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Aukje van Rooden

The Grand Narrative Revisited; Contemporary Flemish Novelists Take Up the Challenge to Create Plots of the Flat World

Abstract: Both in literature and philosophy it is assumed that the beginning of post-modernity coincides with the end of the so-called grand narrative. Referring to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's last book *L'Allégorie*, one could claim that since then, literary (re)presentation manifests itself as essentially 'chronic' and non-allegorical. Moreover, in the wake of Thomas Friedman's *The World is Flat* the twenty-first century is often referred to as an all-visible flat world. This flatness, however, both extends and challenges the postmodern end of the grand narrative. After all, a world without reverse might be particularly suitable for an all-encompassing story. This seems to be the conclusion drawn by the remarkable and comparable recent novels of three Flemish literary writers. Putting to the test existing ideas of literary presentation of post-modernity, they return to the grand narrative while at the same time subscribing to the main characteristics of contemporary literature.

Keywords: Flemish Novelists, Grand Narrative, Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy

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Our point of departure will be Lacoue-Labarthe's book *L'Allégorie*, which ends with a very lengthy afterword written by his friend and colleague Jean-Luc Nancy. Interestingly, this book was the last one published by Lacoue-Labarthe prior to his death in January 2007, yet contains some of the very first texts written by the French philosopher. These texts consist of around thirty prose poems written between 1967 and 1968, right in the middle of a revolutionary event within European society which we now consider to be an exemplar for post-modernity: the May 1968 protests. Nancy's afterword, called "Un commencement" and written almost 40 years later, which retrospectively reflects upon their partially intertwined trajectories of thought, can be read as a philosophical articulation of the view expressed in these poems, a view of a changing world, poetry and the task of poetry within this world. This afterword will serve as a

companion for embarking on a journey unraveling Lacoue-Labarthe's intricate prose poetry.

In order to capture the mood and feeling of Lacoue-Labarthe's prose poems, let us begin by reading several fragments. Here are the first lines from one of his earliest prose poems, called "Chronique":

The bleary water is immobile; the waterside leaning over it has just died: black grass and rocks. The heat is excessive. This is an oxbow lake, a lake cut off from the main stream (sleeping water): the water is so calm that its whole surface is covered with dust, making it look like a piece of land, albeit without the slightest inequality: there is only the quivering of the light that pierces through the leaves of the trees...¹

Should one describe this landscape either as depressing and *unheimisch* or as peaceful and serene? Or perhaps both? What is undeniable, however, is that the landscape described in this poem is *immobile*. This is not to say that it is motionless, since – as Lacoue-Labarthe points out – there *are* quivers, vibrations and movements. The river landscape described in this text is depicted as immobile in the sense that it is not *on its way*, like a river is on its way, originating from a source and heading towards a final destination. This immobility is also expressed in the title: "Chronique". Something chronic surely evolves, but does not *develop* in a progressive way, for better or worse: it is what it is.

This non-progressive chronic passing is also expressed in more or less explicit ways in the other prose poems, albeit under different titles. Furthermore, in these other poems the spatial and temporal meanings ascribed to the chronic landscape in this first prose poem is combined with a second, and crucial, meaning of the French *chronique*, namely that of a *story*, a *chronicle*. The main question concerning contemporary literature raised by Lacoue-Labarthe's poetic texts is thus: how to recount the story of something chronic, of something that does not develop in a progressive way? The most telling example of the junction where both meanings of "chronic" come together can be found in "Overture", the opening text, which appears to recount a primal scene:

*Theatre without characters,
tragedy without protagonists
no, so to say, fiction – myth, adventures, recognition. Almost nothing happens here²*

¹ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L'Allégorie suivi de Un commencement par Jean-Luc Nancy*, Paris: Galilée, 2006: 34. All translations are my own.

² Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L'Allégorie*, 15.

A world, so it seems, where “almost nothing happens”, put to the test in the most severe way, the possibility of a story. Fiction or myth, – that is, *muthos* as the construction of an *intrigue*, a plot – miserably fail to seize this chronic, persistent existence deprived of an adventurous development and even of a proper beginning and end.

One could say that what is put to the test here is nothing less than the prevalent Aristotelian notion of the literary story. From Aristotle’s *Poetics* until at least the Romantics, if not up until today, the main power attributed to literature is that of constructing plots that gradually unravel themselves. In his analysis of tragedy, Aristotle provides *muthos* – which in its most basic sense merely refers to “speech” – with the more specific meaning of a *well-ordered, finished* story that can be conceived of as a *whole*. According to Aristotle, myth – as the decisive element of poetry – turns the literary story into:

an imitation of an action that is complete in itself, as a whole of a certain magnitude; for a whole may be of no magnitude to speak of. Now a whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and end. A beginning is that which is not itself necessary after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something itself, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and which has nothing else after it; and a middle is by nature after one thing and has also another after it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, cannot either begin or end at any point one likes; beginning and end in it must be of the form just described.³

According to the Aristotelian model of the myth, the literary story is thus understood as an *intrigue* that binds together the elements in such a way that their succession becomes not only probable, but also necessary.⁴

It is precisely because of this power to construct plots that Aristotle holds poetry in much higher esteem than history, “more philosophic and of graver import”.⁵ Whereas the historian, bound by his duty to be faithful to the facts, loses himself in describing unimportant details, the poet is capable of zooming out as it were, of providing a view from above of the world as a whole, which depicts the general instead of the singular. This view from above is a fictive construction, which nevertheless – or perhaps because of that – gives an impression of the direction of the river as a whole, of where it originated and where it is

³ Aristotle, *Poetics*. In: *The Complete Works: Vol 2*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984; § 7: 2321.

