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Dutch Novelists Beyond 'Postmodern' Relativism

Thomas Vaessens, *University of Amsterdam*

Abstract

In this article I will show how Dutch authors reoriented themselves from the late 1980s onwards in relation to the postmodern tradition they inherited. I will discuss the critique of postmodernism formulated by Dutch writers in the light of the following hypothesis. A new, late postmodern position has gradually emerged from the Dutch debate about literature and its function. The authors in question consider (literary) postmodernism as a necessary but insufficient counter-reaction against liberal humanism and its self-assured conception of literature. The question that therefore arises is what, if anything, can be saved in terms of values such as sincerity, authenticity, originality and truth, when postmodernism has succeeded in hedging these modern and pre-eminently literary values with suspicion. Can they be reclaimed for literature without returning to their old, essentialist, rationalistic and humanistic underpinnings? Postmodernism is now seen as a medicine against the liberal humanist conception of culture, a medicine which, in the course of the eighties and nineties, revealed unpleasant side effects, such as relativism, cynicism and noncommittal irony. I will try to explain the tendency towards engagement in Dutch novels, not as a late-in-the-day rejection of postmodernism, but as a reaction to its side effects.

Keywords: (Late) Postmodernism, Contemporary Dutch Literature, The Novel, Relativism, Engagement, Devaluation of Literature, Reality Hunger

Introduction: the Demise of (International) Postmodernism

Now that we have reached the point at which postmodernism, rightly or wrongly, has been declared moribund, it is time to assess its literary legacy critically. What has been the effect of postmodernism? Have we gone beyond it in literature? And why this desire to go beyond? What criticism has been levelled against it in the last decades by writers and critics? What have they replaced it with? To what extent do they rely in this respect on (conceptions of) literature that postmodernism has consigned to history?

More than ten years ago, Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema extensively documented the dissemination of literary postmodernism throughout the (mainly Western)¹ world in their monumental *International Postmodernism. Theory and Literary Practice*. Although the authors, as early as 1997, noted that ‘the postmodern impulse seems to have run out of steam’,² they still considered it too early to officially pronounce it dead. In the meantime we can ascertain that anywhere in the world where the postmodern concept has played an important role in discussions about literature, authors and critics are questioning the idea itself and its consequences. ‘The demise of postmodernism’ in literary criticism has even become a commonplace notion in the new millennium.³

The presumed ‘death of (literary) postmodernism’ is generally believed to be very recent⁴ and is highlighted by publications such as Frederick Crews’s satire on postmodern literary and cultural studies and their fashionable professors (*Postmodern Pooh*, 2001) and Andrew C. Bulhak’s *Postmodernism Generator* (2000), a computer programme that automatically generates academic-style texts filled with postmodern jargon, meaningless but superficially plausible (claiming that this is just like a ‘real’ postmodern essay).⁵

Not only has postmodern jargon been criticized, but in particular postmodernism’s deconstructive mode and, in cultural matters, its scepticism towards the cultural tradition of the West (equating the canon with Eurocentrism, exclusion and cultural imperialism).⁶ Interestingly this criticism has been voiced precisely by those authors and critics who were initially a product of postmodernism themselves, as we will see later on. Early postmodern criticism of the universalism that underlies Matthew Arnold’s infamous definition of culture (‘the best which has been thought and said in the world’)⁷ currently seems, upon closer inspection, including for many postmodernist critics, to have resulted in an inert relativistic stance in relation to both the canon and the (Western) values that it embodies. Postmodernism, which started as a reaction against the liberal humanist⁸ (and structuralist) suppression of the historical, political, material and social aspects in the definition of art as eternal and universal,⁹ is now criticized for being relativistic. The anti-essentialist assumptions of postmodernism appear to have unforeseen and unsettling consequences for everyday life as well as for literature. During the last few decades these consequences increasingly came to the attention of postmodern theorist¹⁰ and writers.

Many critics have pointed to social events to explain the waning influence of literary postmodernism. An obvious, and therefore often quoted, date to mark the end of postmodernism is 11 September 2001. The attacks on New York and Washington and the resulting political climate in the Western world seemed a logical end point for the kind of relativistic thinking associated with postmodernism. In the days following 9/11 various international commentators made the link between the terrorist attacks and ‘the end of postmodernism’. Regardless of the rhetorical force which postmodernism had applied in fighting universal values,

the commentators agreed on one thing: there would be a very strong temptation to fall back on such values after the attacks as shown by press headlines such as ‘Postmodern Outlook Objectively Smashed’ (*The Washington Post*)¹¹; ‘Attacks on U. S. Challenge Postmodern True Believers’ (*The New York Times*)¹²; ‘The Age of Postmodern Irony Comes to an End’ (*Time Magazine*)¹³, etc.

Ian McEwan’s post-9/11 novel *Saturday* (2005) is placed at the heart of the debate about ‘the clash of civilizations’, ‘the axis of evil’ and – in intellectual or literary circles – ‘the apotheosis of the postmodern era’¹⁴ or ‘the end of postmodern relativism’,¹⁵ that followed the attacks. In this novel, in which the literary tradition plays an important background role, both elements of the postmodern criticism which are central to this article can be detected. Firstly we can speak of an overt criticism of the way postmodernism is articulated; for example in the main character’s portrayal of his daughter’s vaguely postmodern ‘relativist’ professors (in a way that is reminiscent of the highly amusing professors in Frederick Crews’s satire of postmodern criticism, with their tendency to deconstruct and their scepticism about the values of Western modernity).¹⁶ Secondly, the novel probes into the meaning of the literary (canonical, liberal humanist) tradition for today’s world. This comes clearly to the fore in the scene where a burglary with murder is prevented by the timely quotation of a poem by, of all people, the man who epitomizes the liberal humanist tradition: Matthew Arnold.¹⁷

Whatever one makes of this episode – some critics regard it as other-worldly, ludicrous and kitschy¹⁸ – it certainly puts Arnold’s liberal humanism back on the agenda, not as a model to be blindly imitated, but as a challenge: when postmodernism has succeeded in hedging its pre-eminently literary values with suspicion, can those humanist values now be reclaimed for literature without returning to their old, essentialist, rationalistic and humanistic underpinnings?

What we see (not only in the novel but also in literary criticism)¹⁹ is a gravitation towards the values made taboo by postmodernism. Authors and critics are looking for confirmation of the function of literature and the usefulness of precisely those literary values which postmodernism had dismissed: sincerity, authenticity, truth, etc. They are not attempting to reinstate these values as if postmodernism had never happened, but rather they examine if and how they can be redeployed in a less absolutist way in current literary discourse.

A critical reconsideration of postmodernism (a reconsideration that implies just as much affinity as repugnance) and a reorientation towards the deconstructed values of liberal humanism are precisely the elements that can be observed in the Dutch novelists that will be discussed in this article. Interestingly, these authors formulated their reassessment of postmodernism well before the events of 11 September 2001 that made their second thoughts so commonplace and familiar. In what follows, I will show how Dutch authors reoriented themselves from the late 1980s onwards in relation to the postmodern tradition they inherited. I will discuss the critique of postmodernism delivered by three representative Dutch writers in

the light of the following hypothesis. In the course of the past decades a new and late postmodern position has gradually emerged from the Dutch debate about literature and its function. The authors in question consider postmodernism as a necessary but insufficient counter-reaction against liberal humanism and its self-assured conception of literature. The question that therefore arises is what, if anything, can be saved in terms of values such as sincerity, authenticity, originality and truth, when postmodernism has succeeded in hedging these pre-eminently literary values with suspicion. Can they be reclaimed for literature without returning to their old, essentialist, rationalistic and humanistic underpinnings?

Two of the three authors that I discuss in this article were part of the (two-sided) postmodern tradition at the start of their careers: Joost Zwagerman and Marjolijn Februari, both born in 1963 and both making their debut at the end of the 1980s. Both will, however, eventually distance themselves from their initial affinity with postmodernism in the course of their careers, albeit without rejecting it outright. Although starting from different viewpoints in their critique of postmodernism, they nevertheless draw similar conclusions regarding the status and significance of writers in today's world. This is also true of the third author I will examine in this article, Arnon Grunberg (1971). His debut in 1994 is rather more recent, however, and he mostly associates the postmodern tradition, of which he is critical without rejecting it, with a previous generation of writers.

The main witnesses in this article are three Dutch writers reconsidering their postmodern heritage. It should be stressed at the outset that these authors feel above all uncomfortable with the increasingly questionable *reputation* of postmodernism in the Netherlands, and that this reputation is based on postmodern theory (and in particular on its frequently biased representations in mainstream cultural discourse). In the course of the last decades, postmodernism has been compared with abstraction, 'anything goes' and radical relativism. The fact that postmodern practice (fiction, poetry, drama) was sometimes absolutely anti-relativistic and explicitly engaged could not prevent this. The authors in question tried to escape postmodernism's reputation of being relativist (based on postmodern theory), thereby changing their own authorship (postmodern practice) thoroughly.

