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Searching for New Weapons? Dutch Studies under Late Modern Conditions¹

Bram Ieven & Esther Op de Beek (Leiden University)

Abstract: In this article we argue for a study of Dutch literature that adjusts the ‘what’ (research domain) and ‘how’ (research method) to the time in which we currently find ourselves. We refer to the conditions of our era as late modern conditions (Giddens), which means that they can be traced back to earlier, modern conditions; we can therefore examine the historical and cultural background and causes. The fact that these are conditions means that if we take these conditions seriously they are changing the nature and design of our field. We argue that the study of Dutch literature can help us to trace the concrete affective, emotional and imaginary patterns and routines that both characterize and uphold late modernity. Our argument will take shape through a reading of two contemporary novels: Maxim Februari’s *Klont* (2017) and Lieke Marsman’s *Het tegenovergestelde van een mens* (2017).

Keywords: late modernity / laat-moderniteit, Dutch studies / Nederlandse literatuurstudie, interdisciplinarity / interdisciplinariteit, Maxim Februari, Lieke Marsman

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*There is no need for fear or hope,
only to search for new weapons*
- Gilles Deleuze²

Introduction: searching for new weapons while fleeing

In an essay published over fourteen years ago, in a time marked by war and death,³ Bruno Latour posed a question that, all things considered, targeted the heart of the humanities: ‘why has critique run out of steam?’⁴ To drive home his point he made a somewhat surprising – albeit timely – comparison between military strategy and critical thinking:

[M]ilitary experts constantly revise their strategic doctrines, their contingency plans, the size, direction, and technology of their projectiles, their smart bombs, their missiles; I wonder why we, we alone, would be saved from those sorts of revisions. It does not seem to me that we have been as quick, in academia, to prepare ourselves for new threats, new dangers, new tasks, new targets. Are we not like those mechanical toys that endlessly make the same gesture when everything else has changed around them?⁵

As this passage makes clear, Latour’s essay is more than an inquiry into the failure of the practice of social critique. It is also, and more importantly perhaps, a heartfelt plea for a new approach, a change of strategy; one that moves beyond the supposed restrictions and constraints of critique and towards a more ‘realist attitude’⁶ in which criticism (and perhaps the practice of humanities as such) revolves around offering ‘arenas in which to gather.’⁷ Instead of the one who debunks, the critic would then become ‘the one who assembles.’⁸

The reason why Latour feels that this shift from debunking to assembling is necessary, is because over the course of some fifty years the practice of critique has turned against itself. Instead of debunking myths in favour of scientific facts, as it used to do, criticism has concerned itself with suspiciously calling into question every political, economic and social condition of our times. That in itself is not a problem for Latour and he even applauds its merits. But when this sort of critique gets ‘popularised’ and thrives on ‘being suspicious of everything people say’, then it loses its ability to debunk outdated myths in favour of scientific fact and starts to undermine its own critical goals.

² Gilles Deleuze, ‘Postscript on the Societies of Control’, *October*, 59 (1992), p. 7.

³ The allusion is to Sigmund Freud’s *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, which was written five months after the start of the First World War in 1915.

⁴ Bruno Latour, ‘Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern’, *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (2004), pp. 225-248.

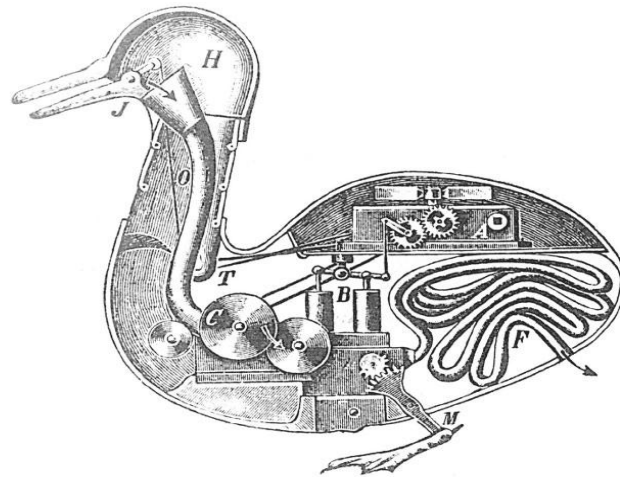
⁵ Latour, p. 225

⁶ Latour, p. 243.

⁷ Latour, p. 246.

⁸ Latour, p. 246.

In Latour's estimation, then, this popularised version of social critique has been responsible for today's virulent scepticism toward scientific facts, the strategic use of 'alternative facts' on the far right of the political spectrum and the inability of the humanities to launch an effective critique of what is happening around the globe today.⁹ This situation needs to be addressed, Latour argues. We may need to change strategy. Within the field of Dutch cultural and literary studies we have focused mostly on practicing relatively traditional historical and literary criticism.



In doing so, we have gathered around common themes and practices that, however relevant they may be, have so far done little to effectively engage with the conditions of twenty-first century globalised Dutch society. It is about time we ask the question whether the kind of approach we are taking to the study of Dutch literature and culture still meets up to the mark, whether our approach to the study of Dutch literature and culture is up to the task of engaging with the complexity of 21st-century Dutch society feeling its way through the rapidly changing globalised and geopolitical network or our times. We, too, should be wary of becoming the kind of 'mechanical toys' that are wonderful museum pieces but have no role to play in contemporary society. Instead we should be working toward a study of Dutch literature and culture that enables an understanding of the global network and cultures position within it. So in our present situation, what does it mean to research Dutch literature? How should it be anchored within the larger societal framework of our times? And what should be its aims?

We cannot possibly claim to answer such an ambitious, agenda-setting question about the present needs and methods of our field of study in just one article. Neither can such a question be answered by just two scholars. To the contrary, these questions merit multiple answers to be

⁹ It is important to understand that Latour is not alone in his perception that the humanities, and even science at large, are either failing to meet up to the social goals it sets itself or are under attack by politics. Since the turn of the millennium a score of humanities scholars and political theorists have turned their attention to this phenomenon. A popular journalistic account of the matter was written by Chris Mooney, who argues in his book that the war on science is the result of a tension between 'a conservative worldview' and 'the dynamism of science' on the one hand and 'raw politics'. Chris Mooney, *The Republican War on Science* (New York: Basic Books, 2007). A more thorough analysis of the situation was given by Michael Bérubé in *The Left at War* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

articulated by scholars working within the field by mining collective knowledge over a longer period of time and learning to profit from the many discordant views that exist within the field. We would, however, like to put the question on the agenda, to create ‘an arena in which to gather’ (to refer once more to Latour’s analysis). In doing so, we will attempt an analysis of a series of themes that define our times by approaching them through literature, each time taxing literature’s unique capacity to bring into view the affective structure that is crucial to shaping the transformations that our times have witnessed.

