



Earlier is Impossible. Deep Time and Geological Posthumanism in Dutch Fiction

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Abstract: What if we radically changed the scale of our imagination as literary readers and cultural historians? Developing recent claims on behalf of the importance of a broader, planetary perspective in literary history, this article argues that the study of Dutch literature would benefit from a 'big historicism', which takes into account the age of the earth and actively reconstructs the changing literary representation of the prehistoric past and the posthuman future. More specifically, the article analyzes the role of 'deep time' in classic and contemporary forms of Dutch fiction, including novels by Willem Frederik Hermans, Dimitri Verhulst, Stephan Enter and Jeroen Brouwers.

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Surveying a variety of recent methods in literary studies that includes the vogue of the 'transnational' and the plea for 'distant reading', the American critic Mark McGurl has pointed out that these approaches all hint at a fundamental methodological question that is rarely raised, let alone fully addressed: the question of scale.² At the end of *The Program Era* (2009), his seminal account of the deep ties between postwar American fiction and the creative writing program, he therefore raises this question himself:

Be it microcosmic or cosmic, a millisecond or a light year, a scene from distant childhood or a faculty meeting the day after tomorrow, the sheer variability of scales of attention in human life has been given short shrift in recent criticism, which errs when it thinks that one or another can claim an a priori privilege in the multi-scalar project of literary and cultural analysis. We can close-read or contextualize at various geographical scales; we can consider [69] one text or many; we can track cultural developments in a certain 'historical moment' or across the centuries: given that the attention span of criticism is highly variable, what might a self-consciousness of scale bring to our critical practice?³

This lack of attention to the problem of scale is hardly surprising. It takes a counterintuitive proposal like that of Franco Moretti – as a literary scholar, one should not describe five novels in detail but rather compare *seven thousand* titles and graph the results⁴ – to see that literature is traditionally connected with a very particular scale. Indeed, as McGurl has demonstrated, the function of literary studies in the modern university is to keep the institution *human* by sanctioning efforts 'to understand the world on the scale of human psychology [...] as opposed to the more specialized scales of attention that operate in, say, microbiology or cosmology or even sociology'.⁵ Even the most sprawling, 'maximalist' literary texts, it seems, mostly convey a

particular, human timeframe. If other academics study the ‘deep time’ of the earth, a geological notion which measures in the *billions* of years, it would not be an exaggeration to say that their colleagues from literature departments, like literary authors, deal with the ‘shallow time’ of humanity. As ecocritics might say, readers, writers and critics often subscribe to an implicitly *anthropocentric* conception of time. It is worthwhile to reconsider this conception, clearly, at a moment in time when, as Dipresh Chakrabarty has observed, ‘anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history’.⁶ Seeing that geological changes have speeded up in the second half of the twentieth century and humans have recently become geological actors – hence the notion of the ‘Anthropocene’ –, the limits of our notion of time and its literary representation merit our immediate attention.

A good example in Dutch of literature’s deliberately small-scale character is Leo Pleysier’s *Dieperik (Abyss)* (2010). Already announcing its minimalist intentions by its size, this ‘novel’ – perhaps novella would be a better word – contains a mere 111 pages. This sense of limitation returns in the book’s plot, which deals with the narrator’s childhood memories from the 1950s, particularly the ones associated with the ‘short period’⁷ his flamboyant uncle Wies lived and worked on the family farm.⁸ One incident in particular is singled out: the narrator’s memory of a near-fatal drowning accident while swimming with his uncle in the former clay pits of the local stone factory. For this epiphanic experience leads to brief reflections on history – traces of the Second World War and other dark but exciting intimations of adult life linger at the bottom of the pits – as well as memory – during ‘a short talk’⁹ many years later, Wies is no longer able to recall the incident, whereas the narrator has duplicated his crucial memory in the miniature memorial that is this book. The reader’s sense of limitation is further reinforced by the use of regional language – from the very beginning, the work [70] draws attention to words from the north-eastern dialect of Belgium – and by the specific narrative perspective – in the first section, the events are focalized through a child narrator with a limited knowledge of the greater world. The fictional universe of the story is also highly circumscribed, as can be seen from the fact that the story’s central locations can be taken in with one glance; from the boy’s *farm*, you can see the *factory*’s tower.¹⁰ Or consider the fact that the town’s French teacher loses her legs in an unexpectedly gruesome accident ‘right in front of the house where she was living (and still lives) [...] while her own mother was watching from behind the window’.¹¹ In this fictional world, people never truly leave their childhood homes, and life-changing events take place on the doorstep, while one’s own mother is watching. Even when the story turns more expansive in the second section, and relates the narrator’s later adult life, it takes the form of a seven-and-a-half page staccato summary.¹² The novella’s miniaturist character can perhaps best be summarized by its first chapter, in which many of the town’s important officials gather for a card game and stir up a lot of noise for what turns out to be, ironically, *small* change.¹³ As the book’s dust jacket puts it, this is indeed a ‘small tale’, as fit for *literary* analysis, you might say, as it is unfit for *geological* study.

Deep Time and Geological Posthumanism

Reacting against the narrow perspectives of literary fiction and literary criticism alike, McGurl has recently tried to recalibrate their scales. His argument takes its cue from a book by the postcolonial scholar Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents. American Literature Across Deep Time* (2006). Here, Dimock tries to reinvigorate American literary history by

(re)inserting into it a systematic awareness of the planet's geographical and historical span. In Dimock's view, literary scholars should no longer limit themselves to shockingly young national boundaries like those of the US, but should take into account the planet's global *extension* and its inconceivable *duration*, its transcontinental sweep and its 'deep time'. For this planetary perspective will enable them to connect Henry David Thoreau to the Indian Bhagavad-Gita, for instance, or Gerald Vizenor to the Eastern folklore figure Hanuman. Apart from broadening the scope of 'American literature', Dimock continues, the advantage of a notion like 'deep time' is that it reconnects distant nations, periods and even species. Reconnecting humanity to the natural world is not easy, she admits in the book's final chapter. Even in Peter Singer's classic argument on animal liberation, 'insects and fish' remain 'ethical *nonentities*', like 'trees, rivers, mountains, and inanimate nature in general'.¹⁴ To recover the view of the world 'as a vast interrelated network in which all objects and creatures are necessary', Dimock feels, 'we need to go back thousands of years'¹⁵ and listen to ancient, indigenous cultures which are supposedly more attuned to deep time and its ecological lessons. Using this seemingly outlandish temporal [71] scale as a measure does not only undermine 'speciesism'¹⁶ but also that other -ism; from the perspective of geological time, we are all 'Africans under the skin'.¹⁷ After highlighting the traces of the planet's duration and extension in the cultural archives, Dimock therefore concludes her book with this lesson: 'while deep time continues, we know that for all races, all nations, and all species, there is only one world'.¹⁸ Against the backdrop of deep time, American literature becomes world literature and all animals and even objects become members of the same family.