⁴ Aristotle equals the “necessary” and the “probable” as two modalities of the same law. The probable is what happens most of the time and what is therefore the general law of each individual case.

⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, § 9: 2323.

heading, rather than that of an immobile, stationary oxbow lake. Although writers of old had already tried to free themselves from the constraints of the Aristotelian plot, the talent – if not the task – of literary writers is still often seen as an ability to abstract from contingent empirical details in order to give an impression of the world in its totality. A higher or underlying truth should, in this sense, be decipherable through the ingenious play of fiction. Though literature gradually departed from Aristotelian plots, his view of literature still seems to be operative.

1 Wandering through the flatlands

This ingenious play of fiction can be described in many ways. Seemingly following the German Romanticists, the description provided by Lacoue-Labarthe is that of an “*allegory*”. In Greek, the words *allo* and *agoreuein* mean “to speak (*agoreuein*) by something other (*allos*)”. An allegoric text thus provides a representation of the world that should not be taken literally, since it does not express the world in its own terms, but by means of *another* vocabulary, at *another* level, in an *indirect* way. The idea underlying this fictional play of allegory is that it can reveal something about reality that would remain obscure if one would simply make a direct imprint of it. It is not reality as it appears here and now, before our very eyes, which is presented, but rather a *general idea about* reality. One could also say – and this is how Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy put it – that an allegory puts an *idea* about reality in *sensible* terms, that it expresses a general idea about reality – the view from above, the overview – in such a way that we can feel it and identify with it.⁶ For Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, “allegory” thus seems to be the model of literary fiction understood, with Aristotle, as a plot of the world as a whole.

Given this analysis of the allegoric power of a literary story, one begins to understand where Lacoue-Labarthe’s junction of both meanings of the chronic leads to. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, a chronic world, an existence that does not unravel in a progressive way from an origin to a final destination, seems to

6 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L’“Allégorie”*, 157. In their study on German romanticism, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe suggest that this view of poetry stems from an “eidesthétique”, that is, an aesthetics where art is understood as the sensible (re)presentation of an idea. See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe & Jean-Luc Nancy, *L’Absolu littéraire: Théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand*, Paris: Seuil, 1978: 52. Trying to radicalise and even to discard this “eidaesthetics”, rather than the “allegory”, early German romanticists choose to embrace the “symbol”, as a *direct* expression of the idea.

demand another kind of story than the allegorical one. The main reason for this, as I would like to put it, is *because the world is flat*. In other words, according to Lacoue-Labarthe there is no higher level, detached and at a distance from everyday life, from which we can have a clear overview of the world. The absence of such a level is an insight that has gradually conquered the minds of post-modern humans, which could be said to mark the beginning of post-modernity. It consists of the awareness that we cannot free ourselves of our historical conditions, that we are stuck in the mud of everyday life, unable to reach beyond it, towards something like a universal, unchangeable and eternal truth.

The following fragments of Lacoue-Labarthe's poetic texts, derived from a prose poem called "Allusion à un commencement", clearly state this postmodern human condition:

Heedlessly we wandered through the wide flatlands ... We hoped to reach the hills at the end before the big frost – and we looked forward to find a resting place there ... The only small doubt was that we did not know exactly what direction we had chosen at our departure point ... A few hours later, it appeared we had not made any progress at all. The night began to fall and the darker it became, the thicker the fog seemed to be ... We had to admit that we were lost ... Everything around us was without boundaries; it became evident that there was no endpoint, nor any means of a possible return to the beginning.⁷

This post-modern human condition is described by Lacoue-Labarthe as a wandering through flatlands in the vain hope of reaching a final destination, that is, a summit where one can rest and which provides an overview of the completed trajectory. The absence of such a resting place is also underlined by the fact that this prose poem is written in the imperfect past tense; it does not concern an action or a condition that is completed, as is the case when one uses the perfect tense ("we have wandered"), but it indicates an ongoing state of being, a *chronic* state of being, an action that cannot be completed. We are still wandering, we will never reach a resting place, which is high and dry. We are condemned to the flatness of the world.

What are the implications of this flatness for literature? If poetic texts cannot find a resting place where they can find a higher or deeper truth, what *can* they do? Lacoue-Labarthe raises this very question in the same prose poem. At a certain point, the protagonist of the text – the "I" – wonders how to recount the story of this wandering: "If they interrogate me, what fable, what improbable story could I tell?"⁸ The answer given in the poem is the following: "Nothing of

⁷ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L'Allégorie*, 66–70.

