fabriek waar een bepaald voorwerp wordt gemaakt: nu en dan mislukt er een, ze maken een tweede dat goed is en het mislukte exemplaar gooien ze weg...[176]

If Osewoudt is a separate person, however, he and Dorbeck are both products of industry, created as "mass commodities," each only different versions of the same product and dependent upon a "higher power" that makes the decisions about manufacturing. What is more worrisome is his belief that he is flawed. When he meets Dorbeck, he becomes truly persuaded of his own inferiority:

Toen wist ik het. Toen wist ik dat hij het geslaagde exemplaar was, dat ik in vergelijking met die man geen reden van bestaan had, dat ik mijzelf alleen aanvaardbaar maken kon, door precies te doen wat hij zei.[176]

Here again it is clear that Osewoudt takes the opportunity to interpret the actual encounter with Dorbeck on the basis of his own inferiority complex and to draw conclusions from it.

In Osewoudt's conversation with Marianne, this feeling of inferiority is readdressed as it extends into his most intimate relationship, the one with her. He assumes with certainty that she would obviously prefer Dorbeck to him. Marianne, apparently a clever psychologist in her own right, asks Osewoudt if he would rather be someone other than himself, but then indicates Osewoudt's uniqueness and special worth to herself in the following passage:

Het lijkt wel of je mij zeggen wil dat je eigenlijk een oplichter bent en dat ik mij vergis door van je te houden. Het lijkt wel of je, als je Dorbeck hier kon roepen, mij aan hem cadeau zou willen doen. Denk je dat ik dat prettig vind?[177]

Marianne also reminds him of his historical responsibility for the things he has done: "Maar die dingen heb je toch helemaal alleen gedaan, Filip, alleen, helemaal alleen. Dorbeck was er toch niet bij?"[178]

Osewoudt is clearly aware of the particular power and command that Dorbeck holds over him, which distinguishes itself in essence from military command inasmuch as it is a personal power, not an institutional one:

Een soldaat gehoorzaamt aan de eerste de beste officier die boven hem gesteld is. Hij gehoorzaamt niet aan de man persoonlijk, hij gehoorzaamt de bevelen. Maar ik kan alleen Dorbeck gehoorzamen en niemand heeft mij daartoe gedwongen[...] voor ik hem kende heb ik feitelijk helemaal niet geleefd...[178]

All of this occurs - again - against the background of his own emptiness and his confrontation with his own insignificance and lack of motivation:

...ik offerde niets op omdat ik niets was. Ik kon niets, ik wilde niets. Pas toen ik Dorbeck ontmoet had, toen pas voor het eerst wilde ik iets, al was het alleen maar als Dorbeck zijn, al wilde ik alleen maar was hij wilde. Maar willen wat een ander wil, is al meer dan helemaal niets willen.[178]

Thus far it is still evident that Osewoudt finds himself in confrontation with the figure of Dorbeck, that he exists, but that it is Osewoudt who provides this figure with a very particular significance, determined by his own personality structure.

Osewoudt encounters Dorbeck once more, when he appears with Ebernuss at a meeting of the resistance. Osewoudt's joy at seeing him again is immediately blocked off by Dorbeck, in the typical

discussion strategy that I have elucidated. However, Dorbeck's attitude toward Osewoudt has clearly taken on a different form in this meeting compared to previous ones. Indeed, Osewoudt is again a pure receiver of orders: "Er is ook nu geen tijd veel te praten, Osewoudt..."[214] and he calls upon him to kill Ebernuss, which Osewoudt also does immediately and without much consideration. Dorbeck's speaking style is now almost reminiscent of a father's speech:

Ik begrijp dat je mij veel te vertellen hebt, maar niet nu. Verpest alles niet door mij tegen te spreken. Tot dusverre heb je je schitterend gedragen. Je bent mijn grootste steun geweest. Doe ook dit nog even voor mij. Geloof niet was Ebernuss zegt, hij houdt je voor de gek.[214-215]

As it turns out later, Dorbeck is speaking the truth here. The meeting with Dorbeck leaves Osewoudt strongly affected emotionally: he weeps like a child.[215] In the car, Dorbeck speaks further of Ebernuss in a fatherly, determined tone that betrays his personal interest in Osewoudt.[249-50] He even allows himself to be photographed, in a scene that reprises the metaphor of the mirror:

Uit de spiegel staaarde Dorbeck hem aan. Hun hoofden waren vlak naast elkaar. Osewoudts haar was weer helemaal blond, maar ondanks dat en ondanks de baard van Dorbeck, was de gelijkenis in hun gezichten nog altijd ontstellend groot. Het leek werkelijk of dezelfde man dar stond tweemaal, een keer in vermomming. En toch, als je raden moest welke kop vermomd was en welke echt, je zou eerder de baardloze bleke kop voor de vermomming houden. Zo hielden zij zich een seconde doodstil, elkaar aanstarend in de spiegel. Osewoudt hield de sluiting ingedrukt met een gevoel van exstase: hij dacht: nu ben ik eindelijk compleet, als is het maar op een foto.[219-220]

Thus, for a brief moment, Osewoudt's fragmented ego becomes whole. That does not mean, however, that Dorbeck is proven to be an alter ego; rather, it is the healing power of a little understanding that affects Osewoudt in a way that apparently complements and completes him.

