

THE AFTERGLOW OF POSTMODERNISM IN RECENT DUTCH AND FLEMISH FICTION

Hans Bertens

Utrecht University

426 The reports of postmodernism's death are greatly exaggerated, as Mark Twain might have put it, and as a quick look at the *Bibliography* compiled and published under the auspices of the American Modern Language Association will confirm. The *Bibliography* is more in general an extraordinarily useful tool, but for those with a special interest, or perhaps simply curiosity, it has the added attraction of providing information on the frequency with which terms and phrases, literary or otherwise, occur in the periodicals and books that it searches and indexes. If you want to know how often the terms "postmodernism" and "postmodern" were used over the past thirty-five years, the *Bibliography* has the answers. In the 1980s (1980-89), "postmodernism" was used 732 times and "postmodern" 562 times. The next decade, 1990-99, was a bad one for those scholars and critics who sought to defend the literary-critical tradition against the onslaught of French-inspired revolutionary notions. For "postmodernism," the counter stops at 3190, and for "postmodern," at 2240. The new millennium did not make much of a change, at least not initially: 2000-09 has 2945 instances of "postmodernism" and 2250 instances of "postmodern." It is only in the last five years that interest finally seems to flag, even though "postmodernism" and "postmodern" still belong to the most frequently used terms in the *Bibliography's* corpus (923 and 838, respectively, but in what is only half a decade).

It must be said, though, that those figures may be misleading. Let us have a quick look at the frequencies of the related terms "poststructuralism" and "poststructuralist." In their best decade, 1990-99, "poststructuralism" achieves a rather disappointing score of 466 and "poststructuralist" does a lot worse with a score of 218. And in the current decade, "poststructuralism" clocks in at 98 and "poststructuralist" at 69—in other words, since 2010, the *Bibliography* has counted fewer than 35 mentions a year for the pair. It is not far-fetched to assume that "postmodernism" or "postmodern"

often stand in for “poststructuralism” and “poststructuralist.” However, even if that is the case, we have every reason to believe that the critical discussion of postmodernism is far from over.

What these figures do not tell us is how postmodernism has fared and still fares in that discussion. But it is not a secret that right from the start, postmodernism and the postmodern have been highly controversial, more often than not associated with intellectual nihilism, and even with a loss of historical awareness and of genuine emotion. There have also been voices defending postmodernism—associating it with feminism, the empowerment of ethnic minorities, and other more hopeful sociocultural developments of the later twentieth century—but that defense mostly ignored the metafictional, self-reflexive postmodern fiction of the 1970s and 1980s and pointed to fiction that explicitly dealt with political issues (Bertens, “Close Encounters”). It is only more recently that a revaluation of postmodernism *tout court* has got underway. Almost twenty years ago, arguing that metafictional strategies do not necessarily exclude emotion, I claimed with youthful enthusiasm that “[t]he logic of postmodernism demands emotion, raw and public emotion, an emotion that crackles in front of an audience that virtually spans the world” and suggested that postmodernism “demands a contemporary equivalent of Molly Bloom in the Oprah Winfrey show, with a Leopold sitting dubiously in the front row and later, somewhat sheepishly, joining her on the stage, together with an updated version of Blazes Boylan” (Bertens, “Why Molly” 25-26). I originally presented these statements in a conference whose call for papers had opened with the claim that “[i]t is hardly surprising that displays of emotion appear to be absent from postmodernism art and postmodern discourse” (25), a claim that perfectly summarizes what at the time was almost a consensus, but which to me seemed utterly mistaken. And in a follow-up article, entitled “Close Encounters of the Wrong Kind: Poststructuralism and the Postmodern,” I suggested that that mistake was because postmodernism was almost invariably seen through a poststructuralist lens, blinding its critics to the fact that postmodern fiction was not poststructuralism put into literary practice, but was first of all a literary mode. This is not to say that poststructuralism is irrelevant to a discussion of postmodern fiction or of postmodern art in general—one does, after all, not have to believe in a *Zeitgeist* to realize that it may not be accidental that two rather different modes of dealing with reality may quite independently from each other develop ideas that clearly have some sort of affinity.