The next section of this article ('Postmodernism in the Netherlands') explains how postmodernism has manifested itself in Dutch literature: which postmodernism is given shape in local discussion? Subsequently, in the section 'Redefining the Postmodern Heritage', the article explores the question how this construction has functioned in the discussion as a terminus: how was that postmodernism criticized? The final part ('Late Postmodernism in Dutch Literature') analyses three representative authors to discover what has replaced postmodernism in literature: what attempts have been made to challenge (or even go beyond) postmodernism?

I want to make two preliminary remarks. (1) My main concern is not to discuss in detail the specificity of the situation in contemporary Dutch literature, which would take me beyond the scope of this article. Rather, by using Dutch authors and

Dutch literary texts, I would like to contribute to the international debate about the relevance of postmodernism.²⁰ (2) This article does not claim to be a 'realistic' inventory of what is happening in Dutch literature or to be exhaustive. It seeks to explain a few established patterns in recent literature proceeding from an explanatory model which is, of course, necessarily simplified and sketchy.

Postmodernism in the Netherlands

Postmodernism was remarkably late in entering the literary debate in the Netherlands. It barely interested journalistic critics.²¹ The agenda of leading reviewers in newspapers and magazines in the 1980s and 1990s never departed from the liberal humanism that postmodernism had just consigned to history. When the term did put in an appearance in Dutch literature reviews in the mid 1980s it was with considerable reserve.²² Critics showed that they were aware that postmodernism had been a buzzword for some time in other circles (architecture, history of art, fashion, lifestyle, etc.) and, for this reason, they used it sparingly and with a certain reluctance.

Academic circles hardly showed any interest either in postmodernism until well into the 1990s.²³ Academics studying Dutch literature at Dutch universities were generally suspicious of it because of its fashionable character. When a Dutch academic summarized the position of literature in the Netherlands in 1993 for an international audience (German in this case), he wrote:

Recently the concept of 'Postmodernism' also took root in the Netherlands. It is significant that it provoked a response amongst literary journalists in particular and that it – like any buzzword – rapidly suffered from semantic inflation.²⁴

Because of this journalistic and academic reserve in respect of the 'P-word', the Dutch chapter of the conceptual history of postmodernism has remained rather thin. Nevertheless, it is possible in retrospect to identify two forms of 'postmodernism' in the Netherlands; two broad mental orientations, which bring some order in the rather chaotic debate around the issue hitherto characterized by terminology confusion and 'semantic inflation': a playful postmodernism (predominant in literary journalism) and an intellectualized postmodernism (predominant in academia). The word postmodernism as I use it here refers to a construction that can be recognized in critical discourse, not to any literary reality (writers, movements, novels, etc.). It is a postmodernism-in-inverted-commas (although I will leave the inverted commas out, as I will be needing them frequently later).

1. *Playful postmodernism*. In the world of literary reviews this concerns a 'postmodernism' (allow me to use the inverted commas just this once) centred upon (American) mass or popular culture. The keywords of this playful version are zeit-

geist, eclecticism, pastiche, relativism and the blurring of boundaries between high and low culture: anything goes.²⁵ Patron saints: Warhol, Madonna, Fukuyama. A seminal publication for this playful postmodernism in the Netherlands was a special 'Pomo' issue of the trend-sensitive weekly *Haagse Post* of 18 April 1987, compiled by a young Joost Zwagerman.²⁶ In his ambitious introduction Zwagerman sketched the outlines of an anti-modernistic postmodernism concerned above all with rejecting the elitist rigidity of High Modernism.²⁷ In this way 'postmodernism' came to be understood in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Dutch literary reviews as the collective name for the texts in which the existential emptiness of the 1980s received form and substance by means of the unbridled cutting and pasting of quotations, especially drawn from popular culture. Zwagerman's zeitgeist novel *Gimmick!* (1989) is a good example. With this novel Zwagerman sought to align himself with what Bret Easton Ellis and Douglas Coupland were doing in English.²⁸ The writings of Zwagerman, known as a playful postmodernist, have also been linked with international authors such as Paul Auster and Martin Amis.²⁹

2. *Intellectualized postmodernism.* Academic circles reacted with boredom to Zwagerman and others' playful postmodernism. Academics used terms such as 'postmodern pop art' or 'literary pop art' to describe it: a not very complex and essentially conservative and affirmative literature which never forces the reader to change his reading attitude.³⁰ These negative epithets also reveal what was considered in academic circles to be the 'real' postmodernism. This intellectual postmodernism was rooted in French philosophy which had started challenging the pretensions of modern thought in the wake of 1968. Keywords: anti-humanism, dissemination, deconstruction and the end of Grand Narrative. Paragons: Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard. The texts associated with this intellectualized postmodernism were found hermetic by its opponents, as was the poststructuralist theorizing with which it linked itself. These fragmentary texts were supposed to resist any presumption of understanding reality from within an ontological or metaphysical system. They unmasked the 'I' and 'reality' as fictions and lacked any 'centre'. According to a respected study of (intellectualized) postmodernism in the Dutch novel, writer and philosopher Marjolijn Februari is 'one of the most typical postmodern authors', especially since her first novel *De zonen van het uitzicht* (*Panorama's Sons*, 1989) is constructed around 'the absence of a centre'.³¹ From an international point of view this experimental and philosophical novel is reminiscent of the work of authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Julian Barnes and Italo Calvino.³²

Zwagerman and Februari have a different background but, as soon as they started criticizing postmodern tradition(s), they took exception to the same things. It will become clear later that the self-criticism in both postmodern orientations shows remarkable similarities. This comes as no surprise, since the two variants of postmodernism I distinguish share a number of important assumptions. An important starting point for authors from both orientations, for example, is the rejection of all forms of cultural hierarchy or authority (the canon, high and low art) on

principle and the questioning of notions of 'originality'. The critique of postmodernism of both orientations is aimed at the underlying relativism of such assumptions and on the paralyzing effects of this relativism on the writer.

Redefining the Postmodern Heritage: Late Postmodernism

Before I turn to Februari, Zwagerman and Grunberg and their respective struggles with (their own) postmodernism, I will go through the four definite themes which appear in the wider discussions about the heritage of (literary) postmodernism in Dutch newspapers, literary and cultural magazines, book reviews and academic criticism from the late 1980s onwards. In doing so, I will try to formulate a hypothesis for discussing the individual writers in the next section. This discussion – amongst other things about the work of the three authors examined in the next section – focuses on four related points: the alleged relativism of postmodernism, the supposed devaluation of literature, the relation between literature and its public and the relation between literature and ethics. I want to make their interconnection more explicit by reformulating them in general terms (and in a somewhat lapidary manner, leaving aside local curiosities or controversies between individual Dutch authors and critics).³³

1. *Alleged relativism.* Postmodern thought is associated by critics in both its manifestations (playful and intellectualized) with (cultural) relativism. In playful postmodernism there is an eclectic relativism of 'anything goes', and in intellectualized postmodernism it is a cultural relativism which refuses to accept universal criteria for fair or morally responsible actions and thinking. Postmodern man is supposed to no longer have independent foundations that are beyond discussion, no pure leverage point from which his actions and thinking can be directed. Postmodernism has unmasked the 'universal values', with which a modern and humanistic West liked to skirmish, as context-bound ideological constructions. Critics of postmodernism point out that this relativism of both manifestations makes any claim to authority virtually impossible, and that this has consequences for literature too.³⁴ They do not want a return to the kind of authority that liberal humanism clung to, or to a world in which a homogeneous cultural elite successfully mystifies the ideological content implicit in their taste. The return of the liberal humanist suppression of the historical, political, material and social in the definition of art as eternal and universal is even less desirable. They do, however, question the disavowal of reality which seems to characterize much of postmodern literature. They also pose the (rhetorical) question of whether postmodern deconstruction of everything the West held dear (humanistic values such as *Bildung*, emancipation and progress, the canon, etc.) is the final answer.

