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Modes of narration and the use of the theme of death
in selected novels of Marcellus Emants

Although among the Dutch naturalist writers Marcellus Emants (1848-1923) does not occupy as prominent a place as, for instance, Louis Couperus and Frederik van Eeden, his 1894 novel *Een nagelaten bekentenis* (A posthumous confession) belongs beyond any doubt to the best Dutch prose produced at the end of the nineteenth century.

In 1948 Garnt Stuiveling, a specialist in Dutch literature of the nineteenth century, hoped that a monument would be erected to Emants in his anniversary year, lest this great writer be forgotten. It turns out that there was no reason for concern, for the novel was reprinted in 1951, 1960, 1969, 1994, and 1997. As recently as 2000, J.H.T. Joosten published an article entitled "Investigating from the sickbed, or why Willem Termeer did not kill his wife: a new hypothesis about Emants' 'A Posthumous Confession' (Speurwerk vanaf het ziekbed, of waarom Willem Termeer zijn vrouw niet vermoordde: een nieuwe hypothese over Emants' *Een nagelaten bekentenis*)." Later in the present article this intriguing hypothesis will be discussed. I can add further proof of the novel's continuing popularity: when I was in Holland doing research in the late seventies for my article on Turgenev and Emants, I happened to have a conversation with a high school student. I told him about my research and asked him whether he knew the writer Emants. He answered that he of course knew his novel *Een nagelaten bekentenis* and that the first line was: "Mijn vrouw is dood en al begraven."

As with many naturalist writers, the themes of

doom and tragic lives are paramount in Emants' oeuvre. Death plays a major part in naturalistic novels, but in Emants it is especially prominent. And that is not surprising in an author who once declared that he had never been thankful to his parents for giving him life. Looking back at the time that he was a law student, he told the journalist M.J. Brusse in 1907: "In Leyden I became a misanthrope" (In Leiden ben ik mensenhater geworden; Dubois 23. All translations from Dutch are mine). In a letter of 17 August 1887 to Frits Smit Kleine, a co-editor of several journals in which Emants collaborated, he wrote: "In your letter to Eva [Emants' wife] there was a sentence that has to be answered. You wrote: Life is worth living. To my mind that is not correct. Life would be worth living if it either had a goal or provided for a credit balance in happiness. Such a goal does not exist, or if it does, than we don't know it, and nobody can strive for an unknown goal" (Emants 1995: 48). In a letter of 1918 to Freule E.C.V.E.M. van Nispen tot Sevenaer, he wrote: "... life must come to a halt when knowledge of self has been reached. The latter I interpret as follows: living mankind will at one point become aware that not living is better than living" (het leven [moet] ophouden als de zelfkennis bereikt is. Dat laatste vat ik aldus op: de levende mensheid zal eenmaal inzien, dat niet-leven beter is dan leven) (*ibid.* 189).

To a certain degree the conclusion is simple. In Emants' oeuvre death functions as a means to prove that parting from life, i.e. dying, is preferable to living. But the inevitable painful road that Emants' heroes and heroines have to travel before reaching

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the point of their liberating death is very distinct. We may feel that a man who married three times and wrote some sixteen plays, many short stories and six novels can hardly be said to have suited the deed to the word. Yet it is correct to call Emants a dogmatic pessimist. And *A Posthumous Confession* is, of all the writer's novels, the one that most conforms to his self-proclaimed pessimism.

Upon looking at the novel's title the reader must conclude that the author of the confession has died. Upon reading the first paragraphs - "My wife is dead and already buried ... I am too afraid of every excitement, too afraid of a glass of wine, too afraid of music, too afraid of a woman; because only in the morning when I am level-headed do I have control over myself and am sure to keep silent about my act" (5) - we conclude that the novel is a first-person narrative and that both hero and heroine are dead, and not only that, but that the hero, Willem Termeer, murdered his wife. Thus the narrator foregoes making use of the device of suspense similar to what Tolstoy uses in "the Death of Ivan Il'ich" and Thomas Mann in "Death in Venice." The advantage is that the reader is asked to concentrate on the development of the drama. But it is difficult to agree with J.J. Oversteegen, who compares the novel to "a problem whose solution we already know, and which is put to us because of the important theoretical aspects of the calculation" (Oversteegen IV: 5). M.G. Kemperink's observation seems more accurate: "Emants gives a solid scientific base to his pessimistic view of the world à la Schopenhauer. He delineates and argues the problematic relationship between man and wife, repeatedly chosen by him as a theme, with the help of psychological and psychiatric theories and findings" (Kemperink 162).

