‘Postmodern Elements in Postwar Dutch Fiction’

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A glance at the ever-growing list of publications on literary Postmodernism shows us that there is no agreement whatsoever on even the most elementary issues: does the term refer to a period, to a movement, to a certain body of texts? Is the issue a shared social orientation in the various poetics of a number of writers or should the term be reserved for the description of a specific repertoire of textual strategies? Which texts can be admitted to the postmodern canon and which should be refused admission? What are postmodernism's most dominant characteristics?

If one tries to find the traces of a postmodern condition in a specific culture (in my case Dutch culture), one should begin with showing his literary critical hand. After all, the first thing to be said is that Postmodernism is in the Netherlands primarily seen as an imported product. As we know, the first attempts to develop Postmodernism as a literary critical concept had an American origin. In the U.S., the concept would seem to be related first of all to the writings of a group of authors (Sorrentino, Coover, Gaddis, Barthelme, Pynchon, and others) who are hardly known in Holland. When American critics refer to international exponents of literary Postmodernism - Joyce, Beckett, Cortázar - then the Dutch (and in more general the European) critic tends to see their work simply as examples of Modernist literature.

It must also be said that the American debate on the question of Postmodernism has annexed a number of themes and motifs that for years have played a role in European discussions of modern literature, even though the term Post-
modernism was never used. The various descriptions of the postmodern novel illustrate that the term ‘postmodern’ (at least within the literary context) functions as a carry-all for all those literary phenomena for which Umberto Eco had designed the concept of the ‘open’ work of art, or the work of art ‘in motion,’ for which Barthes had created the term ‘texte scriptible,’ and which the diverse European literary critical surveys had classified as ‘experimental prose,’ ‘metaliterature,’ and ‘neo-avantgarde.’

Yet, in spite of this, the term Postmodernism has of late struck a responsive chord with European critics. This would seem to be connected with a need to assess postwar literary developments against the background of the literature of the interbellum, a period that was dominated by Modernism and the various avantgardist movements. Reflections on postmodernism often raise the question, either implicitly or explicitly, whether the literary experiments of the interbellum - ranging from Futurism and Surrealism to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Musil's *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* - did not reach limits which cannot be further expanded. It would in any case seem to be a fact that during that period a literary norm came into being which postwar literature could not ignore. One may register at least three reactions to this ‘norm.’ There is first of all the view that the radical literary experiments of the interbellum period should be considered a closed case. In this view all later attempts at experimentation have only succeeded in producing a helpless neo-avantgarde that misses all vitality and creates nothing more than a sterile laboratory literature. I mention this way of seeing things because it dominates especially the Dutch literary scene.

A diametrically opposed reaction is to be found in the cultural criticism of the so-called Frankfurter Schule (Adorno) and the poststructuralists (for instance in the work of Foucault or Lyotard), who, especially in their view of literature, are closer related than the different traditions which they draw upon might suggest. In this reaction the work of Joyce, Musil, Blanchot, and others has established the norm for the extent to which technological and social developments have transformed the traditional functions of literature and their corollary strategies. Here, the classic organical literary work is no longer capable of giving form to the individual's experience in our society.

A third reaction sees the interbellum experiments not as an absolute norm, but as one of the poles in the literary field of force. Postmodernism recognizes no taboos; not a single style, not a single strategy, is not available for use. A hierarchy of norms is simply out of the question. One refuses to see literary development as a process in which literature disengages itself more and more from its former obligation to present visions of reality. Especially Bürger and

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Wellmer defend this position in their critiques of Adorno and Lyotard.

In conclusion one might say that the term Postmodernism has, since a number of years, found itself a place in an ongoing discussion on the relations between the neo-avantgarde and the experimental literature of the interbellum period.

We need still another preliminary remark. One finds in the various literary-critical varieties of Postmodernism critical and theoretical notions that are in fact reflections of the literary experiments of the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. I offer as an example the work of the Russian Formalists (from Shlovsky to Jakobson) whose insights reached Western Europe only in the 1960s. The same holds true for the work of Volosinov and Bakhtin who, with their dialogical concept, have deeply influenced especially French theoreticians. It is these theoreticians - in their discussions on the *nouveau roman* - who have, more than others, developed a number of notions that have since then been incorporated into the postmodern canon. This has also happened with the insights developed in reception esthetics (Jauss, Iser), semiotics (Eco) and poststructuralism (Barthes, Kristeva), that originally were designed to facilitate the analysis of late 19th and early 20th century literary experiments. Much of this is now, retroactively, considered to belong to the postmodern code. This is perhaps the reason why those who attempt to (re)construct this postmodern code run into problems of periodization. After all, the techniques that they have in mind when creating such a code have a long tradition which goes back at least to mannerist art. All it needs is to have a look at the studies of Hocke and Hauser in order to find to what an extent the experimental urge of the modern period is indebted to techniques that were developed in the shadow of the Renaissance. It is not accidental that Lyotard thought to find traces of Postmodernism in Montaigne (Lyotard 1986:33).