Returning to Dimock's argument in 'The Posthuman Comedy', McGurl has recently recast her form of 'big historicism'¹⁹ to reach a radically different conclusion. He begins by broadening Dimock's definition of deep time and restoring it to its original, 'geological meaning',²⁰ where it does not refer to 'thousands of years' but to 'the 3.5 thousand million years in which life on earth has been evolving, or for that matter, the 4.5 thousand million years from now until the earth is incinerated in the heat-death of the sun'.²¹ A consequence of this even 'deeper' time is that Dimock's reassuring conclusion of planetary kinship disappears. Drawing inspiration from philosophers like Quentin Meillassoux and Graham Harman, McGurl identifies a conceptual connection between deep time and so-called 'speculative materialism'.²² Despite important differences between the representatives of this philosophical movement, he says,

[t]he central idea [...] is a relatively simple and starkly post-postmodern one: it is to take non-human objects as seriously as possible, refusing the philosophical privileges long accorded to the human and to human representation [...]. In its long-limbed, humanoid verticality, the tree has made a perfect poster child for 'nature' in the discourse of liberal environmentalism. Here one instead finds the obdurate rock, the dead-cold stone taking center stage as an image of the non-human thing, the thing that simply does not care, and has been not-caring for longer than anyone can remember – in fact, longer than there has been such a thing as memory.²³

If Dimock's version of deep time *reconnects* humans to the planet and its other animal inhabitants, McGurl's version *disconnects* humans from the tectonic layers and mute stones that surround and ignore them.²⁴ Indeed, his argument suggests that we can add another variety of posthumanism to the ones explicitly identified in his article; if other varieties undermine human self-mastery by highlighting our reliance on technology (Katherine Hayles's technological posthumanism) or our continuity with other animals (Cary Wolfe's biological

posthumanism), McGurl's argument highlights our insignificance in deep-historical terms. Call it *geological* posthumanism. This perspective truly takes planetary time seriously and firmly unsettles the existing scales of literature and literary criticism. Here, you might say, we encounter a *non-anthropocentric* conception of time, [72] which has received insufficient attention, even in ecological accounts of literature.

Spelling out the relevance of these claims for literary scholarship, McGurl's latest publications have outlined an ambitious research program for future work on what he calls 'cultural geology' and the 'posthuman comedy'. In his broad summary, the residual humanism of postmodern thinking is currently being challenged by 'a new cultural geology', which refers to 'a range of [...] initiatives that position culture in a time-frame large enough to crack open the carapace of human self-concern, exposing it to the [fact] of its external ontological preconditions'.²⁵ McGurl speaks of 'geology' here to capture this interest in a deeper time and the planet's 'blank indifference'²⁶ to human representation, even if it is clear that the form of criticism he has in mind is 'much less impressed by the agency of the human than geology proper'.²⁷ At first sight, it is hard to see how this project can have a *cultural* dimension, as human history, let alone literary history, barely registers in the vast, agency-undermining reaches of geological time. Yet McGurl, like Dimock, believes that deep time leaves its traces in literary and other artistic representations and that a 'cultural geology' can hence map 'the glimpses we hallucinate, in various cultural works, of the unincorporated remainder of the work of all periods'.²⁸ A similar argument lies behind the phrase 'posthuman comedy', which is 'a critical fiction meant to draw together a number of modern literary works in which scientific knowledge of the spatiotemporal vastness and numerousness of the nonhuman world becomes visible as a formal, representational, and finally existential problem'.²⁹ Once again, the idea is to study literature against the background of geological and even 'cosmic'³⁰ time, even if this inhuman perspective is hard to think and write about. In speaking of comedy here, McGurl is not saying that these posthuman works are by definition funny but rather that they evoke the fragility of the human in celebrating 'various forms of ontological *lowliness*',³¹ for instance via figures like the slug, the swarm or the zombie.³² There is another reason why genre is important to his argument. As we have seen, McGurl feels that most instances of literary fiction – think of *Dieperik* – trade in the small and the everyday. This implies that cultural geologists need to revisit 'those literary forms willing to risk artistic ludicrousness in their representation of the inhumanly large and long',³³ namely the science fiction of authors like Olaf Stapledon or the horror fiction of writers like H.P. Lovecraft. Against the dominant emphasis of critics and authors on a minimalist mindset, in short, cultural geology recalibrates the scale of literature and criticism by drawing attention to the existential and representational problems associated with deep time. [73]

The Posthuman Comedy in Dutch

In the rest of this article, I would like to connect these insights with a number of literary works in Dutch, to unearth their participation in the 'posthuman comedy' and to begin the work, however tentatively, of 'cultural geology'. Instead of focusing on genre fiction, however, I will briefly consider some examples of literary fiction that, in seeming contrast to McGurl's claims, also hint at deep time and its fatal implications for human mastery over the self and the earth. In other words, this article would like to offer a provisional answer to the following, Dimock-like question: *what does Dutch literature look like if we consider it 'across deep time'?*³⁴

Admittedly, I am not the first to speak of ‘deep time’ in connection with Dutch literature, but I think it is important to further examine this notion, by taking into account literary works from different periods (as the conceptualization of deep time has changed throughout history) and by paying attention to the different functions of deep-historical references.³⁵ An allusion to the deep past or the deep future does not only popularize scientific insights, in my view, but also serves as a contrastive foil for a reflection on human memory, as an ironic mirror for insignificant human follies, as a hyperbolic means to elevate small-scale stories to a putatively timeless level, as an ecological argument in an attempt to raise the reader’s awareness of planetary problems and/or as destabilizing glimpses of a sublime deep past and a potentially posthuman future. I will begin my inquiry with two clear instances of literary deep time and geology and then consider less obvious examples to demonstrate that this topic is a rich seam for literary critics (and literary historians) to mine.

