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Vaessens, T.L.; Joosten, J.

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POSTMODERN POETRY MEETS MODERNIST DISCOURSE Contemporary Poetry in the Low Countries

Jos Joosten & Thomas Vaessens
Translation Pieter Vermeulen

*Our role as critics is, in the first place, to characterize
the dominant discourse and then to read against it
that writing it has excluded or marginalized.*

Marjorie Perloff

Preamble: Postmodernism in the Low Countries

Contemporary poetry in the Low Countries appears to be an extremely multi-faceted affair: never before did so many tendencies inhabit the field of poetry, and commentaries in the Low Countries, but also elsewhere, have repeatedly admitted their confusion about the current dispersal of the field. The *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing* even talks about the ‘Balkanization of contemporary poetry’.¹ A popular explanation of the increased diversity of the cultural canon invokes the observation that the present “intellectual class” lacks the coherence and unified background of that of, say, 50 years ago. Nor is this new multiplicity as readily hierarchized as it used to be: what Andreas Huyssens has called ‘The Great Divide’ – a phrase that has graduated to a cliché describing the separation between low and high culture – belongs to an era we have decidedly left behind.² The current multiplicity of poetical tendencies and forums (collections, periodicals, but also the stage and the internet) has led to the critical declaration of a ‘cultural leveling’, or of ‘the end of the avant-garde’, which assumes that the relative democratization of culture has fully assimilated (and therefore fatally corrupted) whatever avant-garde may still exist. There are, then, no more poets who position themselves in radical opposition to the literary mainstream, trying to redirect its course - and if they exist, they belong, together with their more popular colleagues, to the literary circus as it performs in the media, the commercial circuit, and on the many award shows. ‘Democratization’ rules the day: where the image of poetry used to be structured by distinct tendencies and individual authors, it is now dominated by pluriformity. Poetry has become a festival culture: the borders between genres and styles have blurred and the traditional horizontal stratification of the literary field has become obsolete.

This spectacle has led Dutch poets to embrace the ‘anything goes’ as the catch phrase that sums up the new, so-called postmodern, poetical mentality. The fuss surrounding the publication of Arthur Lava’s anthology *Maximaal* in 1988 then marks the end of the struggle between rivaling poetical tendencies. In a questionnaire trying to trace tendencies in contemporary Dutch poetry published in *De Groene Amsterdammer* from 21 July 2001, the participants agreed that the ‘Maximalen’ [‘The Maximals’] in the late eighties (Lava, Joost Zwagerman, Pieter Boksmas, e.a.) count as the last genuine poetical movement.³ They are generally considered ‘the last who

¹ Hoffman, ‘Poetry: Schools of Dissidents’.

² Huyssens, *After the Great Divide*.

³ Van Casteren, ‘De Groene poëzie-enquête’.

publicly professed their opinions'.⁴ After them (and thanks to them), enter the 'age of anything goes',⁵ an age 'without a significant debate over tendencies', 'without factions that publicly hate each other's guts and are willing to fight it out'.⁶

Taking their cue from the poets, Dutch critics soon adopted a conception of postmodernism to which the poets' 'anything goes' was crucial. When Dutch publications on Dutch literature discuss postmodernism, this term refers to what has also been called 'literary popart':⁷ authors associated with the periodical *Barbarber*, performance poets, the so-called 'Zeventigers' ['The Generation of Seventy'], the 'Maximaal'-movement, and the writers associated with 'generation Nix'. Their 'postmodernism' consists in their self-conscious refusal of traditional, 'elevated' literary values: they transgress the accepted frames of good taste in their choice of subject, of literary genres in their embrace of a genre such as the column, and of the traditional book form in their emphasis on performances. One example is Bertram Mourits' recent study on the poetics and poetry of the generation of the 'Zestigters' (J. Bernlef, K. Schippers, C. Buddingh'), which characterizes postmodernism as anti-pretentious and focused on American (mass-)culture.⁸ Postmodernism, for Mourits, implies a break with the tradition of European avant-gardes, i.e., of warring literary factions; nowadays, anything goes.

The picture looks very different in the case of contemporary Flemish poetry. Here also it was the poets who crucially dictated the image of poetry (especially Dirk van Bastelaere and Erik Spinoy, who manifested themselves polemically in the Flemish literary field from the mid-80's on), but their poetics and their analysis of the current poetical landscape are radically different from that of their Dutch colleagues. These poets have self-consciously inscribed themselves in a predominantly French discourse, commonly referred to in philosophy as 'poststructuralist' or 'postmodern'. Bakhtin, Barthes, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Lyotard, de Man – these are only some of the entries in the index to *Wwwbhooooosshhh* (2001), a collection of Van Bastelaere's polemical essays on poetry since 1985.⁹

In this essay, we attempt to reconsider the Dutch and Flemish poetical production since the 80's in the light of 'postmodernism'. The conception of postmodernism that we have developed first of all wants counter the (Dutch) *communis opinio* that there has been no avant-garde since the 60's. The fact that also the non-mainstream contemporary poets have been co-opted by the commercial literary circus surely indicates that as an *institute*, the avant-garde has fundamentally changed its nature since the beginning of the last century, but that fact does not reduce the 'alterity' and 'foreignness' of the *texts* of the contemporary avant-garde. Second, we want to resist the (Flemish) tendency in the debates around postmodernism and literature to have extra-poetical authorial statements and intentions participate in the conceptualization of 'postmodernism in poetry'. Finally we want to reduce the divide between Dutch and Flemish

⁴ Kregting, 'Van god los maar niet heus'.

⁵ Rob Schouten, qtd. in Van Casteren, 'De Groene poëzieënquête'.

⁶ Oosterhoff, *Ook de schapen dachten na*, p.88. For an overview of the literary situation after *Maximaal*, see Vaessens, 'Een weg door het korenveld'. For the case of the anything goes-mentality, see Joosten, 'Onttichting'.

⁷ Ruiter and Smulders, *Literatuur en moderniteit in Nederland*.

⁸ Mourits, *Zestig*.

⁹ For an overview of the poetical climate in Flanders since the mid-eighties, see Van Dyck, 'Het schrijven van geschiedenis'.

poetical discourse by studying poets from both countries: Robert Anker, Arjen Duinker, , Elma van Haren, Astrid Lampe, Lidy van Marissing, and Tonnus Oosterhoff on the Dutch side, and Dirk van Bastelaere, Paul Bogaert, Peter Holvoet-Hanssen, Erik Spinoy, and Peter Verhelst on the other.¹⁰

1. How to Read a Poem

In K. Michel's 1999 collection *Waterstudies* [*Waterstudies*], the poem 'Indringend lezen volgens dr. Drop' ['Incisive Reading according to Dr Drop'] stands out: we read a didactic monologue, instructing the reader in the art of reading poetry.

{After one
reading we will
all find it
a difficult poem,
this *hand o.a.*
Yet we can through
patient reading
come a long way. But
in advance we must
accept that in
this kind of poem some
'blind spots' often
remain.
These are the places where the poet's
associations were apparently
so personal
that it is more or less a coincidence
if you can feel them still.} ¹¹

[Zoals in de bijgaande brief gezegd: ik zou geen Nederlandse vertaling in de voetnoten opnemen...]

Even those who do not know the title can see that this is a class in poetry reading. Many Dutch people in their thirties, however, will recognize the title: it refers to *Indringend lezen* [*Incisive Reading*], a textbook written by W. Drop and J.W. Steenbeek and repeatedly republished after its first appearance in 1970 for Dutch classes in secondary school. Michel's poem is, in fact, a

¹⁰ For a more elaborate version of our research on postmodernism in the poetry of the Low Countries, Vaessens and Joosten, *Postmoderne poëzie in Nederland en Vlaanderen*.

¹¹ The Dutch version reads as follows: 'Na een keertje / doorlezen zullen we / het allemaal wel / een moeilijk gedicht / vinden, dit *hand o.a.* / Toch kunnen we met / geduldig lezen een / heel eind komen. Wel / moeten we bij voorbaat / aanvaarden, dat je in / dit soort gedichten vaak met / een paar 'blinde vlekken' / blijft zitten. / Dat zijn de plaatsen waar de associaties / van de dichter kennelijk / zo persoonlijk zijn geweest / dat het min of meer toeval is / of je ze kunt navoelen.'

readymade, a literal transcription from a chapter in which Drop and Steenbeek offer a model reading of Gerrit Kouwenaar's poem 'hand o.a.' Two things follow from this poetical borrowing. First, Michel's *readymade* indicates his awareness of the conventions governing the reading of poetry, and therefore also of *his* poetry. As a trained reader, Michel is clearly aware of the existence of textbooks that prescribe reading strategies. Second, it is clear that in his poem, Michel is commenting on the text he is recycling. He ridicules *Indringend lezen* in his comical *readymade* (by, for instance, emphasizing the didactic tone of Drop and Steenbeek through pointed enjambments), which shows that he lucidly sees through the reading conventions the textbook expounds and (re-)affirms.

Recent poetry offers many more examples of these observations: the last decades have produced much poetry that conflicts with readers' expectations and conventions, i.e., with the conventions that ground the traditional thinking about poetry. Before we tackle this contemporary poetry, which is certainly problematic for many readers, we first want to show where these reading conventions come from and how solidly they are anchored in modern poetological discourse.

