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***Proceedings***  
**of the CAANS-ACAEN annual meetings in 2017 (Ryerson University)  
and 2018 (University of Regina)**

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CANADIAN JOURNAL OF NETHERLANDIC STUDIES  
REVUE CANADIENNE D'ÉTUDES NÉERLANDAISES

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## From the editor

*Inge Genee*

At the CAANS-ACAEN annual general meeting in 2018 it was decided to make some changes to the way in which CJNS/RCEN is published. First, it was decided to produce a new type of Proceedings, which will contain the papers presented at the annual conference as originally delivered at the conference with minimal editing. Second, we decided to no longer publish two issues per volume. Instead, we will publish articles to our website individually as they become ready, and bundle them together at the end of the year into one single volume. This way we can publish articles earlier, and combining them into one volume rather than two separate issues will ease the workload for the editor.

You find in front of you the first of the new Proceedings volumes. It contains presentations from the CAANS-ACAEN annual meetings in 2017 and 2018. The 2017 meeting was held at Ryerson University in Toronto, Ontario, on May 27-28, 2017. The 2018 meeting was held at the University of Regina in Regina, Saskatchewan on May 26-27, 2018. The papers were internally reviewed by the editorial board and lightly copy-edited, but are otherwise printed more or less as they were delivered at the conferences.

Three of the papers presented in 2017 are included in these Proceedings. The first contribution is by Ton Broos and outlines the life and works of E.M. Beekman, an expert on Dutch colonial literature. The second contribution, by Michiel Horn, discusses Rudy Kousbroek's very critical opinion on Marshall McLuhan. The third and final one is by Adrian van den Hoven and has as its topic the novel *La Chute* ('The Fall') by Albert Camus.

The remaining papers were presented in 2018. We begin with a contribution by our keynote speaker Joke van Leeuwen, a well-known Dutch author. Then Tanja Collet writes about the diary of the Flemish Father Ladislas Segers, who served as a stretcher bearer in the Great War and later emigrated to Canada. Jos Eggermont argues that an explosion in Leiden in the year 1807 indirectly resulted in a number of Nobel prizes for Dutch scientists in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Michiel Horn's second paper describes the work done by Dutch physicist Samuel Abraham Goudsmit for various American projects in

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and after WWII. Basil Kingstone's paper on the work of Belgian poet Paul van Ostaïen concludes this volume.

I would like to thank our managing editor Steven Gillis for his invaluable assistance over the last two years. Steven has helped with French translations, copy-editing, proofreading and correspondence with authors, as well as managing the workflow. This issue was produced with in-kind support from the University of Lethbridge Journal Incubator in the Lethbridge Centre for the Study of Scholarly Communications (CSSC) at the University of Lethbridge. I would like to thank the incubator staff and the University of Lethbridge School of Graduate Studies, who funds the stipends for the managing editors, for their support over the last eight years.

Lethbridge, April 2019

## De la rédaction

*Inge Genee*

A l'assemblée générale annuelle de la CAANS-ACAEN, a été prise la décision d'apporter des changements à la façon dont le CJNS/RCEN est publié. D'abord, on a décidé de produire une nouvelle sorte d'actes, qui comprendront les articles présentés à la conférence annuelle comme ils y ont été présentés, avec peu de changements. Par ailleurs, nous avons décidé d'arrêter la publication de deux numéros dans chaque volume. Nous publierons plutôt des articles sur notre site-Web au fur et à mesure et en temps voulu et nous les rassemblerons en un seul volume à la fin de chaque année. De cette façon, nous pourrons publier plus tôt des articles. La fusion en un volume, au lieu de deux numéros séparés, devra aussi alléger la charge de travail du rédacteur/de la rédactrice.

Vous avez actuellement sous les yeux le premier des nouveaux volumes d'actes. Il comprend des présentations des conférences annuelles de CAANS-ACAEN des années 2017 et 2018. Le rassemblement de 2017 a eu lieu à l'Université Ryerson à Toronto en Ontario le 27 et le 28 mai 2017. La séance de 2018 a eu lieu à l'Université de Regina à Regina en Saskatchewan le 26 et le 27 mai 2018. Les articles sont passés par une évaluation interne faite par le comité de rédaction. Nous avons également apporté quelques modifications, mais les articles de ce numéro sont autrement publiés tels quel, comme leurs auteurs les ont présentés aux conférences.

Trois des articles présentés en 2017 font partie de ces actes. Ton Broos a écrit le premier, résumant la vie et les travaux de E. M. Beekman, un expert de la littérature coloniale néerlandaise. La deuxième contribution, par Michiel Horn, examine l'opinion très critique de Rudy Kousbroek sur Marshall McLuhan. Adrian van den Hoven a écrit la troisième et dernière de ces contributions, discutant du roman *La Chute* d'Albert Camus.

Les articles restants ont été présentés en 2018. Ils commencent par la contribution de notre orateur principal, Joke van Leeuwen, une auteure célèbre néerlandaise qui a écrit plusieurs œuvres. Tanja Collet présente un texte sur le journal du prêtre Ladislas Segers, qui a servi en tant que brancardier pendant la Grande Guerre et qui a émigré plus tard au Canada. Jos Eggermont argue qu'une explosion à Leyde en 1807 avait indirectement entraîné plusieurs prix Nobel pour des scientifiques néerlandais pendant le premier quart du 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle. Le

deuxième article de Michiel Horn décrit les travaux de Samuel Abraham Goudsmit, un physicien néerlandais, sur divers projets américains pendant et après la Seconde Guerre mondiale. L'article de Basil Kingstone sur les œuvres du poète belge Paul van Ostaïjen conclut ce numéro.

J'aimerais remercier notre directeur de la rédaction Steven Gillis pour son aide indispensable durant les dernières deux années. Steven a aidé avec les traductions en français, avec les étapes de la révision, avec la relecture et avec les correspondances avec les auteurs, ainsi qu'avec la gestion du flux de travail. Ce numéro a été produit avec le soutien technique de l'University of Lethbridge Journal Incubator dans le Lethbridge Centre for the Study of Scholarly Communications (CSSC) à l'Université de Lethbridge. J'aimerais remercier le personnel de l'Incubator et l'École des études supérieures de l'Université de Lethbridge, qui finance les allocations pour les directeurs de la rédaction, pour leur soutien durant les dernières huit années.

Lethbridge, avril 2019

## Van de redactie

*Inge Genee*

Op de jaarvergadering in 2018 werd besloten om een aantal veranderingen aan te brengen in de manier waarop CJNS/RCEN gepubliceerd wordt. Ten eerste werd besloten om een nieuw soort “Proceedings” te produceren, waarin de voordrachten gegeven op het jaarlijkse congres in hun oorspronkelijke vorm worden afgedrukt. Ten tweede besloten we niet langer twee nummers per jaar te produceren. In plaats daarvan zullen artikelen op de website worden geplaatst zodra ze klaar zijn, en aan het eind van het jaar worden de beschikbare artikelen dan gebundeld tot een jaargang. Op deze manier kunnen artikelen sneller gepubliceerd worden, en het produceren van één in plaats van twee nummers zal de redacteur werk besparen.

Voor u ligt het eerste nummer van de Proceedings nieuwe stijl. Het bevat presentaties van de jaarvergaderingen in 2017 en 2018. De eerste bijeenkomst vond plaats aan Ryerson University in Toronto, Ontario, op 27-28 mei 2017. De bijeenkomst van 2018 vond plaats aan de University of Regina in Regina, Saskatchewan, op 26-27 mei. De essays zijn intern beoordeeld door de redactieleden en licht geredigeerd, maar zijn verder min of meer gedrukt zoals ze op het congres werden voorgedragen.

Drie van de presentaties van 2017 zijn hier opgenomen. De eerste is van Ton Broos en behandelt leven en werk van E.M. Beekman, een deskundige op het gebied van Nederlandse koloniale literatuur. De tweede bijdrage, door Michiel Horn, bespreekt Rudy Kousbroek’s zeer kritische mening over het werk van Marshall McLuhan. Het derde en laatste stuk is van Adrian van den Hoven en behandelt de roman *La Chute* (‘De Val’) van Albert Camus.

De rest van de lezingen werden gehouden in 2018. We beginnen met een bijdrage van onze keynote spreker van dat jaar, de bekende Nederlandse auteur Joke van Leeuwen, die een enorm oeuvre op haar naam heeft staan. Tanja Collet sprak over het oorlogsdagboek van de Vlaamse Vader Ladislas Segers, een brancarddrager in de Eerste Wereldoorlog die later naar Canada emigreerde. Jos Eggermont maakt aannemelijk dat een ontploffing in Leiden in het jaar 1807 indirect resulteerde in een aantal Nobelprijzen voor Nederlandse wetenschappers in het eerste kwart van de twintigste eeuw. Michiel Horn’s tweede lezing behandelt het werk van de Nederlandse natuurkundige Samuel Abraham

Goudsmit voor verscheidene Amerikaanse projecten in en na de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Basil Kingstone's bespreking van het werk van de Belgische dichter Paul van Ostaijen sluit dit nummer af.

Ik ben onze redactie-assistent Steven Gillis dankbaar voor zijn zeer gewaardeerde assistentie in de afgelopen twee jaar. Steven was verantwoordelijk voor Franse vertalingen, copy-editing, proeflezen, correspondentie met auteurs, en het managen van de werkprocessen. Dit nummer is tot stand gekomen met steun van de University of Lethbridge Journal Incubator in het Lethbridge Centre for the Study of Scholarly Communications (CSSC) aan de University of Lethbridge. Graag bedank ik hier ook de staf van de Incubator voor hun steun in de afgelopen acht jaar, en de University of Lethbridge School of Graduate Studies voor het beschikbaar stellen van de beurzen die ons in staat hebben gesteld om studenten aan te stellen als redactie-assistenten.

Lethbridge, april 2019

## The bear and the orchids. Life and works of E.M. Beekman, authority on Dutch colonial literature

*Ton Broos*

Last year it so happened that two widows of scholars of Dutch asked me if I was interested in a free copy of the complete *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* (WNT, 'Dictionary of the Dutch Language'), the largest dictionary in the world (although this is a pre-internet observation).<sup>1</sup> It is a sign of the times that I wasn't enthusiastic, mainly because it is available on-line, and who wants 43 volumes of printed material? Even libraries don't show interest as they point at their lack of space. However, I got to reading the introduction to the WNT, and the initial editor Matthijs de Vries writes in 1882: "*Maar by ons, vrije Nederlanders, hoekiger en kantiger van natuur, met scherper getekende individualiteit, en boven alles gesteld op onbelemmerde uiting van eigen kracht.*" ('But among us, free Netherlanders, of a more awkward and angular nature, with sharper drawn individuality, and above all fond of an unlimited expression of our own strength.')

(De Vries & Te Winkel 1864-2001, lxxvii).

This powerful characterization matches perfectly one of the owners of the WNT, and I am referring to: Eric Montague Beekman (1939-2008), Monty for his friends. He was a colleague who taught Dutch at the University of Massachusetts, although teaching was not his first priority. It would keep him from his own research and creative writing, which comprised of novels and poetry, many translations from Dutch, and scholarly interpretations of international literature. Monty Beekman was one of those rare animals who combined a bearish attitude and posture with an elegant and light dance step, a combination of heavy lifting with feather light down dwindling. Trying to describe the many facets of Monty's research and his importance for Dutch literature is like trying to put a pair of pants on an octopus. Those of us who were teaching Dutch literature in the English-speaking world gratefully used his interpretations of Paul van Ostayen, Simon Vestdijk, or his selection of Multatuli's aphorisms with extensive introductions. He

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<sup>1</sup> This is the text of a presentation delivered to the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies / Association canadienne pour l'avancement des études néerlandaises (CAANS-ACAEN) held at Ryerson University in Toronto, Ontario, on May 27-28, 2017.

gave a presentation to CAANS in 1987 called “On the centennial of Multatuli’s Death.” Not many people know that he also translated stories from modern Dutch literature, because they were unpublished samples of works by writers in residence, done for the Translation Foundation in the 1980s and 1990s. “Translation is such a marvelous no man’s land. I feel generous toward the unknown slob who has wrung beauty from an obscure language [...] I fancy myself creative while translating one medium of speech into another; it requires skill, knowledge, and sensitivity” (Beekman 1971, 23).

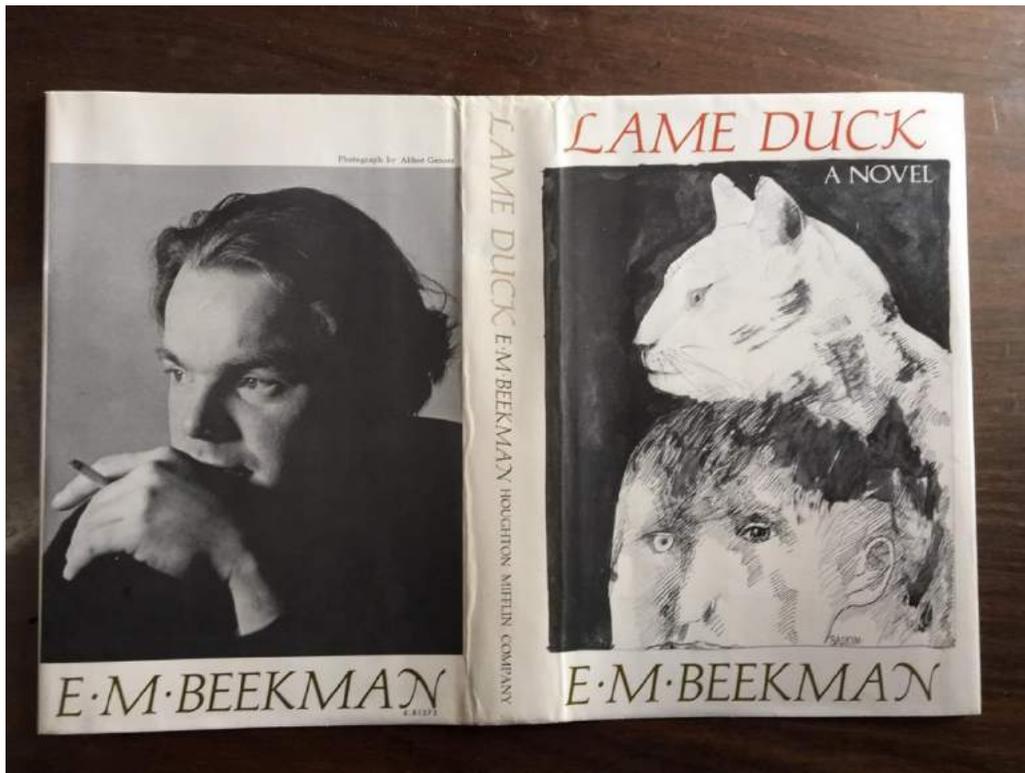


Figure 1. Front cover of *Lame duck*. A novel by E.M. Beekman.

Because of his translations and his editorial work in the series *Library of the Indies*, Monty became world famous. Dutch Indies literature would have stayed hidden in the caves of forgotten texts, the faded portraits of *tempo doeloe* or times past, if it was not for Monty’s persistence and dedication, so well expressed in the title of his study *Troubled pleasures*.

Fame was not in the stars if you look at his childhood. You don’t know what parental cruelty, childhood abandonment and mental anguish is until you have read the description that Monty made of Simon Klemman, his alter ego in his autobiographical works *Frozen years* (Beekman 1993) and *Mastering silence*

(Beekman n.d.). Young Simon is left in a boarding school in the Netherlands during World War II, not unlike Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, complete with corporal punishment and porridge for breakfast. His subsequent years in Indonesia are of a similar mental torment, now inflicted by his alcoholic abusive father. It is perplexing that Monty even spent one minute of his time on the country that brought so many cruel memories. But then, as he later writes, one should not remain despondent but turn defiant. That must have inspired him also in his interest in the works of Georgius Everhardus Rumphius, the German born naturalist who worked for the VOC, the Dutch East India company, on Ambon, and was the author of two masterpieces on tropical plants, shells and animals. Monty translated *The Ambonese curiosity cabinet* (Beekman 1999) and the *Ambonese herbal* (Beekman 2011) in six hefty volumes, originally published in Dutch in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

As I mentioned before, Monty Beekman was born in The Netherlands in 1939, in a dysfunctional family that forced him to stay in a boarding school during the war. After an escape, he roamed the streets for months, living off food he stole from farms. His parents eventually took him out of the Reformatory Institution in 1945 and his father accepted a position as a mining engineer, moving the family to the Dutch colonies in South East Asia.

Life in the Dutch East Indies with an abusive father made for horrendous stories; I quote from Monty (n.d.)'s unpublished manuscript to illustrate this:

He [the father] got up, moved swiftly around the table, grabbed Simon by the neck, swung him around, and slammed him against the door. "You will do what I tell you, you idiot, even when I haven't said anything. Damn it, you are always around, always where you are not wanted." And when he slammed the boy for the third time he missed the door and Simon's head smashed against the doorjamb. A big gash over his left eye spurted blood and flowed down his face, matting his thick, sun-bleached eyebrow. The man whirled him around and snapped, "Stand at attention when I talk to you!" and the boy did so without making a sound, staring straight ahead, blood blinding his left eye, the same one that had been injured at St. Joseph's. Physical pain was easier to handle than the constant verbal abuse, because then Simon could reach back to the war years and the Vangray Reformatory, and press a reserve of will power into service that could make him almost impervious. (Unpublished ms., n.d., 61)

His autobiographical memoir ends with his repatriation to Holland. It was not surprising that Monty Beekman fled the family and came to the United States as a teenager in 1957. One of his later works has a publisher's blurb, and reveals, probably in his own words:

After a brief stint in the U.S. Army, he kept himself alive with a variety of jobs (oilman on the Rock Island Railroad, bartender, plastics factory worker, janitor, bouncer, lab assistant) before earning his B.A. in English and Comparative literature from the University of California at Berkeley in 1963 and his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Harvard University in 1968. He has taught for more than three decades in the Department of Germanic Languages at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and is the author of more than two dozen books including novels, short stories, scholarly works and poetry. (Beekman 2003, 97-98)

Part of his studies was doing research as a Fulbright Fellow in 1965-66 in Belgium, which resulted in his *Homeopathy of the absurd: The grotesque in Paul van Ostaïjen's creative prose* (Beekman 1970). An example of his expertise in comparative literature can be found in his *The verbal empires of Simon Vestdijk and James Joyce*, published in 1983. Although Vestdijk has almost disappeared from the Dutch literary consciousness, *Meneer Visser's hellevaart* ('Mr. Visser's small inferno') of 1936 still enjoys a certain popularity, and Beekman makes comparisons with parts in Joyce's *Ulysses*. We also read about Vestdijk's *Else Böhler* (1935) and his *Ivoren wachters* ('Ivory Guards', 1951), which refers to the protagonist's teeth. In an appendix, Beekman lists Dutch words and expressions that contributed to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (Beekman 1983, 200-209).

His greatest triumph at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst must have been a named professorship as Multatuli-professor, which he deserved as the grandmaster behind his series *Library of the Indies*, translations of Dutch colonial literary works into English, in as many as 12 different editions. They vary from Multatuli's *Max Havelaar*, A. Alberts' *The islands*, Louis Couperus' *The hidden force*, Rob Nieuwenhuis' *Faded portraits* (a personal friend of Beekman and published under his pseudonym E. Breton de Nijs), to Maria Dermoût's *The ten thousand things* or Van Schendel's *Jan Company*. Over time, Monty became an authority on Indies Literature and the logical sequence was his *Troubled pleasures: Dutch colonial literature from the East Indies, 1600-1950* (Beekman 1996). This work, more than 600 pages long, does not pretend to be a complete, inclusive history of Dutch colonial literature, but shows an extensive depth and provocative knowledge of this literature. He definitely tries to raise its profile as he compares it to American literary examples.

The selection of works discussed was his choice and therefore prone to criticism. Gerard Termorshuizen writes for instance: "Beekman is not exactly a master of knowing when to stop. As far as I am concerned, he should dispense his enormous knowledge in smaller doses. Caught up in his strongly associative stream of thought, the structure of his scholarly argument suffers as a result" (Termorshuizen 1998, 512). The reviewer here refers to Beekman's dealing with

P.A. Daum, comparing his writing to the literature of the Old South of the United States. Bert Paasman complains in his review in NRC newspaper that he has to study literature first before he can read Beekman (Paasman 1998, 37). It shows the narrower path of thinking that one sees in Dutch critics, always weary about scholars writing in a non-Dutch language, whereas Beekman wants to widen the horizon of Dutch literature and create a greater seat for Dutch in general in the literary theater of the world.

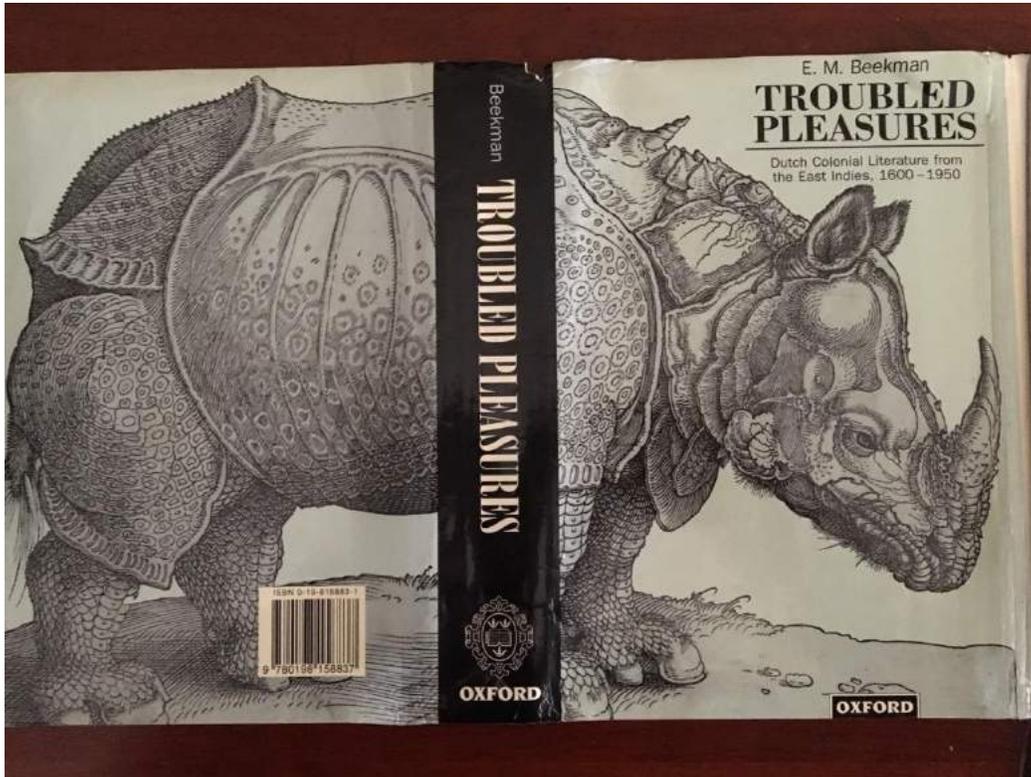


Figure 2. Front cover of *Troubled pleasures*. Dutch colonial literature from the East Indies, 1600-1950 by E.M. Beekman.

In a few letters that Monty sent to me, you can smell some of his temperament, often caused by books in the making. Listen to him in 1995: “I am waiting. Waiting to find out about the grants, about my *Indisch* book, about the fate of 2 manuscripts of mine at New Directions. I feel like a giant case of constipation. But negative diarrhea I don’t want either!” He signs the letter with “*semper idem*” and he must often have thought that it was all the same when it took so much time to get his work funded and published.

