

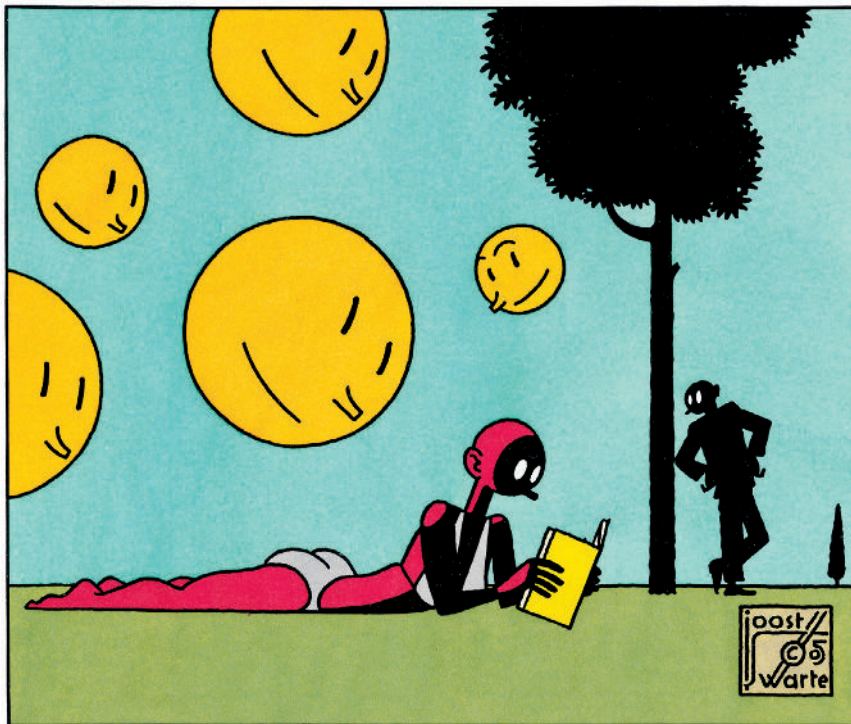
Dutch and Flemish Prose of the Early Twenty-First Century

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[MATTHIJS DE RIDDER]

When the twin towers came crashing down on 11 September 2001, so did the post-modern belief in the end of the 'grand narratives', which had all but dominated Dutch and Flemish literature in the 1990s. Or so it seemed. The era-changing event certainly brought about a new sense of historical awareness, provoking novels that grappled with the hubris of the preceding decade. Set in the 1990s, Marja Brouwers's *Casino* (2004), for instance, tells the story of a critical, albeit suggestible journalist who enjoys a summer of carefree joy in the Mediterranean on a friend's expensive yacht. Each time the protagonist's moral compass starts to tilt a little (shouldn't they come to the rescue of a sinking refugee boat heading for Lampedusa?) his conscience is soothed by the promise of sex, luxury and a free mansion in Amsterdam. A couple of years later, the journalist slowly awakens from the dream in which he has been living. While researching an undercover operation, in which the Dutch government tried to bust drug organizations by itself acting as a drug dealer (the so-called IRT affair), he discovers that his own life has been funded with dirty money all along. He wants to be outraged, he even wishes to re-instate the old categories of right and wrong, but he knows he is complicit in the crime.

After 9/11 it was clear to many people that a new era had begun, yet it proved very difficult to start with a clean slate. Though a lot of writers felt the need to descend from their ivory towers, so to speak, and shed their light on recent events, it still seemed impossible to go back to the time of all-encompassing philosophies. Awoken by the disenchanting incidents in recent times and in dire need of clarity or even 'truth', many a protagonist became tangled up in ever more complex fictions. This is the surprising plot of Désanne van Brederode's novel *Mensen met een hobby* (People with Hobbies, 2001). Its protagonist Lilly finds the fact that grand narratives have lost their validity has not led to a society that felt uprooted or in any way insecure. People simply focus on their own small narratives, or 'hobbies' as Lilly's boyfriend Tom calls them. While she wittily bemoans the *Cosmopolitan* etiquettes and homegrown philosophies that structure the lives of her acquaintances and artist friends, Lilly gradually embraces the philosophy of an obscure Danish thinker, planning her every move according to his moral system. When this philosopher turns out to be invented,



Reading causes ageing of the skin

gone is her refreshing opinionated self-confidence. Her whole endeavour has proven to be nothing but a hobby.