There is a reasonably large amount of theoretical writing on the reading of poetry, much of it speculative, as we lack empirical data about the strategies readers deploy in the reading of poetry.¹² Eugene Kintgen's *The Perception of Poetry*, one of the few attempts at empirical verification we are aware of, offers a long list of difficulties such an empirical approach confronts.¹³ Kintgen studies the trained reader in practice, but the reader's behavior can also (and perhaps better) be described by starting from the theory informing this practice, as it can be found in the classroom and in textbooks. Gilles Dorleijn has argued that these poetry textbooks function as mirrors: 'they reflect, often from a distance, what has been consciously and unconsciously thought about literature in a certain era'. Or to put it in a different image: 'they function as a hatch: they contain the ideas that future writers and readers will receive as frames of reference'.¹⁴

The poetics of textbooks say as little about the actual strategies of the 'common reader' as Kintgen's observations do about the reading behavior of trained readers. We do not believe this is a problem, as, in our opinion, the poet does not primarily react to the ways his works are read *in reality* by the common reader; he is, in fact, as ignorant of those as Kintgen or we. He reacts rather to the *conventions* of reading as they are upheld by professional readers (critics, scholars), to their claims about how poems *should* and *can successfully* be read. As it is our ambition to show the dominant expectations, assumptions, and strategies that are deployed in the process of reading, we do not focus on the common reader, but rather on his instructors, i.e., the professional readers whose task it is to teach new readers (students) the skill of 'real' reading. As textbooks claim to present an adequate and productive mode of reading, our task of discovering the dominant presuppositions governing the reading of poetry has meant an investigation of all

¹² Some examples of theoretical work on the reading of poetry: Tsur, 'Levels of Information Processing in Reading Poetry'; Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artific*; Murray, 'Unity and Difference'; Fish, 'How to recognize a poem when you see one'; Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens*, Büchbinder, *Contemporary Literary Theory and the Reading of Poetry* en Eco, *The Role of the Reader*. Ton Anbeek's review of a collection of poetry interpretations outlines some constants in Dutch poetry analysis ('Richtlijnen voor analyse').

¹³ Kintgen, *The Perception of Poetry*. For empirical research on (the) reading (of poetry), see also Hoffstaedter (*Poetizität aus der Sicht des Lesers*) and Segers (ed.), *Receptie-esthetika*.

¹⁴ Dorleijn, 'Spiegel en doorgeefluik'

known poetry textbooks published in the Netherlands and in Flanders after the Second World War.¹⁵

We will not here repeat our analysis of these textbooks as they have been used in the Dutch and Flemish classrooms. Instead, we will focus on the excerpt recycled in Michel's poem, as it allows us to momentarily reduce the scale of the issue of reading conventions to the micro-level of a single poem: Michel's poem is for us exemplary for the practice of much contemporary poetry in upsetting the reigning reading conventions. His *readymade* not only ridicules the overly didactic tone that characterizes books such as Drop and Steenbeek's, but also its premises, the conventions of the trained reader. The excerpt quite precisely displays the classical premises of reading as they are found in all recent and more or less recent poetry textbooks. In spite of notable shifts in emphasis, the tradition in which the Dutch and Flemish reader have been trained since the War is remarkably homogenous.¹⁶

2. The Conventions of the Trained Reader

Michel's *readymade* condenses traces of three crucial assumptions of classical poetry analysis. The original text reads as follows:¹⁷

After one reading we will all find it a difficult poem, this *hand o.a.* Yet we can come a long way through patient reading. But in advance we must accept that in this kind of poem some 'blind spots' often remain. These are the places where the poet's associations were apparently so personal that it is more or less a coincidence if you can feel them still.

The reservations the authors register in their analysis suggests that the 'real' goal of analysis is, for them, the elimination of 'blind spots'. A good poem is an organic whole in which each part has a function. This idea recurs throughout *Indringend lezen*: 'structural analysis', for instance, serves to allow us to 'perceive the poem as a whole'; the poem is 'a microcosm' and expresses an essence that can be recovered with the aid of 'the key of the poem as a whole'.¹⁸ These statements convey the first assumption of trained reading: the poem is an 'organic' whole and is valued as 'natural' and as a source of exceptional knowledge. The pervasiveness of this 'essentialist'¹⁹ principle becomes apparent in other textbooks in, for instance, the continuous comparison between the poem and an organism. In Westerlinck we read that a 'good poem' displays 'the ordered totality

¹⁵ Westerlinck, *Het schoone geheim der poëzie*; De Groot, *Algemene versleer*; Mussche, *Nederlandse poëtica*; Elema, *Poëtica*; Lodewick, *Literaire kunst*; Drop & Steenbeek, *Indringend lezen*; Brems, *De dichter is een koe*; Bronzwaer, *Lessen in lyriek*; Van Alphen e.a., *Op poëtische wijze*; Van Boven & Dorleijn, *Literair mechaniek*. In our *Postmoderne poëzie in Nederland en Vlaanderen*, we have not focused on the role of the periodical *Merlyn*, which was crucial in the reception of the method of 'close reading' in the Netherlands. For this, and for the overestimation of that influence on academic and critical ways of reading, Vaessens, 'De mythe van Merlyn'.

¹⁶ See again Vaessens, 'De mythe van Merlyn'.

¹⁷ Drop & Steenbeek, *Indringend lezen*, p.32.

¹⁸ Drop & Steenbeek, *Indringend lezen*, p.21, 22, 35.

¹⁹ Perloff writes, quoting Barthes: 'modern poetry has the "essentialist ambitions" of trying to "actualize the potential of the signified in the hope of at last reaching something like the transcendent quality of the thing"'. Perloff, *Poetic License*, p.269.

of a living organism': it is 'an indivisible whole in which the constituent parts are related organically to each other and to the whole, to existence and life'.²⁰

Another interesting aspect of Michel's excerpt is the passage saying that 'the poet's associations [can] apparently [be] so *personal* that it is more or less a coincidence if you can *feel* them still'. The words in italics suggest that the poet *does* know what the reader fails to understand. The poet, that is, is presumed to be present in his poem. This is the second classical premise of reading: the text represents a subject, it allows us to hear an authentic 'voice', albeit decidedly not that of the author. *Indringend lezen* assumes throughout that a poem contains a speaking 'I' that dictates our perception, a voice (not necessarily that of the poet) that the reader must try to hear, the voice of someone he tries to establish contact with. For instance: 'Self-recognition will always be a prerequisite for establishing contact with a poem'.²¹ This premise of the voice is closely related to the idea, undisputed in all textbooks, that poetry is a form of communication. With or without explicit reference to Roman Jakobson, the poet is conceived as a sender, the poem as a message and the reader as a receiver.²² Poetry is the *transmission of meaning*, and *poésie pure* is consequently left out of consideration.

One of the undisputed articles of faith of close reading – widely practiced in the Netherlands since the periodical *Merlyn* (1962-1966) introduced the New Criticism – is the anti-personalist conviction that a poem should not be confused with its author. Still, the poetical 'I' in one form or other tends to resurface in the poetics postdating *Merlyn*. Interpreting a text, so the prescription goes, means trying to unify the differences and similarities that can be remarked between the textual elements of the poem. This unity is mainly sought in the poem's structure, but as this structure is supposed to have been introduced by the author, even the most rigorous anti-personalists in the last analysis have recourse to the authorial instance.

We can finally distill a third premise from the first lines of Michel's text. After a first reading, the poem will still be considered 'difficult', but through 'patient reading', i.e., *rereading*, 'we can come a long way'. The underlying assumption is that the poem can be deciphered (almost) completely, as it progressively reveals more of the connections between the different words in each new reading. In other words, even when it initially strikes the reader as chaotic, the poem will show its inner coherence on a higher level. This third premise (the requirement of coherence) is the most dominant reading convention in the twentieth century.²³ Drop and Steenbeek also assume the principle of coherence: 'structure' is a 'web of cohesive forces', and interpreting means looking for 'structural principles that unify [the] poem'.²⁴ The poem itself delivers coherence and the indication (or construction) of this coherence is the goal of reading.²⁵ The poem is an 'organic' whole, the text represents a subject, and it displays inner coherence –

²⁰ Westerlinck, *Het schoone geheim*, p.211.

²¹ Drop & Steenbeek, *Indringend lezen*, p.5.

²² De Groot, *Algemene versleer*, p.67.

²³ Cp. Joosten, 'Coherentie als literaire norm in moderne en postmoderne poëzie'.

²⁴ Drop & Steenbeek, *Indringend lezen*, p.19, 78.

²⁵ Reading is, then, as it were, a struggle with the text, a struggle that is won when the text reveals its secret. As Trilling writes, the typically modern experience of the literary work is 'to begin our relation to it at a conspicuous disadvantage, and to wrestle with it until it consents to bless us. We express our high esteem for such a work by supposing that it judges us. And when it no longer seems to judge us, or when it no longer baffles or resists us, when we begin to feel that we *possess* it, we discover that its power is diminished' (*Beyond Culture*, p.62.)

we find these three ‘classical’ premises of reading in all post-war poetry textbooks. This is, however, not the place to analyze them further.²⁶

3. Postmodern Poetry: a Definition

To recapitulate: we have deployed ‘Indringend lezen volgens dr Drop’ in order to demonstrate how the contemporary poet is manifestly critical of the reading program prescribed in poetry textbooks. This program dictates a careful, meticulous reading method, aims for the discovery (emphatically, not the construction) of coherence, and propagates controllability. It conceives of the poem as an autonomous entity; literary study takes the form of meticulous textual analysis, and its result must enable an interpretation of the text in which as many textual elements as possible (if not all) are meaningfully connected.