When he enjoyed a sabbatical in 1996, he wrote from Leiden: “Leiden is a nice place but everything is so goddamn small and narrow and crammed in this

country. Faith [his wife] and I now live in a one-room apartment where the beds are up under the rafters and only accessible by ladder!”

Fortunately, it did not stop him from his work, as he writes:

I am slowly getting the research done and might even start writing the introduction. I have been forced to find out the craziest things and would you believe this [in his proud excitement he starts writing in Dutch]: *5 woorden die ik absoluut niet thuis kon brengen kunnen ook niet door het Lexicologisch Instituut gevonden worden! Als Beekman het niet weet, weet niemand het! Ja jonge, zo zit dat.* (‘5 words that I absolutely could not identify could not be found by the Lexicological Institute either. If Beekman doesn’t know, nobody knows! Yes, my boy, that’s the way it is.’)

He was referring to his masterpiece, Rumphius’ voluminous works, for which there is not enough praise in the past, present and surely in the future.

The story of Rumphius’ life and works is worth mentioning. Georgius Everhardus Rumphius was born in Germany, but joined the Dutch East India Company first as a soldier, later as a merchant and as a judge, in Amboina, the Moluccas, now part of Indonesia. His enormous interest in his surroundings made him start descriptions of the natural world for which there was great interest. His natural and botanical observations made for his nickname: “the Pliny of the Indies”, but he was also called “the blind seer.” The reason for this is that he lost his sight in 1670 at age 42; Beekman claims it was glaucoma. More disasters fell on him as he lost his wife and daughter four years later in an earthquake. On top of this, his manuscript with illustrations was destroyed in a fire in 1687. To recreate his work he had support from officials, colleagues and his son, besides his formidable memory and creative imagination. The first six books of the Herbal were shipped five years later to Holland for publication, but the ship sank after a French attack. Fortunately, a copy had been made, which he amended until three months before his death in 1702 at the age of 74. Both titles were published posthumously in 1705 and 1741.

Beekman set out to translate all of Rumphius’ works into English. In 1982, a reviewer of *The poison tree*, a publication that gave a foretaste of Rumphius’ oeuvre with quotes, said it thus:

Beekman deserves great credit for rendering Rumphius’s prose so magnificently and, in the process, focusing attention on him as a Dutch stylist of note. As evidence, it is worth quoting a single example of the translation, Rumphius’s description of the high mountains of Ambon, the harsh environment of *Muscus Capilaris*: “There no voice is ever heard, neither those of men nor those of beasts, nor even birds, whereas all animals eschew these cold and rough pinnacles of the world. And an eternal

silence, a ghastly twilight, and a whisper of winds reigns there, nor should one speak loudly but cross these mountains in patient stillness, for a loud crying will stir the air to rain.” (Fox 1984, 366)

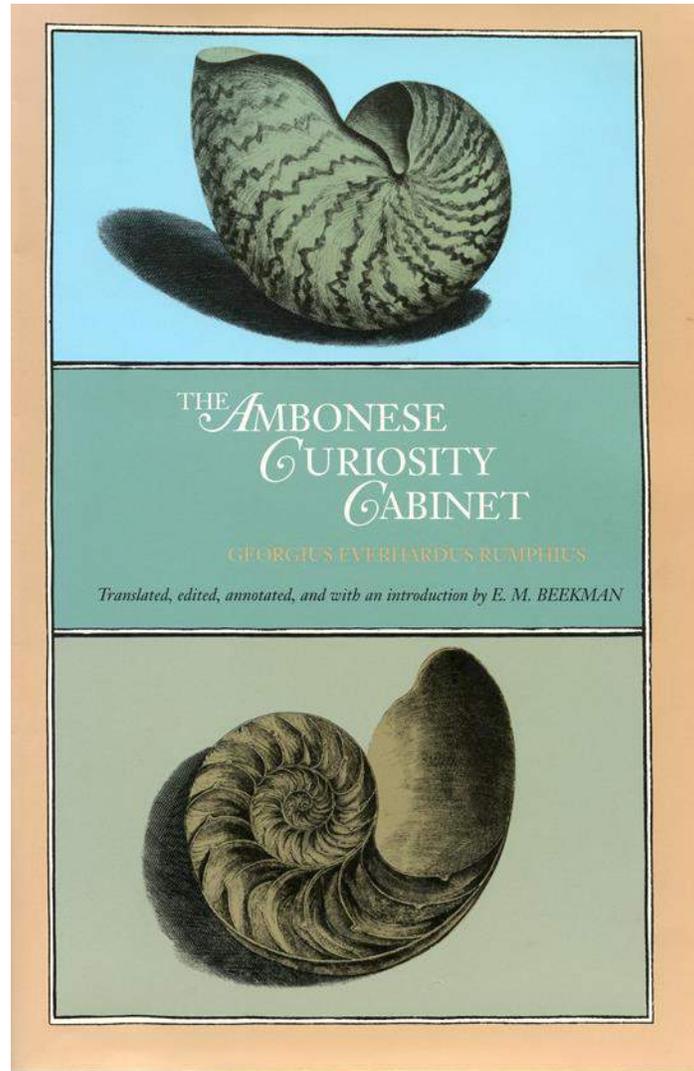


Figure 3. Front cover of *The Ambonese curiosity cabinet* by Georgius Everhardus Rumphius, translated, edited, annotated and with an introduction by E.M. Beekman.

I invited him to Ann Arbor where he delivered the 4<sup>th</sup> DeVries VanderKooy annual memorial lecture in 1999. It was a remarkable talk because he introduced things uncommon to us in the spirit of Rumphius, and comparing this with the beautiful interpretation that Maria Dermoût gave us in her novel *The Ten Thousand Things* (1955). This novel describes the life of an elderly lady called Felicia who lives in harmony with the ten thousand things that form creation and include death in

different manifestations. It was a bestseller in its American translation. Monty pointed out the parts that she used from Rumphius' work and put it in a new light. I quote from the book that was published after the lecture:

What he [Rumphius] teaches is that we should see beauty even if one's life is a disaster, even if malignity rears up and strikes. In other words, we should try to transcend the now, overcome the constrictions that society and the human condition have forced upon our souls. Life is always difficult, but one should be able to warm one's soul in the glow of beauty. [...] Wisdom is not only in the heart but also in the object. It requires listening. We should listen to nature as Rumphius did. It is a gift, because it is free, gratis, for nothing. It will restore us and it can provide solace. And that is why it is magic. (Beekman 2003, 41-43)

He was at the time working on *The Ambonese herbal* which found its final publication shortly after his death in 2008. The book has five volumes plus an extensive index and describes in remarkable detail more than 2,000 plants, their habitats, and their economic and medicinal uses. Its 800 original illustrations are a treasure trove for botanists, anthropologists, historians, etc. As he had pointed out in an article on Junghuhn, he recognized that scientific documents were literary texts as well, verbal messages that tried to persuade; persuasion employs rhetoric and rhetoric is style (Beekman 1991).

I do not know how he found time to research another writer's literary work, but perhaps it was no coincidence that he published a work called *The crippled heart* (1997), an introduction to the life, times and works of Willem Godschalck van Focquenbroch. Not only does this writer's name sound funny in English, but like his biographer, he was also a gifted individualist who refused to fall in line. Focquenbroch was born in Amsterdam in 1640, obtained his medical degree in 1662 and went to West Africa to make his fortune as a colonial official. He died soon in Elmina, Africa's Gold Coast in 1670. In 1997, Beekman's publication did not reveal much new information about the Dutch author's life, but his translation of four long annotated letters from Africa, together with a lengthy introduction, gave a unique new insight into this region from this early period, for the first time in English (Beekman 1997; Broos 2017).

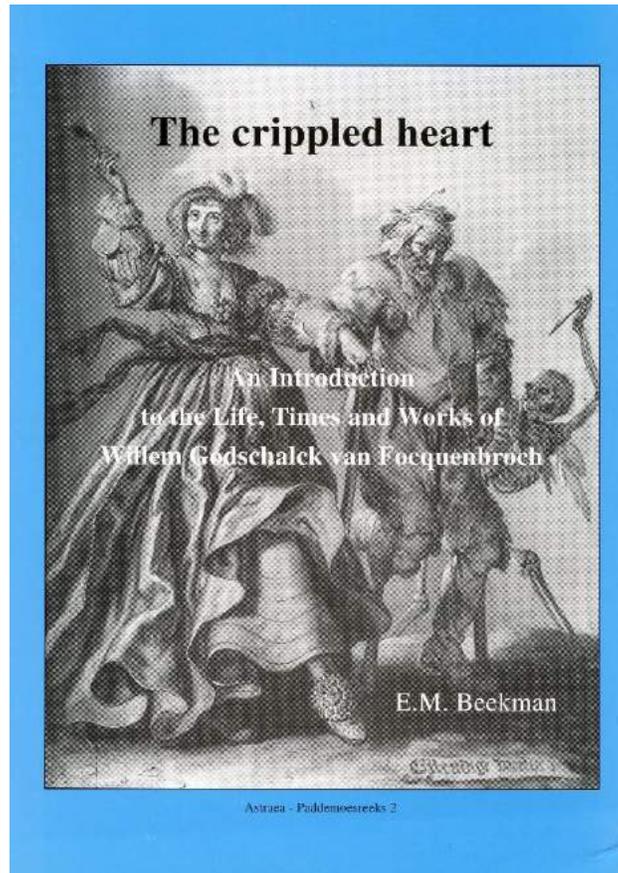


Figure 4. Front cover of *The crippled heart*. An introduction to the life, times and works of Willem Godschalck van Focquenbroch by E.M. Beekman.

Besides editing other people's work, he was a writer of fiction in his own right. First there was *Lame duck*, published in 1971, describing the life of Hugo Lenz, a cripple, a loner, who makes his living by doing translations. In the novel he describes himself as a "writer (of sorts). Has a small legacy which will allow him to be always respectably poor" and "insecure, loner, lives like an erratic boulder unnoticed except by his own smell" (Beekman 1971, 233). He wards off his demons and loneliness with pills and Dutch gin in the company of friends, a publisher Latro who commissions him to turn out pornography, a Shakespeare scholar called Scop and a beer salesman called Feld, not forgetting a brief stint of a love relation with Nadine. This all plays in Paris and mainly Amsterdam with a leading role for his cat Asmodee, who takes his master flying through Dutch heaven as he is shot out of the sky.

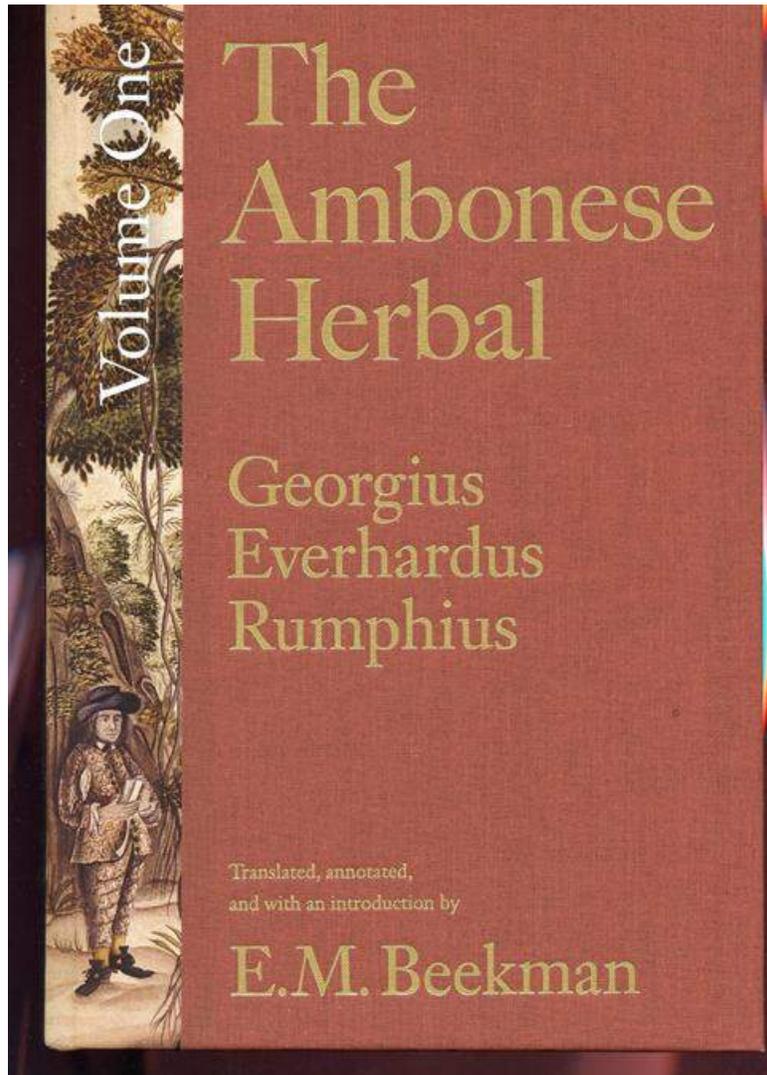


Figure 5. Front cover of Volume I of The Ambonese herbal by Georgius Everhardus Rumphius, translated, annotated and with an introduction by E.M. Beekman.

After *Lame duck*, he wrote *The killing jar* in 1976. It deals with an American novelist called Toivo Syystalvi (the blurb misspells Sysstalvi), author of a successful novel *Past reason hunted*, who is invited to go on a lecture tour to France, Holland, and England. In Amsterdam he meets a philosopher who is murdered, followed by assassins trying to kill him. He is thrown back into the world of his father, Kall, who disappeared during WWII, fighting among his fellow Finns. A CIA agent Blaise Donner and another spook called Happy Higgins are also deeply involved as our hero finally is dealing with his three rivals. Hilarious pages deal with his secret stay with the circus and performances as a clown; also noteworthy is the way he blusters into the American embassy, where he demands the services of the

available call girl in the basement, which he calls “the relief station” (Beekman 1976, 186). The storyline is somewhat contrived for my taste and there is a tendency of exaggerated usage of obscure words, which must be the result of a translator, writer, literary wordsmith, who frequents reference works forcing readers to use the alphabet more than necessarily. I have a slight suspicion that he wants to show off his extraordinary command of English as a second language learner, which makes sometimes for unnecessary slowdowns in pace and rhythm.

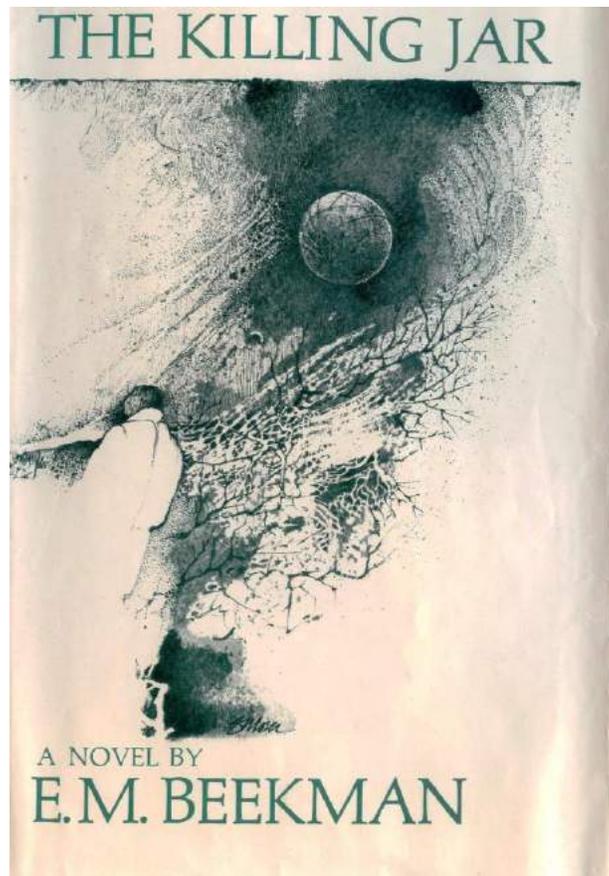


Figure 6. Front cover of *The killing jar* by E.M. Beekman.

Another part of Monty’s literary life was his poetic talent. He described it as follows: “I had other presumptions once, but after a certain age and the cold logic of bereavements, life does indeed seem a lesson in leaving and poetry a better grade of litter” (Beekman 2003, ix). The title of his collected poems is therefore *The litter of leaving: Collected poems*, published in 2003. Beekman’s poetry has been described as “acerbic, disturbing, earthy, and bizarrely comic” (Beekman 2003, cover text). In contrast, his poems also reflect his search for beauty and peace in an unsettled, often cruel and disappointing world. Beekman regards

nature as the ultimate solace, “the one that gives and the one that taketh away” (Beekman 2003, ix). In his final chapter, “Nature (Solace)”, Beekman presents a lovely and tranquil series of short poems that stand in sharp contrast to his sardonic accounts of failed relationships, personal terrors, ludicrous contemporary culture, and the disappointments of academic life. Beekman’s intellectually sensuous poetry reflects a lifetime love affair with language.

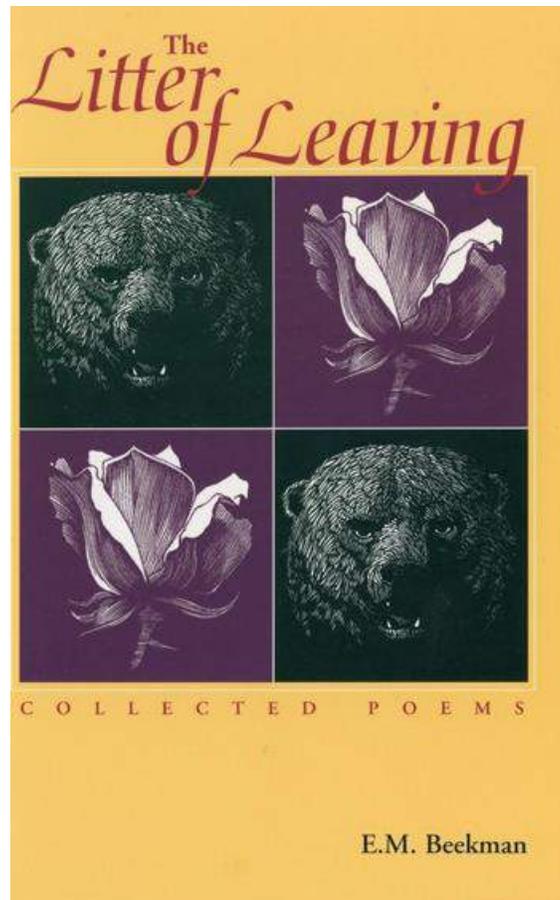


Figure 7. Front cover of *The Litter of Leaving: Collected Poems* by E.M. Beekman.

So, is there a conclusion? We should be grateful for Eric Montague Beekman who was an important personality of the international Dutch literary landscape. He was the promotor of Dutch colonial literature, the *trait d'union* between two languages, but also his own *persona literata* as novelist and poet. Most of his life he lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, around the corner from Emily Dickinson’s

home. She gets this dedication in Monty Beekman's publication of 2003 *Rumphius' Orchids*: "To him who keeps an Orchis' heart / The swamps are pink in June."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This quote from Emily Dickinson contains an error. The original reads: "with June".



## Rudy Kousbroek on Marshall McLuhan

*Michiel Horn*

Allow me to take you back to 1967. On February 20, a clear winter day, I accompanied three other young men in driving to Port Hope, Ontario, where Vincent Massey, Canada's first Canadian-born Governor General, lived in retirement at his country estate, Batterwood House.<sup>1</sup> Three of us, William Dean, Ian Lancashire and myself, were Junior Fellows of Massey College, the University of Toronto graduate residence that Massey had created and of which he was the Visitor. Our driver, Derrick Breach, was a former Junior Fellow.

The purpose of our visit was to present Massey, who was celebrating his eightieth birthday, with two presents from the Junior Fellows. Having been introduced to Massey's dogs, Beau and Nash, we settled down to conversation, allowing him to pick the topic. After a couple of false starts he hit on Marshall McLuhan and the ideas advanced in his book *Understanding Media* (McLuhan 1964a), which Massey was reading. He offered the opinion that McLuhan was "a bit of a charlatan". Dean, who had taken a course with McLuhan, agreed, Lancashire gently demurred, while Breach (a mathematician) and I expressed no opinion. As I recall the events of that day, the conversation reached no clear conclusion.

My reluctance to contribute to the discussion was not due to ignorance of McLuhan's book. It had appeared in 1964, and I read the paperback edition two years later. After finishing it I commented in the diary I kept at that time: "An entertaining book, though scarcely well-written. I have the feeling that obfuscation is used to appear profound. But perhaps he just writes confusingly." Agnostic about the book's assertions, I willingly left their assessment to Dean and Lancashire, students of English literature and better informed than I was.

That is where McLuhan stayed, at least for me, until the summer of 1971. While I was visiting my art historian brother Hendrik (Jack) in Amsterdam, he gave me a slim volume with the comment that I would find its critique of McLuhan's work interesting. The book was *Het avondrood der magiërs* by Rudy Kousbroek; it

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<sup>1</sup> This is the text of a presentation delivered to the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies / Association canadienne pour l'avancement des études néerlandaises (CAANS-ACAEN) held at Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario, on May 27-28, 2017.

contained a section with the mocking title “*Het licht uit Toronto*” (‘The light from Toronto’). The book was a revelation to me, not least for its trenchant criticism of McLuhan’s thought. At the time he was revered by many in North America and regarded as a prophet with deep insights. It was stimulating to get a different view of him.

Born on Sumatra, Herman Rudolf Kousbroek (1929-2010) came to the Netherlands with his family after the war, which he spent in a Japanese internment camp, a subject he later wrote extensively about. After a gymnasium education in Amsterdam, he began the study of mathematics and natural science but dropped out and moved to Paris, where he studied Japanese. For years he lived alternately in France and the Netherlands before settling in Leiden in 1992. Fluent in several modern languages, he was mainly active as a poet, translator, essayist and newspaper columnist, notably in *Vrij Nederland* and the *NRC Handelsblad*. He won the *P.C. Hooftprijs* for his essays in 1975. A prominent atheist and advocate for animal rights, he was “*een denker met gevoel*” (‘a thinker with feeling’), in the words of editor and critic Arjan Peters, who wrote Kousbroek’s obituary in *De Volkskrant* (Peters 2010).

*Het avondrood*, containing essays and articles written in 1967 and 1968, has as its unifying theme *het moderne bijgeloof* (‘modern superstition’). Kousbroek finds this wherever people are searching for “*de Waarheid*” or “*het Hogere*”, a mystical truth or higher reality that is believed to lie beyond that which can be perceived by the senses or known by logical and rational means. To the seekers for *het Hogere*, the findings of the natural sciences, which are often beyond their comprehension, are conceived to be a manifestation of this higher reality, but are not to be confused with it. Kousbroek locates a key stimulus for the search for a mystic reality in fear of the incomprehensible:

Het moderne mysticisme is de reactie van mensen die afgezien hebben van pogingen om de hen omringende werkelijkheid nog verder te begrijpen. Het is de vlucht uit een werkelijkheid die te gecompliceerd geworden is om nog interpreteerbaar te zijn met de vederlichte rationele bagage die de meeste mensen in onze samenleving meekrijgen. (Kousbroek 1970, 23-24)<sup>2</sup>

Another major stimulus is the fear of death. To Kousbroek, modern mysticism represents regression on a massive scale, a return to an infantile view of the world.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Modern mysticism is the response from people who no longer attempt to understand the reality around them. It is the flight from a reality that has become too complicated to be interpreted by the feather-light rational thinking skills that most people in our society are brought up with.’