As Stuart Hall once argued, ‘it matters what [cultural studies] is in a particular situation.’¹⁰ That situation for us today is one characterised by highly specific political and historical conditions. Following the sociologist Anthony Giddens, we will refer to these as late modern conditions. Unlike postmodern approaches that argue that modernity has been fragmented or broken down, late modernity implies that the project of modernity is still in place but has also taken on an entirely new quality: it has turned inward, molecularising social and cultural interaction in previously unseen ways, leading to extreme economic and social flexibility and precarity but also to political impasse.¹¹ Our task, as a field, could be to contribute to a richer understanding of these complex conditions through the study of literature. More specifically, studying Dutch literature may help us to understand the specific affective relations that late modern conditions give rise to and how they were played out specifically within globalised Dutch culture: the transformation of public intellectuals into entertainers without impact and the devaluation of in depth knowledge this entails, the loss of political agency in the face of an all-encompassing economic system and impending ecological catastrophe, the extreme intensification of flexibility in social and economic life, and the precarisation of individuals who feel utterly powerless in the face of these changes. Following Lauren Berlant, we would argue that it is ‘in the affective scenarios ... and discourses’ of contemporary literature that ‘we can discern claims about the situation of contemporary life.’¹²

In accordance with this claim of literature’s possibility to offer unique insight in the subjective, affective relations taking shape in late modernity, the central themes of our argument will take shape through a reading of two contemporary novels: Maxim Februari’s *Klont* (2017) and Lieke Marsman’s *Het tegenovergestelde van een mens* (2017). As we move back and forth between literary analysis and social critique, we hope to not only shed light on what we call late modernity but also to make a beginning with answering the more encompassing question that will be relevant to the future of Dutch studies: how should we, as a field, respond to these changes?

In Maxim Februari’s Klont (2017) one of its main characters, Alexei Krups, is your prototypical contemporary celebrity intellectual. To be sure, the research and activities of this 21st century intellectual should by no means be mistaken for that of the more arcane,

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies’, in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg and others (London: Routledge, London, 1992), p. 292.

¹¹ For Giddens initial analysis of late modernity, see Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Oxford: Polity, 1991). For a more recent approach to the concept of late modernity, see Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, trans. by J. Trejo-Mathys (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 192 and further.

¹² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 9.

mid twentieth century prototype of the public intellectual. For while the latter had a mind built around sustained intellectual study and engaged in a 'culture of critical discourse'¹³, Alexei Krups only creates the semblance of intellectual depth by conjuring a seemingly coherent and critical narrative enlivened by grabbing images of social distress, patched together on the basis of other people's research outcomes found on the internet. Krups focuses on the hot topics of the day, which in his case happen to be the impact of big data and automation on people's everyday lives and on society as a whole. But instead of providing a sustained analysis of the actual impact, Krups prefers to sketch out a shady image of an imminent threat; a threat that, so the narrative goes, has already begun to impose itself - the formation of a so-called informational glob or lump that is running its own course, with no regard for human needs. Fabulating, forging, fictionalising and plagiarising Krups jostles up an intellectual myth that has the feel and sense of urgency of a post-apocalyptic blockbuster movie but is in fact merely a figment of his imagination.

Klont paints a picture of how in our times spectacular and easily digestible narratives are spun around hypercomplex issues such as big data and automation (or any other of the big issues of our time, more on which later). The success of Krups and other like-minded real-world intellectuals, Klont seems to suggest, is related both to the type of narrative they can give us and to the style in which they perform it: our longing for a narrative that remains manageable while helping us make sense of the world teams up with the lascivious intellectual enjoyment we derive from the quasi-apocalyptic overtones of such narratives. Like apocalypse, these narratives are embraced by so many because the present themselves as 'revelations', revealing the 'true meaning' of a social, political or cultural phenomenon. Pleasing his audience while desiring for ever bigger audiences, Krups comes up with increasingly ludicrous suggestion, all of them based on ideas and evidence that are partly made up, partly stolen from other, more serious but much less renowned scholars and intellectuals. In Krups's successes, the post-truth paradigm and big data challenge come together.

The second main character around which Februari spins his tale of contemporary intellectual jet setting, big data and old ways of knowing, is Bodo Klein, a senior policy advisor at the Dutch ministry of national security. Klein's boss is intrigued by Krups story of an informational glob readying itself to take over the internet - but also somewhat suspicious. Klein's job is to investigate the matter and, if necessary, to debunk Krups's story. Describing the experience of Klein listening to Krups's immensely popular public lectures, Februari succeeds in presenting a clear idea of the difference between these two men:

As long as Krups was talking, one had to find that the stories he came up with were dubious, not quite utter nonsense, but not quite reliable either. The problem with Krups's lectures was that he posed relevant questions - while the anecdotes he wanted to answer them with could neither be substantiated by proof or source material; there was no method that could corroborate what was in fact no more than rhetoric.¹⁴

¹³ Alvin Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), p. 28.

¹⁴ '[Z]olang Krups aan het woord was, moest je vaststellen dat de verhalen die hij aandroeg dubieus waren, geen laaiende onzin, maar ook niet bijster betrouwbaar. Het probleem met de lezing van Krups was dat hij interessante vragen stelde – maar dat de anekdotes waarmee hij ze wilde beantwoorden niet door bewijs of bron konden worden

Februari's Klont presents us with two types of intellectuals. The first, Alexei Krups, is an agile and pliable thinker but also rather superficial. In fact, Krups is beyond superficial: his thinking is all surface with no real debt behind it. To disguise his superficiality, Krups appeals to the intellectual imagination of his readers and listeners to conjure up the promise of deep insights - a promise which is never truly fulfilled so that the intellectual longing and curiosity of his audience is never fully satisfied and they keep coming back for more. He succeeds in doing this by focusing in all his talks on a phenomenon that, in Krups's view, escapes human intellect and evolves outside of the reach of human thinking: the glob or lump.

Glossing over Latour's outcry over the status of critical theory within the humanities, one might mistake his argument for a plea for assimilation: instead of criticising contemporary society, he seems to suggest, we should develop theories that move with the flow of contemporary developments so as to influence it indirectly. To be sure, that is not what Latour is arguing for. Nevertheless, the risk exists that Latour's shift in strategy - from the negativity of critique to the more constructive approach of assembling scholars and society around a couple of big issues - will lead to a further undoing of critical thinking. And while this is not Latour's position, this 'assimilationist' approach has been on the rise over the past decade. Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse have rightly warned us for the potential consequences of adjusting too easily to the existing norms and values of our present-day society.¹⁵ Instead of abandoning critical theory altogether, they propose we reinvigorate ideology critique. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe's recent work, they propose to call this an 'agonistic approach' to literature.¹⁶

They issue a strong warning against a form of Dutch literary studies that derives its rationale from its 'adjustment to a reality that is perceived as given [een als gegeven beschouwde werkelijkheid].' In this approach to literature and culture, there is no longer any critique on a 'contingent, discordant and disputable order.' What remains is an unquestioning acceptance of that order. Consequently, such an approach to Dutch culture will no longer be able to explain to its readers that the world - or, perhaps more apt for our purposes, late modernity - is in fact contingent and always revolves around conflicts.¹⁷ And one of the key features of studying literature, Demeyer and Vitse suggest, is that it enables us to do just that: to call the existing order

onderbouwd; er was geen methode die zou kunnen staven wat in feite niet meer was dan retoriek.' Translation by the authors from Maxim Februari, *Klont* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2017), pp. 133-134.

