



Appendix

Three Poetical Essays by Willem Frederik Hermans: Preamble, Behind the Signposts No Admittance and Unsympathetic Fictional Characters

For scholarly reasons of reproducibility and verifiability, the reader can find here three English translations of texts written by Hermans that I used for the article 'The Modernist Affair with Terrorism: The Curious Case of Willem Frederik Hermans'. The translations were made for scholarly usage within the NWO project '[The Power of Autonomous Literature: Willem Frederik Hermans](#)' (2010-2015) and/or as course material within the curriculum of Modern Dutch Literature at Utrecht University. Although one of these texts ('Preamble') is a fictional text with a dramatized author and one of them is a very short column originally published in a newspaper ('Behind the Signposts'), I consider them all very important poetical essays on the greater purpose of Hermans's literature.

Preamble (pp. 38-42) is the translation by Ina Rilke of 'Preamble', the introduction of the short story collection *Paranoia*, first published in Dutch in 1953. It was recently republished as part of the [seventh volume of *Volledige Werken*](#).

Behind the Signposts No Admittance (pp. 43-44) is the translation by Sven Vitse of 'Achter borden Verboden Toegang', first published in *Het Vrije Volk*, 25 January 1956. It was republished in *Het sadistische universum* (1964), now part of the [eleventh volume of *Volledige Werken*](#).

Unsympathetic Fictional Characters (pp. 45-55) is the translation by Michele Hutchison of 'Antipathieke romanpersonages', originally published first in *De Vlaamse Gids* 44 (1960) and republished in the fifth and extended edition of *Het sadistische universum* (1967), also part of the [eleventh volume of *Volledige Werken*](#).

Daan Rutten, January 2020

Preamble

[translated by Ina Rilke]

I

In the days when I began to write, without having made an all-consuming habit of it, I was already collecting large quantities of writing paper.

The fact of a writer having a lot of paper in stock is, in itself, nothing special. Although there are plenty of writers who, at moments of inspiration, must resort to wallpaper, it is non-writers in particular who tend to think it perfectly normal for an author to keep a quantity of blank paper in the house. They will be surprised at my admission that I, although in possession of good-quality paper of various types, still never use it.

I write on the backs of old calendar sheets and cut-up posters, on used envelopes, on bills, and on letters from other people if there's any space left.

It's not to save money that I'm so miserly in this respect; it's because I'm incapable of writing on new paper.

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.

I can spend a long time looking at stationery shop windows. I have never worked in an office, so I'm fascinated by the range of paper types and formats that turn out to exist: the notebooks as thick as a fist or even two fists, with marbled red-and-blue edging, the cash books as big as a tabletop, the folders, the filing cards and index tabs. I get catalogues sent to me by the companies that trade in them.

At regular intervals I make plans to furnish some of the rooms in my house with the latest office equipment complete with sophisticated filing systems, so I that could survey at a glance all I have forgotten and will forget, in spite of myself - all I think of, have thought of and must yet think of. But I know I'd rather spend the time it would take to fill all those books, cards and printed forms with past notions, on thinking up other things.

Still, if I ever become a millionaire I'll move into a palace filled with office supplies, all of which will be found unused when I'm dead - in gross disparagement, to the outsider's mind, of those unfortunates who are not millionaires and who must live out their days scribbling in the wretched oversized notebooks and ledgers I treasure just for the heck of it. No one asks himself whether an empty filing system may not be the best legacy of all.

Even today the temptation of a stationery shop can become irresistible to me, and I go in and buy the latest model of ring-binder. But it disappears among the rest of the supplies, because when I sit down to write I prefer to fish out some old school exercise book with a few pages to spare. I only write on paper that would otherwise be used to light the fire.

II

The saying goes that paper is patient. It can be maltreated at will by bullies, obviously. But that has nothing to do with patience.

For paper doesn't truly become paper until it has been used, and once it's been used there's not much to be done about it. The patience of paper is no greater than its size in square centimetres. For me that's not enough. It could just as well despise me and prefer to seek recourse elsewhere. That is why I don't dare to write on new paper.

New paper can still run off in all directions.

III

Sometimes I muster myself and start writing in a smartly bound, fresh-smelling notebook, but after a few hours, seeing all the crossed-out words, the blots and above all my hideous scrawl on the pristine smoothness of that harmonious format, I find I can't forgive myself for not leaving the thing as it was when it came from the shop, and then I put it away in some spot where I'll never find it again.

Only handwriting, crossings-out and blots draw my attention. Because whatever deliberate meaning there may be in there, it's a mere fraction of what I should have been writing, amounting to no more than two or three hairs sticking up from the void into which it sinks.

It seems to me that I'm represented by the blots and crossings-out alone, the way a bacterium is represented to the naked eye only by the disease it causes.

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.

So I prefer to stick to writing, for all that I'm aware, perhaps more so than most people, that no writer does justice to his paper. That's why I only write on paper that has its back to the wall, paper for which no further opportunities arise than the stove or my fountain pen.

So there we are, face to face, the paper and I, each with our back to the wall, confronting the choice between on the one hand writing and being written on - and on the other, oblivion.