The poetry of the poets on which we focused our research confronts these assumptions head-on, and literary criticism has not failed to note this collision. Take, for instance, a review of the collection *Golden Boys*, published collectively by Dirk van Bastelaere and Erik Spinoy in 1985. The reviewer is Hugo Brems, who is also the author of one of the textbooks under analysis, the 1991 *De dichter is een koe* [*The Poet is a Cow*]. In that book, Brems had warned the reader that the interpretation of poetry can deteriorate into all too particular associations with hardly any connection to the text as soon as the interpreter abandons the idea of the poem as a significant whole. Those like us, who value the intersubjective verifiability of a textual *analysis* surely can agree with this, but whether this requirement of unity and coherence also applies to the *poem* is less certain. The reader must, for Brems, ward against obscurity, but does the claim that poetry ‘does not intend obscurity, but clarity’ still apply to contemporary poetry? Does this poetry still aim to ‘understand, record, and phrase, not disperse or confuse’?²⁷ Part of the answer is found in Brems’ review of *Golden Boys*, where the reviewer admits that this poetry forbids interpretive solutions. He writes: ‘There is something peculiar about this poetry. I think it has no center, no core. It does not develop an idea nor, inversely, look for an essence, but rather falls apart in shreds’. Also: ‘It has probably something to do with the disintegration of an attitude to life [...] This is the first time that I feel strongly that a new development in poetry confronts me with a generation gap – that I can say something about it, that I feel a more than ordinary fascination for it, but that in certain essential respects I remain an outsider’.²⁸

We here catch a glimpse of the conflict between a reading method intent on unity (Brems talks about the ‘essence’ and the ‘center’ he fails to perceive because the poetry falls apart in ‘shreds’) and a kind of poetry whose authors explicitly claim that it resists traditional exegesis. Van Bastelaere writes somewhere that ‘it seems that most critics fail to grasp that their critical concepts may well be flawed’.²⁹ The crucial reason to call poetry like that of Van Bastelaere ‘postmodern’ (as Brems does) is the definite difficulty one runs into when one approaches it with a *modern* reading method. The poetry instructors we hear in the textbooks seem particularly dedicated to order. This is Drop and Steenbeek: ‘In order not to drown in a sea of impressions

²⁶ For a more elaborate analysis of the poetry textbooks and for the substantialization of the three premisses, see the first chapter in Vaessens and Joosten *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse poëzie* (p.15-30).

²⁷ Brems, *De dichter is een koe*, p.161.

²⁸ Brems, ‘Golden boys?’, p.548.

we always try to bring order in our lives. We group experiences by discovering the common element in them; we fashion laws of cause and effect, of symptom and disease. In short, we generalize, and see distinct experiences in the light of general phenomena'.³⁰ The postmodern philosopher Jean-François Lyotard considers this order, this reduction of specific phenomena to an artificial order of universal truths, typical of *modern* thinking. Modern man subordinates unordered facts to the Idea – in its most global sense, 'to organize the mass of events coming from the human and nonhuman world by referring them to the Idea of a universal history of humanity'.³¹ And just as the premise of an orderly worldview on which the poetry textbooks are constructed is connected to modern thinking, so the norms and opinions on literature they propound are linked to a modern(ist) poetics. 'Mirrors from a distance': just as the textbooks in the twenties of the last century still reflected the romantic poetics of Willem Kloos (so the post-romantic modernist M. Nijhoff forty years later still felt compelled to oppose it), so those after the war mirror the contours of a poetics that poets had developed (long) before the war.³² Poetry that resists these modernist norms is, by definition, postmodern poetry, i.e., *postmodern* poetry distinguishes itself from modern poetry by colliding with the assumptions of a reading method that proved exceptionally successful in the study of *modern* poetry.

4. Excursus: A Countermovement in Literary Criticism

Although the modernist reading assumptions we indicated are generally accepted, we are of course not the first to question their functioning as *doxa*. J.J. Oversteegen, for instance, especially in his later work, repeatedly shows that he does not feel constrained by the assumptions of traditional reading: 'genuine poetry can only be experienced'. This reference to Eliot's statement that 'genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood' connects him (in 1986) to a very different conception about poetry and its effect: his *Anastasio en de schaal van Richter and the Richter Scale* [*Anastasio and the Richter Scale*] evinces a poetical consciousness that is entirely different from the cognitive orientation of the poetry textbooks, and this divergence is mainly due to the fact that Oversteegen thinks about poetry from the perspective of the *reader*.³³ We read about 'the poetical experience' and the 'poetical shock', which indicates a recognition of the ungraspable aspect of poetry that resists (full) understanding. In a quotation of Alfred Housman, Oversteegen writes that 'the name and nature of poetry indeed seems to be more physical than intellectual'. Later, Hugo Verdaasdonk also opposed the dominant reading method's intent on meaningful and logical coherence. Verdaasdonk's statement that only empirical literary studies are worthy of the predicate 'scientific' stems from his conviction that traditional literary criticism

²⁹ Van Bastelaere, 'Groeten uit de strafkolonie', p.223.

³⁰ 30 Drop & Steenbeek, *Indringend lezen*, p.24.

³¹ Lyotard, *Postmodernism Explained*, 24.

³² This close connection between poetics and poetry is also evident in the corpus of poets that the textbooks use as examples. These are (with a few exceptions) not contemporary poets, but poets mainly active between 1910 and 1940: Boutens, Nijhoff, van de Woestijne, Vestdijk, ... poets who, however complex their opinions may be, ultimately aim for a (provisional) order and coherence in their poetry. The poets are not supposed to be too dissident: Leopold, for instance, who celebrated 'the richness of the incomplete', is far less often invoked as an example.

³³ Oversteegen, *Anastasio*.

Is based in a *normative* (and hence unscientific) poetics. He observes that the accepted conventions fail to grasp the presumably inaccessible (*montage*-)texts of Jacques Vogelaar, Daniël Robberechts, and Lidy van Marissing because they were constrained by an understanding of textuality that was grounded in the conception of the literary work of as a coherent, meaningful unit, devised for the transmission of insight.

Oversteegen and Verdaasdonk exemplify a countermovement in literary criticism that has, since the early 60's, run more or less parallel to the development of literature itself. Ten year before Verdaasdonk's opposition to the cognitive orientation of the reigning conception of textuality, Susan Sontag had already voiced a similar critique in the States (from which she admittedly drew very different consequences). In *Against Interpretation*, she attacked the reader's tendency to consider literature as a mental scheme of categories, of a content fitting in a logical order. Such a merely intellectualist, cognitive approach to art cancels its full (physical) experience. Erotics, rather than hermeneutics, becomes the tool of the experiencing reader: 'In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art'.³⁴ Oversteegen, Verdaasdonk, and Sontag observe that there are texts which a traditional reading method cannot grasp. Their observations are part of a growing awareness (since the 60's) that the text no longer leads to the one and only teleological meaning that, in the last analysis, returns to the author. By now, this awareness has crucially changed our idea of the relation between author, text, and reader: we no longer simply assume that the reader has access to the interior of the author through the text, and that he thus reconstructs the 'real' meaning of a text. When Roland Barthes declares the death of the author in 1968, he points out that it is not the author but the *reader* who assigns meaning to a text, independently from the author's intentions. And when Jacques Derrida criticizes logocentrism, he similarly breaks with the traditional presuppositions about the relation between text, author, and reader: He not only mines the certainty that a 'meaning' can be referred to the original 'intention' of an 'I', but also the belief that representations refer to a pre-existent reality. These ideas can be linked to the resistance to the pretensions of modernism we discussed before. According to critics like Sontag and Leslie Fiedler in the 60's, the modernists had ascribed an almost religious status to poetry and had invested it with an entirely imaginary promise of salvation. Such pretensions can only be maintained by author who consider literature as a communicative medium that adequately describes reality and transmits meanings – and these are precisely the assumptions that have been exposed since (an certainly not only by) Barthes and Derrida.

In the Dutch literary field, this development has led to a perceived alliance between literature and the opinions of the periodical *Forum* (its humanist focus on the subject), modernism (its hope of mending the fragmentation of the world through language) and the traditional reading method (its strategic intent on unity and coherence). This brings us back to our earlier definition: if we accept that the strategies advocated in poetry textbooks are indeed inherently modernist, then the literature that can no longer be adequately analyzed in this way, the literature that actively resists such a reading, can properly be called postmodern.³⁵

³⁴ Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, p.8.