⁸ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L'Allégorie*, 70.

this all could be told from the beginning till the end, like one could recount a journey; such a journey had never begun, and could never have taken place.”⁹ Similarly to “Ouverture”, as cited earlier, the emphasis is on a flat world wherein one is condemned to an endless wandering without any overview or view from above, resisting every “fable” (*muthos*) that tries to force it into a well-balanced whole, with a beginning, middle and end. But even if we accept that it is impossible to fashion our postmodern condition into the form of a plot or a story which neatly progresses like a journey, we cannot deny that we *are* reading a poetic text and that Lacoue-Labarthe *has been* able to recount this wandering condition. What answer does the poem itself offer us?

Here, the junction of both meanings of *chronique* finds its culmination point: Lacoue-Labarthe’s poetic texts express, both in content and form, that a chronic existence does not demand a plotted fable, but rather this other kind of story, the *chronicle*. What remains in the absence of a higher, second level, which would allow us an overview of our individual or collective journey, is to recount this world in the form of a chronicle, like the Aristotelian *chroniqueur* who indifferently narrates every detail without distinguishing that which is important from that which is trivial. What remains is bearing witness to this wandering, the endless wandering itself: to the experience of living in a flat, one-level world without any summits. Or as Nancy’s puts it: “Literature is nothing but this story [*récit*], or better – since a *story* is impossible – nothing but the expression of this impassable, but nevertheless necessary and compulsive, descent towards some kind of absolute beginning.”¹⁰ For Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, literature thus seems to amount to recounting the *impossibility* of relating a story.¹¹

Indeed, post-modern literature is all about deconstructing plots, about plural perspectives and loose ends. In the end, I would suggest that Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy aim at something more radical. They clearly do so, since showing the *failure* of the attempt to construct a plot does not quench the thirst for such a plot. On the contrary, perhaps. Maybe a stream of consciousness only makes us long more eagerly for a clear distinction between that which is important and that which is trivial. Maybe the foggy and fragmented account of amnesiac protagonists only makes us long all the more eagerly for a well-plotted story. Maybe the constant transgression of the border between fact and fiction makes

⁹ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L’“Allégorie”*, 71.

¹⁰ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L’“Allégorie”*, 152.

¹¹ Their view is of course very similar to that of Maurice Blanchot, as expressed, for instance, in the “*récit*” *La folie du jour*, which ends with the highly ambiguous remark “A story? No. No stories, never again.” Maurice Blanchot, *The Madness of the Day*. New York: Station Hill Press, 1981.

us long all the more for an unshakeable truth. Leaving aside whether or not this is indeed the case, it is clear that such literary attempts still refer, albeit in a negative way, to a higher level, a higher truth, a clearer view – but one that can never be attained. This is what Nancy means when he says that we should realize that the loss of this higher level, of a final destination “is not an idea, has no form: this loss implies that one has to leave behind the whole idea of such a final destination.”¹²

This has a major consequence for what I have called the allegorical play of literature. If there is only this single-level, flat world and nothing else¹³ – so no reign of universal ideas hovering from above, no summit offering refuge, no hidden layer with deeper structures – an allegory is strictly speaking impossible, since allegorical literature, as we saw, does not represent the world in its own terms, but in those borrowed from “another world”. The essence of a flat world is precisely that we are unable to disconnect and dissociate ourselves from this world and that we are therefore only able to express it in its own terms. Within a flat world, there only exist horizontal relations of worldly things and views to other worldly things and views. There are no vertical relations. This is probably the reason why Lacoue-Labarthe has put the title of his book – *L’“Allégorie”* – between quotation marks. His prose poems about lakes, rivers and endless flatlands are allegories of what cannot be allegorized. They are – as Nancy emphasizes – allegories which do not illustrate one thing by means of another, which makes them not really allegorical: “If allegory is written between quotation marks, it is a fake allegory or an allegory that falls short, an imitation of an allegory.”¹⁴

Taking this shift from allegory to “allegory” seriously implies a radical *literalisation* of poetry: poetry is no longer an allegoric way of speaking, but has to be taken *literally*. In one of his many essays dedicated to Hölderlin, Lacoue-Labarthe states that this German poet was one of the first to have recognized the necessity of this shift from poetry alluding or pointing to something *other* than is said, to poetry that states exactly or merely what it says, unable to do so otherwise. In his book *Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry* (2002), Lacoue-Labarthe – quoting Jean-Pierre Lefebvre – states that “[a]fter his return from France, and perhaps despite certain appearances, Hölderlin *calls a cat a cat*. When he evokes his stay abroad, for example, he does so with an almost photographic precision – or, to put the matter differently, he has become extraordina-

12 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L’“Allégorie”*, 158.

13 This “nothing else” forms the subject of Nancy’s important text “Rien que le monde”. Jean-Luc Nancy, “Rien que le monde”, *Vacarme* 11 (2000). See: www.vacarme.org.