There is no denying that Emants aimed at showing that the tragic end of Willem Termeer, the principal character of the novel, is inevitable. That, however, does not happen with the help of any planned theoretical scheme but rather on the basis of carefully selected psychological causes. As can be expected in a naturalistic novel, there are hereditary factors, such as Willem's strong sensuality, which has been stimulated by the fact that he was weaned from every form of love by both his parents. Furthermore, there is the fact that he experiences his life as aimless because, being financially independent, he does not have to work. He is in a position to buy love, and does so because of the debacle of his marriage, for whose tragic end in murder and suicide the narrator carefully prepares us. Termeer marries Anna Bloemendael for all the wrong reasons. Although he cannot be called a pathological case because of his meticulously constructed survey of his past life, he is doubtless neurotic.

Following his thirtieth birthday he spends a very unpleasant and humiliating evening with so-called friends; and on his way home, as a very bad omen, he slips and falls into the mud. During the night, as I wrote in a previous article: "...he suddenly awakens because of an immense, unfocused anxiety that expresses itself in the fear of incurable illnesses" (Zweers 30). And then suddenly he visualizes that his only hope of gaining some inner tranquility is by getting married, but, unfortunately, he cannot think of any girl to propose to. Then he remembers the daughter of his former guardian, Anna Bloemendael. She agrees to get married, but also for the wrong reasons: she wants to leave the stuffy atmosphere of her parental home. Being rigid and frigid and only concerned about doing her duties as a housewife, she turns out to be the last person able to give Willem the

love, caresses and warmth he so desperately longs for. She, feeling far superior to her husband, looks at him continuously with a contemptuous smile, and that behavior torments him to the point that he starts to hate her and decides to kill her.

For more than a hundred years, critics and readers alike thought that the novel encompasses a murder and a suicide. In the above-mentioned article of 2000, Joosten convincingly argues that there are two suicides. When Termeer enters his wife's bedroom with the intention of killing her, he finds next to her bed on the night table a bottle which is three-quarters empty and a porcelain spoon. He administers the last quarter of the fluid to his wife, who looks to him just like a corpse. It is hard to disagree with Joosten that what Termeer in fact does is to finish the suicidal act of his wife, who at that moment is already dying. The novel's ending is ingeniously constructed by Emants in that Termeer is naturally very anxious to declare to the outside world that Anna, by taking an overdose of chloral hydrate, committed suicide, an explanation readily accepted by their general practitioner, whereas Termeer all the while feels himself to be a murderer.

But the reader may wonder whether the cleverly fabricated ending is entirely satisfactory. It must have crossed Termeer's mind that Anna was in the process of dying by her own hand. There were several unusual circumstances: the unlocked bedroom door that lately had always been locked, the low burning gas flame inside the room, and, above all, the almost empty bottle and spoon beside her bed and the frightening way she looked. If Termeer had added to the description of the scene his awareness of what must have happened, he would have continued feeling guilty of having intended to kill his wife,

but it would have alleviated his soul to realize that he was not actually a murderer. Emants could have given an additional dimension to the tragedy by having Termeer painfully become aware that Anna's life, especially after the loss of her daughter and the departure of her confidant, pastor de Kantere, had become as hellish as his own, to the point that she wanted to end it. But even without this dimension, the unfolding of the story line remains fascinating and gripping.

One might expect that in his next major novel, *Inwijding* (Inauguration) of 1901, Emants would have tried to refine his narrative technique in order to prove more convincingly that not living is preferable to living. He did not, but in this novel also, death features very prominently because it results in the main hero's inauguration into life as it is. On the other hand, as Anbeek very rightly says, "...a bigger contrast than between the keen-witted self-analyst Termeer and the naïve young lawyer Theodoor van Onderwaarden, the main hero of *Inwijding*, seems hardly possible" (Anbeek 35). Emants added to his foreword the following curious words: "[A] warning to a few among the many who may regret having read this book" (Emants 1978: 1). The author seemingly anticipated a possible negative reaction on the part of the reader to another such sad story. Then he continues: "In the following pages I set myself the task of bringing to life for a while a few very ordinary people and in such a fashion that the reader not only would see them move and hear them speak but also would have to participate in their thinking and feeling. I don't know whether that task was carried out well. After all... that also depends on the reader" (*ibid.*) And indeed Theodoor van Onderwaarden and his family (his mother, uncle, two sisters, and brother-in-law),

