

Cannibalism and Literary Indigestibility: Figurations of Violence in Bart Koubaa's *De leraar*

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Abstract

Several novels that respond to the events on September 11, 2001 in more or less direct ways engage with the issue of violence. While many of these novels centre on external agents of violence inflicted upon Western societies, this article draws attention to recent literary preoccupations with violence as an intra-European phenomenon by zooming in on Bart Koubaa's novel *De leraar* (2009): the narrative of a disillusioned teacher who turns out to be a cannibal. The article analyses the intertwining of different forms of violence in this novel in the context of recent rearrangements in the European political landscape, a politics of fear of 'others' and, particularly, a shift in Dutch public rhetoric on migration and multiculturalism labelled as 'new realism'. Through an ambivalent and often ironic use of 'new realist', liberal humanist, and right-wing discourses, the novel teases out the violent desires inherent in dominant European discourses on migration, tolerance and hospitality, and the interrelatedness of 'external' violence, such as terrorism, with a kind of violence generated by the liberal West.

The article unravels the novel's performance and critique of violence, and addresses its affective operations on the reader by introducing the concept of 'literary indigestibility'. This concept is brought to bear on the implications of literature's subjectivisation of 'indigestible', untranslatable subjects (here, a European cannibal), as well as literature's potential intervention in public rhetoric in ways that cannot be easily 'digested', i.e. appropriated into familiar categories and 'rational' arguments.

Keywords: Violence, Post-9/11 Literature, European Identity, New Realism, Cannibalism, Bart Koubaa

Since the events on 11 September 2001, the fear of others has been a central mobilising force in politics both in the United States and in several European coun-

tries. These ‘others’ – terrorists, Muslim fundamentalists, but also ethnic minorities and migrants – are perceived as a threat to citizens of the West and their way of life. This politics accompanies significant rearrangements in the European political landscape since 2001: the emergence of anti-immigrant populist parties, the ‘mainstreaming’ of anti-immigration policies, the sense of living in perpetual crisis and the intensification of nationalism in a time of waning nation-state sovereignty.¹

In this fear-driven politics, violence is primarily located in external ‘others’, against which Western societies feel the need to barricade themselves, often by using violent force in the name of public security. Several literary works written both in the United States and Europe after what has been nicknamed ‘9/11’ address this climate of fear and the ways it has affected the relation between self and other in the ‘post-9/11’ Western world. Novels that deal with the events of 9/11 in a more or less direct manner often focus on the victims, the traumatic imprint of the terrorist attacks on people’s lives and the process of either national or individual recuperation. Some novels delve into the psyche of those ‘others’, the terrorists, in an attempt to understand their motives. In doing so, they sometimes link contemporary terrorism or Muslim fundamentalism, and the violence it has exerted in Western realities, with global capitalism and US politics, suggesting terrorism as a kind of violence that is (also) bred ‘at home’ in the West. Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), John Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006), and Salman Rushdie’s *Salim al-Murshid* (2005) are examples of the latter literary trend.

In European novels that deal with the events of 9/11 and the way they have infiltrated the European psyche, Kristiaan Versluys detects a general sense of solidarity with the United States: Europe and the United States appear united under the concept of ‘the West’.² Despite the rekindling of anti-American sentiment in Europe as a result of the US war against Iraq, European novels, according to Versluys, predominantly projected a ‘continuing Western transatlantic discursive community, sharing essential values and traditions’.³

In most of the so-called ‘9/11 novels’ that address the issue of violence, the agent of violence remains external to Americans or to the West.⁴ It either stems from a wholly external terrorist threat, confirming the divide between the ‘forces of good’ and the ‘forces of evil’, or it derives from (marginalised) Muslims raised within American society (as in Updike’s *Terrorist*), or it is linked with American politics and its role in global capitalism (as in Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*). But even in the latter case, fundamentalist violence represents a threat that still needs a (semi-)external other in order to be materialised, despite the fact that in Hamid’s novel the United States are implicated in breeding this violence, almost in a suicidal manner.

In Europe today, as the temporal distance to the events of 9/11 grows bigger, direct literary engagements with these events grow scarcer. Nevertheless, the imprints of the terrorist attacks both on American and on European ground that

mark our post-9/11 world, and the significant developments that have been reshaping the political and social landscape in Europe since the beginning of this century, are central concerns in recent European literature. While many '9/11 novels', especially those published in the first years after 9/11, showed a preoccupation with external agents of violence, however, there may also be another trend in European literature today: a tendency to draw attention away from the 'other' as a violent agent (the terrorist, the fundamentalist, the marginalised foreigner, the migrant) and to underscore Europe itself as a space that generates violence instead of just being on the receiving end. Thus, while in post-9/11 politics non-Western 'others' living within or outside Western societies are regularly tagged as agents of violence, European literature also addresses forms of violence 'inside the gates' of Europe: violence that is endemic in European societies and/or performed by Western European agents.

Whether there is currently an increasing preoccupation with forms of intra-European violence in Western European literature is a hypothesis that would call for extensive research into recent literary production. It would also require critical scrutiny and careful use of the category 'European literature' itself, which is anything but homogeneous or self-evident. This kind of research is part of a larger project that falls outside the scope of this article. In the following, I zoom in on a specific work that foregrounds violence as an intra-European phenomenon: *De leraar* (The Teacher), a novel by Flemish author Bart Koubaa published in 2009. My reading of *De leraar* will lay out the contours that a literary preoccupation with intra-European violence may take. It will hopefully also serve as an impetus for further research into the issue of violence in contemporary European literatures. My focus on a work of Dutch literature deviates from the Anglo-American focus of studies of '9/11 literature', thereby encouraging the study of literatures from minor European languages in a transnational framework shaped by the challenges post-9/11 Europe is facing.⁵

In *De leraar*, the reader enters the mind of a disillusioned teacher in a Flemish secondary school, in which most of the students come from underprivileged migrant families. As readers find out towards the end of the narrative, the protagonist turns out to be a cannibal, who has murdered and consumed thirteen people, most of which belonged to ethnic minorities. By centring on this agent of extreme violence, I address the implications of the *subjectivisation* of such a figure in literature: the fact that a cannibal becomes the protagonist and narrator of a novel, inviting the reader to experience the world through his eyes.

This essay probes figurations of violence in this novel in the context of the aforementioned rearrangements in the European political landscape, and, particularly, of a shift in Dutch public rhetoric on migration and multiculturalism, roughly introduced in 2000, and labelled as 'new realism'. Although to a certain extent the novel will be read as symptomatic of these contextual factors, the discursive context in which I situate it does not assume an explanatory function.

Rather, I pay attention to the ways in which the novel illuminates and refashions its context rather than being reduced to a 'passive representation of external circumstances'.⁶ The novel unravels a critique of the inconsistencies and blind spots of dominant discourses on migration and multiculturalism, as well as the violence inherent in Western liberal discourse and its foundational categories, such as tolerance and hospitality. In undertaking an analysis of the discourses and ideologies that run through *De Ieraar*, I also set out to locate the singularity and difference of the novel from these discourses. Through this difference, I show how it yields an intriguing understanding of this context.

De Ieraar stages the intertwinement of different forms of violence within Western societies, as well as the interrelatedness of 'external' violence, such as terrorism, with a kind of violence generated by the liberal West. In what follows, I look at the rhetorical and narrative strategies through which violence is staged. In order to explore figurations of violence in the novel, I take up the distinction made by Slavoj Žižek between three forms of violence: *subjective* violence, which is visible and performed by a 'clearly identifiable agent'; *symbolic* violence, which is inscribed in language; and *systemic* violence, which is embedded in economic and political structures.⁷ The last two kinds of violence, which Žižek characterises as 'objective', are invisible and thus more difficult to detect and interrogate. Subjective, visible violence, Žižek argues, is perceived as such 'against the background of a non-violent zero-level'. Objective violence defines and sustains this 'zero-level': it is 'inherent to this "normal" state of things' and is therefore invisible. However, it is precisely this kind of invisible violence that needs to be addressed in order for us to understand 'what otherwise seem to be "irrational" explosions of subjective violence'.⁸ Ideology is most effective when things appear neutralised into an 'accepted background'. The same applies to 'objective violence', which 'at its purest appears as its opposite': as the ground we occupy, 'the air we breathe'.⁹

The intertwinement of systemic and symbolic violence with subjective violence takes centre stage in my reading of *De Ieraar*. In probing figurations of violence in the novel and trying to establish the novel's position vis-à-vis the discourses it accommodates and criticises, there is always the risk of doing violence to the work itself in the act of reading. Producing a coherent interpretation by bypassing contradictions, deviant details, unfitting elements and residues of meaning would be a form this interpretive violence may take. I thus try to be attentive to elements that mark the work's unwillingness to complete the signifying transaction with the reader in a conclusive manner.¹⁰

The novel's controversial protagonist reiterates but also ironises and debunks the 'logos' and central categories of public rhetoric. The novel, I will argue, makes readers alert to invisible forms of violence at play in familiar discourses and practices that seem 'innocent', ethical and virtuous. In doing so, it makes readers uncomfortable. In order to capture the novel's main operation on the reader, I introduce the concept of 'literary indigestibility'. This concept refers

both to literature's subjectivisation of 'indigestible', untranslatable subjects, as well as to 'indigestibility' as an operation of literature itself, which constitutes its force in the social and political field. This operation captures literature's ability to project the ambiguity and underlying violence in the vocabulary of public rhetoric in ways that cannot be easily 'digested', i.e. appropriated into familiar categories and arguments. Through its critique of violence, however, the novel also conveys the wish to seek alternative resolutions of political dilemmas and dominant fantasies.

