The Modernist Affair with Terrorism: The Curious Case of Willem Frederik Hermans

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Abstract: Terrorism and literary modernism have an uncanny liaison. How should we understand and judge this eerie relationship? This article examines the case of the novelist and polemicist Willem Frederik Hermans from a psychoanalytical perspective. It argues that it is too naïve to say that literary writers do not commit terrorism, simply because their acts of violence involve words only. Terrorists are not just those who threaten to inflict physical violence on others to acquire attention for their ideological cause. This does not mean, however, that we should not try to differentiate philosophically between the terrorism of terrorists and the terrorism of literary modernists. We can catch sight of a more tenable, structural difference between the two forms of terrorism if we take into account the psychoanalytical notions of the *symbolic* and *imaginary* with respect to terrorism, as well as the related concepts of *perversion* and *sublimation*.

A Terrorist Writer[1]

As early as 1995, the Dutch writer Willem Frederik Hermans (1921-1995) predicted a terrorist attack with an airplane on a capital city such as New York, which of course became a horrific reality on September 11, six years later. In an interview that took place only a couple of months before he died, Hermans spoke about this fear.[2] He had reason to believe that a terrorist attack would actually happen in the West. The news had been full of it during the previous year. Four Algerians of the Groupe Islamique Armé had hijacked a plane carrying more than two hundred civilians and had planned to explode it over Paris. 'Just imagine if they had succeeded', Hermans commented: 'all of Paris – gone! Only for the stupid ideas of those people!'[3] Hermans, who had polemicized fiercely with Catholics in the first decades after the Second World War, reckoned the failed attempt of the Islamist group to be a sign of a revival of aggressive fundamentalism. He felt that measures were needed to put a halt to absolutism. Strangely enough though, the thought also crossed his mind that this dreadful scene might deserve a place in one of his next novels: '[...] bam! Everything gone! I will not do it above Paris, because I love Paris too much. But let's say above New York or some such city, would be an option.'[4]

It may sound harsh, especially considering the future events of 9/11, but one cannot understand this utterance as just an uncanny joke or slip of the tongue. In line with Maurice Blanchot's (in)famous short literary statement, made in 1936, that literature is somehow connected to terrorism,[5] Hermans repeatedly uttered a very similar message. At the beginning of his career, for instance, while speaking at a student conference in the northern Dutch city of Groningen in 1954. An anonymous reporter quoted Hermans:

> In the modern novel the form is a bridge towards the convention, across which the author can carry his explosives to blow up conventional reality. The writer is a summoner who summons ghosts against the ghosts of normalcy. His motto should be: "My ghost against your ghost"[6]

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[1] This article develops more fully some elements of my doctoral thesis on Willem Frederik Hermans: *De ernst van het spel* (Hilversum: Literatoren, 2016). I wish to thank Wilbert Smulders, Laura van Gelder and Diane Webb for their pre-print comments.

[2] W. Noordhoek, 'Jurassic Park bestond nog niet': Textbook with interview accompanying W.F. Hermans, *De God Denkbaar, Denkbaar de God*, audiobook (4 CD's) produced by Wim Noordhoek and Wim Brands (Hilversum: VPRO, 1995).

[3] 'Je zou denken: eindelijk wordt de mensheid verstandig, maar nee hoor, nu steekt nota bene de Islam de kop op, de fundamentalisten. Wilden een heel groot vliegtuig boven Parijs uit elkaar laten ploffen. Stel je voor dat dat gelukt was: heel Parijs weg! Voor die stomme ideeën van die mensen!' In W. Noordhoek, 'Jurassic Park bestond nog niet' (Unless otherwise noted, the translations are mine).

[4] '[...] bam! Alles weg! Maar dat doe ik niet boven Parijs, want ik houd te veel van Parijs. Maar laten we zeggen boven New York of zo, dat zou best kunnen.' In: W. Noordhoek, 'Jurassic Park bestond nog niet'.

[5] M. Blanchot, 'Le terrorisme, méthode de salut public', in *Combat*, July 1936.

[6] 'In de moderne roman is de vorm een brug naar de normaliteit, waarover de auteur zijn springstoffen kan vervoeren om die normaliteit op te blazen. De schrijver is een oproeper van spoken tegen de spoken der normaliteit. Zijn devies zou moeten zijn: "Mijn spook tegenover Uw spook."' In [anonymous], 'W.F. Hermans: "Schrijver is oproeper van spoken"',

Hermans's biographer, Willem Otterspeer, argues that statements such as these define the critical core of Hermans's authorship. 'You can make fun of it', as Otterspeer maintained in an interview, 'but then you denaturize the literature of Hermans. He was a terrorist, and he wanted to be so. Polemics, according to him, can only be written on the edges of left and right. A polemicist is a terrorist.'[7] Otterspeer's view is shared by other literary scholars and Hermans specialists, such as Wilbert Smulders and Frans Ruiter, who also forthrightly characterized Hermans as a 'terrorist'.[8]

The decisiveness of this qualification should at least make us wonder about the consequences. If meant neither jokingly nor metaphorically, does this mean that the contemporary polemical enemies of Hermans, such as Adriaan Morriën, were right in condemning him as a 'fascist desperado' who used literature perversely as a 'terrorist method'?[9] Were attempts to silence Hermans, which actually occurred in the 1950s, fully legitimate or should we ethically judge the strange relationship between literary modernism and terrorism in other ways?

To address this issue, I will take a closer look at the novella *Het behouden huis* (1951), which was recently retranslated into English by David Colmer as *An Untouched House* (2018).[10] When this short story came out in the Netherlands, Hermans's famous literary colleague Harry Mulisch reckoned it to be unsurpassed with regard to style and dialogue, but he strongly condemned the content, calling it a terrorist form of 'bestial destruction'.[11] A comparison of this story with 'Preamble', a fictional essay that introduces *Het behouden huis* in the short story collection *Paranoia* (1953), makes it possible to comprehend modernist terrorism philosophically. We will then look at the novel *Ik heb altijd gelijk* ('I'm always right', 1951), Hermans's most "terrorist" piece of writing according to contemporary critics. This novel also displays an obvious intertextual relationship with Hermans's essayistic text 'Behind the Signposts No Admittance'. This text confirms that from a psychoanalytical perspective the terrorist position of this modernist writer is *symbolic* and therefore quite different from the *imaginary* stance taken by the violent antiheroes that inhabit his literature, and the terrorists we see in the daily news.

Nieuwsblad van het Noorden, 1 November 1954. See also W. Glaudemans, *De mythe van het tweede hoofd: De literatuuropvattingen van W.F. Hermans, 1945-1964* (doctoral thesis, Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht, 1990), p. 159.