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belonging to the upper-middle class society of The Hague at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, can be called ordinary people. Even Tonia, Theodoor's mistress, who belongs, significantly, to a lower stratum of that society and is sickly, distrustful and jealous, cannot be called otherwise. It is still worth while pointing to an important difference between *Een nagelaten bekentenis* and *Inwijding* in terms of the mode of narration. Whereas the first is a first-person narrative, the second is a so-called *personale roman*, i.e. it is written in the third person but comes close to a first-person narrative because the narrator relates the main hero's thoughts and emotions mainly from the latter's point of view. But he remains the one who tells the tale and occasionally comments on Theodoor's behaviors, and who is responsible for the description and characterization of the hero's entourage. Thus, the reader is not only informed about what takes place within Theodoor's mind but is also acquainted with the narrator's interpretation of his surrounding world.

Philip Vermoortel gave his article of 1983 a very fitting title: "From Seeming Reality to Real Semblance: 'Inauguration' of Marcellus Emants" (Van schijnbare werkelijkheid tot werkelijke schijn; Vermoortel 114). And indeed Van Onderwaardengrew up in the upper-middle class of The Hague, whose pillars are convention, proper behaviour, making a career with the help of the proper relationships and thus being a "schijnbare werkelijkheid." Then he starts his liaison with the lower-middle class woman Tonia, who in the course of time conceives a deep love for him, which he returns, although he is all the while fully aware that he will never be able to introduce her to his milieu, leave alone marry her. He enjoys the intense happiness of being truly loved and loves Tonia sincerely, sustains her financially

and buys her presents; but she also intuitively knows and feels that there is a class boundary which he will never trespass in order to fully surrender to her. After they have had a nasty quarrel and during a lengthy period when he is absent, she has an abortion of his child. Naturally, given the time and place, this is not performed professionally, with the result that she contracts peritonitis; she initially recovers, but the illness returns, causing her excruciating pain, and leads to her death.

Theodoor, upon learning about it from her sickly father, cries and is devastated, but slowly starts realizing that a heavy burden has fallen from his shoulders and that he has a new lease on life; he can build up a career, accepted by his milieu, of whose shallowness he is conscious, but of which he nonetheless remains part. The death of his unborn child and of the woman he sincerely loved has taught him that that liaison was hopeless and that his future lay within the boundaries of his own upper-middle class society with its semblance of true values. At the beginning of the novel, Theodoor has just graduated from university with a law degree. The arch-pessimist Emants introduces his hero in a surprisingly positive way: "It has been a good thing that he [Theodoor] had worked so hard! Very good that he had not undermined his health like so many others, squandered his money, and spoiled his future! He had denied himself many pleasures, had resisted many temptations; but now came the reward in feeling wonderfully healthy, in being able to walk around with pride and raised head, in audaciously daring to reach out for every desirable task." (19) The narrator masterfully succeeds in letting the reader feel part of the two contrasting milieus in which Theodoor is compelled to move: in his own, he has to attend formal dinners in tails and

make pleasant conversation; thereafter, whenever the occasion offers itself, he flees to Tonia's small and stuffy quarters, where he is met sometimes with expressions of true love, sometimes with outbursts of unfounded distrust and jealousy, against which it steadily becomes more and more hopeless to defend himself.

Whereas in most cases in the *personale roman* the narrated time (*erzählte Zeit*) is not fully covered by the narrative time (*Erzählzeit*) - we are clearly only given a selection of the character's thoughts - in *Inwijding* the reverse occurs: sometimes during a moment of emotional upheaval, it is hard to believe that so many thoughts have crossed Theodoor's mind. Such is the case after Tonia tells him about her abortion:

“When you didn't come back... then I thought... if he'd stayed... I'd have liked it... such a little thing of his; but now... what could the little creature expect but dire poverty... a child of mine among people that are so cruel. No... it has to go... and then I went to Amsterdam... I got rid of it... It was soon done and I was soon back; but perhaps something remained.” (Toe jij nie terugkwam... toe docht ik... nee...as-t-ie lief was gebleven... had ik 't wel aardig gevonde... zo'n klein wezentje van hem; maar nou... wat heb 't schaap anders te wachte dan bittere ellende... 'n kind van mijn onder de mense... onder de mense die zo wreed zijn. Nee... 't mot maar weg... en toe ben ik na Amsterdam gegaan... en 'k heb 't weg late make... 't Was gauw gedaan en 'k was gauw weer terug; maar d'r is misschien iets blijve zitte)