³⁵ We agree with Newman (*The Post-Modern Aura*, p.27) that the modernism that was opposed by the postmodernists was not only (or even, not primarily) the wave of literary innovation from the early twentieth century, but rather the 'second revolution' thirty or forty years later, which was a more massive revolution in literary theory, criticism, and education, 'which interpreted, canonized and capitalized the

5. The Problems of Postmodern Poetry

The postmodern refusal of the modernist reading strategy fits the scenario of the avant-garde movements as it has dominated the history of poetry since the age of romanticism, i.e., the scenario in which every new movement buries the norms and conventions of its predecessors. Like every avant-garde, postmodern poetry refuses the support of the reigning rules. In the case of postmodernism, there is, yet, a new complication: an alternative for what it dismissed is not available. The postmodern poet does not merely reject a particular set of reading conventions, but rather the very mentality that wants to ground orderly thinking in conventions. The postmodern poet precisely refuses to believe in a set of strategies that can be successfully deployed in every new act of reading: such failure-proof strategies have been unmasked as an illusion, since concrete phenomena simply cannot be reduced to universal truths. The poetological assumptions that were propounded in modernist literary criticism were directly tied to a world view that overcame its doubts about its access to reality and its uncertainties about the sufficiency of language with the aid of thought constructions, Grand Narratives, and Unified Theories. For the modern poet, the coherence of the poem was a counterforce to the chaos of the world, and postmodernism marks a clean break with such literary homeopathy: it not only refuses to accept the particular systems that deliver their ready-made prescriptions and proscriptions, it also refuses to believe in the very possibility of alternative systems.

A logical consequence of postmodern poetry's resistance to one all-encompassing Concept is its refusal of an all-encompassing Counterconcept. This is also why we prefer not to apply the unitary concept 'postmodernism' to the contemporary poetical field in the Low Countries: the latter's complexity resists such a coercively unifying activity.³⁶ Instead of 'characteristics', then, we choose to speak about 'problems': whoever sets out to read postmodern poetry with the conventions of the trained reader is confronted with problems on different levels. In the rest of our essay, we will discuss seven of these problems, with the aid of specific examples: the problems of *originality*, *perfection*, *identity*, *autonomy*, *morality*, *coherence*, and finally that of *intuition*. All seven of these concepts, as we will show, were relatively unproblematic in modern(ist) poetry: a poem simply *had to* be original and perfect, just as it was simply *presumed* to be coherent and autonomous, and so on. The postmodern poet critiques these modern self-evident truths by, first of all, simply denying them: a poem is *not* original, perfect, coherent, nor autonomous. The conflicts this denial gives rise to are the subject of the following subsections.

The seven 'problems of postmodern poetry' derive directly from the postmodern dismissal of the three basic assumptions of modernist reading. Just as the idea of originality follows logically from the assumption that poetry contains an authentic 'voice', and just as the autonomy of the poem is a consequence of the conception of the poem as an 'organic' whole, so too the other concepts can be derived from the three basic poetical assumptions. When the poet no longer holds to these assumptions, the concepts that logically follow from them become problematic. The respective problems were, of course, already registered in (much) earlier poetry,

Modernist industry', and which was referred to as the New Criticism in the Anglophone world.

³⁶ For the issue of 'labelling', see our more elaborate discussion in *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse poëzie*, p.34-37.

and not least in that of the romantics and the modernists themselves. Postmodernism is then in the first place the site of their co-occurrence and their explicitation. The new poetry brings together a few problems that had already been announced in separation and makes the struggle with them radically explicit.

5.1 The Problem of Coherence

Our first postmodern problem manifests itself at the level of reading, and is the most readily perceptible of the seven problems. Much new poetry, moreover, explicitly thematizes the problem of coherence: poets display their awareness that the poem, as a linguistic construct, can never escape a certain degree of order, while at the same time contesting that so-called inescapability in their poetry.

The work of Peter Verhelst offers many instances of this paradoxical move. His collections immediately show the – sometimes even compulsive – impositions of order that are invariably reflected in a cyclical or otherwise regular structure. These compositional moulds, however, are always disturbed by minor irregularities. Also, the content of this poetry repeatedly reflects on the impossibility and undesirability of order as such. A striking image in his collection *Verbemelte*³⁷ (1996) proves that Verhelst considers a certain degree of incoherence as characteristic of the postmodern poem:

[...] Just look, you say,
and you point: a Rorschach test, a postmodern poem,
spreads across the floor [...]

The poem as a formless stain on the floor: nobody has intended anything with it and everybody can read in it whatever he likes. What M. Vasalis' criticism of the poetry of the Generation of the Fifties (the 'Vijftigers') dismissed as a fault (she compared poems like those of Lucebert with random ink stains in which one can perceive anything, as they represent nothing of themselves) is here being celebrated as a virtue. These lines are followed by a catalogue of images that ends as follows:

[...] The image
crawls out of its skin, lies crawling, breaks
in front of my eyes. Nein. Nothing tends to order,
the display says, random
the mosaic splits
and generates an endless chain of what can be
possible/impossible while we gratefully nod
nod

Verhelst confronts the reader with a chaotic hemorrhage of images that at no time pretend to form a unity on a higher plane: there is no central unifying instance. Even the poet himself

³⁷ Literally, *Palate*, but with a pun on 'hemel' ['heaven?'] impossible to convey in English.

withdraws: to the question where the author of all this may be, *Verhemelte* parenthetically offers the following offhand answer:

(Laughing he lies
on the couch using the remote control,
humming: most of you
will not like this; the author is
not to be blamed. It is not even
meant for you, S***ers of Authority. Teasingly rubs one index
finger over another. Na-na na-na na-na.
Write your own book.)

Poems without a recognizable controlling instance or a principle of order are fundamentally incomplete and are less a closed unit than a random set of loose ends. This does not have to go hand in hand with typographical irregularities (as it does in Peter Holvoet-Hanssen's *Santander* [2001]): even the apparently well-ordered poems in Erik Spinoy's *Susette* (1990) are far from coherent because of their very diverse contents, and the same goes for the short-line poems in Astrid Lampe's *Rib* (1997). Those poets who write poems that refuse to cohere play with the reader's tendency to look for coherence, as becomes clear in Lucas Hüsgens long poem *Nevels orgel* [*Fog's Organ*] (1993). It starts with the line 'who – with the bodies of garden gnomes?'; the second dash, that announces the continuation of the sentence started with 'who', does not appear in the poem: the poet does not return from the side-tracks he takes, but rather forever sets out on new ones.

In *Verhemelte*, mythical characters (Icarus), fictional characters, historical figures (Pieter Bruegel) and real people (Dutch artist Rob Scholte) meet each other. Jan Lauwereyns' *Blanke Verzen* [*Blank Verse*] (2001) places Clark Gable, the 'ex-poet' Uwe Yser (Lauwereyns himself?) and the mythical singer Orpheus together in a town in Arizona. The postmodern poem does not refer to one recognizable reality – it rather opposes the idea that there is one ultimate referential level, which is very different from the method of the modernists, however chaotic their texts may appear: Van Ostaijen's *Bezette Stad* [*Occupied City*] is a very complex text, but from beginning to end refers to wartime Antwerp.³⁸ The relation between the words and their referents may be hard to recognize or to discover for the twenty-first century reader, but ultimately remains intact. In postmodern texts, such a relation no longer holds, as the spaces they describe are not part of one and the same world.³⁹ What we get is, in Van Bastelaere's words, 'parts of a whole that is missing': there is no whole encompassing the elements of the poem, not even on the abstract level of a thematic synthesis. The postmodern poem, described by Mary Ann Caws as a 'frame without a center',⁴⁰ debunks the idea that there exists something like a totality: the 'worlds' it evokes are, in the words of Brian McHale, 'fragmentary, discontinuous, flipping back and forth between literal and figurative'.⁴¹

³⁸ See Bogman, *De stad als tekst*.

³⁹ Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, p.10-17.

⁴⁰ Caws, 'Story-Line Poetry', p.51-59.

⁴¹ Brian McHale, 'Making (non)sense of postmodernist poetry'.

5.2 The Problem of Identity

When we read according to the rules prescribed in the poetry textbooks, we pay close attention to the voice we hear in the poem. ‘The approach to the lyric expounded and exemplified by the New Critics’, in Jonathan Culler’s analysis, boils down to imagining (or constructing) a speaker and a context: ‘Identifying a tone of voice, we infer the posture, situations, concerns, and attitudes of a speaker’.⁴² Whoever doubts the correctness of this observation should imagine being asked to publicly recite a poem by, say, Willem Kloos. Anybody will deploy intonation or facial expressions as some sort of disclaimer, lest the listeners think the speaker himself is crying over ‘flowers broken in the bud’.⁴³ The ‘I’, the center of Kloos’ text, demands identification: the reader somehow positions himself in relation to him, as he presents himself in his text as a recognizable person (who is, importantly, not the same as the poet). Whoever reads lyrical poetry is, apparently, somehow brought to approach the poem as if it were a dramatic monologue, as if it were the fictional imitation of an individual expression.

However common this idea (in his *Glossary of Literary Terms*, M.H. Abrams defines the lyrical poem as ‘any fairly short, non-narrative poem *presenting a single speaker* who expresses a state of mind or a process of thought and feeling’),⁴⁴ as a starting point for reading postmodern poetry (even *lyrical* postmodern poetry) it is singularly ineffective. Instead of questioning to what extent the completed poem still relates to the intentions of its author, as the modernist Nijhoff did, postmodern poets deploy experimental procedures in which poetry is created without (much) influence of the poet. The famous *ready-mades*, as K. Schippers and J. Bernlef ‘made’ them in the sixties, are examples of this. In the seventies, poets such as Gerrit Krol (*APPI. Automatic Poetry for Pointed Information*) and Grete Monach (*Compoëzie [Compoetry]*, 1973) designed computer programs that could write poetry, which resulted in instances of non-intentional poetry.