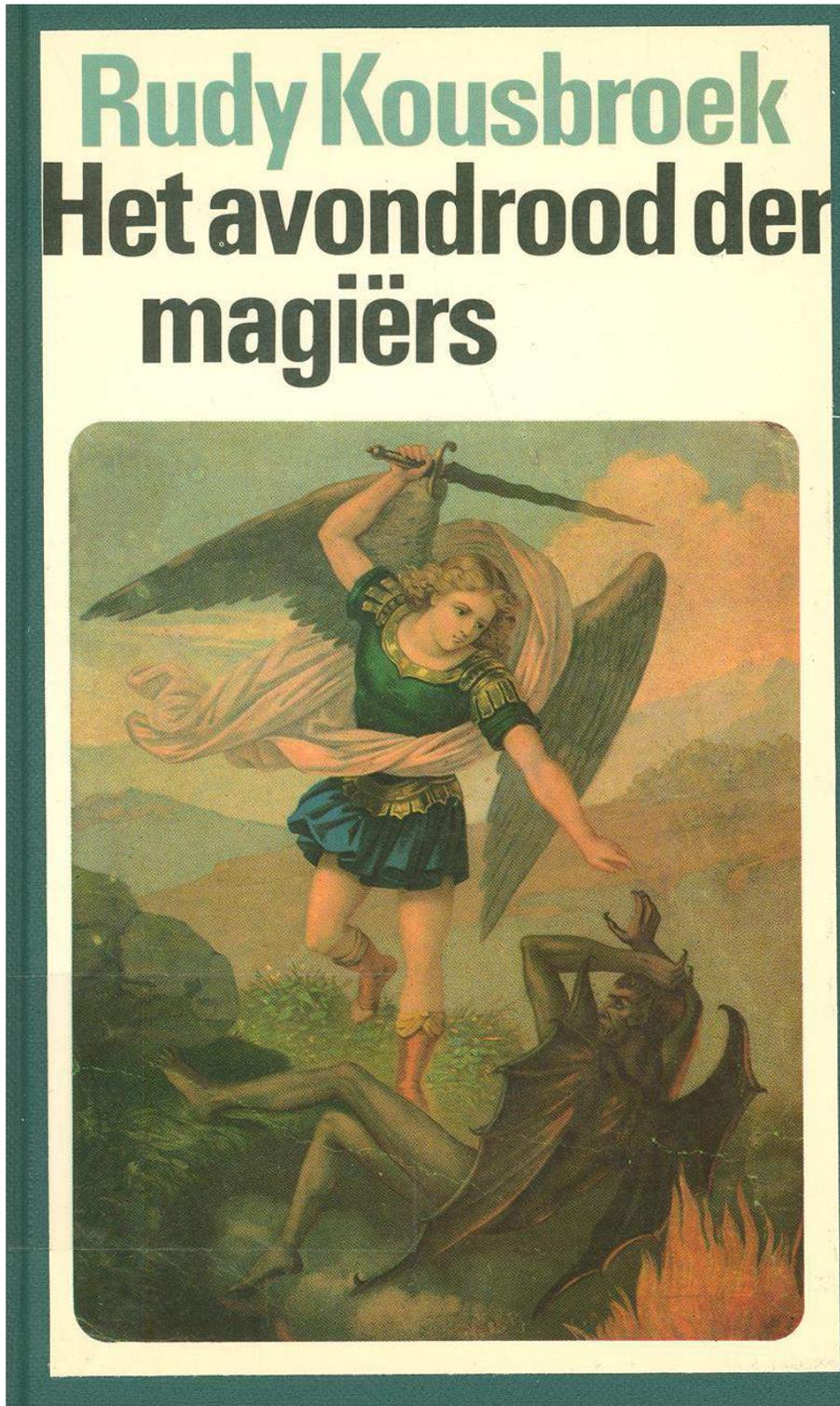


Figure 1. Front cover of *Het avondrood der magiërs* by Rudy Kousbroek.

Among the targets of Kousbroek's scepticism are the philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1942), the Jesuit thinker Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), the psychologist and LSD-advocate Timothy Leary (1920-96), and the film-makers Stanley Kubrick (1928-99) and Jean-Luc Godard (b. 1930), as well as Marshall McLuhan.

Herbert Marshall McLuhan (1911-80) was an Edmonton-born professor of English literature. He obtained his B.A. from the University of Manitoba and his doctorate from Cambridge University, and he spent most of his teaching career at St Michael's College, which is federated with the University of Toronto. There he became interested in two early works in communications theory written by the University of Toronto political economist Harold Adams Innis, *Empire and Communications* (1950) and *The Bias of Communication* (1951). In an introduction McLuhan wrote for the re-issue of the latter book, he acknowledged his debt to Innis, while taking issue with him for failing to reach the same insights McLuhan did, as in: "It had not occurred to Innis that electricity is in effect an extension of the nervous system as a kind of global membrane" (McLuhan 1964b, xiv). This is classic McLuhan: supremely confident and given to categorical but opaque declarations.

For a brief summary of McLuhan's thought, I can do no better than quote from a famous article about McLuhan, accompanied by a question-and-answer session, that appeared in a 1969 issue of *Playboy*:

McLuhan contends that all media – in and of themselves and regardless of the messages they communicate – exert a compelling influence on man and society. Prehistoric, or tribal, man existed in a harmonious balance of the senses, perceiving the world equally through hearing, smell, touch, sight and taste. But technological innovations are extensions of human abilities and senses that alter this sensory balance – an alteration that, in turn, inexorably reshapes the society that created the technology. According to McLuhan, there have been three basic technological innovations: the invention of the phonetic alphabet, which jolted tribal man out of his sensory balance and gave dominance to the eye; the introduction of movable type in the 16th Century, which accelerated this process; and the invention of the telegraph in 1844, which heralded an electronics revolution that will ultimately retribalize man by restoring his sensory balance. McLuhan has made it his business to explain and extrapolate the repercussions of this electronic revolution. (Playboy Interview 1969, 53)

McLuhan may have owed some of his insights to Innis, but he did not emulate that scholar's scrupulous concern for facts and data. He *did* share Innis's infelicitous use of language. Kousbroek was not impressed by McLuhan's English:

Het spijt mij dat ik [...] moet bekennen dat het zijn taalgebruik is, dat mij in Marshall McLuhan het meest tegenstaat. Het Engels van McLuhan is stuitend. Mistroostig, hardvochtig, onnauwkeurig, onverschillig, houterig, zakkerig, square, knarsend en vreugdeloos, het zijn woorden die het nog maar onvolledig weergeven. (Kousbroek 1970, 85-86).<sup>3</sup>

Recalling my first reaction to reading *Understanding Media* I can only say: Amen!

McLuhan, it must be said, would have regarded Kousbroek's criticism (and mine) as wrong-headed. The critic Richard Kostelanetz wrote in the *New York Times* on January 27, 1967: "Everything McLuhan writes is originally dictated, either to his secretary or to his wife, and he is reluctant to rewrite, because, he explains, 'I tend to add and the whole thing gets out of hand'." In this self-serving view, muddled writing was actually meritorious, being evidence of profound cogitation. Kostelanetz reports him as saying: "Clear prose indicates the absence of thought."

More damaging than the poor quality of McLuhan's prose, in Kousbroek's view, was his readiness to invent his own facts in support of his ideas. One of the more astonishing of these "alternate facts" is that "the adolescent, as opposed to the teenager ... was indigenous only to those areas of England and America where literacy had invested even food with abstract visual values. Europe never had adolescents. It had chaperones" (McLuhan 1964a, 302). And again: "Tactility is a supreme value in European life. For that reason, on the Continent there is no adolescence, but only the leap from childhood to adult ways. Such is now the American state since TV, and this state of evasion of adolescence will continue" (McLuhan 1964a, 324-325). It was McLuhan's conviction that television "had disposed America to European modes of sense and sensibility. America is now Europeanizing as furiously as Europe is Americanizing" (McLuhan 1964a, 322).

Before television, McLuhan states, there was a clear distinction between "the detribalized and literate West", which he limits to the United Kingdom and North America, and a tribalized, less literate, more tactile Europe, oriented to the ear, "intolerant, closed, and exclusive", rather than to the eye, "open, neutral, and associative" (McLuhan 1964a, 302). This is the reason, in his view, that although "ideas of tolerance came to the West only after two or three centuries of literacy and visual Gutenberg culture, no such saturation with visual values had occurred in Germany by 1930" (McLuhan, 1964a 302-303). In the Russia of the 1960s this was, he asserted, still far off.

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<sup>3</sup> 'I am sorry to have to [...] admit that it is Marshall McLuhan's use of language that I find most grating. His English is abominable. Depressing, harsh, imprecise, careless, wooden, wretched, square, grinding and joyless, these are words that only partially express it.'

The central concept in McLuhan's thought is that "the medium is the message [...]. It is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association [...]" (McLuhan 1964a, 7, 9). If this is so, Kousbroek notes, it is strange that the medium of print, introduced in various countries of Europe at much the same time, should have had a different effect on the continent than in the British Isles and later in the United States. This is a conundrum, unless, as McLuhan asserts, the continental peoples *are* inherently more "tribal", "tactile", and "earthy", less "literate" and "visual" than their English and American counterparts. As Kousbroek says, McLuhan's distinction between a literate English-speaking West and a less-literate Europe that is closer to even less-literate Asia and Africa informs a good deal of his writing. But the notion that Teutons and Slavs as well as the inhabitants of the Low Countries, France, Spain, Italy, Greece and so on, are more tribal and less visually oriented than the English-speaking peoples is stated as a fact. It is unsubstantiated by hard evidence.

Kousbroek has a lot of fun with McLuhan's excursions into European social history, used to shore up his theorizing. Kousbroek offers several examples. One concerns the automobile and its past. "From the beginnings of the automobile", McLuhan asserts, "[Europeans] have preferred the wraparound space of the small car" (McLuhan 1964a, 325). And also: "The small European car [...] was no visual package job. Visually, the entire batch of European cars are so poor an affair that it is obvious their makers never thought of them as something to look at. They are something to put on, like pants or a pullover" (McLuhan 1964a, 326). On the other hand,

"[...] the American car had been fashioned in accordance with the *visual* mandates of the typographic and the movie images. The American car was an enclosed space, not a tactile space [...]. In the American car, as the French observed years ago, 'one is not on the road, one is in the car'.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, the European car aims to drag you along the road and to provide a great deal of vibration for the [human] bottom. Brigitte Bardot got into the news when it was discovered that she liked to drive barefoot in order to get the maximal vibration. (McLuhan 1964a, 327)

Ah, yes, those tactile, earthy, *sexy* Europeans.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> As is typical in *Understanding Media*, the quotation is not footnoted. Who were these French? The quotation feels as though it has been made up for the occasion.

<sup>5</sup> McLuhan adds: "Even English cars, weak on visual appearance as they are, have been guilty of advertising that 'at sixty miles an hour all you can hear is the ticking of the clock.' That would be a very poor ad, indeed, for a TV generation that has to be *with* everything and has to *dig* things in order to get at them." First of all, cars don't advertise, companies do. Second, the slogan, mangled here and unattributed, was: "At sixty miles an hour the loudest noise in this new Rolls-Royce comes

As Kousbroek points out, McLuhan's views about the automobile are rooted in sheer ignorance (Kousbroek 1970, 92). The early history of the automobile shows no general European preference for small cars: consider the Alfa Romeo, Bugatti, Daimler, Hispano Suiza, Mercedes, and Panhard, to mention but a few. By and large and at all times since the late nineteenth century, people of means, wherever they live, have preferred large, luxurious cars. They did so in the Europe of the 1960s, when McLuhan wrote, but lower incomes than in North America, as well as higher taxes on gasoline in Britain and Europe, and the crowded nature of European and British cities,<sup>6</sup> all facts overlooked or ignored by McLuhan, forced most European as well as British drivers into small cars. (It should be noted that McLuhan believed one of the effects of television to be that it led Americans, too, to prefer "the wrap-around space of small cars" (McLuhan, 1964a, 316). This he held to be one of the consequences of Americans becoming more tactile under the influence of television. McLuhan evidently did not anticipate the rise of the SUV and its enormous popularity.)

Moving to another point of criticism, Kousbroek derides McLuhan's statement that it was "the literate American colonists who were first to insist on a rifled barrel and improved gunsights. They improved the old muskets, creating the Kentucky rifle. It was the highly literate Bostonians who outshot the British regulars" (McLuhan, 1964a, 341). Kousbroek points out that rifled barrels existed in Europe from the late fifteenth century on, and by the beginning of the eighteenth century every great power in Europe had numerous regiments that were equipped with rifles.

Van de superioriteit van de 'hooggeletterde Bostonians' over de Britten, waar McLuhan het over heeft, blijft niets anders over dan dat de Britse regering te krenterig was om haar koloniale troepen met behoorlijke geweren uit te rusten. (Kousbroek 1970, 92)<sup>7</sup>

He notes that, on this occasion, McLuhan has, presumably for the purpose of his argument, included the British among the Europeans, more oral and so

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from the electric clock." Dating from 1958, it is one of the most famous advertisements produced by David Ogilvy of Ogilvy and Mather. It had nothing to do with "English cars" in general. It's hard to believe McLuhan did not know this.

<sup>6</sup> An aunt who lived near Olympiaplein in Amsterdam used to complain about a Cadillac-driving neighbour: "*Die bezet met zijn monstreuse wagen twee parkeerplaatsen.*" ('He takes up two parking spots with his monstrous vehicle.')

<sup>7</sup> 'Of the superiority of the 'highly literate Bostonians' over the British, which McLuhan mentions, nothing more remains than that the British government was too cheap to equip its colonial troops with decent guns.'

presumably less capable marksmen than the more literate North American colonists.

McLuhan goes on to claim that “in the Second World War the marksman was replaced by automatic weapons fired blindly in what were called ‘perimeters of fire’ or ‘fire lanes’. The old-timers fought to retain the bolt-action Springfield which encouraged single-shot accuracy and sighting” (McLuhan, 1964a, 341).

(An aside: Kousbroek does not discuss the issue, but McLuhan’s claim is sufficiently misleading that it must not be allowed to pass without comment. The marksman was not replaced by soldiers firing automatic weapons. Starting in the First World War he was complemented by them. The argument in the American armed forces, particularly the US Marine Corps, was about the relative merits of the M1903 Springfield and the rifle that replaced it during the Second World War, the semi-automatic M1 Garand.<sup>8</sup> US infantrymen were equipped with rifles, as were infantrymen in all armies. Many of them were effective marksmen: the sniper was far from disappearing. The website *War History Online* provides a list of the Second World War’s ten most lethal snipers. Headed by a Finnish soldier active during the 1939-40 Finno-Soviet War, the list’s next nine places are occupied by Soviet soldiers (Saad 2016).<sup>9</sup> All ten used the Soviet-made Mosin-Nagant rifle, generally, though not unanimously, considered to have been the best sniper rifle in use during the Second World War.<sup>10</sup> This casts doubt on McLuhan’s implied judgement that North American literate man is more effective as a marksman than the more tactile/oral Europeans.)

McLuhan uses his misrepresentation of military history to make yet another controversial claim:

At this stage of technology, the literate man is somewhat in the position of the old-timers who backed the Springfield rifle against perimeter fire. It is this same visual habit that deters and obstructs literate man in modern physics [...] Men in the older oral societies of middle Europe are better able to conceive the nonvisual velocities and relations of the subatomic world.

(McLuhan, 1964a, 342)

Elsewhere he writes:

[...] Literate man can learn to speak other languages only with great difficulty, for learning a language calls for participation of *all* the senses at

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<sup>8</sup> See Miskimon (2017). McLuhan altogether misunderstands this debate.

<sup>9</sup> It does seem appropriate to ask whether the Soviet statistics were inflated.

<sup>10</sup> The 1903 Springfield, the German K98 Mauser and the British P14 Enfield also have their champions. See for instance: <https://www.quora.com/What-was-the-best-sniper-rifle-in-WW2-and-why>. Accessed July 10, 2017.

once. On the other hand, our habit of visualizing renders the literate Westerner helpless in the nonvisual world of advanced physics. Only the visceral and audile-tactile Teuton and Slav have the needed immunity to visualization for work in the non-Euclidean math and quantum physics. Were we to teach our math and physics by telephone, even a highly literate and abstract Westerner could eventually compete with the European physicists. (McLuhan, 1964a, 267)

Koesbroek's comment on these statements is caustic:

Het is goed om er aan te herinneren dat deze denkbeelden precies samenvallen met de gangbare vooroordelen van de kleine Noord-Amerikaanse (in did geval Canadese) burger: de voorstelling van Europeanen als achterlijk, sexy, primair, en daar tegenover de Amerikaan als beschaafd en geletterd. Amerika is het 'eigenlijke' Westen, waarbij de Engelsen een soort status van gelijkgestelden krijgen, ten slotte spreken zij ook Engels en niet een of ander barbaarse taal. Sommige van die Europeanen zijn wel duivels knap, maar op gebieden die eigenlijk weinig menselijks meer hebben, zoals niet-euclidische meetkunde en quantumfysica [...]. (Kousbroek 1970, 89-90)<sup>11</sup>

There are other passages that imply that McLuhan does not consider Europeans to be Westerners as he understands the term. Sentences such as "like the oral Russian, the African will not accept sight and sound together" (McLuhan, 1964a, 287), and (writing of radio and its effects) "the German defeat had thrust them [the Germans] back from visual obsession into brooding upon the resonating Africa within" (McLuhan, 1964a, 301), help to convince Kousbroek that "er bestaat voor McLuhan [...] tussen Amerikanen en Engelsen, 'Westerners', enerzijds, en 'Europeanen' anderzijds, een principieel verschil; het verschil tussen Russen en andere Europeanen, tussen Teutonen and Afrikanen, tussen de Slaaf en de Aziat, is alleen gradueel" (Kousbroek 1970, 91).<sup>12</sup>

When he wrote his two best-known books, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media*, McLuhan seems to have known very little about either

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<sup>11</sup> 'It is good to remember that these views overlap perfectly with the common prejudices of the common North-American (in this case Canadian) petit bourgeois: the representation of Europeans as backward, sexy, primitive, opposed to the American as civilized and literate. America is the "real" West, with the British being afforded a status of sort of equals, since after all they speak English too and not some barbaric language. Some of these Europeans are devilishly clever, but only in fields that are virtually inhuman, such as non-Euclidian geometry and quantum physics.'

<sup>12</sup> 'For McLuhan there exists a principal distinction between American and British, "Westerners", on the one hand, and "Europeans" on the other; the difference between Russians and other Europeans, between Teutons and Africans, between the Slav and the Asian, is only a matter of degree.'

Europe or the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, economics, and political science. This is perhaps not surprising. His undergraduate majors were English and philosophy; his doctoral dissertation was in English literature. He studied in Cambridge, England, from 1934 to 1936 and 1939 to 1940, but a biography of him indicates that, before the 1970s, his longest visit to the European continent was his 1939 honeymoon in parts of Italy and France (Fitzgerald 2001, 51-52). He does not seem to have spoken any language other than English. (Does this shed light on his comment about the “great difficulty” literate man has in learning to speak other languages?) As for subjects like history and anthropology: he seems to have devoted no time to studying them in any disciplined way. He uses history and the social sciences to support his views, but his statements about past events and developments are riddled with elementary errors.

McLuhan seems to have been cavalier about this. In 1966, responding to questioning by the Columbia University sociologist Robert K. Merton, McLuhan said: “You’re not trying to explore anything with me. You’re exploring my statements, not the situation. I’m not interested in my statements. I don’t agree with them. I merely use them as probes” (Finkelstein 1968, 14). However, these “probes”, inaccurate and even fictional though they often are, do at first glance lend a spurious semblance of scholarly or scientific respectability to ideas that are, in fact, generally neither falsifiable nor verifiable. But that may not have mattered to McLuhan, or so Kousbroek seems to have thought. He believes that McLuhan’s ideas embody a mystical promise of human salvation through electronic media, if only we will abandon our obsession with factual content, part of the now-superseded age of literacy, and will abandon ourselves to the tactile medium of television.

This, Kousbroek argues, points to something more sinister.

In een bespreking van de Hollandse vertaling van *Understanding Media* [...] heb ik er al op gewezen dat het McLuhanisme racistisch is, en die merkwaardige onverschilligheid tegenover verifieerbare feiten heeft die totalitaire denkwijzen eigen is. (Kousbroek 1970, 98)<sup>13</sup>

In this view, McLuhan is the prophet of a new superstition that, by encouraging us to submit to electronic media, threatens to deliver us to the commercial enterprises that control these media. Asking how McLuhan can possibly be taken seriously, he writes: “*Het antwoord luidt dat onze samenleving een onstilbare*

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<sup>13</sup> ‘In a review of the Dutch translation of *Understanding media* ... I have already pointed out that McLuhanism is racist, and has the remarkable indifference in regards to verifiable fact that is inherent to the totalitarian way of thinking.’

*honger heeft naar heilsbeloften die zich aandienen onder de naam van wetenschap*" (Kousbroek 1970, 93).<sup>14</sup>

Let me return to Vincent Massey's assessment in 1967. Would Kousbroek have agreed with him that McLuhan was "a bit of a charlatan"? The answer is not clear. A short essay in *Het avondrood*, "Announcing the Rudy McKousbroek Newsletter", suggests that the possibility of charlatanism did occur to Kousbroek (1970, 80-82). However, while he argues that McLuhan was mistaken in his attempt to develop a comprehensive theory of human development, and that he willingly veered into the realm of superstition in doing so, I see no compelling reason to believe that Kousbroek thought McLuhan was guilty of bad faith. Deluded, yes, dishonest, no.

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<sup>14</sup> 'The answer is that our society has an insatiable hunger for promises of salvation disguised as science.'



## The void in Camus's *The Fall*: A trip from Amsterdam, to Ghent and Paris and back again

*Adrian van den Hoven*

*The Fall* (*La Chute*) was published in 1956 and was the last complete novel completed in Camus's lifetime.<sup>1</sup> He was killed in a car accident on January 4, 1960 and in his briefcase was found the incomplete manuscript of *The First Man* (*Le Premier homme*) which was published in 1994. Camus's first two novels, *The Stranger* (*L'Étranger*) and *The Plague* (*La Peste*), were set in Algeria where he was born in 1913. *The Fall* differs from them in that it is set in Amsterdam, but it is also a much more complex and allusive novel.

*The Fall* is also Camus's first major work after *The Rebel* (*L'Homme révolté*), published in October 1951. This work denounces "the slave camps under the banner of freedom and massacres justified by the love of man", and it lauds balanced and "Mediterranean thinking" (Camus 1965, 413-414; 707). The work was a straight forward attack on his erstwhile left-wing friends who saw in the Soviet Union the new saviour of mankind. However, a novelist's approach must be more allusive and he must allow his reader to uncover the message through much more enigmatic signs. The result is a multifaceted work in which the significance of names, places and elusive references must be deftly grasped. For example, the novel's title does not just refer back to the biblical fall of man, or that of the mythological Icarus who wished to reach the sun, but also to the "fall" of the young woman into the Seine and, finally, to the fall of modern man into hypocrisy and cowardice.

Then again, the narrator's name is a direct reference to St. John the Baptist, described in the New Testament as the precursor of Christ. Amsterdam's "Zeedijk area" is compared to Dante's Hell, and below that surface, one can recognize Paris, the city in which both the narrator and his anonymous interlocutor practised law. The detailed description of Amsterdam is essential to an understanding of the novel's purport since it is portrayed in contrastive terms

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<sup>1</sup>This is the text of a presentation delivered to the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies / Association canadienne pur l'avancement des études néerlandaises (CAANS-ACAEN) held at Ryerson University in Toronto, Ontario, on May 27-28, 2017.

with Paris and therefore allows us to better grasp Camus's intent, which is to see the modern intellectual - and specifically the French intellectual - as a person who is duplicitous but eager to judge his fellow man and in whose heart resides a moral void since he is at all times eager to ignore what has occurred behind him, while simultaneously lacking the courage to help those who cannot help themselves.