7 'Je kan er een lolletje van proberen te maken, maar dan denatureer je de literatuur van Hermans. Hij was een terrorist, die wilde hij ook zijn. Polemiek werd volgens hem alleen aan de uiterste flanken van links en rechts geschreven. Een polemist is een terrorist.' In T. Jaeger, 'Terroristen belagen mij', *NRC Handelsblad*, 27 februari 2015.

8 F. Ruiter and W. Smulders, 'The Aggressive Logic of Singularity: Willem Frederik Hermans', in *Journal of Dutch Literature*, 4.1 (2013), 4-42.

9 A. Morriën, *De gruwelkamer van W.F. Hermans, of Ik moet altijd gelijk hebben* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1955).

10 W.F. Hermans, *Het behouden huis* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1951), also in critical edition of collected works: *Volledige Werken* 7 (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2006), and recently translated into English by David Colmer as *An Untouched House* (London: Pushkin Press, 2018). Estelle Debrot made an earlier English translation: 'The House of Refuge', in: S. Marcus (ed.), *The World of Modern Fiction* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966).

11 Mulisch speaks of 'bestiale destructie' in his article 'De behouden vrijheid', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 9 August 1952.

A Theory of Terrorism[12]

It seems self-evident that literary writers and artisans can never be true terrorists, simply because the conventional definitions of terrorism do not apply. Terrorism derives from the Latin word 'terror', which means dread or fear, and the Indo-European tre- or tres, which means to shake or tremble. Common sense and jurisprudence have, however, added the crucial element of ideological violence to identify terrorists. The Dutch state, for instance, defines terrorism as 'committing violence against human lives', or inflicting 'society-disrupting damage on objects', with the ideological purpose of undermining and destabilizing society.[13] It is hardly possible, from this perspective, to understand literary writing as a form of terrorism and writers as terrorists – but perhaps this is too naïve. Philosophers such as Judith Butler, Willem Schinkel and Slavoj Žižek warn us against narrow definitions of violence and terrorism, because they omit a variety of violent aspects, and tend to reify existing power relations.[14] The Dutch state's definition, for example, stresses *intentional* and *physical* violence aimed at human lives and objects. This is understandable and defendable from the perspective of the liberal democratic state, but it is philosophically questionable. One might argue that this definition automatically obscures other violent aspects, such as symbolic violence or structural violence, the state monopoly on violence and the abuse of state violence ('state terrorism').

The above-mentioned theoreticians also agree with modernist writers such as Blanchot (and Hermans himself) that language and imagination actually can be violent and terroristic. For Schinkel, violence is not only physical harm, but first and foremost a 'reduction of being', and this reduction often starts off with words, for instance when we categorize and marginalize certain people who do not really belong to society as 'immigrants'.[15] Subsequently, Schinkel argues that it is more precise and less partisan or biased to say that terrorism is a 'performative process', a dialectic form of symbolic rhetoric and counter-rhetoric, or storytelling if you will, in which both state and non-state combatants try to symbolically highlight (or unfold) the original 'event' ('Casablanca', 'Madrid', '9/11') to legitimize their cause. The psychoanalytically minded

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[12] This paragraph on terrorist theory is not aiming or claiming to be exhaustive. It only builds the argument that a) literary writers actually can be terrorists, and b) deploys a specific reading theory for understanding the modernist authorship and the writings of Willem Frederik Hermans and possibly other modernists, surrealists or magical realists. I opt for a psychoanalytic theory and, even more specifically, a psychoanalytic theory that emphasizes the pivotal element of aesthetical and socio-symbolic structures regarding terrorism. Psychoanalytical theory on terrorism and literature is very rich and in order to obtain a profound and timely perspective, one surely must include works of others. One can think of Pierre Benghozi, Robert Beshara, Christopher Bollas, Franco Fornari, Melanie Klein, Robert Jay Lifton, Jerry Piven, Kriss Ravetto, Ruth Stein, Klaus Theweleit, Vamık Volkan and Frank Vande Veire.

[13] 'Terrorisme is het uit ideologische motieven plegen van op mensenlevens gericht geweld, dan wel het aanrichten van maatschappij-ontwrichtende zaakschade, met als doel maatschappelijke ondermijning en destabilisatie te bewerkstelligen, de bevolking ernstige vrees aan te jagen of politieke besluitvorming te beïnvloeden.' In: Rijksoverheid, *Nationale Contraterrorismestrategie 2016-2020*, p. 6.

[14] J. Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004); W. Schinkel, *Aspects of Violence: A Critical Theory* (Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and S. Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile, 2009).

[15] W. Schinkel, *Denken in een tijd van sociale hypochondrie: aanzet tot een theorie voorbij de maatschappij* (Kampen: Klement, 2007).

Žižek also emphasizes the symbolic aspects, such as the 'spectacle' and the 'fantasy' of terrorism.[16] In the light of these highly aesthetic notions of performance, rhetoric, spectacle and fantasy, the novelist as a terrorist suddenly does become conceivable.

Besides the fact that Hermans was very much 'into Freud' and preoccupied with psychoanalysis,[17] Žižek's take on terrorism is particularly interesting, because he does seem to differentiate between two forms of terrorism. He speaks rather negatively of the terrorist attackers of the Twin Towers, but he also uses the term to describe public intellectuals with whom he sympathizes, such as Julian Assange of WikiLeaks, who, in his opinion, is 'a terrorist, but in the sense that Gandhi is a terrorist'.[18] Can Žižek shed some light on the ambivalence of terrorism with regard to modernist writers such as Hermans?

As usual, Žižek neglects to explain carefully why and in what sense Gandhi was a terrorist, but we can deduce the logic underpinning of this statement from his Lacanian background. He agrees with psychoanalyst-philosopher Jacques Lacan that the human self, or identity, is not something naturally given, but primarily a *virtual identity* that exists because of two rather fictitious, socio-aesthetic modes of identification: the *imaginary identification* and the *symbolic identification*. They both remain active as long as the subject is alive, but to understand them, it is instructive to note that Lacan sees them taking turn consecutively in the development of the human subject.

Thrown into the world, the human child experiences reality as highly traumatic, chaotic and strange, as the Other. He is surrounded by superficial signs that show up everywhere, both from its own chaotic body (the Lacanian 'corps morcelé') and from others (kisses, gestures and words from above the cradle), without psychologically being able to control or understand any of it, let alone derive any pleasure from it. It is an experience of complete displeasure, of lack, as Lacan says, but the imaginary identification will provide the first way out. Lacan began to develop this idea in his famous essay 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function'.[19] The human child recognizes its mirror image and takes it as a first identity, a proto-Self. This imaginary Ego provides a 'jubilant' experience, because this seemingly controllable image provides the child with an *order of unity* instead of chaos. Suddenly, all the *signifiers* surrounding him start to make sense, as they must refer to him as being the *signified*! He must be the signified of all the strange signifiers coming from the Other. Now he can envisage himself as *signifié de l'Autre*.[20]

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[16] S. Žižek, *Welcome in the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 5-17.