Postmodernism’s rehabilitation really took off with Robert L. McLaughlin’s “Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World” of 2004. McLaughlin convincingly argued that in spite of “their wordplay, their awareness of the conventions of narrative fiction, their anticipation of readers’ expectations, their blatant and subtle referencing of other texts [...] in short, their continually breaking the fourth wall and refusing to let us suspend our disbelief,” writers such as Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, Robert Coover, Ishmael Reed, John Barth, and others “care deeply about the world” (59). McLaughlin also very usefully pointed

out how Barth's often-quoted "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967) had persistently been misread. Contrary to what many contemporary commentators believed, Barth had never advocated the complete self-referentiality with which his name has often been associated. For Barth, the writers who in 1967 were at the cusp of innovation and busy reinvigorating the novel as a genre belonged, as he put it, to "the few people whose artistic thinking [wa]s hip and any French new-novelist's, but who manage[d] nonetheless to speak eloquently and memorably to our still-human hearts and conditions, as the great artists have always done" (McLaughlin 56).

428 In the last ten years this revaluation has gained more and more steam. In 2007 Jane Flax claimed that, "contrary to many critics of postmodernism, its necessary ethical correlative is not an 'anything goes' relativism" (87). In the same collection of essays, Mike and Nicholas Gane argued that "[m]odern readings of the postmodern here tend to confuse the refusal to construct universal or grand narratives with an act of ethical and political indifference" (130), while John McGowan, an early participant in the debate on postmodernism, expressed his "sense that much of the postmodern debate was awfully silly. Caricatures of the West, of various intellectual traditions and positions [...] often prevailed" (98). *Twentieth-Century Fiction's* special (double) issue of 2011 on postmodernism continued this reassessment, as did my own "Postmodern Humanism" of 2012 and Mary K. Holland's *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature*. In the book's "Introduction: Writing Postmodern Humanism," Holland, too, argues that "we have often mischaracterized postmodern literature—especially fiction that takes as its starting point the language problems described by deconstruction theory—as unable to represent or care about the things that literature has traditionally cared most about: human relationships, emotional interaction with the world, meaning" (14). Writing about European postmodernism, Theo D'haen sees a similar "poststructuralist realism" (Holland's term): the Flemish writer Paul Verhaeghen "uses the typically 'postmodern' device of metafiction to reflect on the meaning of the Holocaust, and of literature, and of literature about the Holocaust" (D'haen, "European Postmodernism" 276). D'haen explicitly links this contemporary European postmodernism to Christian Moraru's "cosmodernism"—"the worldview expressed by the newer American fiction using 'postmodern' techniques" (274)—thus inscribing both in a hybrid mode of fiction that virtually spans the Western world and is already assured a place in the pantheon of "world literature" (D'haen, *Concise History*).

If, following in Theo D'haen's footsteps, one looks at recent Dutch-language—that is, Flemish and Dutch—fiction, Moraru's "cosmodernism" is very much in evidence. To offer some obvious examples: in 2014, the prestigious Dutch Libris Literature Prize was awarded to Ilja Leonard Pfeiffer for his novel *La Superba* (2013), while the important Flemish Gouden Boekenuil ("Golden Book Owl") was won by the young (Dutch) writer Joost de Vries with his *De republiek* ("The Republic," 2013). Let me briefly discuss these novels before I move on to the two novels that are my main concern here.¹ *La Superba*, which is situated in the city of Genova (called *La Superba*