Lyotard's historical reference calls forth an image of Postmodernism as a radically skeptical orientation within modernity. If modernity is seen as a belief in scientific and technological progress, in the demise of mythical thought, in control over the nature and destiny of society, then Postmodernism forms the melting pot of all those diverse cultural utterances that cast doubt on that belief. As Lyotard writes, ‘Le postmoderne ainsi entendu n’est pas le modernisme à sa fin, mais à l’état naissant, et cet état est constant’ (Lyotard 1986:30). Seen in this light, Postmodernism is a phenomenon that has always accompanied modernity, sometimes forced into a peripheral position, then again surfacing violently and in diverse forms.

Translated into literary-historical terms, I construe Lyotard's position as

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presenting a Postmodernism that offers a radical skepticism with respect to the notion that literary works create a meaningful coherence in the form of an organical work of art, that they aim at creating order in a reality that is perceived as chaotic, and that they represent (a view of) reality.

Adorno called the ‘fortschreitende Negation des Sinns’ the principle of modern art (in his case primarily a negation of traditional ways of establishing meaning). Lyotard's counterpart to Adorno's principle of modern art is the never-ending negation of representation which he sees as the principle of postmodern art. According to Lyotard, the postmodern writer finds himself in the position of a philosopher: he interrogates the various language games and can do so with an endless variety of means - from irony and parody to a critique of language and metacommentary. The postmodern text always functions as a commentary on another text.

It seems to me that we can relate this to the position of McHale, who sees the transition from a Modernist to a Postmodernist literature in terms of a shift from epistemological to ontological problematics. Using McHale's interesting thesis as my jumping-board, I see Postmodernism's relationship to Modernism not in terms of a changing of the guard, but prefer to see Postmodernism as a group of strategies that seek to problematize literary genres and the framework of literature itself, that is to say as a radical orientation towards framing processes and therefore as a radical pole in the force field of modern literature. Modernist literature undermines the pretentions of Realism, in which the history of a hero is related from an omniscient perspective. Modernism at least ironizes the role of the narrator, introduces for instance multi-perspective narration, and does no longer motivate its characters' actions by recurrence to material and social circumstances. The chronological presentation of events is no longer respected. But the notion that a fictional reality can be created, that reality can be represented in fiction, is at best relativized, but not relinquished. Postmodernism does not stop there: it affects each and every narrative element. During the act of writing narrative frames are continually tested. Postmodern literature is no longer concerned with narratives that represent a possible reality, it is obsessed with the reality of language.

If one starts from the hypothesis that postmodern literature draws on the repertoire of strategies that seek to jeopardize or break with narrative frames, a whole series of examples from Dutch literature should be discussed here. Especially during the 1970s a good many novels were published that either explicitly or implicitly offered commentary on the conventions of the classical Realist novel. I mention here, as especially striking, the work of Brakman,
Kellendonk, Schippers, Bernlef, ten Berge, Ritzerfeld, de Winter and Beurskens. Whereas in Realistic literature narrative strategies are purposely used to evoke locations, to create and situate characters, and to build up narrative tension or, alternatively, to make the story's developments as plausible as possible, in the work of these authors such elements are either directly or by way of the novel's structure, subjected to commentary. But when we look abroad and take the work of Joyce, Arno Schmidt, Wiener, Blanchot, Beckett or Sollers as our norm - experimental prose in which such narrative elements are either relegated to the background or have vanished altogether - then the list of postmodern Dutch literature is very limited indeed. It is then primarily the work of Schierbeek and Vogelaar that comes to mind and - with some reservations - the writings of Nooteboom, Ferron, and Polet - authors who otherwise, with respect to their poetics, have not all that much in common. One might also think of two novels by W.F. Hermans, De god Denkbaar, Denkbaar de god [The god Thinkable, Thinkable the god] and Het Evangelie van O. Dapper Dapper [The Gospel of O. Courageous Courageous], or Harry Mulisch’ De Verteller [The Narrator] - texts that at least as far as form is concerned depart widely from what one would normally expect a novel to offer. But it must at least be noted that both Hermans and Mulisch are deeply attached, in their respective poetics, to the notion of the organic work of art, so that they should rather be seen as representatives of Modernism.

