



Images of Europe

The (de)construction of European identity in contemporary fiction

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Abstract: In recent years the problem of European identity has become increasingly urgent. The Dutch and French voters rejected the EU's Constitutional Treaty in 2005 and the debate about EU membership for Turkey threatens to cause a rift in the European community. What do Europeans have in common and what is typically European about Europe's history and culture? This article wants to tackle that question from a literary perspective, arguing that literary texts contribute to the construction of a shared sense of belonging among European readers. It examines in what way novels by Koen Peeters, Christoph Ransmayr and Michel Houellebecq help shape a collective European identity by negotiating a shared historical narrative and a shared cultural and philosophical heritage. The main thesis of this article is that European identity in these novels is constructed in a critical and self-reflexive manner: European identity is as much deconstructed as it is constructed. The destructive flip side of European modernity informs that identity as much as its social and cultural successes. European identity, these novels also suggest, is always the combined effect of national and transnational modes of identification.

Keywords: European identity, Contemporary European fiction, Collective memory

Introduction

Robin, an employee in a public relations company, is enjoying a stroll in the heart of Brussels, the capital of Europe. Brussels's most famous (and most overrated) tourist attraction, a small statue of a urinating child the Belgians call 'Manneken Pis', is being dressed up in a folkloristic suit. It takes Robin a few minutes to realize this is done in honour of a Romanian delegation. It takes four glasses of gin for this realization to develop into a true epiphany:

It's hanging even above and between us: the detached, voluntary European civilization. Europe is a thing of flags, hats, ribbons. The language of the people mixed with the language of the authorities, and all that nourished by local [100] dishes and baptized with water from Manneken Pis. Suddenly my whole life seems simple.¹

This is a scene from Flemish novelist Koen Peeters's *Grote Europese roman* (*Great European Novel*), a novel exploring the topic of European identity from the perspective of a business clerk

from Brussels travelling all around Europe. But is life really that simple? Does Europe rely on food and folklore?

The date in the novel is '9 September' and in New York 'two towers are on fire'.² In real world politics, the aftermath of this event – however inaccurately referred to in the novel – served to divide rather than unify the European Union. As political scientist Thomas Risse remarks, 'the fight over European contributions to the U.S.-led "coalition of the willing" in Iraq' sharpened the debates about European identity and more specifically 'about Eastern Europe's place in the "new Europe"'.³ The problem became even more urgent when the Dutch and French voters rejected the Constitutional Treaty for the European Union, which was 'full of identity talk and symbols'.⁴ Moreover, the question whether or not Turkey should be allowed to join the EU is threatening to split the European community. Apparently, things are not as simple as they might seem to a slightly intoxicated public relations officer and it really is complicated to define what it means to be 'European'. What are the images of Europe (de)constructed in contemporary fiction?

Being European – or not?

In this article the signifier 'Europe' will refer both to a cultural-historical entity – as in European political history, European cultural and scientific heritage – and to a political construction, the EU as a phase in the ongoing economic and political integration of European states. Both conceptions of Europe, although conceptually different, are inextricably connected. The question of European identity – what is distinctly European? – arises from the process of European integration, yet the answer relies on Europe's cultural-historical heritage. People who identify with (an image of) Europe's cultural-historical heritage may more readily identify with the EU's political institutions if these are presented as the embodiment and guardian of that heritage.

Identity and identification are also inextricably connected: European identity relies on citizens identifying with Europe – i.e. integrating a European dimension, besides a national and/or regional dimension, into their personal identity constructions – while this identification presupposes the construction of a recognizable European identity. European identity, in fact, refers precisely to this complex process of identity construction on a European level. In the first part of the article I will discuss the question of European identity and identification with Europe as a primarily political problem, arising from problems facing the EU as a political construction. [101] In the second part I will discuss three literary case studies.

The problem of European identity

As the European Union expands and deepens, the problem of European identity becomes increasingly urgent. From the 1970s onwards the European institutions have shown great concern about the question of identity construction.⁵ What do the member states of the EU have in common apart from their membership? What distinguishes Europe as a cultural-historical zone from other, non-European parts of the world? The public debates about the European Constitution and about Turkey's possible entry into the EU have, to a great extent, revolved around identity questions: what cultural, political and religious values could be considered as typically and/or specifically European?

This concern about identity is reflected by the official EU discourse on European cultural heritage. According to the European Commission, European identity is to be found, paradoxically, in Europe's rich cultural diversity.⁶ Cultural policy in the EU should therefore promote the diversity of Europe's cultural heritage as the key to a shared sense of belonging. As diverse as that heritage may be, it is nevertheless a heritage all members of the EU share, so the argument goes. From the 1992 Maastricht Treaty onwards, 'culture' has become an important issue in the official EU discourse.⁷

This concern about European identity is related to a more general reflection on the EU's (diminishing) status as a geopolitical and economic power, but it is also motivated by the EU's internal political problems. According to Cris Shore, the focus on European identity is primarily driven by political concerns. The main problem facing the European Union in recent years is the lack of public legitimacy of its political institutions. In order for there to be a legitimate European democracy, there has to be a European *demos* that recognises itself as a transnational 'people' and identifies with the transnational institutions that claim to represent it. As Shore indicates, the fundamental problem of the EU 'lies in the fact that the "European public", or *demos*, barely exists as a recognisable category, and hardly at all as a subjective or *self-recognising* category'.⁸ Contrary to the neo-functional assumptions guiding the process of European integration in its early decades, public identification with and attachment to the European institutions has not emerged as a simple by-product of the creation of a unified European market for goods and people.

Facing the nonexistence of a European *demos* in a rapidly expanding transnational community, the European Union has shifted its attention from merely economic integration to the increasingly urgent problem of European identity and the construction of a common sense of belonging among the citizens of its member states. This shift was spurred on by the growing awareness that the Union's economic [102] prosperity might suffer from a chronic lack of public allegiance to its institutions. 'Identity-formation and "culture-building" have thus become explicit political objectives in the campaign to promote what EU officials and politicians call *l'idée européenne*'.⁹ Culture can contribute to the construction of this collective identity.

Collective identity

Collective identities or group identities can be found on many different levels, among the members of a region, a nation or a linguistic group, or among people sharing a religious or political conviction. Collective identity could be broadly defined as a shared sense of belonging to a group: the members of the in-group feel that they have something in common which sets them apart from the out-group. The people belonging to the in-group identify with the group and its members (even if they do not know them personally), which means that their membership of the in-group is part of their sense of who they are. People may simultaneously identify with different groups, which may or may not intersect, and they may have stronger feelings about one level of identification than about another.¹⁰ Collective identity on a European level, therefore, implies the sense of belonging to a European 'people'.

Collective identity, be it regional, national or transnational, is never a given: it is always a social, cultural and political construction. It is the outcome of a process of negotiation. In order for a collective European identity to arise, citizens of European states need to experience Europe as an in-group, and this experience can be constructed or reinforced by political discourse, cultural artefacts, public debate etc. Wilfried Spohn distinguishes between two levels

of European identity: a 'European civilizational identity' and a 'European integrational identity'.¹¹ The former implies identification with 'Europe as a geographical culture area', with a common European political and cultural history 'separating [Europe] from non-European civilizations'.¹² The latter refers to the process of political and economic unification, 'the attachment, loyalty and identification with the European integration'.¹³ Needless to say, civilizational identity refers to Europe as a cultural-historical entity, whereas integrational identity refers to the EU as a political construction.

European identity, according to Spohn, should be envisioned as a variable combination of the various national identities, which are transformed but not superseded by transnational identity, and both civilizational and integrational European identity. As Thomas Risse observes, European identity does not need to be a strong, homogeneous collective identity. More important is the 'Europeanization of (national) identities', which implies that 'references to Europe and the EU have been incorporated into national and other identity constructions'.¹⁴ This process of Europeanization will result in multiple transnational identity constructions across the EU. European identity, therefore, could be seen as the continuous process of interaction between, on the one hand, various attempts by political or cultural [103] authorities to define what is distinctly European, and, on the other hand, the immensely variable levels of identification of European citizens with a European ingroup, with Europe as a political construction and/or Europe as a cultural-historical entity.