14 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L’“Allégorie”*, 157.

rily *prosaic*.”¹⁵ One of the consequences of poetry becoming prosaic and literal – a consequence not only sought by Hölderlin, but also by Lacoue-Labarthe in his own “*prose poems*” – is the abolition of the fundamental difference between poetry and prose. The difference between these two types of literature can also be traced back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, where well-plotted tragic poetry is distinguished from so-called “episodic” poetry that lacks such a plot and which resembles more the work of a *chroniqueur* or a Lefebvrian photographer.¹⁶ For Lacoue-Labarthe, Hölderlin is one of the first poets who accepted the flatness of the world with its most radical consequences, by giving up the possibility of a higher, deeper level – and in its wake, the tenability of the distinction between prose and poetry.

With this reading of Hölderlin’s poetry, Lacoue-Labarthe clearly distinguishes himself from Heidegger’s interpretation. One could say that according to Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger ignores the flatness of Hölderlin’s poetic universe, attempting to save its presupposed sacred power, that is, its power to hover above the everydayness of things and to construct a “plot of the world”. For Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger’s interpretation is thus a “*sacralisation*” of Hölderlin’s poetry: it attributes divine powers to a medium that cannot but call a cat a cat. Or in Lacoue-Labarthe’s own words:

One can say without exaggeration, so clearly and exemplarily is the entire lexicon and all the syntactic resources of Heidegger’s commentary condensed into these few lines [of Heidegger’s commentary in *Andenken* on Hölderlin’s lines “*Die braunen Frauen dasebst*”, AvR], that the *denial of the “prosaic”* ... is the surest and probably the only means of saving ... the sacred (*mythical*) character of Hölderlin’s supposed sermonizing.¹⁷

For Lacoue-Labarthe, Hölderlin is one of the first radically post-modern poets *avant la lettre* who *de-sacralised* poetry by devoting himself to calling a cat a cat. But how are we to understand such prosaic poetry that calls a cat a cat?

In his lengthy afterword to Lacoue-Labarthe’s “*Allegory*”, Nancy suggests that one should describe this prosaic poetry as the *opposite* of an allegory, that is, not as an *allo-gory* but as a *tauto-gory*. In other words, as poetry that is not saying something *other* than it says, but says *exactly* what it says, or – as Nancy asks the reader rhetorically – “[a]n allegory that does not allegorise anything, does it not transform itself, *ipso facto*, in a *tautegory*?”¹⁸ Within this Romantic

¹⁵ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007: 42. My emphasis.

¹⁶ See especially Aristotle, *Poetics*, § 9.

¹⁷ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry*, 58. My emphasis.

¹⁸ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L’“Allégorie”*, 160.

notion of the “tautegorical”¹⁹, lies the modest but noble task of post-modern literature, according to Nancy. Post-modern literature, the literature of the flat world, should not devote itself to constructing plots, but to expressing the flatness of the world, or more precisely: *to letting the world express itself in its flatness*. It should not try to hover above the world, so as to add something to or deduct something from it, but should bear witness – as Lacoue-Labarthe formulates it in his prose poem “Allusion à un commencement” – to “the unstoppable changes of the surface, chances that provoke this buzzing and silent grumbling of things, of the earth, that is audible to everyone.”²⁰ For both Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, a poet of our times does not need to perform ingenious moves, but merely has to listen to the buzzing that surrounds him.

2 Three plots of a flat world

This is a much nobler, and more ambitious, task than would appear to be so at first hand. Similarly to Nietzsche’s madman who announces the “death of God” in the marketplace, as described in *The Gay Science*, the poet who expresses the flatness of the world seems to have arrived too early. Although we wander and keep continue to wander through the daily flatlands of our world, in our “necessary and compulsive descent towards some kind of absolute beginning”²¹, it seems as if we are unable to stop longing for a well-plotted account of this wandering, for a resting place which is high and dry, which will reveal the completed trajectory. Like existential mosquitoes, literary writers shall have to remind us constantly of the “surfaciality” of our world, opening our ears to the buzzing of the surface.²² Nevertheless, it seems as if some of today’s writers attempt to seek another and even more ambitious way to face this challenge. There is – mostly within Flemish literature – a tentative but undeniable tendency that can be described as a *return to the grand narrative*. As we know, what marks the post-modern condition, in the words of Lyotard, is the end of the grand narratives, the *grands récits*, the acceptance of the impossibility of telling a story

¹⁹ Nancy borrows this word from Schelling, who borrowed it from Coleridge. See also Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée*, Paris: Bourgeois, 1991: 124.

²⁰ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L’Allégorie*, 71–72.

²¹ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L’Allégorie*, 152.

²² The word “surfaciality” is Critchley’s. Simon Critchley, “Surfaciality: Some poems by Fernando Pessoa, one by Wallace Stevens, and the brief sketch of a poetic ontology”, *Fulcrum* (2006).

about the totality of things. Not only in philosophy, but also in literature these meta-narratives have given way to more modest and local narratives, to a manifold of *petits récits* written on the skin of time and in the veins of everyday chaos. In light of what I have sketched so far, the task these “new” novelists have set themselves is – to say the least – quite revolutionary: they try to present the flat world as seen from above. Or, in other words: they have chosen to construct a *plot of the flat world*.