An author I have so far not mentioned is Gerrit Krol - the only one who has indeed characterized himself as a postmodern writer. He is virtually the only author whose prose experiments have been given credit by Dutch reviewers. Apart from Krol's, radical experiments can hardly expect to be appreciated by the critical establishment. Typically, the just mentioned novels by Hermans and Mulisch - who can otherwise count on a wide and appreciative audience - are considered by the critics as artistically the least successful parts of their oeuvre.

One final note before I will briefly discuss some of these experiments. If Postmodernism would have to be identified with French poststructuralism - and there are Dutch critics, and not the least influential ones, who tend in that direction - then I might as well end this essay here. French philosophy and French literary theory have practically no influence whatsoever on the Dutch literary scene, not among academics and not among reviewers. It is perhaps characteristic that the attempt to arrive at a description of a postmodern period code in Dutch literature was presented abroad. Douwe Fokkema undertook his exploration of the field at Harvard University, in 1983, as part of a lecture series on Modernism and Postmodernism. He, too, focused primarily on a description of

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a number of techniques that he saw exemplified especially in the writings of Hermans, de Winter, and Krol. I agree with some of his observations, to which I hope to add here, even though I have, as will be clear by now, my doubts as to whether the characteristics that Fokkema has listed can be seen as a period code.

The locus classicus of 'epistemological doubt' (McHale) in Dutch literature is to be found in the work of W.F. Hermans and especially in the essays in which he formulates his poetics. Hermans is, without reservation, one of the most influential authors in postwar Dutch literary history. His poetics make themselves felt in, for instance, the writings of Ferron and Krol, who - although widely different as regards style and technique - can identify effortlessly with what Hermans wrote in an essay on the classical and the experimental novel: the novelist is he who designs a personal mythology and not at all he who pretends to offer a true representation of reality. As Hermans writes, ‘A novel in which everything that happens is teleological, has possibly little to do with an objective depiction of reality. The events that take place in daily life are, after all, not teleological, or, if they are, fail in nine out of ten cases to be indeed effective. If one pays close attention to one's surroundings, one sees no unity of action, but pluriformity and meaninglessness of action, confusion, chaos and boredom. That is the reason why the novel does not lend itself to a description of reality.’ He adds, ‘I believe that the novel has a wholly different function. It is not the reality that is described that is important, but the one who offers the description. For it is a peculiarity of man that he still must describe that chaotic reality by which he is surrounded. He describes it as if it were well-ordered. He wants to invest it with order. Perhaps he knows this, is aware that it is his highly personal order that he imposes upon reality, but he cannot stop himself.’

This view is present in the background of all the novels that Hermans has published since 1947. Most of them do indeed create the impression that they have been conceived along classical realistic lines and situate the stories that they tell against the Second World War or the liberation (De tranen der acacia's [The tears of the acacias], 1949; De donkere kamer van Damocles [The Dark Room of Damocles], 1953; Herinneringen van een Engelsbewaarder [Memories of a Guardian Angel], 1974). However, the traditional impression that these novels create in the reader is deceptive. The protagonists of Hermans' novels try to subordinate reality, to impose their truths upon concrete reality, to make the facts fit their personal framework, but their escapades inevitably lead to grim ends. They either perish in the chaos or are left behind in disillusionment. Reality never allows itself to be moulded into the interpretive frames they choose to employ. And because the fictional reality would seem to be presented from the

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point of view of these protagonists the reader is equally misled.

The factual historical background in Hermans' writings has also a meaning in terms of poetics because the war is present as the chaotic universe in which ‘normal’ values, norms and regulations are shelved and in which the characters lose their anchorings in a familiar and safe order. The distinction between guilt and innocence, good and evil is no longer clear. This chaotic universe provokes attempts at ordering whose reliability is forever ambiguous. Time and again characters in Hermans' novels deceive themselves and others with their hallucinatory fantasies. But Hermans, who has frequently demonstrated his familiarity with Wittgenstein's language philosophy, is of the opinion that the deceptive character of such orderings must also (and even especially) be attributed to the nature of language. As a result, we find in his oeuvre also a number of texts in which the emphasis is rather on the linguistic constructs themselves than on the construction of images of reality. That is the case with De god Denkbaar, Denkbaar de god [The god Thinkable, Thinkable the god] (1956) and its sequel, Het Evangelie van O. Dapper Dapper [The Gospel of O. Courageous Courageous] (1973), that have little in common with traditional narrative structures.