Violence inside the Gates: New Realism and post-9/11 Europe

The shattering of the image of Holland as a successful multicultural experiment gave way to a new constructed image, which found one of its first expressions in the bleak terms of what Paul Scheffer in an article in *NRC Handelsblad* in 2000 called the 'multicultural drama'.¹¹ According to this discursive shift, which roughly took off at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the preceding image of Holland as a happy multicultural society supposedly constituted a convenient (or hypocritical) covering of the 'truth' about multiculturalism, which now needed to be exposed. Baukje Prins in her study *Voorbij de onschuld: Het debat over integratie in Nederland* (2004) termed the rhetoric accompanying this shift as 'new realism' ('nieuw realisme'). In the rhetoric of the 'new realism', which has been popular in public debates on integration and multiculturalism in the last twelve years, there is a recourse to an undisputed notion of 'reality' that one should dare to address 'as it is', without hiding behind relativistic approaches and nuanced or complex arguments. The new 'truth' and the 'tough' reality that Dutch society is faced with served as legitimation for harsh measures. The tightening of immigration laws as well as several proposals for anti-immigration (and anti-Islamic) measures by right-wing politicians have dominated the policies and political discussions of the last decade in Holland and Belgium.

This discursive shift resonates in practices witnessed in several European governments since 9/11. In an article in *The Guardian* (2010), Žižek discusses recent incidents of violent expulsion of 'unwanted' others from European nation states and violent attitudes toward migrants as symptoms of a new politics. This politics uses fear in order to mobilise citizens, turning them into a paranoid multitude. As Žižek writes,

The big event of the first decade of the new millenium, was when anti-immigration politics went mainstream and finally cut the umbilical cord that had connected it to far right fringe parties. From France to Germany, from Austria to Holland, in the new spirit of pride in one's cultural and historical identity, the main parties now find it acceptable to stress that immigrants are guests

who have to accommodate themselves to the cultural values that define the host society – ‘it is our country, love it or leave it’ is the message.

When dealing with the ‘immigrant threat’, Žižek argues, European governments may righteously turn down ‘direct populist racism as “unreasonable” and unacceptable for our democratic standards’ but at the same time they issue “‘reasonably” racist protective measures’. These measures are granted legitimacy on the basis of the supposed threat nation states face from problematic migrant groups or immigration flows, especially from Islamic countries – what Dutch right-wing politician Geert Wilders has typically called a ‘tsunami of islamisation’. ‘Reasonably’ harsh anti-immigrant measures are therefore presented as necessary in order to prevent worse violent outbursts. The tendency to label anti-immigration measures as ‘reasonable’ or ‘necessary’ in dealing with a threatening ‘reality’ is what Žižek calls ‘barbarism with a human face’.

In his recent book *The Fear of Barbarians* (2010), Franco-Bulgarian philosopher Tzvetan Todorov also draws attention to the violence generated by our fear of others in the West since 9/11.¹² Todorov looks at Western countries today as dominated by fear, and specifically the fear of barbarians. Reactions of the United States to the 9/11 attacks, including military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere under the banner of the ‘war on terror’, demonstrate the dangers of giving in to this fear. Harsh anti-immigration policies and xenophobia in European countries in the years after 9/11 are manifestations of the same fear. His central thesis is that our fear of barbarians threatens to turn us into barbarians. While ‘we’ (by ‘we’ Todorov refers to the West) set out to defend democratic and humanist values, we end up sacrificing and betraying them.¹³

For Todorov, instances of this kind of violence in Europe today are contrary to the spirit of Europe itself. He thus seems to find solace in certain European values, which hold a more reassuring message for the future. The kind of liberal humanism Todorov represents is starkly at odds with Žižek’s Marxist perspective, and this becomes evident in the role Todorov reserves for Europe in countering the dangers that lie in the current ‘fear of barbarians’ in the West.

In a chapter in his book entitled ‘European Identity’, Todorov delineates the values that distinguish Europe from the rest of the world and, by extension, the values ‘we’ would need to protect in the post-9/11 world. Refusing to identify European identity with a specific tradition, he refrains from defining it in essentialist terms. Rather, he situates European identity primarily in plurality: the way Europe accommodates the plurality of the ‘regional, national, religious and cultural identities that constitute it’ forms the basis for European unity.¹⁴ This plurality allows the coexistence of different, even contradictory, perspectives and stimulates productive competition and critical thought, as all ‘values can be subjected to examination’.¹⁵ What is more, this pluralism ‘prevents one of the participants assuming a hegemonic position and setting himself up as a tyrant over the

others'.¹⁶ Historically, Europe exhibits an openness to foreign, external influences but also manages to grant 'differences the same status': differences receive an equal, legitimate status, as long as they also conform to a general normative framework, which forms the basis for unity. The European Union is a community of 'autonomous' but, significantly, 'consenting' states.¹⁷

Todorov's presentation of European identity as plural, egalitarian, and non-hegemonic acquires an ironic undertone in light of the current crisis in Europe and the polarisations and unequal power relations among European nation states that this crisis has intensified. What underlies his sketch of Europe, however, is an unconditional belief in consensus democracy. The value of tolerance is for Todorov the minimal condition for resorting conflict not by force but 'simply by negotiation and persuasion.'¹⁸ There is, in my view, nothing 'simply' or self-evidently non-hegemonic about this logic of consensus. As Chantal Mouffe argues, the 'conflictual dimension of social life' is a necessary condition for democratic politics. Consensus, on the other hand, tries to eliminate or artificially suppress conflict.¹⁹ What underlies the ideal of consensus, Danielle Bouchard adds, is an attempt to exclude and erase all dissimilar, improper and barbarous elements or identities that are indefinable and block communication.²⁰ Thus, in idealising consensus, Todorov bypasses the violence inherent in this logic. 'European identity', he states, 'is founded on the renunciation of violence'.²¹

Ultimately, in Todorov's vision, 'the idea of civilization merges into that of Europe' and the project of the European Union is 'an attempt to make the way the world works a little more civilized'.²² European values (the legacy of European Enlightenment) and the ideal of 'Europeanisation' should guide the liberal democratic West today. Of course, when Europe deviates from these values – for example, by exercising violence – that is undoubtedly, according to Todorov, barbaric. But Todorov's conceptualisation of European identity makes it possible to view phenomena of Western violence as deviations and *exceptions* to the rule – the rule being that European humanist values privilege plurality and openness to others. Todorov's approach suggests that instances of intra-European violence are the errant stitches in the fabric of a European identity that is synonymous with civilisation, and that these errant stitches can be amended if Europeans stay faithful to their core values. By contrast, Žižek would detect behind phenomena of visible intra-European violence a far more pervasive and invisible systemic or symbolic violence, endemic in neoliberal capitalist practices and European politics. While for Žižek the worst violence lies behind visible violent acts – or, more precisely, is omnipresent and all-pervasive, and yet goes unnoticed – Todorov's account implies that violent or barbaric phenomena in Europe *stay* at the surface, as a temporary overshadowing of the true European spirit of peaceful consensus and plurality.