¹⁵ Hans Demeyer en Sven Vitse, 'Revanche of conflict? Pleidooi voor een agonistische literatuurstudie', *Spiegel der Letteren*, 56 (2014), pp. 511-538.

¹⁶ Their theory of agonistics is based on Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London / New York: Verso, 2013).

¹⁷ Like Chantal Mouffe, Demeyer and Vitse's understanding of the political hinges on the crucial idea that the political order is contingent. To emphasise this point, Mouffe and Laclau (re-)introduced the Gramscian concept of hegemony. In an analysis of the origins of the concept, Laclau and Mouffe explain that 'the concept of 'hegemony' will emerge precisely in a context dominated by the experience of fragmentation and by the indeterminacy of the articulations between different struggles and subject positions.' Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London / New York: Verso, 1985), p. 13. This essential point of post-Marxism, namely that the political power blocs and the social and political struggles that it entails are necessarily contingent, lies at the basis of Demeyer and Vitse's agonistic literary critique.

into question through the study of literature or culture. This is the essence of their agonistic approach to literature. Such an approach, they write,

is irreconcilable with accepting as a neutral given any form of hegemony of an existing order – be it within society or within the field of literature. Every literary phenomenon relates explicitly or implicitly to such a hegemony ... and it is the task of an agonistic study of literature to explain these relations.¹⁸

Demeyer and Vitse's take on ideology critique seems a relevant way to combat the strategies of assimilation that they detect in recent years in the study of Dutch culture. However, to argue that all Dutch literature relates to the existing hegemonic order seems like something of a truism that even a defender of an assimilationist approach to literature would not want to deny. The difference between Demeyer and Vitse's agonistic approach and the assimilationist approach lies in whether (and how) these hegemonic relations should be the focal point of a literary analysis. While Demeyer and Vitse believe that the study of literature must consist in rendering explicit these hegemonic relations, an assimilationist approach would be more interested in understanding how these power relations are used to bring literature to the centre of public attention.

Our own approach, however, differs from both the agonistic and the assimilationist. What we value in the agonistic critique that is offered by Demeyer and Vitse, is that they render explicit the embeddedness of literature within a political structure that, in essence, is contingent. Moreover, if literary critique can emphasise that contingency through the study of literature then that will potentially lay the groundwork for a different understanding of literature in relation to society. However, like many post-Marxist analyses they do not explicitly address the political inefficacy of literature and the historical specificity of our own time (which can explain the inefficacy of literature). Our critique of Demeyer and Vitse's agonistics thus revolves around two issues, both of which we would like to explore further in this article. The first issue revolves around the *inefficacy* of their approach and the insight it yields. Although we are prepared to accept that literature can provide insight in political power structures and emphasise their contingency, we need to ask why this kind of insight offered to us through literature has so little impact? From this follows a second issue. To be able to fully address this first issue, we contend, it is not enough to provide a theoretical framework that will allow us to politicise literary studies.¹⁹ As valuable as this framework may be, we will first of all need to make a *specific* and *historical* analysis of the social and political conditions of our own time to understand the inefficacy of literature. After all, isolated from the specific historical process of our own time, such a theoretical framework will neither be able to explain why critique has lost its impact nor will it be able to help critique to regain its political impact. The waning of this impact is most certainly not the result of the rise of assimilationist approaches to literature. Quite to the contrary, we

¹⁸ Demeyer and Vitse, p. 530.

¹⁹ Demeyer and Vitse develop such a political framework on the basis of a critical contemporary reading of post-Marxism (with a central position for Mouffe's concept of agonism and Laclau and Mouffe's recuperation of Gramscian hegemony to emphasise the contingency of the political) but in principle other theoretical approaches might lead to similar results without explicitly addressing the historical situation of our own times.

would argue, we should read these assimilationist approaches as a symptom of a larger, more encompassing historical conditions. We propose to call this late modernity.

*In 1951 Theodor W. Adorno publishes one of his most pensive books to date, *Minima Moralia*, with the subtitle *Reflections on a Damaged Life*.²⁰ Adorno's book of aphorisms attempts to gauge the impact of intellectual exile, an experience he himself underwent during the 1930s and 40s, first in Oxford (from 1934 to 1938) and later in New York and Los Angeles (from 1938 to 1949). Exile, Adorno argues, leads to a form of intellectual incapacitation, it is an experience that leads an intellectual to be cut off from society: 'Every intellectual in emigration is, without exception, mutilated', Adorno writes. And a few lines below he adds: 'He lives in an environment that must remain incomprehensible to him, however flawless his knowledge of trade-union organisations and the automobile industry may be; he is always astray. Between the reproduction of his own existence under the monopoly of mass culture, and impartial, responsible work, yawns an irreconcilable breach.'²¹ Bodo Klein, the public policy officer in Maxim Februari's *Klont* who is given the task to critically examine the veracity of Alexei Krups's theories, would probably recognise himself in this image of the exiled intellectual. Dr. Klein is 'an expert on technology and an eminent official at the Ministry of Security', the narrator of *Klont* explains. In the eyes of his young protégé Nas, Klein is 'an internationally renowned pioneer in the field of digitalisation and security.' But as far as Klein is concerned, he is really 'no one at all'. That is to say:*

It's not that he didn't want to write probingly about his own lot in this era of complex networks and de-individualisation; it's simply that he couldn't. He was a failure, and if his judgement halted this was not out of shame or regret about his own impossible behaviour, his thinking halted because his head was too small. One could say that when it came to thinking about himself, and if he had such a thing like a self-image at all, ... it was the kind of self-image akin to that of a blowfly, with the sort of neural calculating force that could only handle one task at a time. He couldn't both and at the same time contemplate his own littleness and the kind of managerial techniques required to guide 8 billion people.²²

Needless to say, Klein does have a self-image, and it is not that of a blowfly. More accurate would be to argue that Klein is deliberately practicing a form of self-effacement, a practice

²⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. by E.F.N. Jephcott (London / New York: Verso, 2005).

²¹ Adorno, p. 33.

²² 'Hij wilde in dit tijdperk van complexe netwerken en de-individualisering wel indringend over zijn eigen levenslot schrijven, maar het lukte niet. Hij was een mislukking, en als zijn oordeel stokte, dan kwam dat niet door schaamte of spijt over zijn eigen onmogelijke gedrag, het denken stakte omdat zijn hoofd te klein was. Je kon zeggen dat, als hij over zichzelf nadacht, als hij al zoiets als een zelfbeeld had, ... het een zelfbeeld was dat nog het meest leek op dat van een bromvlieg, met een neurale rekenkracht die maar één taak tegelijk aankon. Hij kon niet tegelijk nadenken over zijn eigen kleinheid en over de managementtechnieken die nodig zijn om 8 miljard mensen aan te sturen.' Translation by the authors from Februari, *Klont*, p. 56.

necessary for him to do his job as an expert on big data and security. Effacing oneself is an important element of Dr. Klein's personality, one which he feels is essential to what he stands for as an intellectual and expert. It is this trait that distinguishes him from the kind of 'new' intellectual that Alexei Krups represents. In every intellectual activity he undertakes, Krups makes sure he is at the centre of attention. The expert knowledge that Klein possesses, on the contrary, is the kind of knowledge that is acquired by an exceptional mind but does not need the personality and congeniality of the intellectual to become convincing.