The title of the 1956 novel already indicates the tautological nature of the story and of the language which the story employs. It is virtually impossible to reconstruct the actual course of events in the novel; after all, what is highlighted is the rather curious reasoning of the novel's characters. Logic would seem to be replaced by linguistic associations or sophisms. The protagonist - if one can speak in this context of a protagonist - is Denkbaar who thinks himself to be God. Unfortunately, the documents that would confirm his ‘divine’ identity cannot be found. The novel then presents the quest for these secret papers. In the meantime Denkbaar is dependent on his persuasiveness to make others believe that he really is what he pretends to be. At a certain point he says: ‘I am everything which may be thought.’ The secret papers are supposed to contain everything which may be thought. Unnecessary to say that those secret papers are the subject of much discussion. Language fails to express the notion of all that is potentially thinkable. Whereas in various language games words such as ‘God,’ ‘Immortality,’ ‘Essence’ are used to fill the gap, this novel kills off such terms as pseudo-profundities. Denkbaar tattoos secret codes on the skin of a police woman or a whale, tries to convince others of his identity, even becomes leader of a religious sect - but he speaks only in enigmas, which apparently fascinates most of the characters that he happens to encounter and that, as a result, become his followers. Naturally he prefers paradoxes: ‘The true meaning of my words is a secret that I do not know myself. How will those who
argue know my attributes, no matter how many secrets they have encoded or even doubly encoded! For even if all attributes are mine, it does not follow that an attribute that is secret would have to be known by me even if it is my attribute!

Every endeavor to construe an adequate image of reality by means of a code turns out to end in hallucinatory fantasies. Codes and cryptographics play therefore an important role in this novel that mocks metaphysics. The novel's characters find themselves in the dark room of their language from which they cannot escape. Even Denkbaar himself is not allowed an escape. He ultimately loses the war with Afschuwelijke Baby [Horrible Baby], his antagonist, who is not hampered by a knowledge of any codes at all. One of Denkbaar's followers, O. Dapper Dapper [O. Courageous Courageous] succeeds in escaping the total devastation. He appears as the hero of *Het Evangelie van O. Dapper Dapper*, the earlier novel's sequel, which continues the linguistic manoeuvrings with, among other things, an exegesis of *De god Denkbaar*. These novels must surely be counted as Hermans' most experimental fictions, but primarily in terms of form. They have, for that reason, in the meantime been classified as postmodern (Fokkema 1984). However, they remain with Hermans' other novels above all the work of a 'creative nihilist,' as Hermans has characterised himself.

Harry Mulisch, who in 1958 achieved a prominent place in Dutch literature with his 'war novel' *Het Stenen Bruidsbed* [The Stone Bridal Bed], in 1970 risked an experiment - *De Verteller* [The Narrator] - that was received rather negatively by reviewers. That reception probably moved Mulisch to publish an extensive commentary on and explanation of his experiment in *De Verteller verteld* [The Narrator Narrated], 1971, in which he also motivates his novel in terms of his poetics - a motivation which is worth quoting in light of the current discussion on Postmodernism:

'Since, in our age, in which we are caught like rats in a trap, the telling of great histories is annexed by other media and disciplines (...) writers restrict themselves to what is small. It started already with Flaubert (...) and ended with Joyce, Beckett, Ionesco, Robbe-Grillet, Heisenbüttel, who all depend on the way they pack their goods. In literature the great histories have sunk towards the second, third, fourth rank, to social realism, the detective, pornography. Now I do not want to turn this on its head and claim that I have written a novel of the first rank because it contains a “small history;” but I do want to say that the arguments [against the novel] are unsound. Maybe *De Verteller* is simply no good at all, but not because of that; maybe it is incomparable, but not because of that.'
Mulisch would, for that matter, forgo later literary experiments and composed - apart from the various genres which he practiced - classical realistic novels of which *Twee vrouwen* [Two Women], 1975, and *De Aanslag* [The Assault], 1982, (its movie version won the Oscar for the best foreign movie in 1986) are the most famous. When it went into its third reprinting in 1986, *De Verteller* was presented by the publisher as a ‘postmodern novel:’ a curious re-run!

The novel begins and ends literally with two puzzle pictures. The first puzzle consists of numbered points that must be connected with each other with straight lines. When one draws the lines a pictures emerges of two embryos connected by an umbilical chord. The image refers to the novel's two most important characters, Joris and Jesse, who are half-brothers. Beneath the novel's surface shimmers the story of a family history. Joris Sytzma waits with a toothless mouth for the dentures that are being made. He spends his time on a motor-launch that is at berth in a bay and tries to reconstruct the family history in that period of waiting. He begins a search for his half-brother Jesse. The reconstruction reveals that they have the same father, a brother of their mothers, who are twin sisters. The reader can only reconstruct this history if he solves the many enigmas that the novel presents. The last picture is, as it were, the first one in reverse: it has white lines against a black background and one sees Gemini, the constellation.