The use of the stolen panel 'The Righteous Judges' from the Ghent's cathedral altar piece is equally important because of the subtle and sophisticated use that the novelist makes of it. Camus never visited the cathedral<sup>2</sup> but he may have read P. Coreman's *Van Eyck: L'Adoration de l'agneau mystique* (1946), which contains a detailed description of the altar piece's convoluted history, while also showing the blank rectangular space which contained the painting of the stolen panel. From Coreman's description, Camus may also have learned that the back of the panel, which the thief returned, contained the painting of St. John the Baptist. This detail may have inspired Camus to name his narrator after him. In that sense it could be argued that in the novel, Camus has managed to reunite the two panels that had been separated but, at the same time, he provides a new twist. He may have borrowed St. John's name but his behaviour is opposite to him and, additionally, he is not a 'righteous' judge but a judge/penitent.

Jean-Baptiste may well be clamouring in the 'modern' desert but, instead of being on a pilgrimage to the Lamb of God, namely the Innocent one, his ultimate goal is to denounce all men, including Christ, as guilty, and to insist on their cowardice.

The novel opens with Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a Parisian lawyer addressing an unknown customer in the bar 'Mexico City', situated in Amsterdam's notorious Zeedijk district. One assumes that this 'stranger' will quickly identify himself and participate in the discussion so that this monologue will turn into a lively dialogue. But nothing of the sort occurs! We do ultimately discover that this customer is a fellow Parisian lawyer (F, 5; 44/OC, 765)<sup>3</sup> but, aside from that, his identity remains unknown. All his responses are absorbed in Clamence's monologue and this Parisian remains but a hollow presence, a spectre who accompanies Clamence to the end.

These two Frenchmen are sophisticated individuals, as is indicated by Clamence's use of the imperfect subjunctive when he states: "Quand je vivais en France, je ne pouvais rencontrer un homme d'esprit sans qu'aussitôt j'en fisse ma

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<sup>2</sup> Correction. I have since read *Albert Camus, Maria Casarès. Correspondance. 1944-1959*. Ed. Catherine Camus. Paris: Gallimard, 2017. On page 984 Camus writes to Maria Casarès from Bruges and indicates that he visited Ghent the day before.

<sup>3</sup> All references to the English translation of Albert Camus (1956) *The Fall*, translated by Justin O'Brien, as well as to the definitive edition of Albert Camus's complete works, Albert Camus (2008) *Œuvres complètes, iii: 1949-1956*, are incorporated in the text as follow: (F, .../OC,...).

société” (imperfect subjunctive italicized), and he continues: “Ah! je vois que vous bronchez sur cet imparfait du subjonctif!” Justin O’Brien translates this as follows: “When I used to live in France, were I to meet an intelligent man I immediately sought his company,” and: “Ah, I see you smile [rather than ‘flinch’] at that use of the subjunctive” (F, 5/OC, 698). The present subjunctive is common enough in spoken French but Clamence is using the imperfect subjunctive which is reserved for literary French and this usage marks him as someone who wishes to be recognized as super-sophisticated.

Clamence immediately contrasts himself with the owner of the Mexico City bar. He typescasts him as a ‘gorilla’, who is monolingual – however unlikely that may seem in cosmopolitan Amsterdam – and who does not care what his clients think. This ‘big animal’s’ motto is: “Take it or leave it.” Clamence opines: “Imagine the Cro-Magnon man living in the tower of Babel! But no, this one does not feel exiled, he goes his way, nothing bothers him.” As all educated Frenchmen know, ‘Cro-Magnon man’ was the earliest form of the modern human. Its remains were found near Les Eyzies, Dordogne, France in 1868, but then he adds that ‘this primate’ also possesses a ‘suspicious character’. Clamence assumes that it might explain the latter’s “shadowy and grave look, as if he suspected that something is not quite right between people” (In French Clamence states: “que quelque chose ne tourne pas rond [i.e. “round”] entre les hommes” [F, 4/OC, 698]). Not surprisingly, a little later when the two lawyers are walking home along Amsterdam’s canals, he remarks: “[W]e are at the heart of things here. Have you noticed that Amsterdam’s concentric canals resemble the circles of hell? The middle-class hell, of course, peopled with bad dreams” (F, 7-8/OC, 702). It is for that reason that Clamence prefers the ‘primitive’ inhabitants of the Mexico City bar and he is especially attracted to the barman “because [these kinds of creatures] are of one piece”; and he even feels some “nostalgia for [these] primates [because] they don’t have ulterior motives.” Of course, Clamence considers himself to be very different since he possesses ‘a communicative nature’ and is quite ‘garrulous’.

Back in the bar, he asks his fellow Parisian to look up and points out something that will assume great significance at the end of the novel’s second half:

Notice, [...], on the back wall above [the barman’s] head, that empty rectangle marking the place where a picture has been taken down. [And he continues:] Indeed, there was a picture there, and a particularly interesting one, a real masterpiece. Well, I was present when the master of the house received it and when he gave it up. In both cases he did so with the same distrust, after weeks of rumination. In that regard you must admit that society has somewhat spoiled the frank simplicity of his nature.

(F, 5/OC, 698)

In the last pages, Clamence, who has invited his interlocutor to his abode, asks him to open a cupboard in his room and tells him:

Yes, look at that painting. Don't you recognize it? It is "The Just Judges." That doesn't make you jump? Can it be that your culture has gaps? [In French he uses "des trous" i.e. 'holes'; 'voids']. Yet if you read the papers, you would recall the theft in 1934 in the St. Bavon Cathedral of Ghent, of one of the panels of the famous van Eyck altarpiece, "The Adoration of the Lamb." That panel was called "The Just Judges." It represented judges on horseback coming to adore the sacred animal. It was replaced by an excellent copy, for the original was never found. Well, here it is. No, I had nothing to do with it. A frequenter of *Mexico City* [...] sold it to the ape for a bottle, one drunken evening. [...] For a long time... our devout judges sat enthroned at *Mexico City* above the drunks and pimps. Then the ape, at my request, put it in custody here. [...] Since then, these estimable magistrates form my sole company. At *Mexico City*, above the bar, you saw what a *void* [italics added] they left. (F, 39/OC, 756)

In French these judges are called "les juges intègres"; and that adjective also means 'complete' or 'one'; however, as we will later discover, Jean-Baptiste Clamence is double since he claims to be both a judge and a penitent!

It is indeed true that the panel was never recovered and has been replaced by an excellent copy that only the cognoscenti can recognize as a fake. Nevertheless, Camus leaves an important 'detail' out of Clamence's monologue:

In the night of April 10, 1934 the panels "The Righteous Judges" and "St John the Baptist" [were] stolen.... The first missing report only mention[ed] one panel! A mistake that is often made because the [two] panels once formed the front and back of one single panel, but [...] were separated [when it was in German possession] in 1894. On May 1 Monsignor Coppieters, [received a] ransom demand of 1 million francs.... In [one of the letters that followed] there [was] a deposit receipt [for the Brussels railway station's] luggage office. There [the police discovered] a package .... When it was opened [...] the undamaged grisaille of St John the Baptist was discovered. (The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb 2007, 2-3)

Camus never visited Ghent or the St. Bavon Cathedral<sup>4</sup>, but nevertheless he must have had an in-depth knowledge of the altar piece's history and must have been aware of the panels' eventful past. However, Camus's artful omission is very helpful in explaining his protagonist's role. Like his namesake John the Baptist – featured on the back panel – Clamence wears 'a camel hair coat' even if "the camel

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<sup>4</sup> But see footnote 2.

that provided the hair for [his] overcoat was probably mangy" (F, 6/OC, 700). He also "clamours in the desert" and ultimately wishes that he may be "decapitated" (F, 44/OC, 764). However, since he claims to be both judge and penitent (F, 6/OC, 703) his behaviour is very much unlike John the Baptist especially in the second part of the novel.

We do know, however, that Camus visited Amsterdam "from October 4 to 7, 1954" (Lottman 1979, 538-539) and it explains why the author chose this 'watery' hell hole for Clamence to plie his trade as the legal counsel (F, 7-8/OC, 714) of Mexico City's low life.

It must be stressed that when Clamence refers to its habitués he does not disparage them. As he remarks: "these gentlemen over here [who] live off the labo[u]rs of those ladies over there. [...] They are] more moral than [...] those who kill in the bosom of the family by attrition. [...] And yet, even if f]rom time to time, these gentlemen indulge in a little knife or revolver play, don't get the idea that they're keen on it. Their role calls for it" (F, 6/OC, 699). If he stresses that these members of Amsterdam's low life are 'preferable' to the Parisian élite, whom he characterizes as piranhas, it is that he much appreciates their blatant honesty which distinguishes them from the hypocritical Parisian élite. That night, after the two Frenchmen leave the bar, Clamence walks his friend back to his hotel and he reveals that he lives in the Jewish quarter but then immediately corrects himself:

or what was called so until our Hitlerian brethren made room. What a cleanup! Seventy-five thousand Jews deported or assassinated; [now] that's [a] real [void]. I admire that diligence, that methodological patience! When one *has* no character one has to apply a method. Here it did wonders incontrovertibly, and I am living on the site of one the greatest crimes in history. (F, 7/OC, 701)

Given what happened to the Jewish community, it is not surprising that the city reminds him of "hell" (F, 7-8/OC, 702). Therefore, when near the end of his monologue, Clamence accuses himself of *the crime of omission*, that is to say of not having attempted to save the young woman who had thrown herself into the Seine, one can only say that it pales in comparison to what happened in the Jewish quarter where thousands of persons were *deliberately* and *brutally* exterminated on the simple grounds that *their identity* made them subhuman. And, of course, the fact that Clamence has chosen this city - Amsterdam - as his domicile is a stark reminder that much more is at stake in this novel than a stolen panel or a helpless, drowning woman. In addition, it also makes forcefully clear that modern man's inhumanity to man is perpetrated mostly in a *void* and, more often than not, *behind* a façade of respectability.

Hence, it is for this reason that Clamence compares Amsterdam to Paris: “[The latter] is a real *trompe-l’oeil*, a magnificent stage-setting inhabited by four million silhouettes. [...] It always seemed to me that our fellow citizens had two passions: ideas and fornication. [...] Still, [...] they are not the only ones, for all Europe is in the same boat” (F, 5-6/OC, 698-699). ‘Trompe l’oeil’, a popular art form, uses two dimensions to create the illusion of depth, i.e. the third dimension. Ironically, however, it appears that, historically speaking, the ‘shameless’ Dutch do not need to create illusions since they refuse to ‘hide’ their nefarious deeds. This is the reason why, on their second walk, Clamence asks his fellow Parisian to appreciate the beauty of a house they are passing by:

Charming house, isn't it? The two heads you see up there are heads of Negro slaves. [...] The house belonged to a slave dealer. Oh, they weren't squeamish in those days! They had assurance; they announced: “You see, I'm a man of substance; I'm in the slave trade; I deal in black flesh.” Can you imagine anyone today making it known publicly that such is his business? [...] I can hear my Parisian colleagues right now [...] Slavery? – certainly not, we are against it! That we should be forced to establish it at home or in our factories – well, that's natural; but boasting about it, that's the limit!

(F, 16/OC, 716)

The Dutch blatantly advertise their inhuman trade but even if Clamence does not consider them morally superior to the French, he prefers them to the hypocritical Parisian élite and he goes out of his way to stress their brutal honesty.

Additionally, the country's seemingly simplistic inhabitants share a characteristic with Clamence:

I like them, for they are double. They are here and elsewhere. [...] Holland is a dream, *monsieur*, a dream of gold and smoke - smokier by day, more gilded by night. And night and day that dream is peopled with Lohengrins like these, dreamily riding their black bicycles with high handle-bars, funereal swans constantly drifting throughout the whole land, around the seas, along the canals. Their heads in the copper-coloured clouds, they dream; they cycle in circles; they pray, somnambulists in the fog's gilded incense; they have ceased to be here. They have gone thousands of miles away, toward Java, the distant isle. They pray to those grimacing gods of Indonesia [... and these] remind these homesick colonials that Holland is not only the Europe of merchants but also the sea, the sea that leads to Cipango and to those islands where men die mad and happy. (F, 7/OC, 702)

One cannot help but hear in this idyllic description echoes of Baudelaire's poem *Invitation to the Voyage*:

The oriental splendor, all would whisper there/ Secretly to the soul/ In its soft native language/ [...] See on the canals/ Those vessels sleeping. Their mood is adventurous;/ [...] they come from the ends of the earth./ –The setting suns/ adorn the fields/ the canals, the whole city/ With hyacinth and gold;/ The world falls asleep/ In a glow of light. There all is order and beauty, Luxuriousness, peace and pleasure. (Baudelaire 1954)<sup>5</sup>

Next, Clamence establishes a link between Amsterdam's topography and that of Paris. When wishing his interlocutor good-night, he states that he will not go any farther and provides the first hint for his refusal to cross a bridge at night:

I'll leave you near this bridge. I never cross a bridge at night. It's the result of a vow. Suppose, after all, that someone should jump in the water. One of two things – either you do likewise to fish him out and, in cold weather, you run a great risk! Or you forsake him there and suppressed dives sometimes leave one strangely aching. (F, 8/OC, iii, 703)

However, it will take Clamence time to explain in detail what happened on a certain 'evening', and, even when he is pressed to reveal what occurred that fateful night, he dawdles: "I'll get to it, be patient with me" (F, 12/OC, 710). In fact, first, Clamence needs to explain what happened to him "two or three years ago" (F, 23/OC, 728), but *after* the fateful incident which closes the novel's first half. While crossing "the Pont des Arts" and feeling "a sense of completion [...and] satisfaction, at that very moment, a laugh burst out behind [him]." And somewhat later, at home, he "heard laughter under [his] windows"... and when he "went to the bathroom [...his] reflection was smiling in the mirror, but it seemed to [him] that [his] smile was double" (F, 14-15/OC, 713).

He has now come to the nagging realization that he is a ridiculous and pompous fool, and finally proceeds to narrate the fateful moment that gives the novel its title *The Fall*:

I was returning to the left Bank and my home by way of the Pont Royal. It was an hour past midnight [...]. I had just left a mistress, who was surely already asleep. [...] On the bridge I passed behind a figure leaning over the railing and seeming to stare at the river. On closer view, I made out a slim young woman dressed in black. The back of her neck, cool and damp between her dark hair and coat collar, stirred me. But I went on after a

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<sup>5</sup> La splendeur orientale,/ Tout y parlerait/ À l'âme en secret/ Sa douce langue natale/ [...] Vois sur les canaux/ Dormir ces vaisseaux/ Dont l'humeur est vagabonde/ [...] ils viennent du bout du monde./ — Les soleils couchants/ Revêtent les champs,/ Les canaux, la ville entière,/ D'hyacinthe et d'or;/ Le monde s'endort/ Dans une chaude lumière./ Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté/ Luxe, calme et volupté. (Baudelaire 1967)

moment's hesitation. At the end of the bridge I followed the quays toward Saint-Michel, where I lived. (F, 23/OC, 727)

Once again, he only sees the woman from '*behind*' when he crosses the bridge. It is only when he is "some fifty yards" away and the bridge is quite far '*behind*' him, that he "hear[s] the sound – which, despite the distance, seemed dreadfully loud in the midnight silence – of a body striking the water." (F, 23/OC, 727)

At that moment, Clamence

stopped short, but without turning around. Almost at once [he] heard a cry, repeated several times, which was going downstream; then it suddenly ceased. The silence that followed, as the night suddenly stood still, seemed interminable. [He] wanted to run and yet didn't stir. [He] was trembling, [he] believe[d] from cold and shock. [He] told [him]self that [he] had to be quick and [he] felt an irresistible weakness steal over [him]. [He has] forgotten what [he] thought then. "Too late, too far..." or something of the sort. [He] was still listening as [he] stood motionless. Then, slowly under the rain, [he] went away. [He] informed no one. (F, 23/OC, 727-728)

Virtuous behaviour had been easy for Clamence when it was a simple matter of helping an old person across the street but this tragic situation puts his entire being to the test, and it is at this moment that Clamence turns cowardly and shrinks away. From now on he will have to live with the fact that he had been unwilling to risk his life to save another person. When his interlocutor asks him about the woman's fate, he admits he went into denial: "Oh, I don't know. Really I don't know. The next day, and the days following, I didn't read the papers" (F, 23/OC, 728-729). This is the same Clamence who had defined modern man as follows: "I sometimes think of what future historians will say of us. A single sentence will suffice for modern man: he fornicated and read the papers" (F, 6/OC, 699). Indeed, sex had been on his mind when he passed behind the woman but now he has stopped reading the newspapers to avoid facing the facts and being confronted with the stark reality that he lacked the courage to save a woman from drowning!

One might think that from this point on, Clamence willingly placed his crime front and centre and faced squarely the event that had remained obscured 'behind him' and 'behind all of us'. Yet, even though he now claims that we are all both judges and penitents since "we don't have enough energy to do good nor enough to do evil", he continues to occupy a middle ground: "Then you know that Dante accepts the idea of neutral angels in the quarrel between God and Satan. And he places them in Limbo, a sort of vestibule of his Hell. We are in the vestibule, [my dear friend]" (F, 27/OC, 735). But, of course, that fateful evening continues to haunt him and finally he realizes that he cannot escape from it:

One day, however, during a trip [...] I was aboard an ocean liner – on the upper deck, of course. Suddenly, far off at sea, I perceived a black speck on the steel-grey ocean. I turned away at once and my heart began to beat wildly. When I forced myself to look, the black speck had disappeared. [...] Then] I saw it again. It was one of those bits of refuse that ships leave behind them. Yet I had not been able to endure watching it; for I had thought at once of a drowning person. (F, 33-34/OC, 746)

As a consequence, Clamence will now attempt to suppress his guilt by ‘drowning’ himself in debauchery, and one is reminded of Pascal (1966)’s remarks about the major reason for man’s need for diversions and entertainment: “the reason [...] lies in our unhappy, feeble and mortal condition which makes us so miserable that nothing can console us when we think about it.”<sup>6</sup> But Clamence, as a modern non-believer, makes clear that he has gone far beyond that because he is already living in hell:

God is [no longer] needed to create guilt or to punish. [...] You were speaking of the Last Judgement [he says to his friend]. Allow me to laugh respectfully. I shall wait for it resolutely, for I have known what is worse, the judgement of men. For them [there are] no extenuating circumstances; even the good intention is ascribed to crime. (F, 34/OC, 747-748)

In other words, to quote Camus’s favourite author, Nietzsche: “God is dead”, and there has been a ‘transformation of all values’ and Clamence’s behaviour is a prime example of it. He is unlike John the Baptist because he avoids the water and he is no Christ figure either, even though he thinks he has something in common with both. In his universe everyone is guilty, including Christ, as Clamence explains:

[D]o you know why he was crucified [...]? [...] The real reason is that *he* knew that he was not altogether innocent. [...] He was at the source, after all; he must have heard of a certain Slaughter of the Innocents. The children of Judea massacred while his parents were taking him to a safe place – why did they die if not because of him? Those blood-spattered soldiers, those infants cut in two filled him with horror. But given the man he was, I am sure he could not forget them. (F, 34-35/OC, 748-749)

The Bible makes little of Christ’s guilt by association but Clamence cannot help but speak of it. He is well aware of Christ’s agony on the cross (F, 35/OC, 749), but as a judge/penitent he needs to find him also guilty. After all, if “we cannot assert

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<sup>6</sup> “la raison [...] consiste dans le malheur de notre condition faible et mortelle, et si misérable, que rien ne peut nous consoler, lorsque nous y pensons de près.” (Pascal 1966, ii, 66)

the innocence of anyone, [...] we can state with certainty the guilt of all. Every man testifies to the crime of all the others – that is my faith and my hope” (F, 34/OC, 747).

After he has shown his fellow Parisian the panel of ‘The Righteous Judges’, he explains why he has not returned it to its rightful owners. He admits being guilty of harbouring stolen goods but feels justified because now it belongs to “the owner of *Mexico City* bar [who] deserves it just as much as the [...] bishop of Ghent.” And he provides another reason: “all those who file by ‘The Adoration of the Lamb’ will be unable to distinguish the copy from the original and hence no one is wronged by my misconduct.” In addition, he remarks: “in this way, I dominate. False judges are held up to the world’s admiration and I alone know the true ones.” Of course, Clamence may be in possession of the ‘righteous’ judges but he is not one of them because he is also a penitent, that is to say, guilty. Clamence concludes: “Finally, [...] everything is in harmony. Justice being definitely separated from innocence – the latter on the cross – the former in the cupboard – I have the way clear to work according to my convictions.” With one stroke Clamence has undone the intent behind the altar piece whose central figure, the Lamb, represents Christ’s innocence and, as a consequence, from now on he can play his new role of judge/penitent in the *Mexico City* bar and rule over everyone because as he says: “[it is frequented] by men from all corners of the world [...] [and when] I preach in my church of *Mexico City*, I invite the good people to submit to authority and humbly to solicit the comforts of slavery, even if I have to present it as true freedom” (F, 42; 41/OC, 760-761). Here we hear echoes of Hegel’s master-slave relationship but it is also a comment on his erstwhile friend Sartre who as a ‘critical fellow traveller’ of the French Communist Party had opted to side with it and the Soviet Union.

Clamence’s final wish is that his crime be uncovered because, as an ‘accomplice’ in the panel’s theft, he might even be beheaded and then: “All would be consummated and, unseen and unheard, [he] would have completed [his] career as a false prophet who cried out in the desert but refused to leave it.” His execution would have completed the circle but, unlike the Biblical John the Baptist who was beheaded when he denounced King Herod’s and Salomé’s licentious behaviour, our Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a false prophet, wants to dominate today’s morally arid void. Now only one task remains. When his interlocutor tells him that he is *also* a Parisian lawyer and hence very much ‘like’ him, he asks him to reveal “what happened to [him] one night on the banks of the Seine and how [he] succeeded in never risking [his] life.” At that moment, he fully adopts his interlocutor’s voice, speaks for him and implies that the two of them are equally cowardly: ““Oh young woman, throw yourself into the water again so that I may a second time have the chance to save both of us!”” But clearly, neither he nor his

colleague would dare immerse themselves in the Seine's freezing water. And he is sure his colleague will agree: "A second time, eh, what a risky suggestion! Just suppose, [...], we should be taken literally? We'd have to go through with it. Brr...! The water's so cold! But let's not worry! It's too late now. It will always be too late. Fortunately!" (F, 44/OC, 765).

With these remarks, Clamence confirms his inveterate cowardice, but, of course, his real intention is to speak for all because he wants to indict an entire generation. The void behind the Mexico City's barman, the void left by the Nazis in Amsterdam's Jewish quarter and the void left by the woman who jumped into the Seine can never be filled again because they are but a reflection of the hollowness that resides at the core of modern society. In Clamence's eyes, today's men are cowardly and two-faced: they may claim the right to judge others but they make absolutely sure that, beforehand, everyone else's guilt has been established.

*The Fall's* ending also provides another, but this time pessimistic, twist to Nietzsche's concept of the 'eternal return' which Camus had already "explore[d] in [...] *The Myth of Sisyphus* in which the repetitive nature of existence comes to represent life's absurdity [...]. Yet Sisyphus does not give up and continues to roll [...] the stone up the [mountain]" (Wikipedia Contributors 2019).

And, in *The Stranger*, Meursault had courageously defied the priest and insisted that he would be glad to start life over again if only: "in that other life [...] [he] would be able to remember this life" (Camus 1946; Camus 2006, 211; translation changed by AvdH). However, Clamence's cowardice is limitless because *he* would never take the plunge and therefore he will go around and around but always stop short of breaking through this circle. Camus imputes the same circular behaviour to his readers. He refers to Clamence's and his anonymous interlocutor's behaviour as emblematic in the hope that their lack of courage resonates since these readers are viewed as equally unwilling to fill in the blanks, look behind their backs, and recognize their cowardice when it comes to helping those in distress. These are also the same people who have continued to turn a blind eye to Europe's hideous colonial past and its treatment of the Jews.