I write, because with each thought I forget there is less of me to last.

IV

A human life is a collection, a great stockpile of movements and ideas. Most of it is lost forever, and it cannot be denied that the memory is distressingly arbitrary in selecting what to retain and what to discard.

I knew someone once who (by way of goodbye forever) photographed his meals prior to eating them and his faeces prior to flushing the lavatory. Each month yielded him a hundred and thirty photographs, no two the same: a breathtaking collection.

If we could register everything, every single thing we hear, see, taste and believe, including our mistakes, our most idiotic opinions, and also our unfinished sentences, and if we moreover possessed an organ capable of overseeing this museum at a glance, how much less reason there would be to think of ourselves as insignificant!

Because then everything would be of equal significance, just as we have no choice now but to treat everything as equally insignificant, as insignificant as a piano lacking most of its strings, and to take what we remember and retain to be just a fluke, and what we call our life to be nothing but residue, the lingering smell of a long-extinguished fire.

There will come a time when the moralists and humanists offering opinions on the nature of man will be taken no more seriously than we now take the Roman augurs who foretold the future by observing the entrails of sacrificial animals, and when there will be just as little reason to spare human dignity as there is now for us to avoid travel during the crescent moon. Because by then it will be common knowledge that nothing can be proved about mankind, and that in all man's doings, in his being and appearance, now and in the past, there is not a trace to be found of what he is and has been.

We are nothing but the beachcombers of our own lives, gathering odds and ends along the sea of forgetfulness. In our hand we hold the rusty nail from a large, sunken ship - and we take the lump of rust to be a watch. Because the fact that one thing remains while the other disappears means that no one can deny the difference between the two, even if the difference is no greater than that between the guilder in your pocket and the guilder you've spent. But that is no excuse for the persistent superstition that whatever dregs remain must necessarily belong together, that they add up to a system, a watch, or a jigsaw puzzle.

I can't bring myself to surrender to those lucid minds whose ideas display the coherence of a train schedule or logarithm table, nor do I get carried away by those who write as though they have laid old newspapers cuttings in a row, or have stained their paper, or crumpled it up, or torn it to shreds.

V

It will not be long before the rise in population density exerts so much pressure on individual freedom that there will be nobody making an effort to put their ideas of the world and of themselves into words. Politicians are eager to persuade us that, unless we're careful, a world-view (currently of a much-feared world) will be imposed on us through some ideology or other using violent means and concentration camps. It may happen, because you never can tell, but whether we're careful or not won't stop the new world from coming, because nobody will know what to do about it.

In that world people will have no more inclination to act individually or express a personal opinion than we have in ours to fight duels.

VI

Man thinks in terms of words that do not really exist, and is blind to original chaos.

There is only one real word: chaos.

Some Negro tribes use one word for the man who climbs a mountain and another for the man sent packing by his wife, one word for a man who kills a lion and another for a man who weaves baskets. But the human memory is limited. It is only because primitive peoples tend to stay put or take several generations to make a single journey, and therefore live in a much smaller world than ours, that they can afford so many words. They feel no need for our abstractions, which have nothing to do with reality.

Since our words are (of necessity) restricted in number, there is repetition, yes, but there is no reality. We live in a falsified world. All we have is the same words being repeated over and over, but they convey nothing. The single real word in our languages is: chaos. Like the word 'god', it means everything and nothing. And yet 'horse' is hardly more specific. For a horse in the stable is a different 'horse' than a horse before the cart. And a stable without a horse is not the same as a stable with horses, and a cart without a horse is no longer the same cart. Take a horse from the stable and harness it to a cart, and both horse and cart are changed. They are different each minute: when the horse steps forward, when the wheels begin to turn, etc. etc. They move, they wear out. They change from one second to the next. But no one in the world ever mentions this! 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.

VII

I write, although I know that each word I write means omitting ten thousand others. But those ten thousand continue to float around like particles of mud in a glass of dirty water. If you look down at the surface, they obscure the dregs lying on the bottom. I can see what I have written only through the murk of amorphous matter. Now can you see why the paper I've written on strikes me as defaced? And can you imagine how badly treated my sheet of paper is, to my mind, compared to the paper inscribed by a calculating machine or printed with a photograph?

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.

I sometimes imagine a truly happy life: shutting myself away to read, day in day out. But even then I wouldn't escape from writing, because there wouldn't be enough light. You can still write in the dark, but not read.

VIII

For science, language ceases to exist. Science thinks in new signs, which, by the way, don't replace language, but constitute a separate form of thinking, the only form of thinking that yields certitude, because uncertainty is kept out of it by consensual effort, as far as that is possible.

The old uncertainties resulting from language-thinking remain in place.

Under these circumstances it can happen that someone confronts himself without recognizing himself as such, or confronts someone else and thinks he recognizes himself. That which is unanimously ascertained (science) loses its value for the soul, which, having lost touch with its own relevance to science, turns a blind eye to it.

Only this can explain why man spends most of his life dealing with the unknown, with chaos. Only cranks make a hobby of doing sums.