by its residents), cannily mixes autobiographical fact with fiction, creating a knot that cannot be disentangled. Its protagonist and intradiegetic narrator is the six-foot writer Ilja Leonard Pfeiffer, whose girth is a good match for his height, and who has recently settled in Genova, just like the real-world writer Pfeiffer, very much a public character, who some years ago took his impressive frame to Genova on an antiquated bicycle. (*La Superba* is only one of a whole batch of recent novels in which the author doubles as its protagonist—see, for instance, Clemens J. Setz’s *Indigo* [2012, English translation 2014] and Jesse Ball’s *Silence Once Begun* [2013]). Having settled in one of the more obscure recesses of Genova’s medieval quarter, Pfeiffer—from now on *La Superba*’s protagonist—one night literally stumbles over a slender, silk-stockinged human leg, amputated at the hip. Having handled the leg and afraid that it can be traced to him, he takes it home to make it disappear, but not before his overheated imagination—not hindered by a pretty low sexual threshold—has tempted him to start stroking its curves, an activity that arouses him to the point that he actually has an orgasm, leaving even more of his DNA on the *corpus delicti*. In short, *La Superba* is a rather wild and improbable ride, witty and hilarious, a ride that ends on an indeterminate note with what may become a homosexual encounter with the man (!) whose leg was by way of punishment amputated by fellow transvestites. But before we get there, we hear the poignant story of an illegal North African migrant who, with many other migrants, must survive in the streets of a hostile city; we see how Pfeiffer’s callousness is a contributing factor to the descent into prostitution of a young waitress; we get a glimpse of mafia tactics in what would seem to be respectable *haut-bourgeois* circles. Most importantly, we see how Pfeiffer’s macho sense of himself is gradually undermined. Used to throwing his weight about in both the literal and the figurative sense, and routinely dismissive and exploitative with regard to women, he is forced to face his role in the waitress’s unhappy fate in a personal encounter with the girl, and likewise forced to recognize the irony in his fondling of the amputated leg when he meets its former owner. *La Superba*, then, has serious moral and political dimensions. While obviously celebrating its protagonist’s linguistic exuberance, his wit, and his cutting sarcasm, it also condemns the deliberate insensitivity, the refusal to take others on their own terms, which fuels much of Pfeiffer’s exuberance. And so we have ontological confusion and other narrative tricks, intertextuality, and outrageous events in the best postmodern tradition; but, next to that, and inseparable from it, we find, as the narrative progresses, genuine emotional involvement, compassion and political awareness.

We find a similar development, although less outspoken, in Joost de Vries’s *De republiek*. De Vries’s novel starts traditionally enough. Its narrator, Friso de Vos, is a young historian who would seem to be the right-hand man of the academic celebrity Josef Brik, and who, as a sort of editorial assistant, is involved in the academic journal that Brik runs. But the illusion of unproblematic referentiality is shattered when we hear that Brik, a specialist in Hitler studies, has once worked closely with his American colleague Jack Gladney. For those who are familiar with Don DeLillo’s

White Noise of 1985, in which Jack Gladney is a wholly fictional specialist in Hitler studies, it is immediately obvious that de Vries is playing intertextual (and ontological) games. What is more, he explicitly wants the reader to know that such is the case. For those who have missed the reference, he provides the necessary information at the end of the novel. Another clue to de Vries's postmodern leanings is that neither Brik nor his journal, tellingly entitled *De slaapwandelaar* ("The Somnambulist"), are interested in facts or truths regarding Adolf Hitler, but focus on what one may call Hitler's cultural afterlife—representations of Hitler in whatever form they may occur. The novel even prints some rather hilarious pictures of objects—the façade of a house, a light switch—resembling Hitler's facial characteristics (the moustache and the slanting haircut). This interest in representation rather than in representation's origin(s) leads to a number of dialogues that further alert the reader to the fact that de Vries is fully cognizant of all postmodern arguments regarding origin and authenticity, even where such sensitive subjects as Nazism are involved. (We also hear of a journal, **430** *Blondie, tijdschrift voor Hitler studies* ["Journal of Hitler Studies"], the title of which references a Dutch right-wing politician who later will make a cameo appearance.)

The positively lighthearted way in which Adolf Hitler's afterlife is treated is gradually countered by a number of mysterious events that are never fully explained. Like the American jazz trumpeter Chet Baker (who is duly referenced), Brik falls to his death from an Amsterdam hotel room. Then Brik's house in upstate New York is burgled. When de Vos attends a conference on Hitler studies in Vienna, even stranger things happen. He is expertly seduced by a young woman and finds extensive and very explicit footage of the encounter when, somewhat later, he switches on his hotel television, with some scenes suggesting that the girl is clearly aware of the hidden camera. There is also the sudden, and unprovoked, jealousy of another Brik follower, a Dutch look-alike not insignificantly called Philip de Vries. It is possibly his posing as de Vries that gets the narrator into trouble—a trouble that may have its origin in an international racket dealing in Hitler memorabilia that itself is, again, the target of secret agents of unknown nationality. It is as tantalizing as it is entertaining, but we never know. What we do know is that after an emotional crisis which leads him, much like *La Superba's* Pfeiffer, to unsuspected and unpleasant depths in himself, de Vos emerges chastened and saner than before and seeks comfort in reconnecting with his estranged girlfriend. The bottom line is love. In spite of its Hitler studies, less dark than *La Superba*, *De republiek* also ends on a note of redemption.