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# Scheppingsdrang

*Joke van Leeuwen*

Dat gebeeldhouwde woord *scheppingsdrang*, ik zou het in een gesprek maar met moeite bezigen, en toch weet ik dat ik deze drang heb sinds ik een meisje was en sommige mensen nog deden alsof alleen mannen hem op een serieuze manier bezaten en vrouwen genoeg hadden aan baren, als hun soort van scheppingsdaad.<sup>1</sup>

Het is een opdringerige en tegelijkertijd gelukscheppende aanwezigheid, zozeer dat als een verhaal of dichtbundel voltooid is, er na de voldoening een hinderlijke leegte ontstaat en ik me tijdelijk, zij het nooit lang, een werkloze voel, klaar voor een nieuwe ingeving die genoeg potentie heeft om ermee te gaan worstelen.

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Een roman begint voor mij met een of meer beelden. Het eerste dat me voor ogen kwam en het begin bleek van mijn laatste roman *Hier*, was van een overmatig gezette man op een bed. Ik besepte nog niet wat hij daar deed, maar wel dat er iets uit dat beeld zou groeien. En dat gebeurt al schrijvende. Ik maak geen schema's, ik zie een deel van de weg die voor me ligt in de verwachting dat die weg, ook als ik hem nog maar een beetje zie, verder doorloopt, en in mijn verbeelding ontstaan personages die volop tot leven komen en met wie ik al schrijvende meeleeft. Dan zit ik onder hun huid en komen er nieuwe perspectieven op, als cadeaus in mijn hoofd.

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<sup>1</sup> Een eerdere versie van deze tekst werd gepresenteerd op de jaarlijkse vergadering van de Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies / Association canadienne pour l'avancement des études néerlandaises (CAANS-ACAEN) die plaatsvond aan de University of Regina in Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada, op 27 en 28 mei 2018. Voor meer informatie over Joke van Leeuwen's 40-jarig schrijverschap zie een recent artikel in *Ons Erfdeel* en beluister het interview dat het tijdschrift met haar hield: <https://www.onserfdeel.be/nl/joke-van-leeuwen>; of bezoek haar eigen website: <https://www.jokevanleeuwen.com/>. Dank aan *Ons Erfdeel* voor toestemming tot herdrukken van de illustratie bij dit essay.



De verbeelding wordt gevoed door wat ik zie, lees of meemaak. De fictieve grens in *Hier* is een samenstelling van allerlei indrukken en ervaringen uit de werkelijkheid, de scènes die zich in een leger afspelen zijn gevoed door getuigenissen van soldaten, en ik herinnerde me weer dat ik op mijn lagere school in Amsterdam een potloodhoge Nederlandse vlag moest breien die voor geen meter wapperde, en in Hoegaarden een bord met fietsroutes had bekeken, waarbij alle mogelijkheden ten zuiden van de zeer nabije taalgrens onleesbaar of afwezig waren. Zulke associaties kwamen in een andere vorm in het boek terecht. Voor mijn roman *De onervarenen* voer ik mee op een vrachtschip naar Paramaribo om de oceaan te leren kennen en voor *Feest van het begin* las ik eind achttiende-eeuwse kronieken in een Frans dat nauwelijks van het huidige verschilde en genoot ik van de levendige stijl van een van de kroniekschrijvers. Zo voedt de werkelijkheid op vele manieren de verbeelding. Ik moet daarbij denken aan het beeld 'Koning en Koningin' van Henry Moore, dat dichtbij de ingang van het Antwerpse Middelheimmuseum staat: de voeten realistisch vormgegeven, de hoofden geabstraheerd.

In een recensie over *Hier* werd het fictieve van de locatie bekritiseerd, maar een roman is fictie, de personages zijn fictief, dus ook als een locatie aanwijsbaar is, gaat het nog steeds om fictie. Bovendien: toen ik in de jaren negentig

*Bezoekjaren* schreef, benoemde ik de Marokkaanse steden waar het verhaal zich afspeelde wel, maar merkte ik aan de reacties van lezers dat de betekenis van mijn verhaal die lokaal aan te wijzen werkelijkheid oversteeg. Een oudere Nederlandse vrouw zei bijvoorbeeld dat ze de angst herkende die ze zelf als kind in de Tweede Wereldoorlog ervoer, en Japanse jongeren die niet of nauwelijks wisten waar Marokko lag waren geraakt door de maatschappelijke durf van de twee oudste jongens in het gezin. Daarom deed ik het in *Feest van het begin* anders: ik koppelde de al te bekende termen en plaatsaanduidingen in verband met de Franse revolutie los door ze anders te formuleren. En in *De onervarenen* komen in het fictieve dorp dat de kolonisten stichten getuigenissen uit verschillende werkelijkheden samen, van een dominante eigenaar in Brazilië tot een epidemie in Suriname. In *Hier* is tijd en plaats nog onbestemder, of liever: opgebouwd uit een nog grotere variëteit aan tijden en plaatsen. En waar er enerzijds altijd wel iets van mijn eigen biculturele achtergrond valt te bespeuren, maakt fictie het mogelijk breder en vanuit een ander perspectief naar de eigen tijdgeest te kijken.

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Als kind heb ik nooit getwijfeld over wat ik later wilde worden. Iets met schrijven en iets met tekenen. In een te groot handschrift pende ik de avonturen neer van een jongen en een meisje die volstrekt gelijkwaardig samen op de rug van een walvis de wereldzeeën bevoeren. Zelf was ik mijn geboorteland nog niet uit geweest, maar ik begreep dat verbeelding je verder brengt. Thuis hadden we veel boeken, ook de goede kinderliteratuur van die dagen. Toen mijn moeder uit *Winnie de Poeh* voorlas en er zelf hard om moest lachen begreep ik dat kinderboeken geen reservaat hoefden te zijn. Kort erna begon ik een huiskrant, handgeschreven in een preekschriftje van mijn vader. Mijn moeder kreeg het maandelijkse nieuwe exemplaar als eerste in handen. Achter de deur bleef ik luisteren of ze misschien een keer in de lach schoot, en als dat gebeurde, voelde ik me innig tevreden, want ik had haar aan het lachen gebracht met iets wat ik had opgeschreven.

Ik werd puber, woonde inmiddels in Brussel en bezocht een atheneum waar op één keer na geen interesse was voor het schrijven en op papier schilderen waar ik thuis volop mee bezig was. Op basis van de testen die het Psycho-Medisch-Sociaal Centrum in het laatste schooljaar afnam, werd me geadviseerd om arts te worden, iets wat nog geen seconde bij me was opgekomen. Als ik vertelde dat ik wilde schrijven en tekenen zei de een dat je daar geen droog brood mee kon verdienen en de ander: o, dus binnenhuisarchitectuur.

In Antwerpen ging ik naar de kunstacademie, ik was een van de weinige meisjes die niet meer thuis woonden, net achttien jaar geworden. De meeste tijd

bracht ik dat eerste jaar door in een atelier met stoffige doeken en droogbloemen die we moesten naschilderen, want verse, zei men, moesten eerst in hogere regionen worden aangevraagd. Ik ging bij het raam staan, schilderde de daken van Antwerpen en kreeg weerzin tegen de geur van olieverf. Intussen was ik in mijn studentenkamer veel gaan schrijven, alsof ik daarmee uit het keurslijf van de opleiding kon ontsnappen. Ik wilde voor volwassenen schrijven, maar had het gevoel dat ik eerst meer ervaringen van allerlei slag moest opdoen. Toch stuurde ik een lang verhaal dat *Buurmans gek* heette op naar een schrijfwedstrijd voor jongeren uit Zuid-Nederland en Vlaanderen. De brief waarin ik werd uitgenodigd op de prijsuitreiking te komen, raakte nog voor ik hem had gelezen zoek tussen de bladzijden van een boek en vond ik nog net op tijd terug om de trein naar Eindhoven te kunnen nemen, waar Judith Herzberg de tien zogeheten ontmoetingsprijzen uitreikte. Tot de andere winnaars behoorden Luuk Gruwez en Eriek Verpale.

Mijn academiestudies voltooide ik aan Sint Lucas in Brussel. Het eindwerk bestond als gebruikelijk uit een grafische reeks op basis van iets bijbels, dat jaar de Tien Geboden. Terwijl ik met mijn protestantse achtergrond eerst aan enige exegetische deed en toen tien linsneden maakte, zag ik dat het merendeel van mijn jaargenoten de tekst had aangegrepen voor het verbeelden van nonnen en monniken in scabreuze houdingen.

Ik verzeilde ook in het cabaretcircuit. Op een avond, toen ik voor een rijke familie optrad en er telkens iets onverwachts gebeurde – een hond die aansloeg of de voordeurbel die dwars door een gevoelig bedoeld liedje heen rinkelde – smolten alle zenuwen die ik had gehad weg en stond ik daar kalm te denken: dit is wat ik te bieden heb – te nemen of te laten. Sindsdien heb ik nooit meer enige podiumvrees gevoeld.

Het eerste jaar na het behalen van het diploma dat ik geen enkele keer aan iemand heb hoeven laten zien, zocht ik vergeefs een geïnteresseerde uitgever. In het Vlaanderen van destijds vond men de door mij getekende gezichten en gezichtjes niet lief genoeg. Dan maar naar Nederland, waar ik soms na een urenlange treinreis weer binnen tien minuten buiten stond omdat de medewerker met wie ik had afgesproken niet aanwezig bleek. Ook werd ik wel naar huis gestuurd met een opdracht – bijvoorbeeld het ontwerpen van postkaarten – om daarna een brief te krijgen dat mijn werk niet paste bij de uitgeverij. Uiteindelijk vond ik een klein fonds, dat ik in 1984 omruilde voor Querido.

Toen ik met mijn eerste cabaretprogramma het Camerettenconcorso won, werd ik uitgenodigd in een tv-praatprogramma. Dat de als dwarsligger bekendstaande Johan Anthierens mij zou interviewen, sprak me zeer aan, maar tegenover een jonge meisjesachtig ogende vrouw als ik wist hij geen andere dan clichématige vragen te stellen: leuk smoeltje maar niks te vertellen, dat werk. Zulk soort erva-

ringen had ik vaker, en niet alleen omdat ik een vrouw ben. Toen na vijftwintig jaar boeken, optredens en prijzen in een biografie van Annie Schmidt geheel ten onrechte een typische jaren-zeventigbrief over de sekseverschillen tussen Jip en Janneke, die haaks stond op alles wat ik al die jaren had gedaan, aan mij werd toegeschreven (geen fout van de auteur zelf overigens) werd ik overstelpt met verzoeken van tv-praatprogramma's en tijdschriften. Nooit daarvoor of daarna heb ik ook maar enigszins zo'n belangstelling van de media meegemaakt in verband met wat wél van mijn hand was.

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Voor mijn eerste roman werd gepubliceerd, had ik al jaren kinderboeken geschreven en getekend. Vanwege die combinatie bedacht ik een vorm waarbij de tekeningen het verhaal meevertelden en geen tautologische illustratie werden. Ze stonden op welbepaalde plaatsen binnen het verhaal, iets wat ik met schaar en lijm in elkaar knutselde. Ook werden de tekeningen meermaals zijsprongen of zetten ze de tekst in een verband dat alleen een tekening kon tonen. Inmiddels heeft de wacomtablet zijn intrede gedaan, waardoor de schaar niet meer nodig is.

In al mijn werk probeer ik zwaarte en lichtheid in evenwicht te brengen, het soort humor te bezigen dat wortelt in ernst, en het soort verbeelding dat wortelt in werkelijkheid. Zo is de verbeelding in *Toen mijn vader een struik werd* gebaseerd op de werkelijkheid van vluchtelingen, met wie mijn ouders, mijn grootouders en ikzelf soms te maken hadden.

Het verschil tussen een roman en een kinderboek zit hem voor mij alleen in de mate van complexiteit en in het perspectief, dat voor kinderboeken bij beginnende mensen ligt.

In de jaren tachtig was in Nederland een klimaat ontstaan waarin goede kinderliteratuur kon gedijen, wat vanaf de jaren negentig ook in Vlaanderen het geval werd. Journalisten schreven erover en scheidden originaliteit en een goede stijl van de vele clichés en oppervlakkigheden binnen het genre. Ik zat als jonkie naast Annie Schmidt te signeren en keek met plezier naar de grote rij mensen van verschillende generaties die op een handtekening van haar stonden te wachten.

Met de steeds sterkere dominantie van het marktdenken en het verwarren van kwantiteit en kwaliteit veranderde die sfeer. Het begon voor mij met een middelmatig schrijver die betoogde dat die geprezen kinderliteratuur elitair was, en met een ouderavond waarop werd beweerd dat de kinderboeken van Querido beter niet gekocht konden worden. Het werkte bevreemdend, want ik had allang ondervonden dat mijn boeken helemaal niet elitair waren en door allerlei soorten kinderen en volwassenen werden gelezen, bovendien deed ik uiterst onelitaire dingen, zoals het basaal enthousiasmeren van kinderen in een Haagse volkswijk of

aan de niet-toeristische kant van Aruba. Maar, zoals ook bij andere takken van kunst het geval was, het etiket ‘elitair’ rukte op en ik werd jarenlang nog nauwelijks in Nederland gevraagd, gelukkig wel in Vlaanderen, Duitsland en elders. Typerend was mijn in 2003 verschenen kinderboek *Kweenie*, een op de computer gemaakt verhaal over verhalen, dat in Nederland niets teweegbracht, in Duitsland op een eindejaarslijstje van een grote krant kwam en daar en in Vlaanderen nog vorig jaar inspiratiebron was voor theater- of woord-academievoorstellingen. En intussen vloog ook mijn boek *lep!* de wereld over.

Een jaar of vier geleden zat ik weer eens naast iemand met een grote rij lezers voor zich die een handtekening wilden, alleen was het dit keer een onbekende schnabbelaar in het muizenpak van Geronimo Stilton, die nephandtekeningen uitdeelde. *Sic transit gloria mundi*, zou mijn vader zeggen als hij toen niet allang dood was.

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Mijn poëzie ontstond vanuit de liedteksten die ik voor mijn cabaretprogramma's schreef. Ik wilde allerlei andere mogelijkheden en vormen onderzoeken. Een liedtekst moet in één keer overkomen, poëzie mag er langer over doen. Naast de beeldspraak hecht ik aan de muzikaliteit van mijn zinnen. Ik ben nog steeds bezig nieuwe mogelijkheden uit te proberen. En waar proza voor mij eerder lijkt op een huis dat ik aan het bouwen ben zonder nog te weten hoe het er uiteindelijk uit zal zien, lijkt poëzie meer op een tent waar ik op tijd en stond in kruip om iets toe te voegen of te verleggen, en wat erin ligt dan weer even met rust te laten en op afstand te houden om het daarna scherper te kunnen zien. En terwijl proza voor mij begint met beelden in mijn hoofd, begint poëzie met een zin die me invalt, of soms alleen maar een woord. Ik kan het vage gevoel hebben dat een gedicht het nog niet helemaal is, en over straat wandelen, waar me dan opeens een woord invalt, en daarna thuis in die denkbeeldige tent merken dat dat ene woord het geheel in orde brengt en het gedicht voor mij af is, wat anderen er ook over denken.

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Die zich niets van pensioengerechtigde leeftijden aantrekkende scheppingsdrang is soms knap vermoeiend, maar ik kan me niet voorstellen hoe mijn leven zou zijn zonder deze beheptheid die me veel goeds heeft gebracht, zoals alle reacties van lezers – van jonge kinderen tot bejaarden –, al dat uitbundig lachend of aandachtig luisterend publiek, de vijftienhonderd mensen die ik in Frankfurt een zuiver driestemmig akkoord liet zingen, de erkenning in de vorm van prijzen waarmee ik

ook nog eens een financiële buffer kon opbouwen, en nog veel meer. En ik heb trouwens ook een kind gebaard en vond dat prachtig, maar die andere drang is niet aan sekse gebonden, al werden nog in 2002 in het leerboek Nederlands van mijn zoon alle vrouwelijke auteurs in één hoofdstuk bijeengegreden, terwijl de rest van het boek over mannelijke auteurs ging.

Ja, ook ik heb zoals vele anderen scheppingsdrang. Of moet ik zeggen: die scheppingsdrang heeft mij, en zal mij houden ook.



# The war diary (1914-1919) of Father Ladislav Segers: Patriotism, Flemish nationalism and Catholicism

*Tanja Collet*

## 1. Introduction

In the summer of 2017, I received, in my capacity as president of the *Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies* and board member of the *Gazette van Detroit*, a copy of the war diary of Jozef Segers, a Capuchin friar, whose religious name was Ladislav van Zondereigen or Father Ladislav.<sup>1</sup> Although it remains unpublished until today, the diary forms the basis of Father Ladislav's prose poem, *Bardenlied op het Belgisch Leger, 1914-1918* ('A Bard's Song about the Belgian Army, 1914-1918'), which was published under the pseudonym *Vossenbergh*<sup>2</sup> in the *Gazette van Detroit* between November 1953 and October 1954.

Father Ladislav was a romantic and idealistic seminarist when he joined the Belgian Army on August 1, 1914, barely three days before Germany's declaration of war. As many other young Flemish theologians and priests did, he would serve in the Belgian army as a stretcher bearer. In the early days of the war, Father Ladislav witnessed, in this capacity, the fall of the cities of Namur and Antwerp. He then retreated with the Belgian Army beyond the river Yser, where he took part in the Battle of the Yser (October 16-31, 1914) which would effectively halt the German advance.

After the Battle of the Yser, the German Army virtually held all of Belgium, except for a small portion situated behind the Yser Front between Ypres and the French border. The Belgian Government went into exile in Le Havre, in Normandy.

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<sup>1</sup>This is the text of a presentation delivered to the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies / Association canadienne pour l'avancement des études néerlandaises (CAANS-ACAEN) held at the University of Regina in Regina, Saskatchewan, on May 26-27, 2018.

<sup>2</sup>*Vossenbergh* refers to a *motte*, or 'man-made hill', in the village of Zondereigen, on which a *motteburcht*, or 'wooden castle', once stood (Janssen 2005). In 1955/1956, Father Ladislav finished composing his *Gelmellied* ('Song of Gelmel'), a prose poem about the castle and its first lord, the Norseman Gelmel.

King Albert chose to remain in unoccupied Belgium (“*Vrij België*”) and established his headquarters in Veurne. As for Father Ladislas, he would spend the next few years in the trenches of the Yser Front, where he remained stationed until Armistice Day, November 11, 1918.



Figure 1. Stretcher bearers in WWI, Lier, Belgium, 1914. Father Ladislas Segers second from right. Photo courtesy Heemkundekring Amalia van Solms. Reproduced with permission.

During this protracted military stalemate, Father Ladislas would share in all of the trials and tribulations of trench life with his fellow comrades: stretcher bearers and chaplains, students and intellectuals, but mostly simple soldiers or *piotten*. He would see many of his young comrades seriously maimed or fatally injured. Among them his best friend, fellow Capuchin friar and stretcher bearer, Tarcis Kyndt, and also Frits Beert, a romantic student, with whom he shared a love for Flanders’ medieval past and for Conscience’s and Rodenbach’s *blauwvoet* (‘bluefoot bird’), symbol of the pro-Flemish student movement.

[...] I had lost my romantic friend Frits because of an unfortunate accident that cost him his right hand. While I was putting him in the Red Cross truck, he yelled “fly Bluefoot, fly” and then he sighed and whispered “it’s a pity, hé Ladis, that this is not a war for Flanders.”<sup>3</sup>

(Father Ladislas, unpublished War Diary, n.p.)

<sup>3</sup> “[...] ik had mijn romantieken vriend Frits verloren door een spijtige onvoorzichtigheid die hem de rechtse vuist afsloeg. Toen ik hem in den Rood-Kruis-wagen stak, riep hij van “vliegt de Blauwvoet” en zuchtte zachter “t is toch spijtig, hé Ladis, dat het geen oorlog is voor Vlaanderen.”

When on leave, he would often travel to De Panne, a coastal city in *Vrij België*, where he would discuss military and political dynamics with like-minded Flemish stretcher bearers, priests and intellectuals, such as Ildefons Peeters and *Mejuffrouw* ('Miss') Belpaire, founders of the Flemish-minded Catholic newspaper, *De Belgische Standaard* ('The Belgian Standard'), which was widely read at the front.

It is under these circumstances that Father Ladislas wrote his diary; a diary that, like numerous other letters and diaries of Flemish soldiers, would record not only the horrors of war, but also the stories of Flemish persecution and disappointment. It is assumed that Father Ladislas started writing his war diary some time during the war, in all likelihood upon the request of Franciscus Laroy, prefect at the Capuchin seminary (Tytgat n.d., 2). He revised and finalised the text, however, after the war.

Father Ladislas' war diary is not written as a traditional diary. It is not divided up in sections headed by a specific date and place, and does not give day-to-day summaries of events. Instead, the diary is composed of continuous text, devoid of any type of headings or references to when and where the text was written.

The war diary bears witness to Father Ladislas' moral dilemmas at the Yser Front: (1) his love for King and Country and his growing dissatisfaction with the treatment of ordinary Flemish soldiers by their mostly French-speaking superiors in the Belgian Army; (2) his growing sympathy for the Flemish Movement and his involvement with *De Belgische Standaard*; (3) his bewilderment at the hedonistic one-day-at-a-time approach to life which became more and more widespread at the front as the war lingered and continued to claim staggering numbers of lives.

In the remainder of this article, I will focus on the three identified themes of patriotism, Flemish nationalism and Catholicism, and briefly analyse selected passages from Father Ladislas' war diary. I will also, when relevant, use excerpts from the articles he published in *De Belgische Standaard*.

## **2. For King and Country? Patriotism in Father Ladislas' war diary**

Father Ladislas was born in 1890 in Zondereigen, a small village in the Flemish countryside, a stone's throw away from the Dutch-Belgian border. A gifted student, he left Zondereigen in 1903 to continue his studies at the Apostolic Seraphic School in Bruges. Six years later, in 1909, he joined the Order of Capuchin Friars Minor, a branch of the Franciscan order, with the intent to dedicate his life to the priesthood. His studies, however, were brutally interrupted by the outbreak of World War I, during which he and numerous other young seminarists served in the Belgian Army, often voluntarily and without carrying arms (Shelby 2014, 77), as stretcher bearers. He survived the war; in fact, he completed his WWI service

as a sergeant with numerous citations and decorations. He was ordained priest in 1920, and left Belgium for Canada, in 1927, to work with Flemish and Dutch immigrants in southwestern Ontario. There he became a regular contributor to the *Gazette van Detroit*, and composed at least three books of verse: the aforementioned *Bardenlied*, the *Gelmellied*, a legend about the Norse or Viking origins of Zondereigen and its surrounding villages, and *The Song of Hulda's Rock. The Indian Legend of Pelee Island*. Father Ladislas spent the last five years of his life in relative isolation on Pelee Island, Canada's southernmost island in Lake Erie. He died in 1961, and was buried in Blenheim, where he had been parish priest from his arrival in Canada in 1927 until his departure for Toutes-Aides, Manitoba, in 1950.