This concept of collective identity – European or otherwise – is not without its opponents. From a broadly poststructuralist and postcolonial perspective the attribution of (cultural, national, ethnic) identity has been both deconstructed as an essentialist illusion and attacked as a political and ideological recipe for exclusion and violence. Hayden White, commenting on the EU's quest for a European identity, summarizes these reservations neatly. 'The error, less cognitive than moral, lies in the ascription to the in-group of an identity, a self-sameness that is always inflected in the direction of belief in an essence'.¹⁵ The error is moral, moreover,

'because essentialism is always elaborated in the mode of exclusion rather than of inclusion'.¹⁶

White is wary of the superiority claims which inevitably seem to accompany the notion of European identity. Europe's self-definition as a cultural-historical entity implies that European culture 'in contrast to its less fortunate counterparts elsewhere and in other times, "has a history" or is "historical" in nature'.¹⁷ White, therefore, welcomes the questioning of the concept of (cultural, national) tradition which has traditionally supported identity construction. Bo Stråth complements White's remarks with a discursive analysis – inspired by Edward Saïd – of Europe's efforts at self-definition in the past few centuries. The discourse regarding European identity 'has had the demarcation of the Other in terms of "Us" and "Them" as an important point of departure'.¹⁸ Historically, Europe has always seen itself in the mirror of the Other (to borrow Stråth's phrase), be it the Orient, the New World (America) or Eastern Europe.

Collective memory

A crucial factor in the construction of collective identity is collective memory: people identify with those with whom they share a narrative about past events. In the case of Europe this shared historical narrative is strongly informed by the twentieth century history of war, genocide and ideological strife, a past which European integration is said to have overcome.

However, the struggle between competing historical narratives (for instance about the division of Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War) can disrupt the construction of collective identity. As Klaus Eder remarks, collective identity and collective memory are the outcome of 'a permanent struggle of naming'.¹⁹

The EU supports the development of a collective identity based upon powerful collective memories. Shore argues that 'the absence of a sense of common historical experience or shared memory'²⁰ is an impediment to sustainable European integration. Symbolic and cultural representations of what the members of a group [104] have in common become all the more important as those members engage less in direct social relations. As Benedict Anderson (1983) demonstrated in his seminal work on 'imagined communities', cultural artefacts such as newspapers and novels can give members of a nation or an empire, living thousands of miles apart in often considerably differing circumstances, the sense that they belong to one and the same community, and share a common outlook on life. The EU, according to Eder, is a transnational society in need of symbolic mediation if ever there was one: it is 'a society dependent upon cultural techniques such as symbolically-mediated representations of what a people have in common'.²¹

How can this need be met? Eder suggests we dismiss traditional modes of identity construction in which unity is based on mythical symbols or the glorification of a shared heroic past. More sustainable results are to be expected from what he calls 'the reflexive mode'²² of relating to European history: a collective reconstruction of the past with an eye both to Europe's civilizational achievements and to the traumatic past of perpetrators and victims of crimes against humanity. It is a way of coming to terms with the past while simultaneously constructing collective memories. According to Hayden White, part of European identity should be the acknowledgment that 'anti-Semitism has been a component of Europe's own efforts at self-identification since its beginnings'.²³

Eder points out that this long-term collective process requires 'a European public space, which provides an arena for communicating the past to European citizens'.²⁴ Given the linguistic and political obstacles barring the creation of a European public space – implying transnational media and public debate – it seems necessary to explore alternative means for symbolic mediation. Literature on European cultural policy focuses on the deliberate efforts on the part of the European institutions to construct Europe as a political community.²⁵ Symbolic mediation, however, does not necessarily have to be the result of deliberate policy. Cultural artefacts, such as literary texts, that have not been created for this purpose can contribute to the shaping of a common European consciousness, to a collective European identity based upon a collective European memory.

Literature and European identity

This is exactly what this article wants to investigate: it aims to explore the ways in which literary texts contribute to the construction of collective identity and collective memory on a transnational, European level. In other words, what images of Europe, European history and European cultural heritage are constructed or possibly deconstructed in literary fiction? And in what ways do literary texts help shape a multi-layered system of identification, which is capable of addressing and mobilizing both national (or regional) and transnational feelings of belonging? These are the questions that this article will try to answer. [105]

In its focus on collective memory and collective identity this article links up with cultural memory studies. The notion of collective memory – introduced by Maurice Halbwachs – implies that ‘no memory is ever purely individual, but always inherently shaped by collective contexts’.²⁶ These socio-cultural contexts include the community in which we live and the (narrative) conventions this community uses to construct its shared past, but also the media, institutions and cultural artefacts in which this shared past is embodied. Collective memory arises from the interplay of ‘individual memories’ and cultural memory ‘which is represented by media and institutions’.²⁷ The narrative construction (or performance) of memory is of vital importance to the construction of identity. As Astrid Erll observes, ‘[t]he concept of cultural memory has opened the way to studying these processes at a collective level’.²⁸

Commenting on Halbwachs’s concept of collective memory, Jan Assmann distinguishes between two types of collective memory: ‘communicative memory’ and ‘cultural memory’. Assmann terms ‘communicative memory’ what Halbwachs called collective memory: a non-institutional memory which ‘lives in everyday interaction and communication’ without being ‘formalized and stabilized by any forms of material symbolization’.²⁹ Cultural memory, however, is not restricted to oral history: ‘It is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms’.³⁰ The literary text is such a symbolic form which can be studied as a repository of cultural memory. As Birgit Neumann points out, literary texts, by suggesting ‘interpretations of the past’, may ‘influence how we, as readers, narrate our pasts and ourselves into existence’.³¹

This article concentrates on a literary form of cultural memory: collective memory as it is embodied and mediated by literary texts, which in this way contribute to the construction of collective identity. It discusses three novels written in three different languages (Dutch, French and German – the English translations are mine). The novels are *Grote Europese roman* by the Belgian/Flemish novelist Koen Peeters (*Great European Novel*),³² *Die letzte Welt* by the Austrian novelist Christoph Ransmayr (*The Last World*)³³ and *Les Particules Élémentaires* by the French novelist Michel Houellebecq (*Atomised*).³⁴ The novels are selected because they demonstrate in what way literature can contribute to the shaping of European identity by tackling issues of European history and shared heritage. However, only one of the novels, Peeters’s *Grote Europese roman*, explicitly foregrounds Europe as a central theme.

The selection of novels also takes into account poetical diversity. Ransmayr’s *Die letzte Welt* can be considered as a text-book example of postmodern historical fiction: it is a self-reflexive, meta-fictional novel blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, past and present. Houellebecq’s *Les Particules Élémentaires* can be read as a critique of European modernity, and more specifically of the Enlightenment’s ‘grand narrative’ of emancipation and moral progress. Although not without its ideological and narrative ambiguities, it does so, however, in an anti-poststructuralist vein, rejecting the neo-Nietzschean deconstruction of metaphysics as much as [106] 1960s libertarianism. Koen Peeters’s *Grote Europese roman* offers a postmodern, ironic response to the tradition of the *Great American Novel*. Its deep concern with issues of community, mutual understanding and authenticity is both thwarted and sharpened by its reluctance or inability to move beyond narrative irony.

Different as they are, what these novels do share is a highly critical attitude towards European history and its cultural and philosophical heritage. I want to analyse to what extent these novels deconstruct as well as construct historical narratives and conceptions of cultural heritage on which collective memory and collective identity are founded. To what extent do these novels contribute to the deconstruction of nationalist or Eurocentric mythology and to the

construction of a more open, heterogeneous and self-reflexive conception of collective, transnational belonging?

In my analysis of these novels I want to give the abstract notion of (the construction of) collective identity a concrete form, by focusing on three aspects of literary fiction which help shape a sense of belonging to a European *demos* or community. Literary fiction can contribute to the recognition or construction of, on the one hand, a shared historical narrative and, on the other hand, a shared cultural heritage. A third aspect I will be discussing is that of shared philosophical concerns, an aspect closely related to that of shared cultural heritage. In the next section I will focus on memories of a shared history in Peeters's *Grote Europese roman*. In the section following the next I will discuss traces of a shared cultural heritage in Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt*. In the final section before the conclusion I will look into the philosophical concerns developed in Houellebecq's *Les Particules Élémentaires*.

Memories of a shared history

As indicated in the previous sections, the formation of a collective identity implies the construction and recognition of a shared history – collective identity rests on collective memory. Literary fiction contributes to the construction of collective memory by offering (parts of) a historical narrative that can be shared among the members of a transnational community of readers. The memories of the Second World War are of vital importance to the construction of European identity. The memory of war in itself serves to legitimize the project of European integration – the EU's official discourse relies heavily on the shared experience of war – while at the same time inspiring the deconstruction of Europe's self-definition as beacon of civilization. More distant memories, however, also come into play: memories going back to the so-called origin of European civilization in classical antiquity, as in Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt*, which I will be discussing in the next section.