A good place to start is Dimitri Verhulst’s *Godverdomse dagen op een godverdomse bol* (*Goddamn Days on a Goddamn Globe*, 2008). In contrast to works like *Dieperik*, which try to understand the world on the scale of human psychology, Verhulst’s book explicitly aims to paint a bigger picture. Accompanied by a motto that likens humanity to an ‘evil virus’,³⁶ the book tells the story of human history, from the moment animal life emerged from the waters to the moment modern scientists invented the hydrogen bomb, passing via the beginnings of agriculture, the rise of Rome, the medieval crusades, the discovery of the Americas and the two world wars. Clearly, this book gestures in the direction of a planetary, deep time perspective, even if its conclusion is much less optimistic than Dimock’s. Apart from a single remark that humanity can do ‘without meanness for a short time span’,³⁷ there is no positive note about our species in this 186-page onslaught on the reader’s mind that drives home, in repetitive detail, that men are sordid creatures which systematically exploit women and animals in their relentless hunger for food, sex and violence. As if to remind the reader of the planetary time that will also be monitored by the 10,000 Year Clock being built in Nevada, the narrative is occasionally interrupted by a ‘ding dong’ to mark the further growth of the human population and, concomitantly, the further extinction [74] of animal species.³⁸ These recurring themes do not only encourage readers to reflect on the historical periods they are reading about but also to consider the destructive environmental effects of humanity’s existence. Apparently, the price of our non-progress is the extinction of fellow species like the mammoth, the dodo and the Tasmanian tiger, not to mention the destruction of untold numbers of birds and whales. As I mentioned, this environmental message is couched in a story that attempts to represent a deeper time than the one we usually find in literary fiction, spanning several aeons rather than mere moments. Yet Verhulst’s book is also instructive because it shows the imaginative difficulties associated with geological time. For the book’s narrator remains a highly anthropocentric affair, given its moralistic stance and its impossibly wide-ranging yet curiously limited perspective on human history (we only hear of the Americas when the Europeans do?). More importantly, the narrator is unable to fully imagine the planet’s history. As I mentioned, the book begins when animal life first crawled onto the earth, a process that took several attempts but happened about 400 million years ago. At this stage in history, we find this passage: ‘What time is it? Early, it is still early. *Earlier is nigh impossible*. The day is still young and [...] nothing is set in stone’.³⁹ Earlier is almost impossible, we hear, even though the planet at that point had already existed for about *four billion years* and other forms of life had been present for about *three billion years*. But it seems that these events fall outside the ‘goddamn days on a goddamn globe’. The earth may have a history, in other words, but it does not have a

story. As McGurl suggested, it appears that the ‘spatiotemporal vastness’ of the nonhuman world indeed poses a serious ‘representational problem’. As we will see, we encounter some version of this problem whenever we come across allusions to deep history.

Obviously, cultural geologists should also consider literary texts that explicitly deal with geology. And what better example of a ‘geological novel’ is there in Dutch than Willem Frederik Hermans’s *Nooit meer slapen* (*Beyond Sleep*, 1966)? In this classic ironic tale, the reader meets Alfred Issendorf, a young PhD student who travels to the Norwegian highlands to find traces of historical meteorite impacts but fails to obtain the necessary aerial photographs to do his research, fails to make an impression on his Norwegian colleagues and fails to find meteorites, ironically leaving the country right after a meteor slams into a nearby patch of Norwegian soil. The novel’s geological dimension seems important, not only because it is central to the plot, but also because Hermans himself was a geologist and because the novel explicitly and self-consciously uses specialized geological jargon.⁴⁰ Yet most critics have been reluctant to discuss this geological focus, rather choosing to connect it to Hermans’s historical context or broader worldview or to reinterpret it in the psychological or philosophical terms of Freud and Wittgenstein.⁴¹ Hence, they suggest that the novel is not about deep time but about the early 1960s and not about ‘geological research’ but about ‘self-scrutiny’.⁴² Additionally, when notions like ‘geology’ and ‘erosion’ are explicitly [75] discussed, they are frequently interpreted allegorically, as stand-ins for the abstract ‘process of creation’ or, in a move made famous by Freud himself, for psychological layering and transformation.⁴³ These interpretations seem to be corroborated by remarks made by the author as well as by certain passages from the novel, and it cannot be denied that Alfred’s psychology – the relationship with his dead father especially – is important to the narrative.⁴⁴ Yet it remains problematic to ignore the novel’s many references to geology, to my mind, if only because they hint at a systematic preoccupation with deep time. Here, I would therefore argue for a strategic form of ‘surface reading’, one which takes the book’s remarks about geology at face value, and reconstructs its version of the posthuman comedy.⁴⁵

As *Beyond Sleep* deals with characters who read the landscape in terms of the big history of geology,⁴⁶ it is not surprising that it also reflects on the origins of the world, most explicitly in a debate between the co-travellers of Alfred’s ill-fated geological expedition. Taking issue with Mikkelsen’s religious cosmogony, the sceptic Qvigstad tries to disprove all sorts of origin myths by noting that they invariably fail to explain the provenance of the ‘matter’⁴⁷ used by the gods in their construction of the universe. He then subjects religious views of history to a *reductio ad absurdum*. If a god made this inscrutable world and these ignorant people, he did a poor job, for his children are clueless and he seems disinclined to help:

[Humans] go to bed with each other without realising that children will be the result, they club each other to death and eat each other up. It takes them thousands of years to come up with a language, and several more to develop a script. [...] [God] didn’t care when a few million old women were burnt at the stake as witches, he just smiled. He let cholera, typhoid and the plague wipe out entire cities before permitting the microscope to be invented and consequently the germs of disease to be unmasked.⁴⁸

As this set of mini-narratives (every sentence is a narrative in its own right) indicates, Hermans’s novel shares its pessimistic account of human history with Verhulst’s book. No wonder, then, that the latter explicitly alludes to Hermans’s famous notion of the ‘sadistic universe’.⁴⁹ More importantly, we encounter an equally *broad* view of history, which does not

only go back to medieval witch trails but also to the prelinguistic state of early hominids, and even further; Qvigstad does not want to talk about ‘seven centuries ago’, when origin myths were written down, nor about ‘eight thousand years ago’, when geological upheavals might have established the factual basis for these myths, but about the real ‘beginning’⁵⁰ of the universe, which is impossible to conceive as ‘it may not be billions of years since it happened, but *billions raised to the billionth power*’.⁵¹ Additionally, Qvigstad muses on the fate of ‘our descendants [...] in a few million [76] years’.⁵² Granted, these reflections on the deep past and future are voiced by a particular and not necessarily reliable character. Yet the novel suggests that such reflections should not simply be discarded, for Alfred also reflects on the ‘history of the universe’⁵³ and humanity’s ‘insatiable thirst for the blood of others’.⁵⁴ What is more, the novel returns to the long ago and the far ahead in other passages.