And yet, deep inside Bodo Klein something is eating away at him. Yes, he is indeed an expert, and an internationally renowned one as far as that is concerned. But all the same he is mourning for something he has lost in the process of becoming an expert: he has lost his subjectivity, and along with it his ability for critical action in the world. In order to be able to be the scientific expert that he longs to be, and that his job requires him to be, Bodo Klein must relinquish his own political and critical subjectivity. Like any technocrat, Klein can only do one task at the same time. And he can only take on one role: either a technocratic expert or a critical thinker - but not both. And ultimately, the fear is that 'every expert serves his master.'²³ As a result, Klein's subjectivity is relegated to the private sphere; it can have no place in the public sphere. But in the private sphere, too, Klein's subjectivity cannot express itself. Klein feels superfluous in his own house.

Following Adorno, we could describe Bodo Klein as a 'detached observer' both in the private and in the public sphere. 'The detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant; the only advantage of the former is insight in his entanglement, and the infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such.'²⁴ Like the kind of intellectual that Adorno is describing, Klein believes that at the very least he is able to assess the nullity and entanglement of his own thinking (unlike Krups). And he finds joy in contrasting this intellectual insight of his to the almost childlike freedom that Krups takes in his intellectual play:

*Today Bodo Klein [...] could observe his own brain from a distance; He observed his jaunty intellect facing the enormity of the world - and the littleness of his own behavior towards others, the shameful banality of his life. But Krups, being childish, was worse [...]. He had - and here Bodo's consciousness halted briefly, because even if this wasn't what he was literally thinking there was something uneasy about his suspicion toward the boyishness and childlessness of Alexei Krups - no children, no real responsibilities and no job. This meant that the thinker could say anything he wanted, without taking into account the consequences.'*²⁵

²³ Guy Debord, *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle*, in *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), p. 1602.

²⁴ Adorno, p. 26.

²⁵ *Vandaag kon Bodo Klein [...] zijn eigen brein zien, vanaf een afstand; hij zag zijn parmantige intellect tegenover de enormiteit van de wereld - en de kleinheid van zijn gedrag tegenover anderen, de beschamende banaliteit van zijn leven. Krups was nog erger, in zijn kinderachtigheid [...] Hij had - en hier stakte Bodo's bewustzijn even, want ook al dacht hij dit niet letterlijk zo, er was toch iets ongemakkelijks aan de intuïtieve argwaan tegenover de jongensachtigheid, de kinderloosheid van Alexei Krups - hij had geen kinderen; hij had geen echte*

Here we have it: every expert serves his master (Debord). Operating under the late modern conditions of contemporary society, Bodo Klein is not only an example of old-fashioned non-subjective expertise; he is also an example of how this kind of expertise has morphed into a contemporary situation in which precarity and flexibility have allowed this kind of intellect to exist but lose every last inch of its potential criticality. We could think of Klein as a type of intellectual that has been lost: he may have started out as an intellectual and an expert who also had the ability to think critically, but over the years he has been morphed into a technocratic expert devoid of any and all subjectivity. Only in the seclusion of his own bedroom does Klein still find the courage to think critically.



To bring into view the specific historical conditions that can help us explain why critique has run out of steam, we will need to go beyond literary theory in the strict sense of the word. This does not mean that we turn away from literature, however. Quite to the contrary, it would simply

verantwoordelijkheden en geen baan. Dat wil zeggen dat de denker kon zeggen wat hij wilde, zonder zich rekenschap te geven van de gevolgen. Translation by the authors from Februari, *Klont*, p.234.

require us to take a different, more contextual and historical and political approach to literature that is already being explored by a number of scholars in our field.²⁶ Neither does it imply that we need to shy away from theoretical and conceptual approaches of literature. Again: quite to the contrary. We need a thorough theoretical framework (quite possibly the one proposed by Demeyer and Vitse) to complement our specific socio-historical and socio-political analysis. To begin with, before exploring our more historical understanding of late modernity we will need a short conceptual excursion on the nature of the political to make our main point: that in our present time we are witnessing an erosion of the political.

In our view the political is defined by collective action. Because whenever and wherever a group of people decide to undertake a common effort, an effort that cannot be undertaken by an individual alone, there arises negotiation over the nature of that group, collective or community and negotiation about the practices or actions it should undertake will arise. It is this mixture (negotiation over the nature of a group and negotiation over the actions to be undertaken) that lies at the heart of the political. These negotiations will always entail difference, disagreement and plurality, and the political process of constructive negotiation over action arises from this.²⁷ Following authors such as Jacques Rancière and Chantal Mouffe, we would like to introduce the distinction between politics and the political.²⁸ Whereas ‘the political’ is understood as the essence of what defines politics, ‘politics’ is then understood as the concrete historical actions that are carried out on a day to day basis. This distinction does not mean that the political cannot be jeopardised however. This is exactly where we believe an historical approach to the political

²⁶ Scattered across the field, we can find many valuable elements of such an approach with regard to politics, media, and the socio-historical position and development of literature and the humanistic tradition of critique. To limit ourselves to just a few examples, Judith Gera’s *Structures of Subjugation in Dutch Literature* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2016) offers an analysis of the construction of colonial and feminist subjectivity through (or in relation to) Dutch narratives from early modern times until today, thus offering an acutely political and historical analysis of how subjectivity came to be what it is today. Taking a very different approach, Sander Bax’s *De Mulisch Mythe* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 2015) focuses on a single author, but puts this restriction to good use by studying how the rise of new public media in the 1960s and 70’s led to a structural change in the role of literature and its political impact on society. Similarly, in her recent dissertation *Hoe Nederland Indië leest* (University of Amsterdam, 2018) Lianne Snelders takes a comparative, global and decolonial approach to render explicit the compartmentalised colonial narratives that shape our own time and our understanding of Dutch history (or absence thereof). Miriam Rasch’s *Zwemmen in de oceaan: Berichten uit een post-digitale wereld* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2017) serves as a road map to studying the social relevance of literature in a post-digital age. There are numerous other valuable studies we could refer to, but our point will hopefully be clear: our goal is not to invent an entirely new approach to Dutch literary studies but rather to make explicit (and to bring together in a more explicit way) the hitherto fragmented and implicit but extremely valuable socio-political analyses that have been undertaken by many Dutch scholars.

²⁷ In identifying collective action as the essence of the political, we are staying quite close to a typically modern understanding of politics. On this issue, see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958). According to Arendt, because action always has unforeseen outcomes and because different individuals have different ideas about which actions to take, action ‘corresponds to the human condition of plurality ... [and] this plurality is specifically the condition – not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life.’ Arendt, p. 7.