Ready-mades and computer poetry are extreme cases in which postmodern (or even antimodern) authors rigorously invert the modernist principles. They offer radical examples of a phenomenon that, in a more mitigated form, is part and parcel of all postmodern poetry. This poetry problematizes the idea of a voice resounding in the poem, even when not giving the impression of being a mechanically and automatically constructed product. Poetry like that of F. van Dixhoorn does not appear to represent a state of mind, nor an opinion or an emotion. On the first page of the poem ‘Armzwaai’ we read these two stanzas:

2. wave arms
3. *A-a* monkey tried to be funny
and bit the captain in the nose
the captain got really upset
and put the monkey in a powder box
4. the moon
that slowly ascends

⁴² Cp. Culler *Literary Theory*, p.71.

⁴³ ‘Ik ween om bloemen in de knop gebroken’ is one of Kloos’ most famous poems.

⁴⁴ Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, p.108 (our italics).

in her cold light
wild dogs are sliding by
stand still en take in the air
of the lonely monkey
1. this is a boat
I can't
aAll day

The inconsequential numbers and the hackneyed children's rhyme (in the original version) immediately give the poem an impersonal ring. We learn nothing about the 'I' in the penultimate line, not even when we turn the page and read 'wait for you'. 'I can't wait for you all day' is a perfectly coherent statement, but it is immediately followed by another number, and a completely unrelated statement. When another 'I' appears under in a further rubric, it has apparently nothing in common with the 'I' on the first page.

Since Lucebert's 'Sonnet' put an end to the subjective navel gazing of the genre, the primacy of poetical identity has been under great pressure. Part of the explanation must be sought in the changing conception of the subject. As Stuart Sim writes, 'Humanism has taught us to regard the individual subject as a unified self, with a central core of identity unique to each individual, motivated primarily by the power of reason'. Modernism embraced this idea of 'the subject as a rational, unified, powerful and controlling being', but this idea was eroded by the influence of what Sim calls 'destabilizing forces' (Claude Lévi-Strauss' idea of the 'death of man' or Roland Barthes declaration of 'the death of the author' as the instance controlling textual meaning): for the postmodernist, the subject is 'a fragmented being who has no essential core of identity or self that endures unchanged over time'.⁴⁵

More ironic, but at least as instructive for the problematized position of the poet behind the poem, is 'Tonnus Oosterhoff', a poem reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's 'Five-Finger Exercises', in Tonnus Oosterhoff's *De Angeland* (1993) [*The Landholder*]

'You are so authentic, so modest.'
'For my own pleasure!'
It is a pleasure
To be Tonnus Oosterhoff.
'I too would like to be him.'
You would, but that is impossible!

That is impossible.

The postmodern poem is, as Brian McHale writes, an 'echo chamber in which discourses resound and mingle' so confusingly that the reader is unable 'to assimilate them to any single unitary or

⁴⁵ Sim, *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*. Cambridge 1998, p.366.

speaking-position'.⁴⁶ He must then also renounce the idea that something like 'the author' is still present somewhere in the text as a central consciousness: Where the modernist still attempted to confront the fragmented chaos of reality by assuming a 'subject of signification', the postmodern poet gives up on the whole idea of an intentional subject.⁴⁷ The word is not only a tool, it itself uses the poet. A good illustration is found in Tonnus Oosterhoff's (*Robuuste tongwerken, een stralend plenum* [(*Robust Tongue Works, a Radiant Plenum*): 'I was singled out by rhyme and rhythm' – a statement which is immediately amended: 'no, by rhythm and rhyme, that sounds better'.

5.3 The Problem of Originality

Originality has become a self-evident literary virtue since the age of romanticism. It was the necessary condition a 'real' poem had to fulfill in order to distinguish itself from fake kitsch or formulaic poetic diction. This self-evident virtue has, however, come under discussion in the last decades, and this has problematized the status of the poem. How does the poem earn its special value when it no longer pretends to be original?

The problem of originality involves two elements, which are linked to two closely related meaning components of the word 'originality'. The word first of all indicates individuality: whatever is original is not derived or borrowed from others. Poetry that is original in this sense in no way resembles other poetry; it is unique and unprecedented, the product of a unique individuality. For postmodern poetry, this characteristic is no longer self-evident. Does something like an original individual exist? The postmodern poet doubts this, and thus does not create his own, entirely unique language construct, but takes his place in the middle of other (earlier) texts, texts he refers to, parodies, plagiarizes, or spins a variation on. On this level, the problem of originality primarily concerns the issue of intertextuality. Spinoy's collection *De jagers in de sneeuw* [*The Hunters in the Snow*] (1986) is a good illustration of the intertwining of postmodern texts and other texts, and the same goes for Verhelst's *Witte bloemen* [*White Flowers*] (1991), which concerns itself with the life and work of Charles Baudelaire.

Originality can, second, also mean 'carrying its own characteristic feature, distinguishing itself by something singular'. Poetry that is original in this sense is first of all authentic, and that authenticity grants it a special status. The claim to originality of modern poetry is, on this level, a rhetorical legitimization strategy: an authentic poem creates, thanks to the independent imagination of the poet, something that was previously not there, or at least not put into words. This authenticity is valorized as 'natural' by romantics and modernists alike, which grants the authentic poem an extraordinary status that exceeds the merely human. One of the implications of an 'organic' theory of poetry, as the modernists professed it, is the assumption that the poem is original. As the poet grants the initiative to language itself, and as he claims not to work from any palpable design, he presents his poem as something having some sort of necessity, as a text

⁴⁶ McHale, 'Making (non)sense', p.28. Cp. Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism*, p.44. See also Holden, *Style and Authenticity in Postmodern Poetry*. Columbia 1986, p.332, Jerome Mazzaro, *Postmodern American Poetry*. Urbana/Chicago/London 1980, p.VIII. James McCorkle (*The Still Performance. Writing, Self, and Interconnection in Five Postmodern American Poets*. Charlottesville 1989, p.44) sees things differently: for him postmodernism in poetry is also the 'reinvention of the self that can engage a variety of voices, fragments, and inadvertent glimpses'.

⁴⁷ Vgl. Ernst van Alphen, 'Naar een theorie van het postmodernisme'.

that participates in the exceptional occasion that gives rise to it (which does not necessarily entail a belief in the possibility of an 'adequate form').

The modern conception of originality then has consequences for the status of the poem, and it is these that much contemporary poetry renounces, most often in the conviction that authenticity claims are false. The urgency of this conviction has, of course, only increased as the mass media are flooding us with ever more so-called 'authenticity' – on television, more and more time is devoted to the so-called uniqueness of random fifteen minutes-celebrities. Against the background of such contemporary phenomena, the modernist claims to authenticity and naturalness acquire a different meaning, and are radically abandoned in postmodern poetry: the poet avoids the 'natural look' the modern poem still aspired to. This puts an end to what Marjorie Perloff has called the 'strenuous authenticity' of romantics and modernists (which she also discerns in the poems in the contemporary mainstream of 'official verse culture').⁴⁸

Postmodernism questions the myth of authenticity, often through a special relation to intertextuality. The practice of referring to other texts is of course as old as the second text in world literature, but in the new poetry these references are not only more numerous, but also of a crucially different nature. Reference is often imprecise or even deliberately wrong, which seals the end of the illusion of an orderly textual universe. There is no such thing as a source from which elements are derived, as now everything is derivative. Postmodern intertextuality then deliberately misleads its reader.⁴⁹ A remarkable example is offered by a reference to Heiner Müller's play *Mauser* in Verhelst's collection *Otto* (1989). In the middle of the collection, Verhelst quotes ten lines on a page that is for the rest left entirely blank, to which he diligently adds the correct reference. Whoever decides to consult this source, however, sees that Verhelst has radically altered Müller's text. For instance, where *Otto* reads 'and I saw / him who I was *love* a thing of / flesh and blood / and other matter', Müller has in fact written '[...] and I saw / Him who I was *kill* a thing of flesh blood / And other matter'.⁵⁰

5.4 The Problem of Perfection

The problem of perfection manifests itself on the level of form. For a modernist formalist like Paul van Ostaijen, the only thing that mattered (back in 1928) was 'the perfection of the poem'.⁵¹ Form was, accordingly, the object of critical valuation. 'Perfect', in this sense, is a poem that is 'per-fected', 'fully-made', without any formal lack: it has found its definitive form. The background for this criterion of perfection is modern poetological discourse that tends to ground its terminology for poetry (and poetic creation) in the characteristics of living and growing creatures.⁵² These biological metaphors, introduced by the romantics and elaborated in the poetics of the modernists, presents the poem as an organic unity of elements whose functioning is crucial to the functioning of the whole: in August Wiedmann's words in his study *Romantic*

⁴⁸ Perloff, *Radical Artifice*. Chicago/London 1991, p.19-20 en p.134.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, Fokkema, 'Het Postmodernistische citaat', p.21. Fokkema stresses that 'the ordering that the postmodernists offer [by means of intertextual relations] [...] consciously avoids a psychological or argumentative motivation'.