Todorov does not fully identify Europe with 'the West'. In fact, he detects a fissure within the West between the European Union and the United States. This

rift has assumed a more pronounced form since the collapse of the Berlin wall and the fall of Eastern bloc communism.²³ In laying out the nature of this fissure, which pertains both to political action and ideals, Todorov emphatically casts the United States in a less favourable light. Europe is typified by a stronger sense of history, which reinforces a 'self-critical reflex'. More dissenting voices enjoy freedom of expression in Europe than in the United States, and Europe appears to be more self-conscious, self-critical and less nationalistic. In the United States, by contrast, the unity of a single state manifests itself in the exclusion of dissenting voices, which do not easily enter mainstream media. While Europe no longer nurses 'dreams of empire', the United States follow a more 'hegemonic and imperial model'. In politics, even though European nation states have taken part in the US 'war on terror', they tend to follow American policies with 'extreme reluctance', as Europe prefers to resolve conflict through negotiation rather than military force.²⁴

Todorov's assumed rift between Europe and the United States would encounter a countercurrent in post-9/11 European literature which, if we take up Versluys' argument, seems to reinforce the sense of a 'transatlantic discursive community'. But whether or not one accepts Todorov's distinction between Europe and the United States, my reading of *De leraar* through the issue of violence will test Todorov's assumed distinctiveness of the European space as ultimately plural, self-critical and open to dissenting voices and otherness. I am particularly attentive to the ways in which, in the space of literature, this sketch of Europe relates to, and clashes with, the aforementioned developments in the European discursive and political landscape after 9/11, including anti-immigration policies and attempts to 'protect' the 'European subject' from external others by constructing barricades and closing borders.

The 'Reasonable' Face of Symbolic Violence

The protagonist in *De leraar* reiterates the discourse that promotes the 'barbarism with a human face' Žižek talks about, but in a way that exposes its 'nonhuman' face. The main part of the book comprises 120 short chapters, ranging from a single line to a few pages each, in which the protagonist, nicknamed 'the Crow', recounts incidents from his everyday life as a schoolteacher. The Crow is a fifty-five year-old teacher in a public school for professional training ('beroepsopleiding'). His task consists in improving his students' Dutch language skills and teaching them how to name car parts in correct Dutch. The 120 chapters of his narrative resemble diary entries, through which we get a fragmented narrative about his relations with students and colleagues, his outlook on society and the educational system, and childhood memories.

The Teacher introduces himself as a down-to-earth person ('I stand with both feet on the ground and read the newspaper every day').²⁵ Already in the first

pages of his narrative, he reflects on a change in the way he and his colleagues talk. While a few years earlier none of the teachers would dare speak openly about the ills of the educational system, now 'we are not ashamed anymore of what we think, we do not withhold our opinions anymore'.²⁶ This observation partakes in the rhetoric of the 'new realism', marked by a disdain for political correctness: the truth about society and its ills can finally be told without restraints. Indeed, in the rest of his narrative the Teacher misses no chance to expose the 'truth' about the deplorable state both of his students and of an educational system that is foreign to their needs.

His students, the majority of which come from underprivileged neighbourhoods with a high criminality rate, lack the skills and language to rise above their grim fate. In the Teacher's eyes, they are a lost cause. According to the official education plans sent from Brussels, the objective of his teaching should be that students 'develop skills and attitudes that will allow them to function in an adequate and meaningful way as adults in society'.²⁷ Despite this noble goal, the Teacher knows that the future prospects of his students are practically non-existent: these are teenagers from poor families, who cannot utter a single sentence in correct Dutch. The gap between the students' actual needs and the objectives set by the ministry of education is a recurrent theme in his narrative, and creates an ironic tension between official discourse and 'reality', as seen from his perspective. 'If we look at the numbers', he remarks, 'we see that everything is going well; we even make progress, which cannot be said about every school'.²⁸ However, statistics, as well as the educational ideals formulated in Brussels, have no bearing on this school. The students at his school and the ministry of education speak two 'languages' foreign to each other.

For the Teacher, his teenage students are 'language prisoners': language is not a system of thought but an obstacle to communicating their experience. His diagnosis of a bleak reality behind the idealisations of official discourse, and his consequent disillusionment, may tempt readers to identify with his perspective. Many may find his diagnosis refreshingly truthful, reasonable and successful in exposing the hypocrisy of state discourse. Readers who, consciously or not, have internalised the discourse of the 'new realism' are likely to applaud his willingness to speak his mind and tell the 'truth' beyond convenient coverings. Readers may also find his attitude to the predicament of these teenagers sympathetic, invested with paternal support and understanding.

This, however, is far from the whole story. The novel constantly tempts the reader to identify with the perspective of a teacher that will prove to be a perverse cannibal, while it constantly inserts new elements that would make such an identification highly disturbing. Thus, if we focus on the power structures implicit in the Teacher's language, the 'truth' that is being disclosed about the students becomes more suspect than we may initially think. His attitude to the students is often marked by condescension, and his 'reasonable' speech is interspersed with

markers of violence, both physical and linguistic. Thus, he makes a Moroccan student write the sentence 'I am a monkey' a hundred times. His supportive attitude is often combined with violent fantasies, like the wish to beat his students, which is realised when he gets into a fight with them during the rehearsal of a school play.²⁹ Their attempts to speak Dutch sound to him like the mumblings of a barbarian language or, worse, like animal sounds.³⁰ 'The more pitiful their Dutch is', the Teacher remarks, 'the stronger their body language, their deaf and dumb slapstick'.³¹ His migrant students are sad actors in a comedy performed for his amusement. His speech casts them as primitive creatures acting upon instinct, not reason. Even the teacher of Islamic studies at his school is nicknamed 'King Kong', connoting the backwardness of Islamic faith, which many of his students belong to.

Sympathy and condescension thus appear as two sides of the same coin, often merged in the same utterance: 'They are not the worst. They can sometimes drive me crazy, but they are still people, and people can ask for forgiveness'.³² Even when he shows sympathy, his speech betrays his will to maintain his sovereign power over them: he represents the Law of a (democratic) society that subjectivises them as lesser citizens.

Sympathy and cynicism, support and condescension, create a strange mixture in his narrative. The reader's possible temptation to identify with the narrator, therefore, holds the danger of giving in to the lure of a discourse that is invested with violence. As the biggest part of the novel is narrated by the Teacher, the reader, having no other authorial voice to rely on, is forced to follow the Teacher's perspective and constantly oscillates between identification and disidentification. The tendency to identify with the narrator may alert the reader to the symbolic violence (the racism, the condescension, the violent fantasies) implicit in her own 'reasonable' views towards foreigners and migrants. Signs of violence in the Teacher's speech become increasingly explicit, and towards the end the reader finds out that she has been identifying with a cannibal. The reader's possible (initial) identification with the Teacher makes her complicitous with his violence: a discursive violence, which also finds literal expression in extreme physical violence. 'Nobody is innocent', the Teacher characteristically remarks when, at the very end, after his arrest, someone refers to his victims as 'innocent' people.³³

Trying to pin down the Teacher's political and ideological persuasion is a complicated venture. The racist overtones of his speech, which sometimes become unabashedly overt, tempt us to view him as a representative of the extreme right. After all, he concedes that his vote goes (for the first time in his life, he claims) to the extreme right. His speech, however, is replete with contradictions and conflicting claims, making any attempt to categorise him as a representative of a single discourse or ideological conviction futile. His narrative is a tension field in which different discourses and ideological perspectives reinforce or undermine each other. Thus, the absolutism of his views is often undercut by a relativising

impulse, such as his statement that he does not believe in objective truth, as there are multiple perspectives from which the same event can be constructed.³⁴

At times, racist convictions give way to more nuanced perspectives, which emerge from an ironic mimicking of right-wing discourse: 'Of course it would be easy and unethical to say that the weak are weak because they are unlucky, genetically and in terms of environment; it is indeed their own fault if they do not jump at the chances that are offered to them to step out of the vicious circle; especially the chances that our school offers them'.³⁵ Considering his low opinion of the school and the educational system, the reader senses the irony in this statement. Verbal irony is one of the most distinctive rhetorical devices in his narrative. Irony can be generally defined as 'the intentional transmission of both information and evaluative attitude other than what is explicitly presented'.³⁶ In the above statement, the reader can infer that the speaker holds the opposite opinion from the one he explicitly articulates. But why not simply say what he means, then? The function of such an ironic statement is very different from a literal stating of one's view. Although it is often described as a 'simple antiphrastic substitution of the unsaid (called the "ironic" meaning) for its opposite, the said (called the "literal" meaning)', Linda Hutcheon argues that irony is 'inclusive and relational', requiring the interaction of the 'said' with the 'unsaid', not the replacement of the one with the other.³⁷ The Teacher's ironic statement stages the tension between two conflicting viewpoints: a right-wing discourse that would hold the weak responsible for their conditions versus a Marxist view that holds the violence of the system responsible for the condition of the lower classes. Presented with both perspectives, the reader may make her own choices.