2. *Devaluation of literature.* The second theme arising in the Dutch reconsideration of the postmodern legacy in literature (discussed in relation to authors such as

Februari, Zwagerman and Grunberg) is the changed status of literature and its culture in the world. In reflecting on the legacy of postmodernism, the general feeling that literature has a less prominent role in today's postmodern culture and pluralistic society is a crucial point. The authors are confronted with, in Antoine Compagnon's words, 'the erosion of literary culture' and with William Marx's 'devaluation of literature': the diminishing impact of bestowing literary value on the outside world by experts in the field. As Compagnon puts it:

Literature has become a marginal area, a peripheral appendix of culture; it has disappeared from social discourse.³⁵

The liberal humanist idea of a restricted category of authors and literary works that have an absolute example value while serving as a general quality standard corresponds to a hierarchically stratified society which is now firmly consigned to the past: a society whose upper echelons defined a stable order of values that was cemented by the institutions and supposedly endorsed by the entire community. Today, however, we are living in a pluralistic society, differentiated by function instead of rank and which has few common values. The values associated with literature are not part of this limited consensus.³⁶ As we will see, the authors studied in the next section do not deny this postmodern reality, but they do not take it for granted either. They are seeking a new legitimacy for the writer's authority, one that would allow him to interact with the world.

3. *Literature and the public.* The third recurring point in Dutch literary discussions since the late 1980s is intimately linked to this reflection on the conditions and the possibility of literary authority, namely the relation between literature and public. There has been a moment in the career of many a Dutch author (including the three authors discussed here) where they started reflecting upon the form, and consequently, the accessibility of their work. Against the backdrop of the shrinking influence of literature on social discourse, these authors broke with the experimental postmodern features which also typified their own work at that time. They experienced the formal and compositional elements of postmodernism (such as fragmentation, indeterminacy, the 'Russian doll'-effect, the severing of all links between language and reality, etc.) either as too playful and non-committal or as unnecessarily puzzling and hermetic. In more recent works of authors such as Februari, Zwagerman and Grunberg any postmodern form experiment has been rejected or watered down. These authors revert to relatively conventional forms (storytelling, plot, readability, character, etc.). Critics have interpreted this as a conventional overture, whether appreciated by the reviewer or not, to the reading public.

4. *Literature and ethics.* The fourth and final point that continually reappears in Dutch discussions on the legacy of postmodernism is the fact that critics of postmodernism focus on moral and ethical problems, both within their novels and outside (columns, journalism). Februari, Zwagerman and Grunberg all wrote

novels embedding a reflection on the possibility of literary engagement. Thus they echo (or pioneer) a tendency also highlighted in the last few years by Dutch literary criticism. 'It has finally happened', noted a critic of the authoritative book section of the daily newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* in 2008:

Literature has been chased out onto the street. After years of to-ing and fro-ing about whether writers should concern themselves with social problems, the question has been answered.³⁷

When, in early 2010, the weekly *De Groene Amsterdammer* asked critics and other experts to compile a Top-21 of twenty-first century novels the editorial noted:

The time of great psychological and philosophical novels is over [...] as is that of the purely aesthetic novel. What seems relevant now is actuality. More and more fiction and non-fiction form an alliance, and increasingly the fear of terrorism and concerns about immigration and the environment seep through in literature. The clash between civilizations as a result of globalization is a fertile topic. Many novels are about 'The Other'.³⁸

The new attitude of Dutch authors in relation to postmodernism, as examined in this article, therefore correlates with a redefinition of the moral and ethical dimensions of literature.

In the last decades, the image conjured up in Dutch literature by the convergence of these four points is that of a writer trying to think himself beyond the relativism that has been compared with postmodernism. Postmodern theory challenged the essentialist premises of liberal humanism with great rhetorical virulence. The idea that literature stands above politics as a universal form of expression was unmasked as an article of faith and the absolutism of the 'white' canon as an eternal and universal standard came to an end. This postmodern 'victory' over liberal humanism initially went hand in hand with a certain triumphalism but the writers discussed here have distanced themselves from this. They realized that the breakdown of the aristocratic cultural ideal of liberal humanism was only a first step. It was undoubtedly necessary, but in itself it was not a tenable (over)reaction. The postmodern deconstruction of old presuppositions and certainties has been mired in cynical relativism, including with respect to the possibilities of literature which, according to a considerable number of contemporary writers, fails to respond to the needs of an evolving culture. The historical usefulness of postmodernism is therefore accepted but its offshoots are being criticized: an unbridled relativism, an ironical stance in life where nothing is real anymore and the terror of the 'anything goes' slogan.

The three authors discussed in the next section of this article have candidly faced the consequences of these offshoots for writers. They may have settled scores with

an outmoded cultural ideal but have also side-lined themselves in the process.

Late Postmodernism in Dutch Literature

The basic assumption of this section is that three representative voices in Dutch literature express a desire to go beyond postmodernism. Februari, Zwagerman and Grunberg have abandoned their postmodern literary posts. They are no longer positioned as more or less prominent players within the closed realm of literature but as public intellectuals whose new playground is the public sphere. Their search for new connections between literature and the world marks a new phase in what is called postmodernism, which is characterized by a reorientation in relation to everything that postmodernism had vigorously dismissed in an earlier phase, perhaps too vigorously. This very reorientation makes them late postmodern authors.

Marjolijn Februari: the Writer as a Public Intellectual

Following her first novel *De zonen van het uitzicht*, Marjolijn Februari was described by critics and journalists as a 'notorious postmodernist'.³⁹ Although she had already distanced herself from the relativism associated with postmodern thinking ('the infinite relativizing of postmodernism is absolutely not the message I am giving' she said as early as 1990),⁴⁰ reviewers concluded that the author of *De zonen van het uitzicht* 'narrowly followed in the postmodern wake' or 'took the postmodern tour'.⁴¹ Even academic criticism placed the young Februari in 'the inner circle of postmodernism'.⁴²

When her second novel *De literaire kring* (2007; English translation 2010: *The Book Club*) was published, the chosen form was much less experimental and immediately labelled by critics as less postmodern (and even anti-postmodern). 'Februari has converted to linear prose', a critic remarked, and another noted that Februari had renounced 'postmodern theory' in favour of 'pragmatism and worldliness'.⁴³ *The Book Club* is 'an easy read'⁴⁴ which, in contrast to her earlier work, 'excels in its accessibility',⁴⁵ and in which the author displays evidence of a 'wider view of society', said the reviewers.⁴⁶

The Book Club concerns a literary circle of self-satisfied, rich and powerful dignitaries of a Dutch village. Februari sketches a picture verging on a caricature of this club's liberal humanism. Its members entertain idealized notions about the healing and character-building powers of high culture in general and canonical literature in particular. They obviously hate 'the extravagances of postmodernism'⁴⁷ more than anything: their exalted conception of culture has barely suffered from the onslaught of postmodernism which has failed to enter the world of *The Book Club*.

Februari's book club novel reads as an indictment against the hypocrisy of a self-appointed cultural elite of white males and their out-dated liberal humanism. In

this respect *The Book Club* fits in a broad trend in international literature, from Martin Amis's *The Information* (1995) to Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005). One character in Februari's novel typifies the presumptuous members of the reading group sarcastically as 'right-thinking humanists' ('weldenkende humanisten')⁴⁸ and their reading club based on high culture as a 'moral money-laundering organization' ('morele witwasorganisatie').⁴⁹

The Book Club is more than a postmodern settling of scores with liberal humanistic pretensions, however. The novel – which in many ways reminds one of Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of globalization and the newly acquired independence of global elites from territorially confined units of political and cultural power⁵⁰ – thematizes the decreasing importance of the public sphere (Habermas's *Öffentlichkeit*) and therefore the decreased social relevance of the writer who, more than anyone else, breathes in the public sphere.⁵¹ The activities of the book club members have ever-increasing financial and moral consequences as they manage branches with annual turnovers in excess of the turnover of the government of the country they live in. Yet no one oversees them. They do business in each other's backyards, invisible to the public and its representatives in the public arena, politicians, journalists and writers. In the world of the book club members, public discussion is seen as a rear guard action, fought between people without either reach or muscle. The fact that the members, high on high culture, place the writer on a pedestal is therefore mere chutzpah: indeed, they have a stake in ensuring that the writer and other potentially embarrassing snoops are kept as powerless bystanders. In their world, literature is but harmless wallpaper.

A crucial question raised by the *The Book Club* is what the writer can do about it. How can he reach the people with power and responsibility again? Certainly not by losing himself in 'the extravagances' of a failing postmodernism. Februari's novel sketches an alternative answer. When a young woman from the village makes waves with an international bestseller the fact that the book club will discuss it is par for the course. The members try to prevent this by all means and it slowly transpires why. The bestseller describes the true story of how a fellow villager, a former member of the book club, knowingly sold impure glycerine to a medicine manufacturer in Haiti with the result that seventy people died, including many children.