[17] For instance, in his essay 'Unsympathetic fictional characters' ('Antipathieke romanpersonages'), Freudian psychoanalysis is very much prominent: 'Freud wrote that the conscious content of a novel acts as bait for the unconscious content' and 'Freud's discovery of an unconscious beyond the reach of rational will has become an integral aspect in judging human behavior', 'Unsympathetic fictional characters', trans. by Michele Hutchison, in *Journal of Dutch Literature* 10.2 (2019), 45-55. Original: 'Antipathieke romanpersonages', in *Volledige Werken* 11, pp. 129-150. See also on Hermans and psychoanalysis, M. Dupuis, *Hermans' dynamiek: De romanwereld van W.F. Hermans* (The Hague: BZZTôH, 1985) and Jaap van Heerden, 'W.F. Hermans en de psychologie', in *De Gids* 168 (2005), 959-967.

[18] S. Žižek, 'How WikiLeaks opened our eyes to the illusion of freedom', *The Guardian*, 19 June 2014.

[19] See J. Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience', in J. Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), pp. 75-81.

[20] See J. Lacan, *Le Désir et son interprétation 1958-1959. Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre VI.* (Paris: Martinière, 2013), p. 27, p. 167, p. 179 and p. 230.

In his mind, the strange Other is not against him anymore, no, he thinks of himself as the real part that the Other is missing and longing for. In the imaginary position of the autonomous outsider, outside symbolic and superficial discourse, he can imagine himself the desired 'missing link' that can provide a stable ground and turn the symbolic world into a cherished imaginary 'completeness'.[21]

The imaginary ordering of the subject is important for the formation of the ego, since it provides a sense of self-mastery, but, according to Lacan, another identification must take place soon. A 'cultural intervention' must take place, because the imaginary identity is prone to instigate aggression and violence.[22] The self-conception of being the meaning or essence of all superficial signifiers (things, words) surrounding him, thus being the real thing underpinning and grounding everything else and thereby guaranteeing the stability of the order, is outrageous of course, and unsustainable. When the ego discovers that occupying and colonizing this central place of the Real is impossible because the world remains chaotic and simply does not act the way he wants, he will first behave aggressively toward the outside world, to off-load its own lack onto others. Eventually, though, the proto-subject will accept his 'symbolic castration'. Instead of identifying with the *signified*, he will identify with the surrounding *signifiers*. He will accept a given name and construct his identity within and through words of the given discourse.

The identification with the superficial signifiers unburdens the ego of being identical to the (lost) essence of all things/signifiers, which is untenable anyway. The chaos can never really be included in an enjoyable order, but 'words' (or signifiers) prove to be more adaptable than a static imaginary ego. Whenever the chaotic Real catches up with a symbolic identity, the psyche is able to reconfigure with other signifiers before the lack reveals itself too directly and causes anxiety.[23] Without the rather flexible order of the *symbolic*, the subject is less able to cope with the experience of lack, because the only strategy to protect his narcissistic imaginary ego is to behave aggressively by projecting the inner lack onto others. Letting go of the imaginary Self is felt as a loss (or 'symbolic castration'), but it is a loss that is liberating.

We should bear in mind, however, that the imaginary identification will not be completely lost after the symbolic intervention, and that it can prevail again under certain conditions within symbolic discourse. A remnant of the lost (and never really possessed) imaginary completeness resides as a repressed fantasy, famously dubbed by Lacan as 'object a'.[24] This fantasy captures the moment when the *imaginary* ego had to give up itself to a mysterious world of *symbolic signifiers*. Therefore, this phantasmal object is often suspected in the most mysterious signifiers, especially the ones that seem to be central within the symbolic order. These are the master signifiers, the big words everyone talks about without really knowing what they mean, such as 'Democracy', or 'God'. As long as they remain somewhat vague and distant, they keep the dream of enjoyment alive and provide this imaginary illusion of a meaningful order, collectively and inclusively. However, imaginary violence might return, for instance, when a sudden crisis triggers

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[21] J. Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II* (London/New York: Norton 1991), p. 185.

[22] See J. Lacan, 'Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis', in J. Lacan, *Ecrits*, pp. 82-101.

[23] J. Lacan, *Anxiety. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. Book X, trans. by A.R. Price (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 86 and p. 214.

[24] J. Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), p. 571.

complete disbelief in the societal structure. An overdose of suspicion and repulsion towards current master signifiers leads to situations in which subjects imagine that the vague place (of meaning) shielded by the master signifier is there for the taking. Lacan refers to Hitler as someone who disavowed the symbolic order and colonized the forbidden, imaginary place of the Real, creating a perfect Reich, the fascist version of completeness and harmony. This led to a paranoiac and violent imaginary order.[25] Lack and chaos did not truly cease to exist, but were projected onto others who could be excommunicated and destroyed. The mythical figure of the Jew is of course a telling example of this social and ideological process of imaginary excommunication preceding physical destruction.

Žižek would call this form of (state) terrorism the effect of a 'passion of the Real', the imaginary dream of retaking the authentic signified instead of residing in a symbolic world of fake signifiers. Fundamentalist terrorists claim that they are outside the symbolic order and coincide with the Real, and are able to 'awaken us [...] from immersion in our everyday ideological universe'.[26] The paradox is that they need an imaginary symbol to uphold this fantasy, a 'theatrical spectacle', just like the infant who turns the world completely upside down in order to make-believe he is the *raison d'être* of all things.[27]

The other form of terrorism Žižek discusses is quite the opposite from a Lacanian perspective. Žižek mentions, for example, the surrealists during the Bosnian war, who 'traversed the fantasy' in a 'playful manner', using symbolic counter-imagination and irony to perform the *impossibility* of the Real as a satisfactory place.[28] These artists do not refute symbolic discourse at large. They only show the flipside of our cultural universe, the unfoundedness and alterability of our symbols. For Žižek, the relevance of Julian Assange is not that he offered the satisfaction of the real facts behind the symbolic curtain: 'We didn't really learn anything from WikiLeaks we didn't already presume to be true [...].'[29] The revolutionary element of WikiLeaks resides in the symbolic operation it deployed: 'We all know the classic scene from cartoons: the character reaches a precipice but goes on running, ignoring the fact that there is no ground underfoot; they start to fall only when they look down and notice the abyss. What WikiLeaks is doing is just reminding those in power to look down.'[30]

Lacan would say that this formation does not belong to the imaginary realm of perversion, but to the symbolic strategy of sublimation. As Marc De Kesel demonstrates in his dissertation on Lacan's *Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacanian sublimation is somewhat counter-intuitive. In common sense, sublimation is usually understood as a cultural form presenting the illusion of gratifying our transgressive desire, which is considered perverse in everyday life. According to

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[25] See J. Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, p. 72 and J. Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 567.

[26] S. Žižek, *Welcome in the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 9.