Dorbeck's behavior towards Osewoudt remains friendly and sympathetic, even if he also reprimands Osewoudt in a fatherly manner for apparently believing that he has a right to aid from other people, just like a child.[222] Yet he still wants to help Osewoudt in all concerns, brings a nurse's outfit for him to wear, wants to help him and Marianne escape to England, and seems to be quite dependent on Osewoudt's help:

Ik kan in moeilijkheden komen. Het kan zijn dat ik een beroep op je wil doen. Wat ben je dan van plan? Je in vrouwenkleren op straat wagen? Ja, of nee? Dorbeck's vuisten begonnen te trillen..."[222]

When Dorbeck does leave him, he behaves like an abandoned child: "Je had mij tenminste een pistol moeten geven! riep hij." [223] This is the last he sees of Dorbeck. From this point on the perspective changes: Dorbeck becomes a fiction precisely because outside society does not believe Osewoudt's claim that such a figure existed.

## II The fiction of Dorbeck

Already in earlier passages in the novel, the impression could develop that Dorbeck is a pure fiction, an opinion that Dr. Lichtenau also expresses. The character of this doctor thus marks a discursive strategy of the book, a possible way of explaining the events. In contrast to Lichtenau's view, however, there are other perspectives that oppose his theory, such as that of Vater Beers and Osewoudt's own. In addition to this, there are a number of names that are actually on the wanted list and that could be Dorbeck's aliases (even Dorbeck could be an alias).

Osewoudt himself has phases in which he cannot tell Dorbeck and himself apart. When a photograph of him is shown in the cinema, he cannot distinguish if it is really one of himself or the one of Dorbeck: "Of was het een foto van Dorbeck die hier geprojecteerd werd?" [143]

Osewoudt begins to have doubts about the identities of various individuals, which is explained by the fact that names and the giving of names are no longer identical with specific identities but rather have become interchangeable; this further

problematizes the question of whether the system of signs still guarantees a link between signified and sign. Thus, the foundations for assumptions about what constitutes reality are called into question, and basic trust in the existence of others can no longer be justified: "Wie heet nog wel zoals hij heet? Wie is te vertrouwen en wie niet?" [155]

On a practical level, his observation makes evident the extent to which individuals must live with fragmented images of the world, particularly - but not only - in times of war. The daily uncertainty of life is exacerbated by the general feeling of an inability to trust. If an already fragmented self like Osewoudt is confronted with these problems, the disorientation is even greater and leads here to the physical annihilation of the individual.

## III Conclusions

In my view, Dorbeck's existence is certain. The problem being addressed here on the epistemological level is that of the construction and, following that, the re-construction of reality. Where the means are lacking, no reconstruction can occur. With this theme, the book addresses a problem that became an issue not only in the Netherlands but generally after the Second World War: How can one prove guilt if the material evidence is missing? On the other hand; if there is no evidence, is one innocent?

This is one level of observation in the novel *De donkere kamer van Damokles*. Another is the ethical and political question of personal responsibility. For this question it is irrelevant if Dorbeck actually existed or not; as Marianne indicates at various moments, Osewoudt is responsible for his actions in any case, whether motivated by an alter ego or by another person.

A third descriptive level has to do with the history of the resistance in the Netherlands, an organization which must ask itself the unpleasant question of the extent to which it was aware of its own actions and what motives formed the basis for the acts of its members. This is in my view the fundamental question that the novel *De donkere kamer van Damokles* poses. Personally, I do not think that the Dutch resistance falls into discredit for this reason - Osewoudt's motives were honorable - but through this question, the problem is formulated

of a nation's fundamental psychical structure that becomes the basis for its actions. The Germans were characterized by a strong belief in authority and deified the figure of Hitler in the search for an all-powerful father figure to guide and rule them, and carried out their horrific acts, for which they personally did not believe themselves to be guilty, on the basis of this predisposition. Similarly, Osewoudt obeys Dorbeck, who mirrors and strengthens the self that had been fragmented by a specific trauma.

If Dorbeck does exist, and in my view there is much evidence to support this, then his fictitious aspect is not his existence, but rather the meaning of his existence.

Osewoudt's fate emphasizes the fact that in the long run, one cannot hand over responsibility for one's actions to another person, apparently endowed with greater authority; whether or not Dorbeck existed, Osewoudt must assume responsibility for himself and the actions that he perpetrates solely on the basis of his interpretation of "reality."

Thus, Hermans calls attention on an epistemological level to a complex pattern of problems which are especially acute in the 20th century, that is, to the psychodynamic background of behavior in a society that no longer offers any sensible explanations of the world, but rather leaves the individual alone with interpretations that often have a pathological character, thereby reinforcing those pathological structures while simultaneously holding the individual personally responsible for his actions.

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