Not all hobbies or small narratives turned out to be so devastatingly futile. The beginning of the twenty-first century saw the birth of various small-time heroes, who tackled their marginal existences in their wee narratives, gradually turning them into tales of grand(er) proportions. In Annelies Verbeke's *Slaap!* (*Sleep!* 2003), the sleepless protagonist goes through a rough period. When she finally comes to her senses, she finds herself on the beach, where she is reborn, rapidly reliving all stages of human evolution. Dimitri Verhulst's *De helaasheid der dingen* (*The Misfortunates*, 2006) introduces the reader to a cast of colourful people, who, while living a life of liquor and licentiousness, imagine they are on top of the world. Likewise, the brawling and bantering heroes of P.F. Thomése's *J. Kessels, The Novel* (2009) manage to turn their absurd quest into a return to the Garden of Eden, or in their case the 'Snack Bar of Yore'. And even the story of a rival band of school buddies in Tommy Wieringa's picaresque novel *Joe Speedboot* (*Joe Speedboat*, 2005), on second glance turns out to be a clever retelling of the Apocalypse.

Whereas most of these extrapolations of the characters' misfortunes are fairly harmless for society at large, in his quest for a better understanding of things, Jörgen Hofmeester, the protagonist of Arnon Grunberg's novel *Tirza* (2006), constructs a fantasy that proves to be as delusional as it is dangerous. Hofmeester has never been very successful in life, but a combination of a frugal attitude and a high-risk hedge fund keep him afloat during the nineties.



**Reading is
highly addictive,
don't start**

A couple of weeks after 9/11, however, his carefully constructed *Dutch dream* goes up in smoke. Desperately trying to find an explanation, he soon identifies the perpetrator:

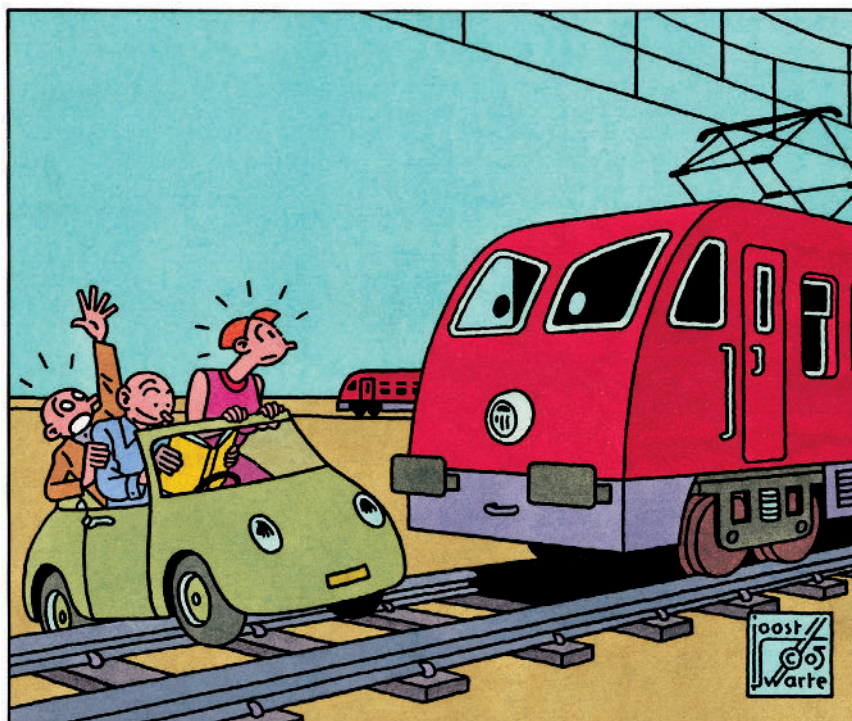
History, he feared, was getting personal now. The anonymous world economy had gotten a face, a body, a name. Mohammed Atta, he was the one who stole Hofmeester's money, his financial independence, his children's freedom, which was almost within reach, almost within reach. Mohammed Atta was to blame, Atta had decapitated Hofmeester's hedge fund.