The novel's subtitle is ‘Idioticon voor zegelbewaarders’ [Idioticon for Guardians of the Seals], a reference to a dictionary of a certain idiom (with the association: idiocy). Not surprisingly, the novel more than anything else quotes ways of speaking, language games. The ten ‘seals’ that are presented are as many rewritings of fragments taken from familiar fictional genres - from children's literature to science fiction, from Karl May to James Bond. Apart from that, the texts are presented in different founts. The italicized passages usually ironize the rewritings they appear in. The novel plays with cyphers and codes - which, by the way, can all be deciphered by the reader. The Narrator, for instance, also turns out to be a counter who has miscounted. (In Dutch the verb ‘vertellen’ is both to narrate and to miscount.) The number 3628700 plays an important role. It is the product of the numbers 1 to 10, and does not only refer to the novel's ten seals, but also to Mallarmé's *Le Livre* and, by way of that book, to the Hermetic tradition from which Mulisch, also in his other writings, rather frequently borrows motifs.

Experiments with language and narration do not occupy a central place in either Hermans’ or Mulisch’ work. That place is reserved for novels with a more or less traditional narrative structure. Things are different with Bert
Schierbeek, who may be regarded as a pioneer in the field of Dutch experimental prose. Practically from the beginning - his first innovative writing appears in 1951 - his texts lack all narrative structure. ‘I did not believe anymore in story,’ Schierbeek once said in an interview. ‘I thought life was 777 simultaneous stories and that the I had to grab left and right like an octopus to catch everything that happened both on the outside and on the inside and had to mould that into form.’ Schierbeek is, as his texts testify, first and foremost a language collector who orchestrates the voices in his prose without forcing them into a narrative scheme. Het Boek Ik [The Book I], 1951, De andere namen [The Other Names], 1952, and De derde stem [The Third Voice], 1955, are ruled by a strongly associative form of writing in which the author is guided by the sound of words and the rhythm of sentences. The title of the first experiment, Het Boek Ik, is programmatic for all of Schierbeek's oeuvre. The author does not figure as the creator of a fictional reality, but the linguistic character ‘I’ turns into the subject of the writing. The referentiality of this ‘I’ is then at stake. The meanings of the pronouns shift with the shifting linguistic landscapes. The composition of one's subjectivity is a permanently dynamic process. ‘I explain to myself the world my being.’ In this syntactically ambiguous phrase from Het Boek Ik Schierbeek has concisely formulated the point of departure for his literary projects. The boundaries between subject and object, between inner and outer world, disappear. Consequently, we find ‘No one is waterproof’ in capital letters on one of the pages of De andere namen.

It is possible, then, to characterize Schierbeek's work as postmodern: it is far removed from a discursively ordered argument in which a certain notion is being represented. Instead, we encounter a polyphony of voices from different cultures, philosophies and myths, which continuously puts our own vision of reality to the test. In Het Boek Ik Dutch alternates with French, German, English, or Spanish expressions. The dialect of the region where Schierbeek spent his earliest years stands undaunted next to quotations from Heraclitus, Nietzsche, Zen Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies. All these language games resist the notion of a static, universal truth. There is no hierarchy whatsoever in the orchestration of these voices. In his later work, too, Schierbeek will present himself as an author who, first of all, is out to resist standardized, official languages. In Een grote dorst [A Great Thirst], 1968, and Inspraak [Having a Say], 1969, the languages of advertising, of the military, the church, of authorities in general, are not only amply quoted, but also amply ridiculed. The notion of (technological) progress - embodied in texts on the exploration of space and scientific experiments - is brought into contrast with statements by creators of modern art and literature.

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In the later work - *Weerwerk* [Resistance], 1977, *Betrekkingen* [Relations], 1979, and *Binnenwerk* [Inside Work], 1980 - not much is left of the exuberant style of the earlier period. Autobiographical facts are intertwined with texts that Schierbeek has collected on his travels to the U.S. But in these sober collages there is still the unmistakable sympathy for the stories of the nameless, in which no world-shaking events are related, but that testify to a considerable reserve with respect to the Progress that is not theirs. Rather than for the great Narratives about the meaning of life Schierbeek looks for those places (and for the language that is spoken in them) where the zest for living does not allow itself to be dictated by power and authority. Schierbeek’s voices announce the demise of the Metanarratives (Lyotard).