As Koen Peeters's *Grote Europese roman* demonstrates, it is the history of war and large-scale destruction, perhaps more than anything else, that informs European identity. The novel is preceded by a 'Dedication' which explicitly refers to the Great [107] American Novel: 'I want to write a book like a Great American Novel, disguised as a Great European Novel.'³⁵ This novel should present 'the history of European mankind'³⁶ in a grand and epic form, yet from the limited perspective of an employee working and living in Brussels.

Needless to say, the Great European Novel turns out to be a *petite histoire* rather than a grand narrative: its panoramic European grasp of thirty-six European capitals is a self-reflexive linguistic construction and its protagonist's European experience lacks epic grandeur as well as deep intellectual and emotional understanding. As Bart Vervaeck remarks, the wider the encyclopaedic panorama of Europe becomes, the more its structure disintegrates into a disseminated network of fragments.³⁷ Aiming to be American, this Great Novel turns out to be deeply European: thoroughly aware of its own limitations and of the traumatic failures of European history.

At the request of his boss Theo, a self-made businessman of Jewish-Lithuanian descent, Robin travels around Europe to write a report on new prospects for the advertising industry and, more importantly, on the issue of European identity. Theo has a rather grim view on Europe's historical foundations. 'Europe is that disorderly lot that for centuries has been conquering, loving and murdering one another in campaigns with flags.'³⁸ Europe is 'Goethe and Virgil', but also 'Napoleon and Hitler'.³⁹ It is simply not possible to imagine the one without

the other. On his visit to Berlin Robin shares Theo's views with his colleague Diana: 'We have to remember the names of Europe's dead', Theo once told him, 'because they are the essence of Europe.'⁴⁰

Robin is encouraged by Theo to read the stories, novels and poems written by holocaust survivors such as Primo Levi and Paul Celan. His thoughts on Europe – compiled in his notepad, ironically entitled 'Great European Notebook'⁴¹ – are structured along the lines of Levi's book *The Periodical System*: every chapter in Robin's notebook is named after one of Europe's capitals. He has written down his observations on Europe, 'capital after capital, chapter after chapter',⁴² resulting in 'the periodical system of Europe'.⁴³

This suggests that Robin's finished report is the *Grote Europese roman* itself, which has a similar structure. All chapters are named after European capitals, although Robin only visits some of those cities. Other capitals are only mentioned in passing. Oslo, for instance, is mentioned in an e-mail sent by Oscar – also known as 'Oslo' – the resigning security agent in Robin's company. Sofia, as it happens, is the destination of a cheap flight – even cheaper, so the advertisement says, than 'Sabrina', suggesting that 'Bulgarian girls are for sale and are prostitutes'.⁴⁴ The periodical system of Europe, knit by a minor public relations officer, is a rather loose bag, which can be held together by any piece of string. The system does not pretend to be all-encompassing: it is a limited system, ironically signalling its artificial construction and its inability to achieve completeness. Perhaps the capitals are not even always the prime sites of history. Haunted by 'stories about executions, disappearances, [108] suicide' Robin looks for Auschwitz on a map: 'No, that is not a European capital.'⁴⁵

Whereas in the earlier parts of the novel Robin is primarily concerned with the problem of communication and mutual understanding in a world of superficial acquaintances and empty business talks, he gradually grows more sensitive to Europe's shared memories. In Warsaw he visits the Jewish ghetto, but he is equally susceptible to traces of the communist regime and the ensuing capitalist take-over. Warsaw was bombed once and is now 'spread evenly in communist or capitalist fashion, that doesn't make a difference'.⁴⁶ Usually he doesn't get to see much of 'the big history from the booklets',⁴⁷ but in palimpsests of European history such as Warsaw or Berlin 'big history' has a tendency to shimmer beneath the surface of casual walks and talks. Even a light-hearted dinner party in a trendy Berlin neighbourhood is invested with memories of Kristallnacht, which saw the burning of a synagogue next to the restaurant. Nevertheless, that 'tragic history is not on the agenda tonight',⁴⁸ Robin wryly remarks – or is he really embarrassed?

Back in the Brussels office Robin even hints at a painful, highly inconvenient character trait common to ruthless capitalism and fascism: the tendency to dismiss people. However, he is soon to dismiss this train of thought: 'Unbecoming, absolute improper it is to link a business reorganization to that type of history'.⁴⁹ The link between transnational capitalism and the Second World War is significant, nonetheless: whereas the process of integration propelled by capitalist economy creates a transnational community reduced to financial statistics and business chatter, a genuine sense of common belonging can only be founded on the shared memories of war.

Not only does this novel honour the memory of those deceased and murdered in the Second World War, it also tries to uncover the cultural and linguistic diversity Europe hides beneath its unified economic market. On his travels to a number of European countries Robin collects linguistic souvenirs, words and phrases in the various national languages, which he gathers in his notebook. His souvenir from Ljubljana is the so-called 'dual form', in addition to the

singular and plural form, a grammatical feature which apparently is unique to the Slovenian language and which kindles Robin's romantic longing for a companion.

To a group of collectors he meets in Berlin, Robin reveals a specific linguistic interest: words that are known to many people in Europe, 'but that in one language indicate an animal'.⁵⁰ His focus on the names of animals is possibly a tribute to Theo, whose past Robin imaginatively (re)constructs on the basis of personal documents he finds in Theo's office. In Robin's account, Theo, as a true European, studied languages obsessively and compiled lists of words, with a particular love for birds. As a child, Theo 'learned – very uselessly – the names of birds in four widely used languages and Latin by heart'.⁵¹ More than anyone else, Theo is 'international, European' – as a multilingual war victim, he quite simply embodies Europe. [109]

Robin's notebook, for that matter, is a fragmented and scrappy monument to Europe's (linguistic and cultural) unity in diversity, which is threatened by global monolingual capitalism and the general tendency towards the levelling of differences. 'Languages die',⁵² Robin muses. 'In two thousand years we will all speak the same language. Will we understand one another then?'⁵³ It is precisely that longing for community and for mutual belonging which spurs on Robin's trips across the European Union. This longing for community, the novel suggests, is not satisfied by the surface appearance of similarity and homogeneity offered by international airports and corporate office buildings. To the travelling business agent every corner of Europe looks alike, and so do all Europeans. 'We are so even-tempered, so similar, we are empty and generic.'⁵⁴ This type of unification, Robin observes, is an obstacle to community building rather than a sign of its success. Nevertheless, this is the material anyone trying to uncover or construct that community will have to work with.

His understanding of Europe's capitals and languages is as superficial as his acquaintances with foreign colleagues. Having raised the question 'do you have to know a city thoroughly' he confidently replies no: 'one visit is sufficient, and a few notes in a travel diary'.⁵⁵ This is cosmopolitanism in the age of multinational capitalism. Robin feels connected to the capitals he visits in the same way as one feels connected to a person sitting next to you in a bus: 'if you leave, you don't greet. Two days later you have forgotten one another'.⁵⁶

The construction of an imagined European community is a job for clever copywriters and public relations agencies. In Luxemburg Robin meets an energetic marketeer who has come up with a way to exploit Europe's need for a shared sense of belonging: he has developed a round game based on European mountains, 'Montepolis'.⁵⁷ Not only do mountains appeal to the imagination, the mountain game, moreover, will provide Europe with 'a system' which will bring together all countries in 'a table'.⁵⁸ Robin's meeting with the Berlin collectors, however, suggests that arbitrary collections of any traces of human existence, unable as they are to capture the true meaning of being European, come as near to a genuine European '*folksonomy*' as any ethnographical account. 'This is the new, unfinished museum of the true international ethnology'.⁵⁹

These arbitrary collections could be seen as so many attempts to construct a network, to find an arbitrary relationship in a seemingly fragmented heap of unqualified data. In a society in which relations of reciprocity have gradually been erased, these random collections – the more so if they can be shared between people – might be the stepping stones to a new sense of community and (shared) belonging.

Koen Peeters's *Grote Europese roman* contributes to the shaping of a transnational, European identity and to the construction of European 'imagined community' – although that

community is arguably deconstructed as much as it is constructed. For Robin, however, as for (some of) the Belgian readers, this identity is a multiple [110] identity, both national and transnational: the novel is both about Brussels and Belgian identity and about the European Union. Brussels figures prominently in the novel – with detailed references to streets and museums – and Belgian identity is quite favourably presented by the narrator. The citizens of this country are ‘polite and always a bit boring. [...] Nobody loves them, but nobody hates them either. This country is the ultimate self-mockery, the teasing, non-passionate love, a language game’.⁶⁰ This focus on national, Belgian identity – as opposed to regional, Flemish identity – is in itself a political statement.