The narrator often returns to the image of our Stone Age ancestors, for instance. Apart from shorter references to primal instincts,⁵⁵ to the inventors of fire⁵⁶ and to cave people,⁵⁷ prehistoric people are invoked for ironic purposes; an American tourist is described as a bloodthirsty ‘Flintstone’,⁵⁸ as he insists on killing a polar bear with bow and arrow, and as his mouth, at one point, looks as if he has spent ‘the last couple of hours with a dinosaur bone clamped between his jaws’.⁵⁹ References to these primal humans also serve a different purpose, though. During his trip across the highlands, Alfred starts to reflect on the fate of the barrow builders, the Stone Age people who established megalithic tombs five thousand years ago, levering the giant rocks forward ‘[o]ne point five kilometres in a decade’.⁶⁰ It may seem mad or unfeasible to us now, he notes, but ‘[a]nything is feasible, provided people [...] have faith in their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren and don’t doubt the necessity of the task at hand – such as building barrows for the dead’.⁶¹ The passage is interesting, not only because the landscape again provokes a form of mental time travel (just like the American tourist, Alfred equates travelling north with travelling back in time) but also because it shows that Alfred feels connected to his ancient ancestors, even if he is less certain about his own, scientific task. Yet even the efforts of the barrow builders ultimately appear like a senseless sacrifice: ‘[t]here is no trace of anyone having devoted his entire life to getting that particular boulder to budge. It looks no different from the others dotted about the moors, and no archaeologist would give it a second thought’.⁶² Like the strange ‘rough chunk of red granite’⁶³ on a town square, the highland rocks defy our human meanings and projects. In the deep North, we are not only reminded of the deep past but also of the frailty of cultural memory.

The novel also returns to the topic of the deep future by alluding to ‘astronaut[s]’⁶⁴ – forcing him to eat out of a tube, the inhospitable landscape does not only turn Alfred into a *caveman* but also into an *astronaut* –, to an extra-planetary perspective and to the future end of mankind. When he ascends a mountain, Alfred imagines himself to be in outer space, occupying a spatial and temporal position that is as impossible, in its own way, as that of Verhulst’s narrator:

Out there in that void somewhere there’s me, gazing on the earth, a planet no bigger than a football. [...] Never have I been so acutely aware of the thinness of the atmospheric layer that sustains human existence. [...] [Humans] need only travel to the extreme north or the extreme south, or climb a mountain for [77] that matter, for us to reach our limits. It has taken [...] centuries of scientific endeavour [...] to launch one manned spacecraft. [...] In my mind’s eye I see the world as a globe, a sphere covered by a thin membrane, which is the substance within which I am able to exist to the exclusion of all else. [...] Seen from a

distance, my globe looks as if it is supposed to be covered in ice. [...] In the next Ice Age [the ice] may get as far as the tropics. The end of the world. Ragnarok.⁶⁵

Like a literary premonition of the first picture of the earth taken from outer space, by the Apollo 8 mission in 1968 (the book was published in 1966, as I mentioned), this passage unmistakably evokes a ‘sense of planet’, to use Ursula Heise’s resonant phrase. Once again, the Norwegian landscape prompts an extended reflection on human limitation that centers, this time, on the diminutive size of the earth and its protective atmosphere, and leads to an apocalyptic vision of the future that finally returns to the mythical register criticized by Qvigstad. This is not the only passage where the novel’s characters reflect on the potential end of mankind. In line with the book’s systematic attention to fragile, failing human bodies, the novel’s characters consider the possibility that ‘the human race will die out’⁶⁶ and that ‘the earth [will] break into pieces at some stage’.⁶⁷ Indeed, this apocalyptic tone even crops up in a random landscape description, where clouds are described in terms of ‘twenty atom bombs exploding simultaneously’,⁶⁸ terms which were undoubtedly topical at the time (the Cuban missile crisis would still have been in people’s minds when Hermans’s novel was first published) but also evoke a sense of planetary time. As these references to the planet’s history and future – its geological record and cosmological future – fit into a systematic reflection on human finitude, I think that we should not only interpret *Nooit meer slapen* in terms of Freud, Wittgenstein or postwar society but also, like *Godverdomse dagen op een godverdomse bol*, in terms of geological posthumanism.

Personal Geologies

The books by Verhulst and Hermans have demonstrated that deep time figures prominently in contemporary as well as classic works of Dutch literature. Seeing that they explicitly deal with big history and geological research, however, they appear to suggest that the topic of deep time is a niche concern that is only relevant for a very limited subset of literary works. Until now, moreover, I have only been able to hint at the fundamental tension at the heart of the deep time experience, namely the clash between psychology and human memory on the one hand and geology and natural indifference on the other. In this section, I will examine these issues by turning to two additional examples of geological posthumanism. [78]

Dividing the story between three male narrators, Stephan Enter’s *Grip* (2011) deals with their diverging accounts of a life-defining climbing trip to Norway, their relation to the enigmatic Lotte, and the bittersweet memories prompted by their prospective reunion in Wales twenty years later. Further complicating matters, the ruminations of these narrators are interspersed with their speculations on future life-extension technologies, as discussed in the Dutch and English newspapers they encounter. On a general as well as an individual level, the novel thus appears to revolve around the limits of memory, love and human existence, not geology. It is true that two of the main characters are academics, but we hear little of their actual research and there is no systematic use of geological or other scientific jargon, in contrast to the vaguely similar *Nooit meer slapen*, to which Enter’s novel refers both explicitly and implicitly.⁶⁹ At first blush, the dramatic background of the Norwegian mountains therefore appears to function as a mere objective correlative for these stark emotions and their (un)successful suppression. Consider the fact that the ‘enormous space’⁷⁰ seen on a mountain top is interpreted in the light of enormous personal possibilities, for instance, or that the rock-strewn side of a mountain is likened to ‘the bald solitude [...] of an age-old spirit, who had once entertained thoughts and feelings that now only existed in petrified and frozen form in these

unpredictable shapes'.⁷¹ Vincent's lingering but erroneous memory of Lotte's appearance turns out to be as outdated, moreover, 'as that of a star that was visible in the sky but had ceased existing in the universe a long time ago'.⁷² As these passages indicate, personal issues are linked with geological and cosmological images to give them additional weight and to lift them from the mundane contemporary world to a putatively higher, seemingly transhistorical level. As one reviewer puts it, this is a novel that does not seem to be part of 'the stream of spectacular, contemporary and fashionable books'.⁷³ Again, however, we could interpret some of these images differently, seeing their hints to the deep past and deep future not in terms of personal memories but in terms of actual, *impersonal* geologies. The advantage of this strategy is not just that it enriches rather than impoverishes the geological references but also that it further explains the novel's systematic return to the debate about the potential prolonging of human life expectancy. It should not come as a surprise that a book considers technological posthumanism in such detail, after all, if it also explores its geological relative.