Although the powerful club members succeeded at the time in burying the story, they have no wish to face it again. They try to disqualify the book by dismissing it as pulp fiction ('bedside novel', 'girl's diary').⁵² Autobiography does not seem highbrow enough for them, convinced as they are that True Literature should above all rise above everyday life banalities. This diametrically opposes two things in the novel: on the one hand the exalted notions of the book club members about what literature does and allows (which dictate that literature is above all a question of abstractions), and on the other hand the more modest opinions of a bestselling writer who prefers the concrete. 'Seen from the writer's point of view there is no such thing as political culture, no world history nor tragedy', she says in *The Book*

Club, but only 'the individual reactions to them'.⁵³ She pleads for concrete engagement rather than inflated abstractions.

It would be difficult to call *The Book Club* 'chick lit' or a 'bedside novel', but the fact is that Februari comes much closer to it with her second novel than with her first experimental postmodern one. She has repeatedly reflected on this reversal in interviews and essays since its publication. Soon after, for example, she looked back on her debut as follows:

Politics rippled, the money flowed and writers had collectively taken a sabbatical [...]. Paradoxes, mirror effects, echo chambers, illusions and the derailing of illusions: those were the literary techniques during the glory days of postmodernism. They were techniques of literary criticism and philosophical reflection.⁵⁴

But politics no longer flows gently, Februari concluded in 2007, since 'the storm is also raging over the West'. In a short time 'a completely new experimental situation has arisen' and, according to Februari, writers have to adapt and set themselves up as public intellectuals. Februari does it herself in her politically and socially oriented columns, but fiction also requires it. 'The windows have been blown open', she writes, and the writer needs to find 'new goals' and a 'new public':

A new necessity has arisen to personally take responsibility, in writing, in the public domain [and] to transpose social, ethical and religious theories into concrete social, moral, religious problems.⁵⁵

Literature can feed public discussion by leaving the safe level of abstract convictions and descend towards concrete and small stories. As early as 2004 Februari wrote that with these little concrete histories she wanted to raise the level of 'literary sensitivity'⁵⁶, especially in the social elite which normally does not concern itself with individual histories but only the general rules and laws to correlate these histories.⁵⁷

After reaching a small group of cultural insiders with her first novel, Februari aimed at a wider public with her second. She looked for an alliance with readers whose daily work confronts them with moral issues and with 'the real world'. In this respect one could say that *The Book Club* investigates what is tenable in liberal humanism, after its postmodern deconstruction, in the culture and society of today.

Joost Zwagerman: the Writer and the Devaluation of Literature

His work, his interest in popular culture, his obstreperous way of assailing the established order in the world of poetry, his dynamic handling of the media, everything about him was qualified as postmodern when poet and novelist Joost Zwagerman came onto the literary scene at the end of the 1980s. He was seen as 'the

zeitgeist expert',⁵⁸ someone well up on the 'Amsterdam pomo-scene'.⁵⁹ His novel *Gimmick!* was described by one reviewer as the 'cynical diagnosis of postmodern culture'.⁶⁰ The word postmodern itself appears frequently in the novel and refers to an anti-pretentious kind of art and culture, a culture despairing of ever producing something original or real. The self-presentation of the young and career making Zwagerman reinforced this idea of postmodernism. Pretending all along that postmodernism could not be taken seriously was part and parcel of the playful postmodern prose which was becoming fashionable in the Dutch literature of the time.⁶¹

Zwagerman's flirtation with the postmodern zeitgeist did not last. Shortly after *Gimmick!*, he appeared quite sceptical himself about the type of disengaged and remote postmodernism he had initially represented. During the 1990s he began to engage himself more and more as a writer. He came to view postmodernism as a phenomenon, stranded in its own cynicism, which was responsible for literature turning in on itself. From that point onwards he called on his fellow writers to engage and to show a raised awareness of the needs of society. Thus he speaks repeatedly of the scandalous fact that there is no trace in the European literature of the 1990s of what he called 'the most burning issue of Western Europe: the question of immigration'. 'In Dutch literature all the protagonists are white', he said in 1994, 'as if we did not live in a multicultural society'.⁶²

In 1994 Zwagerman lends weight to this call for literature to connect with the world and topical issues. His novel *De buitenvrouw* (*The Mistress*) deals with multicultural society and the lack of understanding between its supporters and its opponents. The writer allows his protagonist to conclude a monologue over the xenophobia of the Dutch with an outraged judgment on artists and intellectuals:

Now that it was really necessary to kick a conscience into the citizen, the cultural vanguard launched into easy camp and postmodern irony.⁶³

De buitenvrouw has clear overtones of self-correction in its political and ethical dimensions. Zwagerman himself was in any event no longer taken by the seductions of postmodern irony. He no longer wanted to be a camp artist. In other words: in the 1990s, Zwagerman constructed his identity by rejecting his former 'postmodernism' whilst looking for direct engagement, which he found in multiculturalism (for many progressive people in those days this was indeed a welcome new interpretation of their engagement).

Three years later he covered this reinvention of himself as a writer in the novel *Chaos en rumoer* (*Chaos and Commotion*, 1997). This novel pits two stereotypical types of writers against each other: the protagonist (a worrying liberal humanist who finds fin de siècle twentieth century culture superficial and calls literature 'a minority sport'⁶⁴ while struggling with writer's block), and his opposite (a slick successful author versed in literary fashions who wins prize after prize). In the

protagonist's eyes his popular opponent is a 'non-committal postmodern joker'⁶⁵ who does everything that can be expected from a postmodern author in line with the stereotype. He keeps using quotations (as authenticity or originality no longer exist in the postmodern worldview) and plays postmodern games with the relation between fiction and reality.⁶⁶

Zwagerman's *Chaos en rumoer* reads like a critical self-examination in which both types of writer are held up against the light as reflections of Zwagerman himself.⁶⁷ With his caricature of a (self-)portrait of the 'non-committal postmodern joker', he again distances himself from his former position as an author. He challenges the playful postmodern conception of literature with the high-minded liberal humanism of the protagonist. However, that liberal humanism is also portrayed as a caricature: the writer with writer's block is the loser who never takes off in the cynical world of *Chaos en rumoer* and whose splendid isolation is not taken seriously by anyone. His seriousness and his somewhat naïve striving for truthful words are not really held up as a worthy alternative for the playful, anti-pretentious and disengaged postmodernism of the successful author (and the former Zwagerman). But this postmodernism is definitely qualified by this (pursuit of) seriousness.

At the end of the novel, after developments we will not go into here,⁶⁸ a kind of synthesis is achieved: thanks in part to his opponent, the protagonist overcomes his writer's block and writes a book that aims to be an improved version of his opponent's. His attempt at synthesis can be interpreted as Zwagerman's view on writing: the author takes a step back from his own postmodern position, not by falling back on the completely isolated and necessarily blocked position of his protagonist (who does not suffer from writer's block by chance) but by renouncing the cynical, fashion-conscious and superficial aspects of postmodernism and re-orienting himself towards the values and expectations of what postmodernism had ended: those of liberal humanism.

With the conceit of writer's block, Zwagerman proves to be acutely aware of the problematic situation of the writer as a public figure in today's expanding and diversifying culture.⁶⁹ The protagonist arrives at an impasse because he has to operate in a world in which there is barely agreement as to who is worth reading and who is not. In *De buitenvrouw*, the reflection on the dwindling public interest in literature also plays a part when the protagonist, a Dutch language teacher at a secondary school, realizes that for his pupils, writers 'had become as abstract as the kings and *stadhouders* (governors) from history lessons'.⁷⁰ As a literature teacher, traditionally one of the gatekeepers of High Culture, he experiences the fact that postmodernism's scepticism towards universal standards has made any authoritative attribution of quality impossible. The consequence is that literature highly regarded by experts and insiders is no longer guaranteed a place in a widely shared canon.

Zwagerman's critique of postmodernism (a critique to which he paradoxically gives shape in a novel, *Chaos en rumoer*, which ultimately is thoroughly postmodern: in the final section, 'reality' appears to be fiction and the other way round) is also a

reaction to the crisis in which literary culture has found itself under postmodern rule. In *Chaos en rumoer* he portrays a cynical literary crowd who no longer believe in the power of literature and who consider it as an insider joke for cognoscenti. In the course of the 1990s, Zwagerman reached the conclusion that his own earlier postmodernism was the wrong answer. He exchanged uncaring cynicism for a new engagement. Zwagerman divested his own postmodernism of its cynical and superficial sides. He tried to tone down the postmodern scepticism that prevented writers (like himself) from tackling ethical and moral issues. His own novels have increasingly dealt with precisely these issues and, in doing so, the writer deliberately chose an accessible style. (Zwagerman himself considers his *Chaos en rumoer* to be proof of his competence to write a postmodern novel that is still readable).⁷¹ Beyond his novels, the writer Zwagerman has also expressed himself through columns and other journalistic interventions in the public sphere which are increasingly politically motivated, whether in books, newspapers, magazines or radio and television.