²⁸ In *On the Political*, Mouffe introduces her own understanding of the difference between politics and the political. Simply put, she argues, ‘political science which deals with the empirical field of ‘politics’, and political theory which is the domain of philosophers who inquire not about facts of ‘politics’ but about the essence of ‘the political’.’ Mouffe, *On the political*, p. 8. For Rancière’s distinction between politics and the political, see his ‘Ten Theses on Politics’, *Theory & Event*, 5, 2001.

as collective action become relevant. Concrete historical actions within politics can corrode the political, put pressure on it, and even foreclose it. As Hannah Arendt argued, political action can be instrumentalised, for example by subjugating it to an economic measure that is seen as superior and as having precedence over the political, at which point the political starts to erode.²⁹ In *The Human Condition* Arendt takes issue with this ‘instrumentalisation of the whole earth and the world, this limitless devaluation of everything given, this process of growing meaninglessness where every end is transformed into a means.’³⁰ Of course the political still exists, but the instrumentalisation of concrete actions (turning politics into mere policy) now starts to eat away at the political, eroding it and devaluing it. ‘The instrumentalisation of action’, Arendt suggests, leads to ‘the degradation of politics into the means for something else.’³¹

While the instrumentalisation that Arendt discerns has been identified by many social and political theorists as an inherent property and danger of modernity³², over the past six decades (and increasingly so since the 1990s) instrumentalisation has morphed into something new: no longer mechanical and industrialised, no longer clearly separated into private and public or private and collective, both personal life and public life have come under the sway of an ever more flexible 24/7 mentality of late modernity. Especially since the 1990s we have witnessed how these conditions have corroded collective political action in favour of instrumentalised individual (or privatised) action. This is not a gradual change in the sort of actions we wish to undertake; it is a discrete and qualitative change that is eating away at the political, that is to say that is breaking down the collective framework in which we can discuss and disagree constructively. Paradoxically, perhaps, this has led to a politics of consensus. On closer inspection, however, this is no so strange. A politics of consensus means that collective action is no longer generated by genuine political debate in which a plurality of ideas is unavoidable and consensus is never reached, but instead is dictated by bigger, seemingly all-encompassing processes over which we as individuals are powerless: the unchangeability of economic reality, the inevitability of ecological catastrophe. In other words, following Arendt, political action has been instrumentalised. Many scholars, including Chantal Mouffe, have analysed and criticised the misapprehension that there can or should be such a thing as post-political consensus, a consensus that stands above or beyond the often conflictual and discordant debates in politics. But these analyses have not led to a reconsideration of the post-political predicament that we are in at the moment.³³ On a concrete level, for the average individual the erosion of the political has led to an increasingly precarious economic and social situation and a growing awareness of impending ecological catastrophe that puts the individual under psychic pressure.

²⁹ An earlier version of this hypothesis of the erosion of the political in relation to Dutch and global society was advanced in the conference *Waiting for the Political Moment*, organised by Bram Ieven and Frans-Willem Korsten in Rotterdam, June 2010. For a further understanding of the political moment in relation to the erosion of the political, see Frans-Willem Korsten, *The Dutch Republican Baroque* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), p. 187 and further.

³⁰ Hannah Arendt, p. 157.

³¹ Hannah Arendt, p. 230.

³² Of particular relevance in this regard is the work of Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (San Francisco: Beacon Press, 1964).

³³ On Mouffe’s critique of the politics of consensus, see *On the Political*. On the concept of post-politics see, among others, Erik Swyngedouw, ‘The Political Art of Urban Insurgency’, in *Interrupting the City: Artistic Constitutions of the Public Sphere*, ed. by Bram Ieven and others (Amsterdam: Valiz Publishers, 2015), pp. 162-175.

On a cultural level, too, the erosion of the political is having enormous impact. But precisely for that reason analysing culture can help us understand ‘how people are empowered and disempowered by the particular structures and forces that organise their everyday lives in contradictory ways, and how their (everyday) lives are themselves articulated by the trajectories of economic, social, cultural, and political power.’³⁴ For a discipline like Dutch literary studies, this is a task that has become very relevant in today’s world. After all, we are not making a plea for a general approach to the study of culture; we are trying to figure out what the task of the study of contemporary Dutch literature can be today.

Late Modern Conditions

What would the study of Dutch literature look like when its research questions, research objects and its methodology were attuned to these late modern conditions and the erosion of the political? What would a study of Dutch literature require to be able to analyse the intricate interrelation of politics and culture with the aim of understanding the ongoing erosion of the political? And ultimately, can we imagine an approach to the study of Dutch literature that is able to empower the tradition of critique once more? To do so, we would not only have to take an interdisciplinary approach to Dutch literature, studying it in relationship to economics, politics and culture; we would also need to make a socio-historical analysis of the political, economic and cultural roots of our own time.

In *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991) British sociologist Anthony Giddens traces the outlines of what he calls the late modern conditions of our time. His sociological analysis of our era fits in a broader tendency in the late 1980s and early 1990’s in which sociologists as well as literary and cultural theorists tried to come to terms with the new and specific conditions of our own time. More specifically, while arguing that many of the essential processes that were associated with (sociological) modernity were still in place (ongoing globalisation, instrumental role of technology permeating all aspects of social life, and intensification of industrialisation and the pressure this puts on the environment) they also argued that these processes had begun to take on a new shape. To identify what was new and how this new condition had substantially changed modernity, different social theorists employed difference concepts. While Zygmunt Bauman referred to this as liquid modernity and Ulrich Beck would focus on the fundamental social, economic and ecological role of risk in contemporary society, Anthony Giddens’s analysis emphasised the *reflexivity* and the *flexibility* that these modernity’s processes now began to take on.³⁵ We are drawn to Giddens’ analysis because of his focus on these conditions (adding to it our own analysis of the erosion of the political). We are drawn to a theory of late modernity because it allows us to analyse how these fundamentally new conditions find their roots in a longer historical and social process that, not incidentally, spans roughly the same time scope as that of the study of modern (Dutch) literature.

More concretely, however, how are we to understand the reflexivity and flexibility that modernity has incurred? Well, to begin, late modernity is marked by a series of processes that are of a highly particular nature but were set in motion by modernity: ecological catastrophe, global finance capitalism and rising inequality on a global scale (though not necessarily on a

³⁴ Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 8.

³⁵ See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2000); Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society* (London: Sage, 1992).

national scale), the rise in migration and the resurgence of nationalism (with these last two processes having been caused by the former two). The global finance capitalism that dominates our economy, for example, is a specific form of capitalism that we might call reflexive.³⁶ But this is tied in a flexibilisation of work, the flexibilisation of work time and leisure time, the flexibilisation of social relationships and so on. The migratory flux that the globe is currently facing, is caused by an economic inequality that partly results from financial capitalism (and partly draws on a much longer geopolitical and economic history of inequality and ecological catastrophe) but again deepens the condition of flexibility, giving flexibility a new twist: flexibility of home, nationality, and social life in general. This in turn leads to reactionary forms of virulent populism and neo-nationalism that try to re-establish a non-flexible concept of identity, home and nation.