Traces of a shared cultural heritage

European identity is not only based upon memories of a shared history, it is also believed to rely on so-called ‘civilizational’ identification: that which distinguishes Europe from the rest of the world is its particular cultural heritage. Nowadays few leading intellectuals or politicians would openly claim that this heritage is superior to that of other parts of the world – though some do – but the construction of European identity implies the need to stress the uniqueness and specificity of this shared heritage. The ‘other’, so often (implicitly) invoked in identity constructions, need not be the ‘other without’, it might as well be the ‘other within’: a traumatic core at the heart of this identity.

Christoph Ransmayr’s novel *Die letzte Welt* indulges in raking up Europe’s literary heritage. The novel resurrects the mythical world of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Half historical fiction, half fictional history, *Die letzte Welt* presents both characters culled from the history of Rome and characters inspired by Ovid’s mythological poetry. The protagonist Cotta, an avid reader of Ovid’s poetry, sets sail for the village of Tomi, on the outskirts of the Roman Empire, in search of the great poet. On the emperor’s orders Ovid had to leave Rome and rumour has it that he spent the last years of his life as a recluse in Trachila, a primitive settlement near Tomi, in the sole company of his assistant Pythagoras, anachronistically culled from Greek antiquity. As Thomas Anz remarks, however, ‘Der Autor Ovid ist und bleibt verschwunden’, a central issue in Anz’s reading of *Die letzte Welt* as a prime example of postmodern fiction.⁶¹

In a typically postmodern way, *Die letzte Welt* blurs the distinction between reality and fiction. Tomi’s inhabitants all share names with characters from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Moreover, they seem to shift shapes in ways prescribed by the Roman poet. The rope maker Lycaon wanders around at night in the guise of a wolf;⁶² his name-sake in Ovid’s poem, the tyrant Lycaon, eventually morphs into a wolf. Battus, the shopkeeper’s son, at the end of his life turns into stone,⁶³ sharing his fate with the shepherd of the same name in the *Metamorphoses*.

Die letzte Welt also blurs the distinction between past and present, a technique typical of Ransmayr’s historical fiction which Jutta Landa succinctly refers to as its [111] unsettling ‘historical promiscuousness’.⁶⁴ Cotta’s world is the world of imperial Rome, despotically ruled and toughly policed by the emperor, yet at the same time it is twentieth century Europe. The text abounds with anachronisms – ranging from Tomi’s ‘bus-stop’⁶⁵ and an ‘electrical appliance’ feeding ‘bulbs’⁶⁶ to Naso’s pictures in the newspapers, showing the poet delivering a speech⁶⁷ – which make it very clear that Roman antiquity is depicted from a twentieth century perspective. In the postmodern historical novel, according to Linda Hutcheon, ‘the events [...] are shown to be consciously composed into a narrative, whose constructed [...] order is imposed upon them’.⁶⁸ The metahistorical analysis, focusing on the self-reflexive narrative construction of

past events, clearly applies to Ransmayr's novel too. Moreover, these anachronisms remind the reader that this novel is as much concerned with twentieth century political issues – fascism and communism in particular – as it is with Roman antiquity.

The shared history of war, oppression and resistance is crucial to the novel – more specifically the history of fascist and communist dictatorship, and politically motivated terrorism. Because of its anachronisms the novel is reminiscent of both Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany. *Die letzte Welt* revives the classical origin of European civilization, but not without suggesting that classical antiquity shares traits with one of the darkest periods in European history. Pictures showing dissidents are 'retouched' in a conscious effort to erase dissidents from history.⁶⁹ Following the banishment of the dissident poet, libraries 'purified' their collections and academies amended their doctrines.⁷⁰ In an analysis of Ransmayr's depiction of Rome, Ralf-Peter Märtin concludes that the novel's chief aim is 'dem Leser eine einzige Erfahrung, die aber mit frappierender Intensität zu vermitteln: die des Dichters in einer Diktatur'.⁷¹

Thies, the village's undertaker, arrived in Tomi after deserting from a defeated and disintegrated army which had destroyed 'the most flourishing cities of the Black Sea'.⁷² He still suffers from nightmares which are reminiscent of the Nazi camps and the gas chambers: he sees 'people gasping for breath' and the strong treading on the corpses of the weak to reach the last remnants of unpolluted air.⁷³ Although Thies receives money from a disability fund he refuses to return to his homeland or to visit Rome. The war has destroyed the way back to the so-called civilized world and has spoilt all chances of redemption for those surviving – 'man is a wolf to man'.⁷⁴

Ransmayr's Rome resembles communist and fascist totalitarianism, yet its dissidents bring to mind anti-capitalist activism. Emperor August's Rome is presented as a ruthless police-state violently suppressing dissident voices. Sometimes a resistance fighter, however, manages to shoot 'a head of the authorities, the senate or the army'.⁷⁵ Cotta secretly sympathizes with those subversive, terrorist activities, which may remind the readers of the Italian Red Brigades or similar activist groups resorting to extreme violence. Naso gradually turns into a martyr of the revolution. As 'a famous, broken victim of dictatorial harshness', the banished [112] poet is hailed as a hero of 'the resistance' against the imperial state.⁷⁶ When nine years after his banishment, the rumour of Naso's death is spread in Rome, the poet's status has acquired mythical proportions. More than ever he is a danger to society: 'every posthumous word of the exile' could spark the 'uprising'.⁷⁷ The image of the dissident in exile is reminiscent of both Leon Trotsky – banished and subsequently murdered by Stalin – and Wolf Biermann, the writer and folk singer expelled from the GDR in 1976.

Read anachronistically, *Die letzte Welt* offers a nightmarish vision of the contemporary world. There is not a single spot in the Empire where the banished dissident cannot be traced, because all inhabitants of the Empire are duty bound to spy for the emperor. Wherever the fugitive wants to hide, 'eventually every eye, every ear in his neighbourhood started to change into the eyes and ears of Rome'.⁷⁸ This does not stop people from fleeing Rome: under August's reign more and more citizens try to break free from 'an ordered life' and to escape permanent state supervision.⁷⁹ These 'state deserters', not unlike modern political refugees, gather in 'port towns' and are constantly 'on the run from the authorities and police patrols'.⁸⁰ The novel not only tackles the problem of political refugees but also that of human trafficking and economic migration: a sailor called Iason uses his ship – the Argo, as in Greek mythology – to bring the

unemployed and impoverished from all over the empire to Tomi, promising them 'a golden future' and stripping them of their last possessions.⁸¹

In a poststructuralist, Foucauldian vein, this novel also calls into question the Western rational mode of thought and brings to the fore its (mythical) 'excluded other'. Cotta's journey to Tomi is not only a journey to the outer reaches of the Roman Empire; it is, moreover, a journey to the periphery of reason and logical thinking. 'Rome', Anz argues, 'represents modern, centralist reason, Tomi (and Trachila) on the other hand represent the other of reason: mythology, fantasy, madness, wilderness, nature.'⁸² Battus's petrification breaks the spell of this enchanting town and makes Cotta realize the thread by which he holds on to reason has already been cut. He has gradually grown accustomed to 'a world in between [...], where the laws of logic no longer seem to hold'.⁸³ Battus's fate is 'ungraspable in Rome's rational thinking'.⁸⁴ The forces of reason are clearly understood as political and even totalitarian forces, since reason is confirmed by 'every palace' and 'every battle line'.⁸⁵ No wonder then that Tomi is populated by outcasts and refugees from all corners of the Empire, escaping the empire's rational cruelty.

The last resort of reason at the borders of the Black Sea is the poet Naso, or so Cotta likes to believe. He clings to the idea of reason Naso represents: only Naso might be able to restore 'the clear-cut lucidity of Roman reasonable thinking'.⁸⁶ Naso, however, is nowhere to be found, his house in Trachila is in ruins, and his literary inheritance is scattered over shreds of cloth. In Trachila, Cotta finally gives in, easing the 'vexing contradiction between Rome's reasonable thinking and the [113] incomprehensible facts of the Black Sea'.⁸⁷ In this world apart, the firm grip of rational thought and political authority no longer holds.

This unsettling of the forces of reason was in a way Naso's ultimate political move: before he died he 'finally freed his world of the people and their ordering by telling *every* story to the end'.⁸⁸ Cotta realizes that the pieces of cloth he found in Trachila contain the life stories of all Tomi's inhabitants, including the story of their deaths, e.g. Procne's and Philomela's transformation into birds. At the Black Sea, life unfolds along the lines of his *Metamorphoses*,⁸⁹ but the poet's victory over repressive reason appears to imply the disappearance of mankind. Nature seems to side with art in this battle: Tomi suffers from severe climate change and is gradually overgrown with excessive vegetation. This leads Henk Harbers to this somewhat bleak conclusion: 'Destruction and downfall are not only depicted, they are basically also justified and affirmed.'⁹⁰

Die letzte Welt reaches for the roots of European culture in a highly ambiguous move. On the one hand, by way of its technique of anachronistic collage, it offers a bleak picture of war, oppression and political conflict across the ages, suggesting that the classical origin of European culture suffers from the same traumas as contemporary society. On the other hand, it welcomes the literary imagination of one of Europe's greatest poets, Ovid Naso, as a force capable of destabilizing the potentially totalitarian forces of reason. In a highly self-reflexive manner the novel offers a model for remembering both the distant past of classical antiquity and the recent past of Europe's involvement in fascism and in Cold War politics.