Arnon Grunberg: the Writer's Hunger for Reality

No matter how much Februari and Zwagerman differ as writers, their reactions to postmodernism are similar. Both want to use literature to reflect on moral and ethical issues, they choose accessible literary forms and they intervene explicitly in public discussions, including outside their novels. As the heyday of postmodernism recedes into the distance, the differences between the two manifestations of postmodernism in the Netherlands also disappear from view, and the critique of postmodernism results in similar author strategies.

As happened with Februari and Zwagerman, the early work of Arnon Grunberg was also qualified as 'postmodern' in the second half of the 1990s. The work of this undeniable *jeune premier* of contemporary Dutch literature clearly shows both playful postmodern traits and more philosophically oriented characteristics of intellectualized postmodernism. Critics decried Grunberg's two faces, sometimes in one and the same review.⁷² On the basis of novels such as *Blauwe maandagen* (1994; English translation 1997: *Blue Mondays*), Grunberg's first novel about a young Jewish boy who struggles with his identity, he is labelled as an unfettered ironist who is deadly serious when describing love as illusion and truth as a lie. He actually contributed to this image himself with a number of cynical one-liners.⁷³ At the beginning of his career Grunberg seemed to have associated himself with what Douglas Coupland in *Generation X* (1991) has called the 'Cult of aloneness': 'the need for autonomy at all costs, usually at the expense of long-term relationships'.⁷⁴

While some critics saw in Grunberg's early work yet another, almost routine, exercise in postmodernism,⁷⁵ others (including the author himself) declared that, on the contrary, this work marked a departure from it. This peculiarity was also true of the early reception of his contemporary and spiritual kinsman Dave Eggers. The

fact that all reviewers, whether for or against Grunberg (or Eggers), had nothing positive to say about postmodernism, is telling for the new constellation that has been in place since the turn of the century: for many critics, postmodernism is passé.

‘As you know so-called postmodernism is already behind us’ begins an interview with Grunberg in 2007. Not only is the interviewer convinced that postmodernism (‘all stories are already told’) is dead and buried, the writer himself is critical. ‘The idea that all stories are told seems complete nonsense’, he replied. ‘As soon as society begins to disintegrate you can no longer hold this position’.⁷⁶

We can see that in the course of his career Grunberg himself tires of the post-modern pose of detachment that he still supported in the mid 1990s. He turns away from the pernicious indifference of the ‘anything goes’ doctrine and he explicitly rejects the very irony he saw as his salvation before. In line with David Foster Wallace and subsequent New Sincerity writers such as Eggers and Jonathan Safran Foer, Grunberg criticizes the ironic stance that seems to be ingrained in postmodernism because it can get mired in relativism. In this vein he spoke in 1999 of ‘irony as a cancer stifling everything. The irony that has rendered our food inedible and many books unreadable’.⁷⁷ His own reputation as a writer hiding behind the play of irony increasingly irritated him. ‘My God, how I long to be taken seriously’ (‘Mijn God, wat verlang ik ernaar [...] om serieus te worden genomen’), he wrote in 2007 in a text about the task of the writer, a text which, he assured his readers, was ‘guaranteed to be irony-free’ (‘gegarandeerd ironievrij’).⁷⁸

The way Grunberg sees the task of the writer can be distilled in the first place from his novels, in which he shows himself more and more committed and concerned. In 2003, his book *De asielzoeker* (*The Asylum Seeker*) provides a pointed reflection on the (im)possibility of literary engagement. The novel paints a damning portrait of a failed writer who suffers from ‘the postmodern drive to unmask’.⁷⁹ With *Tirza* (2007) Grunberg proceeded to write one of the most remarkable Dutch 9/11-novels. *Onze oom* (*Our Uncle*, 2008) is a novel about the moral dilemmas in the context of war and terror in a South American dictatorship.

The end of that novel lifts the veil a little on Grunberg’s working methods. A journalist – clearly Grunberg himself – is visiting one of the protagonists, an arms dealer, for an interview. The suggestion is that he is gathering material for the story we have just read. The interview the journalist carries out with the arms dealer is the kind Grunberg has conducted himself in real life. During interviews at the time of publication he repeatedly stated that he had researched arms dealing and spoken to dealers.⁸⁰

If Grunberg’s early work was often a mixture of autobiography and at times aberrant fantasy, his subsequent work is increasingly based on thorough fieldwork: the writer Grunberg is leaning more heavily on the journalist Grunberg who, since 2005, has visited Dutch soldiers in Afghanistan and camped with the American army in Iraq in the course of reporting for leading Dutch newspapers.⁸¹

In the novel *Onze oom* the arms dealer asks the journalist the reason for his visit.

'I try and get as close as possible', he answers quietly, 'to danger, destruction, death'.⁸² That is exactly what Grunberg is doing in his recent novels. He is interested in making literature out of real experience, out of the proximity of others and realities that cannot be deconstructed away in relativism. Literature has to return to the essence of life and, with this in mind, the writer starts to work in a documentary manner. His novels are increasingly based on journalistic fieldwork. In *Onze oom*, for instance, not only did he incorporate the results of research into the illegal arms trade, but also interviews with imprisoned women in Peru. In this respect Grunberg joins the recent trend towards non-fiction, documentary fiction or 'non-fiction novels' typical of authors such as the Americans Eggers (*What Is the What*, *Zeitoun*) and Foer (*Eating Animals*), but also Europeans like François Bon (*Daewoo*), Aifric Campbell (*The Semantics of Murder*) or Thomas Brussig (*Wie es leuchtet*).

Critics have reacted in different ways to these changes in his work. The new seriousness is valued. One critic noted that 'the mature and serious tone' of his recent journalism contrasted starkly with the 'reckless, boyish and sarcastic tone' of earlier work.⁸³ Another, however, regrets that with *Onze oom* Grunberg has left the domain of literature in order to bring us 'arid pamphleteering prose' which conveys 'one-sided moral messages'.⁸⁴ Grunberg has parried this criticism, aimed at style and form rather than content, as follows:

Criticism of style is always the means of choice to pacify reality [...], a means of not having to talk about the book and what happens in it, to keep the novel at arm's length from the reader so that his worldview does not have to topple, that everything can stay as it was.⁸⁵

A more frequently recurring element in Grunberg's reflection on literature and authorship is his criticism of writers and critics who hold on to old literary conventions, without re-examining them in the light of a fast-changing culture. Primacy of style is one such convention. According to Grunberg, today we should be asking ourselves whether style has not become an obstacle to the writer who wants to be in touch with reality and his public. Literature is threatened, he said in 2001, 'by the ignorance of those who want to continue practising it against the grain'.⁸⁶ They are making a reserve out of literature. This has to be prevented, he wrote in 2009, 'because the idea that the park of literature is a paradise is less obvious than some of its inhabitants like to think'.⁸⁷

According to another literary convention, the author can never be held accountable for what his characters say. While this convention is taken for granted by insiders (breaking it is taboo), Grunberg has re-examined it. When an interviewer spoke critically of the utterances of one of his characters, Grunberg conspicuously did not use this opportunity to distance himself from his character. 'No, I would not call it fiction', he said, 'I appreciate it if someone takes the words of my character seriously'.⁸⁸ Of course it does not mean that Grunberg has to endorse what is

said by his character, but neither does he believe that what is said in the novel has a clearly defined function outside of its fictional world. The novel is not a work of art that only refers to itself, but an attempt to intervene in real debates. As Grunberg put it in a recent blog-posting: 'The idea that in the name of literature everything should be allowed in novels or poems pushes literature to the periphery of society'.⁸⁹

Since Grunberg's attempt to overcome the cynicism of his early work which was generally held to be 'postmodern', he no longer tries to hide behind literary conventions or behind postmodern ideas about the crisis in language and the complexity of reality. 'Ah, the exquisite complexity of reality', he quipped in 1996, 'it can serve as an excuse for almost everything'.⁹⁰ Statements such as these should alert the reader to the fact that Grunberg wants him to focus on content and abandon his suspicions of postmodernism he may harbour against it.⁹¹ They are characteristic of his genuine pursuit of a literature that breaks free from its isolation and that does not seek to (aesthetically) please the reader but (ethically) shake him up.

Conclusion: Late Postmodern Ambivalence

Two things have come to light in this article. The first is that the authors discussed started criticizing postmodernism after initially embracing it. They searched for a new position and did not shun inspiration from traditions and forms associated with the liberal humanist position that postmodernism was supposed to have left behind. The second is that this quest for a new third position can be interpreted as a reaction against a changing literary climate. The authors seek new ways of exercising their trade in order to revitalize a marginalized literature. They are no longer ashamed of having certain expectations of (the public effects of) their work and they strive to strip writing of its permissiveness.