[27] See Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, pp. 5-17.

[28] See Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!*, pp. 17-19.

[29] S. Žižek, 'How WikiLeaks opened our eyes to the illusion of freedom', *The Guardian*, 19 June 2014.

[30] Žižek, 'How WikiLeaks opened our eyes to the illusion of freedom'.

De Kesel, this is false, considering the Lacanian concept of sublimation.[31] For Lacan, sublimation does not mean to surpass the boundary of the symbolic universe to get in touch with the mystical Real. Instead, sublimation means symbolizing the border between the symbolic and the Real, *symbolizing* the unsurpassable gap between our symbolic universe and the lost object of our desire. Symbolizing the border of the symbolic Law opens up a psychological space beyond in which our desire is aroused. One can think of courtly poetry depicting the Lady as a desired but elusive and unreachable symbol, inflaming our desire even more. Sublimation opposes perversion.[32] Symbolizing instead of occupying the other side *while maintaining symbolical distance* is the most ethical stance possible for Lacan, because *it opens up a free space for desire*. It reminds us that no individual or ideology whatsoever can claim to include the missing link, a real essence underpinning a final order that completely satisfies all of our desire. This way, society leaves a free space open for movement and change, and avoids totalitarianism.

An Untouched House

Was Hermans performing the symbolic role and trying to show a sublime glimpse of the abyss, or did he want to occupy the locus of the Real, aggressively and perversely claiming his alternative ideological reality of nihilism to be the one and only truth? Prior interpretations of *An Untouched House* do indeed claim that 'chaos' wins over 'order',[33] and that this is very much consistent with the ideology of nihilism often accredited to Hermans.[34] Let us take a closer look at the short story about a Dutch partisan freedom fighter somewhere in Central Europe at the front during the Second World War, threatened by Germans. When the soldier, the first-person narrator, approaches a small town, all the signs tell us that his symbolic order is on the verge of collapse. Traumatizing external forces ('explosions') take over symbolic reality ('memory') and turn him from a human subject into a crawling animal capitulating to chaos:

> What difference does war make? – Imagine somebody who doesn't have a memory, who can't think of anything beyond what he sees, hears and feels... War doesn't exist for him. He sees the hill, the sky, he feels the dry membranes of his throat shrinking, he hears the boom of... he'd need a memory to know what's causing it.[35]

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[31] See the chapter 'Sublimation' in M. De Kesel, *Eros and Ethics, reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar VII*, trans. by S. Jöttkandt (New York: SUNY, 2009), pp. 163-204. See also J. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960* (London/New York: Norton, 1997).

[32] M. De Kesel, 'Sublimatie en perversie: genese en belang van conceptueel onderscheid bij Lacan', in *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 3 (2003), 465-485.

[33] See K. Fens, 'Buiten de gevestigde chaos', in *Merlyn* 2 (1963-1964), 23-34; J.A.A. Mooij, 'Symbolic Action in "Het behouden huis" by Willem Frederik Hermans', in *Dutch Crossing* 1 (1983), 50-64; G.F.H. Raat, *De vervalste wereld van Willem Frederik Hermans* (Amsterdam: Huis aan de Drie Grachten. 1985) and M. Dupuis, *Hermans' dynamiek. De romanwereld van W.F. Hermans* (The Hague: BZZtôH, 1985).

[34] See F. Ruiter, 'Willem Frederik Hermans en het nihilisme in de Nederlandse literatuur', in F. Ruiter and W. Smulders (eds.), *De literaire magneet. Essays over Willem Frederik Hermans en de moderne tijd* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1995), pp. 14-37, and G.F.H. Raat, *Literatuur als noodzaak: Willem Frederik Hermans: Facetten van een schrijverschap* (Amsterdam: Vossiuspers, 2010).

[35] Hermans, *An Untouched House*, p. 9. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Suddenly the symbolic coordinates make no sense anymore, as he is not able to understand his foreign-speaking fellow fighters: 'there wasn't a single person I could understand' (9). Symbolic authority loses its hold over him, since he no longer understands his sergeant's 'orders' (10). Concepts of time and place become unstable, just as the rules of games and sports become inconceivable to him. This dissociation becomes clear when he walks past three red gravel tennis courts: 'I no longer knew how tennis was played; I didn't know what the net, the white lines, the tall white chair, that heavy roller in a corner meant' (19). The moment he drops out of symbolic reality, he literally seems to face the limit of the symbolic order when he bumps into a house with 'gleaming deep black' windows. The tree in front of the house looks like a gallows and this could have been a warning sign, but he decides to have a 'look inside', because signs have lost their meaning anyway (19).

From the moment the protagonist crosses the threshold of this enigmatic house, the story does in fact give the impression that he actually is able to colonize the Real, which means in his case: to become as one with the chaotic forces of nature. He experiences his entry into the 'real house, a genuine home' as the 'solution of the riddle [...] of all that exists in the world' (20), because residing in this sanctuary seems to offer him true and limitless enjoyment that he associates with animal or childlike forms of satisfaction. He eats out of the pot and disregards the civility of brushing his teeth, or washing his hands before eating (28).

If this were the end of the story, one could argue that it does hold out the possibility of an enjoyable reality outside the symbolic – a desirable reality coinciding with the Real. This would affirm the ontological position of the fundamentalist terrorist. I do not think this is the case, however. What happens instead is that the protagonist does not really get his hands on the Real outside of the virtual order; instead, he merely rebuilds a different order that is just as virtual and artificial. However, this order follows a somewhat different logic, i.e. an *imaginary logic*. The 'magic' noticed in earlier readings by Kees Fens and G.F.H. Raat, or the 'atmosphere of enchantment' seen by J.A.A. Mooij, can be understood perfectly as the result of a regression into the imaginary order of the mirror stage.[36] As soon as the symbolic coordinates are torn down, the signs around him shapeshift into an imaginary bubble that completely mirrors the Self and turns the house into a mirage: 'The abandoned houses were about to stir and gather round me, offering themselves to me like women in travel stories about Indochina.' (18). The signifiers speak to him, *as if* he embodies the real meaning everything else revolves around: 'Draped over a sofa was a lady's coat. It spoke like objects in detective stories' (21). At the same time, the impossibility of the imaginary unity of the mirror stage starts to haunt him. The signifiers tell him that he is 'not alone' (21) in this symbolic world and that he is never truly where he desires to be, at one with his cherished realness:

> I stood before a mirror in which I could see myself from head to toe to shave. If I had a room lined entirely with mirrors I could stay in it forever without getting bored, like Robinson Crusoe on his island. Those who only *think* are only half in touch with themselves. Seeing is more valuable, seeing is everything. Seeing yourself as someone else would be salvation, but you always stay on the wrong side. (26)

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36 See Fens, 'Buiten de gevestigde chaos', p. 33; Raat, *De vervalste wereld van Willem Frederik Hermans*, p. 103; Mooij, 'Symbolic Action in "Het behouden huis", p. 54.