The only Dutch writer who so far has explicitly spoken about the possibly postmodern character of his work is Gerrit Krol. In a lecture on the abstract novel - given as part of a lecture cycle entitled ‘Modernists versus Postmodernists,’ in Utrecht, 1984 - Krol gave an assessment of the speculations that had been offered by the commentators of Postmodernism to arrive at the conclusion that the characteristics enumerated in those reflections were indeed relevant for his work. What is immediately striking in Krol’s texts is their often fragmented character. They usually involve a montage of short blocks of text that are sometimes numbered - as if they were sections in a scientific treatise - so that an algebraic ordering would seem to come into being. Still, that does not imply that the narrative line has vanished completely from Krol’s work. There’s often an anecdotal narrative layer consisting of autobiographical data, stories about his work (Krol works as a systems designer for a large oil company), about traveling, about his relations with women. But these anecdotes are employed within a configuration of philosophical queries that are often related to one of Krol’s central themes: the principle of infinity. Krol is not accidentally intrigued by the work of the graphic artist Escher. In *Het gemillimeterde hoofd* [The Millimetered Head], 1967, we find for instance a detail from Escher’s ‘Belvedere’ printed as an illustration of the problem of ‘how to paste two incompatible worlds together so that the joint cannot be seen.’ This (invisible) joint between the finite visible world and the infinite invisible world appears to be brought up in Krol’s work in ever changing contexts. In their montage construction, the novels would seem to be built up out of analogical reasonings that keep circling this problem. *De man achter het raam* [The Man behind the Window], 1982, confronts the reader with the ‘humanization’ of an automaton, called Adam, the incarnation of an abstract idea. Rudi and Wessel, who have developed the automaton, gradually find themselves in a world of paradoxes. According to Adam, the computer, they suffer from a strange disease, they ‘believe that one gains in certainty by finding a basis for one’s assumptions. In
doing so, they appeal to phenomena which they call evident and the descriptions of which they call axiomas. To them, that is the beginning: the first question that one asks, and if one ends with those axiomas, by asking ever more questions, then that is certainly not the beginning but the end.’ Within the structure of the novel this statement also has a self-referential function. It refers to one of the problems which are discussed in the novel: the relation between the representation of something and the representation of that representation. Krol's novels often utilize quotation marks. Certain statements can be attributed to characters. Later, however, the same statements, put between quotation marks, appear to refer only to themselves. *De man achter het raam* is situated in this transitional position - between referential language and metalanguage, on the joint between the finite and the infinite world. That leads in this particular novel to the following central problem: ‘How is it possible that our thinking is to such an extent determined by things that do not exist? What is then the value of those things that do exist for our thinking? What is the difference? How is it possible that we indicate both categories with words, with the same words, and how do we know when we use those words whether we refer to something that exists, or that does not exist? That doesn't make any difference, does it? There's fewer words than things that exist, and don't exist. Most words have been used before. Are there words that have never been used by anybody?’

The novel's title indicates the heart of the problem in a different way: a Weltanschauung presupposes a frame. The novel tries to examine the process of creating frames itself. In this sense one might call *De man achter het raam* a postmodern novel: it tries to construct the rules of its own creation. Krol's novel belongs with those postmodern texts that turn themselves inside out. Again and again the issue of language as an instrument of description is raised. In *Een Fries huilt niet* [A Frisian Never Cries], 1980, we read: ‘How does one describe a face?’ This question is followed by a blank space. ‘How does one describe a location without naming it so that the reader says: I've been there?’ Again followed by a blank space. A possibility is suggested: ‘Offer a theory of all locations in the world.’ And another one: ‘Offer a meta-theory.’ Krol solves this problem by quoting the language that is used in those locations, by printing illustrations from advertisements or pornographic magazines or schematic representations that take the place of words next to his texts. Not only the separation of word and image, but also that of narrative and analytical aspects and of the various genres is forever at issue, so that the reader, too, is provoked by these novels to ask questions about the frames within which the act of reading them takes place.

That such experimentation with genre conventions evokes questions that have
their basis in an ‘ontological doubt’ is also clearly illustrated by, for instance, the writings of Cees Nooteboom, especially in his novel *In Nederland* [In The Netherlands], 1984, which not only raises explicitly the problem of the status of the various provinces of the imagination - as these are given shape in fairy-tales, myths, novels - and questions the elements of narrative schemes, but which also foregrounds the ways of being of the text itself, its limits, its beginning and its end. ‘What is where, and when?’ ‘What is a fairy-tale?’ ‘What does one do when one writes a fairy-tale?’ ‘But what is reality?’ *In Nederland* is interspersed with these and other questions.