From their late postmodern position, Februari, Zwagerman and Grunberg have taken an ambivalent stance in relation to the postmodern legacy. They endorse postmodern criticism of the universal pretensions of liberal humanism, but they are also forced to conclude that it has failed to put the historical, political and ethical dimensions of literature back on stage. As a response to a changing culture it is unsatisfactory. This is why these late postmodern writers have turned again to postmodern taboos such as *authenticity* and *originality*.

Late postmodern ambivalence clearly came to the fore after the 9/11 attacks, when commentators all over the world, including in the Netherlands, announced the end of postmodern relativism. Dutch journalist and literary critic Michaël Zee-man wrote on 14 September 2001 in a newspaper that on 9/11 'a few hits' had put an end to the 'feeble cultural relativism of postmodernism'. It seemed that history had not yet come to an end.⁹²

It is tempting to interpret the literary forms of the critique of postmodernism, such as the New Sincerity movement, as a literary variant of the general confusion

that followed the attacks of 9/11. Yet if, with today's knowledge, we follow the critical trail back in literature, we can see, long before 9/11, some elements that can be interpreted as 'late postmodern' coming to the surface. This is true for Zwagerman and Grunberg, as we have seen earlier, but also for the work of (dissenting) Dutch writers like Frans Kellendonk, Leon de Winter, Robert Vernooij, Dirk van Weelden or Charlotte Mutsaers from the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁹³ Literature is not just a reaction to a social reality. Often it is one step ahead of that reality.

Notes

- 1 In this article the term 'Western world' broadly refers to all the European nations or nations that are greatly influenced by European languages, traditions and culture (including, e.g., the US).
- 2 Bertens in Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema (eds.), *International Postmodernism. Theory and Literary Practice* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1997).
- 3 Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism. American Fiction at the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 19-24.
- 4 In the 1990s for example, when, in the words of Maggie Humm, the commodification of postmodernism was a business success story ('The Business of a 'New Art': Woolf, Potter and Postmodernism', in J. Simons and K. Fullbrook, *Writing: a Womens Business. Women, Writing and the Marketplace* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 111). Minsoo Kang dates 'the death knell of postmodernism in the U.S.' to 19 June 1993, when 'the standard [postmodern] devices of self-reference, ironic satire, and playing with multiple levels of reality' were moved out of the realm of literature and high culture into the more profane domain of popular film. They suddenly also seemed to appear in an Arnold Schwarzenegger film, *The Last Action Hero*, which made the 'intellectual idea's final demise' (Kang) a fact (cited in Andrew Hoberek, 'Introduction: After Postmodernism', in *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 53-3, 2007, p. 233). In this view postmodernism simply became a victim of its own success.
- 5 See Frederick Crews, *Postmodern Pooh* (New York: North Point Press, 2001) as well as [<http://www.elsewhere.org/pomo/>]
- 6 See, e.g., Frank Furedi, *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone? Confronting 21st Century Philistinism* (London/New York: Continuum, 2004), Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense. Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1998), and *Intellectual Impostures. Postmodern Philosophers' Abuse of Science* (London: Profile Books, 2003). In this article I am not dealing with the kind of anti-postmodern criticism Paul Michael Lützeler addresses when he writes that postmodernism has always been criticized by 'Anhänger der Moderne wie Einheits- und Werteverteidiger' who judged the superficial and cynical character of postmodernism from the start. Lützeler, 'Von der Postmoderne zur Globalisierung. Zur Interrelation der Diskurse', in Paul Michael Lützeler (ed.) *Räume der literarischen Postmoderne. Gender, Performativität, Globalisierung* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 2000), p. 1) gives German examples, but he also mentions Gerald

- Graff, *Literature Against Itself. Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).
- 7 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy. An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Murray, 1869; repr. New York: Macmillan & Co, 1882), p. 4.
 - 8 I use the term 'liberal humanism' to denote the ruling assumptions, values and meanings of mainstream literary theory until the late 1960s: literature is timeless; literature contains its own meaning; the text will reveal constants and universal truths for each of us; the purpose of literature is the enrichment of life; content stems from form; a literary work is 'sincere'. See Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: an Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), Hans Bertens, *Literary Theory: the Basics* (London/New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 6-9 and Patricia Waugh (ed.), *Literary Theory and Criticism. An Oxford Guide* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 245-55.
 - 9 See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction* (New York/London, Routledge, 1988), p. 178.
 - 10 See, e.g., Frederic Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 146, 1984, who argued that the late capitalist cultural logic of postmodernism had ruined the normative values of modernism (and that this is not necessarily a good thing), or Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) who analyzed the drawing apart of postmodern theorists and the (general) public and who posed the question if and how politics and ethics are still possible after the postmodern rejection of concepts such as 'truth' or 'foundation'.
 - 11 London 2001. For a critical statement about the link between the end of postmodernism and 9/11 see: Stanley Fish, 'Condemnation Without Absolutes', *The New York Times*, 15 October 2001.
 - 12 Edward Rothstein, 'Connections. Attacks on U.S. Challenge the Perspectives of Postmodern True Believers', *The New York Times*, 22 September 2001.
 - 13 Roger Rosenblatt, 'The Age of Irony Comes to an End', *Time Magazine*, 16 September 2001.
 - 14 Martin Amis in *The Guardian*, 18 September 2001 (Martin Amis, *The Second Plane. September 11: 2001-2007* (London: Vintage Books, 2008), p. 5.
 - 15 Luke Slattery, 'Wake Up and Smell the Cordite', *The Australian*, 24 October 2001.
 - 16 Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), p. 124, but also p. 77 and p. 146.
 - 17 Liberal humanism: see note 7.
 - 18 See, e.g., Max Watman, 'Ignorant Armies Clash by Night', *New Criterion*, 1 May 2005; Gregory Miller, 'Saturday, Bloody Saturday', *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, 20 March 2005; Barber van der Pol, '222 keer niet van hetzelfde', *De Volkskrant*, 20 May 2005.
 - 19 Thus, Andrew Gibson, begins his *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel. From Leavis to Levinas* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 6-9, with a direct challenge of postmodern discourse by referring to another precursor of the same reviled tradition: 'It is time to go back to

- Leavis', he writes, an opening which, with its reference to one of the most influential twentieth century representatives of liberal humanism, courted yawns of boredom or disbelief, wry smiles and ironical jeers. Unnecessarily, according to Gibson, because even the most convinced postmodern theorist has already converted himself anew to a neo-humanistic focus on ethics. Gibson addresses the work of Nussbaum and Rorty, which he calls 'rather pre-structuralist'. Rorty (1989) does indeed refer to liberal humanists such as Arnold, Leavis, T.S. Eliot, Frank Kermode and Harold Bloom in a very positive sense.
- 20 I will focus on the Dutch situation, leaving Belgian literature written in Dutch aside: the idea of postmodernism has a different history in Belgium and therefore the reconsideration of its legacy by Flemish authors (such as Pol Hoste, Koen Peeters or David Nolens) has taken a different shape. See, e.g., Bart Vervaeck, 'De kleine Postmodernsky: ontwikkelingen in de (verhalen over de) postmoderne roman', in Elke Brems et al. (eds.), *Achter de verhalen. Over de Nederlandse literatuur van de twintigste eeuw* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007) and Sven Vitse, 'Flemish Literature: Questions of Commitment and Authenticity', in Thomas Vaessens and Yra van Dijk (eds.), *Reconsidering the Postmodern. European Literature Beyond Postmodernism* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011, forthcoming).
 - 21 The exception that proves the rule is Carel Peeters, the only critic in Dutch newspapers who thought it was worthwhile to parry postmodernism's criticism of liberal humanism. None of his colleagues reacted to this essay. See Frans Ruiter, 'Postmodernism in the German- and Dutch-Speaking Countries', in Bertens, Hans and Fokkema, Douwe (eds.), *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1997), Jeroen Overstijns, 'Van realisme naar postmodernisme (en weer terug?). Advocaat van de hanen van A.F.Th. van der Heijden in een postmodernistisch perspectief', *Spiegel der letteren*, 38-1, 1996), pp. 15-42, Odile Heynders, 'Poststructuralisme in de Nederlandse literatuur- en architectuurkritiek: een vergelijking', *Tijdschrift voor literatuurwetenschap*, 2-3 (Amsterdam; Amsterdam University Press, 1997), pp. 220-1 and Thomas Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman. Literatuur, autoriteit en engagement* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 209; repr. 2011), pp. 55-6.
 - 22 The first review (available in the comprehensive digital database of Dutch literary criticism in newspapers: LiteRom, <<http://www.knipselkranten.nl/literom>>) in which the word 'postmodernism' is used to characterize works of literature in the Dutch language appeared on 12 May 1983 (Leo Geerts, 'Jaap Goedegebuure over Jeroen Brouwers of een kletsmeier over een praatgenie', *De Nieuwe*, 12 May 1983).
 - 23 The first essays on postmodernism by Dutch literature scholars in the Netherlands are: Anthony Mertens, 'Een tikkeltje te koket misschien? Marjolijn Februari is niet voor één gat te vangen', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 14 February 1988; Ernst van Alphen, 'Een kind droomt zich af', *Forum der letteren*, 26-1 (The Hague: Smits drukkers-uitgevers, 1985), pp. 20-32 and 'Naar een theorie van het postmodernisme', *Forum der Letteren*, 30-1 (The Hague: Smits drukkers-uitgevers, 1989), pp. 21-37, and Klaus Beekman, 'De strategie van het postmodernismedebat', *Spektator* 18-5, 1989, pp. 343-46 and 'Een proeve van