Characteristic for late modernity is the extremely complex dynamic through which different forms of reflexivity and flexibility become entwined. Again, this dynamic complexity is a property we can rightly ascribe to modernity as a whole. This dynamic has been at work in the way modernity intertwined colonialism, the everlasting search for new markets and new profits, the continual technological and industrial innovation and the ongoing uprooting and displacement

³⁶ Fernand Braudel has argued that finance capitalism ‘was no newborn child of the 1900s’, late alone late modernity. Instead, he argues, ‘in the past - in say Genoa or Amsterdam - following a wave of growth in commercial capitalism and the accumulation of capital on a scale beyond the normal channels for investment, finance capitalism was already in a position to take over and dominate, for a while at least, all the activities of the business world.’ See Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century: Perspectives of the World*, trans. by S. Reynolds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 604. On the basis of this argument Giovanni Arrighi has developed a theory of the cyclical nature of finance capitalism, arguing that it is an inevitable outcome of a cycle capitalist economy goes through. See Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Time* (London / New York: Verso, 1994), p. 159 and further. This may be true, but the argument that we are trying to make is that in previous eras it did not become a dominant *global* principle of reflexivity that changed the very nature of society. Today, by contrast, finance capitalism not only dominates our global economic system, it is also interlinked with a whole array of related reflexive processes (cultural, historical, and social).

of people and ecosystems. Such an analysis of modernity as the emergence of a ‘world market [which] has given immeasurable development to the trade, navigation, land-based means of transport’ is not new.³⁷ However, the theory of late modernity hypothesises that these dynamics of modernity has taken on a new dimension in the last four decades or so. More specifically, what distinguishes late-modern dynamics is not the geographical extent of that dynamic (as was the case during the great colonial waves) or the bureaucratic character of that dynamic (as was the case during the bureaucratisation of the state apparatus and commerce in the nineteenth and early twentieth century)³⁸, but the intensification and internalisation of that dynamic. Not simply the extent of social change upheaval has increased, but the very bandwidth and intensity by which these changes affect our social practices and ways of doing things.

To begin, what is novel in the dynamic of late modernity is that new technologies (i.e. new means of transportation, new means of analysing data on a massive scale, and media for communicating and accessing information) have led to a far-reaching reorganisation of space and time.³⁹ As a result, social relationships, local and global identities and social practices and costumes are no longer firmly attached to age old traditions but are rapidly changing their nature. In analysing this phenomenon, Zygmunt Bauman has proposed we think of this through the metaphor of liquidity. We could think of late modernity as liquefying all social relations, institutions and forms of conduct: the old ones still exist, but they have somehow become fluid. Obviously, Bauman’s metaphor is a powerful way of envisioning the extreme flexibility of our social world. Being liquefied (or, hyperflexible) our individual choices, institutions and related norms of conduct have little or no duress, both in the sense that we are no longer (socially) imprisoned by them, and in the sense that they do not endure for a long period of time.⁴⁰

While the analysis of late modernity has so far focused on the transformation of larger social and economic structures and institutions, the conditions of late modernity ultimately bear down on individual and individual lives that are led under these conditions. By way of literature, it becomes possible to bring into view the intricate web of individual feelings, affects and actions and the way they are shaped by the social changes induced by late modernity. After all, it is individual life here and now that is led under increasing conditions of flexibility and reflexivity; and it is individual life that needs to endure the increased precarity and insecurity that this entails.

In her debut novel Het tegenovergestelde van een mens (The opposite of a human being, 2017), Lieke Marsman tells the story of the recently graduated climate scientist Ida. After having obtained her graduate degree, Ida does not know exactly what the next goal in her life should be. She hesitantly takes the first steps in what could possibly be the beginning of

³⁷ Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (translated from the German by S. Moore in cooperation with F. Engels) 1848, *Marxist Internet Archive*, URL: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>

³⁸ On the bureaucratisation of industry and the state apparatus, see Henry Jacoby, *Bureaucratization of the World* (San Francisco: University of California Press, 1973).

³⁹ For an analysis of the transformation of space and place through communication technologies see Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). In ‘Transport and Globalization’, Jean-Paul Rodrigue provides a decent overview of the impact of transportation technologies on globalisation, in *The Sage Handbook of Transportation Studies*, ed. by Jean-Paul Rodrigue and others (London: Sage, 2013), p. 17-29.

⁴⁰ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times*, p. 65 and p. 105-106.

a successful career as a scientist, but could just as well be a senseless undertaking: she will start an internship in Northern Italy, where she will investigate the removal of a dam in the Alps. At first sight, climate seems to be the central theme in Marsman's debut novel. While, in Klont, digital technology threatens to swallow up the world altogether; in Het tegenovergestelde van een mens man-infested nature is the threatening force: a force whose power cannot be imagined properly by human beings and most certainly cannot be controlled. That threat, which is caused by man but now escapes the grip of man and has led to a life of its own, is also presented thematically in both novels by means of a strong contrast between what is fixed and what is liquid.

In Klont, which obviously refers to a solid shape itself, it rains incessantly. The eagerness with which the story of Krups is received, reveals how the felt threat of fluidity also becomes a desire for a solid form: a solid story of an expert, Alexei Krups, which perhaps consists of lies, but in which something is made intelligible that we experience as a serious threat but that we cannot oversee. In Het tegenovergestelde van een mens, the rising water, due to heavy rainfall, threatens to destroy a dam. The perpetual rain, in climatic terms caused by depression, reflects the emotional world of the main character in a fairly classical way: Ida is also depressed. Ida's emotional depression becomes manifest in her incessant expression of generic, meaningless platitudes, including remarks about depression as a cultural phenomenon, such as: 'Twenty-first-century Western depression is characterised by a lack of desire because of a lack of lack: affluence.'

Ida's individual depression, the climatological depression, and the cultural trivialities of a millennial that the text constantly recurs on - all this makes this novel an extremely interesting case for those who want to get grip on conditions we are living in. Like many of her generation, Ida has the somewhat indefinable feeling of being overwhelmed by the amount of options in life, the feeling of guilt she has about climate problems and the resulting apathy. Ida interprets the connection between a macro and micro level of her era as a form of loneliness: 'Even the sky is empty. And so we put ourselves off by destroying all that silent nature around us, like a desperate lover who is not being texted back and gets soused in the cafe.' As a climate scientist, Ida is deeply concerned with the environment and impending ecological catastrophes; at the same time, she is unable to look beyond herself. This inability to look beyond one's own self is a central problem in Het tegenovergestelde van een mens. The question asked here is not just why Ida can look no further than herself - even if she wants it so badly and even though she thinks that she is doing so? But also, in a more abstract sense: why can mankind look no further than his own individuality? When Ida's mother casually remarks that man is a 'thoroughly evil being', Ida tries really hard to become 'the opposite of a human being' (hence the title of the novel). She tries to imagine what it would be like to be a thing - a cucumber, or a table. Ida's thought experiment reminds of what the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) once claimed: 'Man is even more inclined to think of himself as a piece of stone on the moon than as an I.' The latter indeed would exceed the limits of the I, which is impossible. Ida finds out that she simply can't do it and draws the following conclusion: 'Who can't be anyone else, must ensure that he is at least as good as possible.' And, although that may seem to be a simple task; under the given conditions it turns out to be a hell of a job for Ida. And perhaps more importantly: it shows us how the impasse results from the late modern conditions. It would be a shortcoming, though, to interpret the climatic depression in the novel as a metaphor

for what happens to us in these conditions. Perhaps we should read it the other way around: following Marsman's line of thought the comparison functions as a means to think beyond ourselves. What would a caring and loving relationship with nature be like? Marsman might only use the human relationship to show how our limited perspective makes us careless lovers, being too busy with ourselves to be sincerely concerned about the other. Perhaps the breaking of the dam should be interpreted as nature breaking up with us.