The novel's essentially intertextual character is already announced in its motto: ‘Where did we find the story? Do you want to know? We got it from the garbage can with all those old papers.’ The author within the novel, Alfonso Tiburon de Mendoza, is apart from his role as author also an inspector of highways. That combination produces in the novel a sustained metaphor of writing as a form of spatial ordering. To write is to find a place in the landscape of what has already been written: a topography. ‘To write consists of imposing an alternative order on that which has already been written, there's always a hundred writers in your hand, even if one doesn't know it or doesn't want it. There's nothing one can do about it.’ The motto raises the question of the original story. This question is repeated in every possible way in the course of the novel and creates, as a result, numerous mise-en-abîmes, labyrinths (as is also the case with Nooteboom's earlier *Een lied van schijn en wezen* [A Song of Shadow and Substance], 1981), in which the novel is a representation of a fairy-tale or myth and the other way around, and which, in their turn, create a whole string of indeterminacies. Is *In Nederlands* novel about a writer who tells (or repeats) a fairy-tale or a fairy-tale in which the coming into being of a novel is related? ‘Writing is forever asking the same questions and philosophy would seem to consist of always slightly different answers, it is the inventory of the answer.’ The writer occupies the position of the philosopher as envisaged by Lyotard: not as a builder of systems but as a questioner of language games.

The manipulation of genre conventions is undoubtedly part of the postmodern syndrome. Perhaps we are concerned with a phenomenon in which every text constitutes its own genre. Practically all writers that have been mentioned so far thematize in their novels the boundaries of the various genres and because of that also the boundary between fiction and reality. Within this context, the historical novel is the genre that lends itself par excellence to an examination of such issues as the referential status of language and literature. Louis Ferron, for instance, emphatically uses data from European (but especially German-Austrian) cultural history. The events in his first three novels, *Gekkenschemer*...
[Twilight of the Insane], 1974, Het stierenoffer [Bull’s Sacrifice], 1975, and De keisnijder van, Fichtenwald [The Stone Cutter of Fichtenwald], 1976, would seem to be set against the respective backgrounds of Ludwig II and Wagner's Bavaria, the Weimar Republic, and the Nazi era. But with the growing of Ferron's oeuvre it became more and more clear how these historical references should be interpreted: as illusions which magically present history as a form of hallucination. The characters of his novels are hybrids, composed of elements taken from historical figures and borrowed from literary heroes. The protagonists of De gällische ziekte [The Gallic Disease], 1979, Nathanael and Zeitblom, for instance, turn out to have been borrowed from a story by E.Th.A. Hoffmann and Thomas Mann's great Faust novel. Equally remarkable is that the historical events that the novels refer to are taken out of their chronological order. Events from various periods are placed within inappropriate historical frames. As Nathanael tells us, thereby foregrounding the problem that is central to all of Ferron's novels: ‘I dreamed that the dream was that manifestation of reality that constitutes a foreshadowing of that reality that we perceive with our senses.’ As Ferron once noted in an interview: ‘Hidden behind every truth is an opposite truth and every truth is the offspring of its opposite (..). Historical reality of, say, the past two hundred years is an illusory fiction, a saddening mess that can only fascinate because of its high content of kitsch.’ In Ferron's work this vision leads to a number of carnivalesque novels in which both the religious and the secularized myths of redemption of the 19th and 20th century are presented in the style of the music-hall, the pulp novel, or the western.

Like Louis Ferron - but from a wholly different point of view and with different means - Sybren Polet experimented with the historical novel. Already in 1961 he began a large prose project, the so-called Lokien-cycle. The characters in the novels that are part of this project - including Breekwater (1961), Verboeden tijd [Forbidden Time] (1964), Mannekino (1967), De Sirkelbewoners [The Inhabitants of the Circle] (1970), De geboorte van een geest [The Birth of a Mind] (1974), Xpertise of de experts en het rode lampe [Xpertise or the Experts and the Little Red Lamp] (1978) - are fill-in characters who change their identities constantly and can function simultaneously in different time layers. With the continuation of the cycle, social history came to occupy a more and more prominent position in the novels. More and more Lokien finds himself in a position in which he is confronted with historical documents which he (re)reads and with the help of which he tries to develop a historical vision. In Xpertise, for instance, Lokien collects various materials for a book with the projected title ‘History's High Hat,’ a written dream which he has lived with for years as with an idée fixe: ‘a character, living in a variety of periods, achronological and partly even a histori-
cal, always changing into someone else, into dozens of others, sometimes even female, animal, all ages, from infancy or even foetus to extreme old age, the immortal human being of a faraway SF future or possibly ending up as an (immortal) thought, consciousness without matter.' This phrase is a concise characterization of Polet's work, of which permanent transformation is the most prominent feature. The continuous alternation of genres within the text, the quotations from the most diverse sources, are supposed to give literary shape to a kaleidoscopic view of reality. Polet borrows these techniques from a long tradition of prose experiments, from Sterne to Dos Passos, a tradition that he himself has tried to map in an extensive introduction to his anthology of Dutch prose experiments, *Ander proza* [Other Prose].