Philosophical concerns

The novels discussed in this article explicitly or implicitly tackle philosophical problems which have been or still are vital to the development of European culture and its growing awareness of the tensions governing it. Particularly striking in this respect is *Les Particules Élémentaires* by Michel Houellebecq. The publication of this novel created a stir in the European literary and

cultural scene, not in the least because of its scathing and far-reaching critique of cultural liberalism and the sexual liberation championed by the generation of 1968. As Wendy Michallat observes in an article examining the novel's references to the popular youth press of the 1960s and 1970s, *Les Particules Élémentaires* represents 'the liberal vision of the '68 generation' as 'a ruinous extension of capitalist ethics into the erstwhile sheltered domain of sexual intimacy'.⁹¹

Although the story of the half-brothers Bruno and Michel is set in France and the criticism is primarily aimed at the French post-1968 cultural and intellectual climate, the novel's philosophical implications apply not only to French society but to Western European society in general. As the narrator explicitly points out, the novel is concerned with the 'European malaise',⁹² and the libertarian, new age [114] holiday resort Bruno visits is similar in conception to 'so many other places in France or Western Europe'.⁹³ Implicitly, the novel even sets up a binary opposition between Europe and the United States, the latter being considered as the source of the wave of permissiveness and destructive libertarianism flooding Western Europe from the late 1960s onwards. As Bruno remarks, '[t]here is not a single example of a American fashion that has not succeeded in flooding Western Europe a few years later'.⁹⁴

In the same way as Koen Peeters's *Grote Europese roman*, this novel contributes to the shaping of a multiple identity, in this case both a national, French identity and a transnational, European identity. It does so, moreover, in a highly critical and provocative manner. It is tempting to read *Les Particules Élémentaires* as a revisionist interpretation of European modernity in general and Western European post-war history in particular. One should, however, take into account the perspective from which this history is (re)told: the narrator, speaking as 'we', is presented as a post-human creature living in an age which witnesses the extinction of mankind's 'last representatives'.⁹⁵ Living in the year 2079, the narrator looks back upon the social and scientific developments leading up to the 'metaphysical revolution' which gave rise to the utopian new world he inhabits.

As Liesbeth Korthals Altes has clearly demonstrated, the ambiguous and polyphonous nature of this narrative voice subtly undercuts the credibility of its gloomy socio-cultural analysis. The narrative voice appears to waver between clinical distance and empathy, between scientific authority and parody.⁹⁶ The narrator's reliability also suffers from his tendency to signal the rift between his post-human world and the world of misery the two main characters of his story live in.

In the text several words referring to old world concepts – such as 'democracy'⁹⁷ or 'the concepts of individual freedom, human dignity and progress'⁹⁸ – are italicized, suggesting that these notions are hard to understand for post-human beings. The style of narration often suggests an archaeological exploration of a primitive society, betraying the perspective from which this past is constructed. The narrator's tendency to compare human behaviour with animal behaviour – he likens Michel's social inadequacy to the behaviour of a male rat deprived of physical contact with the mother rat,⁹⁹ to give but one example – indicates that twentieth century history is dismissed as post-human civilization's prehistory. It is not hard to understand, then, why this narrator, constructing his culture's prehistory, falls into the trap of describing the past as a sequence of events logically resulting in the present.

One has to take this narrative perspective into account in order to appreciate and qualify the often one-sided view of European history this novel offers and which has alienated some of its readers.¹⁰⁰ In the epilogue, the narrator depicts 'human history from the fifteenth till the twentieth century' – also referred to as the materialist era – as a 'history of gradual dissolution and disintegration'.¹⁰¹ This history left behind a society fractured into isolated 'elementary

parts', without the comfort of any social bond whatsoever. This materialist age roughly coincides with the history [115] of physics from Galileo to quantum physics. In a first phase, European physics, according to Michel's Irish colleague Walcott, had taken 'a first barrier'¹⁰² and succeeded in dethroning God. Bohr's seminal contribution to the study of the atom removed 'a second barrier', which was 'the idea of an underlying reality', an ontology which provides the foundation for human thought and action.¹⁰³

At first Michel does not compare favourably with the Danish physician, whose Institute of Theoretical Physics in Copenhagen, so the narrator informs us, unsettled 'the old categories of space, causality and time'.¹⁰⁴ In Michel's Parisian institute of molecular biology, the sparks of creativity are few and far between. In his later, Irish period, however, Michel lays the foundations for a metaphysical revolution based on cloning, biology's victory over death and over (inefficient) sexual reproduction. This metaphysical revolution is expected to create a new ontology, based on the interconnectedness of parts, and to restore 'the sense of community' and a feel for 'the holy', while bringing the Nietzschean generation of 'Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and Deleuze' into disrepute.¹⁰⁵

Les Particules Élémentaires conjures up a bleak and dystopian image of European intellectual history in order to prepare the ground for its own dialectical twist. In that sense it still very much belongs to that history. As a dystopian critique it wages a campaign against the materialist excesses of European modernity. If the novel enters into dialogue with Europe's cultural, more specifically philosophical and scientific heritage, it does so in order to challenge its critique of traditional morality. This argument, however, relies on a rather one-dimensional causality lacking in nuance and subtlety. According to Jean Cohen, chief supervisor in the boarding school where Bruno was tortured by his fellow pupils, there was a clear link between Nietzsche's philosophy and Nazism, because that philosophy denied compassion and raised itself above the moral law, thereby unleashing the destructive forces of desire and lust.¹⁰⁶ This and similar statements by Bruno and Michel set up a crude binary opposition between Nietzsche and Kant, the latter representing, in Michel's view, universal and absolute morality.¹⁰⁷

This one-sided causality is also clearly at work in Bruno's long monologue on sadism, in which he discusses a book by Daniel Macmillan. The most radical advocate of the unrestrained exercise of lust was, of course, Marquis De Sade, whose visions of lust and cruelty could be seen as the obscene flip side of modernity's critique of morality. According to Macmillan, De Sade's fantasies were enacted by the former hippie David di Meola and his criminal gang of sadists and snuff movie enthusiasts. Pretending to be Satanists they were actually 'absolute materialists',¹⁰⁸ whom conventional sexual pleasure no longer satisfied. Macmillan considers these torturers and killers as 'the illegitimate children of the hippies',¹⁰⁹ suggesting a causal relationship between sexual and moral liberation and excesses of (sexual) violence and cruelty. The avant-garde performance artists gathered under the label of *Wiener Aktionismus* – Hermann Nitsch chief among them – are also guilty by association: [116] their extreme, libertarian individualism, their violent rejection of social and moral conventions supposedly paved the way, according to Macmillan, for David di Meola's criminal excesses.¹¹⁰

Similarly, the narrator sees a clear link between women's liberation and the dissolution of society. The widespread use of efficient contraceptives, spurring on the sexual liberation of the 1960s, introduces a new phase in that ongoing process of dissolution, 'a new phase in the historical development of individualism'.¹¹¹ What was celebrated as a giant step in the

emancipation of Western women, according to the narrator, ended up destroying family ties and thus eradicating the last remnant of collectivism in liberal capitalist society. Without the protection of these traditional bonds, the individual was now at the mercy of ruthless market competition, in the sexual as well as in the economic arena. This is exactly the social mechanism that the story of the two brothers sets out to illustrate. They are both victims and products of that development: whereas Michel abstains from sexual intimacy, Bruno desperately tries to participate in this vicious sexual competition.