The widely-acclaimed novel *Goddamn Days On a Goddamn Globe* [*Godverdomse dagen op een godverdomse bol*] (2008), written by Flemish author Dimitri Verhulst, is one of the literary works at the forefront of carrying out this paradoxical and seemingly impossible task.²³ This peculiar novel sketches the entire history of humankind, from its early ape-like stages, balancing on two feet, to what it has become today, bored, intelligent creatures capable of destroying the whole planet with one nuclear bomb. Far from adopting the modest, lingering, open or dispersed form of most contemporary literary texts, this novel unravels itself between a beginning and an end that are nothing less than the Beginning and the End of humanity as such. From the very first lines – “All beginnings are difficult. Look. It crawls out of the water without looking back” – the author unravels human history until it reaches its unavoidable ending: “The bomb, made from one piece and weighing about five tonnes, began a fall that could neither be stopped nor broken, unless by its own explosion. Below, where people believe that folding a thousand paper cranes brings luck, only 46 seconds remain for folding.”²⁴ Within this novel, the ingenious play of fiction is used to the extreme, whereby the view from above is expanded to an even greater, almost infinite distance where there is no longer a protagonist, or better still: where the globe itself is the only protagonist left.

But, as the novel’s title suggest, this is a *god-damned* globe, a globe damned by God, meaning a godforsaken globe: a world abandoned by God. Despite the view from above, or maybe because of its infinite distance, the god-less world described in this novel is the flattest world one can imagine. One of the linguistic ploys used to reflect this flatness is the omniscient space and time-travelling author’s consistent use of “t” to refer to the human species, which is the abbreviated, and therefore even more indefinite, version of the Dutch indefinite article “het” [*it*]. Although the human species described is far from a being a “flat” character, it still seems to be deprived of higher intentions or motivations,

²³ In 2009, the book received the Libris Literatuurprijs, which is the Dutch version of the Booker Prize.

²⁴ Dimitri Verhulst, *Godverdomse dagen op een godversomse bol*. Amsterdam/Antwerp: Contact, 2008: 183. All translations are my own.

without nevertheless becoming a plaything in the hands of a completely predetermined world: “Apparently, the genius managed to adjust. ’t Stopped moving from one place to another. ’t Settled somewhere in a sweet-smelling location, with babbling rivers, a lovely view and twittering baby birds. And ’t adapted the world as ’t pleased.”²⁵ Although all decisive moments, inventions and revolutions in human history pass by, such as the beginning of agriculture, the author’s detached style has the remarkable result that “’t” inventing nuclear weapons is as indifferent as “’t” brushing its teeth.

What, then, is the “plot of the totality of things” constructed by Verhulst? What is the progressive, predetermined development of humankind, its origin and destination, unraveled within this novel? What general idea springs from the author’s resting place at an infinite distance? In an interview held after winning the 2009 literary award, Verhulst answers this question as follows: “We have travelled an incredibly long way, but we have been walking in circles.”²⁶ We could interpret the circularity evoked by Verhulst as an indication of the idea of an eternal recurrence of the universe, which indeed is one of the oldest and most enduring stories of the world, but the novel actually seeks to express something else. It is not this circularity, but the “incredibly long way”, this promising long journey heading towards a definite endpoint, that forms the central focus of the book. Although described by a kind of *cosmotheoros*, the plot constructed by this novel nevertheless differs crucially from the Aristotelian grand narrative. Instead of seeking a higher instructive value in the “probable and necessary” course of things, Verhulst reveals the “chronic” nature of our existence. Instead of catching sight of the course of the river, Verhulst’s view from above reveals that the river itself is nothing but an oxbow lake. In other words, rather than disposing of the format of the plot, it is by means of the most ambitious storyline ever that the plot itself is stripped of its old ontological pretensions.

Another remarkable example of such a return to the grand narrative is the 2005 novel *Swarm* [*Zwerm*] by Flemish author Peter Verhelst, which bears the ambitious subtitle *History of the World*. Despite its heavily fragmented form and the author’s attempt to write not only *on* the skin of time, but also to crawl *under* it, this lengthy novel presents the history of the world as a merciless countdown from page 666 to zero. Page 666 starts with the stereotypical image of the ultimate Beginning, the aurora:

²⁵ Dimitri Verhulst, *Godverdomse dagen*, 27.

²⁶ The interview can be watched on Youtube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=7n31Qo2CUXM

There's scintillation, a fold in the air, yet it remains unclear what it is. A few seconds later, *things* phosphoresce, as during a snowfall at night. Then, the sun rises.
A voice says: "Welcome to the land of hope."²⁷

This "history of the world" thus seems to adopt the classical model of a well-plotted history which leads the reader from the beginning of the beginning to the end of all ends. However, such a progressive – or regressive – evolution is completely absent from Verhelst's novel. Beginning and end appear rather to switch places or to coincide. Chronologically, this "history of the world" begins with the collapse of the "silver-colored complex" (a reference to the Twin Towers), an apocalyptic event that announces the beginning of the universe dominated by fear and violence as depicted in *Swarm*. From here, several story-lines and characters unfold at a dazzling speed: wars and accidents are superimposed as so many interchangeable manifestations of a disintegrating world; an unknown virus is spreading rapidly; people, both affected and invulnerable, are on their way, but to unknown destinations; the roaring guitars of Motörhead's *Ace of Spades* rise to a crescendo, then fade away.