The narrator's ironisation of several viewpoints and discourses is not just a means of dismissing them. It underscores the ability of language to accommodate more than one perspective, code and ideology in the same utterance – what Mikhail Bakhtin calls 'linguistic hybridity'.³⁸ Irony can use this ability in language to create semantic confusion and undermine 'stated meaning by removing the semantic security of "one signifier: one signified" and by revealing the complex inclusive, relational and differential nature of ironic meaning-making'.³⁹ Thus, irony in the narrator's speech exposes the instability of language, inviting the reader to read both right-wing or left-wing discourses, as well as official state discourse, with suspicion.

What is more, the narrator's ironisation brings out the ambiguity inherent in common beliefs: 'That liberalism forces our students to grab a knife is blasphemy, my generation has had a solid upbringing, a proof thereof are the aforementioned objectives and educational plans of the Flemish Community'.⁴⁰ Subjective violence (the weak grabbing their knives) is here suggested as a response to Western neoliberal structures, which deprive certain groups of the means to protest and claim a future. The violence performed by the 'other' – here, disenfranchised ethnic minorities – is presented as a side-effect of the liberal system

itself. Violence would be the only way for them to claim visibility in a social order that denies them representation. At the same time, the Teacher's diagnosis here could also end up giving credence to the general prejudice that associates these 'others' with the threat of violence, especially in dominant rhetoric since 9/11. Opening up discourses to ironic, subversive citations also entails the risk of reinforcing dominant discourses instead of destabilising them – a consequence of the open-endedness of irony and the open temporality of utterances.

The symbolic violence of language is related to the fact that it is always ideologically invested. The Teacher names a series of stereotypes circulating in the Dutch and Flemish communities about foreigners and migrants, and concludes:

My students know very well how people think about them and their family, how their faith is considered as the root of all evil, how they are branded as the cause for lack of safety. The language I teach is an instrument to say something about ourselves and our surroundings, every word draws a boundary and gets in the way of nuancing, my students feel that, just as the whole world population feels what love and hate is but has no words for them; which does not mean that they are stupid or insensitive, it is the language, our language, that makes sure that we get this impression.⁴¹

The inability of his students to effectively respond to social prejudice and formulate a counterdiscourse is here not only attributed to their poor command of the Dutch language, but to the ideologies inscribed in this language. Thus, language subjectivises them in a specific way: stupid or, worse, dangerous citizens, (potential) criminals or terrorists, a threat to public safety and the 'root of all evil'. Although he refers to language as an 'instrument', the overall suggestion is that language is more than a transparent medium through which a fully formed pre-linguistic experience finds expression. Language constructs 'ourselves' and 'our surroundings' by drawing boundaries – such as the boundaries between 'autochthonous' and 'allochthonous' citizens.⁴² These boundaries mark the exclusionary violence of language, which remains invisible and, in Žižek's terms, 'objective' so that, in the Teacher's words, 'we get this impression' as something natural. The Teacher's comment suggests that even if his students would speak perfect Dutch, this language would still not be suitable for capturing their subjectivity: how can they posit a legitimate self in a language that constructs them as inferior, dangerous objects, denying them visibility in the social?

Nevertheless, there is an instance in which his students' linguistic deficiency becomes an instrument of resistance and critique. The Teacher gives his students an exercise: he divides a series of Dutch proverbs into two parts, and places each part in two columns. The students are asked to match each half of every proverb with its corresponding other half in the opposite column. The results of the exercise are highly disappointing but, interestingly, one of the students makes a

single (incorrect) connection between two sentence parts in the two columns: 'Oost, West, tikt het nergens'.⁴³ The parts comprising this erroneous proverb belong to two Dutch proverbs with the same meaning:

'Zoals het klokje thuis tikt / tikt het nergens'.

'Oost West / thuis best'.

Both proverbs correspond to the English expression 'there is no place like home'. Both contain the word 'home' ('thuis'). However, the student joins precisely those two sentence parts from which the word 'home' is missing. His mismatched new proverb yields the opposite meaning of the two correct proverbs. A literal translation gives us: 'East, West, it ticks nowhere'. The lines of connection in the exercise – allegorising perhaps the longed-for connection to the 'host' culture through a better command of the language – turn into lines of exclusion in the resulting new proverb: the same society in which some are 'at home', makes the concept of 'home' alien to others. The verb 'tick', taken out of its context (the clock) in this new word-combination, metonymically evokes the association with bombs and terrorism. This violent connotation turns the homely, safe content of these proverbs into something uncanny and violent: a 'ticking bomb' is attached, as it were, to the notion 'home.' The association of 'ticking' with terrorism evokes the common fear that the violent agent is the one *without* a home (the migrant). However, in the novel the actual agent of extreme violence is the one who is 'at home': the Teacher himself. The mismatched proverb highlights the significance of *erratic utterances* in exposing the symbolic violence of language and, perhaps, making this violence contestable. If the power of a proverb resides in its naturalisation by convention, which makes us accept its meaning as self-evident, the student's erratic rewriting of two common proverbs deprives them of their familiarity and persuasiveness, and draws attention to their underlying ideological assumptions.

With its contradictions, the Teacher's speech does not only deconstruct the discourses it ironises, but also itself. Pinpointing the protagonist's 'true' ideological identity is hard, as his speech fluctuates from an (extreme) right-wing perspective, at times explicitly racist, to a Marxist critique of (neo)liberal discourse. This constant movement across the ideological spectrum precludes any attempt to place him under one of the categories of identity politics.

His narrative is all about concealment and disclosure: from the disclosure of the purported ugly truth about the educational system in Flanders, to the gradual disclosure of the Teacher's own despicable acts. However, these disclosures do not bring us closer to a notion of 'truth' that can be safely posited. The Teacher remains a confusing figure, whose conflicting views hold the seeds of their own deconstruction. What is disclosed, then, is not so much the 'truth' about him or society, but rather the *violence* of any discourse that would assert to grant access to

the truth. A discourse that claims to reveal the ‘truth’ or the ‘facts’ behind hypocritical coverings, which is precisely what the discourse of ‘new realism’ does, is the most ideological of all, as it makes its ideological premises (and their violence) invisible – and thus, uncontestable. By denaturalising the discourse of ‘new realism’, the Teacher’s narrative draws attention to the symbolic violence it carries.

The novel’s critique of this discourse does not stop at uncovering its ideological premises. If it would do so, it would in fact reiterate the same rhetorical gesture of that discourse in order to criticise it: the gesture of ‘exposing’ something ‘true’ – in this case, *ideology* – hiding behind a façade. The narrative does more than point to the ideological nature of seemingly neutral discourses: it foregrounds a kind of *violence* in them, which has an undeniable materiality, as it promotes exclusionary practices and determines people’s lives in pervasive ways. The Teacher’s violence against his victims may also be viewed in this light: as a materialisation and substantiation of symbolic violence. The transmutation of symbolic violence into literary praxis underscores the materiality of symbolic (linguistic) violence and its inextricability from physical violence. This inextricability is also suggested in a reference to the Teacher’s military past: trained as a professional sharpshooter, as he tells us, he later decided to exchange his gun for language by becoming a teacher.⁴⁴ His gun and language are both instruments of violence.

The shifting of convictions, views and ideological perspectives in the Teacher’s narrative has an additional, perhaps surprising implication. In a certain sense, it turns the Teacher into an embodiment of the liberal subject itself: a subject that holds its beliefs rather provisionally and puts them up for questioning.⁴⁵ The Teacher may be viewed as a liberal ironist who, according to Richard Rorty, is ‘always aware that the terms’ in which he describes himself ‘are subject to change’, and ‘of the contingency and fragility’ of his vocabulary.⁴⁶ Liberal subjects pose as ‘flexible, constantly changing their presuppositions’.⁴⁷ That the perverse figure of a Western cannibal can be read as a version of the liberal subject is, of course, highly disturbing. The Teacher emerges perhaps as the monstrous excess of the liberal attitude to freedom of speech: a modern Frankenstein, whose body holds stitched together and displays the paradoxes of liberalism. Such a display invests the values and perspectives in his narrative with a suspect, violent quality.

The Contradictions of Liberal Discourse: Between Tolerance and Hospitality

The Teacher’s speech does not only stage conflicts between different ideological perspectives, but also the contradictions *within* some of the foundational categories of liberal discourse. In what follows, I particularly focus on the way the novel recasts the discourse on tolerance and hospitality – two interrelated con-

cepts that take centre stage in debates on migration and integration in Western European societies. The discourse on tolerance and hospitality has a crucial function in the narrative, as it accompanies most of the protagonist's violent acts.