In *La Superba* and *De republiek*, we have novels that gradually move towards a recognizably realistic framework. In their combination of the "postmodern" techniques and the "realistic" referentiality that constitutes Moraru's cosmodernism, that D'haen finds in Verhaeghen's *Omega Minor*, and that Holland traces in a number of recent American novels, the emphasis shifts towards the referential pole—very gradually in *La Superba*, more abruptly in *De republiek*. Interestingly, in stark contrast with this, in two very recent novels by indisputably postmodern writers, the novel's *fabula*, the underlying, strictly chronological sequence of events that is then creatively processed

to become its *suzhet*, is directly taken from life and then effectively postmodernized along lines familiar from their earlier work.

I will first look at *De kunst van het crashen* ("The Art of Crashing," 2015) by Peter Verhelst (b. 1962), a Flemish writer who is widely seen as postmodern—if not *the* most postmodern of all Flemish writers—and then at an equally recent novel, *Worst* ("Sausage," 2014) by Atte Jongstra (b. 1956), who is generally considered one of the most postmodern—if not *the* most postmodern—of all Dutch writers. My reasons for discussing these novels lie precisely in the fact that their referential character is so explicit. (I would, by the way, argue that a combination of referentiality and self-reflexiveness has characterized postmodern fiction right from the beginning, but I would also agree that in recent years the balance has shifted somewhat towards the referential pole of this axis.) Both *De kunst van het crashen* and *Worst* draw on autobiographical data, with both writers confirming that real world events—which are easily recognizable—constitute the basis and the framework of their novels. In its preface, the narrator of *De kunst van het crashen* tells us that on the 23rd of April, 2013, on the freeway between Ghent and Antwerp, his car was hit by a truck tire that had come loose, overturned more than once, and skidded upside down to a halt. Miraculously, the narrator not only survives the crash, but is not even seriously hurt. Naturally, there are bruises—mostly caused by the airbag that has saved his life—there are aching muscles, and there is a little blood, but that is all. What happened to the novel's narrator happened to Verhelst and according to the narrator/Verhelst—after the preface, the two will part company—the book is "an ode to the places and times I glimpsed during the crash, to the truths, but not necessarily in a philosophical, and certainly not in a religious sense" (*Kunst van het crashen* 9). In *Worst*, the germinating moment of the novel is equally unexpected and, if less dramatic, certainly as traumatic. Apparently out of the blue, on 1 June 2012, the narrator's wife tells him to get lost, permanently, and to leave her and their marital home. Stunned and hurt, the narrator obeys her wishes—apparently one of the marriage's patterns—but when after a week has gone by, she inquires when he will return home; he tells her that the marriage is over. What follows is the story of very unpleasant divorce proceedings—with a good many flashbacks to happier but, with hindsight, always vaguely ominous times—and the story of the narrator's struggle with loneliness, nicotine, alcohol, and willing and less willing sexual partners. Although it is impossible to say to what extent the often depressing, often hilarious scenes that Jongstra presents are strictly autobiographical, there can be no doubt that the novel's narrator is Jongstra himself. For one thing, he has said so, although that does not necessarily mean all that much in Jongstra's case. But we have also his former wife's version of both the marriage and the divorce (Hoogervorst).

Perhaps the most fascinating thing about these novels is that, in spite of their referential framework, they fit so well in their creators' oeuvre. Since this is not the place to review that oeuvre, I will in Verhelst's case only use his 2005 magnum opus (for the time being) *Zwerm* ("Swarm"), while in Jongstra's case I will briefly look at one of

his most postmodern novels.