The surreal series of events that follows can be explained as the violent effect of the impossibility to uphold this quasi-autonomous, imaginary position outside that ultimately would support the symbolic order of language and culture. The others entering the house not only threaten his life, most of all they threaten his imaginary delusion of occupying the locus of the Real. The protagonist does not really mind the Germans who accommodate themselves. What irritates him, though, is that the German colonel glorifies 'Culture': 'You make me sick to my stomach, I thought' (39). He hates to learn something about the symbolic identity of the true owner of the house who collected 'books about fish' stacked upstairs (43). When the owner returns ('I want a word with you!') and proves his ownership with a (symbolic) 'document' and the writings on 'a folded sheet of paper' (44-45), the protagonist goes berserk and kills both the owner and his wife.

With Sigmund Freud, one could have predicted that the repressed always returns: the symbolic order cannot be disavowed forever.[37] When a locked door eventually opens, he finds a strange old man who keeps fish in aquariums on racks. This symbolic paternal authority reminds him that although the symbolic is unfounded and therefore crazy in a way, it cannot be avoided: 'He was pulling out all the stops: his fish, a unique collection, culture [...]. It was like an octopus playing a theater organ' (60). Having become completely jaded after this enigmatic performance, the protagonist watches other partisans come in and take over, 'enjoying' this interval of the Real for a brief spell, torturing and killing the German and the old man. This takeover also prefigures the re-symbolization of the chaotic space. He rediscovers his ability to speak with other partisans ('I rattled off the same story as before', on page 68) and he starts to concern himself again with symbolical appearance, exchange and the symbolical notion of time. He picks up two cameras and a golden watch that had belonged to the deceased owner of the house, which will make him 'very popular' (79). The moment he makes his re-entry into the symbolic, the house that represented the fantasy of the Real completely loses its habitability: 'It was like it had been putting on an act the whole time and was only now showing itself as it, in reality, had always been: a hollow, drafty cavern, rancid and rotting at its core' (80).

The story briefly opened up the possibility of occupying the chaotic Real when the protagonist passed the window to invade the closed house, but almost immediately this window of opportunity is closed off by the narrative, because the chaos is unlivable and incites phantasmagoria, violence and death. In this respect, the story does not seem to be a recommendation to colonize the perverse terroristic position of the outsider. It only performs the quasi-terroristic position of the borderline. Is this a coincidence, or is this a position in Hermans's literature that is represented consistently? In the text 'Preamble' one can indeed find more proof that the implied author Hermans continuously acts more like a border liner who articulates a sublime or sub-liminal awareness of the symbolic border and the chaos that resides beyond.

'Preamble'

After first publication, the novella *An Untouched House* was published along with five other stories in the collection *Paranoia*, which was first released in 1953. This book opens with 'Preamble', a short text that occupies the middle ground between a short story and an essay. The

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[37] See S. Freud, 'Repression', in S. Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. by James Strachey in collab. with Anna Freud, vol. XIV (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), pp. 141-158 (p. 154).

narrator of this story-essay seems to confirm that the implied author does not intend to suck the reader into chaos, but takes a somewhat different position.

The dramatized narrator introduces himself as a rather strange writer, a miser who collects used paper because he prefers to write 'on the backs of old calendar sheets and cut-up posters': 'My new paper remains untouched; it lies scattered all over the house, in the oddest drawers, at the bottom of cupboards, in the attic, in the basement.'[38] At first glance, he seems to be as insane as the protagonists of the following stories, since he does admit that he shares 'a touch of inimitable insanity' (5) and refuses to distance himself from them by calling them 'mentally ill' (4).

Yet the reader should notice that his subjective position is more ambivalent. Although he is reluctant to act like a 'psychiatrist' who diagnoses his subjects from the moral high ground, he does show a higher degree of reflexivity and the intellectual capacity to understand what makes his characters perform 'a largely disloyal and unreliable impression' (4).[39] What his characters fail to accept, is something they share with most people, namely that Being equals 'Chaos' ('There is only one real word: chaos', on page 3) and that there is no such thing as an everlasting (imaginary) order promising 'certainty' (4). The minor difference between normal people and the insane is only that the latter cannot cope with this uncertainty by finding a form or order in shared symbolic myths and customary forms of life: 'The only thing separating these deranged individuals from other people is that they are incapable of being redirected to any of the traditional delusional systems' (5). The writer finds these deviant outsiders interesting because they mirror and thereby reveal the delusion of the well-behaved, law-abiding citizens who unconsciously perceive and affirm their society as an unchangeable and naturally given reality.

Possibly the writer is only half-crazy, because he is very much aware that both the citizen and the outlaw mistakenly claim a false Truth ultimately grounded beyond the borders of the symbolic. Civilized people tend to believe that their symbolic society is rooted in something more than symbolic forms and figures. The outlaw sees through the authority of the Law, but exchanges it for an imaginary and idiosyncratic truth that is equally delusional and even more untenable and unliveable: the chaos outside of the symbolic system. The writer warns that although the chaos is the only original truth behind our linguistic symbolic reality, our 'falsified world' (3), this does not mean that we are able to live without language. By disavowing the socio-symbolic communicative order, the lunatic casts himself completely out of society and loses his social agency and societal status:

People who stand outside this world stand with their backs to the wall, like the paper I write on. They stand against the wall of the prison or the madhouse, most of them with their back, just a very few with their nose facing in' (5).

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38 Hermans, 'Preamble', trans. by Ina Rilke, in "Three Poetical Essays by Willem Frederik Hermans: Preamble, Behind the Signposts No Admittance and Unsympathetic Fictional Characters", in *Journal of Dutch Literature* 10.2 (2019), 37-42 (p. 37). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

39 I do not completely agree here with Frans Ruiter who more or less positions the writer on the same level of insanity as the protagonists in the stories that follow 'Preamble'. See F. Ruiter, 'Ingewikkelde herhalingen: Preambule in analyse', in *Spektator* 1 (1986-1987).

If you dissociate yourself from the communicative order, you are simply excommunicated by the others who label you as being 'insane'. Unintentionally, the lunatic even helps to consolidate the established societal order according to the dramatized writer who prefigures Michel Foucault's history of madness and Giorgio Agamben's philosophy of the 'inclusive exclusion'.[40] Labeling the maladjusted 'mad', is an effective imaginary strategy of civils within the symbolic order to dispatch and differentiate themselves from the insane and to think of themselves as reasonable and well-adjusted. Seen this way, the outsiders offer the insiders an easy way out! They can readily be labeled 'crazy' by the insiders, upholding the false image that the society of insiders is founded on reason: 'They have been reinstated in the world where everything goes as it should, back in the filing system under the M of mad, the same filing system that I will always leave a blank' (5).