A couple of weeks later, his precious daughter Tirza introduces Hofmeester to her Moroccan boyfriend, Choukri. Hofmeester, at this point completely delusional, is sure he recognizes Choukri as his nemesis: 'Mohammed Atta is in my home. Atta has arisen.' He then vows to rid the earth of the man he holds to be the infamous terrorist.

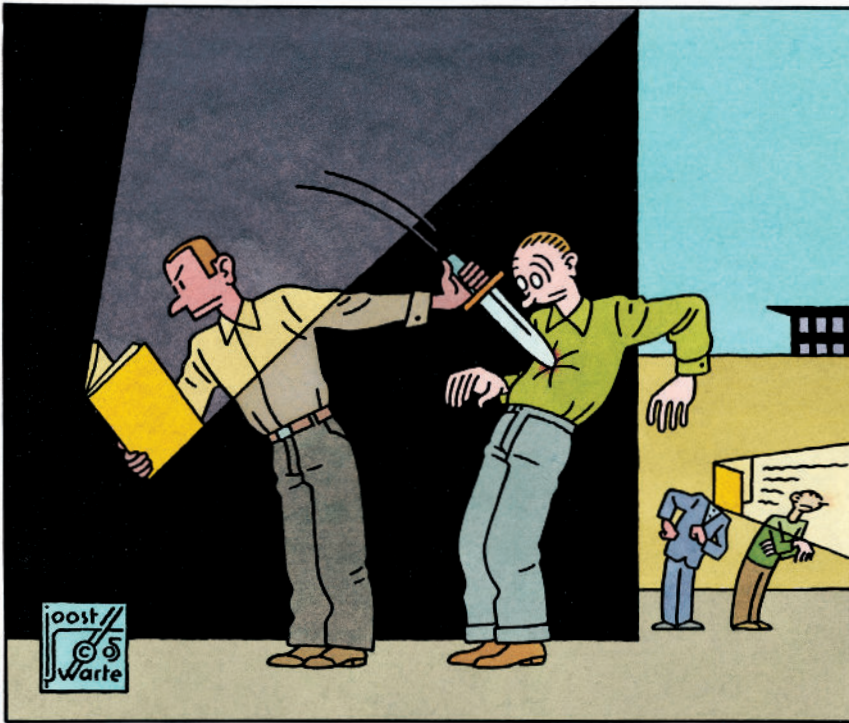
Atta is but a figment of Hofmeester's imagination. Gradually, however, his ever more crippling fantasy becomes exemplary for the way in which the western world reacted to the 9/11 attacks. With his deceptive tale, Grunberg shows that the world had not become more dangerous because of the sudden rise of a ruthless agitator, but because of the fact that the West itself got stuck in a blinding narrative in which Evil had to be met with even bigger Evil, allegedly for the sake of civilisation.

In search of a new grand narrative, more than one fictional character discovered that the theorists of post-modernism might have had a point when they stated that reality was unknowable. Despite claims to the contrary, at the turn of the century writers didn't simply turn their backs on post-modern principles – in many cases they merely employed them differently. Instead of representing the world as an endless patchwork of tales and images, writers often subjected 'reality' to apparent 'truths', which had a tendency to complicate matters even further.

Whereas novels tended to be more straightforward in terms of story line and structure than in preceding years, in many cases they explicitly challenged history. In *De heldeninspecteur* (*The Hero Inspector*, 2010), Atte Jongstra tells the story of a Dutch officer during the Belgian revolution of 1830 and the subsequent Ten Days' Campaign of 1831. This man has the daunting task of assessing the exploits of his fellow soldiers. Impressionable as well as near-sighted, he re-writes history as it happens. In his *Canada Trilogy* (1999-2006) Pol Hoste delves into the confusion of tongues known as world history. The main character of Koen Peeters's *Grote Europese roman* (*Great European Novel*, 2007), meanwhile, tries to capture the essence of the abstract concept of Europe. He travels to all the political, financial and administrative hubs of the continent. Along the way, however, he finds that the heart of Europe isn't to be found in Brussels or Strasbourg, but in Auschwitz and Mauthausen. These are the places where history speaks of terrifying, but real human emotions. Set in the Cold War's heyday, Marc Reugebrink's *Het grote uitstel* (*The Great Delay*, 2007) features a band of characters that also have a hard time reducing their political disputes to more human proportions. Political theories are flying high, but in the end the heated discussions aren't really satisfying. They are going to change the world, the characters say, and they are going to make love, that as well, but their climaxes – politically as well as sexually – are endlessly postponed, until, in the end, nothing really appears to have happened. And finally, in Jeroen Olyslaegers's diabolical novel *Wij* (*We*, 2009), 1970s' Flemish nationalism



