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Autonomy and/as Faith

Autonomie en/als geloof

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Abstract: This article rejects the customary, but essentialist concepts of ‘the autonomous text’ and ‘the autonomous author’. It characterizes ‘autonomy’ not only as the central article of faith within the cultural ideology of historical modernism, but also as an attitude that typifies a transhistorical receptive discourse that is informed by this ideology.

Keywords: Literary autonomy, historical modernism, commitment, receptive discourses / Literaire autonomie, historisch modernisme, engagement, receptiediscours

Introduction

I'm grateful to be invited by Wilbert Smulders and Frans Ruiter to respond to their thought-provoking paper in this volume. I really admire Smulders's and Ruiter's collaborative work, especially their amazing 1996 book on literature and modernity,¹ a book that profoundly changed my view on literature and academic criticism. The questions that occupy center stage in their current project on literary autonomy are, in my view, precisely the questions academic criticism should focus on: What kind of impact does literature have? What justifies literature? From where does it derive its authority? What kind of commitment does it have? And how is it possible that W.F. Hermans could, on the one hand, stress the autonomous character of his work and his position within the world, and on the other hand, simultaneously become the embodiment of a committed author with a huge cultural and even political impact?

All these questions circle around the underlying relation between autonomy and authority. By focusing on that relation, we return to an issue that seemed to have been missing from the agenda of literary studies for some time: the effects and functioning of literature in the world. Like every cultural form, literary experience is radically, quintessentially hybrid, as Edward Said reminded us twenty years ago: "if it has been the practice in the West since Immanuel Kant to isolate cultural and aesthetic realms from the worldly domain, it is now time to rejoin them".² Smulders and Ruiter energetically encourage us to do so.

However, I am also somewhat critical of Smulders's and Ruiter's position. For all the appreciation I have for their project, I find some of their propositions and claims untenable. I particularly have doubts about their interpretation of the concept of 'autonomy' in their discussion of 'the social role of autonomous literature'. I have arranged my objections in the three remarks below.

1

In 2004 Derek Attridge noticed that ever since the introduction of what we have come to call 'Theory' in literary criticism we had begun to treat literary works more and more as cultural and historical documents on a par with other kinds of writing, and not as texts remarkable for their ability to survive historical change and to have a distinctive and meaningful effect on readers.³ Today, 10 years later, the pendulum seems to be swinging back the other way again. In the past decade, critics like Rita Felski (*Uses of Literature*, 2008) and Terry Eagleton (*The Event of Literature*, 2012) distanced themselves from the perspectivism, sometimes even nihilism, of Theory (in its more radical variations), bringing the specificity of literature, its legitimacy and value back on the agenda. Ruiter's and Smulders's important project is another very timely and welcome token of the recent shift towards singularity. By focusing on the specific literary ideology of autonomy, and by adopting Attridge's concept of singularity, Ruiter and Smulders stress that literature should *not* be treated as one discourse among others.

¹ Frans Ruiter and Wilbert Smulders, *Literatuur en moderniteit in Nederland 1840-1990* (Amsterdam / Antwerpen: De Arbeiderspers, 1996).

² Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 68.

³ Attridge in an interview with Mark Thwaite (Mark Thwaite, 'Derek Attridge', 8 January 2004 <<http://www.readysteadybook.com/Article.aspx?page=derekattridge>> [accessed 5 February 2014]).

I totally agree with them on this point. However, we cannot go back to the time ‘before Theory’, when the governing theoretical and ideological assumptions of literary studies went largely unacknowledged and unexamined.⁴ We especially have to avoid falling back upon superseded and naïve ontologies of ‘quality’ or ‘literariness’. And that is quite a challenge, especially in the kind of research we are talking about. The terms under scrutiny – terms like ‘singularity’, ‘originality’, ‘inventiveness’ and, the most important one in Ruiter and Smulders’s project: ‘autonomy’ – do not uncomplicatedly name something in the world. When we use these terms, we have to be aware that they refer to articles of faith.