Tolerance, Jacques Derrida argues, implies a paternalistic gesture: the other is not accepted as equal but as subordinate and inferior. Tolerance presupposes a condescending concession towards the other and a hierarchical relationship, in which the tolerant subject is always 'on the side of the "reason of the stronger"'.⁴⁸ Wendy Brown identifies the concept of tolerance as the crux of contemporary 'civilizational discourse'. She observes that from the mid-1980s, and especially at the turn of the twenty-first century, there is 'a global renaissance in tolerance talk' which coincides with multiculturalism taking centre stage in discussions of liberal democratic citizenship.⁴⁹ In contemporary civilisational discourse, Brown argues, the liberal subject poses as having a unique capacity for tolerance – a capacity identified with civilisation. Western societies thus 'become the broker of what is tolerable and intolerable' and pose as the generous 'tolerator' of minorities.⁵⁰ The discourse on tolerance is based on hierarchical oppositions: 'When the heterosexual tolerates the homosexual, when Christians tolerate Muslims in the West, not only do the first terms not require tolerance but their standing as that which confers tolerance establishes their superiority over that which is said to require tolerance'.⁵¹ Tolerance is implicated in a discourse of power.

When comparing tolerance to the concept of hospitality – another central concept in discussions on migration – Derrida concludes that hospitality, or rather his notion of 'unconditional hospitality' in particular, is the opposite of tolerance.⁵² In *Of Hospitality* (2000), Derrida makes a distinction between 'absolute' and 'conditional' hospitality. Absolute or unconditional hospitality requires the opening of the host's home not only to a foreigner with a name and a definite status, but to 'the absolute, unknown, anonymous other'.⁵³ It is hospitality graciously offered to the other, without any demand or imperative from the host.⁵⁴ Conditional hospitality, on the other hand, requires a process of interrogating and screening the foreigner before welcoming her. The guest is subjected to the host's laws, and the host exercises his sovereignty over the guest, in a process that involves exclusions, violations and violence.⁵⁵ The guest is tolerated as long as he or she complies with the host's Law. Tolerance for Derrida describes precisely this 'conditional hospitality'.

In the novel, the power and violence that underlie the discourse of tolerance in its relation to hospitality become manifest in the Teacher's relationship with one of his (migrant) students. From the beginning of the narrative there are allusions to 'the incident'. As the reader finds out much later, the 'incident' involves the Teacher's humiliation by a group of students, who restrain him while they pull down his pants and underwear. During a school play they show a video of the incident, and some time later the same video ends up on YouTube. From early on in the narrative there are also regular references to 'his student', a student he

appears to have taken under his care. Despite the loving tone he uses to refer to this 'student', the reader senses something fishy in their relationship, as hints to violence and sexual abuse increase in his descriptions. Towards the end things clear up: this student, Mustafa S., turns out to be one of the individuals involved in the 'incident'. The reader is led to understand that the Teacher kidnapped him and kept him in his basement for a long time, where he subjected him to an 'educational process' involving repeated raping, drugging and torture. Eventually, the student is ritualistically murdered and his body parts consumed by the Teacher.

The Teacher's 'educating' of 'his student' is a response to his humiliation during 'the incident'. During the 'incident', the involved students – the objects of his tolerance – damage the Teacher's authority over them. Kidnapping and confining one of them in his basement (an act of 'forced' hospitality) is his way of resuming power over the other: 'I will teach him to speak with two words, to bow and show respect for what we have realised, for our culture and our property. This is my task'.⁵⁶ His task consists in forcing the other to appropriate the host's law and culture and to accept that the 'home' in which he is a guest will always remain the host's property. The liberal game of tolerance thereby reveals its ugly face: the Teacher forcefully removes the boy from the social sphere, deprives him of all rights and reduces him to 'bare life', as he assumes power of life and death over him. 'Without me you do not exist', the narrator remarks about his prisoner.⁵⁷

The Teacher's assumption of absolute power over a weaker other that lives under his roof finds an analogue in an incident involving a cat. When he discovers that a cat has given birth in his attic and is taking care of her kitten, the Teacher decides to let her and the kitten live, despite his initial intention to drown the kitten. From his viewpoint, he is granting hospitality to these animals by (reluctantly) tolerating their presence. When he offers the kitten milk and its mother bites him in the hand – an instinctive reaction to the perceived threat to her young one – he slaughters both the cat and her kitten with an axe. His guests, tolerated under strict conditions, have breached the host's rules. As soon as the tolerated subject exhibits 'ungrateful' behaviour, tolerance reveals its violent face: the guest loses all rights and is even annihilated. The sovereign can engage in extreme brutality against the ungrateful guest, suspending the guest's rights, while still being able to claim that he is following the law he has set himself: it is the sovereign's right to suspend the law (and pact of hospitality) when he decides that the guest threatens his power (the cat's attack against him).

Nevertheless, the violent flipside of tolerance has to be repressed for tolerance to remain convincing as a cardinal liberal virtue. Thus, descriptions of the Teacher's treatment of his student are cast in a vocabulary of love, care, self-sacrifice and forgiveness. If he beats his student, it is for his own good; if he bleeds, he takes care of his wounds.⁵⁸ The sleeping pills or drugs he gives him to keep him sedated are referred to as 'medication'. Even when the narrator's descriptions

hint at violence (i.e. references to wounds or dry blood on the student's head), this violence is integrated in a discourse of love and selfless devotion.⁵⁹ He wants to 'save' the boy, whom he declares to treat as a son. For this 'educational process' to work, however, the law of the host is not to be questioned: 'He has to trust me blindly. I know what I'm asking. Without a master he is nothing, a bird in front of a cat'.⁶⁰ When he sexually violates him, it is presented as fair punishment for an ungrateful remark the student made. Shortly before he murders him, the Teacher has a fantasy in which he and his student spend an idyllic Sunday together: he bathes him, cuts his hair, covers him with a blanket and watches over him, 'like a crow over his young one'.⁶¹ Following this nursing, the Teacher decides that this education will be completed with a lesson about suffering, 'a practical lesson'.

The vocabulary about his student is double-layered. Healing and hurting, discipline and rape, fair punishment and torture, medication and drugging, the loving father and the ruthless torturer/executioner: these pairs emerge as sides of the same coin. As the reader gradually detects violent traces between the lines of a vocabulary of care, the liberal discourse of tolerance betrays a violence internal to the Western value system. In the Teacher we witness an overidentification with the power system: the system's principles are drawn to their extreme implications, so that their obscene, excessive side emerges. Power, as Žižek argues, always generates its own excess. As an embodiment of the system's excess, the Teacher is the 'obscene underside of the Law', which the law tries to hide in order to sustain its credibility and authority.⁶² In Western politics after 9/11, such excesses are often swept under the table or dismissed as unfortunate exceptions. President G.W. Bush, for instance, stated that the 'abhorrent' torture practices in Abu Ghraib 'don't represent our America' and do not reflect 'the nature of the men and women who serve our country'.⁶³ The novel confronts us with the strange familiarity of such excess, forcing us to see it as endemic in European societies, just as the Teacher, at least for a big part of his narrative, appears to hold 'reasonable' and socially accepted views.

The student's execution is described in biblical language: the Crow (the Teacher's nickname) as God the Father sacrifices his Son, who will rise and teach the Word: he will speak Dutch and his students will understand him. The consumption of his student's flesh and blood is paralleled to Christ's offering of his body and blood in the Holy Communion. The mystery of the Communion (and the Bible as a whole) is recast through the imagery of murder and anthropophagy. It is worth noting that the discourse of Christianity is where the concept of 'tolerance' originates from. This discourse, the novel suggests, nurtures a violent underside.

Towards the end of his narrative, the Teacher uses the metaphor of the 'rotten apples' - a metaphor he had already used in relation to his students - to refer to himself: 'I am who I am, perhaps the one rotten apple that contaminates the

whole basket. But let us not forget that the mouldy apple produces a hormone through which the other apples grow faster'.⁶⁴ While the system will present him as an anomaly - a sick exception that embodies the evil opposite of European values - his metaphor suggests that the system needs this violent excess to sustain itself.