Zwerm is an enormously ambitious novel, as its subtitle, *Geschiedenis van de wereld* ("History of the World"), does not try to hide. The novel's design also does not hide its less than cheery outlook. It starts with a sunrise and a voice telling us to enter "the land of hope," but it also starts with page 666, the number of the Beast, and whoever or whatever the Beast may be, it has never been associated with hope and happiness. And then, after implying that we will watch a film shoot—"A voice says: 'Silence on the set! Camera! Action'" (665)—the novel counts down, even beyond zero, to page -6, where the suggestion that we may have been watching the shooting of a movie—"A voice says: 'Cut!'"—is repeated and followed by another suggestion that we are witnessing a circular process:

A voice says: "Start at the beginning."

Another voice says: "This is the beginning." (-5 - -6)

- 432** Whatever our reading of the novel's enigmatic beginning and ending, there can be no doubt that it references a number of the most horrifying events of the last eighty years. We hear, for instance, of the infamous eugenicist Otmar Freiherr von Verschuer and his sadistic protégé Josef Mengele, and of the Vietnam war—in one of the many subplots we meet Lieutenant William Calley, not any older than he was at the time of the My Lai massacre. Another subplot features Wadra Idriss, the first Palestinian suicide bomber, although in other scenes the same woman appears as Dina Nasser, a Palestinian advocate of civil disobedience (Vitse 265). In yet another subplot we have Baruch Goldstein, who in 1994 went on a rampage and killed 29 Palestinians, while we also witness the Israeli government's treatment of the nuclear technician Mordechai Vanunu, who after exposing its nuclear program was convicted of high treason. And in the vast basement of the Silver-Colored Complex, the high-rise that occupies a central place in the novel, scenes take place that remind one of the gas chambers of Auschwitz. But the references to the unspeakable crimes of the Nazi regime and the violence and trampling of human rights in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians—the role of Hamas does not escape *Zwerm*'s searchlight either—exist within a larger fictional framework that again uses extra-textual events—the ultimate destruction of the Complex clearly echoes 9/11—but robs them of their specificity and makes them generic. *Zwerm* presents a world of terrorism, kidnappings, random violence, police brutality, and high-level conspiracy, accompanied by such comparatively minor evils as hypocrisy and failed attempts at communication. And then there is something ubiquitous, "let us call it a virus for lack of a better word," that keeps gaining strength until towards the novel it may reach a new ontological level altogether: "is this the point at which the virus becomes metaphysical?" (18).

We never hear what that virus exactly is, although violence, as Bart Vervaeck suggests, would make a good candidate: "The new, viral human being, ironically advocated in the black pages [at the center of the novel] is someone who has incorporated and recognized violence as an integral part of his being and productivity"

(Vervaeck 1086). And the plethora of narrative fragments, narrative voices, and only intermittently continuous narrative lines never adds up. There is no narrative coherence—even if we have some sort of thematic coherence—and the reader looking for such coherence even meets with deliberate obstruction:

The raid proceeds as planned. Six policemen run through one of the Silver-Colored Complex's corridors and batter down a door.

The raid does not proceed as planned. The policemen don't plunge into a room but into a darkness that disconnects all their senses. (*Zwerm* 561)

Zwerm's nightmare world is as unpredictable, illogical, atemporal, and chaotic as the real thing, but, as in a real nightmare, what menaces us comes ever closer. Strangely, but perhaps it should be seen as a testimony to the power of Verhelst's imagination, the passages that are more or less directly based on extra-textual events are less effective than the fictional world in which they are incorporated, no matter how fragmented and only partially comprehensible that world may be. There can, in any case, be no doubt that *Zwerm*, in classic postmodern fashion, oscillates between referentiality and self-reflexivity, inviting two mutually exclusive reading strategies that throughout the novel keep frustrating each other, one mode of reading that sees it as an autonomous verbal artifact and one that sees it as referring us to the extra-textual reality of Auschwitz, My Lai, the Gaza Strip, and so on. Commenting on *Zwerm*, Paul Verhaeghen's *Omega Minor* (2004), and Koen Peters's *Grote Europese roman* ("Great European Novel," 2007), Vervaeck argues that "[i]n this recent assimilation of Pynchonian postmodernism, Flemish postmodern fiction foregrounded the cultural and social critique that had been implicitly present from the onset, explicitly throwing it in the reader's face, and combined it with an encyclopedic narrative" (1080). I would not quite agree and say that that critique is both foregrounded and undermined by these novels' narrative strategies. As Verhelst himself said in an interview with a Flemish newspaper, "I do hope that after reading [*Zwerm*] you have a number of moral questions. But you'll have to solve them yourself outside the book. I don't offer any answers" (Rogiers n. pag.).