Even those who believe in their own positivism don't succeed in devoting their time exclusively to positive occupations.

IX

I have called this collection of stories PARANOIA, which is not to say that the characters I describe suffer from that mental illness. I am no psychiatrist; I do not diagnose. I was thinking of all those people who live the way I write: with a wheel of fortune at the back of their mind, a bad-luck bird perching on their shoulder, and an anything but shock-proof compass dangling from their neck.

If my characters make a largely disloyal and unreliable impression, it is not because I wish to moralize about these failings, for I am no moralist - it is because I believe that there is nothing that can be calculated with certainty. In daily life, if a person is not permanently aware that he can think anything he likes about other people, if he pretends to be trustworthy and trusting, it's only to show that he knows how life should be lived. Those few (and many at home) who lack this trait and consequently fall prey to suspicion and delusion, are merely in the position of not seeing why one event should take place and not the other, why this should be fact and that a hallucination. 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.

Their view is that none of the normal proofs have been given, just as I have failed to prove why certain words are necessary and others should be scrapped.

Much like a watch made of rusty nails, they stand outside the age-old framework representing the truth, outside the world that carries on doing what is 'necessary' and refraining from what is 'forbidden', without anyone being able to prove why that should be so.

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.

Those few have been insufficiently mysterious. 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.

X

You may wonder why I am allowing these confidences to precede a collection of stories that have nothing to do with my personal vicissitudes.

It is because I myself am unable to prove that they have nothing to do with me personally, and because I have my moments of severe doubt as to whether this is true, whether I am right in denying that these vicissitudes are mine.

And for those of you who find all this too complicated, this preamble may at least be justified in that it offers a glimpse of what a recent critic referred to as 'a touch of inimitable insanity'.

Groningen, Oct. '53.

Behind the Signposts No Admittance

[translated by Sven Vitse]

Few people know how much I feel attracted to what is concealed behind the signposts No Admittance.

Even people who have publicly spilt the beans on me and who have complained that I did not explain all about myself beforehand don't know that, because I have never brought it up. But ever since I was fourteen years old I have spent many days at those isolated places from where merely some rumbling and smoke reaches passers-by. And often not even that. Only a Private Road where only those people go who are entitled to, leads to those places, from the public road which is nothing more for its part than a side-road of the main road.

It is there that monstrous draglines, pneumatic drills and dynamite destroy the illusion that our world should be an 'inhabitable world'. It is here where it becomes clear what kind of planet our world really is: a huge stone, pure at the inside, solid and clear, dirty at the outside, mucous and worn out.

That dirt, that wear material, those grindings, left behind as the wear and tear by ice, snow, rain and wind, has produced everything: the microbes, the vegetation, the animals and the human race. Sometimes this huge stone is cleaned up a little by nature. She breathes upon it, scratches it, knocks on it or strikes a match to it. The newspapers speak of catastrophes: tornados, floods, avalanches, forest fires, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. It causes cries of distress, but in fact nothing happened: the huge stone is still perfectly intact.

Cut a splinter of the stone and it will show its pure cosmic colours, its minerals called jewels and gems if they are hard enough to withstand the wear and tear and do not contribute to the world's habitability.

Behind those signposts No Admittance dusty labourers need brute force to cut a little fragment of our huge stone. There the material is being mined of which we build our houses, the coal that warms us and the ore of which one forges weapons.

Sometimes I walk around those abysses without doing anything, considering how man, frantically straining himself, gnaws crumbs off the enormous meteor he is helplessly tied to, upon which he roars through the universe like a shipwrecked person on a raft, without the prospect of nearing other shipwrecked people on other rafts.

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 enamelled jars lie. There is a stench as if only the lowest forms of life would venture here.

No one comes here but the dusty workers and me. The workers pay no attention to me. No-one will come and look for me there, in that thundering loneliness where I belong although I never discuss it with anyone.

The rattling of the machines sounds to me like the music of the revolution. Here the pointless heroism with which man digs himself into his rock thumps in dark alleys which proportionally can not even be compared to a pin-prick.

Here the trampling of a prisoner on the concrete floor of his cell resounds, amplified a thousandfold.

Unsympathetic fictional characters

[Translated by Michele Hutchison]

1.

The only writers who are true writers are those who intend to see more than the reader sees, who mean to recognise more than was recognised prior to them writing about it. Every reader forms an enormous obstacle to the writer in this, all thoughts of an actually existing readership inhibit and, in so doing, pervert the writer's pronouncements.

It is therefore only worth having written when the writer is certain he has expressed what his reader knew but remained silent about; what his reader dreamed of but repressed upon awakening.

I will admit that this implies a belief that the reader has the same mental constitution as the writer deep down.

Sometimes this belief is incarnated in clearly demonstrable ways, but mostly it is not.