Despite the rigid count down, and although the beginning and end collapse, we can once again see a certain circularity at work here, one which undermines the course of this development. Similarly to the end of Blanchot's *The Madness of the Day*, this magnum opus ends with the words:

A voice says: "Begin at the beginning."
A voice answers: "This is the beginning."²⁸

Like Blanchot's "essay"²⁹, and in line with Lacoue-Labarthe's and Nancy's poetical-metaphysical claims, this ambitious novel seeks to stress the impossibility of recounting our existence in this flat world by means of a classical story. More so than Verhulst, the author of *Swarm* uses post-modernist techniques, such as plural perspectives, atypical typography and the montage-like overlapping of scenes, to underline this impossibility. Nevertheless, apart from deconstructing the reader's tenacious belief in a "land of hope", that is, in a well-ordered world reflecting universal truths, the author of this "history of the world" intends to

²⁷ Peter Verhelst, *Zwerm. Geschiedenis van de wereld*, Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2005: 666. All translations are my own.

²⁸ Peter Verhelst, *Zwerm*, -5/-6.

²⁹ On the cover of the book, the work was announced as "Un récit?". In the table of contents and on the first page, however, it was simply called "Un récit". In a second version of the text, the indication has been removed altogether.

provide a grand narrative, a narrative of the totality of things – albeit in a new way.

It is crucial that the history of the world depicted by Verhelst is not a history of ideas, but of the *world* itself: of *things* (a word consistently written in italics by the author), things that just *are* in their stubborn, flat existence. For example, in a passage that fits perfectly within the history of humankind sketched in *Goddamn Days On a Goddamn Globe*, Verhelst writes:

ONCE UPON A TIME ...

... there was a hairy species,

let's call it the Homo erectus, messing about in the bushes in search of nuts, carrots and fruits. He finds a pile of bones, *things* that look like sun-bleached, bark-stripped *things* which hang on the *things* that produce bunches of *things* he can put in his *thing*...³⁰

Again, the view from above constructed in this novel is not a higher universal and timeless perspective, but the perspectiveless view of the surveillance camera, registering without selection, zooming in and out without any specific reason. It is therefore not surprising that surveillance cameras play a crucial role within *Swarm's* universe.

Similar to Verhulst's 2008 novel, the cold, detached voice of the narrator is not a mere stylistic device, but seems to be the expression of a certain type of metaphysics. Although this remains implicit in his analysis of the "allegory", Nancy is the one who probably gave the most accurate description of this new metaphysics. In his book *La pensée dérobée* (2000), he states that "*Aux temps modernes succède le temps des choses*": modern times are followed by the *time of things*.³¹ One could say that coming to terms with the philosophical implications of this "time of things" forms the core challenge posed by Nancy's entire oeuvre. The ambition underlying his work seems no less than the search for a new "fundamental ontology", an ambition – as he stresses in *Being Singular Plural* – that is not so much his own, but rather a necessity imposed upon him by our times. "This text", as he mentions in the opening of this work from 1996, "does not disguise its ambition of redoing the whole of 'first philosophy' by giving the singular plural of being as its foundation. This, however, is not *my* ambition, but rather *the necessity of the thing itself and of our history*."³²

In other words, the single-level world we live in can be understood as a world where we are not only surrounded by things, but also part of them – we

³⁰ Peter Verhelst, *Zwerm*, 205.

³¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *La pensée dérobée*. Paris: Galilée, 2000: 186.

³² Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000: xv. My emphasis.

are things ourselves, as *Swarm* suggests: “There is a woman in the car. She is the incarnation of the primal scream; a wide open, red mouth that isn’t even a mouth anymore, but an *inside bulging out*.”³³ In the world of things, humans have no real inner selves, but are merely things among other things, *in medias res*, inter-beings within a fluid, endlessly changing mass. In a flat world, where there are only horizontal relations of worldly things with other worldly things, we find ourselves strangely enough in the somewhat indifferent condition described by both Verhulst and Verhelst. A condition whose dynamics are not determined by the distinction between what is important and what is trivial, but by the “unstoppable changes of the surface”, the quivers, vibrations and movements that happen *between* things and which determine them.

As the following passage from *Swarm* suggests, the spreading, unknown virus determining this universe may well be interpreted as a “personification” of these unstoppable changes of the surface:

Everything and everything has been infected
 Nobody is anymore who they believed to be
 Nothing is anymore what we believed it to be
 Maybe this is the moment where this *ever-changing thing* – let us call it a virus for lack of a better word – is this the moment where the virus becomes metaphysical?³⁴

Like the idiosyncratic novel of his compatriot, the “history of the world” sketched by Verhelst seems to adopt the format of the grand narrative precisely in order to evoke or perform the *ta panta rhei* of things without stable identities, beginning or end.