In light of the above, it may not seem too surprising that the Teacher's self-image is that of a 'moral being':

I am a moral being. I work and pay my bills on time. [...] I don't fly to third-world countries to relax and I don't buy cheap shirts sewn together by a small Chinese girl in a dark atelier. I use my car only when absolutely necessary [...] Yes, I am a moral being, I keep the economy of our society running [...] I help build an honest society that invests my tax money well in safety and social security and gives the Third World a piece of the pie.⁶⁵

Although these actions that constitute him as a moral, conscientious citizen may seem at odds with his atrocities, the latter constitute the obscene continuation of those practices. He is the system's abject and, simultaneously, he is the system itself, or rather its excess.

Suspect Voices: The Cannibal, the Journalist, the Terrorist

In the last twenty pages of the book a new narrative voice takes over. Although the new narrator remains unidentified, we may assume that we hear the voice of a journalist, who investigates the Crow's case, setting up his criminal profile and seeking an explanatory framework for his actions. Through the journalist's narrative, the reader is for the first time informed about the full extent of the Teacher's actions: he has murdered and consumed thirteen victims, most of which are lower-class migrants. When his crimes were exposed by the police, the Teacher fled to America, where he was eventually arrested after one of his victims there managed to escape.

The journalist explores different explanatory angles for the Crow's deviance: psychological profiling, family history (his abandonment by his father when he was a child), genetic disposition, social factors and the like. The Teacher is also juxtaposed with other infamous modern Western cannibals through a comparative study of their behaviour. The fact that he is miraculously cured from his terminal prostate cancer, the journalist suggests, may also be causally related to his anthropophagic practices.

At first sight, the journalist's narrative serves to 'close' the Teacher's case by laying out his actions and establishing his insanity through a dry discourse with an air of scientificity. Placing him in a genealogy of Western cannibals - a few other anomalies in the Western civilisation - aims at making his acts intelligible.

The report of his arrest and confinement in a psychiatric institution also has a reassuring function: he is withdrawn from the social and placed forever in its margins. The journalist 'dissects' the cannibal in language. Through a combined use of medical, journalistic, psychological, anthropological and legal discourses, he attempts to make the Crow 'digestible', comprehensible, categorisable.⁶⁶

Even though the narrator/journalist constructs the Crow as an aberration, he observes that cases of cannibalism in our civilised world come up with an increasing frequency. Then, in the last paragraph of his narrative, he makes a surprising remark about the Crow's anthropophagy, which disrupts the rational tone of his account: 'Incomprehensible, because any of us who has ever tasted human brains will agree with me: raw or fried, they hardly differ from the taste of sheep brains'.⁶⁷ This unexpected shocking comment turns the reassuring function of his report upside down, making his speech 'indigestible' too. The suggestion that many of us, including the journalist himself, have tasted human brains turns the anthropophagic desire into a generalised phenomenon. Cannibalism is not cast as an exception, but something any of us may or may not endorse based on taste.

This trace of a schizophrenic, perverse subtext to the journalist's rational discourse becomes profoundly disturbing, because it makes all narrative voices, discourses and perspectives in the novel equally unreliable. The Teacher and the journalist do not produce an unreliable and a reliable narrative respectively, with the latter explaining the inconsistencies and enigmatic aspects of the former. There is no authorial voice the reader can trust. The final narrative, which aimed at integrating the Crow's deeds into familiar analytical frameworks (psychiatry, genetics, anthropology, etc.) fails to yield the reassurance it promises.

In the book's final sentence, the journalist-narrator all of a sudden sends us off in yet another direction by drawing a parallel between cannibalism and terrorism. Neither of these acts, the journalist remarks, can be accommodated within existing linguistic structures: 'every situation is unique and our language is too poor to fully account for cannibalism. Just as terrorism is a deep human predisposition, on which the last word has not been written yet'.⁶⁸ This is the only explicit reference to terrorism in the book.

The reader finds herself at a loss again. How does a terrorist relate to a Western cannibal? The parallel with terrorism conjoins Western violence (that of the Teacher) and the violence of non-Western others (terrorism) from an unexpected angle: neither this European cannibal nor the terrorist should be thought of as the absolute other - the personification of an 'evil' that is impossible for European citizens to comprehend. Both figures are symptomatic of the Western system of power and its internal contradictions. Thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard have argued that the kind of terrorism associated with 9/11 is not the opposite of what the West represents, but a symptom of what Derrida calls an 'autoimmunitary process', by which a superpower (the United States) turns

against itself in a quasi-suicidal fashion. Terrorists, according to this argument, were in fact recruited, trained and armed by a Western world that invented the politics of terrorism.⁶⁹

The Teacher's consumption of migrant bodies signals the desire to eliminate the supposed threat of 'evil' others. But just as the Teacher (the system's obscene underside) desires to eradicate these 'others', society subsequently tries to eradicate and 'digest' the Teacher, by constructing him as an anomaly. As the system 'consumes' its others, including its own excess, the distinction between external violence (terrorism) and Western violence fades out. Their intertwinement is hypostasised in the novel as Europe's 'other' (the Muslim migrant) literally becomes part of the Teacher's body: the system's 'internal other' swallows up the system's *supposed* threatening external 'other'. The final reference to terrorism, seemingly out of context, may also be read in this light.

An allegorical reading of the book yields several interpretive assumptions. Does the West's fear that it might lose its global power and its cultural and moral superiority push it to acts of violence against its others? Is the integration of migrants in Western European societies a form of cannibalism - a strategy of accepting others into the body of Western Europe by devouring the threatening aspects of their difference, which cannot be easily domesticated? If so, are there alternatives to this process? Does the West prosper by 'eating' (exploiting, appropriating) its others, just like the Teacher's fatal cancer disappears through the consumption of his victims' flesh? The book could be read as an extended metaphor for the way the West or, more particularly, Western Europe treats its others: destroying the 'evil enemy' by becoming evil itself. Following Todorov's thesis, the book suggests that it is precisely our society's irrational fear of barbarians that makes it evil, barbaric, cannibalistic.

Although there are different messages one could draw from the novel, the contradictory, enigmatic elements both in the Teacher's and in the journalist's narrations forestall any univocal allegorical interpretation we may try to impose on the novel. There are always elements that escape the allegorical model we may apply to the narrative. Just as the Teacher's conflicting ideological perspectives obstruct his safe categorisation, the journalist also undermines his own speech through his final comments. The novel makes sure to produce its own semantic 'excess,' which stalls the reader's attempt to consume it in the same cannibalistic fashion.

This means neither that the work fails to produce any intelligible meanings, nor that it dissolves in relativism and in a free play of signs without consequences or ethical implications. The hermeneutic impulse of my reading - and any reading that seeks to attach meaning(s) to the work - is amply rewarded by the novel's semantic richness, and simultaneously counterpoised by the work's resistance to a potential hermeneutic 'violence' that would try to impose semantic closure on it. The deployment of divergent perspectives within the same narrative voice, the

ideological uncertainty, the ambiguity of ironic language, the unreliability of both narrators are all elements through which the work prevents the reader from fully overcoming her distance from the work, in order to complete the hermeneutic transaction. The novel thereby invites a kind of reading that combines the impulse to understand what the work knows with an attentiveness to the work's difference from itself, the ways it carefully distances itself from the 'messages' it articulates, without making them irrelevant, empty, inconsequential.

Literary Indigestibility

To describe the novel's resistance to semantic closure and hermeneutic appropriation, as laid out above, but also its affective impact on the reader, I propose the concept of 'literary indigestibility'.

The novel leaves the reader with a weird feeling in the stomach. This is not just a figure of speech, but captures the way the novel engages the reader on a physiological level. The novel literally *sits heavy on our stomach* - and not just due to its subject matter. Many reviews of the novel in the Dutch press describe the book's effect in physical terms, as an intense sensation that grasps us. Edith Kunders in *de Volkskrant*, for instance, notices the novel's strange 'aftertaste': 'The meals that he [the Crow] consumes acquire a very nasty aftertaste at the end of the book. And this actually applies to the novel as a whole too'.⁷⁰ Jann Ruyters in *Trouw* describes *De Leraar* as 'a stifling, disturbing book, a challenging reflection on our reality that you cannot let go of'.⁷¹ In *8Weekly*, Hannes de Deurwaerder captures the book's physical effect in terms of choking: 'the book cuts [...] your breath mercilessly, until nothing more than a vacuum remains in the end'.⁷² The novel invites us to go back and read it again as soon as we finish it, perplexed at the uncomfortable taste it leaves us with, which refuses to be 'digested'.