Like most of his Flemish contemporaries, be they fellow theologians or intellectuals, Father Ladislas was well versed in the heroic medieval history of Flanders, and was well aware of its symbolic value for the Flanders of his day which, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, occupied a rather subordinate position within the Belgian state. Like his contemporaries, he was also well acquainted with the pro-Flemish writings of Hendrik Conscience, Albrecht Rodenbach, Guido Gezelle, etc., and he fully understood the symbolism of their nationalist-focused works, which abounded with references to the 1302 *Battle of the Golden Spurs*,<sup>4</sup> a foundation myth for the Flemings, and to the mythical *blauwvoet* ('bluefoot bird'). The *blauwvoet* came to represent Flemish-mindedness in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Albrecht Rodenbach (1865-1880), a poet and student leader, included Hendrik Conscience's verse, "*Vliegt de Blauwvoet! Storm op zee!*" ('The Bluefoot flies! Storm at sea!'), from his 1871 novel, *De kerels van Vlaanderen* ('The Boys of Flanders'), in the student song, *De Blauwvoet* or *Het lied der Vlaamsche zonen* ('The Bluefoot' or 'The song of the sons of Flanders'). During the Great War, the verse became the rallying cry of Flemish-minded soldiers at the Yser Front, and the *blauwvoet*, symbol of Flemish resistance, became associated, by extension, with the *Frontbeweging* ('Front Movement').

A hellish scene. The Germans screamed [...] "Hoch! Hoch! [...]." Our battle cry was "Vive le roi! Vive le roi!" ('Long live the King!'), but we Flemish students wanted to die in Flemish and chanted "Vliegt de Blauwvoet! Storm op zee! [...]." <sup>5</sup> (Father Ladislas, unpublished War Diary, n.p.)

<sup>4</sup> The Battle of the Golden Spurs ("*Guldensporenslag*"), fought at Kortrijk on July 11, 1302, took place within the context of a Flemish revolt against French rule. Flemish rebels and militiamen defeated the French army. Their military victory subsequently became an important component of the nationalist rhetoric of the Flemish Movement.

<sup>5</sup> *Duivels tafereel. De Duitsers huilden [...] "Hoch! Hoch! [...]." Onze stormkreet was "Vive le roi! Vive le roi!", maar wij Vlaamse studenten wilden in het Vlaams sterven en huilden "Vliegt de Blauwvoet! Storm op zee! [...]"*.

Fellow seminarist and stretcher bearer, Matthias Vermang, characterised Ladislas, in his own war diary (quoted in Tytgat n.d., 1), as “*een romantieker op en top [...] Hij dweept [...] met de Vikings, Breidel, en De Coninck*<sup>6</sup> [...]” (‘A true romantic [...] He worshiped the Vikings, Breidel, and De Coninck [...]'). With this particular mindset, it is safe to assume that Father Ladislas would have felt deeply stirred by King Albert’s strategic referral, on August 5, 1914, to the *Battle of the Golden Spurs* in his appeal to the Flemings to resist the German invasion: “*Gedenkt, Vlamingen, den slag der Gulden Sporen!*” (‘Flemings, remember the Battle of the Golden Spurs!’) (Fenoulhet, Gilbert & Tiedau 2016, 70). In fact, many Flemings interpreted the King’s plea to remember the *Battle of the Golden Spurs* as an implicit promise that their demands for equal language rights and greater autonomy would be granted after the war. Fervently Flemish-minded but *passivist* (‘passivist’),<sup>7</sup> Father Ladislas would remain loyal to Belgium all throughout the war, despite King Albert’s lack of follow through in moving forward toward fulfilling his promise. Father Ladislas was, indeed, as Matthias Vermang (quoted in Tytgat n.d., 1) wrote: “*onverbidelijk trouw aan God en Vaderland*” (‘staunchly loyal to God and Country’). But, Flanders was first and foremost the object of his patriotic feelings.

In the trenches of the Yser Front, however, his loyalty to King and Country would be severely tested, as the tension between his sense of duty and his love for Flanders gradually reached critical heights. Father Ladislas intensely felt the anger, frustration and malaise of the *piotten* who were laying down their lives for Belgium while being met with what they perceived to be disrespect and distrust by their French-speaking comrades and superiors. He felt, furthermore, increasingly dissatisfied over the language issue that was a consequence of the unbalanced representation of Flemish speakers in the Belgian army, which, like all other Belgian administrative and public institutions, had French as its *de facto* language (Shelby 2016, 183). According to the WWI Belgian Ministry for War, at least 80% of the soldiers in the field were Flemish, while 65% of those with a rank were Walloons or French-speaking (Boudens 1995, 249). In recent years, there has been a great deal of discussion among historians, such as De Vos and Coenen (1988) and De Schaepdrijver (2013), over these numbers. De Vos and Coenen (1988), for instance, estimate, based on the number of infantry deaths, that the Flemish numbered 61% in 1914, increasing to 70% in 1918. The Flemish, however,

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<sup>6</sup> Jan Breydel and Pieter de Coninck are Flemish patriotic heroes who, in 1302, led a violent but successful uprising against Philip the Fair, King of France.

<sup>7</sup> Within the Flemish Movement, *passivisten* (‘passivists’) represent the majority of the *flamingants* who chose to remain loyal to Belgium during the war and refused any form of collaboration with the German occupier to further the Flemish cause. *Activisten* (‘activists’), on the other hand, participated actively in the German occupier’s *Flamenpolitik*.

were seriously underrepresented among the officers, junior officers and even corporals, since a reasonable knowledge of French was required for these and other administrative positions. The *piotten*, and Flemish-minded chaplains, stretcher bearers, students and leaders of the *Frontbeweging*, all protested the inequity in the Belgian Army. In fact, they actively lobbied for the official recognition of their language by the military, and for the creation of separate Flemish and French-speaking units within the army. In 1917, a slogan painted on what came to be known as the *steen van Merkem* ('the stone of Merkem') immortalized the spirit of their request: "*Hier is ons bloed. Wanneer ons recht?*" ('Here is our blood. When are our rights?') (Shelby 2016, 181). In the same year, on July 11, day of the commemoration of the *Battle of the Golden Spurs*, the *Frontbeweging* circulated its first *Open Brief* ('Open Letter') addressed to King Albert to protest against the abuses at the Front. Adiel Debeuckelaere, its author, reminded the King of his speech of August 5, 1914 to demand equal language rights for the Flemish:

Majesty,  
 Putting all our trust in you who, upon our entering the world war, reminded the Flemish of the anniversary of the Battle of the Golden Spurs, we come to you, we the Flemish soldiers, the Flemish army, the army of the Yser, to tell you how much we are suffering [...]. [...] We Flemish soldiers, we suffer because we are Flemish. We are commanded by officers who do not understand our language, who do not want to understand it, who despise it even.  
 (Hermans 1992, 227-229)

When the King seemingly ignored the *Open Brief* as well as other Flemish pleas for justice, and when, in the meanwhile, the crackdown on Flemish-minded students, chaplains and stretcher bearers at the Yser Front intensified, Father Ladislas' frustration gave way to anger:

Flemish intellectuals especially were kept under surveillance [...]. There were house searches and arrests. Army chaplains were humiliated and banished. Stretcher bearers were forcibly removed. Corporals and sergeants lost their ranks. [...] Msgr. Marinis issued a statement defending all clergymen from taking part in Flemish politics. [...] These [...] persecutions were then the King's response to the proud and respectful letters addressed to him by the *Blauwvoeten* ('members of the Flemish Movement'). I do not dispute that it is the King's duty to fight the anarchy

in the army. But the Flemings were propping up the throne and that support was weakened as a result.<sup>8</sup> (Father Ladislas, unpublished War Diary, n.p.)

In his anger, he added, even more defiantly: “*Leve dan de bestuurlijke scheiding [...]! Nu of nooit zal Vlaanderen leven [...]*” (‘Well then, hurrah for the administrative split [of Belgium] [...]! Now or never Flanders will live [...]’).

Several years later, in 1946, he admitted in a letter to his cousin and fellow priest, Fons Van Beek, that he had, at times, been tempted by the more radical approach of the *activisten* (‘activists’) and their objective of Flemish independence outside of the Belgian State:

And I remember how I fantasized, during the first war, about a revolutionary Flemish army and for sure had joined its ranks, if the revolution had taken place. Slowly something had died inside of me.<sup>9</sup>

(Father Ladislas, unpublished War Diary, n.p.)

In fact, he had been particularly subject to this temptation:

[...] when I had to silently witness the injustice done to the Flemings. When we had to lay down our lives for Flanders while being denied the right to speak freely about the Flanders that they wanted to crush.<sup>10</sup>

(Father Ladislas, unpublished War Diary, n.p.)

### 3. Flemish-mindedness in Father Ladislas’ war diary

Shortly after Father Ladislas lost his romantic friend, Frits Beert, he started contributing to *De Belgische Standaard*, launched in January 1915 by Ildefons Peeters, a fellow Capuchin, and Marie-Elisabeth Belpaire, a Flemish writer, who was well known in *flamingant* circles. The newspaper was Flemish-minded, but hardly anti-Belgian; in fact, it defined itself as “*Vaderlandslievend, Vlaamsch en Katholiek*” (‘Patriotic, Flemish and Catholic’) (*De Belgische Standaard*, 10 January

<sup>8</sup> “*Vooral de Vlaamsche geletterden wierden bespied [...]. Huiszoekingen en gevangenzetting grepen plaats, aalmoezeniers wierden gebroken en verbannen, brankardiers uit hun midden weggerukt, korporalen en sergeanten hun graad afgetrokken. [...] Voor de geestelijken kwam vanwege Mgr. Marinis het verbod om nog aan Vlaamsche politiek mee te doen. [...] Die [...] vervolgingen zijn dan ’s konings antwoord op de fiere, eerbiedige brieven door de Blauwvoeten tot hem gericht. Ik wil nu ’s konings plicht niet betwisten die anarchie in ’t leger tegen te gaan. Maar Vlaanderen stutte den troon en die steun heeft daardoor zijn stevigheid verloren.*”

<sup>9</sup> “*En ik herdenk hoe ik ermee dweeptte en voorzeker had weergekomen in de rangen van het revolutionair Vlaamsche leger met den eersten oorlog, indien de revolutie had doorgedaan. Stuk voor stuk zijn veel dingen doodgegaan in mij.*”

<sup>10</sup> “[...] *ten tijde dat ik zwijgend het Vlaamsch onrecht moest aanschouwen. Dat wij sterven moesten voor Vlaanderen zonder ons gedacht te mogen zeggen overdat Vlaanderen dat men worgen wilde.*”

1915, 1) and it reflected “passivist-like pro-Flemish sentiment” (Shelby 2014, 81). It was, despite its rather moderate rhetoric, often censored by the Belgian Army and not supported by the Belgian authorities (Boudens 1995, 250), for whom the paper was both too Catholic and too Flemish. Among its many collaborators, it counted illustrious *flamingants*, such as August Van Cauwelaert, Cyriel Verschaeve, and Dirk Vansina.



Figure 2. *De Belgische Standaard*, *De Panne*, Belgium, early 1915. Father Ladislas Segers back row right. Ildefons Peeters front row left. Photo courtesy Heemkundekring Amalia van Solms. Reproduced with permission.

At the Yser Front, Father Ladislas became a frequent visitor to the villa *Ma Coquille* in De Panne where the newspaper was housed. He contributed several articles; for instance, in the very first issue, an article on life at the Yser Front, “*Aan den IJzer*”:

Yes, heroes of the Yser, the fatherland is proud of YOU! Your actions fill the most beautiful page of our centuries-old history. Future generations will forever contemplate that page full of admiration. And you, fallen heroes, who died a martyr for your God-given duty, rest in peace in the cherished cemeteries of the free land of Flanders!<sup>11</sup>

(Father Ladislas in *De Belgische Standaard*, January 10, 1915, 2)

Father Ladislas shared Father Ildefons’ pro-Flemish ideology deeply rooted in Catholicism. Like many other chaplains and priests, he viewed Catholicism as a vital element in the survival of the Flemish people and of their culture and language within French-dominant Belgium. Deeply concerned over the amoral temptations (beer, prostitutes, etc.) that were ubiquitous at and behind the Front, he became involved with other stretcher bearers, such as Tarcis Kyndt, in study groups, organized by priests and student leaders, with the aim to distract the *piotten* from the pervasive immorality and to instill in them, at the same time, a stronger Flemish consciousness. The study groups, such as Ladislas’ *Eglantierke*, represent the birth of the *Frontbeweging*, a *flamingant* political movement but which was, in actuality, initially a literary and cultural movement. Indeed, when, on February 11, 1917, the study groups were forbidden by the Belgian Army (though they had initially been supported by King Albert with monetary gifts towards the purchase of books), most groups merged in the clandestine *Blauwvoeterijbond*, which, on February 28, 1917, re-emerged as the politicised *Frontbeweging*. This tragic turn of events also greatly affected Father Ladislas’ Flemish-mindedness, which reoriented itself from a romanticised view of Flanders steeped in a glorious medieval past to a more politicised and radical desire for political autonomy. The expressions, “Well then, hurrah for the administrative split [of Belgium] [...]!” and “the free land of Flanders”, in the quotes above, translate that political leaning. The following excerpt is also indicative of that more polarized line of thinking:

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<sup>11</sup> “Ja, helden van den IJzer, het vaderland is fier op U! De schoonste bladzijde onzer eeuwenoude geschiedenis is het verhaal Uwer daden. Ons nageslacht zal immer voor die bladzijde stilstaan vol bewondering. En Gij, roemvolle dooden, martelaars der plicht door God U opgelegd, slaapt veilig op dat dierbaar eereveld in ‘t vrije Vlaanderland!”

The military authorities brutally suppressed our “Eglantierke”. All the study groups were abolished because they dealt with Flemish culture. [...] As a result of that brutal repression by a political caste my democratic conviction has only grown stronger.<sup>12</sup> (Father Ladislas, unpublished War Diary, n.p.)

Father Ladislas and numerous other soldiers, stretcher bearers and priests active in the *Frontbeweging* favored a *passivist* approach toward greater Flemish autonomy. However, when, on April 30, 1918, several Front soldiers defected to the German side, the *Frontbeweging* seemingly took on an *activist* approach, and lost the support of moderate *flamingant* leaders, such as, for instance, the Catholic Frans Van Cauwelaert. The Catholic leadership of *De Belgische Standaard* would, in the midst of this political storm, continue to practise, in spite of frequent journalistic and political accusations to the contrary, a *passivist*, pro-Belgian, *flamingantism* (Hildebrand 1957, 129). As for Father Ladislas, he did very much the same, though the army kept the chaplains, stretcher bearers and intellectuals, who they held responsible for the anarchy in the Belgian Army, under close surveillance (Boudens 1995, 253).

#### 4. Catholicism in Father Ladislas’ war diary

For Father Ladislas, Catholicism was a pillar of Flemish culture, and an integral part of his Flemish-mindedness. As a Catholic *flamingant* and man of God, he first felt bewildered and then discouraged by the soldiers’ gradual loss of religious commitment and faith. In his war diary, he recorded the anguished soldiers’ angry rejection of God: “And then [they] blaspheme and allege that there is no God since He allowed the war to happen” (Unpublished War Diary, n.p.)<sup>13</sup> And he described, in some detail, the moral transgressions that would go together with the gradual abandonment of the teachings of the Church. In fact, Msgr. Marinis, senior chaplain to the Belgian Army, mentioned in his report, submitted to Cardinal Mercier shortly after the armistice of November 11, 1918, that “as far as the troops’ moral standards were concerned, nothing whatever was done [by the military authorities] to prevent or restrain bad behavior” (Boudens 1995, 257). As the war dragged on, Father Ladislas observed that “*de soldaten [...] te veel oermensch, te wild geworden [waren] om [nog] christen te zijn*” (“the soldiers had returned to a primitive and wild state and could no longer behave as Christians”) since any day could be their last (“*t Kon alle dagen de laatste zijn*”). The *piotten*,

<sup>12</sup> “Met brutale hand ontwortelde [...] de militaire overheid ons “Eglantierke”. Alle studiekringen werden afgeschaft omdat daar Vlaamsche Kultuur in zat. [...] Die brutale vervolging door een caste uitgeoefend, heeft mijn democratische gedachten nog versterkt.”

<sup>13</sup> “Dan [...] vloeken [ze] dat er geen God is vermits Hij den oorlog zou toelaten.”

he wrote, became as heartless and as reckless as ephemeral mayflies (*“Wij werden hertelooze, onbezonnen kerels. Éendagsvliegen [...]”*).



Figure 3. Father Ladislav Segers throughout his life. Photos courtesy Heemkundekring Amalia van Solms. Reproduced with permission.

To fight the loss of faith and the rise of immorality, chaplains and stretcher bearers helped “set up libraries for the soldiers, [...] organise[d] French courses for the Flemish troops [...], taught the illiterate to read and write and established study groups” (Boudens 1995, 256). These Flemish-minded Catholic initiatives represent, as mentioned before, the birth of the *Frontbeweging*. The military authorities therefore blamed the chaplains and the stretcher bearer instructors for the emergence of the Flemish Movement in the Army, disregarding, according to Msgr. Marinis, the soldiers’ actual grievances: the injustice done to their language; the poor living conditions at the Front; the arrogance of the officers, etc. (Boudens 1995, 256-257). The military clergy had however, argued Msgr. Marinis, been “the only ones who had concerned themselves with the lot of the [mostly Flemish] soldiers” (Boudens 1995, 258).

## 5. Concluding remarks

In 1919, Father Ladislav was dismissed from the army, and returned to monastic life. In 1927, he became the spiritual leader of the Flemish diaspora in the Great

Lakes region, where he continued to have an impact on Flemish nationalist thinking, as can be concluded from the numerous articles he published in the pro-Flemish but *passivist Gazette van Detroit*.

His surviving family members speculate that he suffered from untreated post-traumatic stress disorder, which in all likelihood contributed to his desire to distance himself (physically and otherwise) from loved ones in Belgium. Indeed, he returned to Belgium only a few times, always leaving without saying his proper good-byes.

Towards the end of his life, it appears that the need for exile evolved into a need for solitude and reflection. In 1950, he left the Great Lakes region to serve as a priest in a rather remote area of Manitoba, populated largely by native and métis communities. It is in the relative isolation of the parish of Toutes-Aides that Father Ladislas turned his war diary into the *Bardenlied op het Belgisch leger, 1914-1918* ('A bard's song about the Belgian army, 1914-1918'), published by the *Gazette van Detroit* in 1953-1954. He died nearly seven years later in 1961, after suffering a heart attack on Pelee Island (Lake Erie), where he continued to serve a small Catholic parish.

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# From gunpowder-blast to Nobel Prizes: An explosion in Leiden

*Jos J. Eggermont*

## 1. Blast

During the French occupation of what is now the Netherlands, a ship loaded with 17,000 kg of gunpowder on its way from Hilversum to Delft was moored at the *Steenshuur* in Leiden.<sup>1</sup> It exploded on January 12, 1807 at 16:15, for reasons still not known with certainty, albeit rumours abound. The explosion caused the deaths of 151 people and wounded more than 2,000. About 220 houses were completely destroyed or were no longer habitable. Even on the outskirts of the city many windows were destroyed. The sound of the explosion was heard in The Hague, about 15 km away.

King Lodewijk Napoleon was quickly present to view the disaster. On the spot, he donated 30,000 guilders from his private means, and granted the city of Leiden freedom from taxes for 10 years. Little did he know that he would be forced to abdicate as king in 1810, after which the country became part of France. He also organized a national collection for the recovery of the disaster area, which resulted in about two million guilders. His residence in The Hague, *Paleis ten Bosch*, was readied as a hospital. The badly damaged Roman Catholic church near the disaster area was restored and christened the *Lodewijks church* (after the patron saint of the King).

The large hole in the center of Leiden allowed the university to build a large laboratory on the empty spot at the *Steenshuur* that housed the Departments of Anatomy, Chemistry, Physiology and Physics and the university administration. The building was completed around 1860. Across the *Steenshuur* canal a pleasant park was laid out and named after Van der Werff, who was mayor at the time of

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<sup>1</sup> This is the text of a presentation delivered to the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies / Association canadienne pour l'avancement des études néerlandaises (CAANS-ACAEN) held at the University of Regina, Regina, Saskatchewan, on May 26-27, 2018.

the liberation of Leiden from the Spanish siege in 1574. (This section is based on Wikipedia Contributors 2017.)



*Figure 1. Lodewijk Napoleon visits the victims of the gunpowder ship in Leiden, 1807. Painting by Carel Lodewijk Hansen, 1807, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, SK-A-3925.*

## **2. Nobel Prizes**

The Nobel Prizes form a set of annual international awards in recognition of academic, cultural and/or scientific advances. The Nobel Prize was funded by Alfred Nobel's personal fortune. In 1888, Nobel was astonished to read his own obituary, entitled "The merchant of death is dead", in a French newspaper. As it was Alfred's brother Ludvig who had died, the obituary was eight years premature. The article disconcerted Nobel and made him apprehensive about how he would be remembered. According to official sources, Alfred Nobel bequeathed 94% of his fortune to the Nobel Foundation that now forms the economic base of the Nobel Prize. The awards are in Physics, Chemistry, Physiology and Medicine, Literature and Peace. The latter was originally described as "to be given to the person or society that renders the greatest service to the cause of international

fraternity, in the suppression or reduction of standing armies, or in the establishment or furtherance of peace congresses" (Chisholm 1911).

The first Nobel Prizes were awarded in 1901; three of the recipients were the Dutchman Jacobus Henricus van 't Hoff (Chemistry, University of Groningen), the German Willem Conrad Röntgen (Physics), and the Swiss Henri Dunant (Peace). The Leiden Nobel Prize explosion led to five awardees of which four in Physics: Lorentz and Zeeman (1902), Van der Waals (1910), Kamerlingh Onnes (1913); and Einthoven (1924) in Physiology and Medicine.

### 3. The path to the four Nobel Prizes in Physics

#### 3.1 *Lorentz and Zeeman*

Hendrik Antoon Lorentz was born in Arnhem, the Netherlands, on July 18, 1853, as the son of a plant-nursery owner. When he was four years old, his mother died. In those days the elementary school did not only have school hours in the morning and in the afternoon, but also in the evening. When in 1866 the first high school, HBS (*Hogere Burgerschool*, a type of high school dominated by science courses but without classical languages) opened its doors in Arnhem, Hendrik Lorentz, as a gifted pupil, was ready to be placed in the 3rd year. After the 5th year and a year of study of the classics, required for admission, he entered Leiden University in 1870, obtained his B.Sc. degree in mathematics and physics in 1871, and returned to Arnhem in 1872 to become an evening-school teacher, while at the same time preparing for his doctoral thesis on the reflection and refraction of light. Hendrik Lorentz obtained his doctorate in 1875, when he was just 22 years old; no more than three years later he became professor of theoretical physics at Leiden University, a position especially created for him, and one of the first of such chairs in the world. A few years later Heike Kamerlingh Onnes became his experimental colleague, after vehement discussions in the faculty. Lorentz strongly supported Kamerlingh Onnes then, and he proved an ideal colleague for him (Berends 2009).

Pieter Zeeman was born on May 25, 1865, at Zonnemaire, a small village on Schouwen-Duiveland, Zeeland, as the son of the local clergyman. After having finished his high school education at Zierikzee, he went to Delft for two years to be tutored in the classical languages, which was required for admission to the university. In Delft, he stayed at the home of Dr. J.W. Lely, brother of Cornelis Lely, who was responsible for the concept and realization of the *Zuiderzee* Works. This was an early connection to Lorentz' post-retirement work (see below). In 1883, the aurora borealis happened to be visible in the Netherlands. Zeeman, then a student at the high school in Zierikzee, made a drawing and description of the phenomenon and submitted it to the journal *Nature*, where it was published. The editor praised "the careful observations of Professor Zeeman from his observatory

in Zonnemaire.” In 1893 he submitted his doctoral thesis on the Kerr effect, prepared under the supervision of Kamerlingh Onnes, to Leiden University and became a *Privatdozent*. Pieter Zeeman’s time at Leiden University during that period took an unexpected turn in the year 1896, when he was fired by Kamerlingh Onnes, because he conducted experiments in the laboratory in relation to spectral lines in a direct violation of orders. His research on spectral lines nevertheless became the bedrock of his career as a scientist. In that same year, Zeeman presented his findings at the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences and in the Proceedings of the Royal Society of London, and was immediately recognized by eminent scientists. His old mentor Hendrik Lorentz also took an interest in the findings and consequently it became well known (Van der Waals Jr 1943-1944).