A novel very similar in both its ambition and form, and published almost simultaneously, is *Omega Minor* by Belgian author Paul Verhaeghen, who has been living and working as a cognitive psychologist in the United States for some time. His residency there is probably also the main reason for the publication of an English translation by the author, for which he received *The Independent Foreign Fiction Prize* in 2008.³⁵ The back cover of this translation promises a “novel of big ideas, a tale of survival of the soul cast in a whirlwind plot that is in turns smart, inquisitive, funny, violent, nutty, pornographic, moving, deeply compassionate, and profoundly moral. Or not.” As with Verhelst’s novel, this ambitious project involves an equally ambitious number of pages. Coming to

33 Peter Verhelst, *Zwerm*, 569.

34 Peter Verhelst, *Zwerm*, 18.

35 Paul Verhaeghen, *Omega Minor*, Champaign/Londen: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007. The Dutch original of *Omega Minor* was published in 2004 and also received three Dutch and Flemish literary awards.

nearly 700 pages, the book is more firmly historically situated than Verhelt's *Swarm*, taking place in the years immediately prior, during and after World War Two in Berlin. By no means does it attempt to conceal its ambition to provide an understanding of the universe as a whole.

Once again, such ambition manifests itself in a story stretched out between the absolute Beginning and the absolute End. The title on the very first page of the book is preceded by a Hebrew aleph and the first, quasi-biblical, lines read: "*Im Anfang war die Tat* – In the Beginning was the Act."³⁶ However, as in *Swarm*, the absoluteness of this beginning is undermined, since the next lines not only immediately evoke the end, but also dismantle the prophetic or biblical weight of the first lines:

And this is what concludes that act, that serpentine pas-de-deux so skillfully performed against the satin backdrop of the blackest night: a lightning bolt hurls upward in a blinding curve of pristine white, the laws of gravity suspended for a quarter-second. There is a scream of triumph as the gushing garland – that string of boundless energy – spouts into the springtime air: With a dull thud alabaster the blob flops on a silken belly, tan and taut and humid with moonlight, and in the panting silence after the victory cry the room echoes with the silent howl of half a billion mouths that never were: 23-chromosome cells thrash their tiny tails in terror of the bare and barren skin.³⁷

With the same surgical detached voice as Verhulst's and Verhelst's, yet in a style much more lyrical than that of his two compatriots, Verhaeghen describes an act that initially seemed to be that of the creation of the world, but which turns out to be one of the many ejaculations of the protagonist, a physicist and self-declared "authority on the Absolute Beginning, the Nanosecond Zero from which all else originates".³⁸ Or better still: the author depicts the act of the creation of the world as an ejaculation.

Instead of, or perhaps in addition to, seeing this as a provocative gesture, one could argue that these initial lines engage with one of the more complex elements of Christian theology: that of God's "self-emptying" (*kenosis*). Since the doctrine of *kenosis* is used as an explanation of God's incarnation in the world by the very act of creating it, it touches directly upon the issue of the world's flatness discussed in this article. Since a God emptying himself is a God giving up his divine attributes to assume human likeness, this act can be interpreted as the undoing of a divine realm *outside* of time and space, removing the view from

36 Paul Verhaeghen, *Omega Minor*. 11.

37 *Ibidem*.

38 Paul Verhaeghen, *Omega Minor*, 115.

above, and in this sense, of the world *becoming flat*. Although it can in no way be reduced to it, Verhaeghen's novel therefore reads as a statement about the possibility of grasping the enigma of the universe after the divine realm has been brought to a closure. This statement does not just find support in Verhaeghen's consistent spelling of "God" as "G*d", but also in the fact that one of the novel's main characters – called De Heer ("The Lord") is a blind, suicidal Holocaust survivor.

The title – *Omega Minor* – plays a key role here. Being the name for the cosmological constant proposed by Einstein, the notion "omega" itself seems to stand for the possibility of a cosmological plot of the world. In a passage that provides the most concise summary of the novel's *enjeu*, Verhaeghen says:

Omega is a parameter that is very much needed to describe the universe, and Omega is the biggest riddle of them all. Omega is the parameter that tells us what will happen to the universe, what will happen to us, and there is something seriously wrong with the value of that parameter.³⁹

What is wrong is that the value of this parameter happens to be equal to one. This means – as is announced with great fanfare – that the universe is not heading towards a spectacular final implosion or implosion, but...

is flat, in perfect equilibrium between expansion and contraction. It will keep on expanding forever, but the expansion tends towards an asymptote – it slows down until it becomes too small to be observable. At that point *the universe will have become flat – that is static*.⁴⁰

Although *Omega Minor*'s plot, like that of *Goddamn Days On a Goddamn Globe*, creates an absolute beginning which is indeed the starting point of a chain of events in an Aristotelian sense, this chain of events is not heading towards a final destination. Or rather: if it is heading towards a final destination, such as the explosion of a nuclear bomb in *Goddamn Days* and *Swarm*, this final destination does not transform the trajectory into a completed whole. Instead, the succession of events becomes *chronic*, so that we appear not to be *on our way*, but rather endlessly lingering, wandering. It will be no surprise, then, that *Omega Minor*'s ending recalls that of *Swarm*: "There will never be an end to the world. Never an end."⁴¹