Readers do not like being taught lessons in a straightforward manner. To borrow the words of Koubaa's protagonist, 'I don't need to take any moral lessons from someone who is wasting his time reading. I don't need anybody pointing their finger at me as long as I am alive'.⁷³ The self-deconstructive elements in the speech of both narrators, the constant shifting of positions, the irony, the multi-layeredness of language make it impossible to reduce the novel to clear-cut propositions or moral predicates. Through its complex enactment and critique of violence, the novel certainly yields a kind of knowledge that is meaningful in current debates on European politics, multiculturalism and integration. In that sense, its knowledge is 'digestible'. Yet, it refuses to convey this knowledge with the arrogant confidence and univocity that we often find in political and public rhetoric. In the above ways, the work undermines its own authority - its ability to have a 'final saying' on the issues it raises. This openness is not without risks, as it makes the novel's voice more vulnerable to (mis)appropriations. But it also creates a space within literature that is much needed in our post-9/11 societies: a

space that becomes political neither by being easily translatable into straightforward messages nor by muting conflict through consensus, but by staging unresolved tensions.⁷⁴

De leraar intervenes in current debates not by claiming to show things as they truly are - in the footsteps of the rhetoric of the new realism - but by questioning the vocabulary and premises of current public debates. The Teacher literalises violent desires embedded in the public rhetoric about (Muslim) migrants, integration, the issuing of anti-immigration laws, or the revival of nationalistic sentiments in European countries. In so doing, Koubaa's protagonist does not become intelligible as the negative part of an opposition between civilised Europe and its barbaric others. He rather places this opposition under erasure.

On one level, the novel points to the 'cannibalistic' practices involved in the way European societies deal with migrants: they try to make them 'digestible' in official discourses. This is what identity politics and the rhetoric of the 'new realism' also do: they reduce complex subjectivities into prefabricated categories. In the novel, the migrant victims of the Teacher, who lack even the linguistic tools to challenge the violence of the system, are sites of otherness that end up being literally 'consumed'. On another level, the novel underscores the 'indigestibility' of its protagonist who is also, albeit very differently, a site of otherness: his is a violent alterity endemic in Western societies, and therefore harder to acknowledge and give a place in discourse. On both these levels, the novel exposes the limitations of identity politics when it comes to accommodating (radical) otherness, and points to those supernumerary bodies that cannot be easily 'digested' and placed within an identity group.

But through and against the example of its hero, the novel offers us more than a twofold choice between expulsion or full assimilation of otherness. It invites us to envision alternative ways of dealing with alterity. With this in mind, I want to look at the following words by the protagonist:

If man is fed up with constantly looking at himself in the Mirror, someone should find the courage and walk through the Mirror. We have by now already seen enough of who and what we are, or precisely who and what we are not. I, too, have overanalysed myself. I have swallowed flesh and intestines, not only those of others. [...] Now that I am stuck with one leg in front of and the other behind the Mirror, I realise that I should not have made a detour, because *beyond the Mirror lies new land, uncultivated land, rich in resources with which we can restore ourselves.*⁷⁵ (emphasis added)

The novel does not hold up a mirror to society by telling us how we should look at ourselves and others or by exposing the 'reality' under hypocritical or 'politically correct' representations. Rather, this quote suggests, the Teacher wishes to break

the mirror of identity politics. If we insist on extracting a lesson from the novel, this could then be it: try to find those new materials - new modes of knowing, speaking or relating to others - in the land beyond the mirror, beyond the terms and concepts we keep recycling without questioning (tolerance, human rights, hospitality, education) and beyond the production of the other on our own terms.

The Teacher's subjectivity and voice is too extreme and unstable to offer another *rational* argument in current debates on migration and multiculturalism. Nevertheless, the novel intervenes in these debates through its *difference* from the discourses in which these debates are played out. The freedom of literature to stage confrontations between heterogeneous codes and discourses in polyphonic texts makes it an ideal arena for exposing the intertwinement of subjective, objective and symbolic forms of violence, where more 'rational', strictly regulated discourses (such as those of public debates and political rhetoric) may fail to do so. Literature offers a medium in which the violent fantasies, anxieties and fears ingrained in dominant discourses can be inflated, exposed and renegotiated.

Instead of taking the Teacher's ideas at face value, as rational arguments in certain debates, we can focus on the noise this figure makes: the way his speech makes our own speech and the values we live by suspect, violent. Breaking the mirror and looking beyond it removes the ground under our feet. Daring to listen to the noise of this radical other is dangerous: beyond the mirror there is the unknown. However, only by breaking this mirror can we create an open future, in which radical change becomes possible.

De leraar does not leave us much ground on which to sustain Todorov's sketch of Europe's identity - presented earlier in this article - as non-violent, open to otherness and granting legitimacy and equal status to dissenting voices. The complacent image of Europe as a countervailing force to the violent, aggressive face of the United States after 9/11, which was advocated by several European intellectuals, is debunked in the novel through an implicit sketch of Europe as a space that cloaks an invisible but far-reaching violence. Paradoxically, however, at the same time that it refutes it, the novel also *proves* Todorov's argument about Europe as self-critical and open to dissent. In addressing, exposing and contesting this kind of violence at the heart of a Western European society, the novel as a whole *performs* that self-critical attitude that Todorov finds representative of Europe's spirit. The novel thus shows that (European) literature *can* offer that discursive space of multivocality and dissent that seems to be missing from political rhetoric and dominant discourses in Europe today.

Nevertheless, the novel's performance of dissent and self-critique is not carried out in any self-congratulatory mood that would support a morally superior image of (Western) Europe. The violent structures that permeate the European project, which the novel hints at, indicate that there is more at hand than a temporary violent 'deviation' from the norm of Europe as enlightened and civilised. Violence is not the opposite, but the stuff that accompanies those European ideals that

Todorov and others identify with civilisation. Literature's role, in this case, is to explore this indigestible message, in its full implications, and present it perhaps as a 'ground zero' from which new modes of thinking or relating to the other could emerge in the future. This seems to be one of the lessons of Koubaa's Teacher. But should we take his word for it? He is, after all, an unreliable narrator at best, a perverse cannibal at worst.

Notes

1. See S. Žižek, 'Liberal multiculturalism masks an old barbarism with a human face', *The Guardian*, 3 October 2010.
2. K. Versluys, '9/11 as a European Event: The Novels', *European Review* 15.1 (2007), p. 65.
3. K. Versluys, '9/11 as a European Event: The Novels', p. 70. Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* is according to Versluys a straightforward example of this unification of Europe and the United States in the notion of the 'transatlantic West'. But even novels with an unmistakable anti-American bias, like Luc Lang's *11 septembre mon amour* ultimately express a sense of solidarity with the US victims. See p. 72.
4. The category '9/11 novel' refers to novels 'that deal directly or indirectly with the events of 9/11'. Versluys, '9/11 as a European Event: The Novels', p. 65. It is, however, a rather loosely defined generic category that has not received rigorous theoretical delineation.
5. For studies of post-9/11 literature with an Anglo-American focus, see, for example, Bragard, Gray, Keniston, Randall and Versluys.
6. I here take my cue from Žižek's reading practice (as it is frequently applied to films), which regularly challenges the precedence of context. For this approach to context in Žižek's reading of literary works or films, see C. Davis, *Critical Excess: Overreading in Derrida, Deleuze, Levinas, Žižek and Cavell* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 113.
7. S. Žižek, *Violence* (London: Profile Books, 2008), p. 1.
8. Žižek, *Violence*, p. 2.
9. Žižek, *Violence*, p. 31.
10. Žižek's distinction between forms of violence is a useful theoretical tool in this venture. However, in my reading I distance myself from the 'arrogation of critical authority' that Žižek's mode of reading often entails, as much as I have often been inspired by his readings of films and literary works. As Colin Davis succinctly puts it in his analysis of Žižek's practice of 'overreading', 'Žižek's writing displays an ingrained distrust of power and received opinions whilst at the same time claiming for itself a position of high authority. If his practice as interpreter often suggests the most wayward, free-wheeling, willful embracing of the work's semantic openness, his rhetoric on the contrary constantly ties it down to single, correct readings'. Davis, *Critical Excess*, p. 133.
11. See P. Scheffer, 'Het multiculturele drama', *NRC Handelsblad*, 29 January 2000.
12. T. Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians: Beyond the Clash of Civilizations* (Cambridge, Polity Press: 2010), p. 7. The book was originally published in French with the title *La peur des barbares: Au-delà du choc des civilisations* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2008).
13. T. Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians*, pp. 7 and 106.
14. T. Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians*, p. 174.