In 1902, Pieter Zeeman received the Nobel Prize in Physics together with Lorentz “in recognition of the extraordinary service they rendered by their researches into the influence of magnetism upon radiation phenomena” (Nobel media n.d.-f). In 1908 Pieter Zeeman was made director of the Institute of Physics in Amsterdam and became the successor of Van der Waals.

Having obtained national as well as international celebrity status, Hendrik Lorentz was appointed in 1919 as chairman of the committee whose task it was to study the movements of seawater, which could be expected during and after the reclamation of the *Zuiderzee*, now called *IJsselmeer*, in the Netherlands. This was one of the greatest works of all time in hydraulic engineering and was potentially only matched by the Delta Works initiated after the 1953 flood disaster. Lorentz was 65 when he took on this assignment. He had retired from Leiden University a few years earlier and had moved to Haarlem, but he still came to Leiden each Monday to lecture on fundamental topics in physics. His theoretical calculations on water movements, the result of eight years of pioneering work, have been confirmed in actual practice in the most striking manner, and have ever been of permanent value to the science of hydraulics (Berends 2009). (This section is partially based on Nobel Media n.d.-a; b.)

### 3.2 *Van der Waals*

The third Nobel Prize in Physics went to Johannes Diderik van der Waals in 1910, for his work on “the equation of state for gases and liquids.” This was based on his doctoral dissertation of the same title based on work he did in the Leiden Physics Laboratory. Johannes Diderik van der Waals was born on November 23, 1837 in Leiden, the Netherlands. After having finished his education at his place of birth, he became a schoolteacher. Although he had no knowledge of classical languages, and thus was not allowed to take academic examinations, he continued studying at the university in his spare time during the years 1862-1865. In this way he

obtained teaching certificates in mathematics and physics. In 1864 he was appointed teacher at a high school at Deventer; in 1866 he moved to The Hague, first as a teacher and later as director of one of the high schools in that town. In his doctoral dissertation (1873, i.e., two years before Lorentz) he put forward an “Equation of State”, embracing both the gaseous and the liquid state; he could demonstrate that these two states of aggregation not only merge into each other in a continuous manner, but that they are in fact of the same nature. This put him in the foremost rank of world physics. Valderrama (2010) notes that in his marvellous Nobel lecture, Van der Waals addressed a strong and clear speech to those who, without foundation, opposed his ideas: “It will be perfectly clear that in all my studies I was quite convinced of the real existence of molecules, that I never regarded them as a figment of my imagination [...] When I began my studies I had the feeling that I was almost alone in holding that view. Many of those who opposed it most have ultimately been won over, and my theory may have been a contributory factor.” (This section is partially based on Nobel Media n.d.-c.)

### 3.3 *Kamerlingh Onnes*

Heike Kamerlingh Onnes was born on September 21, 1853, in Groningen, The Netherlands, where his father owned a brickworks factory. After spending the allotted time at the HBS in his native town, he received supplementary teaching in Greek and Latin. Kamerlingh Onnes became head of experimental physics (residing in part of the Laboratory built on the ‘Ruin’). In his inaugural address “*De beteekenis van het quantitatief onderzoek in de natuurkunde*” (‘The importance of quantitative research in physics’) he arrived at his well-known motto “*Door meten tot weten*” (‘Knowledge through measurement’), an appreciation of the value of experiments, which concerned him throughout his scientific career. Another momentous discovery (1911) was that of the superconductivity of pure metals such as mercury, tin and lead at very low temperatures. (This section is partially based on Nobel Media n.d.-d.)

### 3.4 *The evolution of the Leiden physics laboratory*

Kamerlingh Onnes’ research program was based on investigating the work of Van der Waals for substances that “boiled” at very low temperature, such as helium, as well as their magnetic, optical, and electric properties. Liquid helium was produced for the first time in 1908, and later Kamerlingh Onnes managed to reach a temperature of less than one degree above the absolute minimum, which is at  $-273^{\circ}$  Celsius. In 1913, he received the Nobel Prize in physics “for investigations on the properties of matter at low temperatures which let inter alia, to the production of liquid helium”. Kamerlingh Onnes was a very able manager, who

needed lots of laboratory space. He gradually pushed his chemistry, anatomy and physiology colleagues out of the building and the central administration also left. The Leiden physics laboratory was considered the leading one in the country, and under Kamerlingh Onnes it soon established an international reputation too. However, in 1896, the town council panicked upon learning that, in the laboratory on the 'Ruin', Kamerlingh Onnes was working with considerable quantities of compressed hydrogen gas. This resulted in a prohibition on the storing of hydrogen and some of the laboratory's essential lines of research had to be closed down for several months. After regular checks and a no-smoking regulation were introduced, Kamerlingh Onnes and his staff were again permitted to resume their hydrogen work (Gorter & Taconis 1964). Maybe this stressful time for Kamerlingh Onnes caused his firing of Zeeman in 1896. Part of the problems that continued after 1900 also resulted from the less than harmonious relationship between Kamerlingh Onnes and the physiologist Einthoven, who complained continuously about vibrations caused by the vacuum pumps in the physics laboratory, which disturbed Einthoven's measurements with his newly invented and very sensitive recording equipment (Gorter & Taconis 1964).



Figure 2. The Kamerlingh Onnes Laboratory in 1926. Postcard in author's personal collection.

In 1920, the laboratory at the *Steenschaar* was expanded to about twice its original (~1860) size. The front view as it was in 1920 is still the same at the time

of this writing, albeit that the building now houses the Law Faculty, as physics together with most experimental university departments moved to the new research space between Leiden and Rijnsburg. In 1932 the laboratory was named the Kamerlingh Onnes laboratory. Kamerlingh Onnes ruled his new empire as an enlightened dictator. This is what one can deduce from experiences and opinions of contemporary physicists in Leiden (Casimir 1992).

Hendrik Casimir (1909-2000) merged the two cultures of science and technology in the course of his career. After being trained in theoretical physics by the founding fathers of quantum mechanics (Bohr, Pauli, Ehrenfest), he himself made fundamental scientific contributions as a professor in Leiden and as a director of the Philips Research Laboratory in Eindhoven.

As the director of an enterprise, Kamerlingh Onnes also set up a well-oiled organization presided over by an administrative supervisor, a research team including assistants and postgraduate students, a manager, instrument-makers, glass-blowers, laboratory assistants, technicians, an engineer, an assistant supervisor, not to mention a small army of trainee instrument-makers to perform any number of odd jobs. HKO's project was, indeed, Big Science. (Van Delft 2011, 14)

One of the consequences of the Big Science was that Kamerling Onnes needed extensive cryogenic equipment, required for his low-temperature studies, to be constructed in-house. For that purpose, he had already founded the "*Leiden Instrument-makers en Glasblazers School*" ('Leiden instrument maker and glass blowers school') as early as 1901. The graduates are excellent and world-renowned. The school has expanded over the years and currently has between 300 and 400 students in its 4-year curriculum. Experimental physics students entering the post-bachelor phase also had to participate in a school practicum for three weeks, just to get an idea of how difficult precision instrument making is, and to prepare them for well thought-out requests for equipment needed in their research. I had the 'privilege' to also undergo this ritual, at the start of the years leading up to the Dutch equivalent of the M.Sc. degree. I was given a lump of metal and told to make a perfect cube out of it.

### 3.5 *World recognition of Leiden physics*

International recognition was reflected in a *Scientific American* paper stating:

The most remarkable plant for the continuous production of low temperatures is that of the laboratory directed by M. Kamerlingh Onnes, professor at the University of Leiden. This installation has required on the part of this learned physicist more than twenty-five years' of persevering

efforts such as only those who have in some sort personally conducted research work can comprehend. (Bresch 1912, 93)

During his early and middle career years, Albert Einstein often spent time (starting in 1911) at Leiden University visiting Lorentz. Later (from 1914 on) he often visited his friend Ehrenfest who in 1914 had succeeded Lorentz as professor in theoretical physics at Leiden.

Einstein and Ehrenfest were soul mates. They first met in February 1912 in Prague, where Einstein was a professor until he moved to Zürich later that year. The friendship clicked from the very beginning. They interrupted their intense discussions on subjects like the ergodic principle or gravitation to play Brahms sonatas, with Einstein on the violin and Ehrenfest at the piano (Van Delft 2006, 57).

In 1920, Einstein also visited Pieter Zeeman in Amsterdam where the latter had been appointed Professor in experimental physics shortly after receiving the Nobel Prize.

#### 4. Nobel Prize in Physiology

Willem Einthoven was born on May 21, 1860, in Semarang on the island of Java, in the former Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). His father was an army medical officer in the Indies, and later became parish doctor in Semarang. His mother was the daughter of the then director of Finance in the Indies. Willem was the eldest son, and the third child in a family of three daughters and three sons. At the age of six, Einthoven lost his father. Four years later his mother decided to return with her six children to Holland, where the family settled in Utrecht.

After the HBS – note that four out of five Leiden Nobel laureates received their secondary education at a HBS – Einthoven worked in close association with the great physiologist F.C. Donders, under whose guidance he undertook a study, which was published in 1885 as his doctoral dissertation: *Stereoscopie door kleurverschil* ('Stereoscopy by means of colour variation'), a method that is still applied today in movie theaters by distributing glasses – one red colored and one green – to induce a virtual 3D image. One of Einthoven's teachers was the physicist C.H.D. Buys Ballot, who discovered the well-known law in meteorology that states: "In the Northern Hemisphere, if a person stands with his back to the wind, the atmospheric pressure is low to the left and high to the right" (Wikipedia Contributors 2018). That same year, 1885, Einthoven was appointed Professor of Physiology at Leiden University with his laboratory space in the same building as Kamerlingh Onnes.

The string galvanometer, which he subsequently developed (Einthoven 1903), has led countless investigators to study the functions and diseases of the

heart muscle. The string galvanometer consisted of a several meters long, very thin silver-coated quartz string that conducted the electrical currents from the heart. This string was placed in a powerful magnetic field, which caused sideways displacement of the string in proportion to the current carried. The movement in the filament was projected through a thin slot onto a moving photographic plate. The original machine required water-cooling for the powerful electromagnets and weighed some 600 lbs (Barold 2003).

Einthoven received the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 1924 “for his discovery of the mechanism of the electrocardiogram”. The Physiology laboratory at Leiden, then separate from the Kamerlingh Onnes laboratory, became a place visited by scientists from all over the world. (This section is partially based on Nobel Media n.d.-e.)

### **5. Is there a causal link between the gunpowder blast and the five Nobel Prizes?**

The Netherlands received a total of 20 personal Nobel Prizes between 1901 and 2017. In the first 25 years (1901-1926) there were the five from Leiden plus Van 't Hoff (Groningen, 1901) and Tobias Asser (1911), who studied law at Leiden University and was a law professor at the University of Amsterdam, for Peace. In the next 25 years there were two, then from 1951 to 1976 four, and between 1976 and 2017 there were seven. The number in the first 25 years was, for the Netherlands, disproportionately large and the recipients were largely from the Leiden University laboratory erected on the ‘Ruin’ left by the gunpowder blast. I credit the success to both Hendrik Lorentz and Johannes van der Waals, who instilled an interest and experience in the new field of theoretical physics, and the relentless drive and mastery of experimental physics of Heike Kamerlingh Onnes, which not only contributed to the training in both fields of Pieter Zeeman, but also acted as a stimulant for the strongly physics-oriented Willem Einthoven, albeit that their personal relationship was strained. The proximity of all these people in the same physical space provided by the gunpowder blast contributed, in my opinion, in no small part to the resulting excellence and productivity.

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## Samuel Abraham Goudsmit: The physicist who hunted for Hitler's atom bomb

*Michiel Horn*

Samuel Abraham Goudsmit (1902-1978) is “famous for jointly proposing the concept of electron spin with George Eugene Uhlenbeck in 1925”, or so an anonymous contributor to Wikipedia informs us (Wikipedia contributors 2018).<sup>1</sup> Famous? Really? He seems to be virtually unknown outside the world of physics. Martijn van Calmthout, chief science editor of *De Volkskrant*, has sought to change this with a biography of Sam Goudsmit published in 2016 (Van Calmthout 2016). I recently finished translating it for a US publisher (Van Calmthout 2018). Assuming the book gets some publicity, it should earn recognition for a man who certainly deserves it.

Goudsmit was born in Den Haag, the younger of two children in a petit-bourgeois Jewish family. His parents worked in the retail sector as owners of small enterprises, and the family was financially comfortable without being wealthy. Goudsmit himself was earmarked for the world of trade and commerce, but he showed an early interest in science, and after graduating from the gymnasium in 1922, he entered Leiden University, the first in his family to attend university.

Among the people Goudsmit met there were two men who had a lasting influence on his life and career. One was the brilliant professor of theoretical physics, the Austrian-Dutch Paul Ehrenfest; the other was Goudsmit's fellow student and friend for life, George Eugene Uhlenbeck. (You may remember hearing this last name before: Uhlenbeck was the nephew of C.C. Uhlenbeck, the anthropologist and linguist who studied the language of the Blackfoot and about whom Mary Eggermont-Molenaar has lectured and written. See Eggermont 2005 and Genee & Hinrichs 2009.) Goudsmit seems to have been the more intuitive of the two, Uhlenbeck the more methodical. The two were working together in the summer of 1925 when they came up with a solution to a problem that had been puzzling physicists for some time: the nature of some kind of internal circular

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<sup>1</sup>This is the text of a presentation delivered to the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies / Association canadienne pour l'avancement des études néerlandaises (CAANS-ACAEN) held at the University of Regina in Regina, Saskatchewan, on May 26-27, 2018.

motion in the atom. The solution was the electron spin. The two students might have kept this idea to themselves, but Ehrenfest arranged for its publication in *Naturwissenschaften*, at that time the leading journal in physics. It appeared in November 1925 and, in one stroke, made the two students famous (Uhlenbeck & Goudsmit 1925). They never got the Nobel Prize for their discovery, although they were nominated many times. However, Isidor I. Rabi, a Nobelist in physics, later remarked: "Physics must be forever in debt to those two men for discovering the spin" (Encyclopedia Britannica 2018).

In 1927, Harrison M. Randall, head of the Department of Physics at the University of Michigan, recruited both Goudsmit and Uhlenbeck, in the process laying the basis for what would become one of the pre-eminent departments in theoretical physics in the United States. That year, too, Goudsmit obtained his doctorate from Leiden and married Jeanne (Jaantje) Logher. The couple had one child, Esther.

For the next fourteen years Goudsmit and his family lived in Ann Arbor, although he got back to the Netherlands more than once. In any case he was not isolated from the European world of physics, at that time more important than the North American one. Even before 1927 Randall had launched a summer school that brought physicists from Europe to meet with their counterparts in the United States. Among the European visitors were Ehrenfest, the Italian Enrico Fermi, and the German Werner Heisenberg. Fermi had studied under Ehrenfest, and Heisenberg had also visited Leiden. He and Goudsmit first met there in the mid-1920s, and they became good friends.

For years Goudsmit entertained the hope that he would be offered the professorship at the University of Amsterdam, which was held by the Nobelist Pieter Zeeman until 1935. When the position was offered to him in 1939, however, Goudsmit declined it. He had become concerned about political developments in Europe and especially in Germany. Indeed, he tried to persuade his reluctant parents to emigrate to the U.S. The visas did not arrive in the Netherlands until May 1940, however, and Isaac and Marianne Goudsmit either never got them or were unable to arrange passage. They were murdered in Auschwitz in 1943. Goudsmit's sister Rachel was able to flee to France and eventually reached the United States, but almost all members of the extended Goudsmit family met a violent end during the Nazi years.

In 1941 Goudsmit volunteered for war-related research, working on radar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Two years later he was asked to become the scientific head of the Alsos Mission.

Unlike the Manhattan Project, to which it was intellectually linked, Alsos is little known today. The Manhattan Project was the name given to the effort to produce a nuclear weapon. The origins of the project date from 1938-1939, when

the German physicists Otto Hahn and Fritz Strassmann, and the Austrian physicists Lise Meitner and her nephew Otto Frisch – he later worked on the Manhattan Project – discovered nuclear fission. The possibility that this discovery could lead to a new and more powerful weapon than any so far known, and information that the Germans were probably trying to develop such a weapon, prompted the United States government to move aggressively in this direction. A key contributor in this process was Goudsmit's and Uhlenbeck's friend Enrico Fermi.

Fermi, whose wife was Jewish, left Italy after the promulgation of new racial laws in 1938 and moved to the United States, where he became a key figure in the Manhattan Project when it was established in 1942. While teaching at the University of Chicago, Fermi was in charge of the first major step in the building of the atom bomb. "In the squash courts under the west stand of the University's Stagg Field, Fermi supervised the design and assembly of an 'atomic pile,' a code word for an assembly that in peacetime would be known as a 'nuclear reactor'" (Arbeitsgruppe Radiochemie n.d., 2). On December 2, 1942, the first self-sustaining chain reaction, initiating the controlled release of nuclear energy, was accomplished here.

This was of key importance in the development of the atom bomb. It also demonstrated the importance of knowing how far the Germans were in their progress to such a weapon. General Leslie Groves, who had been appointed director of the Manhattan Project in September 1942, launched the Alsos Mission in early 1943. Its objective was to find out whether and how far the Germans had progressed to an atom bomb. Put in charge of it was a military intelligence officer, Colonel Boris Pash, while Goudsmit was made the scientific head of the mission.

Goudsmit seemed made for the part. Although he was a theoretical physicist, he was not part of the Manhattan Project. This meant that, were he to fall into enemy hands, he would not be able to tell the Germans anything about the progress American scientists and engineers were making toward an atom bomb. He spoke four languages, Dutch, English, French, and German, and, most important, he knew all the leading German physicists personally. Some, like Heisenberg, were friends. His personal connections in the community of German physicists, it was thought, would help him in interrogating them once they had been taken into custody.

Goudsmit gave his own account of the Alsos Mission in a memoir published soon after the war (Goudsmit 1983 [1947]). The first year of Alsos was one of staffing the operation and preparing for the work that would begin once the Allies had a foothold in northwestern Europe. On D-Day, Goudsmit flew to London, where his team was put together and equipped. In late August, he and members of his team flew to Cherbourg and drove to Paris. This is where the real work was supposed to begin, but the breakthrough came only after Pash and his men

entered Strasbourg University in November 1944. At this institution, Germanized after Alsace was incorporated into the German Reich in 1940, several notable physicists had been working, among them the prominent nuclear physicist Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker. Goudsmit reached Strasbourg a few days after Pash. From the documents that were captured he concluded that the Germans had either just recently reached the point that the Americans had in late 1942, or were not even that far yet. “Everything is still at the academic stage. The conclusion is in any case clear: *there is no German atom bomb*” (Van Calmthout 2018, 97). But when he spoke about this to Major Robert Furman, the information officer assigned to him, with a sense of relief, and said that now the American bomb would not have to be used, the more realistic Furman set him straight: “Of course you understand, Sam, if we have such a weapon, we are going to use it” (Goudsmit 1983, 76).



Figure 1. ALSOS members Goudsmit, Wardenburg, Welsh and Cecil, November 1944. Author: US Army. Image in the [public domain](#).

Goudsmit might have been sure no German atom bomb existed, but all the same, after the Allies crossed the Rhine in March 1945, the Alsos team was soon visiting small communities in Württemberg where the Germans' nuclear project had moved after bombing raids made life and research in the Berlin area increasingly hazardous. At Haigerloch and Hechingen, in the area between Stuttgart and the Bodensee, the Alsos team found evidence of experiments indicating that the Germans had been working on nuclear power but had been far from developing a

nuclear weapon. This assessment did not change when prominent German physicists, having been taken into custody, were interrogated by Goudsmit and other scientists. The most prominent of the captives was Goudsmit's old friend Werner Heisenberg. He, like the other physicists, was taken to Alsos headquarters in Heidelberg and interrogated. Later, from July 3, 1945, to January 3, 1946, ten of them, including Hahn, Weizsäcker and Heisenberg, were interned at Farm Hall, an estate outside Cambridge, England, as part of a project known as Operation Epsilon. Every room had concealed microphones in it, and everything the men said was recorded for later analysis. (The Farm Hall Tapes were released in 1992 and eventually formed the basis of a play.)

The tapes confirmed the conclusion Goudsmit had reached before the end of 1944: the Germans had been nowhere near making an atom bomb. Given that nuclear fission was first accomplished by German and Austrian scientists, what explained the German failure to develop a nuclear weapon? Goudsmit offered his explanation in the March 15, 1946, issue of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, expanding it a year later in his ghostwritten book, *Alsos*.

In his *Bulletin* article Goudsmit explained, point by point, what the Germans and their scientists thought they were doing in the years from 1939 to 1945:

1. An energy-producing uranium engine is more likely to succeed than a bomb. In fact, they had entirely abandoned the hope of making a bomb during this war.
2. An atomic bomb is an [sic] uranium engine which gets out of control; therefore the road towards a bomb leads via the construction of the uranium engine.
3. To make a bomb of pure plutonium never entered their minds, or at least was not considered feasible and not taken seriously. The idea of using a pile to produce plutonium and to make a bomb out of that material came to them only slowly, after the detailed radio descriptions of our bomb in August 1945.
4. An [sic] uranium engine is just as important as a bomb because it will make Germany economically self-supporting by the enormous power it may produce. (Goudsmit 1946, 4)

The remarkable thing was that throughout the war the Germans thought they were far ahead of all competitors. Only after the American atom bombs fell on Japan in August 1945, did they realize how far behind they had been. Goudsmit thought the physicists themselves could not be held responsible: the suffocating Nazi regime handicapped science. Moreover, several different departments worked separately on the uranium problem. That lack of coordination was corrected only in 1943, and by then it was too late.

By the end of the war the Germans knew from their experiments that augmentation of the liberated neutrons in a nuclear reaction was possible, but they certainly did not have a self-maintaining source of neutrons (necessary for a reactor or a bomb). Nevertheless, the German nuclear scientists thought that not only would the German route to atomic energy prove interesting for the world, but it would also put German science on the map after the war. "These thoughts were, indeed, the driving force behind the German scientific efforts" (Goudsmit 1946, 5).

Goudsmit estimated that altogether the Germans had put around ten million dollars into nuclear research, and that in all those years at most a hundred scientists had worked on it. Both were a small fraction of what the Americans and their Allies had devoted to the Manhattan Project.

Goudsmit's version of the events did not go unchallenged. Werner Heisenberg, in particular, took issue with his friend's analysis of the German failure to develop a bomb. He was offended by Goudsmit's assertion that the Germans had not fully understood the physics of a nuclear weapon, and set out to explain that the real, perhaps the only, problem facing German physicists was a lack of resources. He also signaled a reluctance to pursue the military potential of nuclear fission.

Benjamin Bederson later wrote, in an article commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of Goudsmit's death:

Over many years Goudsmit and Heisenberg engaged in a coolly polite argument concerning the actual quality of the German effort, complicated by some later discredited claims of German passive resistance to bomb research. Even so, Goudsmit states in an obituary of Heisenberg that his scientific accomplishments were 'as revolutionary as those of [Albert] Einstein and as profound as those of [Niels] Bohr,' but he also states 'many of us hoped that he would have been more outspoken in condemning the Nazi regime.' This was about the most direct criticism that Goudsmit could level at his revered colleague and erstwhile good friend. (Bederson 2008, 3)

Goudsmit's post-Alsos career has interest for the historian of science as well. In 1946 he joined the faculty of Northwestern University. Two years later he moved to the newly-established Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island, where he served as head of the physics department. He was also the long-time editor of the *Physical Review* and, after 1958, of the *Physical Review Letters*, which he helped found. These positions made him a gatekeeper in the worlds of American and international physics: he knew everybody, and everybody knew him. He also contributed regularly to the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, and spoke regularly in public, in the United States and also in the Netherlands.