Yet, however often it is denied, it will never be rocked to the core, otherwise the writer would hold his tongue for good, and be willingly consigned to a mental asylum. The writer only earns his freedom of movement by continually convincing his enemies that they have no right to accuse him of anything, that it is them, their mendacious society (every society is mendacious, whenever, wherever it is), their absurd knowledge, their stupid ignorance, their hypocritical forgetfulness, their unfounded laws, their corrupt beliefs, their futile striving for self-preservation or even success, their temporary nature, their irrelevancy, as despised as his own. Hammering it into their heads that they have no right to judge him, that they do not even have that spurious right they call right. (Anyway, is there any other kind of right? Anyone believing that a 'true' right exists or is even thinkable becomes a journalist before he knows it. A journalist formulates what the masses think and the writer disputes what the masses think and reveals what they do not dare to think.)

2.

A novel is a book about people. There are also novels which are not about people; novels primarily featuring landscapes, beautiful scenery, conditions or cities. There are countless examples of this latter type, particularly in Dutch literature. These novels are boring. Why are there so many of them in Dutch literature and why are they boring?

I cannot address these questions here.

I will limit myself to the people written about in novels about people.

What kind of people?

Are they really people?

How do novels differ from other books about people, such as sociological and psychological studies or historical treatises?

3.

Readers divide the people dealt with in novels into sympathetic and unsympathetic characters.

The sympathy or the antipathy that a fictional character arouses is rarely or never limited to just these characters but will extend to the writer of the novel, even though the latter does not feature in the book at all.

Many readers have the impression and many writers give that impression that writers consider themselves better than the non-writing masses.

The writer gives the impression that he is superior to other people precisely because he describes them, because he uses them as material in his novels, because he judges them, or at least, is capable of placing them in all kinds of light and darkness he considers desirable.

Yet, this is not a reason for placing himself above the masses. In fact, the writer despises himself for the same reasons he despises the masses. There is a deeply buried solidarity between the writer and the masses. It is a solidarity not only based on mutual hatred, but also on a corresponding self-hatred. The reader hates the writer in himself, the writer hates himself in his fictional characters.

Readers who do not accept this, fail to understand the essential function of the novel. Only journalism satisfies them.

Writers who do not understand this are not writers but journalists. Only these kinds of writers, who are in fact journalists, can bring sympathetic characters into existence.

What is a sympathetic fictional character?

It is a character the writer does not reveal more about than the masses, in their interactions based on spurious values, publicly want to know about themselves.

Anyway, as strange as this may seem, the sympathy or antipathy roused by a character has nothing to do with the virtue or vice, as measured by the generally-recognised criteria, which he displays, or the degree to which he appears to share the widespread conditioned responses. He can commit a murder every day and rape a different sister every night, he can turn out to be a racist or an anti-Semite, and yet the audience can still find him sympathetic – as long as at the end of the book the sister turns out to be a changeling so that the universal innate taboo is not broken, as long as the murders are presented as heroic deeds, as long as he allows himself an otherwise contemptuous act of friendliness towards a Jew, and he gives his faithful black driver a generous tip at the end of the year and sends him to church at Christmas.

How sympathetic he is, as long as nothing is examined too deeply, as long as nothing is delved into!

Sympathy or antipathy is not a question of virtuousness, but purely of dimensions.

For years I have been planning to write a book with a protagonist whose character is as pure as snow: someone with an unbelievable amount of love for his fellow men, someone who never gets rich at the cost of others, a Jain monk who wears a cloth in front of his mouth so as not to inhale a single innocent fly, and sweeps the ground in front of his feet so as never step on a worm. A monster of saintliness! I have only consigned this project to the backburner because of the risk that his monstrous saintliness won't turn out to be big or overwhelming enough and that the average reader will believe himself or his grandmother portrayed and flattered.

But it remains one of my greatest worries. The masses want goodness in a novel's hero, but it has to be the kind of goodness with which mediocrity can strike a compromise. A goodness which compared to the goodness of the average tax payer or what he considers this to be, is not made to look criminal. 'Setting too good an example is a kind of slander seldom forgiven,' Benjamin Franklin said.

The average reader demands protagonists who are good without setting too good an example. 'Heroes of human proportions' the journalists call that, and also 'people of flesh and blood.' They mean weak flesh and the blood of bloodsuckers. But no one will notice this, as long as the protagonist (just like the average citizen in daily life) does not express any subversive thoughts. Criminal or ignominious deeds are much less noticeable than an acerbic tongue or a so-called 'negative' outlook on life. The judging of actions and deeds, requires the reader to possess power of judgement, but a judgement is often already worked into the protagonist's verbal utterances. This makes nothing so difficult as having the character of a novel say something which the writer intends ironically, nothing leads to so many misunderstandings.

The hero of what I will call for convenience the serious novel, has different dimensions from the 'human', he is made from something other than 'flesh and blood'. All true fictional heroes are gods or demi-gods, demons, heroes, chosen ones, the anointed, the enchanted or prophets.

It is possible that when Flaubert wrote *Un Coeur simple*, he thought that his simple heroine represented nothing more than a portrait of the average uneducated servant. And yet she is much more. She stands up to the idea that the Holy Ghost is a dove, since a dove cannot speak, and in so doing becomes the prophet of a new religion in which a stuffed parrot is worshiped as a fetish.