The post-human world of the narrator claims to have solved this problem, taking its cue from Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, which is praised by the novel's protagonists as a utopian rather than dystopian model. (The situation is more complex, though: Huxley is also presented as one of the instigators of the hippie movement which is severely attacked in the novel. Moreover, it is precisely this hippie element in his thinking – the focus on sexual freedom and communal living – which attracts the protagonists to his writings.) As Sabine van Wesemael suggests, this alarming reference to *Brave New World* could be interpreted as a warning against the pitfalls of utopian thinking rather than as a plea for unrestricted human cloning.¹¹²

In the last resort, all the problems facing European society in the late twentieth century can be traced back to the advent of modern science, a metaphysical revolution undercutting the Christian foundations of European civilization. In Houellebecq's view, individualisation, hatred and lust were the necessary outcome of that revolution,¹¹³ and so are the disintegration of society and the dissolution of its traditional religious and familial ties. '[H]ow could a society live on without religion',¹¹⁴ he asks himself, a concern he shares with Julian Huxley, Aldous's older brother. Michel informs Bruno about Huxley's attempt to found a religion which is compatible with contemporary scientific knowledge.¹¹⁵ A society, in Michel's view, which gives up religion in favour of materialism and individualism is bound to fall apart and abandon its citizens to base sexual strife.¹¹⁶ In a dialectical twist, however, it is science which eventually opens up the possibility of a utopian community.

Les Particules Élémentaires is a scathing critique of the idealism of the 1960s in particular and on European modernity in general, compensating in clarity for what it lacks in subtlety. The freethinking liberated youths of the 1960s in the following decades gradually turn into decaying bodies, witnessing the commercial exploitation of their ideals and vainly attempting to restore the social bonds they once longed to get rid of. This philosophical critique offers possibilities for identification across [117] Europe, although it is likely to speak to Western Europeans in particular. As a philosophical critique, moreover, the novel also suggests a revisionist construction of Europe's past and offers a historical narrative embodying and structuring memories of that shared past.

Conclusion

The novels discussed in this article offer images of Europe, of its history, its cultural heritage and its philosophical concerns. These are images the reader might identify with, might reject or might want to modify, but all three project a European dimension and a European frame of reference. In that way they contribute to the construction of a European 'imagined community' and open up possibilities for identity formation on a transnational, European level. Quite clearly, none of these novels turn a blind eye to the downside of Europe's history and culture, which, as these novels suggest, are deeply marked by warfare, genocide, political and

ideological oppression and the dissolution of communities. A first step towards the construction of European identity is the deconstruction of Europe's complacent self-definition as a beacon of peace, rationality and civilization.

In Koen Peeters's *Grote Europese roman*, the protagonist and narrator Robin discovers that Europe is more than flags and ribbons, that European community takes more than casual talks in hotel lobbies. More than anything else the signifier 'Europe' refers to a shared historical narrative and a shared understanding of the complexities and horrors of the twentieth century, a century of war and totalitarianism. Apart from an evaluation of Europe's past, this novel is a critique of Europe's limited focus on economic integration and competition, which will never generate a genuine sense of community. It seems that a European cultural identity is not readily available and has to be built from scratch, and from below: the path to a shared identity is scattered with seemingly arbitrary collections of words and images. A coherent and homogeneous identity seems both unwanted and impossible.

Christoph Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt* revitalizes an important source of European cultural heritage: Roman antiquity and, more specifically, Ovid Naso's *Metamorphoses*. It does so, however, in an anachronistic historical collage, combining the world of Naso and emperor August with elements from twentieth century political history. This technique allows for identification with Europe's cultural heritage while at the same time deconstructing the moral purity of both that heritage and Europe's present. Ransmayr's novel can be read as a fundamental critique of Europe's conception of rationality and civilization. Europe, so it seems, needs to re-evaluate its self-definition and face the violent excrescences of the cultural-historical and political heritage it holds so dear.

European identity can only be convincingly constructed in the reflexive mode, paying critical attention to both the successes and the failures of Europe's heritage. [118] This is a point well made by Michel Houellebecq's *Les Particules Élémentaires*. The novel integrates an overall critique of European modernity in general and post-war liberalism in particular into a story of two brothers who embody the problems of contemporary French society. The scope of this philosophical critique is not restricted to France; the disintegration of French society is part of a more encompassing European and more specifically Western European malaise.

Of the three novels discussed in this article, Ransmayr's *Die letzte Welt* is most clearly oriented towards postmodern deconstruction: its anachronistic collage undercuts Europe's confidence in its tradition of rational thought and enlightened politics. Peeters's *Grote Europese roman* could be read as an attempt – at the same time ironic and deeply sincere – to pick up the pieces and to construct a sense of community and a shared geographical and historical frame of reference out of the fragments available to the postmodern observer. Houellebecq's *Les Particules Élémentaires* is an ambiguous re-evaluation of European modernity and liberalism: the historical narrative offered by its narrator is a provocative rewriting of history from the fictional perspective of a self-confident, post-human future society.

It is clear that none of these novels construct congenial and unproblematic images of European history and European heritage. Europeans share a history and a heritage made up of both successes and failures, and the process of European identity will probably have to rely on the former to come to terms with the latter, and come to terms with the latter to deconstruct the former. As a cultural force of mediation, literature can play an important part in that process.

Notes

- 1 All translations are the author's own unless otherwise stated. 'Het hangt zelfs boven en tussen ons: de onthechte, vrijwillige Europese beschaving. Europa is iets van vlagjes, mutsjes, linten. De taal van het volk gemengd met de taal van gezagsdragers, en dat gevoed door streekgerechten en gedoopt met het water van Manneken Pis. Ineens lijkt mijn hele leven eenvoudig', Koen Peeters, *Grote Europese roman* (Antwerpen: Meulenhof/ Manteau, 2007), p. 44.
- 2 Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 45.
- 3 Thomas Risse, *A community of Europeans? Transnational identities and public spheres* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 2-3.
- 4 Risse, *A community of Europeans?*, p. 2-3.
- 5 According to Bo Stråth '[t]he concept of a European identity was launched in 1973, at the European Community summit in Copenhagen'. Bo Stråth, 'Multiple Europes: integration, identity and demarcation to the Other', in *Europe and the Other and Europe as the Other* ed. by Bo Stråth (Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2000), p. 385. In response to the economic crisis the EC tried to re-establish Europe's place in the geopolitical order and to reinforce the public legitimacy of the European project: 'identity replaced integration as the buzzword for the European unification project at a time when the project [119] was experiencing severe strains. The concept emerged in a situation where the very legitimacy of the European integration project was at stake'. Stråth, 'Multiple Europes', p. 385-6.
- 6 See Deborah Parsons, 'Nationalism or continentalism. Representing heritage culture for a New Europe', in *Beyond boundaries. Textual representations of European identity* ed. by Andy Hollis (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), p. 1.
- 7 See Lisa Tsaliki, 'The construction of European identity and citizenship through cultural policy' in *Media and cultural policy in the European Union* ed. by Katharine Sarikakis (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), p. 159. The Treaty calls for the protection of and sustained support for 'the cultures of the member states', which implies both 'respecting their national and regional diversity' and 'bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore', quoted in Tsaliki, 'The construction of European identity', p. 159.
- 8 Cris Shore, *Building Europe. The cultural politics of European integration* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 19.
- 9 Shore, *Building Europe*, p. 26
- 10 See Risse, *A community of Europeans?*, pp. 19-36 for a detailed analysis.
- 11 Wilfried Spohn, 'National identities and collective memory in an enlarged Europe' in *Collective memory and European identity. The effects of integration and enlargement* ed. by Klaus Eder & Wilfried Spohn (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 3.
- 12 Spohn, 'National identities and collective memory', p. 4.
- 13 Spohn, 'National identities and collective memory', p. 3.
- 14 Risse, *A community of Europeans?*, p. 9.
- 15 Hayden White, 'The discourse of Europe and the search for a European identity' in *Europe and the Other and Europe as the Other* ed. by Bo Stråth (Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2000), p. 70.