The dramatized writer seems to opt for a different position, schizophrenically in-between and on the fringes of the symbolic constellation of civil society and the chaos-world of the outsider. He does not think that the 'ideology' of 'politicians', 'moralists' and 'humanists' or the 'new signs' used by the sciences give us a satisfying definitive vocabulary of who we are and what our society should look like (2-4). In accordance with Freudian psychoanalysis, he says that the human subject is incapable of grasping an objective, machine-like and complete picture, and is therefore marked by a lack of being: 'My greatest misfortune is that I didn't come into the world as a machine and that I can't write with light like a camera' (4). Echoing Foucault's anti-humanist conception of enlightened man as only 'a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea'[41] most likely to disappear, the narrator explains: 'We are nothing but the beachcombers of our own lives, gathering odds and ends along the sea of forgetfulness' (3). However, the lunatic who claims 'chaos' could provide a 'harmonious' closure, eventually makes the same mistake as the good citizen who tends to forget and deny the mysterious and chaotic of human consciousness. The first-person narrator does not relate to loony Dadaist-like artists who reductively take chaos as their absolute Truth:

> It's as if I could just as well have dipped all ten of my fingers and also my toes in ink, as if I could have spat on the paper and stamped on it, crumpled it up and torn it to shreds - and the document I'd leave behind in this world would be no less tangible and no less truthful. The only thing stopping me is that there would be nothing mysterious about it.
>   There seem to be people who actually produce poems and paintings using their hands and feet. But that would rule out all sense of mystery, because you know from the start that there is no sense to it (2).

The writer desires to 'stick to writing' (2) because the symbolic order of language warrants difference and the proliferation of meaning: 'There is, really, only one language: a language with an infinite number of words whose meaning changes ad infinitum within a single infinitely divisible moment' (4). Language is not grounded in some more substantial meaning. Therefore,

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[40] See M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (London: Routledge, 2001), G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) and W. Schinkel, *Denken in een tijd van sociale hypochondrie: aanzet tot een theorie voorbij de maatschappij* (Kampen: Klement, 2007).

[41] M. Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), p. 387.

it offers a structure, a fluid order that does not completely deny chaos. The narrator finds this baselessness and openness especially in 'crossings-out and blots' (2). *Within* the symbolic field of meaning, these blots represent what is not yet signified. It is like a sheet of 'new paper' that 'can still run off in all directions' (2).

Circling around these empty signifiers within the symbolic order opens up the 'mysterious' (see page 2 and 5).[42] Only the mystery can truly make 'sense', the narrator says. He says this because the human subject cannot be other than an open project, 'a great stockpile of movements and ideas' ever searching for its true self which cannot be found but only be thought of as the Freudian lost object or the Lacanian *object a*, 'a residue, the lingering smell of a long-extinguished fire' (2). With this somewhat peculiar gift of mystery, the writer does not advocate completely stepping outside the realm of the symbolic, but reminds the reader that the societal order and the symbolic identities it produces, are never satisfactory and harmonious in itself. The symbolic order has no foundation but a chaotic outside into which it excommunicates its outcasts. The writer shows that the uninhabitable place to which we would be expelled and excommunicated, losing our subjectivity and sense of Self, is also the sublime place that is the goal of our most intimate desire. Depressing as this mysterious message may sound to ideologists, moralists and humanists, it also accommodates a sublimation, a safe symbolization of the abyss beyond the symbolic border, the aporia that reminds us that we are not stuck in a closed story and caught in a full circle, and that our symbolic reality, to a certain degree, can be rewritten.

The Literary Terrorist on Trial

The crucial difference between the literary terrorist and the conventional terrorist lies in the structure of their symbolic performance: the latter *imaginarily* claims complete and immediate access to the chaotic locus of the Real meaning as an alternative for symbolic, fake reality. The first one, the writer, only provides a mediated *symbolic image* that veils the Real. Nonetheless, one can expect that the symbolic display of nothingness beyond our symbolic construction of reality might already be threatening for the societal establishment. The modernist literary awareness of the 'lack' in our socio-symbolic edifice, the awareness of an unknown space 'outside' our symbolic order that is unsuitable for occupation and cannot be claimed as a legitimate foundation of any current configuration of social reality, automatically fuels criticism of established symbolic institutions and ideological groups who claim authority.

A good example is the famous lawsuit brought against Willem Frederik Hermans because of his infamous novel *Ik heb altijd gelijk* ('I am always right'), first published in 1951. Hermans was put on trial because of the furious anti-Catholic statements uttered by his protagonist Lodewijk Stegman, which were considered offensive. Eventually the judge dismissed 'the case Hermans', but the fact that many called for his indictment shows how he succeeded in rattling the cage like a terrorist.

Dutch literary historiography understood the eventual acquittal by the court of justice as the victory of the modern writer who advocated the freedom of speech and the 'autonomy' of literature. During the heyday of the formalist movement in literary studies (New Critics, *Merlyn*)

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[42] See for another Lacanian interpretation of 'Preamble' and the notion of mystery: W. Smulders, 'Oog en blik. Over de "geheimZINnigheid" van Hermans' werk', in *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- & Letterkunde* 4 (2017), 268-292.

this stance was academically endorsed by literary theory, but nowadays it has become less appealing. Critics such as Thomas Vaessens argue quite convincingly that the call for literary autonomy wrongly disengages literature from society, because in the end literature cannot be disconnected from other societal (con)texts. Vaessens denounces modernists such as Hermans for making us believe otherwise, thereby forcing literature to exist in a realm of literary irrelevance, a reservation outside of the societal debate.[43]

Although one may agree with Vaessens that the formalist perspective disavows societal ties that cannot be disavowed, it is doubtful whether Hermans should really be blamed for backing literary autonomism.[44] Certainly, after the prosecutor had presented his case, Hermans defended himself by saying that literature is a completely different game within society. Literature, he wrote in 'Polemisch mengelwerk' (April 1952), is an 'as if'-reality and 'a completely different chapter' from everyday political and ideological discourse.[45] At the same time, though, he did take responsibility for his protagonist, even though he had the right to remain silent. He defended himself in the courthouse with the following words: 'The words used by my character are indicated by me. I do not deny this.'[46] Hermans made it perfectly clear how we should understand his protagonist. Stegman, a dishonored repatriate recently returned from the Dutch colonialist war in Indonesia, is someone who dares to speak his mind, but his 'love of the truth' ('waarheidsliefde'), or, following Žižek, his 'passion for the Real', must also be deemed 'reckless' in his venture to 'explode' everything which makes society meaningful.[47] Stegman is not an example, only a pawn in the novel that, as a whole, articulates a somewhat different truth, one that Hermans qualifies as 'cathartic'. The cathartic moment takes place near the end of the story when the truth-speaker Stegman is confronted with Key, a character who symbolizes 'the absolute lie'.[48] After this, it should have been crystal-clear that Stegman, who repeatedly claims to be the one who is 'always right',[49] is not able to back up this imaginary claim. Just as the paratext on the original back cover tells the reader that the novel does not seek to advocate an alternative truth, but only to challenge persons and social groups such as 'Catholics and communists and all others claiming to be always right'.[50]

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[43] See T. Vaessens, *Het boek was beter. Literatuur tussen autonomie en massificatie* (Amsterdam: AUP/Vossiuspers, 2006), p. 12. See also T. Vaessens, *De revanche van de roman. Literatuur, autoriteit en engagement* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2009).