4.

The realistic novel is also essentially a mythical novel, and its creator a magician. Not a psychologist, not a sociologist, not a biologist, but a magician who keeps his own personal natural science alive.

Realism is intrinsically a mythical discipline. It supposes that the everyday reality of life, birth, love, aggression, fear and death is knowable to the same degree of perfection that physics knows physical reality, if physics can be perfect.

Anyone considering everyday reality scientifically: sociologists, psychologists, even economists, know that this is not the case.

To write a realistic novel, to recreate reality, presupposes that the writer knows and has a command of the mechanisms of reality in the same way a technician has mastered the mechanisms of a calculator.

However, the realist writer has not mastered the mechanisms of his reality, he knows only, like every novelist, every fantasist, the mechanics he has invented himself. The realist novelist is a magician too, his story is not an objective account either, but a legend. His objectivity is a method, nothing more. The way he goes about describing reality is not objective; at the very most, it is conventional.

Now the proposition that the natural laws of inanimate matter are nothing but conventions is easy to defend. But these are a different kind of conventions from the unwritten conventions of reality which the historian, the journalist and the realistic novelist must adhere to.

If, as sometimes happens, novels give many readers the impression of rendering ‘reality’, of being nothing other than ‘reality’, this is only because the writer has succeeded in conveying his mythical reality to the reader by suggestion; exactly as the writer of fairytales conveys his fairytale world to readers who know objectively that the things he is recounting cannot have happened. The only difference is that, in the first example, the difference between the writer’s mythical reality and ‘real’ reality is difficult to demonstrate. Usually it only becomes apparent with the passing of the years on account of the fact that ‘real’ reality is only barely known and can only be barely known. (Descriptions of reality are subject to trends.)

Another, second reason, is that, apart from the fact that he does not reproduce the everyday, barely-known reality with pretensions of realism, the writer of fairytales (fantasist, science fiction writer etc.) subjects the physical, accurately-known reality to his own fantasy: he turns a mouse into a lion, he allows hands to break iron, he places a tropical jungle in Antarctica and palaces on the planet Saturn. Space, time and identity impose no limits on him. To offset this, fairytales and fantastical stories do not deviate from the generally accepted morals: evil is punished, virtue is rewarded, the characters remain schematic.)

But the only primary difference between realist and fairytale writers can be found in these different attitudes towards the natural laws, in as much as it is a difference in practice. Most readers are not physicists and cannot pinpoint the places where the writer’s propositions match those of physics and where they do not. (For example, Jules Verne’s reputation as a prophesier of scientific discoveries is based on this, even though his cannonball could never have found its way to the moon, and it will be a long time before a nuclear submarine is as good as Captain Nemo’s.)

If then a story wants to be a fairytale or a fantastical tale, its ‘untruthfulness’ must have an unusually bold shape.

The same goes for the novel’s confrontation with geographical and historical realities. If I publish a novel in the Netherlands in which I say that the Champlain Hotel on the corner of Dufferin and Main Street in Caraquet (Canada) was burned down in 1867 – how many readers can find out whether my statement is true, who will know whether Dufferin Street and Main Street intersected in Caraquet in 1868 [sic.] and whether there was a hotel that... and so on. Who will know whether I am a realist or a fantasist by claiming this?

And yet, you could still investigate it. (Though nobody will.)

In terms of sociological and psychological realities, it is impossible to check the facts.

If, in 1930, someone had written about a doctor incarcerated in Leeuwarden for committing a murder with cyanide, who went on to commit a second cyanide murder in prison, they would have been considered a fantasist. But now, in 1960, something like that seems to have actually happened, so the incident could be the subject of a realistic story, even though a thorough police, psychiatric etc, investigation has not succeeded in making the incident probable. The judges, who are charged with determining reality and may not choose, will chose.

The realist novel is a mythical story because its reality is largely a mythical reality, made up of the general opinion of a group, who take a few observations from all that is observable and put them together to create a myth. Ninety-nine out of one hundred judgements are preconceptions, however commonly stated and shared.

The realist writer thinks he doesn’t choose, but he does choose (in the way of a non-chooser) and his choosing is nothing less than a magical act.

Only the born blind can accuse the writer of lying; he never lies. He cannot lie where there is no truth. Only slavish journalists can reject the mythical character of the novel in the name of the social i.e. commercial myths which they publish in their newspapers as nothing but sanctifying reality: the reality of the indoctrinated fellow marcher who loves the dictator's whip, or in whose welfare state, mediocrity is sacrosanct.

5.

No single story, however realistic, can answer all the questions that could be asked of it. The art of the realist writer is to avoid overly crass objections, his powers of observation should not be inferior to those of the average observer. In short, he knows how to give the impression that everything tallies. And yet he doesn't answer simple questions. His art is to create an atmosphere which excludes certain questions.

Every storyteller hypnotises his readers. When a child is told the fairytale Puss in Boots, in which a cat uses effrontery, murder and deceit to make his owner stinking rich, he does not protest. The cat and his owner are presented as sympathetic weaklings who have to be cunning; their cunningness is a virtue and virtue must be rewarded. The moral of the story is that no criminal offence is prohibited for the weak. But no one says this out loud. Anyone doing so would be a killjoy.