Like in Hermans' work, first of all, the Norwegian landscape triggers an awareness of deep time. The sight of the rugged landscape makes the characters relive the awe of 'prehistoric man'⁷⁴ for sunsets, for instance, and the Spitsbergen islands are described in terms of shark's teeth and 'a titanic fossilized lower jaw'.⁷⁵ Furthermore, Vincent feels that the light of Norway makes you experience a 'soothing slowness',⁷⁶ which prompts the sobering realization 'that the sun's light would be as beautiful and ubiquitous on these islands if there had never been a human to witness it'.⁷⁷ In the Norwegian wilderness, as opposed to the [79] supposedly mundane Dutch landscape, you are aware 'of earth, of space, the idea that you and your belongings are soaring through the universe'.⁷⁸ Apparently, the sight of a sublime landscape – disappointed with the domesticated scenes of nature they encounter when entering Norway, Vincent is reminded of 'Caspar David Friedrich'⁷⁹ when they are finally perched on a desolate mountain top – prompts the characters to reflect on human fragility and deep history. Likewise, Paul notes that you most clearly experience humanity's frailty 'against the backdrop of the mountains'.⁸⁰ Because when you reach the top, you experience '[t]he mountains as [...] undulating waves with white crests – of stone, and hence of a bottomless time – and across it all the butterfly-like fluttering of your own presence'.⁸¹ Paul started climbing, he adds elsewhere, because it encourages the type of reasoning we find in the following passage, where he looks out across the Welsh landscape:

Imagine [...] how once all cultivation and signs of human presence were absent; that everything you saw existed exactly like this – shoreline, the same woods and cliffs – but without humans. For thousands of centuries clouds dragged islands of shadow across slopes and through valleys, the wind blew without sails at sea and the same sun stared out across this land, that had been so desolate from the beginning of time and had determined humans and not the other way around as in the Netherlands. And then the sun would hang above it all [...] for a thousand times longer than our presence lasted – it would be as if you looked at the wave that undermined a sandcastle.⁸²

Inspired by a sense of deep time that can apparently be accessed more easily in Norway or in Wales than in the Netherlands, Paul here occupies a point of view that effortlessly travels back to the earliest past and travels forward to the farthest future, and that is therefore as impossible as that of Verhulst's narrator in *Godverdomse dagen* or that of Alfred's posthuman musings in *Nooit meer slapen*. What is more, the deep past is here imagined to be entirely devoid of life and eventful incidents (as a peaceful, inanimate Eden), but that is only an accurate view, surely,

if we look at a very specific moment in these vast reaches of time (during these thousands of centuries, these very shorelines and slopes emerged and eroded with considerable if not necessarily quick violence). It is only true, in other words, if you ignore geological history and transpose the temporal measure of ordinary literary time to the realm of planetary time. Even here, to put it differently, an anthropocentric notion of time implicitly informs the scene.

As this passage already suggests, the mountain experience does not only hint at the deep past, but also at the deep future; in their indifference, the sun and the ocean will be there ‘until the end of time’,⁸³ even ‘if nothing would be alive anymore and the last bone on earth would have crumbled’.⁸⁴ The Norwegian landscape does not only inspire thoughts about a prehuman planet, in fact, but also [80] about a ‘world after the neutron bomb’.⁸⁵ The description of the Welsh shoreline and the references to the ocean demonstrate, additionally, that such posthuman reflections crop up in less mountainous regions as well, suggesting that these geological concerns are not only relevant for exotic ‘mountain novels’.⁸⁶ Looking at a set of dilapidated buildings on the outskirts of Cardiff, Vincent observes that, undoubtedly, ‘here as well the sun would shine if there had never been a human’.⁸⁷ What is more, the experience and ‘science fiction décor’⁸⁸ of modern train travel also triggers reflections about ‘space travel’,⁸⁹ about ‘old Celt[s]’ as well as ‘twenty-fifth century’⁹⁰ people. And the discussion about life-extension technologies raises a related question: ‘why would humanity continue to exist?’.⁹¹ Picking up a pebble on a beach rather than a mountain, finally, Paul ‘[l]et the idea sink in that this stone had existed in this form for infinitely longer than he himself in his fleshly form. In all probability, this beach was there, precisely like this, before the calendar, before the pyramids, before everything’.⁹² This passage is important, not only because it deals with a non-mountain setting and again shows our limitations in imagining deep time (prehuman history is again seen as uneventful – precisely like this? – and the beginning of recorded history is incorrectly equated with the beginning of ‘everything’), but also because it leads to a highly personal reflection on Paul’s life and past.⁹³ Many of these passages about deep time, in fact, often follow or precede more personal thoughts. Perhaps the book is ultimately not about psychology or geology after all, but about the clash between the human and the posthuman, between *personal* and *impersonal* geologies.

If Verhulst’s book is one of the clearest examples of geological posthumanism, given its seemingly all-encompassing scope, Jeroen Brouwers’ *Geheime kamers* (*Secret Rooms*, 2000) may well sit at the opposite end of the spectrum. This is strange, given that the book features a palaeontologist and often mentions technical terms related to deep time. Yet it is clear from the beginning that the novel’s central subject is not the research of Nico, world-renowned scientist, but the fatal, near-adulterous friendship between Daphne, his soprano wife, and Jelmer, a friend from Nico’s student days who ended up as an unsuccessful history teacher. As the story is told by Jelmer, Nico’s academic interest in the deeper time of palaeontology is, unsurprisingly, frequently mocked. Noting the attention lavished on Daphne by another man, for instance, Jelmer notes: ‘Nico probably did not suspect a thing, I thought, because he was used to staring at things taken from the millennia-old earth’s crust, and not to clearly looking at things from the present’.⁹⁴ This passage shows that, despite Jelmer’s own academic background, he is critical of Nico’s concentration on a broad past because it enables Daphne’s minute deceptions in the present. If you focus on deep time, the suggestion seems to be, you miss what is truly important: the historically shallow but emotionally gratifying time of emotions and intimate relationships.⁹⁵ Seeing that people and their passions inhabit shallow time, ‘why’ spend time digging up [81] prehistoric objects ‘from the darkness of the earth’s depths and aeons’?⁹⁶ The

dubious nature of Nico's research is further stressed when his revolutionary findings are unmasked as forgeries and his academic career crumbles. Which is not to say that Jelmer is impressed with these critiques; locating a certain find 'a few hundred million years too early or too late' is, after all, '[a] trifle in the borderless perspective of eternity'.⁹⁷ Exit deep time.