[44] See L. Ham, *Door Prometheus geboeid. De autonomie en autoriteit van de moderne Nederlandse auteur* (Hilversum: Literatoren, 2015), pp. 234-280. In the chapter on Hermans, Ham took a closer look at the case 'Ik heb altijd gelijk' and showed that literary autonomy is at stake indeed, but not as a fixed and purified position that can be taken or claimed by the author. It is part of a literary self-fashioning, posturing, and intertwined with forces of economy, language, ideology, and the (inter)national political playing field.

[45] Hermans in 'Polemisch mengelwerk' (*Podium* 2, 1952), republished in *Mandarijnen op zwavelzuur* (1964), in *Volledige Werken* 16, pp. 133-147, see p. 147.

[46] 'Immers, de door mijn romanpersonage gebruikte woorden zijn hem door mij ingefluisterd. Dit ontken ik niet', in *Mandarijnen op zwavelzuur*, in *Volledige Werken* 16, p. 265.

[47] *Mandarijnen op zwavelzuur*, in *Volledige Werken* 16, pp. 133-147, see p. 147.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

[50] 'katholieken en communisten en verder allen die menen "altijd gelijk" te hebben', on the dust jacket of *Ik heb altijd gelijk* (Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1951).

In Stegman, who starts a political party in order to become the new ruler of Europe, we can recognize the true terrorist with an alternative *imaginary* claim on the Truth. However, from the perspective of the writer Hermans, he is not his stand-in but a symbolic 'ghost', a pawn, necessary to *symbolically* challenge the symbolic ghosts of the establishment. The protagonist is, along the line of Schinkel, part of a terrorist 'performative process' that anticipates a counter reaction of the established imaginary order. This counter-reaction immediately demonstrates the imaginary weakness or baselessness of the establishment: if all these newspapers, institutions and politicians could become unsettled because of two or three utterances of a character in a novel, maybe we should not consider this order as an impregnable imaginary fortress. Via Stegman, Hermans was able to move himself into the borderline position of a quasi-outsider, a terrorist underdog who is not fully immersed in contemporary society and therefore able to voice a credible critique. In his literature, Hermans is able to show that the post-war society of the Netherlands was not the ideal society it imagined itself to be. The public sphere of 'verzuiling' ('siloization') was restrictive and authoritarian; the best proof of this was provided when officials announced that they were suing a writer who operated in the margins of society.

Indeed, Hermans acted as a terrorist, but it must be emphasized that he restricted himself as a modernist writer to *symbolic terrorism* whose strategy was *sublimation*, instead of the truly violent, *perverse* form of *imaginary terrorism*. This is not because he shied away from violence: he knew very well that polemics can also be violent, and he was definitely not a pacifist.[51] However, he considered it madness to claim a different origin. There is only symbolic reality; beyond the border of the symbolic, there is only nothingness. This is confirmed when we consider that not only *The Untouched House* has its own counterpart-text ('Preamble'). The novel *Ik heb altijd gelijk* also clearly interconnects with another text written by Hermans, namely the short essay 'Achter borden verboden toegang' (1955), or, in English, 'Behind the Signposts No Admittance'. The topos of barriers and signposts is also clearly present in *Ik heb altijd gelijk*, representing the discontent of protagonist Lodewijk Stegman. He *imaginarily* thinks of himself as the one who is 'always right' and therefore as being in possession of a more substantial and fundamental Truth beyond the symbolic boundary, the Real beyond the symbolic, but he repeatedly bumps into symbolic barriers, such as when he goes for a walk in the forest with his mother:

> Suddenly he saw his mother ranting, on a hot dirt road, black hat on, red head, sweaty spots beneath her armpits. 'Man, you cannot go in there! There, in the distance is a sign NO ADMITTANCE and look, over here stands a signpost NO ADMITTANCE as well![52]

Hermans wrote again about this signpost in his mini-essay 'Behind the Signposts No Admittance' in which he also grants the reader a peek into the forbidden area behind the post. It might just as

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[51] A good example of his anti-pacifism is Hermans' polemical book *Mandarijnen op zwavelzuur* (1964) in which Hermans fiercely turned against the so-called 'Third Way', not to be confused with the Third Way in economics advocated by Tony Blair and others in the 1990s. The Third Way in Dutch politics during the Fifties opted for neutrality and impartiality between US and Soviet forces. See *Mandarijnen op zwavelzuur*, in *Volledige Werken* 16, pp. 172-174.

[52] 'Hij zag plotseling zijn moeder staan oreren, op een hete zandweg, een zwarte hoed op, rood hoofd, zweetplekken onder haar oksels. "Maar man, daar mag je toch niet in. Daar in de verte staat een bordje VERBODEN TOEGANG en kijk eens, hier staat ook al een bordje VERBODEN TOEGANG!', in Hermans, *Ik heb altijd gelijk*, in *Volledige Werken* 2 (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2008), p. 175.

well be the very same domain of the Real as recognized by Žižek in the famous 'No trespassing!' in *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941): 'it is highly hazardous to enter this domain of the utmost intimacy, as one gets more than one asked for – all of a sudden, when it is already too late to withdraw, one finds oneself in a slimy obscene domain'.[53] Hermans pictures this domain as follows:

> In those places, behind the signposts No Admittance, the grass is gray with dust, the trees are damaged by lorries scraping against them, large pits are filled with green water, beneath dead bushes broken cog-wheels and bottomless enameled jars lie. There is a stench as if only the lowest forms of life would venture here.[54]

In 'Behind the Signposts', however, we again find a dramatized writer who is aware that, beyond the symbolic, one finds only more displeasure; for him, the Real is an 'inhabitable world'. For this first-person narrator only a 'Private Road' – a personal dream, an individual fiction, a private mystery, an artwork of literature – makes it possible to envisage this place, which means that this Locus of the Real can never be turned into a universal and fundamental Truth, and is not suitable for 'pointless heroism'. It remains an inhabitable and unreachable place of desire and dirt, and therefore an open place whence we can hear 'the music of the revolution'.[55] Unlike this stance of the writer, the anti-hero of the story, Lodewijk Stegman, aims for an all-enclosing alternative ('Greater Europe') in his quest for power. In the meantime, though, the writer demonstrates the impossibility and undesirability of this imaginary claim, and makes sure that his protagonist fails in his endeavour. Every time Stegman tries to realize his imaginary fantasy, his words fail to reach full circle and include or control the bodily and chaotic real, literally making him cough, mumble, yawn, spit or vomit.[56]