Morals are harder to sidestep in realistic stories than in fairytales. But even in the most realistic play, the rocks are made of cardboard and the bathroom door actually opens onto the dark rear of the stage.

The realistic play or story is just a game that no one wants to break up – none of the realists in any case.

What does a child do when she no longer believes in fairytales? She will ask questions which the fairytales cannot answer. How can Santa's reindeers fly? As soon as the questions are asked, the game is over.

The illusion of realist and naturalist writers has been to create a game which can never end, answering all the questions.

It has not been possible to create a never-ending game by sticking to 'reality', but the search for a game that cannot be ended, being able to answer all questions, even by expressly not answering them, is what every serious writer strives for, of every place, or every time.

6.

The art of novel writing would have ceased needing to exist if writers had succeeded in producing nothing but reality. Descriptions of reality are best left to sociologists and psychologists, after all.

Literature has a different function. The novelist I am talking about does not describe reality but creates a personal mythology and he does this deliberately, unlike the realist. His heroes are not 'people of flesh and blood' but personifications.

He can disguise them as he likes: as long dead rulers and generals, or as labourers and soldiers, or as farmers and the petty bourgeois, the kind we are all surrounded with all the time.

In the first case, the mythological hero is barely disguised as a being of flesh and blood: rulers and generals, as long as they have been dead for a while, are supreme mythical figures. This is why the general public has a clear preference for historical novels. They think they like historical novels because what is in them really happened, but that is not the real reason. The real reason is that the reader's subconscious experiences these novels as the language of the subconscious, as mythology, while his conscious mind suspects nothing.

The reader recognises in the heroes and princes beings of a different order from himself, he puts them into categories and renders them harmless, he accepts them as phenomena which cannot hurt him. After all, he was not born 1900 years ago as a Roman Emperor, he does not have anything to do with Nero's or Caligula's atrocities. This is why he can secretly dream: if I'd been born 1900 years ago in Rome and crowned Holy Emperor, I could have taught Nero and Caligula a lesson or two about lascivious behaviour! Or he thinks: in Nero's place, I would have sent the lions back to their cages with a powerful wave of the hand and been generous enough to release the poor Christian prisoners from the arena. After reading this kind of novel, he feels like a better person. When he closes the book, he is forgiven all the failures and setbacks in his own life for a few moments, because he was born in the twentieth century. Until he feels the need to read another such novel, he is granted absolution to sleep in his own inferiority like in a soft bed of warm bodies and it does not cost him a thing.

Even most terrible crimes are splendid, as long as they are committed by a historical figure and written with the inaccuracy common to every writer of history (let alone the writer of historical novels), just like the heroic deeds of Puss in Boots for a child.

Sympathetic protagonists are, for example, the Three Musketeers who stab people to death all over the place for a trifle, and so on, and so on.

Serious novelists do not write for this kind of hedonist. They hate themselves too much for this, they hold themselves responsible for the fact that their deeds are so inferior to the mythological greatness in their imagination. This is why the serious writer will not deal in murder and bagatelles, he will publish no deception as praiseworthy guile. Even though he is always the weakling, he will not always be clever.

Wanting the impossible, a sure sign of lunacy in the eyes of the non-writer, is at the centre of the writer's art and the only thing which makes his life worthwhile.

He does not have anything to do with 'realities' or with 'possibilities', in the way that politicians and journalists do. He does not have to tackle the question of whether his ideas are good for public spiritual health, like clergymen or healers do. The writer who concerns himself with what is possible and desirable is at most a pedagogue. Multatuli, Dostoyevsky and Zola were pedagogues, Henry Miller, Sartre and Kerouac were pedagogues. But luckily not all of the time, and not in all earnestness, even though they may have been ignorant of this themselves.

The writer who concerns himself with what is possible will limit his readership to those unimaginative creatures who know exactly what is possible and what is not.

A novelist's art, or any other kind of art, which limits itself to a certain audience has as little to do with art as science, which limits itself to a certain audience, is science. (e.g. Astrology).

Scientific truths are applicable to every audience. They are universal and fundamental (as long as further developments have not proven the opposite, of course). Science which limits itself to a certain audience, for example, school children, is not science, but a teaching method, pedagogy. No one would contest this.

In literature too, the difference between pedagogues and pioneers should be clear enough, but the newspaper reviewers, preachers, quacks, bellyachers and media magnates gloss over this as much as possible. They refuse to see the difference between Koestler and Kafka, between Harry Mulisch and Gerard Reve.

7.

What is the nature of the impossible thing the writer wants?

It is of a mythological nature, because it is immortality.

The longing for immortality is more complicated than believers realise. Man's attitude to the idea of immortality is ambivalent, to say the least.

On the one hand, man can only live as though he will still be alive tomorrow, i.e. tomorrow as well, and thereafter, eternally. On the other hand, which man of forty does not think with some regularity: another forty or fifty years at the most and thank god, it will all be over?