⁵⁰ Müller, *Mauser*, p. 64: '[...] und ich sah / Ihn der ich war töten ein Etwas aus Fleisch Blut / Und andrer Materie [...]'. Italics ours.

⁵¹ Van Ostaijen, *Verzameld werk/Proza. Besprekingen en beschouwingen*, p.329.

⁵² Cp. the definition of the organic theory of art in Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, p.168.

Roots in Modern Art, the poem is ‘a self-generated autonomously evolved and internally constituted system characterized by an organic interdependence of parts; none of which admitted change or removal without drastically affecting the life of the whole’;⁵³ it is a ‘living totality’ characterized by ‘wholeness and supreme organization’; it displays an organic (and, therefore, natural, self-evident) coherence. This is especially clear in the case of Nijhoff, a contemporary of Van Ostaijen, who surpassed every other Dutch poet-critic in the rigorous practice of formalist criticism, and who expressed his impatience with critics who ‘dismiss the absence of any articulable regularity in the modern lyric, and who deduce from this inarticulability the non-existence of this regularity’.⁵⁴ In other words, however hard it may be to describe these regularities, they most definitely are there. We will return to a not unimportant implication of this belief (because the modern lyric apparently shows a coherence of a more than human order), but for now it is important that also this modernist insists on formal perfection; even when he compares a poem to a Persian carpet - in order, apparently, one hundred years after the rise of romanticism, to mark the modernist distance from the romanticism inherent in his earlier comparison of the poem with an organism – this merely re-affirms the completeness and formal perfection of the poem’s miraculously well-crafted construction.

It is in the wake of poetical modernism that the trained reader was instructed in the art of reading according to Nijhoff’s norms. Poetry textbooks prescribe reading strategies based on the assumption that the poem is a perfect, miraculously well-crafted composition. Also in this respect, the modernist norms of critical discourse are impotent when dealing with the practice and the theory of the new poetry. Whoever still holds on to the perfect, organic form is, in the dismissive words of Van Bastelaere, guilty of ‘some kind of neo-classicism that invokes order, balance, clarity, meter, structure, etc. (its patron saint: Nijhoff; its credo: ‘Order in life!’; its dress code: modesty)’.⁵⁵ Against this New Critical ‘commitment to the finitude or closure of the text’ (Frank Lentricchia),⁵⁶ postmodern poetry opts for open form.

In *De geschiedenis van een opsomming* [*The History of an Enumeration*] (2000), Arjen Duinker mobilizes a variety of techniques to ward off the impression that the poems as found in the collection are to be read as the end-result of the poetical process. In a number of poems, for instance, he offers different textual variants without rejecting all but the best one of them. ‘Multiple choice’ is the apt title of one of these poems:

Perhaps it is true
That a collection of blue splinters
Is fed by monotonous tunes
On a white square.

Bird, go sit in the gutter!

⁵³ Wiedmann, *Romantic Roots*, p.151.

⁵⁴ Nijhoff qtd. in Van den Akker, *Een dichter schreit niet*, p.227.

⁵⁵ Van Bastelaere, *Wwwbhoossbbb*, p.64.

⁵⁶ Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism*, p.142.

Perhaps it is true
That a red peach would be made shy
By small groups of sour children
In a red month.

Bird, do not look for the cloud on the water!

Perhaps it is true
That a collection of black tunes
Can be fully appreciated
In blue splinters.

Bird, the moon has a mouth-ache!

Perhaps it is true
That a white square offers more space
For getting lost in the world
Than a red peach.

Bird, pick your favorite feather!

The postmodern poem is the exact opposite of whatever presents itself as something perfect, as having a divine – because perfect and more than human – status, as it was earlier only found in nature. By being emphatically unnatural it opposes an artistic ideal that has been dominant since the romantics introduced the organic conception of art. The postmodernist will have nothing of such poetical pretension, and therefore presents his poem as im-perfect, in-complete: the loose ends are not to be read as imperfections that have been overlooked, but are essential in a poem that wants to express distrust of the totalizing claim of closed unity.

Similarly, on the level of the collection, the new poetry strives for the disruption of closure. An example is Peter Verhelst's *De boom N* [*The N Tree*] (1994): this collection consists in one poem that is made up of 62 typographically separated fragments. Designed like the keys of an audio-machine, the word 'start' precedes the first fragment and the words 'rewind', 'random', and 'play' follow the last one, which presents the collection as the *coincidental* sedimentation of the 62 fragments. The reader can opt to just start again ('rewind'), and then the 'tape' can be 'played' again in 'random' order. As a one poem collection, *De boom N* exemplifies another tendency in contemporary poetry that is also linked to the postmodern problematization of perfection: the return of the longer (epic) poem. This phenomenon had been out of fashion for a long time. As Robert Gibson explains, 'the quest for poetic purity resulted in the condemnation of the long poem which was dismissed as, at best, a series of pearls of pure poetry strung together on a thread of prose'.⁵⁷ Gibson quotes Paul Valéry's definition that 'en somme, ce qu'on appelle un poème se compose pratiquement de fragments de poésie pure enchâssés dans la matière d'un discours'.

⁵⁷ Gibson, *Modern French Poets on Poetry*, p.147.

This condemnation was gradually reversed when perfection ceased to be considered a self-evident poetical virtue. Apart from Verhelst's *De boom N*; we can name his *Verbemelte*, Robert Anker's *Goede manieren* [*Good Manners*] (1989), Huub Beurskens' *Charme* [*Charm*] (1988), and Van Bastelaere's 'Pornschlegel' as examples of longer poems that resist a presentation as perfect compositions: the higher the number of words, the higher the number of unpremeditated permutations, and the more entropy.

Walter Benjamin observed that, in different historical periods, the ambitions of the artists were a direct consequence of the (technological) changes in their medium.⁵⁸ Whoever has read Oosterhoff's *Wij zagen ons in een kleine groep mensen veranderen* [*We saw ourselves being changed into a small group of people*] (2002) will want to apply Benjamin's observation to our age. Not only the poems in this collection go out of their way to escape the *finitude* and *closure* (Lentricchia) of the poetical text, but also (and especially) the 'moving poems' on the CD-ROM that comes with the poems. Together with Marian van Daalen and Marc Boog, Oosterhoff is one of the first poets in the Low Countries to have used the possibilities of electronic media for the writing of a kind of poetry that solicits a radically different reading attitude - a kind of poetry, perhaps, that demands a different and new reader.

5.5 The Problem of Intuition

We encounter the problem of intuition on the level of the conception of poetical creation, as the conflict of fundamentally different conceptions of how a poem is made (conceptions that, by the way, often can be found side by side in the work of one poet). The elucidation of this problem again requires a short excursion in the metaphors of modernist poetics. 'All that is fair and noble is the result of application and calculation' (Charles Baudelaire); 'enthusiasm is not the state of mind proper to a poet' (Valéry); 'the poet does his job by virtue of an effort of the mind' (Wallace Stevens); 'A poem rarely originates, a poem is made' (Gottfried Benn) – these are all famous statements that are often quoted when we want to demonstrate that the modern poet models himself on the cool constructor, the technician, the maker. Still, there are good reasons to doubt the sincerity of such polemical position statements. We have already noted, for instance, that since the age of romanticism the widely circulated poetological organism-rhetoric has surrounded poetry with a primarily thaumaturgical (and hence irrational) aura. A.L. Sötemann – who listed our earlier quotes in a by now classical essay⁵⁹ – says that he is aware 'that these statements register a certain doubt'.

That is the least we can say. In actual poetical fact, poetry, for the modernists, was anything but cool calculation. For the Low Countries, it is again Nijhoff and Van Ostaijen who can be named as exemplary: although they opposed the romantically-inspired poetics of their contemporaries (Wies Moens) or precursors (Willem Kloos) on strategic grounds, it was precisely from the Romantic catalogue that they borrowed the idea of poetry as an organic counterforce in an age of spreading mechanization. On the deeper level of their *Weltanschauung* they are much closer to the romantics than one would guess from their numerous anti-expressive statements.⁶⁰ The modernist poem, like the romantic poem, was presented as the manifestation of an

⁵⁸ Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', p.217 ff.

⁵⁹ Sötemann, 'Twee modernistische tradities', p.87.

⁶⁰ See Vaessens, *Circus Dubio & Schroom*, p.146 ff.

extraordinary harmony, as a natural (organic) counterforce to the artificial (mechanical) order of the modern world. The most important poetical instrument was then not so much reason, but rather intuition. Technical craftsmanship simply does not suffice for the poet, who remains dependent on a language-metaphysics⁶¹ and on irrational qualities such as his special sensitivity to sound and tone, a sensitivity Van Ostaijen explicitly situated in the unconscious. On this level also, New Critical theory proves to be faithful to the norms and premises of modern poetry. As McHale writes, 'The New Criticism retained, extended and developed the High Romantic view of poetry'. The poem is conceived as an 'organism' that is capable of 'giving access to special knowledge, knowledge perhaps superior to, certainly different from, scientific knowledge'.⁶² The poem transcends the everyday, rational forms of knowledge: it is neither scientific nor rational, but free and playful.