- 16 White, 'The discourse of Europe', p. 70.
- 17 White, 'The discourse of Europe', p. 77.
- 18 Stráth, 'Multiple Europes', p. 420.
- 19 Klaus Eder, 'Remembering national memories together: the formation of a transnational identity in Europe' in *Collective memory and European identity. The effects of integration and enlargement* ed. by Klaus Eder & Wilfried Spohn (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 207.
- 20 Shore, *Building Europe*, p. 35.
- 21 Eder, 'Remembering national memories together', p. 205. If the EU does not succeed in constructing this 'imagined European community', Liza Tsaliki argues, it 'will be at risk of being reduced to a purely economic entity – something the EU has been trying vividly to avoid', Tsaliki, 'The construction of European identity', p. 159.
- 22 Eder, 'Remembering national memories together', p. 216.
- 23 White, 'The discourse of Europe', p. 85.
- 24 Eder, 'Remembering national memories together', p. 216-7.
- 25 Shore investigates the role that European symbols (such as the flag or the anthem) play in the creation of a shared European consciousness, while pointing out the community-building effects of seemingly bureaucratic instruments such as Eurostat and Eurobarometer [120] (see Shore, *Building Europe*). See *Media and cultural policy in the European Union* ed. by Katharine Sarikakis (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) for a discussion of European media policy, involving among other initiatives the construction of a European audio-visual space.
- 26 Astrid Erll, 'Cultural memory studies: an introduction' in *Cultural memory studies. An international and interdisciplinary handbook* ed. by Astrid Erll & A. Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), p. 5.
- 27 Erll, 'Cultural memory studies', p. 5.
- 28 Erll, 'Cultural memory studies', p. 6.
- 29 Jan Assmann, 'Communicative and cultural memory' in *Cultural memory studies. An international and interdisciplinary handbook* ed. by Astrid Erll & A. Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), p. 111.
- 30 Assmann, 'Communicative and cultural memory', p. 110.
- 31 Birgit Neumann, 'The literary representation of memory' in *Cultural memory studies. An international and interdisciplinary handbook* ed. by Astrid Erll & A. Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), p. 341.
- 32 Koen Peeters, *Grote Europese roman* (Antwerpen: Meulenhoff/Manteau, 2007).
- 33 Christoph Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt* (Nördlingen: Greno, 1988).
- 34 Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998).
- 35 'Ik wil een boek schrijven als een Great American Novel, vermomd als een Grote Europese Roman.' Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 4.
- 36 'de geschiedenis van de Europese mensheid', Peeters, *Grote Europese roman*, p. 4.
- 37 Bart Vervaeck, 'Werken aan de toekomst: de historische roman van onze tijd', *Nederlandse letterkunde* 14 (2009), 1, p. 33.

- 38 'Europa is dat zootje ongeregeld dat elkaar sinds eeuwen veroverd, liefheeft en vermoordt in campagnes met vlaggen.' Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 124.
- 39 'Goethe en Vergilius'; 'Napoleon en Hitler', Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 124.
- 40 'We moeten de namen van de doden van Europa herdenken, omdat ze de essentie van Europa zijn.' Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 231.
- 41 'Groot Europees Schriftje', Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 263.
- 42 'hoofdstad na hoofdstad, hoofdstuk na hoofdstuk', Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 263.
- 43 'het periodiek systeem van Europa', Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 264.
- 44 'Dat Bulgaarse meisjes te koop zijn en dat zij hoertjes zijn', Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 239.
- 45 'Verhalen over executies, verdwijningen, zelfmoord.'; 'Nee, dat is geen Europese hoofdstad.' Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 266.
- 46 'breed uitgesmeerd op communistische of kapitalistische wijze, dat maakt geen verschil', Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 194.
- 47 'de grote geschiedenis uit de boekjes', Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 230.
- 48 'tragische geschiedenis staat vanavond niet op de agenda', Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 232. [121]
- 49 'Ongepast, absoluut misplaatst is dat, om een bedrijfssanering te verbinden met dat soort geschiedenis', Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 282.
- 50 'maar die in één taal een dier aanduiden', Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 235.
- 51 'leerde – zeer nutteloos – de vogelnamen uit het hoofd in vier courante talen en het Latijn', Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 127.
- 52 'Talen sterven toch uit', Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 153.
- 53 'Binnen tweeduizend jaar spreken we allemaal dezelfde taal. Zullen we elkaar dan begrijpen?' Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 153.
- 54 'We zijn zo gelijkmoedig, gelijksoortig, wij zijn leeg en generiek.' Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 109.
- 55 'moet je een stad grondig kennen'; 'één bezoekje volstaat, en wat notities in een reisdagboek', Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 88.
- 56 'als je weggaat, groet je elkaar niet. Twee dagen later ben je elkaar vergeten', Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 89.
- 57 'Montepolis', Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 114.
- 58 'een systeem', 'een tabel', Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 115-116.
- 59 'Dit is het nieuwe, onaffe museum van de ware internationale volkskunde.' Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 235.
- 60 'beleefd en altijd een beetje saai. [...] Niemand houdt van hen, maar er is ook niemand die hen haat. Dit land is de ultieme zelfspot, de plagende, niet-passionele liefde, een taalspel.' Peeters, Grote Europese roman, p. 258.

- 61 'The author Ovid is and remains missing' Thomas Anz, 'Spiel mit Überlieferung. Aspekte der Postmoderne in Ransmayrs Die letzte Welt' in *Die Erfindung der Welt. Zum Werk von Christoph Ransmayr* ed. by Uwe Wittstock (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), p. 122. In Ransmayr's novel, Anz argues, not only the author disappears, but also the work. Cotta not only sets out to find Naso, he also hopes to retrieve the work, the mere title of which led to Naso's banishment: the *Metamorphoses* (in a totalitarian society such as Naso's Rome, nothing is more disturbing than the idea of transformation). In Tomi and Trachila Cotta finds traces of this work in 'diverse Bruchstücke, Gedächtnisspuren, mündliche Wiedergaben oder karnavaleske Inszenierungen' – analogous to the way myths survive – but the unity of the work is irremediably destroyed 'several fragments, traces of memory, oral representations or carnivalesque performances'. Cotta's efforts allegorically depict the process of textual interpretation: 'Cottas Versuche, aus den Bruchstücken einen ganzen und einheitlichen Text zu rekonstruieren, schlagen in ähnlicher Weise fehl wie jene Anstrengungen hermeneutischer Interpretation, die der postmodernen Text- und Lektüretheorie suspect geworden sind' 'Cotta's attempts to reconstruct a complete and unified text from fragments fail in a way similar to those efforts at hermeneutical interpretation, which have become suspicious for the postmodern theory of text and reading', Anz, 'Spiel mit Überlieferung', p. 122 & 124.
- 62 Christoph Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt* (Nördlingen: Greno, 1988), p. 84-85.
- 63 Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 214. [122]
- 64 Jutta Landa, 'Fractured Vision in Christoph Ransmayr's *Morbus Kitahara*', *The German Quarterly*, 1998, 71 (1998), 2, p. 141.
- 65 'Bushaltestelle', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 9.
- 66 'einen elektrische Apparat', 'Glühlampen', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 91.
- 67 Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 109.
- 68 Linda Hutcheon, *The politics of postmodernism* (London/New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 66.
- 69 'wegretuschiert', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 110.
- 70 'säuberten', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 126.
- 71 'to convey to the reader, with striking intensity, a single experience: that of the poet under dictatorship' Ralf-Peter Märtin, 'Ransmayrs Rom. Der Poet als Historiker', in *Die Erfindung der Welt. Zum Werk von Christoph Ransmayr* ed. by Uwe Wittstock (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997), p. 117.
- 72 'die blühendsten Städte des Schwarzen Meeres', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 261.
- 73 'um Atem ringender Menschen', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 261.
- 74 'der Mensch ist dem Menschen ein Wolf', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 266.
- 75 'einen Großen der Behörde, des Senats oder der Armee', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 144.
- 76 'Ein berühmtes, gebrochenes Opfer diktatorischer Härte'; 'des Widerstandes', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 128.
- 77 'jedes hinterlassene Wort des Verbannten'; 'des Aufruhrs', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 138.
- 78 'irgendwann begann sich doch jedes Auge, jedes Ohr in seiner Nähe in die Augen und Ohren Roms zu verwandeln', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 186.