De kunst van het crashen has, rather unexpectedly, much in common with *Zwerm*. The germ of the novel is a harrowing car crash caused by the blow-out of a truck tire. That blow-out may be due to mere chance or perhaps to bad maintenance—we never know—but it certainly is not intentional. The extreme violence involved is of a mechanical nature and not a sign of a malevolent universe. This is also the case in one of the tenuously linked, only marginally interlocking narratives of the novel, the one that begins with a plane crash that has only one survivor, whose very minor injuries are similar to those of Verhelst himself after his crash and who, after wandering away from the wreck, finds himself in an empty and highly mysterious landscape where he sees another man, heavily armed and engaged in a running battle with what would seem to be large and dangerous anthropoid apes. By that time we have already followed this armed man's narrative line since he came in from the sea and

found himself faced with a massive black glass wall in which a small aperture allowed him to enter a land with an unfamiliar vegetation—a vegetation that turns out to be South African because the narrator gives the various grasses, bushes, and trees their Afrikaans names and refers us to the glossary with which the book ends for further information. (Towards the end of the novel, Verhelst sets up another autobiographical link with scenes in which he and his partner travel in South Africa.) Again we have the menace and the violence that pervades *Zwerm*. The unnamed man can ultimately only save himself from the anthropoids through rather extreme acts that are described in some detail.

434 In the narrative line with which the novel opens—after the introduction in which Verhelst gives a very low-key account of the crash—we have already been confronted with *Zwerm*-like events. In an unnamed country, a coup d'état has ushered in a totalitarian, viciously repressive, and murderous regime. This particular narrative's protagonist, the young artist Raoul, gets involved in a resistance movement and ultimately is murdered on the orders of a former acquaintance who has chosen the regime's side. Much later we hear how this Mr. H.—another echo of *Zwerm*, by the way—in his turn is killed by Raoul's younger brother, who is then revealed to be the mysterious armed man running through a South African landscape. *De kunst van het crashen* abounds in tantalizing suggestions that never allow the reader to give everything its proper place in an overarching, all-encompassing framework. We certainly have events and elements that we may plausibly trace to their origin in Verhelst's real-life crash. The recurrent passages with references to and descriptions of Eadweard Muybridge's photographic studies of motion suddenly find a place when we see Verhelst describing himself after the crash: "A man who gets out of a car, jerkily, like the frames of a Muybridge photo series" (*Kunst van het crashen* 246). But it is impossible to bring everything together in a sweeping interpretive move. What to do with the limbo-like world in which Verhelst, still hurting from the effects of the crash, meets, among others, Raoul, a woman killed in the plane crash, and his West-Flemish grandfather Marcel?

In *De kunst van het crashen*, Verhelst would seem to employ postmodern strategies to say the unsayable. However, in the novel's last pages, the narrator, whom we at this point may again take to be Verhelst himself, reflects that "each word that seems to breathe more life into the body simultaneously increases the impossibility of ever touching that body, so that you already begin to miss it when reading the first letters" (289-90). He goes on to link that failure of language to represent the extra-linguistic world with a major poststructuralist concern: "That feeling does not point to what has been lost, but to an unquenchable, inconsolable longing for presence" (290). However, even the presence—unmediated by conscious awareness—of the actual body may not suffice. After a loving description of a dreamlike sexual encounter, the narrator muses that "[p]erhaps it is not so much the body that is the only truth, but rather what happens between those bodies. Perhaps that is the only possible religion" (273). But with "perhaps" we end on the note of uncertainty that, apart from the

scenes that directly report the accident and its immediate aftermath—ambulance, hospital, medical examination—characterizes *De kunst van het crashen* as a whole.