Reading
kills



Books contain ideas, insults, opinions and provocations

is portrayed as an ideology awakening to the fact that it cannot reside in the realm of ideas forever. The choice is a daunting one: either realize the long-standing demands by force, or commercialize the main ideas in light entertainment and popular song form.

The limits of literary fiction

Telling disrupting tales – one could say this is one of literature’s more exciting tasks. But is it all literature can do? This question is the starting point of Charlotte Mutsaers’s novel *Koetsier Herfst* (Coachman Autumn, 2008). Its protagonist is writer Maurice Maillot, who has had a huge success in the past, but hasn’t been able to write a sentence since the decease of his cat Grappa, eight years before. The death of his beloved pet, and the indifferent reactions of his fellow human beings to its death, has made him renounce fiction. Now he longs for ‘factuality not virtuality’.

Maillot meets Do, a militant animal rights activist. She is a big fan of one of his earlier books, which she claims is written ‘in the spirit of Bin Laden’s masterful statement: *under which doctrine is your blood, blood and our blood water?*’ Maillot reacts in surprise, but Do is dead serious, both in her reading of Maillot’s work, and in her assessment of Osama bin Laden. In her view Bin

Laden is not a reprehensible terrorist, but a poet who doesn't tolerate any form of domination. Furthermore, in Do's mind, literature and terrorism are interchangeable. Gradually Maillot begins to warm to the idea. Maybe this is the key to the kind of factual literature he craves. He follows Do to Ostend where she is to join the Lobster Liberation Front. When Do dies and the stigmata on her body suggest that she might have been the Messiah, Maillot turns out to be a somewhat reluctant apostle. Suddenly he is not so sure literature should be a poetic form of terrorism, or that he is a dedicated enough fighter for the cause. At the same time, however, the quirky novel *Koetsier Herfst* is presented as his; as the Gospel of Maurice.

Needless to say, *Koetsier Herfst* did not start a wave of terrorist fiction, nor did the book aspire to such a thing one-dimensionally. Mutsaers takes the idea of veracity to the extreme, yet it remains perfectly possible to read the novel as a tale of universal human endeavour. The same goes for other books of the same period that have taken their cue from the zeitgeist or even real-life events, such as Peter Verhelst's *Zwerm* (Swarm, 2005), Yves Petry's *De Maagd Marino* (Virgin Marino, 2010), Peter Terrin's *Post Mortem* (2012), and the contemporary family epics *Pier en oceaan* (Pier and Ocean, 2012) by Oek de Jong, *De omwegen* (Detours, 2013) by Jeroen Theunissen, and *Ik en wij* (I and We, 2014) by Saskia De Coster.

Yet, the sheer number of novels devoted to the pressing issues of the time is remarkable, especially the issue of migration. Ranging from problems concerning multicultural society to mass immigration, the subject has been tackled in near documentary style, as in Dimitri Verhulst's *Problemski hotel* (2003) and Tom Naegels's *Los* (Loose, 2005); in symbolic tales like Arnon Grunberg's *De asielzoeker* (The Asylum Seeker, 2003), Tom Lanoye's *Het derde huwelijk* (The Third Marriage, 2006) and Tommy Wieringa's *Dit zijn de namen* (These Are the Names, 2012); and in confrontational narratives including Elvis Peeters's *De ontelbaren* (The Uncountables, 2005), Koen Peeters's *Duizend heuvels* (A Thousand Hills, 2012), and Annelies Verbeke's *Dertig dagen* (Thirty Days, 2015).