Even though the narrator often mocks Nico's deep-historical perspective, however, geological and cosmological images are systematically used to describe the main characters, their repressed emotions and hidden relationships. To stay with Nico for now, this 'Flintstone'⁹⁸ is characterized as 'a fossilized excrement'⁹⁹ when his scientific hoax is exposed, and he is said to harbour 'reservoirs of lava'¹⁰⁰ deep within, which can erupt 'with geiser power'.¹⁰¹ If he were to find out about her decades-long affair with another lover, Daphne adds, Nico would be lost in the cosmos, like a faltering 'rocket on the way to Venus'.¹⁰² As concerns Daphne, she has 'glacier-blue eyes',¹⁰³ 'galactite-white hair',¹⁰⁴ a 'petrified [...] smile'¹⁰⁵ and a mouth like 'a stalagmite-filled cave from which is heard [an alluring] voice'.¹⁰⁶ At the end of the novel, moreover, she plays the role of Eve in a rendition of Haydn's *Die Schöpfung*,¹⁰⁷ in a scene which evokes themes like marriage and transgression but also conjures up, I would add, the supposed dawn of time. Jelmer, finally, is described 'as a dug-up fossil'¹⁰⁸ at one point, and he consistently associates his semi-illicit relationship with Daphne with the grand scales of geology and astrophysics; he hyperbolically notes 'that I already loved her before the light existed',¹⁰⁹ he searches Daphne's letter for stray hairs that may have been trapped in the correction fluid, 'like a blade of grass between layers of earth',¹¹⁰ and imagines her to be 'on the farthest star'¹¹¹ or in 'an area of the galaxy light years away'.¹¹² The secretive situation with Daphne weighs on him 'like the weight of a menhir'¹¹³ and makes him feel like the 'last man on earth'.¹¹⁴ Like Nico's literal deep time research, Jelmer's figurative deep time descriptions are also undermined; the young Jelmer may be in love 'beyond all horizons and far beyond the zodiac', but his later self notes that the girl in question 'lived remarkably closer than these cosmic distances'.¹¹⁵ Obviously, the main function of these geological images is to characterize the psychologies and relations of Nico, Daphne and Jelmer. In fact, the novel explicitly invites a psychological reading of these geological images. For it does not only allude to Freud and psychoanalysis¹¹⁶ but also describes the titular 'secret rooms' of Daphne's life as 'caves and caverns',¹¹⁷ for instance, and explicitly signals that its allusions to geological depths¹¹⁸ can be interpreted in terms of human concerns like death¹¹⁹ and sleep.¹²⁰

Even if such a reading has its merits, however, it does not account for other passages, which hint at a more literal interpretation of geology. As students, Jelmer and Nico are intrigued by the unrecorded past of deep time, and they embark on an expedition to some caves in the Belgian Ardennes; realizing that [82] 'the world has existed for billions of years longer than recorded history', they aim to unearth 'the coffins of time, *if the notion of time in this context still has any comprehensible dimension*'.¹²¹ Even if this expedition enables Nico's scientific deceptions and ends badly for Jelmer, I would argue that it nonetheless evokes a sense of time that differs from the book's other references to the past, be it the eighteenth century of opera or the indeterminate past of archetypal figures like 'Noach',¹²² 'Echo',¹²³ and 'Eurydice'.¹²⁴ Staring at a rockface, Jelmer is able to access another, deeper time:

The notion of history [...] is represented more by such a rock than by pyramids, medieval cathedrals, battlefields full of memorials. *For hundreds of thousands of years that lump of stone stands there in silence, having no history, like everything in nature, while around it the facts have occurred that are studied as history.* History is what people remember. What does this rock remember?¹²⁵

In contrast to the history of human monuments, there is the history of uncaring rocks, which lasts longer (and is here again perceived to be uneventful by yet another impossible narrator) and lies beyond the personal memory that is explored in the rest of Brouwers' novel. Yet again, the novel confronts personal and impersonal geologies. And if it is true that these passages hint at deep time, do they not provoke a different reading of the geological images discussed earlier? Do they not hint at the *posthuman* rather than the *psychoanalytical* dimension of the novel's references to fossils, glaciers, caves and volcanoes, not to mention spaceships and remote stars? They point towards the unconscious, perhaps, but they also hint at the fragile nature of human life, the indifference of nature and the aeons of history that provide striking images for our emotions but remain as uncaring, in the end, as a dumb stone.

The Long and the Short

In the previous paragraphs, I have drawn on the insights of Dimock and McGurl and the writings of Verhulst, Hermans, Enter and Brouwers to show that there is a temporal dimension at work in literary fiction that cannot be reduced to the everyday present, to our proximate history or to the elusive archetypes of myth, namely the vast and decidedly non-anthropocentric reaches of deep time. Highlighting this woefully understudied dimension of *literary time* does not only shed light on relatively unusual, temporally or geographically expansive works like those of Verhulst or Hermans, but also illuminates what initially appear to be spatially and temporally circumscribed stories such as the one by Brouwers. Even when the setting and timeframe are limited, characters and narrators may tap the resources of deep time to reflect on personal memory, to heighten our awareness of ecological issues, to defamiliarize our conception of history, to [83] poke fun at our limited contemporary concerns or, conversely, to elevate our present struggles to a higher, putatively transhistorical level. This tension between the humanly short and the posthumanly long, between memory and what you might call *counter-memory* is a highly fruitful topic for further research, in my view. Paying attention to this particular scale might shed more light on other novels, whether they explicitly deal with geology, like *Hartslag van de aarde* (*Heartbeat of the Earth*, 2008) by Arthur Umbgrove, or not, like *Vissen reddden* (*Saving Fish*, 2009) by Annelies Verbeke. My account of the posthuman comedy in Dutch also raises important questions about the interaction between genre fiction and literary fiction (books that deal with deep time often share features with science fiction novels, post-apocalyptic novels and campus novels) and about the tension between 'natural' and 'unnatural' narratologies (think of the remarkable narrative perspective in Verhulst's book, or the equally strange passages I discussed from *Nooit meer slapen*, *Grip en Geheime kamers*). Another kind of time is present in literary fiction, in short, and we should study its peculiar formal and narratological properties in more detail.