One of the reasons why we are putting emphasis on Giddens concept of late modernity is because Giddens analysis of it is not just about large social structures and institutions. To the contrary, Giddens is as much interested in the impact this has on life of the individual and how this, in turn, affects the fabric of the social. Central to late modernity is fact that life seems to have no real meaning anymore, Giddens argues. He writes: 'Personal meaninglessness - the feeling that life has nothing worthwhile to offer - becomes a fundamental psychic problem in circumstances of late modernity.'⁴¹ What determines the specific dynamics of our late modern times, is not only that institutions and cultures come under pressure and are dynamically subject to change, but that our own individual position is also undermined while at the same time it seems to become increasingly important. The flexibility and reflexivity of late modernity is internalised, as it where, and played out at the level of the individual subjectivity. Bauman alludes to a similar phenomenon when he argues that 'our fears, like so many other aspects of life in a liquid modern setting, have been deregulated and privatised.'⁴² Today, individuals are not only made responsible for his own project; what is more, that project must also be evaluated continually. In late modernity, people become increasingly responsible for their own lifestyle and planning, and therefore have to assess risks themselves, while at the same time social and economic life has become so complex and flexible that these risks cannot be overseen. With social structures becoming liquefied or flexible, we can no longer lean on them for guidelines and orientation. But neither can we blame them if we fail: individual subjects become responsible for his or her own well-being, as a so-called 'free choosers' whose capacities to quickly adjust to new situations, to be flexible and reflexive seem to be of greater importance than the ability to conform to traditions and conventions. In late modernity, individual or she must be ready at any moment to leave her relations and loyalties for new ones.

This leads to an interesting paradox that we find both in *Klont* as well and in *Het tegenovergestelde van een mens*. It is this paradox, so typical of for late modernity, that can also explain a good part of the erosion of the political. On the one hand, the characters in these novels, just like the individual subjects living under late modern conditions, are completely permeated by what lies outside of their own self. A certain urgency comes from this outside world, but also a threat. In *Klont* this is the threat of internet and a form of machinic thinking that leads a life of its own; in *Het tegenovergestelde van een mens* this is the threat of an ecological catastrophe. In both cases, however, it is a threat that is too complex: the characters feel that on the one hand they have the individual responsibility to solve this problem, but on the other hand, being individuals, they are totally incapable of overseeing the complexity of the problem. The paradoxical result that follows from this for both Bodo Klein in *Klont* and for Ida in *Het*

⁴¹ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 9.

⁴² Zygmunt Bauman and Leonidas Donskis, *Moral Blindness: The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

tegenovergestelde van een mens (as well as for many of us, we presume), is that they completely withdraw and turn inward; but in doing so they lose the little amount of agency that they still had.

This tendency to turn inwards and withdraw from what little agency is left to us is quite understandable given that we are confronted with enormous processes that are both too complex and too big to really grasp an individual (which, again, is the affective experience that is documented in both *Klont* and *Het tegenovergestelde van een mens*).

Whereas Bodo Klein surmised that it was not shame and regret for his own failures that prevented him from thinking outside of his own perspective, but simply the size of his head, Ida in Het tegenovergestelde van een mens is struggling with guilt and shame quite explicitly throughout the novel. For Ida, the inability to contribute to the future, to the climate problem about which she feels guilty, results in depression and apathy. She says: 'My apathy is a consequence of the way the generation of my parents has treated the world, my cynicism an expression of defeat: I use cynical jokes to stand firm in a world I have not chosen, would never choose, but for which I can see no alternative' At the same time, Ida argues that her apathy must not be confused with indifference, when she says that 'apathy could also be the result of having values [...]. It all matters: depression can just as easily result from too much lust for life, as from a lack of it.'

Ida's struggle touches on what we have previously called 'the erosion of the political'. The novel seems to suggest that Ida becomes depressed because of the climate problem, and that the guilt about it mainly ends up with the individual and not with the system that always manages to escape its responsibility because it is constantly in motion and turns out to be completely elusive. In a blog post on the website of DW B, literary theorist Siebe Bluijs argues that the novel, above all, is a confirmation of that process of internalisation. The novel, Bluijs writes, 'illustrates how guilt about climate change mainly ends up with the individual, while the actual managers remain out of the picture. However, because of the one-sided emphasis on Ida's emotional life, the book is primarily a confirmation of that dynamic.'⁴³ Let us zoom in on the way the novel may go along with what we previously called the erosion of the political.

We mentioned earlier that our analysis of late modernity (with a focus on the particular conditions of reflexivity and flexibility that characterise it) would be useful to understand the conditions that have led to the erosion of the political. So far, however, that erosion might have seemed to be a largely abstract phenomenon. In part, this is true (which is why we also insisted on a conceptual analysis of the political as our starting point). But the impact of this phenomenon on our daily lives, and the way we choose to live these lives, is very real and quite tangible. Through the analysis of *Het tegenovergestelde van een mens* and of the conditions of late modernity (conceived as hypercomplex and impossible to grasp cognitively for the individual but

⁴³ Siebe Bluijs and Anne van den Dool, 'Een afstandelijk samenspel tussen natuur en mens. Het persoonlijke ecokritische in *Hoe ik een bos begon in mijn badkamer* van Maartje Smits en *Het tegenovergestelde van een mens* van Lieke Marsman', *DWB*, January 2018, URL: <http://www.dwb.be/sites/default/files/pdf/hb2%20web%20januari%202018%-20Jonge%20wolven%20over%20Lieke%20Marsman%20en%20Maartje%20Smits.pdf>.

with very real effects for our sense of political agency), we have tried to bring into scope the complex interplay between the personal or individual level that characterises late modernity. Today, we can see that paradoxical rift between large encompassing social and economic processes and the emphasis (indeed, even the burden and responsibility) that is being put on the individual more than ever before. The erosion of the political can be understood when we bring into view how society increases to focus on the individual and individual accomplishments, while these individuals themselves experience an overwhelming sense of powerlessness when confronted with the social changes and structures that organise their daily lives. This paradox corrodes both the sense of community or collective that we argued is central to the political, as well as the capacity for agency or action that forms the other central part of the political in our argument.

In lieu of addressing this erosion of the political, day to day politics has tended to focus on leading attention away from the complexity of our situation, either by simplistically emphasising the primacy of the individual and individual action and responsibility (in the case of liberal politics) or by abreacting and lashing out against globalisation in favour of a nationalist sense of community and commonality (in the case of neo-nationalist and populist politics). In the political centre, finally, what is left is a politics of consensus that is faced with its own untenability - not because the things we have reached consensus over cannot be realised, but because that realisation is hampered by an even larger consensus over the primacy of economic globalisation. For example, there is a large consensus today that sustainability and well-being should be at the centre of politics and governmental policies today; but paradoxically this overwhelming consensus is trumped by an even larger overwhelming consensus that the desire for sustainability and well-being should not impede economic growth.