I will try to make myself clear with two examples. At the opening ceremony of the Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, the Netherlands was represented by a rather heavy delegation, which included a state secretary, the prime minister, and the king. The composition of this delegation caused a lot of discussion. For many people, the presence of King Willem Alexander was a smack in the face of human rights organizations and supporters of gay emancipation. And rightly so, one is inclined to think. Still, a poll by a national newspaper showed that 50% of the Dutch people did not agree with the opponents of the delegation. For those who were not opposed to the delegation the presence of sports fanatic Willem Alexander in Putin’s Russia was not problematic because it is *not* a matter of politics.⁵

Keep this in mind while you look at my second example, which is somewhat closer to literature. In 2014 the Flemish poet Charles Ducal was appointed as Belgian Poet Laureate. In the federal state of Belgium this establishment of a national institute as a ‘Dichter des Vaderlands’ caused a stir. Why only one poet laureate in a multilingual country? Many people linked Ducal’s appointment to current debates about whether or not an independent Flemish state is desirable. The poet laureate himself, however, pointed out that the appointment is not a matter of politics. To him, it is a ‘purely literary enterprise’.⁶

In both examples we see that one can, of course, *claim* that a statement is not political, but that such a claim can never stop others from *making* it political. Both the presence of the Dutch king in Sochi as well as the appointment of a poet laureate in Belgium indeed *are* matters of politics, simply because of the fact that these events can be interpreted in the light of current events and topical matters in the political debate. The same goes for autonomy in literature. One can *hope* or *believe* that a text or an author is autonomous, but that doesn’t mean that they really *are*. Thus, in my view, autonomy is *not* a feature of a text. And it is *not* a quality of an author. I reject the customary, but essentialist concepts of ‘the autonomous text’ and ‘the autonomous author’. Certainly, many others have preceded me, and both Derek Attridge’s and Andrew Goldstone’s contributions to this volume reflect the same attitude toward ‘autonomy’.⁷ To assume that a text *is* autonomous is an expression of a belief. And although this belief may be central to the literary ideology of historical modernism,⁸ that does not make it suitable as a

⁴ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London / New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 10.

⁵ Maartje Bakker, ‘Steeds meer kritiek op ‘zware delegatie’ Sotsji’, <http://www.volkskrant.nl/dossier-kabinet-rutte-ii/steeds-meer-kritiek-op-zware-delegatie-sotsji-a3576422/> (13 January 2014) [accessed 2 May 2014].

⁶ Tijn Sadée, ‘Benoeming Dichter des Vaderlands split Belgïe’, *NRC* 30-1-2014.

⁷ See, for example, Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 111.

⁸ I use the concept ‘historical modernism’ (and not just ‘modernism’) to distinguish the historical *period* or *movement* (characterized by a set of beliefs) from the (transhistorical) modernistic *frame*: a heuristic construct that can be used to explain texts, interpretations or uses of literature though the course of modern literary history. See Thomas Vaessens, *Geschiedenis van de moderne Nederlandse literatuur* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2013).

concept for academic critics who try to understand the effects and functioning of literature outside of that specific historical context. Texts and authors will always be appropriated; that is what keeps them alive. And that is how they function in culture and history: their impact is unforeseen.

I believe that the concepts of ‘autonomy’ and ‘singularity’ in Ruiter and Smulders’s approach of ‘the social role of autonomous literature’ are not released from their status as articles of faith. The definition of Hermans’s singularity is as follows: ‘it keeps open the impossible possibility of the other within the endless reproduction of the same’. That sounds great, but – to be honest – I do not understand it. This definition is deeply rooted in Bourdieu’s apodictic idiolect, rooted in the language in which he expresses his poetical beliefs, not as a sociologist, but as a ‘player’ in literary culture. The idea of autonomous literature is one of those poetical beliefs. And the idea of singularity is another, although neither Bourdieu nor Hermans probably ever used this word themselves.

Ruiter and Smulders’s demonstration of Hermans’s supposed singularity is an attempt to reformulate his ideas in terms of their discussion with Bourdieu in the first part of their paper. Do not get me wrong; I am *not* saying that Bourdieu’s faith cannot serve as a model in an attempt to understand Hermans’s poetics. Of course it can. There are striking similarities, as Ruiter and Smulders have very convincingly shown us. What I am saying is that I do not see what kind of knowledge or insight we are producing when we point our finger at these similarities. What can really be *explained* by these similarities?