If he really wanted to be immortal, he would not think this. Real immortality would give him the opportunity to put right everything that had gone wrong, to make up for all damage done.

The writer is not this patient. He does not have enough time. He wants to make up for all the damage right now, prove his innocence, once and for all.

Whose life is free of deceit? Who has never been deceived? Are peace, friendship and love conceivable without deceit?

Who really does not get attached to anything? Not to the opinion others form of him and not to the opinion he has of himself?

While the non-writer only exists in the consciousnesses of the few people he knows personally and can only be judged by them, the writer steps right into the minds of thousands of strangers.

It is possible that there is no other psychiatric explanation for this remarkable behaviour than this: the writer is a person who cannot accept the image that he thinks the people around him have formed of him. This is why he tries to create a new existence in new surroundings. He is a spiritual emigrant.

8.

There are two kinds of writers.

The first kind want to justify themselves as people.

The second kind want to justify themselves as writers.

The first kind are memoirists, in a more or less disguised form. They publish diaries, autobiographies, pseudo-autobiographies or novels in the first person.

Since they want to justify themselves as people, they will claim to stick to reality as much as possible, because otherwise, if they are caught out lying or fantasizing, they run the risk that the rest will not be believed. They want to justify themselves, if necessary as monsters, their confession implies the statement: right, I'm a monster, but you, dear reader, are a monster too in your way.

'Pour moi, je le déclare hautement en sans crainte, quiconque, même sans avoir lu mes écrits, examinera par ses propres yeux mon naturel, mon caractère, mes mœurs, mes penchants, mes plaisirs, mes habitudes, et pourra me croire un malhonnête homme, est lui-même un homme à étouffer.' Rousseau

There is an unvoiced assumption that sincerity and having the courage to confess are virtues, eclipsing any sins confessed.

Readers value confessional writers when they think: 'I'm a monster, but luckily I'm not the only monster; the writer was a monster too and dared to openly admit it.'

The second kind of writer is much less afraid of being taken for a fantasist. He does not insist that his fantasies be believed, but claims that they contain a deeper form of reality and longs for this deeper reality to be justified. Freud wrote that the conscious content of a novel acts as bait for the unconscious content.

As every fisherman knows, the bait is no less important than the hook. Psychologically-minded newspaper critics, most of them shouting out that they won't be fooled, invariably claim that they can find the unconscious content, the 'hook', immediately. This leads to a lot of pointless writing, mainly of a defamatory nature. What the 'hook' is, the unconscious magnet in the consciously written whole, does not only depend on the writer's unconscious, but also on that of the reader not trained in psychoanalysis.

The deeper reality of the second kind of writer is immediately conceived as a mythological reality. He is no realist and does not believe in 'reality'.

His novel characters are not self-portraits or portraits of people the writer has met. They are incarnations of the wild jungle animals which live under the double bottom of the human soul.

The way they are presented, their location in time and space, in actually existing or previously having existed situations, are only secondary when it comes to arguing that the characters in a realist novel or historical account are as mythical as those in a fairytale. Presentation, identity, location in time and space etc. are not secondary when the writer has come to realise that the difference or rather, the boundary, between the 'real world' and the mythical world is not clear, and that, in daily life, everybody creates in his mind his wife, his friends and his enemies – when he recognises just one world: precisely that of the mythical.

– When he has understood the consequences of reputations being made in the 'real world' and broken on the grounds of myth, when he has experienced the fact that millions have died in wars and concentration camps in the name of myth.

–When he has appreciated that the decisions taken even in the most simple of human lives are based partly on chance and partly on mistakes, and that the small number we consider reasonable only have a lack of knowledge of the facts to thank for this.

X. married the wrong woman. His family had all predicted this. Of course, thousands of women would have been better for X. than the one he chose. But one forgets that X. never had the opportunity to meet thousands of women. He could have chosen between perhaps two or three and even these two or three were spread over a ten-year period. Not one of these two or

three happened (and no wonder!) to be suitable. What were his options? Would X. have been better off remaining unmarried? In retrospect, yes, but if he had taken this course, he probably would have spent the rest of his unhappy, lonely life blaming himself for not marrying the woman who was now making him unhappy.

Y1 has the same name as Y2, who was a communist in his youth. Y1's name ends up in a secret dossier. Y1 never gets promoted at work. Y1 spends his whole life wondering where he went wrong. He goes to evening classes to retrain for a new career! He looks for the problem everywhere it isn't and, here is the humorous climax, perhaps he dies thinking he finally discovered the cause. A knowing, acquiescent end, the family calls it. Who can count the truths that never come to light? In any case, Y1's life took an irreversibly and radically different course than it would have if an anonymous secret official had not confused him with Y2.

Z. is tried for an offence against the press code. Z. is acquitted but becomes known as 'the man from that trial'. In any situation where committees are charged with compiling lists of candidates, granting subsidies and more, somebody always remarks casually that Z is 'the man from that trial.' It is astonishing that the committees never put Z forward out of all the candidates they consider, and yet, nobody can say, let alone prove, that Z is being discriminated against.