Theodoor was not capable of saying anything right away. A whirlwind of thought howled bewildered through his head. That everything was over... that he hadn't given advice... that even no trace could be found any more of his act... immediately that salutary certainty blunted the fierceness of the impression so sharply and deeply burned in his mind by Tonia's barren account; but he felt paralyzed by the horror of this first being responsible with regard to the fatefully terrible consequences of an innocent giving in to always misleading lust. A child... his child... his whole life he had... because of it he had almost murdered Tonia... and not a moment... no second in all those weeks had the thought of such a horrific danger even feebly shone in his brain. But suddenly his mind reacted against this taking-upon-himself of all responsibility. She was also guilty. And now he spoke almost harshly, feeling though that he wasn't telling the unmixed truth, but precisely for that reason over-zealous to unburden himself: 'There we have the fine consequences of your damned suspicion. If you had trusted me then all this wouldn't have happened. Then I would have kept you back from that foolishness... then...'

'Would you have liked to have my child?'
(252-53)

In order to give an example of the overly flowery language, which is reminiscent of the style of the later novels of Couperus and cannot fail to irritate the reader of the 21st century, it suffices to quote

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the Dutch original of part of the above English translation: "...dat er zelfs geen spoor meer te vinden was van zijn daad... terstond stompte die weldadige zekerheid de felheid af van de indruk door Tonia's dor relaas zo scherp en zo diep gebrand in zijn geest; maar toch voelde hij zich met lamheid geslagen van ontzetting bij dit eerste verantwoordelijk-staan tegenover de noodlottig vreselijke gevolgen van een argeloos toegeven aan een immer misleidende lust."

But notwithstanding some shortcomings, *Inwijding* is a masterfully narrated story. In terms of the mode of narration *Liefdeleven* (Love Life, 1916) is very similar to *Inwijding*. It is again a *personale roman* and the narrative instance is located in the mind of the main hero, Christiaan Duyts, a painter who is financially independent and lives in a *kasteeltje* (small castle) somewhere in the countryside. It is rather curious that this confirmed bachelor marries a woman after having seen her just twice. Mina is a violinist who lives in The Hague and provides for herself and her mother by giving lessons. At first she rejects Christiaan and even tells him: "You think that I am lovely and good; but I am the opposite... No, don't use any polite phrase. That I find odd. I am not a good person... not even for my own mother whom I love dearly all the same ... how badly we usually get on with one another. Almost always something gets under my skin... (Haast altijd heb ik een sort krieuwel in me...) an irresistible urge to be unpleasant" (Emants 1976: 26). Nonetheless, the marriage takes place, with all the foreseeable tragic consequences and with death functioning as the final turning point. The major difference between *Inwijding* and *Liefdeleven* lies in the cause of Tonia's and Mina's unexpected mood swings towards Theodoor and Christiaan respectively.

Whereas in the former it results from her traumatic experiences with former lovers, in the latter it results from a nervous debility. And clearly, between 1900 and 1916 Emants' focus had shifted. In *Inwijding*, the narrator points with unconcealed criticism to the impossibility of a happy bond between members of the upper- and lower-middle class; in *Liefdeleven* he proves the impossibility of happiness between man and wife *tout court*.

The author shows himself a true naturalist, combining science and art. In this respect we may note with interest what Maartje de Jong writes in her article (we translate the title) "Neurasthenics and Moralists. Medical Theory in Marcellus Emants' *Love Life*" (1996): "In *Pathology in Literature* Emants regularly points to the article 'Character and Psychosis' of 1915 by G.J.B.A. Janssens, a physician at the Endegeest asylum in Oegsgeest... [Janssens] supports the thesis that many mental illnesses are an enlargement of the normal character in the sense that there exists a sliding scale from healthy to sick... Emants was well informed about the recent medical literature and it is also noteworthy that this article was published a year before *Liefdeleven* was written. It is therefore not too far-fetched to suggest that this article influenced Emants when writing his novel" (de Jong 75).

Emants' shift of focus to the medical aspect of his characters naturally influences the mode of narration as well. Compared to *Inwijding* the narrator's descriptions of Mina's sudden totally unmotivated emotional outbursts read like a medical assessment. This impression is further strengthened by the fact that in the following descriptions the narrator makes use of similar wording.

Mina is in a very bad mood and does not want to come down to dinner. This leads to a nasty argument; Mina says that in Christiaan's eyes she never does anything right, whereas she constantly tries to make him happy. The husband gets very annoyed because of all the scenes she makes, which started already during their honeymoon, and thus, the opposite is rather true. But Mina is not open to reason and flies into a fury:

Until she snarled at him, shaking with rage, with deep-red cheeks, tears trembling in her eyelashes, the dark-lighting pupils almost squeezed under the contracted eyelids:

- And our honeymoon... which for others is so wonderful...