In my view, the writer does not opt for the position of the true outsider, the stupefied autonomist who completely disengages himself from society by hiding away in an autonomous art world, just as a lone wolf who perversely, imaginarily and, in Žižek's words, 'ruthlessly realizes its fantasy' of his own private imaginary Idaho outside the symbolic.[57] However, since the literary counterterrorism of Adriaan Morriën and the events in the 1950s, Hermans is repeatedly understood in this fashion, because he was forever fighting 'sacred cows' ('heilige huisjes') and seemed to hate every linguistic and cultural 'myth' circulating in Dutch Culture.[58] According to philosopher Jos de Mul, Hermans, as a reader and translator of Wittgenstein, should have been able to acknowledge that symbolic myths or societal conventions, laws, rules and customs are foundational, constructive and vital for a civilized society, but he seemed categorically to disavow

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[53] Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, p. 87.

[54] Hermans, 'Behind the Signposts No Admittance', trans. by Sven Vitse, in "Three Poetical Essays by Willem Frederik Hermans: Preamble, Behind the Signposts No Admittance and Unsympathetic Fictional Characters", in *Journal of Dutch Literature* 10.2 (2019), 43-44.

[55] Ibid.

[56] See L. Ham, *Door Prometheus geboeid*, p. 256.

[57] Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 'Preface', p. vii.

[58] See I. Weyers, *Terug naar het behouden huis. Romanschrijvers en wetenschappers in de jaren vijftig* (Amsterdam: SUA, 1991).

these 'language games'.[59] This is probably why many recognized a perverse writer who seemed to favor his own literary 'personal mythology'[60] and allegedly claimed that symbolic culture at large was just a thin layer of varnish that could easily be scrubbed away. From a romanticist or existentialist perspective, some have appreciated and reproduced this perverse ethos of the 'freedom maniac' acting as a terrorist 'sovereign' within the literary realm of singularity (Ruiter and Smulders[61]). However, from a moral (and sometimes moralizing) perspective, others reproduced and rejected the very same nihilist or terrorist ethos just as easily (see for instance *Oorlogsmythen* by Ewoud Kieft[62]).

This article questions the dubious image of the terrorist writer as freedom maniac or sovereign. The psychoanalytical perspective can offer a different view on the matter, although more classical 'vitalist' versions of psychoanalysis (focusing on transgressive drives or affects unleashed freely in literature) still run the risk of repeating this false image of the modernist maniac terrorist against society (in my view we see this happen in the interpretation of Hermans by Dupuis[63]). The structural (Lacanian) psychoanalytical theory instead foregrounds the aesthetical dynamics of the symbolic and imaginary in such works of modern literature as 'Het behouden huis' (*An Untouched House*) and *Ik heb altijd gelijk*. These personal mythologies do envisage a more primal domain outside socio-symbolic and ethically and morally stratified culture, but they also reveal an awareness of the impossibility of this maniac position.[64] The moment the autonomous locus of the Real seems to be within reach, the symbolic artwork seals it off again, folding back on itself. What seemed to be open for colonization once again turns into a terra incognita. The modernist writer, in particular, is an expert of societal imagination and symbolization and fully aware that one can never really step outside the realm of the symbolic order, even though his characters pretend that they can. The latter are hooked on their quest for singularity and 'passion for the Real', but the writer clearly expresses their situatedness in heteronomous discursive and societal ties. Genuine autonomy or singularity do exist, but only as constructive and impelling fantasies, as they belong to the realm of the elusive sublime object of our desire.

The theory developed here also enables us to localize the implied author, or, expressed in a Foucauldian manner, the author function performed on the borders of the symbolic discourse.[65] The modernist terrorist is not a pure outsider like a fundamentalist longing to immerse mystically

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59 J. de Mul, 'Onzingeving. Moedwil en misverstand in Hermans' Wittgenstein-interpretatie', in *De Gids* (mei 2008), 451-459.

60 Hermans, 'Unsympathetic fictional characters', trans. by Michele Hutchison, in "Three Poetical Essays by Willem Frederik Hermans: Preamble, Behind the Signposts No Admittance and Unsympathetic Fictional Characters", in *Journal of Dutch Literature* 10.2 (2019), 45-55.

61 F. Ruiter and W. Smulders, 'Van moedwil tot misverstand, van Dorleijn tot Vaessens', in *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* 126 (2010), 63-85, and id., 'The Aggressive Logic of Singularity: Willem Frederik Hermans', *Journal of Dutch Literature*, 4.1 (2013), 4-42.

62 E. Kieft, *Oorlogsmythen: Willem Frederik Hermans en de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2012).

63 M. Dupuis, *Hermans' dynamiek: De romanwereld van W.F. Hermans* (The Hague: BZZTôH, 1985).

64 I agree here with Ham, *Door Prometheus geboeid: De autonomie en autoriteit van de moderne Nederlandse auteur*, p. 203 and p. 209.

65 M. Foucault, 'What is an author?', in *Screen* 1 (1979), 13-34.

into the real father or mother instead of the symbolic ones.[66] Instead, the modernist writer or intellectual holds and analyzes the symbolic border position between the inside of our socio-symbolic game and the chaotic outside of the Real.[67] The outside is not there for the taking, but a mystery that continuously raises questions and imposes social critique. What legitimizes this social construct, the shape of our 'socius', when society is a linguistic structure built on nothing more substantial than the quicksand of the Real? How is the inside defined, and what or whom is excommunicated to the outer rims, and why? The writer is more of an inside-outsider, a border liner who challenges society with these questions, which will turn him often into a terrorist or whistle-blower in the eyes of the establishment. Though as scholars, we should not automatically do as the Romans do, reproducing the image of an arch-enemy, the fundamentalist enemy claiming to occupy the non-existent external foundation or origin ('arche') of symbolic discourse. It would be better to distinguish the position of the literary writer. This modernist form of symbolic terrorism is not perversion, but sublimation. Depicting the border – with all the little cracks and blots in the walls of our safe spaces and gated communities – opens up our productive aporia, a free space of desire and an autonomous place that no subject, not even the writer, can occupy permanently, since it forms the precarious precondition of subjective and societal freedom.

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[66] Which would be the defining characterological structure of religious terrorists according to R. Stein, *For Love of the Father: A Psychoanalytic Study of Religious Terrorism* (Stanford, Calif.: SUP, 2009).

[67] This artistic and intellectual border position of the modernist corresponds with the schizophrenic position of 'Baron Munchausen' developed in W. Schinkel, *Denken in een tijd van sociale hypochondrie: aanzet tot een theorie voorbij de maatschappij*.

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