15. T. Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians*, pp. 172 and 175. In developing this sketch of European identity, Todorov takes stance against other voices, especially those of (extreme) right-wing parties in European nation states today, which conceptualise Europe in essentialist terms as premised on a single (usually Christian) heritage. The approach of such parties serves their political ideologies by enabling the exclusion of others (e.g. Muslim migrants in Europe) from a 'true' European identity.
16. T. Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians*, p. 181.
17. T. Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians*, pp.177, 180 and 184. Todorov seems to gloss over and downplay the power relations permeating cultural exchanges between Europe and the rest of the world, as well as the role of European colonialism, which certainly did not promote a non-hierarchical ordering of difference.
18. T. Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians*, p. 180.
19. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 4.
20. Danielle Bouchard, "'A Barbarous, Rude, or Debased Language": Jargon Democracy', *Contretemps* 6 (2006), p. 11.
21. Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians*, p. 185.
22. Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians*, p. 195.
23. Todorov notes that the idea of a unified homogeneous Western bloc became dominant after the Second World War, 'insofar as Americans and Europeans were opposed to the same enemy, the triumphal Communism of the Soviet Union and its satellites'. T. Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians*, p. 187.
24. T. Todorov, *The Fear of Barbarians*, pp. 188-9.
25. 'Ik sta met beide benen op de grond en lees iedere dag de krant.', B. Koubaa, *De leraar* (Amsterdam and Antwerp: Querido, 2009), p. 9. All translations from the novel are by Maria Boletsi.
26. 'We schamen ons niet meer voor wat we denken, we slikken onze meningen niet meer in.', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p.11.
27. 'vaardigheden en attitudes te ontwikkelen om als volwassen adequaat en zinvol te functioneren in de maatschappij', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 12.
28. 'Als we de cijfers bekijken, zien we dat alles goed loopt; we gaan er zelfs op vooruit, wat niet van iedere school gezegd kan worden.', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 19.
29. See B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, pp. 54-5 and 163.
30. See B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 79.
31. 'hoe erbarmelijker hun Nederlands, hoe sterker hun lichaamstaal, hun doofstomme slapstick', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 119.
32. 'Het zijn de slechtste niet. Ze kunnen soms het bloed onder mijn nagels vandaan halen, maar het blijven mensen en mensen kunnen vergiffenis vragen.', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 120.
33. B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 280.
34. See B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 22.
35. 'Natuurlijk zou het gemakkelijk en onethisch zijn te zeggen dat de zwakken zwak zijn omdat ze pech hebben, genetisch en qua omgeving; het is wel degelijk hun eigen schuld als ze de kansen die ze geboden krijgen om uit de vicieuze cirkel te stappen niet met beide handen grijpen; in het bijzonder de kansen dat onze school hun biedt.', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 134.

36. L. Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 12.
37. L. Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, p. 12.
38. For an elaboration of Bakhtin's 'linguistic hybridity', see R. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 20-2.
39. L. Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, pp. 12-3.
40. 'Dat het liberalisme onze leerlingen naar het mes doet grijpen is blasfemie, mijn generatie heeft een degelijke opvoeding gehad, bewijs hiervan bovengenoemde doelstellingen en leerplannen van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap.', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 124.
41. 'Mijn leerlingen weten heel goed hoe over hen en hun familie wordt gedacht, hoe hun geloof als wortel van alle kwaad wordt beschouwd, hoe zij als de orzaak van onveiligheid worden gebrandmerkt. De taal die ik onderwijs is een gebrekkig instrument om iets over onszelf en onze omgeving te zeggen, ieder woord trekt een grens en staat nuancerend in de weg, dat voelen mijn leerlingen, zoals de hele wereldbevolking voelt wat liefde en haat is maar er geen woorden voor heeft; wat niet wil zeggen dat ze dom of ongevoelig zijn, het is de taal, onze taal die ervoor zorgt dat wij die indruk krijgen.', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 121.
42. The distinction between 'autochthonous' and 'allochthonous' citizens, though uncommon in English in this context, is commonly used in Dutch to distinguish citizens with a migrant background from the rest of the 'indigenous' Dutch population.
43. B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 96.
44. B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 227.
45. T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996), p. 69.
46. R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 73-4.
47. S. Žižek, *Violence*, p. 125.
48. J. Derrida, 'Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides – A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida,' in Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 127.
49. W. Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 1-2.
50. W. Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, p. 166.
51. W. Brown, *Regulating Aversion*, p. 186.
52. J. Derrida, 'Autoimmunity,' p. 127.
53. J. Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 25.
54. J. Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, p. 83.
55. J. Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, pp. 27 and 55.
56. 'Ik zal hem leren [...] te buigen en respect te hebben voor wat wij verwezenlijkt hebben, voor onze cultuur en ons bezit. Dat is mijn taak.', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 113.
57. 'zonder mij besta je niet', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 105.
58. 'Als ik mijn leerling een tik geef, is het voor zijn eigen bestwil. Als hij bloedt, verzorg ik zijn wonden.', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 54.
59. See, for example, pp. 106 and 168.

60. 'Hij moet me blindelings vertrouwen, ik weet wat ik vraag. Zonder meester is hij niets waard, een vogel voor de kat.', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 169.
61. 'als een kraai over zijn jong', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 245.
62. S. Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p. 29.
63. The quote is from an interview with Al Arabiya from 5 May 2004 (<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=120660&page=1>). Accessed 10 February 2011.
64. 'Ik ben wie ik ben, misschien die ene rotte appel die de hele mand aantast. Maar laten we niet vergeten dat die beschimmelde appel een hormoon produceert waardoor de andere appels sneller rijp worden.', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 229.
65. 'Ik ben een moreel wezen: ik werk en betaal mijn rekeningen op tijd. [...] ik vlieg niet naar derdewereldlanden om me te ontspannen en koop geen goedkope hemden die door een klein Chinees meisje in een donker atelier aan elkaar zijn genaaid. Ik gebruik mijn auto enkel voor het hoogstnoodzakelijke [...] Ja, ik ben een moreel wezen, ik help de economie van onze samenleving goed draaiende te houden [...] Ik bouw mee aan een eerlijke samenleving, die mijn belastinggeld goed investeert in veiligheid en sociale zekerheid en de derde wereld een stuk van de taart geeft.', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 195.
66. Thus, the term 'cannibal' receives several explanatory qualifications: his is tagged as an 'aggressive', 'ritual', 'sexual', even 'epicurian' cannibal. See B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 280.
67. 'Onbegrijpelijk, want ieder van ons die ooit menselijke hersenen geproefd heeft, zal het met me eens zijn: rauw of gebakken, verschillen ze nauwelijks van de smaak van schapenhersenen.', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 283.
68. 'iedere situatie is uniek en onze taal is veel te arm om cannibalisme volledig te doorgronden. Evenals terrorisme is het een diepmenselijke aangelegenheid waarover het laatste woord nog niet geschreven is.', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 283.
69. J. Derrida, 'Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides', p. 115. See also J. Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), pp. 3-34. Along similar lines, Žižek views terrorism as part of a process by which the system of power generates its 'superego excess and is then compelled to annihilate it', S. Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, p. 27.
70. 'De maaltijden die hij [de Kraai] nuttigt krijgen aan het einde van het boek wel een heel akelige bijmaak. En dat geldt voor de roman als geheel eigenlijk ook.'
71. 'een wurgend, verontrustend boek, een uitdagende reflectie op onze werkelijkheid, een die je niet meer loslaat.'
72. 'het boek snijdt je [...] de adem genadeloos af, tot er op het einde niet meer dan een vacuüm overblijft'.
73. 'Ik moet geen lessen moraal van iemand die zijn tijd zit te verprutsen met lezen. Niemand hoeft me de les te spellen zolang ik in leven ben.', B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 25.
74. The novel's political force would be in line with Chantal Mouffe's notion of the political as a 'vibrant "agonistic" public sphere of contestation' that does not aim at consensus, but acknowledges the conflictual dimension of social life' as a necessary condition for democratic politics. Ch. Mouffe, *On the Political* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 4.
75. 'Als de mens het gehad heeft met zichzelf voortdurend in een Spiegel te zien, moet iemand de stoute schoenen aantrekken en door de Spiegel heen stappen. We hebben

overtussen al genoeg gezien wie en wat we zijn, of juist wie en wat niet. Ook ik heb mezelf tot op het bot ontleed. Vlees en ingewanden heb ik doorgeslikt, niet alleen dat van anderen. [...] Nu ik met een been voor en een been achter de Spiegel vastzit, realiseer ik mij dat ik beter geen omweg had kunnen maken, want voorbij de Spiegel ligt nieuw land, onontgonnen land, rijk aan grondstoffen waarmee we onszelf kunnen herstellen.'; B. Koubaa, *De leraar*, p. 250 (emphasis added).

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