(Tot ze bevend van woede, met hoogrode wangen, tranen bibberend in haar wimpers, de donker-lichtende pupillen haast weggeknepen onder de vernauwde oogleden, hem toe-snauwde:

-En onze huwelijksreis... die voor anderen zo'n heerlijkheid is...) (58-59).

After a period of relative calm and harmony, Mina even wants to know whether Christiaan is happy with her. Christiaan answers that of course he is, as long as she is kind and doesn't make scenes. But that is not the answer Mina wants to hear:

There the blue of her shining pupils darkened to a threatening black, spasmodic vibrations trembled around her contracted eyes, pulled down her eyebrows; wrinkles grooved deeply in the even skin of her forehead. And stretching the nervously squeezed fists

toward him, she screamed with stiffened upper lip above the angrily bare teeth... (Daar verduisterde het blauw van haar glanzende pupillen tot een dreigend zwart, krampachtige trillingen omsidderden haar vernauwde ogen, trokken haar wenkbrauwen omlaag; rimpels groefden zich vast in haar effen voorhoofdsveld. En de zenuwachtig-samengeknepen vuisten hem toestreckende, krijste ze met opgestrakte bovenlip over de nijdig-ontblote tandtjes...) (73).

There is friction between the spouses because, while Mina refuses to get involved in the household, she pesters the personnel constantly with petty demands, with the result that Christiaan's long time servant Trijn approaches him and complains. Mina has an inkling that there was a conversation between the two and she immediately accuses her husband of siding with the servant, an accusation he does not deserve:

But immediately again, two tight folds lined straight down from the bulging nostrils, her spasmodically trembling eyebrows pulled down the skin of her forehead with two deep furrows into numerous wrinkles and behind the eye crevices, now widely dilated, now contracted to stripes, the pupils stiffened and their soft-lighting blue seemed hardened to a burning black (Doch aanstonds lijnden weer twee strakke plooiën recht van de opbollende neusvleugels neer, trokken haar krampachtig-bevende wenkbrauwen met twee diepe staande groeven het voorhoofdsveld in talloze rimpels omlaag en achter de oogspalten, nu eens wijd opengesperd, dan weer tot strepen vernauwd, verstarde de pupillen, waarvan

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het zachtlichtende blauw verhard leek tot stekend zwart) (86).

The mode of the narration in *Liefdeleven* also differs from that in *Inwijding* because of the narrator's introduction of a third major character, the physician Diepe who, as an adherent to the current nineteenth-century medical theories, is Emants' obvious mouthpiece. After a suicide attempt by Mina, Christiaan reluctantly decides to turn to his friend Diepe for advice regarding his marital problems. In agreement with the medical views of the time, Diepe tells Christiaan that every woman's final destiny is to become a mother. And thus Mina becomes pregnant and totally immersed in the expectation of having a baby. But Jantje is a *scharminkeltje*, a bag of bones, and it is not surprising that the dogmatic pessimist Emants lets the boy die. As in *Inwijding* so also in this novel, death functions as a turning point in the lives of the major characters: Mina has to be put into an institution and Christiaan is faced with the difficult task, now again alone, of building up a new existence at his *kasteeltje*. Although the plot development in this novel is compelling, as it is in *Een nagelaten bekentenis* and *Inwijding*, the reader cannot fail to feel that it is contrived: The good-humoured bachelor Christiaan marries the hysterical Mina notwithstanding the fact that she warns him herself that she is not a good person, and the *deus ex machina* follows, namely the death of the newborn child.

It is difficult to agree with Ton Anbeek that there are guilty parties in this tale. Although the reader may be inclined to view the failure of the marriage as the result of Mina's mental illness and to see Christiaan as the victim, Anbeek's conclusion is "*that Emants wanted to show two sides of the matter*" (Anbeek

61; italics in the original). The novel, though, is a naturalistic one and the characters' lives are determined by fate.

In conclusion, then, the three novels under discussion here are naturalistic and doomed to end in tragedy, but there are major differences among them. *Een nagelaten bekentenis* is totally pessimistic: Willem Termeer is neurotic and cannot survive. The hero of *Inwijding*, although a weak character, is healthy, but in the end he can only survive by adhering to the phony values of his upper-middle class. Christiaan in *Liefdeleven*, also a basically healthy man, learns by bitter experience that no happiness is to be had with an outwardly attractive but mentally ill woman.

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