The postmodern poet radically problematizes the role of intuition. While the modernists attempted to somewhat mask their romantic orientation in this respect with an anti-expressive, anti-romantic rhetoric (the poem is said to be a Persian carpet, the poem a dispassionate constructor), the postmodernists unequivocally put the problem of intuition on the agenda, in the most drastic cases taking recourse to the radical obverse of intuition. Still, the postmodern treatment of intuition may be more complicated than such emphatically anti-intuitive poems seem to suggest, which becomes clear when we have a look at poets such as Stefan Hertmans, Erik Spinoy, and Miguel Declercq. Their work certainly displays a more rational approach than that of their modernist precursors, but at the same time we find a seemingly opposite fascination with romantic art. Unlike the more cautious modernists, who disguised their sympathies for aspects of romantic poetical doctrines behind an anti-romantic rhetoric, these poets dare to confront the Romantic legacy head-on, and Romantic motives and intertexts are prominent in their work. Spinoy derives the governing motive of his *Boze wolven* [*Bog Bad wolves*] (2002) from the Grimm's fairy tales, and his *Susette* (1990) is inspired by (the biography of) Hölderlin. Stefan Hertman's shows his fascination with Goya (*Goya als hond* [*Goya as a Dog*], 1999) while Miguel Declercq is inspired by the figure of Frankenstein (*Person@ges*, 1997). The complexity of Declercq's fascination becomes clear when we consider the rigorous and disciplined composition of his poetry (*Person@ges* even contains a sonnet cycle). Spinoy's interest in a Romantic thematics of the sublime is also apparent in his philosophical discussions of it (Kant, Lyotard).

The core of the problem of intuition is the unsolvable conflict between reason and feeling: is the poem the product of rational calculation (as is suggested in some of Krol's poems) or has it been inspired from up above (which would make the role of intuition decisive, as the same Krol suggested when he announced his turn to an 'anti-rational' style, because he had allegedly 'thought through' the whole process of rational thinking)? As ever, the issue cannot be reduced to an alleged choice by the postmodern poet for one or the other option. Reason and intuition, spirit and body – both extremes are being problematized and are presented in postmodern discourse less as opposite poles than as each other's radicalization.

5.6 The Problem of Autonomy

⁶¹ Sötemann, *Over poëtica en poëzie*, p.123.

⁶² McHale, 'Postmodern Lyric', p.24.

The question of autonomy is raised when the poet reflects on his position in relation to reality. The autonomous status of literature has been established long ago: the acquittal of Gerard (Kornelis van het) Reve in the blasphemy trial of 31 October 1967 at the Amsterdam court marks the non-literary world's acceptance of the idea that a literary text is never simply to be referred to (the author's) reality. This does, however, not mean that all writers embrace the consequence that art and reality have become fully independent domains, i.e., that the gap between literature and the reality it used to interfere in has become close to unbridgeable. Literature's struggle for autonomy has rendered it entirely harmless. In line with the unequivocal canonization of the giants from the 'pure' tradition of autonomous poetry, the idea of the autonomy of poetry was upheld as dogmatic by the autonomy movements in literary studies, such as the New Criticism; the poem became a 'linguistic thing' demanding a rational and technical approach that had to refrain from speculation about its maker: poetry was divorced from its real, physical origin.

In spite of a resistance against the sterility of this approach that was sounded since the sixties – we already referred to Susan Sontag, who stated that a mere intellectual, cognitive approach to art goes at the expense of its full (physical) experience – it has remained dominant until today. And however salutary this limitation may be in a didactic context for avoiding psychological and biographical fallacies, the new poetry registers a growing unease with the fact that the poet has been situated outside reality by these developments in poetry and in literary studies. For many new poets, the idea that art and reality are separated spheres appears as the wrong consequence of the achievement of artistic autonomy. The proponents of this consequence incorrectly assume that art, once it is no longer (ideologically) regulated by a sponsor or a ruler, can simply stop to concern itself with reality – that it has, in a sense, transcended that reality. These poets refuse to lose themselves in an entirely undemanding remoteness. The extent to which they still value autonomy indicates their desire not to be hindered by any imposed order, but this desire is always coupled with a desire for immersion in reality. One instance of a poet who continually plays with the poet's position to his own work is Jan Lauwereyns. In *Buigzaamheden* [*Flexibilities*] (2002) he appears in his own person, sometimes inconspicuously (in the poem 'Zalig Kerstmis, Mr. Lauwereyns' ['Merry Christmas, Mr Lauwereyns']), sometimes entirely obliquely. In the section 'De geest van het experiment' ['The Spirit of the Experiment'] we witness an 'I' following the brain operation one Dekaruto performs on one Rorensu. As such, this subject is not all that extraordinary for Lauwereyns, who for a long time did brain research in Japan; the section becomes more remarkable when we realize that 'Dekaruto' is the Japanese name for the modern philosopher Descartes, and that 'Rorensu' is Japanese for Laurens. Also in the poetry of Oosterhoff, Verhelst, Declercq, and Van Basteleare we find the poets appearing in their own name.

It should be clear that the postmodern poet's reconsideration of poetical autonomy is never tempted to simply opt for a poetics that has historically always opposed this autonomy. For reasons already mentioned when we discussed the problem of identity, he refuses a form of poetry in which the poetical subject expresses its deepest feelings or, from some burning desire to oppose injustice, furiously attacks reality. His attempt at immersion in reality relates in a complicated way to the remoteness of modern(ist) poetry. He does not accept the idea that the finished poem has completely emancipated itself from its author, but at the same time he radicalizes the epistemological doubt that brought the modernists to that idea: where the

modernists at times already did not dare to claim full responsibility for the finished poem, the postmodernists positively deny the possibility of any such control over language.

All this does not make the problem of the poet striving for participation any easier. The same goes for the ontological doubt that is characteristic of the postmodern: can the poet still say anything about reality when both reality and the poet have become unstable positions? Perhaps the problem of autonomy must unavoidably remain unsolved – which seems to be suggested by Verhelst's *Verhemelte*: this collection, which the poets announced as his last work of poetry, ends in an apocalyptic scene in which the poet falls from the sky, just after having there drawn, as the ultimate work of art, a 'totally useless, perfect circle in the sky'. Without answering the question if he wants to, or even can escape poetical autonomy, the postmodernist is sure that he cannot subscribe to the way in which autonomy has been deployed in the literary debate. Where the claim of autonomy sometimes still entailed a claim to objectivity in the case of the modernists ('what you are reading is more than the particular hang-up of the poet'), the postmodernists radically denounce that idea: every work carries his singular signature.

5.7 The Problem of Morality

Literary *engagement* may not have been very en vogue during the last decades, literary moralism has most become positively old-fashioned. It recalls associations with old ideological battles, with sermonizing and excommunications – all of these no longer belong in the current, dispersed literary climate that tolerates everything. In an age that has renounced all Grand Narratives, and that refuses to believe in any legitimizing foundation for human existence, the choice for an ethical subject for poetry is far from obvious. Still, some poets return to moral matters – questions concerning literature ('this is how poetry *ought to be* written') and questions concerning moral life – even when they are aware of the impossibility or inadvisability of any thinking in terms of good and evil. Their problem is that of morality.

This problem manifests itself in postmodern poetry on the level of the tendency or import of the poem. It can be approached from the same historical background as the problem of autonomy. The origins of the current problematic are again situated at the genesis of an autonomous literary field in the nineteenth century. *In Les règles de l'art, Pierre Bourdieu shows how it is clear that 'dans la phase héroïque de la conquête de l'autonomie, la rupture éthique est toujours, comme on le voit bien chez Baudelaire, une dimension fondamentale de toutes les ruptures esthétiques.'* ~~In *The Rules of Art*, Pierre Bourdieu shows how it is clear that, with poets like Baudelaire, 'that in this heroic phase of the conquest of autonomy the ethical rupture is always a fundamental dimension of all aesthetic ruptures.'~~⁶³ Poetry became the carrier of a *different* morality. After the struggle for literary autonomy was completed, the ethical break between literature and the civil world had led to a gap – a gap the modernist poets no longer could, or wanted to, bridge. The heroic posture of the autonomy movement did survive its victory: autonomy was narrowed down from an ethical to a literary matter (pure lyric, impersonality), and a degree of anti-moralism became self-evident.