When he retired in 1974, he moved to Nevada, with his second wife, Irene Bejach. He taught part-time at the Reno campus of the University of Nevada until his sudden death of a heart attack on December 4, 1978. The headline of his obituary in *The New York Times* read: "Samuel Goudsmit, Codiscoverer of Electron's Spin, Is Dead at 76." His work during the war and at Brookhaven was mentioned at length, as well as his editorship of *Physical Review* and *Physical Review Letters*. "Long a leading figure in American physics," was the science editor's assessment (Sullivan 1978). To this must be added that Goudsmit was an accomplished Egyptologist, having become interested in the subject while studying at Leiden. He occasionally wrote about Egyptology, and he left his collection of Egyptian antiquities to the Kelsey Museum of the University of Michigan.

The obituary that appeared in the *Physical Review Letters* in early 1979 concludes in this way: "Though few men have contributed more than Sam to the shape of the world physicists know today, the private memories many of us have of Sam's kindness and consideration, all salted with his bluff wit, are not less important than his more concrete achievements" (Adair et al., 1). May his memory be a blessing.

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## Some observations on Paul van Ostaijen

*Basil D. Kingstone*

Paul van Ostaijen was born in Antwerp in 1896.<sup>1</sup> During the First World War he worked in the city hall there and got into trouble with the law: he yelled “*Weg met Mercier!*” (‘Away with Mercier!’) in a demonstration against that gentleman, a visiting Catholic cardinal who was very much pro-French and anti-Flemish. For this misdemeanour he was condemned to three months in prison, but the occupying authorities (i.e. the Germans) suspended the sentence. After the war he was pardoned, but preferred to live in Berlin because of his admiration for the communist political leader Karl Liebknecht. However, Liebknecht lost his bid for power and was arrested and murdered, and Van Ostaijen came home disillusioned. He was then drafted into the Belgian army to serve in, ironically, the occupation forces in Germany. Afterwards he lived modestly, by his pen, with his health steadily failing. He died in 1928 in a sanatorium, of tuberculosis.

My source for this paper is the anthology of Van Ostaijen's poems and theoretical statements about poetry published in 1955, edited by Gerrit Borgers and published under the title *Music-Hall* (Van Ostaijen 1955; all translations in this paper are my own).

From his first published collection, *Music-Hall*, the anthology offers us *Avond* (‘Evening’), which reveals a not unusual sensitive young soul, dabbling in synesthesia:

AVOND

Ach, m'n ziel is louter klanken  
In dit uur van louter kleuren;  
Klanken, die omhoge ranken  
In een dolle tuin van geuren.

(Van Ostaijen 1955, 28)

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<sup>1</sup>This is the text of a presentation delivered to the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies / Association canadienne pur l'avancement des études néerlandaises (CAANS-ACAEN) held at the University of Regina, in Regina, Saskatchewan, on May 26-27, 2018.

*EVENING*

*Alas, my soul is pure sounds  
In this hour of pure colours;  
Sounds that climb up  
Into a crazy garden of scents.*

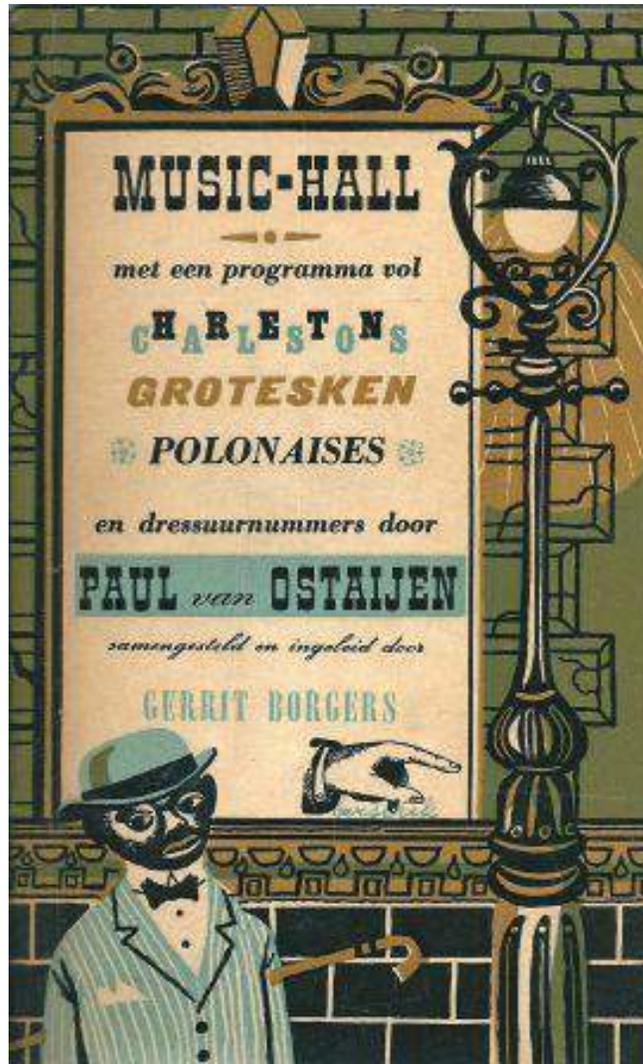


Figure 1. Cover of the 1955 Ooievaar edition of Music-Hall, edited by Gerrit Borgers.

More typical of Van Ostaijen's long-term development is the poem *Babel*, from his second collection *Het Sienjaal* ('The Signal'). Here we see his religious character, his concern with sin and temptation represented by the bright lights of the big city, but also the unorthodox nature of those beliefs:

BABEL (fragment)

Mijn zonden zijn gewijd,  
bedreven in het bloedig Godsverlangen.  
Zoeken naar het Godswezen: bang overspel  
van mijn arm lichaam pijn.

Zalig zal zijn de derde dag.  
De klanken van bazuinen  
in de wind een vlag,  
die mij welkom heet  
om zoveel hellelichte zonden,  
die enkel beproeving waren.

O mijn broos lijf  
ik heb u vaak geofferd  
mijn zielewelzijn.

Mijn lijf beproeven de lampen,  
want één dag zal het moeten ontbloot zijn  
van het naakt verlangen,  
van de zonde en van het vlees.

Pijnig mij honds-blik-zachte lampen, schrille bloemen,  
wellust: zomerfestoenen, witte waanzin van het winterwoud,  
liedjes, gigolo's. De zonde is de straat  
die leidt naar een wit, maar ongedacht gelaat. (Van Ostaijen 1955, 50-51)

*BABEL (fragment)*

*My sins are holy,  
Committed in the bloody desire for God,  
seeking the God-being: anguished adultery  
pain of my poor body.*

*Blessed shall be the third day,  
The sound of trumpets  
a flag in the wind,  
which welcomes me  
for so many hell-bright sins  
which were but a trial.*

*O my fragile body  
I have often sacrificed to you  
The well-being of my soul.*

*The street lights test my body,  
for one day it will be stripped bare  
Of naked desire,  
Of sin and the flesh.*

*Torture me, lamps soft as a dog's gaze, shrill flowers,  
Lust: summer festoons, white madness of the winter forest,  
Songs, gigolos. Sin is the street  
That leads to a white, but unthought-of face.*

Clearly Van Ostaijen was not going to be a docile member of the Church. It was still less likely given his reaction to the slaughter of the First World War – and of the years after. This is obvious from one of his grotesque prose stories called *Intermezzo*. A facing-column translation of it, with the title “Intermission,” excellently done by Kristiaan Aercke, appeared in this journal in the fall of 2003 (Aercke 2003a, b). It presents the world as a live theatre cum puppet theatre cum waxworks, which performs a play consisting of an endless mass slaughter. The audience rebels and demands their money back. Indeed, they riot, to the point where the disorder in the audience spills over onto the stage and is no different from the murderous play itself:

Some gangsters have already butchered fifty people. It is, however, on the stage that the fighting is most intense. Knives flash. Blood drenches white silk and cashmere waistcoats. The women stand howling. Nude or in evening rags. An orgiastic dance. Teeth sink into calves. Into necks. Sever the carotid artery. Forward. Chairs smashed to pieces. (Aercke 2003b, 19)

However, the theatre’s playwright cum director cum manager happens to be (or so he says) God the Father, and he quells his audience’s revolt. Firstly, he does this by asking them how they want him to improve the play, but they cannot agree among themselves; instead, they shout every known political and literary slogan (Van Ostaijen makes fun of all manners of such beliefs). Social and intellectual snobbery cause this divisiveness, and God plays on it skilfully. When that fails, he resorts to a pseudo-logical argument of relentless sophistry:

I know as well as you that the heroes I’ve presented on stage so far don’t fully embody the heroic idea. But why should my heroes be heroes? Is the fusion of hero and clown not much more interesting? Perhaps you also think that my heroes are all cast from the same wretched mould. If that’s

your opinion, then I must interpret that as evidence of your uncultivated sensuality. In that case you can't comprehend the nuances, the differences perceived so sharply by a razor-sharp intelligence. Or do you call my heroes unnatural? In my wax museum theater nothing is unnatural, ladies and gentlemen, not even hypothetically. Against nature, at the most.

(Aercke 2003b, 17)

This argument sounds rather like Van Ostaijen's own sarcastic dismissal of his own critics, in his theoretical statements, but its substance is also uncomfortably like the reply of the Church, when we complain that life is unpleasant and unfair: God is all-powerful, we are told, and it is not for us to argue with Him. This approach does not work very well for the theatre manager, however, so he resorts to sheer bullying and cracking his ringmaster's whip, until the audience are cowed – as in life, they have to stay until the end of the show, unless they want to commit suicide – and give worldwide acclaim to his production. As I remarked in my editorial to that issue (Kingstone 2003, n.p.), one thinks of the end of the Book of Job. Of course, that dealt with the undeserved suffering of one man, not of the whole world.

*Intermezzo* leaves us feeling that Van Ostaijen was trying to laugh at the state of the world, rather than cry. And the usual source of explanation and consolation, the Church, has clearly failed as far as he was concerned. Typical of his *Feesten van angst en pijn* ('Feasts of fear and pain') (1919-1921), of which *Bezette stad* ('Occupied City') forms a part, perhaps, is the ironically titled *Sous les ponts de Paris* ('Under Paris' bridges'). The title is that of a popular song written in 1913, very Parisian, about the poor who sleep under bridges because they can't afford a room. Van Ostaijen goes further: his religious feelings identify not with the hierarchy of the Church, but with human wrecks in the dockside slums; he sees Jesus in "the least of these My brothers", to whom indeed Jesus tells us to do good if we wish to be saved (Matthew 25:40). I will leave a few couplets out of the middle of the citation below. Here is the opening:

#### SOUS LES PONTS DE PARIS

Van alle plaatsen waar Gij uitgestald zijt  
over de bezette stad schreit Uw triestigheid

men heeft U aan alle hoeken opgehangen  
om in een offerblok senten te vangen

Nog hebt Gij de kommunie met het volk gevonden  
het steekt zijn armen in uw warme wonden

Wij steken ons handen in Uw wonden doof  
en blind zijn wij in ongelooft

Priesters en papen hebben Uw Kadaver geschonden  
geleerd te geloven ons tastende handen Uw wonden

Men heeft U kerken gebouwd  
van de wanden zoekt het zilver en goud

Ons geloof is zo klein en zo mat  
als voor uw beelden de dansende vlam (Van Ostaijen 1955, 110)

*UNDER PARIS' BRIDGES*

*From all the places where You are displayed  
Over the occupied city Your sadness cries out*

*They have hung You up at every corner  
to catch pennies in a collection box*

*Still You have found communion with Your people  
who stick their arms in Your warm wounds*

*We stick our hands in Your warm wounds  
deaf we are and blind in our unbelief*

*Priests and papists have violated Your corpse  
taught to believe our groping hands Your wounds*

*They have built churches to You  
from the walls silver and gold glitter*

*Our belief is as small and dull  
as the flame dancing before Your images.*

And here is the last part, where he identifies Jesus with a deserter:

Ik heb U gezien in mijn bezette stad  
in een danszaal de muziek zweeg toen Gij binnentrad

haar trage wals het ritme van Uw gezicht was sterker ZO  
in triestigheid dan een gebroken cello

en de gigolo's en de hoeren dansten hun trage WALS licht  
enkel op het triestige ritme van Uw GEZICHT

Ik heb U gezien in een stinkende slop  
Gij waart met Landsturmman samen

Gij stond onder de opgeëiste werklozen  
naar Duitsland gingen lange treinen van havelozen

Boven op de dijk houdt Gij mee de wacht  
met kille hoeren in de regenende nacht

Nu zijt Gij moe en afgetobd  
de triestigheid in U weer volgepropt

de regen druipt van Uw vuile kletsnatte hennepbaarden  
over de stad

Droppelt samen met de regen over  
alle drek van de stad Uw schokkend ritme mee (Van Ostaijen 1955, 111)

*I have seen You in my occupied city  
in a dance hall the music stopped when You came in*

*their dragging waltz the rhythm of Your face was stronger LIKE THAT  
in sadness than a broken cello*

*And the gigolos and the whores danced their dragging WALTZ  
only to the sad rhythm of Your FACE  
I have seen You in a stinking alley  
You were together with a Home Guard soldier*

*You stood among the requisitioned unemployed  
long trains of shabby people leaving for Germany*

*Up on the dyke You keep watch  
along with chilly whores in the rainy night*

*Now You are weary and worn out from struggle  
stuffed full of sadness again*

*Rain drips from Your soaking wet hemp beard  
over the city*

*Drips along with the rain over  
all the filth of the city with Your shaking rhythm.*



Figure 2. Paul van Ostaïjen. Undated photo (public domain).  
Photographer unknown. Source:  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:VanOstaijen3.jpg>.

Clearly Van Ostaïjen needed an escape from a moral-philosophical dead-end, and his theoretical articles give us a clue as to what he found. The most revealing one is a lecture he gave in Brussels and Antwerp in 1925-1926, with the highly ironic title of *Gebruiksaanwijzing der Lyrik* ('Lyricism, instructions for use') – as if lyricism were a gadget where you pressed a button to achieve an emotional state. He states:

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Most people just can't bring themselves to declare that lyricism doesn't interest them in the slightest. A certain wickedness of civilisation forces people who prefer to play billiards or *zevenzot* – and who play very well, mind you – [sarcasm: it is a game of chance played with dice] – to spend an evening being bored by Russian music. (Van Ostaijen 1955, 164)

They look for a magic password, but they would be disappointed if they had it, for behind the door is only a blind man uttering meaningless words.

Only Ali Baba, who knows the magic word [...] knows that in that man's song [...] there echoes the memory of and nostalgia for a pure law that, in the bowels of this earth, also forms crystals. (Van Ostaijen 1955, 165)

Which is something we cannot recover: "the daemonic [a power greater than oneself – inspiration, if you will] in the end is no match for hopelessness" (Van Ostaijen 1955, 168).

All that is certain is the power of the word, and the poet doesn't create that:

no poem on the subject of fish could ever be more powerful than the word 'fish' itself. [...] From nostalgia for a fatherland of the perfect and from the realisation of the uselessness of any human attempt to get there, from that double cause of longing and helplessness which is the awakener of prayer, poetry sprouts. (Van Ostaijen 1955, 168)

So, poetry is the form Van Ostaijen resorts to, it would seem, in order to remain somehow in touch with God. Indeed, he connects it with ecstasy, an extremely happy state associated with mysticism:

Just as the expression of ecstasy is the negation of the passive emptying into God, so the lyrical emotion is a negation of the pessimistic representation of the world which, it seems to me, alone makes it possible in the deepest depths. (Van Ostaijen 1955, 169)

Poetic creation thus seems to be the escape Van Ostaijen needed, but without having to accept the God of the Church, a corrupt organization with a dogma he had no time for.

This point in my account of the lecture seems the moment to look at the 'pure poem' which he gives to illustrate it. Its title is eloquent: *Spleen pour rire* ('joke melancholy'), the clown trying not to weep. I have done what I can to render the alliterations and the rhythm:

## SPLEEN POUR RIRE

Het meisje dat te Pampelune geboren tans te Honoloeloe woont  
 en in een rode lakkooi gevangen houdt  
 een kobaltblauwe papegaai  
 – zij schilderde hem met Ripolinkoeleuren  
 zoals gezeid de veren blauw  
 de snavel en de poten geel –  
 het meisje van Pampelune te Honoloeloe  
 dat om haar hoge hals heeft een krans van purperen anemonen  
 op haar opalen borst kleine barokkorallen  
 en om haar dijen niets  
 (Vogelveren dorsten haar dijen niet te dragen  
 zo zeer zijn dun haar dunne dijen)  
 dit pampeluner meisje dat te Honoloeloe woont  
 ken ik niet (Van Ostaijen 1955, 160)

## SPLEEN POUR RIRE

*The girl who was born in Pampeluna but now she lives in Honolulu  
 and keeps in a scarlet cage  
 a parrot of a cobalt blue  
 – she painted him with Ripolin paint  
 as I said his feathers blue  
 his beak and his legs yellow –  
 the girl from Pampeluna in Honolulu  
 who around her high neck has a wreath of purple anemones  
 over her opal breast has little baroque corals  
 and around her thighs nothing  
 (Her thighs don't dare to wear bird feathers  
 so thin are her thin thighs)  
 this girl from Pampeluna lives in Honolulu  
 and I don't know her*

Then the poem, hitherto colourful and lighthearted, comes to a disconcerting conclusion:

Priez toujours pour le pauvre Gaspard  
 Il n'est pas encore mort ce soir (Van Ostaijen 1955, 160)

*Keep praying for poor Gaspard  
 He hasn't died this evening yet*

This last couplet quotes Verlaine, and the title echoes his near-contemporary, Baudelaire; both of them ‘cursed poets’. It hints at a great depth of sadness – but one which Van Ostaijen is, I feel, trying to overcome. And indeed, in the rest of the lecture and in subsequent statements, he argues for the different kind of poem which most of *Spleen pour rire* offers us: “A poem of pure lyricism, as the expression of ecstasy, contains the cause of its development in itself and solely in itself [...] This ecstasy alone is the exclusive subject of pure lyricism” (Van Ostaijen 1955, 173-174). It follows that “I am striving for a poem with no subject, the subject of the poem is the poem itself” (Van Ostaijen 1973, 174). Outside experiences merge and change in the poet’s subconscious, then re-emerge as what we can perhaps call inspiration: “If I write a poem, it is because I have nothing whatever left to say [...] The poem has no subject: it *is* the subject [...] The I remains the highest good, but not the poet’s I, the poem’s I” (Van Ostaijen 1955, 175). Likewise for the prosody, Van Ostaijen says that the poem dictates its own prosody: “The result is neither ‘academic prosody’ nor free verse; the prosody is inherent in the poem itself” (Van Ostaijen 1955, 176). Or to quote an article in which he explained the difference between the straightforward lyricism of his friend Wies Moens and his own:

My ideal is for the outlook on life (a pessimistic one in my case) to vibrate in the poem without being expressed outright, and my favourite poems are those which contain my pessimistic resignation in the air of an *allegretto*.

(Van Ostaijen 1955, 147)

Various critics of the time speculated about where Van Ostaijen got his prosodic ideas from. One critic especially annoyed him by claiming he got them from German poets (the Expressionists, presumably), “who did all that ten years ago.” He gave various answers, but the definitive one seems to come in an interview he gave to the French-language review *Le XXe siècle*. The tradition he follows, he says, is not the one “which is artificially proposed by *kapelletjes* (‘coteries’) and academics”, but “the tradition born of spontaneity [to be found] in the work of Guido Gezelle”:

He is the poet of pure lyricism, who expresses almost all the mysteries of sensibility in a dynamic, instinctive, spontaneous poetry, And every truly modern poet accepts this tradition because it has a spontaneous origin [...] the basis of [Gezelle’s] poetry is the word, which carries the sound. For, for us, instrumentation is the technique of poetry; every separate word contributes to the harmonisation, to the sonority of the whole, although every word has its own accent. And we Flemings can easily proceed with the word-accent, the word-rhythm, the word-sound, the word-melody.

Any feeling in the poet, and any outside object, or “a complex of words, e.g. ‘a Flemish cow in a field’”, can be enough “to set the mechanism of our sensibility in motion; the object is transformed in our subconscious, and through the [rhythm inherent in the] word – i.e. the dynamics – the process of our sensibility freely arises and continues. From that comes the plastic form, the so-called deformation of reality.” This statement can be taken, I think, as (among other things) a secular version of Gezelle’s own assertion that all things in nature speak a language, if our soul will listen to them. One thing the two poets certainly have in common is pride in the Flemish language; Gezelle wrote in his dialect, reinforced by words from an older state of it.

Here is a poem by Van Ostaijen in praise of Gezelle:<sup>2</sup>

Guido Gezelle

Plant  
fontein  
scheut die schiet  
straal die spat  
tempeest over alle diepten  
storm over alle vlakten  
wilde rozelaars waaien  
stemmen van elzekoningen bloot  
Diepste verte  
verste diepte  
bloemekelk die schokt in de kelk van bei’ mijn palmen  
en lief als de madelief  
Als de klaproos rood  
o wilde papaver mijn

(Van Ostaijen 1955, 190)

*Guido Gezelle*

*Plant  
fountain  
shoot that sprouts  
stream that sprays  
tempest over all depths  
storm over all surfaces  
wild rose bushes wave*

---

<sup>2</sup> Two notes on this poem: the King of the Alders, in the German ballad, is Death; and I assume *rozelaar* means a rosebush – it is undoubtedly an allusion to Roeselare, where Gezelle taught in the junior seminary for many years.

*voices of alder kings bare  
Deepest distance  
furthest depth  
flower calyx that shakes in the cup of my two hands  
and dear as the daisy  
Like the red poppy  
o my wild papaver*

In his reply to the critic who thought he had copied German poets, Van Ostaijen claims that Gezelle “sometimes took the first line of a folksong and began to embroider on it, in a purely formal manner.” As he himself did, he says, with the line “*Onder de maan schuift de lange rivier*”. The result, *Melopee*, has the same repetition of words and rhythm that we saw in *Spleen pour rire*, and it is haunting (a *mélopée* is a monotonous chant):

MELOPEE

Onder de maan schuift de lange rivier  
Over de lange rivier schuift moede de maan  
Onder de maan op de lange rivier schuift de kano naar zee

Langs het hoogriet  
langs de laagwei  
schuift de kano naar zee  
schuift met de schuivende maan de kano naar zee  
Zo zijn ze gezellen naar zee de kano de maan en de man  
Waarom schuiven de maan en de man getweeën gedwee naar de zee  
(Van Ostaijen 1955, 159)

MELOPEE

*Under the moon the long river moves  
Over the long river the moon moves wearily  
Under the moon on the long river the canoe moves to the sea*

*Past the high reeds  
Past the low grass  
the canoe moves to the sea  
the canoe moves with the moving moon to the sea  
So they are companions to the sea the canoe the moon and the man  
Why do the moon and the man move meekly together to the sea*

I will conclude with two remarks. Firstly, one may feel that Van Ostaijen's explanation of what he is doing is overly elaborate, but we may see in his critical articles a wrestling match with himself, as he seeks a way out of his impasse. Secondly, we may also feel that to rely on the sound and rhythm of words as a solution to one's problem is asking a lot of them, but given the quality of the poetry that results, clearly his efforts met with success.

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