Compared to Verhelst's enigmatic but generally ominous creative response to the accident that might easily have killed him, Atte Jongstra's treatment of his "dismissal," as he calls it, and subsequent divorce is mostly laconic and its irony, sometimes at his own expense but mostly targeting his ex-wife, is not unamusing. In fact, his account makes light of what must have been a very desperate time, given the duly-recorded but mostly glossed-over intake of alcohol and nicotine. Working with flashbacks, Jongstra's intradiegetic narrator gives us a perfectly reconstructible history of the couple's marriage, a history from which the narrator emerges as the long-suffering party, now rather relieved to be rid of an unpredictable and temperamental, not to say ill-tempered and often aggressive partner. (Needless to say, his ex-wife's account gives us a rather different picture of the marriage.) Every now and then, we are given a casual reminder that the narrator—let's call him Jongstra—stays as close as is humanly possible to the facts: "Now that I write this down, I believe that this scene must have occurred hours later on the Saturday in question" (141). Yet the novel opens with an invitation to a puppet show—"Ladies and gentlemen, curtain! [...] the puppet show begins" (11)—suggesting that we will see an all-powerful puppeteer manipulating a number of will-less puppets. This would seem to be much closer to the reality of the novel than Jongstra's striving for verisimilitude. In one of the metafictional passages in *Worst*, Jongstra explains his position to a German audience: "[The Dutch writer] W.F. Hermans has said that in the classic novel not a sparrow falls from a roof without its having some sort of meaning. I don't agree. After all, in the real world so many things happen that are completely meaningless" (218). Such a book, he claims, is "inauthentic" (29). But in the story of his marriage, everything works to create a very coherent portrait of his ex-wife and her personal flaws. It is perhaps not so easy to see chance and randomness as integral to one's love life, not even if it is presented as fiction.

435

There is, then, virtually nothing that is postmodern about the narrator's marital tribulations. But the story of the marriage is embedded in a stream of encyclopaedic information (and disinformation) about sausage. We hear about countless regional and national varieties, we hear stories about famous and infamous sausage makers, about the sausage preferences of writers and other luminaries, about sausage ads from Victorian times to the 1950s. We read stories involving sausage, some of them historical, some of them made up by Jongstra himself; we even get information about Wurst-Frisian, a dialect once spoken in a small region in northern Germany (lifted verbatim, by the way, from the Wikipedia entry on Wurst-Frisian). The narrator, who as a sausage lover has joined the "Sausage Club 'Mondial,'" not only presents the most outlandish facts, figures, and fictions regarding sausage, he also warms our hearts with copious examples of drawings, illustrations, and photographs—a dozen or so in full color in the middle of the book—all of them featuring sausage in one way or another. This is the postmodern Jongstra who, in *De avonturen van Henry II Fix*

("The Adventures of Henry II Fix," 2007), presented the recently-discovered diary of a dignitary who lived between 1774 and 1844 in the provincial town of Zwolle, a diary that came with encyclopaedic information concerning the most diverse subjects, with reproductions of the man's drawings and of a generous sampling from his art collection, not to forget the 507 endnotes and the impressive bibliography provided by Jongstra himself. What the bibliography conveniently omitted were the real diaries and the other historical sources with the help of which Jongstra had constructed Fix and his totally spurious account of himself. Jongstra had even persuaded the Historical Center Overijssel, located in Zwolle, to let him organize a Fix exhibit, a decision for which the Center's director, who of course was in on the joke, was later publicly berated by less playful colleagues.

436 But the postmodern Jongstra and Jongstra the dismissed husband sit uneasily together; or, rather, they sit too far apart. It is, paradoxically, too easy to distinguish the scenes dealing with the marriage from those in which the narrator indulges his passion for sausage and everything related, no matter how tangential, to sausage. The scenes dealing with the marriage and its aftermath add up to a traditional, poignant account of a relationship gone sour. The scenes dealing with sausage remain scenes dealing with sausage, which is the only thing that connects them, even if some of the information we receive is made up by the narrator or only based on linguistic playfulness (as in the case of Wurst-Frisian). There is no temporal structure, no hierarchical relation, nothing that we might construct into a story: *fabula* and *suzhet* are identical. *Worst* has two completely different faces. It combines laconic realism with playful, self-deprecating postmodernism. But the combination is a mismatch. Whereas the realism is serious enough, the postmodern side never rises above the trivial. To put that in different terms, the combination is never made to work.