- 79 'eines geordneten Leben', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 125.
- 80 'Staatsflüchtige', 'Hafenstädte'; 'auf der Flucht vor Behörden und Polizeistreifen', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 125.
- 81 'eine goldene Zukunft', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 204.
- 82 'Rom ... repräsentiert die moderne, zentralistische Vernunft, Tomi (und Trachila) dagegen das Andere der Vernunft: Mythos, Phantasie, Wahnsinn, Wildnis, Natur.' Anz, 'Spiel mit Überlieferung', p. 127.
- 83 'eine Zwischenwelt [...] in der die Gesetze der Logik keine Gültigkeit mehr zu haben schienen', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 220.
- 84 'unfaßbar in die römische Vernunft', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 220.
- 85 'jedem Palast'; 'jeder Schlachtreihe', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 220.
- 86 'die festgefügte Klarheit der römischen Vernunft', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 223.
- 87 'der quälende Widerspruch zwischen der Vernunft Roms und den unbegreiflichen Tatsachen des Schwarzen Meeres', Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 241.
- 88 'Naso hatte schließlich seine Welt von den Menschen und ihren Ordnungen befreit, indem er jede Geschichte bis an ihr Ende erzählte, Ransmayr, *Die letzte Welt*, p. 287.
- 89 As Lynne Cook remarks, 'what occurs is an accelerating rate of transformation and upheaval', in which 'text and reality become one and the same', Lynne Cook, 'The novels [123] of Christoph Ransmayr: Towards a final myth', *Modern Austrian Literature* 31 (1998), 3-4, p. 233. Naso frees his world from humankind's instrumentalized reason, but 'in doing so he must relinquish his own autonomy' and 'disappear into a world he no longer controls', Cook, 'The novels of Christoph Ransmayr', p. 233. According to Cook, the novel demonstrates that social relations of power and domination can only be overcome 'by the elimination and transformation of the autonomous individual' and by the development of a new relationship with the natural world, Cook, 'The novels of Christoph Ransmayr', p. 237.
- 90 'Zerstörung und Untergang werden nicht nur dargestellt, sie werden im Grunde auch gerechtfertigt und bejaht'. Henk Harbers, "'Die Erfindung der Wirklichkeit': Zu Christoph Ransmayrs *Die letzte Welt*", *The German Quarterly*, 67 (1994), 1, p. 67. According to Harbers this is a recurrent motif in Ransmayr's apocalyptic fiction: confronted with civilization's repressive rational order, the subject finds its true identity in disappearing. Discussing Ransmayr's story *Strahlender Untergang*, Harbers writes: 'Denn, so läuft die Argumentation, wenn das Verschwinden des Menschen das Wesentliche ist, dann findet der Mensch seine wahre Identität erst im Verschwinden'; 'Because, so the argument goes, if the disappearance of man is fundamental, then man finds his true identity only in disappearance', Harbers, "'Die Erfindung der Wirklichkeit'", p. 65. The typical storyline of a Ransmayr text goes like this: the protagonist leaves rational civilization behind, 'um schließlich im Untergang, im Verschwinden zu so etwas wie Selbstverwirklichung zu gelangen'; 'finally to attain self-realization in destruction and disappearance', Harbers, "'Die Erfindung der Wirklichkeit'", p. 66.
- 91 Wendy Michallat, 'Modern life is still rubbish. Houellebecq and the refiguring of "reactionary" retro', *Journal of European studies* 37 (2007), 3, p. 314.
- 92 All translations are mine. 'malaise européen', Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), p. 153.

- 93 'tant d'autres lieux en France ou en Europe occidentale', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 135.
- 94 'Il n'y a aucun exemple qu'une mode venue des États-Unis n'ait pas réussi à submerger l'Europe occidentale quelques années plus tard', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 93.
- 95 'ses derniers représentants', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 394.
- 96 Liesbeth Korthals Altes, 'Persuasion et ambiguïté dans un roman à thèse postmoderne (*Les Particules Élémentaires*)' in Michel Houellebecq ed. by Sabine Van Wesemael (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004). Korthals Altes analyses the multiplicity of the narrative voice in Houellebecq's novel. The narrator speaks with multiple and seemingly incompatible voices. He speaks with the voice of the post-human clone, who does not share his human predecessors' emotional and spiritual malaise. In some parts of the novel, however, the narrator speaks with a contemporary – i.e. late twentieth century – voice, and quite often the narrator appears to empathise with the characters or demonstrate a level of emotional and ideological involvement which clashes with the late twenty-first century perspective of the clone. 'Ainsi se constitue une "voix narrative" complexe, [124] dessinant tantôt la perspective distancée du clone ou du chercheur scientifique, pour qui les personnages sont déterminés jusque dans leurs émotions et aspirations les plus intimes, et pour qui l'individualisme est une illusion; tantôt celle d'un narrateur qui se met dans le peau de ses protagonistes, et amène par le pathos le lecteur à croire dans le valeur de leur perspective individuelle' 'Thus a complex "narrative voice" is constituted, sometimes drawing the distanced perspective of the clone or the scientific researcher, for whom the characters are determined even in their emotions and most intimate aspirations, and for whom individualism is an illusion; sometimes, however, that of a narrator who gets into the skin of his protagonists, and by way of pathos leads the reader into believing in the value of their individual perspective', Korthals Altes, 'Persuasion et ambiguïté', p. 37.
- 97 'démocratie', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 98.
- 98 'les concepts de liberté individuelle, de dignité humaine et de progrès', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 385.
- 99 Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 76.
- 100 In a highly critical article Jerry Andrew Varsava rejects Houellebecq's 'one-sided portrayal of a post-war France in which the expression of individual freedoms and the satisfying of individual appetites have become [...] hypertrophied and socially self-defeating', Jerry Andrew Varsava, 'Utopian yearnings, dystopian thoughts: Houellebecq's *The Elementary Particles* and the problem of scientific communitarianism', *College literature*, 2005, 32 (4), p. 148). Varsava criticizes the novel for offering 'a very incomplete rendering of the contemporary epoch', and for suggesting a new utopian 'communitarianism', as the solution to the problems of liberal society, Varsava, 'Utopian yearnings', p. 163 & 157. While focusing on social problems involving sex, drugs and violence, the novel 'ignores entirely noteworthy advances in French society, things like rising standards of living and increased social welfare programs', Varsava, 'Utopian yearnings', p. 151.
- 101 'l'histoire humaine, du XVe au XXe siècle', 'celle d'une dissolution et d'une désagrégation progressives', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 386.
- 102 'une première barrière', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 373.
- 103 'une deuxième barrière', 'l'idée d'une réalité sous-jacente', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 373.

- 104 'les categories antérieures de l'espace, de la causalité et du temps', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 23.
- 105 'le sens de la collectivité', 'du sacré', 'de Foucault, de Lacan, de Derrida et de Deleuze', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 391.
- 106 Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 60.
- 107 Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 46.
- 108 'des materialists absoluts', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 260.
- 109 'les enfants naturels des hippies', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 261.
- 110 Murielle Lucie Clément convincingly demonstrates that the abject has a great fascination for Houellebecq. Her analysis of *Les Particules Élémentaires* reveals many references [125] to blood, physical decay, to death and to the disintegration of dead bodies. In some excerpts, Clément claims, 'la poésie se substitue partiellement à l'abject', as in the almost clinical description of the decomposition of the animal carcass, occasioned by the death of Bruno's grandfather 'the abject is partially substituted by poetry', Murielle Lucie Clément, Houellebecq. *Sperme et sang* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), p. 54. In many other instances, however, this is hardly the case. Clément concludes that in Houellebecq's novels what the characters see, '(q)ue ce soit dans des descriptions oniriques ou littéraires (...), inondée de sang, louvoie aux limites de l'abjection' 'whether it is in descriptions of dreams or literary descriptions (...), flooded by blood, tacks towards the limits of abjection', Clément, Houellebecq, p. 73.
- 111 'un nouveau palier dans la montée historique de l'individualisme', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 144.
- 112 Sabine Van Wesemael, Michel Houellebecq. *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005). Van Wesemael reads *Les Particules Élémentaires* as a decidedly anti-utopian novel, in which the reference to utopian models merely serves to question our contemporary society. According to Van Wesemael, the description of the post-human utopia abounds with ironical and satirical elements severely undercutting the utopian appeal. The readers of the novel, she claims, 'seront plutôt terrifiés par la révolution scientifique envisagée par Houellebecq tout comme ils étaient effrayés des spectres qui hantent les récits utopiques de Huxley' ['will rather be terrified by the scientific revolution considered by Houellebecq just as they will be frightened by the spectres haunting Huxley's utopian narratives'], Van Wesemael, Michel Houellebecq, p. 91. Houellebecq's novels should then be interpreted as anti-utopian novels, pointing out the failure of utopian thinking: 'il est impossible d'imaginer un monde idéal, à la fois réalisable et plus désirable que celui dans lequel nous vivons' ['it is impossible to imagine an ideal world, which is at the same time feasible and more desirable than the one in which we live'], Van Wesemael, Michel Houellebecq, p. 97. Houellebecq's novel *La possibilité d'une île* (Paris: Fayard, 2005) seems to confirm this anti-utopian reading: like *Les Particules Élémentaires*, this novel tells the story of a 'new man', a modified version of mankind which has succeeded mankind as we know it and which is freed from all too human emotions such as love and fear. The novel focuses on one of those 'new men' who is unhappy in this supposedly utopian future and who eventually leaves his society behind.
- 113 Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 200.
- 114 'comment une société pourrait-elle subsister sans religion', Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 202.

- 115 Houellebecq, *Les Particules Élémentaires*, p. 201.
- 116 Vincent Lloyd argues that Houellebecq's novels, although 'traditional religious beliefs are consistently described and portrayed as "stupid"', are 'explicitly concerned with faith, hope and love', Vincent Lloyd, 'Michel Houellebecq and the theological virtues', *Literature and theology* 23 (2009), 1, p. 85. In these novels Lloyd finds traces of 'a postsecular and post-capitalist account' (idem) of those theological virtues. He reads *Les Particules Élémentaires* as a novel criticizing a materialist 'world, stricken of rituals', and [126] longing for islands of love in a barbarous world devoid of social bonds, Lloyd, 'Theological virtue', p. 94.

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