In the course of the 1970s and 1980s the literary periodical *Raster* devoted several issues to this experimental prose tradition. In so far as discussions of French poststructuralism have had any influence at all in the Netherlands, *Raster* has contributed significantly to that influence. There have been issues on the work of Foucault, Barthes, Kristeva and so-called dossiers on the writings of Flaubert, Valéry, Beckett. One of *Raster*'s editors, J.F. Vogelaar, continues in his creative work the experiments of Joyce, Beckett, and especially Arno Schmidt, an author whose work is regularly quoted and rewritten in Vogelaar's novels.

Vogelaar made his debut in 1964 and wrote in a short period a number of novels that turned certain genres (the psychological novel, the detective, and the regional ‘farm’ novel) upside down. In the course of the 1970s he began a project titled ‘operations’ of which so far the following parts have been published: *Kaleidiafragmen*ten [Kaleidiafragments] and *Raadsels van het rund* [Enigmas of the Cow] (1978) and *Alle vlees* [All Flesh] (1980). Of this sequence, *Raadsels van het rund* is the magnum opus. It is a historical novel, but written in quite unorthodox fashion. A man called Ekke Wagenaar is ordered to construct a machine with the help of a manual, put at his disposal by his antagonist, Mon. This manual turns out to be a document by Leonardo da Vinci in which the latter tries to define the term ‘forza.’ Ekke's eight attempts all fail. The novel stages in various ways all the themes that are prominent in the debate on modernity (technology, progress, power, the role of the intellectual), but always in relation to rewritings of texts that are borrowed from the historiography of the modern period and from various representatives of modern literature (from Beckett, Flaubert, Musil, Valéry to Gaddis and Patchen).

*Raadsels van het rund* is as massive as it is complex and can hardly be characterized in terms of a well-defined genre. It may be read as a historical novel, an

*Anthony Mertens, ‘Postmodern Elements in Postwar Dutch Fiction’*
encyclopedia, a diary, a travel narrative, an adventure story, or an essay. But whatever generic frame one will choose as reader, it will always turn out to be a narrative in scaffolding, in progress. It is, consequently, impossible to distil a sequence of actions from the novel because that sequence is inseparable from the act of writing. Again and again there is a fresh start. It is also impossible to speak of a historical novel that offers a picture of a specific historical period; it is a historical novel in a reverse sense, a novel that tries to present its own history. Ekke's assignment reflects the ways in which the collected textual materials are processed. Time and again these are put into a spotlight so that the ‘forza’ may be tracked down. Next to these eight chapters we find in the novel an appendix in which the profiles of five ‘contemporaries’ are presented: Leonardo, Faust, Paracelsus, Jan Hus and Heinrich Anton M. - the last one a schizophrenic who also constructed machines - and whose activities refer to the so-called ‘art brut’ to which the novel will every now and then refer. One might, by the way, characterize Vogelaar's writing itself as a form of ‘art brut.’ The other profiles are devoted to historical figures who must all be situated in the early period of modernity. References to the mannerist art of the 16th and 17th centuries evoke a picture of the historical genre as an (alchemist) laboratory in which chemicals (in this case historical documents) form compounds, are decomposed, melted down, and analysed. But of course the philosopher's stone is not to be found here either. The references to alchemy only serve to support the book's point of departure: the notion that the act of seeking is more important than its goal. More than once the attempt to write a historical novel from a panoramic point of view is ironized and the phraseology with which historians string their historical pictures together presented as insane. The book's title, ‘Enigmas of the Cow,’ is not accidentally a reference to the similar enterprise of Flaubert's clerks Bouvard and Pécuchet, when they endeavored to bring together all the knowledge of their period in an encyclopedia. It is a familiar story how they ended up in a latrine of platitudes. In ‘Enigmas of the Cow,’ the bovine reference indicates stupidity, just as with Flaubert, where ‘boeuf’ is hidden in Bouvard and Bovary. More than once, Vogelaar's processing of texts betrays a resistance against classifying and domesticating forms of historiography. More than once the authoritarian and closed character of ideologies and utopias is highlighted. The book itself is written out of a sense of possibilities rather than out of a sense of what's real. In this way there is a relation with Musil's Mann ohne Eigenschaften. As one reads in Raadsels van het rund, ‘If I would write a novel, then it would be the unwritten novel (...) it cancels itself continually because it goes on (...) a work that shows at every intersection the diversity of possibilities (...) which is active at any given moment.’

Vogelaar's writings constitute one of the most radical experimentations in
Dutch prose and encounter a good deal of resistance. But that is, to a greater or lesser extent, true of most of the novels that have been mentioned here. That resistance grows with the distance that such experiments put between themselves and that what people usually expect a novel to be.

**Bibliography**