- postmoderne parodie en pastiche', *Forum der Letteren*, 32-2 (The Hague: Smits drukkers-uitgevers, 1991), pp. 81-9. Some subsequent publications include Wiljan van den Akker, 'A Mad Hatter's Tupperware Party. Postmodern Tendencies in American and Dutch Poetry', in *The Berkeley Conference on Dutch Literature 1991*, ed. by J.P. Snapper and T. Shannon (Lanham enzovoort 1993), pp. 171-95, Thomas Vaessens and Jos Joosten, *Postmoderne poëzie in Nederland en Vlaanderen* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2003).
- 24 All translations are the author's own unless otherwise mentioned. 'Seit kurzer Zeit hat der Begriff 'Postmodernismus' auch in die Niederlande Eingang gefunden. Es ist bezeichnend, daß er vor allem die Phantasie der Journalisten anregte und wie jedes andere Modewort innerhalb kürzester Zeit an semantischer Inflation litt', Mertens in Frank Ligtoet and Marcel van Nieuwenborgh, *Die niederländische und die flämische Literatur der Gegenwart* (München/Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1993), p. 120.
- 25 While it is true that this notion has become one of the landmarks in the debate on postmodernism, it should nevertheless be noted that a general relativist stance, a juggling with genre conventions, a blurring of boundaries between high and low culture, and a hypertrophy of intertextual or intermedial references may but does not necessarily lead to, or indicate, an 'anything goes'. In fact, there are several contributions to the debate on postmodernism that critically discuss such an uncritical equalization (see, e.g., Wolfgang Iser, *Unsere Postmoderne Moderne* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993)).
- 26 Joost Zwagerman, 'De tijdgeest en het geheim van de zeven schoendozen', *Haagse Post*, 18 April 1987, pp. 20-50.
- 27 Ibid. and Luc van Peteghem, 'Standplaats Zwagerman. Van de eclectische kruisbestuiving of: een tomeloze diversiteit', in Elik Lettinga (ed.), *Standplaats Zwagerman* (Amsterdam, De Arbeiderspers, 2003), p. 151.
- 28 See Bert Bultinck, 'Ik had wel hevige reacties verwacht maar niet dát', *De Morgen* 15 April 2009.
- 29 See, e.g., Pieter Steinz, *Lezen etcetera. Gids voor de wereldliteratuur* (Amsterdam: Prometheus/NRC Handelsblad, 2004), p. 401. Some Dutch 'playful postmodernists' include Joost Niemöller, the writing duo Martin Bril and Dirk van Weelden and the poets who came to be known as 'De Zestigsters': J. Bernlef and K. Schippers.
- 30 Bart Vervaeck, *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman* (Brussel/Nijmegen: VUB Press/Vantilt, 1999), p. 14; Frans Ruiter and Wilbert Smulders, *Literatuur en moderniteit in Nederland 1840-1990* (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: De Arbeiderspers, 1996), p. 288.
- 31 Vervaeck, *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman*, p. 47.
- 32 Willem Brakman, Gerrit Krol, Louis Ferron and Charlotte Mutsaers (in her early work) are among Dutch 'intellectualist postmodernists'.
- 33 The debates are discussed extensively in Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman. Literatuur, autoriteit en engagement* and Vaessens, 'Een weg door het korenveld. Het Nederlandse poëziedebat sinds Maximaal'.
- 34 In the Dutch debate this criticism was expressed by journalists such as Michaël Zeeman and Carel Peters, and by academics such as Maarten Doorman. See Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman. Literatuur, autoriteit en engagement*, p. 220.

- 35 'La littérature devient une zone marginale, un appendice périphérique de la culture; elle disparaît du discours social.', Antoine Compagnon, 'Après la littérature', *Le débat. Histoire, politique, société*, 110 (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), p. 136. See also William Marx, *L'adieu à la littérature. Histoire d'une dévalorisation XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2005).
- 36 Renate van Heydebrand and Simone Winko, 'The Qualities of literature. A Concept of Literary Evaluation in Pluralistic Societies', in Willie van Peer (ed.), *The Quality of Literature. Linguistic Studies in Literary Evaluation* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2008), p. 224.
- 37 Yra van Dijk, 'Vaarwel vrijblijvendheid. De Nederlandse literatuur betreedt het post-ironische tijdperk', *NRC Handelsblad*, 29 August 2008.
- 38 Joost de Vries, 'Top-21', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 3 March 2010, p. 35.
- 39 Jeroen Vullings, 'Wie P.C. Hooft zegt, zegt penose. Over vervlakkings, verwarring en verwachting in de nieuwe Nederlandse letteren', *De Gids*, 170-12, 2007.
- 40 Arjan Peters, 'Dat men mij postmodern noemt, vind ik droevig', *Vrij Nederland* 10 March 1990.
- 41 Carel Peeters, 'Loodzware luchtigheid. Een postmoderne rapsodie van M. Februari', *Vrij Nederland*, 10 February 1990. See Karel Osstyn, 'Ergens gelezen', *De Standaard*, 9 June 1990 and Mertens, 'Een tikkeltje te koket misschien? M. Februari is niet voor één gat te vangen'.
- 42 Vervaeck, *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman*, p. 12.
- 43 See Sophie Gielis, 'Vlees noch vis. Marjolijn Februari's literaire spiraal', in *Ons erfdeel*, 2007-3, p. 170 and Daniël Rovers, 'Wie gemein ich bin! Over de auteur die zijn eigen lezer wordt', *De Witte Raaf*, 131, 2008, p. 3.
- 44 Mark Cloostermans, 'Eenvoudig en ongevaarlijk', *De Standaard*, 7 February 2008.
- 45 Jhim Lamoree, 'Ik stop alles in mijn werk en raak daardoor uitgeput. Een gesprek met Marjolijn Februari', *Het Parool*, 22 March 2007.
- 46 Janet Luis, 'De literaire kring', *Opzij*, 1 April 2007.
- 47 Marjolijn Februari, *De literaire kring* (Amsterdam: Querido, 2007), p. 61.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 50 Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization. The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998).
- 51 See Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman. Literatuur, autoriteit en engagement*, pp. 168-75.
- 52 'Keukenmeidenromans' Februari, *Literaire kring*, p.147; 'Omdat zo'n meisje in het dorp heft gewoond, hoeven we toch niet meteen haar dagboeken te lezen', *Ibid.*, p.147).
- 53 'Maar Ruth Ackermann zou tegenwerpen dat er vanuit de schrijver gezien geen politieke cultuur bestaat, geen wereldgeschiedenis en geen tragedie, het enige wat zij in literatuur kan ontdekken, is de individuele reactive erop', *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- 54 Marjolijn Februari, 'Schrijven met open raam', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 19 October 2007, p. 30.
- 55 *Ibid.*, pp. 30-1.
- 56 'literaire gevoeligheid', Februari, *Literaire kring*, p.209.
- 57 Marjolijn Februari, *Park welgelegen. Notities over morele verwarring* (Amsterdam: Querido,