In my view, accommodating some author’s poetics can never be the ultimate object of academic criticism. It does not help us to understand how literature works. Understanding Hermans’s poetical beliefs, be it in the light of Bourdieu or not, is not the same as insight into the working and effects of the idea of literary autonomy. One can never really answer Ruiter and Smulders’s questions about the effect and functioning of literature when one takes Bourdieu’s or Hermans’s faith in autonomy as a starting point. To put it somewhat polemically: How do Ruiter and Smulders prevent their reader from understanding the final part of their paper as just another utterance of respect for Hermans’s views on literature and the world? Ruiter and Smulders champion the ‘liberating potential’ of these views and they underline their importance. What the project really brings to light is the researchers’ affinity with Hermans’s poetics.

2

My second remark has to do with the interpretation of autonomy as something that is necessarily opposed to the powers that be. This interpretation informs the third section of Ruiter and Smulders’s paper, on ‘Bourdieu and the universal’.

For Bourdieu, literature in the straightforward *l’art pour l’art* tradition is potentially political. This is, of course, very true, and Ruiter and Smulders are right to take this idea of the political potential of autonomy as the starting point of their project. Still, I do not agree with them, or with Bourdieu, when they state that this autonomy is necessarily a critical *counter* power, a power that is inherently and inevitably subversive. By understanding autonomy as a threat to the powers that be, as Ruiter and Smulders do, or by understanding it as being opposed to power, they imply that heteronomy, by contrast, presupposes *solidarity* with the power. It becomes a necessarily affirmative attitude. I think that the binary of *critical autonomy* and *affirmative heteronomy* is part of the same historical modernist faith I

discussed before. It is this faith that makes critics like Ruiters and Smulders discount heteronomy as a *regulating* instrument of the establishment, and that makes them champion autonomy as the *liberating* instrument of the avant-garde. Heteronomous literature can, in their view, 'only' be the 'messenger boy' of power (and I quote the words 'only' and 'messenger boy' from Ruiters and Smulders' essay).

Again, what we see here is that their faith in autonomy (as a beneficial condition for literature and for authors) determines the outcome of their enterprise.

3

My third remark concerns Ruiters and Smulders' discussion of the relation between (political or societal) commitment and autonomy. Discussions about commitment ('engagement') in literature often lack a proper definition of this term.⁹ This is not the place, of course, to develop a theory of 'commitment' in/and literature, but in my (preliminary) definition the idea of 'restrictive responsibility' would play an important role. When we interpret behavior, actions or utterances as being *committed*, we assume that the act or expression in question is steered by a form of restrictive responsibility towards an ideology, an alliance, or an obligation. Commitment presupposes acceptance of this responsibility; it reveals itself in behavior that takes into account the practical consequences thereof.

Aside: since the concept of commitment refers to human behavior, it is obvious that we never can be quite sure about someone's commitment. Decisions about whether or not to call someone 'committed' are made based on speculation about the person's intentions or character. Judgments about commitment, implicitly or explicitly, address the intentions of the actors involved.

Commitment reveals itself in behavior that takes account of the practical consequences of responsibility – when we transpose this rough definition to literature, we could say that a committed (or 'engaged') author is one whom we think takes a certain responsibility, and is prepared to accept the restrictive, practical consequences of that responsibility. At first glance it seems impossible to reconcile such a commitment with the literary ideology of 'autonomy'. But is it really?

Ruiters and Smulders do not think so. They intervene in an old discussion about the assumed incompatibility of (restrictive) commitment and (free) autonomy – a discussion that has been very lively over the last ten years or so, also in the Netherlands (with contributions by Odile Heynders, Geert Buelens, Sander Bax, Yra van Dijk, Laurens Ham, and others). Although many thinkers and literary critics have tried to deconstruct the opposition between the two concepts, commitment and autonomy often are conceived of as antipodal in literary criticism to this very day. On the one side there is something like 'committed' literature that responds to external reality. On the other we have literature that is perceived as being 'autonomous', namely literature that is detached from all historical conditions and that derives its singularity precisely from its independence with respect to external reality.

Like Ruiters and Smulders I am interested in literary phenomena that go beyond this unproductive dichotomy. Autonomy and commitment, the one does not categorically exclude the other. Literature may be independent from the outside world (autonomy), but that does not

⁹ Thomas Vaessens and Yra van Dijk (eds.), *Reconsidering the Postmodern: European Literature Beyond Relativism* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), p. 60.

exclude that it at the same time can have a critical function. The question then of course becomes: What are the conditions under which literature could realize its critical potential? This is where the question of authority comes to the fore.