The novel Het omgekeerde van een mens shows commitment with the world in the sense that the novel itself is a way of being in the world (or as Aukje van Rooden would call it: ontical)⁴⁴: it is the way, that by no means can be called apathetically-paralysed, in which Lieke Marsman chooses to deal with the world. Marsman did not write a classic novel. Instead, she presents a hybrid collage of poetry, fiction and essay: the boundaries between the genres are, again, fluid. Marsman has included three essays that she wrote on behalf of herself. They have now become fiction, which means that not only the boundaries between literary genres - but also the boundaries between author and character, and between science, reflection, theory and fiction - have become fluid.

This iconic fluidity can be read as a critique of the possibility of a coherent narrative - that of an individual as well as of humanity as a whole, comparable to the way in which the British philosopher-literature scientist Galen Strawson, in 'Against Narrativity', argues against two assumptions: the empirical-descriptive thesis that people naturally experience their lives in the form of a narrative, and secondly, the normative thesis that it is good that people do so, that it even is essential to live a well-lived life. Those who do not have a 'story' are said to be doing something fundamentally wrong and are urged to worry about it.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Aukje van Rooden, *Literatuur, autonomie, engagement: Pleidooi voor een nieuw paradigma* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015).

⁴⁵ In Dutch studies research of recent years – not only in literature – a lot of attention is paid to storytelling and the Self as a narrative. We are thinking of the project of Gaston Franssen and Stefan Van Geelen about the Self in

*Strawson believes that such assumptions not only impose unnecessary responsibility and cause stress, but are a huge limitation in attempts to understand ourselves as well.⁴⁶ In fact, such a criticism of narrativity can also be seen in *Klont*, in which the beautiful round story that is plagiarised by the scientist Alexei Krups, responds to the desire for guidance in a post-digital world: for a solid, indisputable truth - the reliable form in which the scientist shows himself to be a trustworthy expert. In both novels, the form in which scientific knowledge is produced is also thematised and criticised. Since her doctoral research, Ida has been very sceptical about the fact that her scientific articles in obscure journals are not read by anyone. She denounces the insecurity, the intellectual exile of science. Scientists may produce knowledge that can change the world - disturbing and critical data that could spur action - but they are not heard and do not choose to be heard. Unless, like Krups, they capitalise on the fears and anxieties of the mass by presenting over-simplified data. Ida is looking for another way to relate to the world, just like Marsman herself is in another concrete form, with this novel. And perhaps we should indeed look for new ways, for a new form, too?*

Conclusions: where do we go from here?

In a sense, the above has been a prolegomenon as well as a proposal for Dutch literary studies for the twenty-first century. It is a prolegomenon in so far that we have tried to outline the social and political impasse that characterises our current era and that we feel should be the starting point for a renewed and more explicitly socio-political focus of Dutch literary studies. The main point, however, is not only that these preliminary observations on the erosion of the political in late modernity might function as an interdisciplinary framework necessary for doing Dutch literary studies in the present time; the main point, is that the study of Dutch literature can actually help us to trace the concrete affective, emotional and imaginary patterns and routines that both characterise and uphold late modernity. For this reason, we have tried to focus on the loss of agency not only within 'the political' in its abstract and conceptual sense, but also on the loss of agency from the standpoint of individual experience. We have tried to demonstrate how this individual experience forms a crucial part of the late modern condition. This is where the astute relevance and unique capacity of studying literature comes in. It is through a concrete study of literature that we can begin to understand what this experience of loss of agency and living under late modern conditions looks like; what is more, studying these affective processes through literature can show us that this individual experience actually forms a crucial element of the late modern condition. This experience has been documented in both *Klont* by Maxim Februari and *Het tegenovergestelde van een mens* by Lieke Marsman, two novels that provide access to the

psychopathology. See Gaston Franssen and Stefan van Geelen, 'De taal der ziekte: Literaire perspectieven op geneeskunde, psychosomatiek en psychiatrie', *Nederlandse Letterkunde*, 23 (2018), pp. 1-9. Similarly, Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar's work on alternative narrative models and their impact on leading a different, alternative life is of particular relevance in this regard. See the special issue on 'Narrative Resistance' edited by Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar for *Global Media Journal / Australian Edition*, 11 (2017), URL: <http://www.hca.westernsydney.edu.au/gmjau/?issues=volume-11-issue-1-2017>.

⁴⁶ See Galen Strawson, 'Against Narrativity', *Ratio*, 17 (2004), pp. 428-452: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9329.2004.00264.x>.

individual affective structure of late modernity in relation to some of its central processes (big data and information processing, and ecological catastrophe).

As we have stated earlier and have tried to demonstrate: many scholars now working in the field of modern Dutch studies have already done a substantial amount of work in analysing the social and political conditions under which literature is being produced. For that reason, the outline of doing Dutch literary studies under late modern conditions that we have tried to provide should be conceived of as a proposal for synthesis, rather than the articulation of entirely new ideas. It is a proposal to pay attention to each other's research and to focus on the converging interdisciplinary framework that guides our research implicitly or explicitly, and it is a proposal for how such a framework might look like. We have hypothesised that many of us are trying to come to terms with the changing nature of literary narratives in relation to the more encompassing structures that are transforming our social, political and economic world and that, indeed, are radically transforming Dutch society as a whole. Our proposal would be to think of this along the lines of late modernity, a theoretical but historically specific framework that we have tried to outline in this article.

To say that we have tried to synthesise ideas by providing a new, larger framework for it, does not mean that adopting this framework and becoming attuned more explicitly to our current time means that modern Dutch studies will simply keep doing what it has always been doing. Quite to the contrary, if we take the challenge of letting our research focus take shape in a more explicit dialogue with our current time (and the political impasse that characterises it) seriously, this will mean that our research practices and methods will change. Like Demeyer and Vitse, we feel that it will need to become more explicitly political. But it will also need to become more socio-historical in its approach, in order to be able to understand how our present time is determined by large processes that have formed over the ages. To achieve such ambitious aims, which require deep historical knowledge as well as interdisciplinary approaches, we might want to become more attuned to collaborative research, joining forces and writing collaboratively (as we have tried to do). We might also consider reaching outwardly, towards scholars and theorists who have not previously engaged with the field of modern Dutch studies. This could be done by explicitly engaging in a dialogue sociological theory, political theory or history; it could also be done by addressing an international audience by publishing open access and in English if possible.

Ultimately, we hope that over time and through joint efforts an accurate analysis of our own times that is able to grasp both the larger encompassing conditions of late modernity that determine it *and* that convincingly demonstrate the structural import of the individual affect that support it, will reinvigorate not just literary studies as a discipline but the tradition of critique that has been at the heart of the humanities since the beginning of modernity. There may be no grand solution to the so-called impasse of critique, but through an astute analysis of late modernity we can start to comprehend it and through an astute analysis of literature we can demonstrate the lasting relevance of the tradition of critique. There is certainly enough to work with in the field, and enough to keep working on. But if we don't want to become overwhelmed by our individual powerlessness in the future, we will have to undertake collective action: we will need to collaborate in our search for new weapons.

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