That we should attend more closely to the vast scale of deep time can be shown, finally, by returning to a work that initially appeared to draw its force exclusively from its small-scale character: Pleysier's *Dieperik*. As we have seen, this tight-lipped story deals with a limited number of characters and events and is set in a specific period and region of Belgium. This short-story-turned-novel would appear to be about as far removed from geological timescales as one might imagine, but a closer look reveals that several elements nevertheless evoke the inhumanly long and vast. For one thing, the novella frequently hints at other countries, despite its regionalist agenda. The narrator mentions songs and movies from abroad, his uncle is said to have been stationed in Germany for a while and the book alludes to migrant workers who

have an unusual ‘skin color’¹²⁶ and come to this specific region from all over the planet to do various menial jobs: ‘packers from Ivory Coast, cleaners from Sudan, fruit pickers from India, floorers from Morocco, chicken butchers from Ghana, façade painters from Poland, tank cleaners from Tunisia, concrete pourers from Georgia, iron bar benders from the Ukraine, road workers from Romania and Albania’.¹²⁷ In fact, the Belmans factory tower may exert a *centripetal* force by being connected to the narrator’s farm (leading to a closely-knit fictional world) but it also exerts a *centrifugal* force; when the narrator reflects on the millions of stones shipped from the factory, he imagines tracking them to the furthest corners of the earth.¹²⁸

Not only the planet’s *extension* but also its *duration* is hinted at. As I mentioned, the Belmans clay pits are at one point associated with the proximate history of twentieth-century war. Yet they are also associated with a deeper history:

The story goes that one time the vertebra of a gigantic prehistoric mammal was dragged up. And part of a tree trunk as well, mostly petrified and dating [84] back to the Cretaceous Period. Recently [...] the teacher said that the subterranean clay deposits were formed by fine light yellow desert dust that was blown here from China millions of years ago [...].¹²⁹

We meet some of these prehistoric creatures, moreover, when the narrator visits a museum where the crucial items on display include ‘the thirty complete iguanodons from Bernissart, the mammoth from Lier, the Ishango-bone [and] the Neanderthals from Spy’.¹³⁰ The reader of this remarkable little book may travel to highly particular locales, in other words, but they are shown to have a long history that predates the human. This sense of deep time re-emerges when the child-narrator considers the millions of stones produced by Belmans:

they are strong stones [...]. Because war may come and everything be destroyed [...], afterwards everything will need to be rebuilt, and that is why stones should never be lacking, there is enough clay in the ground here, more than enough even, *because there has always been clay and there will always be clay*, [...] the white clay out of which God’s hand first created Adam’s rib and only then woman’s [...], the yellow desert dust from the East, *the dust that blew here with the wind from China* [...].¹³¹

Returning to the image of the wind from the far east and the deep past, and connecting the local soil to the oldest and most universal tale of them all, namely Genesis, the narrator here suggests that humans, in living in *stone* houses, unknowingly but quite literally *inhabit* deep time.

In a similar fashion to my reading of the novels by Hermans, Enter and Brouwers, we could interpret these references to geological layers and clay pits in terms of individual memories and the fact that the child narrator had to remain silent about his accident for so long. In this reading, the title of the novella’s second section, ‘the memory of clay’, refers to individual memory and even trauma. Yet there is more to the memory of clay than psychology, I would argue, as the aforementioned references to deep time already revealed. For this particular component of the soil is also associated with the more disquieting reaches of deep time, as the seemingly irrelevant reference to a newspaper article about HADES suggests: ‘(short for High Activity Disposal Experimental Site, [the article] deals with the geological disposal of radioactive waste in Mol, in the Boom clay, at a depth of 224 metres’). When humanity disappears, it seems, we will not only leave modest literary memorials behind, but also objects that last much longer, in some cases as long as twenty-five million years. This particular region does not only predate the human, in other words, but will also *postdate* the human. Maybe the

existential and representational difficulties associated with the inhuman scale of deep time have hitherto received insufficient attention from writers and critics. But in an age where humans have become ‘geological [85] agents’,¹³² it is time we start taking them into account. Because if we do not, it may not just be the case that the very early past appears unimaginable but also that the very far future turns out to literally *be* impossible.

Notes

1. This article is a revised version of the talk I presented at the second BASCE workshop in 2012, ‘The Next Step in Ecocriticism: Ecocritics in the Benelux’. I would like to thank the organizers, Isabel Hoving and Astrid Bracke, and the participants for their insightful comments.
2. In the last couple of years, the topic of scale has nevertheless been put on the agenda by scholars working on globalization, digital humanities and ecocriticism. See Nirvana Tanoukhi, ‘The Scale of World Literature’, *New Literary History* 39.3 (2008), 599-617; Peter Lunenfeld et al., *Digital Humanities* (2012); Timothy Clark, ‘Scale’, in *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, ed. by Tom Cohen (2012), pp. 148-66. Clark’s essay is particularly relevant in the present context.
3. Mark McGurl, *The Program Era. Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 402.
4. See Franco Moretti, ‘Style, Inc. Reflections on Seven Thousand Titles (British Novels, 1740-1850)’, *Critical Inquiry* 36.1 (2009), 134-58.
5. McGurl, *The Program Era*, p. 387.
6. See Dipresh Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, *Critical Inquiry* 25 (2009), 197-222 (p. 201).
7. Leo Pleysier, *Dieperik* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2010), p. 84, p. 101.
8. With the exception of the quotations from *Beyond Sleep*, which are taken from the official English translation, all translations from the original Dutch are mine.
9. Pleysier, *Dieperik*, p. 99.
10. *Idem*, p. 29.
11. *Idem*, p. 36.
12. *Idem*, pp. 90-7.
13. *Idem*, p. 14.
14. Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents. American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 169-70.
15. *Idem*, p. 174.
16. *Idem*, p. 169.
17. *Idem*, p. 177.
18. *Idem*, p. 195.
19. Mark McGurl, ‘The Posthuman Comedy’, *Critical Inquiry*, 38.3 (2012), 533-53 (p. 533).