Let us have a look at a manifestation of the idea of autonomy in today's world, borrowed from the world of journalism. The easiest way to demonstrate the connection between commitment, responsibility, autonomy, and authority is to show what happens when responsibility in any form is categorically evaded. Usually, a competent journalist adheres to a specific code of ethics (obligation to the truth, verification, accountability, etc.). A committed journalist is restricted, not only by his news organization, but by professional guidelines. In present-day TV-journalism a so-called sidekick sometimes interrupts the vital routine of this professional heteronomy. He (or she) is there to interrupt the discussion around the table with witty, funny, curious, or just stupid remarks. He is permitted to say everything because he has no responsibility whatsoever: not for the talk show; not for the interview; not for the issue that is under discussion; not for the message that the guests around the table are trying to deliver as clearly and convincingly as they can; and not for an ideology and its practical consequences. His role is the role of the fool.

We all know that in today's world these talk-show fools have a certain impact on discussions and debates. We also agree that they have some kind of power. At least, they are not harmless. But do they also have authority, like Hermans had a few decades ago? Can we reconstruct their position in the debates that they have an effect on? I think not. They lack real authority because, in principle, they do not carry much responsibility. And what is more, they are free to change their minds whenever they want.

Let us return to literature now, and to the possible impact of the literary ideology of autonomy. One of the more problematic aspects of that ideology is that, for an author who wants to be autonomous, it is almost impossible to take responsibility for something. Responsibility presupposes a context in which there is real contact with other people, and in which these other people are dependent on you. But interdependence seems to be incompatible with true autonomy.

Unlike the sidekick in present-day talk shows, Hermans, an author who lived up to the ideology of autonomy, in the second half of the 20th century had authority. This means that, although he could not *take* responsibility, responsibility was *given* to him. I think people granted him responsibility not because they believed in (or appreciated) literary autonomy, but quite on the contrary, because they basically ignored the author's claims of autonomy by linking his work and his posture to matters that really concerned them. Therefore in Hermans's case there must have been an unspoken agreement between the author and his readers in the world. It was not Hermans's supposed autonomy that was crucial to his authority, but his practical heteronomy. Maybe heteronomy is not so much the inferior counterpart of autonomy after all. It is a necessary condition for responsibility, and thus for authority.

Conclusions

I will now try to formulate some conclusions, recognizing that, in the limited scope of this short response to Smulders's and Ruiter's paper, these conclusions can only be tentative. In the foregoing I tried to show that neither 'autonomy' nor 'commitment' is a feature of literature. One can never give an affirmative answer to the question of whether text X really is

autonomous. Nor could one say without restraint that author Y really is committed (or not). As ‘attributed values’,¹⁰ the designations ‘autonomous’ or ‘committed’ imply two different readerly attitudes towards literature, and these attitudes typify two of the most dominant receptive discourses within modern literary culture.

In a classificatory model for receptive discourses, which I shall present elsewhere, these two discourses can be distinguished by their position on the opposite extremes of an axis that signifies ways of thinking about the relation between the object (the text) and the world. A reader’s position on this scale depends on how strong the bonds between the text and the outside world are to him or her. The extremes on this axis are the autonomist position and the heteronomist position. On the ‘heteronomist’ extreme there are readers who typically try to connect the text to the world in which it was written or to the world in which it is read. For such readers, the text only gets its meaning in connection with extra-textual contexts. Reading as an appropriation of the text is what I call the *heteronomist* tendency, which is recognizable in readings and interpretations executed by readers in search of commitment.

On the ‘autonomist’ extreme there are readers who, on the contrary, believe that a text should be considered as an autonomous artifact, a universe in itself. Central to their approach is the idea that a reading/interpretation has to be deduced from the text’s own internal structures. For them, reading is an act of screening off the text, both from its context of origin as well as from the world in which it is read. This is what I call the *autonomist* tendency, which is recognizable in readings and interpretations executed by readers who believe that literature has to be read ‘as literature’, i.e. in a decontextualized way, with close attention to the ‘literary work itself’.¹¹

It is important to stress that these extreme positions are rarely held in their pure state in the reality of literary culture. The extremes are archetypical and hypothetical; in actual discursive practices, the sharpness of these extremes is usually toned down. Still, they typify two receptive discourses that can be recognized in and around Hermans’s work, and they can serve as heuristic instruments in the analysis of its effective history.