In one country, three hundred years ago, an admiral almost captured the capital of an enemy island with his fleet. Three hundred years later, the country's forces are so reduced that it has no chance of capturing a single enemy capital.

Nevertheless, it pays millions of guilders to keep an old, patched-up aircraft carrier in the fleet. But naturally no one talks about the admiral anymore.

9.

Freud's discovery of an unconscious beyond the reach of the rational will has become an integral aspect in judging human behaviour.

The influence of a person's physical condition or his diet on his humour, his decisions, his life's course has become a banal science.

Yet, the opinion that he is a rational being has not been hampered by these facts, nor by what has been learned about the deliberate or otherwise suggestions which he is exposed to on a daily basis.

If we dismiss all the other causes in which behaviour and ways of being (i.e. the average of all behaviours, rare partly-rational behaviour, and an enormous amount of irrational behaviour) escape the conscious rational control of the individual, we also dismiss the fact that nobody knows where they are headed in the long term, and so it could very well turn out that we are constantly hypnotized: intermittently by targeted advertising, press, television and radio, and permanently by everything that happens to us, everything we have experienced since birth and perhaps even before that.

Even resistance to this 'post-hypnotic influence' is a compulsion, as a rapid survey of alcoholics, vegetarians, teetotallers, idealisms, criminals and artists demonstrates.

There is not a single eccentric who can come up with something entirely new, and, in any case, who would appreciate it?

Resistance is accepted within the context of the subservient whole. Traditional society bears the society of artists like some skyscrapers bear a baroque tower or a Moorish villa on their roofs.

10.

Life is just a game or a comedy, even death and dying are not serious.

Repeating this trivial thought would be pointless if there was not always something in this life which was taken seriously all the same.

For past writers, a life after this life was serious, the hereafter.

For modern writers, logic, stringent logical thinking which stringently adheres to rules laid down in advance, is serious.

However, in order to remain stringently logical, this way of thinking is only suitable for concepts which were tailored to fit this kind of logical thought beforehand. Mathematical computations, for example.

Outside of mathematics, in physics, for instance, logic and truth become much more problematic.

Yet it remains impressive that our tape recorders, our telephones, our televisions and our rockets (sometimes) do what is expected of them. It is not only impressive, it is also a harmonic dissonance in our essentially fantastical, mythical disharmony. It proves to wit

that unstable, hypnotized, obsessed, crazy human beings in certain instances and in certain very restricted conditions are capable of rational, or at least functional, decision-making.

At least that is how it looks. It does not have to be true at all. It could also be possible that there is a certain ordering principle present in the cosmos and that a few individuals who will become successful mathematicians or physicists later, are partly open to the silent suggestion of this ordering principle. (This idea explains the fact that even though each religion is chaos and myth in a Petri dish, some mathematicians and physicists are religious.)

Even the most intellectually gifted are only partly and temporarily capable of rational acts. The idea that scholars and chess masters are more rational outside of their areas of expertise than non-scholars, in their marriages, in their political, religious, ethical convictions, in their contact with other human beings and so is a common error. The best we can speak of in these areas is phony logic.

Partly and temporarily: the number of minutes, even seconds each day that a scholar's brain thinks rationally is negligible. He comes up with solutions in a flash: the rest of his thought is chaotic, even flawed. Chaotic, random, in short: mythical.

Sometimes these brains' thoughts in other areas will be all the more mythical because the brain's carrier does not recognize the mythical character of its thought, fixated as it is by the flashing by of the few seconds in which he actually thinks.

The great scholar A. is anti-Semitic, the great scholar B. is a communist sympathizer, the great scholar C. sees communist spies everywhere, the great scholar D. is a misogynist. They carry

out the same mathematical calculations with the same results but wear different ties and become excited about radically different outlooks on life.

Beyond their mathematics they are not very different from most imaginative writers, beyond their logic everything is paranoia, like it is with everyone.

In order to cope with this existence, they do not attempt to know reality, but the reality that their environment (i.e. the part of their environment that can help or damage them) holds up as reality, or else can be held up as reality – just like everyone.

11.

In a world which no longer believes in immortality, a conduit can only be found in what, in old-fashioned terms, should be called a mythology of Evil.

This Evil is Death.

‘Death, where is your victory?’ the Christians ask. They look for the familiar path. The non-Christians see Death’s victory hour after hour, day after day, year in year out. Death does not only mean dying, the end of an organism, but the broader meaning of the end of every existent situation, the end of every instance.

Death does not only mean perishing, but also being forgotten, disappearing; death is not only killing and destroying, but also cheating and betraying.

The presence of a memory is not limited to humans. Inanimate matter has a memory too. But what is unique to people is that this memory is never completely available at any desired moment. This means that nobody knows the extent of what he remembers and what he does not. In this endless land of darkness, in which it is impossible to be in two places at the same time, which sometimes seems to move around in our bodies like a ribbon or a stream (we can cry with our eyes and then smile with our mouths when influenced by two memories), death constantly finds new prey.

(1960)