- 2004), p. 209.
- 58 Rob van Erkelens, 'Toch liever een pitbull', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 26 October 1994. See André Matthijssse, 'Altijd in contact met de tijdgeest', *Haagsche Courant*, 30 October 1998 and Piet Gerbrandy, 'Klare taal om in te bijten', *De Volkskrant*, 20 July 2001.
- 59 Yves van Kempen, 'Zeker weten', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 19 July 1989.
- 60 Arnold Heumakers, 'Het cynische ziektebeeld van de postmoderne cultuur', *De Volkskrant*, 12 May 1989. See Doeschka Meijning, 'Modern leven. De snelle, jonge mensen van Joost Zwagerman', *Elsevier*, 13 May 1989.
- 61 See, e.g., Joost Zwagerman, 'Drie liefdesbrieven', *Maatstaf*, 35-11/12, 1987, p. 135.
- 62 Ingrid Hoogervorst, 'De buitenvrouw, roman over multiculturele samenleving', *De Telegraaf*, 14 October 1994; Jörgen Oosterwaal, 'Een grotesk gevoel van machteloosheid', *De Morgen*, 16 October 1993.
- 63 'Nu het wérkelijk nodig was om de burger een geweten te schoppen, legde de culturele voorhoede zich toe op slappe camp en postmoderne ironie.', Joost Zwagerman, *De buitenvrouw* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiders-pers, 1994), pp. 258-9.
- 64 'een zaak van weinigen', Joost Zwagerman, *Chaos en rumoer* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiders-pers, 1997), p. 63.
- 65 The protagonist blames his opponent for his 'postmoderne potsenmakerij', *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 126; p. 55.
- 67 Zwagerman in an interview (Xandra Schutte, 'Een ware fabel', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 27 August 1997): both characters are 'two nightmare-like versions of myself'.
- 68 See Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman. Literatuur, autoriteit en engagement*, pp. 125-50.
- 69 See for Zwagerman's essays on this topic, e.g., Joost Zwagerman, *Het vijfde seizoen* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2003), pp. 27-35, Zwagerman, *Het vijfde seizoen* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2003), p.114, and Zwagerman, *Tegen de literaire quarantaine. Kellendonkleding 2006* (Nijmegen, Valkhofpress, 2006) and *Transito* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2006), p. 117. Since the fifties 'the connection between literature and social life is lost', said Zwagerman in an interview (Dirk Zwart 'Paniek is mijn motor'. In: *HN Magazine 1-7-1989*): 'literature is a pastime for the well-to-do middle class'. Zwagerman wants to see this changed. See for a reflection on writer's block novels, the position of the writer and postmodernism Green, *Late Postmodernism. American Fiction at the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).
- 70 'Het viel eenvoudig niet te ontkennen dat de schrijvers die hij hier in zwart-wit aan de wand had hangen, vijftien, twintig jaar geleden, toen hij [Theo zelf] voor het eerst over hen te horen had gekregen, door de leerlingen [...] misschien ook niet werden stukgelezen maar dan toch intuïtief werden herkend als eigenzinnige erflaters, terwijl zij nu voor de Nintendo-generatie even abstract waren geworden als de koningen en stadhouders uit de geschiedenislessen en uitsluitend nog werden geassocieerd met dorre plicht, overhoringen, meerkeuzevragen en roulerende uittreksels', Zwagerman, *De buitenvrouw*, p. 179.
- 71 Manu Adriaens, 'Dit is mijn eerste boek dat helemaal bij daglicht geschreven is', *De*

- Standaard, 11 September 1997.
- 72 See, e.g., Carel Peeters, 'Mefisto Grunberg', *Vrij Nederland*, 28 April 2001 ('Grunberg is the laughing stock of postmodernism'); Gerrit Jan Zwier, 'Aan lager wal', *Leeuwarder Courant*, 29 July 1994 and J. H. Bakker, 'Arnon Grunberg zoekt de grens van het spel', *Haarlems Dagblad*, 17 March 1998.
- 73 See, e.g., Arnon Grunberg, *Grunberg rond de wereld* (Amsterdam, Nijgh & Van Dithmar, 2004), p. 334: 'I do not believe anything'.
- 74 Douglas Coupland, *Generation X. Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 69.
- 75 Arnon Grunberg's early work was judged as fundamentally ironical and free of (true) engagement. See e.g. Hans Werkman, 'Het begraven van hongerigheid', *Nederlands dagblad* 11 March 1998) and P. Hoomans, 'Literair balletje-balletje', *HP/De Tijd* 14 June 2003.
- 76 Onno Blom, 'Mailen met Arnon Grunberg', *Trouw*, 29 December 2007.
- 77 Yasha (=Grunberg) in *VPRO-gids*, 6 December 1999. See Geert Buelens, 'Aforismen na Auschwitz. Over de ironie, ernst en overtuigingskracht van Arnon Grunberg en Marek van der Jagt' in Johan Goud (ed.), *Het leven volgens Arnon Grunberg* (Kampen/Kapellen: Klement/Pelckmans, 2010), pp.13-38.
- 78 Arnon Grunberg, *Over Joodse en andere paranoia. Kellendonk-lezing 2007* (Nijmegen: Valkhofpress, 2007), p. 12. Grunberg's attitude to irony is ambivalent (See Dave Eggers and other New Sincerity-writers). He had been brought up a postmodernist; deconstruction had become second nature to him. He tries to overcome his own initial cynicism without falling back upon a naïve, non-ironical (pre-postmodern) attitude. See Geert Buelens, 'Aforismen na Auschwitz. Over de ironie, ernst en overtuigingskracht van Arnon Grunberg en Marek van der Jagt', in Johan Goud (ed.), *Het leven volgens Arnon Grunberg* (Kampen/Kapellen: Klement/Pelckmans, 2010), pp.13-38.
- 79 'Het postmoderne verlangen tot ontmaskering', Hans Groenewegen, 'Overleven als schuld en boete. Over Arnon Grunberg', in Koen Hilberdink (ed.), *Jan Campertprijzen 2004* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2004), p. 81.
- 80 See, e.g., Mark Cloostermans, 'Waarom zou je het goede aanbidden?', *De Standaard*, 3 October 2008.
- 81 The reports have been brought together in Arnon Grunberg, *Kamermeisjes & soldaten. Arnon Grunberg onder de mensen* (Amsterdam: Nijgh & Van Dithmar, 2009). Of Grunberg's recent novels only the non-representative novel *The Jewish Messiah* (2004) is available in English translation (2008): this novel was rightly characterized by a Dutch reviewer as a thoroughly ironic book in which 'ideals are just a cover for selfish desires' (Bart Wallet, 'Is het tijd voor ernst? Over het probleem van distantie en engagement in de moderne cultuur', *Wapenfelt. Christelijk perspectief op geloof en cultuur*, 55-1, 2005, pp. 4-10).
- 82 'Ik probeer zo dichtbij mogelijk te komen [...] bij het gevaar, de vernietiging, bij de dood', Arnon Grunberg, *Onze oom. Roman* (Amsterdam: Lebowski, 2008), p. 637.
- 83 Yra van Dijk, 'Arnon Grunberg, de uitverkoren auteur', in *Jan Campert-stichting Jaarboek 2009*, ed. by Yra van Dijk et al. (Den Haag: Jan Campert-stichting, 2010), pp. 50-1.

- 84 Kees 't Hart, 'O, o, o, wat is ie slecht', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 3 October 2008. See Leo Schut, 'Over leger en dood', *De Telegraaf*, 10 October 2008; Jann Ruyters, 'Een liefdesverklaring aan hemelbestormers', *Trouw*, 19 January 2008.
- 85 Criticism of style is 'het middel bij uitstek om de werkelijkheid te bezweren [...], om het niet over het boek en wat daarin gebeurt te hoeven hebben, om de roman op veilige afstand van de lezer te houden opdat zijn wereldbeeld niet hoeft te kantelen. Opdat alles bij het oude blijft. Het enige wat daarvoor nodig is, is roepen: de stijl was weer briljant. Het omgekeerde werkt ook: wat een vreselijke stijl heeft die schrijver', Arnon Grunberg, 'De waakhond aan de ketting. De macht van de propaganda', in: *Vrij Nederland*, 5 December 2009.
- 86 'door de onkunde van hen die tegen de klippen op literatuur blijven bedrijven', Arnon Grunberg, 'Aimee Bender. *De mailbox van Arnon Grunberg*'. In: *Humo* 22-5-2001.
- 87 'Dat het park van de literatuur een paradijs is, is minder evident dan sommige bewoners van dat park schijnen te denken', Grunberg, *Kamermeisjes & soldaten. Arnon Grunberg onder de mensen*, p. 23.
- 88 R.V., 'De mensheid zij geprezen: Arnon Grunberg zoekt een redelijk wezen', *Humo*, 30 April 2001.
- 89 <<http://www.arnongrunberg.com/blog/1567-censor>> (blog posting, 2 October 2010).
- 90 Arnon Grunberg, 'Waarom ik de menselijke soort wil schaden', *NRC Handelsblad*, 19 July 1996.
- 91 See Yra van Dijk, 'Arnon Grunberg, de uitverkoren auteur', in *Jan Campert-stichting Jaarboek 2009*.
- 92 Michaël Zeeman, 'Hoe de feiten de verbeelding perverteerden', *De Volkskrant*, 14 September 2001.
- 93 See Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman. Literatuur, autoriteit en engagement*.

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