This problem also dogs *De kunst van het crashen*. The various narrative lines that develop out of Verhelst's accident are certainly not trivial, and the plane crash with only one survivor clearly echoes Verhelst's car crash, while the grim and ominous character of these narratives perfectly match Verhelst's life-threatening experience. But much in the novel, such as the terrorist regime of its opening narrative, belongs to the fictional universe of *Zwerm*—which in itself continued that of Verhelst's earlier work—and is at best very tenuously connected with the crash. However, while in *Worst* the sausage fragments and stories, no matter how entertaining, ultimately stand in the way of the novel's attempt to capture real-world events, in *De kunst van het crashen* it is the other way around. Here it is the references to the crash rather than the narratives that develop out of it that sometimes interfere with our reading, which leads to an intriguing question. Is it possible that the referentiality of postmodern fiction must remain a possibility to be entertained—must remain potential, as in, for instance, *La Superba*, rather than become actual—in order to be truly effective? Is it most of all the reader's referential desire that must be activated and exploited in postmodern fiction, a desire made sharper by the classic postmodern novel's attempts to frustrate referential moves and coherent interpretations? If so, reading postmodern

fiction is an activity with a decidedly masochistic side—as many of its detractors have always maintained. But then, they probably never experienced its rich rewards.

NOTE

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

WORKS CITED

- Bertens, Hans. "Close Encounters of the Wrong Kind: Poststructuralism and the Postmodern." *Räume der literarischen Postmoderne: Gender, Performativität, Globalisierung*, edited by Paul Michael Lützeler, Stauffenberg, 2000, pp. 23-36.
- . "Why Molly Doesn't: Humanism's Long, Long Shadow." *Emotion in Postmodernism*, edited by Gerhard Hoffman and Alfred Hornung, Winter, 1997, pp. 25-37.
- . "World Literature and Postmodernism." *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, edited by Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir, Routledge, 2012, pp. 204-12.
- DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*. Viking, 1985.
- D'haen, Theo. "European Postmodernism: The Cosmodern Turn." *Narrative*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2013, pp. 271-83.
- . *The Routledge Concise History of World Literature*. Routledge, 2011.
- Flax, Jane. "Subjectivity, Ethics, Politics: Learning to Live without the Subject." Goulimari 74-90.
- Gane, Mike, and Nicholas Gane. "The Postmodern: After the (Non-)Event." Goulimari 127-38.
- Goulimari, Pelagia, editor. *Postmodernism: What Moment?* Manchester UP, 2007.
- Holland, Mary K. *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature*. Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Hoogervorst, Ingrid. *Privédomein*. Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2014.
- Jongstra, Atte. *De avonturen van Henry II Fix*. Arbeiderspers, 2007.
- . *Worst*. Arbeiderspers, 2014.
- McGowan, John. "They Might Have Been Giants." Goulimari 57-72.
- McLaughlin, Robert L. "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World." *Symploke*, vol. 12, no. 1-2, 2004, pp. 53-68.
- Peeters, Koen. *Grote Europese roman*. Bezige Bij, 2007.

- Pfeiffer, Ilja Leonard. *Idyllen. Nieuwe poëzie*. Arbeiderspers, 2015.
- . *La Superba*. Arbeiderspers, 2013.
- Rogiers, Filip. "Alles is besmet." *De Morgen* 31 August 2005, n. pag.
- Verhaeghen, Paul. *Omega Minor*. Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2004.
- Verhelst, Peter. *De kunst van het crashen*. Prometheus, 2015.
- . *Zwerm*. Prometheus, 2005.
- Vervaeck, Bart. "In Search of a Critical Form: Postmodern Fiction in Flanders." *Modern Language Review*, vol. 106, no. 4, 2011, pp. 1073-90.
- Vitse, Sven. "Representatie in ander proza en postmodern proza." *Nederlandse Letterkunde*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2009, pp. 245-70.
- Vries, Joost de. *De republiek*. Prometheus, 2013.