Some of the literary consequences of this development for the literature of today were already treated in our discussion of the problem of autonomy. But there are also consequences that do not so much concern the literary text itself, but rather its sociological context: literary

debates, writer's self-positioning in relation to each other and to the world. The self-evident anti-moralism of modern poetry has led to the idea that poetry is no longer the appropriate site for a battle over good and evil, not even over what is good or bad in literature. Literary polemics between opposing tendencies are no longer part of contemporary culture: poets rather congratulate themselves on their renunciation of any firm belief – a complacent attitude that is often summed up as 'anything goes'. In a review of Ruben van Gogh's 1999 anthology *Sprong naar de sterren* [*Leap to the Stars*] (1999), Rob van Erkelens, in *De groene Amsterdammer*, noted the total absence of combativeness in the poets anthologized. 'They do not resist anything. And why would they? Anything goes'. Maarten Doorman writes that 'the poets have lost their team colors', and according to Rob Schouten, 'the old fortresses have been deserted'. The result of this development toward literary 'unruliness', which seems to be a logical consequence of that toward modernist autonomy, is a certain jolly shiftlessness among poets and critics: 'just be glad that we no longer have to fight'. Literary moralism is pointless and naïve, somewhat amusing and only to be frowned at. The proselytizing sermonizer is the exact opposite of the poet. This conception, which fully dominates mainstream poetical discourse, has in the meantime mad its way into the field of literary studies. In an article on 'literary pop-art in the Netherlands', Wilbert Smulders distinguishes a strongly anti-moralist literature as being the most 'vital' in the circus that the Dutch cultural field has become: 'a literature without sense, which refuses to provide any significance, or that at least finds its significance in entertainment and so merely wishes to be consumed'.⁶⁴

Smulders connects some phenomena in contemporary literature to social developments since the sixties and concludes that, in this period, it was sink or swim for the poets: 'they adapted (and survived) or they refused to adapt (and fossilized)'. Survival is a matter of micro-economy: the poet becomes an independent entrepreneur. Ours is, still according to Smulders, an age of a 'poésie du télé': the poet manages his public relations and knows which medium to use in order to be noted. The entertainment he provides wishes to be consumed, and so refrains from disturbing anyone: it affirms and reproduces the reigning norms. Whoever refuses to participate in this literary demobilization becomes a literary fossil. Smulder's examples are Kouwenaar, Ten Berge, Hamelink, Vogelaar, Michiels, and Polet. When we put aside these self-defeating instances, all looks bright in the world of literature. 'The vast majority' of writers has decided 'to occupy a place in the center of culture', and all is peaceful in this ideologically uncontested center. This situation conforms to what one can easily observe for oneself: manifestos are no longer written, new periodicals do not restrict themselves to one movement, but use the unsettlingly vague criterion of 'quality'. Still, not everybody is as comfortable with this peaceful situation. Rein Bloem, one of the fossils Smulders forgot to mention, observes:⁶⁵

Lack of ideological opposition unfailingly produces a leveling, whether we think of contemporary politics, news reports, or reality TV. Oppositional thinking dissolves in an ever widening ink stain; its oceanic scope acquires the depthlessness of the *Wadden Sea*

⁶³: Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, p.106 ~~Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, [quote french version]~~

⁶⁴ Smulders, 'Het einde van de modernistische poëtica'. p.5. following quotes: p.13, p.28

⁶⁵ Bloem, 'De mythe van moeilijk', p.67.

Waddenzee [...]. Things are even worse: whoever or whatever does not want to be part of the center will be removed to the periphery [...]. Whatever lies outside the shared field of vision must be removed from it. The pacification of poetry is wishful thinking, it is a lie.

Bloem here unmasks the anything goes-mentality as a conservative strategy aimed to secure the comfortable sense of homeliness in the middle. While the ‘pacification of poetry’, ‘the demobilization of the writer’, or the anti-moralist character of recent poetry are generally assumed to be self-evident, Bloem points to a (conscious or unconscious) cultural politics that is not at all aimed at democracy or broad participation but rather disables any discussion of the shades of (the stabilized power relations in) the cultural spectrum. ‘Anything goes’, then, becomes an instance of what Bourdieu, following Barthes, calls ‘doxa’:⁶⁶ the authoritative agents’ unvoiced shared belief in the self-evidence of the (their) social world. What is merely cultural is presented as natural.

As the mock-liberalism of the ‘anything goes’ is the main characteristic of the mainstream of contemporary poetry, it has become a prime target of avant-garde critique. The new poetry wants to escape the grasp of the postmodern regime whose self-evidence they oppose in numerous essays. They resist, in the words of Han van der Vegt, ‘a dogma that does not wish to be known as such’.⁶⁷ Oosterhoff warns for the identification of the postmodern and ‘the void in which anything goes because nothing matters’.⁶⁸ ‘Pluralism has soft banks’, as Marc Kregting expresses it when denouncing the false democracy in the literary ‘middle region’ that constructs a dam ‘behind which Our Kind of People collect their idea of culture. They allow anything in that makes the dam stronger, or seems to make it stronger’.⁶⁹

The poet who rejects the ‘anything goes’, who opposes the idea that there are ‘no traffic signs, no prohibitions and no rules’, *does* see certain norms, which clears the way for a new poetic engagement with morality. The postmodern poet wants to show how everything is determined by hidden and/or unconscious norms. But the fact that he *sees* these norms does not entail that he also welcomes, or even designs them. He does not prescribe any morality, but rather reminds himself and his reader that, after the demise of all shared meaning structures, each individual has to assume his own moral responsibility, a responsibility that brings new uncertainties. We do not find right-out moralists in the new poetry, but we do find poets who, against the mainstream, reflect on poetry as an art form that is in no way ethically neutral. Characteristic of these poets is their awareness of the complexity of the situation in the field of morally oriented poetry, an awareness that is also on the level of polemics. When the periodical *De zingende zaag* publishes a ‘manifesto issue’ in 1994, every single contributor explicitly or implicitly (i.e., formally, often using irony) opposes the idea of ‘the manifesto’. Their contributions all in one way or other resist the conventions of the genre. Still, the observation of the editor, George Moorsman, in the introduction to the issue, that the days of the definite manifesto lie behind us, seems to be premature. The meta-manifestoes do not indicate the end of the poetical manifesto, but more

⁶⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art*, p.303-308. Bourdieu, *the Rules of Art*, p.225-8 and p.425. ~~xxxx~~

⁶⁷ Van der Vegt, ‘De eenzame barbaar’, p.58.

⁶⁸ Oosterhoff, *Ook de schapen dachten na*, p.46.

⁶⁹ Kregting, ‘Wij hebben zo’n literatuur niet’, p.243 and p.246.

precisely the fact that the poets (Kregting, Hans Kloos, H.H. Ter Balkt, Duinker, Spinoy, Hüsgen) are lucidly aware of the complications besetting a moral conception of poetry, and it is these complications that are specific to the current, postmodern situation.⁷⁰

6. In Conclusion: Anything Goes, or Does it?

Already within modernist and romantic poetics, we find an ambivalent attitude toward rigid demarcations in schools or movements, and postmodernism more drastically, and by its very nature, opposes every stable classification or label. Erik Spinoy's 1994 observation on the relation between postmodernism and the literary manifesto can, in our view, be more generally applied to the issue of labeling as such:⁷¹

The genre of the manifesto is essentially tied to a time and place that are no longer ours. A 'real' manifesto aspires to the knowledge of an absolute truth it wants to 'manifest'. It therefore displays the relentless intolerance and arrogance that go with such a pretense. The conviction that one possesses the truth and that one can, on that ground, articulate the 'correct rules' can no longer be taken seriously in a time that has gained insight in the temporal and local character of every 'truth' – not in the field of politics, religion, morals, and even less in the field of art.

Our research is, then, not inspired by an insatiable hunger for classifications. We have not attempted a 'complete' history of recent poetry in the Low Countries that remaps the whole field, nor did we hope to re-package a group of poets as a movement. The poets we discussed - either extensively or in passing – are not *by definition* postmodern poets; nor are the poets that we did not discuss *by definition* not postmodern poets. The work of the ones we discussed is marked by an interest in questions of coherence, authenticity, or identity (sometimes with one of these, sometimes with a combination of them). As readers, we found ourselves incapable to give a satisfying account of their practice in terms of the generally accepted reading methods, as it rejects the three modernist premises we described. For the postmodern poet, poetry is a discourse looking for its own rules, and is in no way still referable to a Grand Narrative: as Lyotard has it in what has become a classical (to use the wrong term) definition, '[s]implifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives'.⁷² Even if this is a simplification, it at least indicates that especially on the subject of postmodernism, no new Grand Narrative should be attempted.

What we have tried to correct is the prevailing image of postmodernism as some kind of 'lucky bag' – a cliché that has been gaining currency in poetry criticism and literary debates since 1988, especially in the Netherlands. This so-called 'postmodernism' is characterized by a total eclecticism that is then summed up in the phrase that 'anything goes'. Postmodernism becomes the label for total poetical permissiveness that is often applied to new forms of poetry that in one way or another approach popular culture: either because of their greater accessibility (as in performance-poetry), or because they dress up their basically traditionally romantic poetics with

⁷⁰ For the manifesto and postmodernism, Grüttemeier, 'Das Manifest ist tot – es lebe das Manifest!.

⁷¹ Spinoy, 'Pump up the volume!', p.102.

⁷² Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiv.

showy arbitrary borrowings from contemporary 'low culture'. Lyotard, for one, has been very critical of this conception of postmodernism. In *The Postmodern Explained*, his critique of the 'anything goes'-mentality goes as follows:⁷³

Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: you listen to reggae; you watch a western; you eat McDonald's at midday and local cuisine at night; you wear Paris perfume in Tokyo and dress retro in Hong Kong; knowledge is the stuff of TV game shows. It is easy to find a public for eclectic works. When art makes itself kitsch, it panders to the disorder that reigns in the 'taste' of the patron. Together, artist, gallery owner, critic, and public indulge one another in the Anything Goes – it's time to relax. But this realism of Anything Goes is the realism of money: in the absence of aesthetic criteria, it is still possible and useful to measure the value of works by the profits they realize.

These reservations are sounded not only in philosophy and sociology, but also in poetry. We contend that it is simply incorrect to believe that the superficial celebration of the anything goes as it can be heard in literature and literary criticism has anything to do with today's postmodern condition.

⁷³ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, p. 8.

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