The most successful migration novel of recent years is arguably *La Superba* (2013) by Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer, in which the narrator, also named Ilja, guides his readers through Genoa, a city that is as real as it is an integral part of this dreamer's imagination. 'In a way, the city also exists without me,' he admits at some point, 'at least, I'm willing to assume this much.' Imagining a life in the city with its picturesque alleys and theatrical inhabitants, Ilja discovers there is a limit to the world of make-believe that he, as a writer, tries to comprehend. He then meets Djiby, a Senegalese refugee. At first Ilja is eager to hear his story, as it would benefit the novel he is working on, in which 'the discrimination against immigrants will be a major theme'. Ilja writes down Djiby's story of false hope and deception, but when Djiby returns a couple of weeks later, to tell Ilja his subsequent experiences, the story turns out to be too much to handle for this writer of fiction. Djiby has been beaten up and his papers taken, which effectively renders him an outlaw. Suspicious of his motives Ilja says that he doesn't believe Djiby. But the Senegalese assures Ilja he is not after his money or anything like that. 'I want you to tell my story to the people in the North. That's the only thing I ask of you. Will you promise me that, Ilja?' Ilja remains speechless. The bitter reality of migration has caught up with his fictitious ideas.



Readers die younger

War and dreams

If one ventured to come up with an over-arching theme for a decade and a half worth of literary fiction, it would probably be the dramatic attempt to bridge the gap between the harsh reality and our creative, yet inadequate imagination.

This theme was perhaps most prominent in the war novel genre. In the past sixty-plus years the Second World War has been a persistent subject in Flemish and Dutch prose. The war never really wanted to become history. Even quite recently plenty of novels set in the war period were published, both by writers who witnessed it first-hand, like Hans Croiset with *Lucifer onder de lindes* (Lucifer Underneath the Linden, 2010) and *Lente in Praag* (Spring in Prague, 2013), and by second or third generation writers, such as Johan de Boose in *Bloedgetuigen* (Blood Witnesses, 2011), Nico Dros in *Oorlogsparadijs* (War Paradise, 2012), and Jan Brokken in *De vergelding* (Retribution, 2013).

With its centennial in sight, even the previously often neglected First World War became a popular topic. In the Netherlands (neutral during WWI) greatly divergent novels such as *Dünya* (2007) by Tomas Lieske, *De Nederlandse maagd* (The Dutch Maiden, 2010) by Marente de Moor, *Het grote zwijgen* (The

Great Silence, 2011) by Erik Menkveld and Martin Michael Driessen's novella *Een ware held* (A True Hero, 2013) were at least partly set in 1914-1918. In Flanders (where much of the fighting took place) the shift towards WWI stories was even bigger. *Post voor mevrouw Bromley* (Mail for Mrs. Bromley, 2011) by Stefan Brijs, *Woesten* (2013) by Kris Van Steenberge, *Meester Mitraillette* (Schoolmaster SMG, 2014) by Jan Vantoortelboom (2014) and *Godenslaap* (*While the Gods Were Sleeping*, 2008) and *De spiegelingen* (Reflections, 2014) by Erwin Mortier all transported the readers to the horrors of the Great War.

In the case of Stefan Hertmans's *Oorlog en terpentijn* (*War and Turpentine*, 2013), the situation is almost inverted. This novel does not create an image of the First World War through literary means, here the war presents itself to the writer, in the form of a number of notebooks the author's grandfather, WWI veteran Urbain Martien, left his grandson. While recounting his grandfather's exploits before, during and after the war, Hertmans attempts to bridge the gap between the twenty-first century and the absolutely incomprehensible era in which Martien lived. He paints a portrait of a pensive young man and art student, who saw his world shattered to pieces in a devastating nightmare of violence.

Although he holds his grandfather in high esteem, the writer never really succeeds in bridging the abyss that lies between them. It is only when he trades the political for the artistic realm that Hertmans really begins to understand his grandfather. Throughout his life Martien had been a keen amateur painter, specializing in copying the great classics. But it turns out he did more than just copy. In his rendering of Velázquez's *Venus*, instead of copying the face of Velázquez's model, he painted in the likeness of his one true love, a girl that succumbed to the Spanish flu, months after Martien returned from the trenches. Through his grandfather's diaries, Hertmans gets to know him as a courageous man, yet only in his paintings, in which Martien tried to alter history by briefly imagining his long lost love in the flesh. The writer does meet a kindred spirit here.

Longing is literature's lasting liability. ■