39 Paul Verhaeghen, *Omega Minor*, 210.

40 Paul Verhaeghen, *Omega Minor*, 211. My emphasis.

41 Paul Verhaeghen, *Omega Minor*, 691.

3 “Return” to the grand narrative

Omega Minor can also be read as one of those eloquent encyclopedic novels for which Thomas Pynchon is so famous. They are the type of novels that narrate the history of “almost everything”, eclectically making use of complex scientific theories, religion and myth. For example, *Swarm* can be read both as a hermetically sealed post-modern world play, as well as an intensely engaged novel about post 9/11 society⁴², or – taking another example – *Goddamn Days On a Goddamn Globe* can be read as a neo-Oulipo stylistic exercise of writing a novel without a protagonist. However, as I have tried to argue, these novels all appear to share an ambition that surpasses the existing literary landscape and demand to be designated as *hors-catégorie*. In one way or another, they seem to try and overcome the end of the grand narrative of which the literary text was not only the prototype, but also its counterbalance. Moreover, they form the literary reflection of a broader tendency currently characterizing contemporary continental philosophy: the tendency to “overcome” the so-called “death of metaphysics” or “end of philosophy” as announced in the second half of the twentieth century. Contemporary French philosophy, in particular, is characterized by a strong revitalisation of metaphysical philosophy. Examples include the “mathematical ontology” of Alain Badiou, the “speculative materialism” of his former student Quentin Meillassoux, the “speculative constructivism” of Isabelle Stengers, and the “speculative realism” of Ray Brassier. In brief, contemporary philosophers are trying to find new ways of doing metaphysics after deconstruction. Notwithstanding his engagement with deconstructive thinking, Nancy’s search for a new first philosophy is another telling example of this contemporary tendency.

The most crucial feature of these new forms of metaphysics is the uncompromising primacy of immanence over transcendence. Here, the “flatness” of the world not only manifests itself in a questioning of the possibility of a transcendent viewpoint or realm, but also in an investigation and affirmation of the most radical consequences of the world’s immanence. Another feature is the assumption shared to a greater or lesser degree that literature has lost the value it once had for philosophy. At least, this is one of the main theses of Alain Badiou, a leading figure of these new philosophical explorations. In the important *Manifesto for Philosophy*, he states that twentieth century philosophy, literarily hushed by the inexpressible horrors of Nazi Germany, tried to borrow the stammering, mumbling voice of poetry. In this way, it intertwined its fate with that of poetry,

⁴² See also (Devisch & Van Rooden 2008).

not only taking it as a source of inspiration, but also as an example, and even a remedy, for its own diseases. Yet according to Badiou, instead of strengthening philosophy's elucidating powers, this bond with poetry suffocated philosophy and prevented it from finding its own way. For him, philosophy has not so much come to an end, as the dominant "anti-philosophy" from Nietzsche through Derrida would describe it, but rather simply lost its way. The time has come for philosophy to close this "Age of Poets", so as to regain its own powers.⁴³

But the poetry that apparently suffocated philosophy, seems to be precisely the poetry preceding what could be called the "allegorical" turn described by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. It concerns poetry understood, in Badiou's words, as a "metaphoric narrative", providing "sacralizing representations which postulate the existence of intrinsic and essential relations (between man and nature, men, groups and the Polis, mortal and eternal life, etc.)".⁴⁴ The key example for Badiou is the role Hölderlin's poetry plays for Heidegger.⁴⁵ As Lacoue-Labarthe states in *Heidegger and the Politics of Poetry*, the suffocating bond which philosophy resulted in is perhaps not so much the bond with poetry or literature *tout court*, but a *mythical* view of poetry and literature, one which corresponds with the view that understands poetry and literature in terms of the Aristotelian model of *muthos*. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, by taking Heidegger as the key example, "new" philosophers who aim to disconnect philosophy from poetry make the same mistake as Heidegger did, albeit for the opposite reason: they ignore the *prosaic* character of poetry by *sacralising* it. Instead of connecting the "beginning of philosophy"⁴⁶ with the end of the "Age of Poets", it thus seems as if this new philosophical "age" may have found its own poets in the revolutionary novelists discussed earlier, those who turned the flatness of the world into a grand prosaic narrative.

Contrary to their post-modern predecessors, the works of these novelists are not so much a deconstruction *en acte* of the classical plot and its metaphysical pretensions, but rather go beyond such deconstruction, using this plot as a means to construct another form of metaphysics. The "prophetic" poetic power of zooming out in order to distinguish that which is important from that which is trivial is put to the extreme – not to reveal the powerlessness of this poetic power, but to zoom out to such an infinite distance that all which remains is the world and nothing but the world, this desacralised, godforsaken globe. Re-

43 Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999: 69sq.

44 Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 50–51, 56.

45 Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 74sq.

46 Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 33.

conquering their old Aristotelian powers, these novelists thus appear to provide an all-encompassing worldview, not in order to provide a bright *over-view* which unravels the main course of things, but to show the world on its own terms – as the enduring but “immobile” *ta panta rhei* that characterizes a flat world.