One of the most remarkable episodes in that history started in 1952, when Hermans was summoned to appear in court because of a specific passage in his novel *Ik heb altijd gelijk* (I am always right, 1951).¹² According to the prosecutor, in that passage Hermans deliberately offended the Catholic community in the Netherlands. The fact that this passage is focalized by one of the characters in the novel did not stop the prosecutor from characterizing the passage as offensive. With that, the prosecutor chose an appropriative attitude towards literature: the interpreter reserves the right to extract elements from the appropriable text and to use them (purposely or obliviously) for strategic, therapeutic or ideological reasons.

¹⁰ I borrow the concept of ‘attributive values’ from Renate von Heydebrand and Simone Winko, ‘The Qualities of Literatures: A Concept of Literary Evaluation in Pluralistic Societies’, in *The Quality of Literature: Linguistic Studies in Literary Evaluation*, ed. by Willy van Peer (Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2008), pp. 223-39 (p. 226).

¹¹ See Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*. Twentieth Anniversary Edition, (Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 73; Meyer H. Abrams, ‘The Transformation of English Studies: 1930-1995’, in *American Academic Culture in Transformation. Fifty Years, Four Disciplines*, ed. by Thomas Bender and Carl E. Schorske (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp.123-50 (p. 143), and Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden MA / Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 5.

¹² See Thomas Vaessens, *Het boek was beter. Literatuur tussen autonomie en massificatie* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

The other party, headed by the expert-witness in the court (Garnt Stuiveling, a professor in Literary Studies), advocated another attitude. For Stuiveling it was offensive that the prosecutor isolated one specific passage of the book from the organic whole of the artifact. He handled a discourse in which elements of a text are not being interpreted in their relation to other discourses or extra-literary realities, but in their relation to the structure, complexity, and organization of the work itself.¹³

And what about Hermans's own position during the defense? In fact, it was close to the position of his expert-witness. Hermans stated that, by equating the charged author with a character in his book, the prosecutor endangered 'the freedom of literature'. It is interesting to see how Hermans, reconsidering his own book in the light of the fact that he was being charged for being insulting, makes use of the 'literature as literature' discourse. But I do not follow Smulders and Ruiters when they consider Hermans's own position *not* as part of one receptive discourse among others, but as a framework in which new readings of *Ik heb altijd gelijk* have to fit.

Nevertheless, this is exactly what Ruiters and Smulders's project seems to encourage. For them, 'autonomy' is not an attributed value, but a prescription that regulates proper readings of Hermans's work. Aukje van Rooden, one of the researchers in Smulders and Ruiters's project, wrote an extensive essay on *Ik heb altijd gelijk*. In that essay she interpreted Hermans's 'autonomous' position in the controversy about the passage objected to as an attempt by the author to 'redefine the power of literature in a changing world'.¹⁴ In doing so, Van Rooden attributes a rather heroic idea of 'autonomy' to *Ik heb altijd gelijk* – an idea that is very close to Ruiters and Smulders's ideas about 'the social role of autonomous literature'. It is of course not wrong to do so, but it would be improper to present such a reading as 'approved' by the author. Hermans cannot be brought into action as a judge over his own work or its interpretations, however strong his ideas about literature might have been, and however appealing they are to the critic.

The study of literature has to offer more than testimonies of affinity with the great authors like Hermans. Answers to the questions asked in the first paragraph of this contribution – What kind of impact does literature have? What justifies literature? From where does it derive its authority? – are not to be found in any author's poetics, but in the behavior of readers giving meaning to literature.

¹³ Hans van Straten, *Hermans: Zijn tijd, zijn werk, zijn leven* (Soesterberg: Aspekt, 1999), p. 231; Thomas Vaessens, *Het boek was beter*, p. 7.

¹⁴ Aukje van Rooden, 'Het gelijk van de schrijver. Willem Frederik Hermans' fictieve discussie met Jean-Paul Sartre', in *Nederlandse letterkunde*, 17.3 (2012), 159-77 (p. 170).

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