20. Idem, 533-553 (p. 538).
21. Ibidem.
22. The best if not the most unbiased introduction to this relatively new movement in continental philosophy, to my mind, is Graham Harman's manifesto-like essay 'The Well-Wrought Broken Hammer' *New Literary History* 43.2 (2012), 183-203. His *Circus Philosophicus* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010) is another good place to start. [86]
23. McGurl, 'The New Cultural Geology', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Fall/Winter 2011, 380-90 (p. 384).
24. The difference between their positions is even clearer in the debate between Dimock and McGurl triggered by the latter's essay on the 'posthuman comedy'. According to Dimock, we should not worry about the vast reaches of time highlighted by McGurl, as literary form (particularly the age-old epic) and the human brain are able to 'rescale' these inconceivable durations and cut them down to human size. McGurl has responded by saying that posthuman comedy can indeed be 'both cheerful and annihilating', but he still seems mainly interested in cases where such rescaling techniques run up against their limits. For further details, see Wai Chee Dimock, 'Low Epic' and Mark McGurl, "'Neither Indeed Could I Forebear Smiling at Myself': A Reply to Wai Chee Dimock", both in *Critical Inquiry* 39 (2013), 614-31 and 632-8.
25. McGurl, 'The New Cultural Geology', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Fall/Winter 2011, 380-90 (p. 380).
26. Idem, p. 382.
27. Idem, p. 384.
28. Idem, p. 381.
29. McGurl, 'The Posthuman Comedy', 533-553 (p. 537).
30. Idem, p. 541.
31. Idem, p. 549.
32. For McGurl's remarks on the figures of the slug and the swarm, see 'The Posthuman Comedy'. As far as zombies are concerned, consider his review of Victoria Nelson's *Gothicka*.
33. McGurl, 'The Posthuman Comedy', 533-553 (p. 539).
34. McGurl has pointed out that Dimock's title and subtitle are not entirely innocent in their construction of an 'American Literature' that seems to have existed 'across deep time' and has easily traversed 'other continents'. Nevertheless, these phrases represent an interesting call to arms, I feel.
35. In looking at the interaction between geology and cosmology on the one hand and literary fiction on the other, this article participates in the existing scholarship on the exchanges between Dutch literature and various scientific discourses. The most important reference for my purposes here is Ben Peperkamp's analysis of a nineteenth-century poem by J.J.L. ten Kate, as it already mentions 'deep time'. See Peperkamp, pp. 316-7. In contrast to Peperkamp, however, I think the analysis of deep time should not restrict itself to single authors or single periods, however broadly defined, nor to merely describing literature's (in)accurate representation of its scientific source material. A more interesting approach, in my view, consists in looking at the ways in which literature tries to accommodate the tension between its inevitably human scale and the 'inhuman' scales of science.

36. Dimitri Verhulst, *Godverdomse dagen op een godverdomse bol* (Amsterdam / Antwerpen: Contact, 2008), p. 5.
37. Idem, p. 85.
38. See the website of the Long Now Foundation at <<http://longnow.org/clock/>> and McGurl's remarks about the 'Clock of the Long Now' in 'Ordinary Doom', p. 347.
39. Idem, p. 8 – emphasis added. [87]
40. Willem Frederik Hermans, *Nooit meer slapen* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2009 [1966]), p. 99, p. 186.
41. I have looked at some of the (extensive) secondary literature on Hermans, but do not claim to be an expert. The analyses which are most germane to my argument are Frans Ruiter's 'Vrolijke en minder vrolijke wetenschap', *Gewina* 29 (2006), pp. 36-45 and, especially, Wiel Kusters' 'Chaos, erosie, entropie. Wetenschap en literatuur bij Willem Frederik Hermans', *Nederlandse Letterkunde* 4 (1999), 37-47.
42. G.F.H. Raat, 'Alfred en zijn spiegelbeeld'. Over de vertelsituatie in *Nooit meer slapen*, *Verboden Toegang. Essays over het werk van Willem Frederik Hermans*, ed. by Wilbert Smulders (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1989), p. 221. Oek de Jong argues that some of the passages I will be looking at are not to be taken seriously, as they are simply outdated reactions to the hypocritical idealism of the postwar middle class. See De Jong, 'Zijn muze was een harpij. Over het wereldbeeld van Willem Frederik Hermans', *Een man die in de toekomst springt* (Amsterdam: Augustus, 2004 [1997]), p. 182, p. 185.
43. See Bart Vervaeck, 'De geologie van het schrijven: Hermans', in *In Eigen Boezem. Schrijvers Over Schrijven*, ed. by Roland Duhamel (Leuven / Apeldoorn, Garant, 1999), p. 57 and p. 60, and Jeroen Paalvast, 'Erosie in *Nooit meer slapen*', *TNTL* 118 (2002), 177-83.
44. See Hermans' remarks about Alfred's Fehlleistung in 'De ontstaansen publicatiegeschiedenis van *Nooit meer slapen* (1966)'. Willem Frederik Hermans. *Volledige werken 3. Romans* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij / Van Oorschot, 2010), p. 766. Turning to the novel, technical passages about geology are often summarized (p. 24) or skipped (p. 273) and the protagonist notes that his trip has only taught him things which have 'nothing to do with geology' (p. 201). The book also mentions Freud and psychoanalysis (p. 133, p. 289).
45. See Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading. An Introduction', *Representations* 108.1 (2009), 1-21. In returning to the literal meaning of texts, Best and Marcus argue, we can uncover 'something true and visible on the text's surface that symptomatic reading had ironically rendered invisible' (p. 12). Like geology.
46. Hermans, *Nooit meer slapen*, see p. 22.
47. Idem, p. 155.
48. Idem, pp. 157-8.
49. Verhulst, *Godverdomse dagen op een godverdomse bol*, p. 102.
50. Hermans, *Nooit meer slapen*, p. 156.
51. Idem, p. 158 – emphasis added.
52. Ibidem.
53. Idem, p. 224.

54. Idem, p. 251.
55. Idem, p. 97.
56. Idem, p. 201.
57. Idem, p. 242.
58. Idem, p. 66, p. 300.
59. Idem, p. 301.
60. Idem, p. 118.
61. Idem, p. 119.
62. Idem, pp. 140-1. [88]
63. Idem, p. 70.
64. Idem, p. 240, p. 263.
65. Idem, pp. 249-50.
66. Idem, p. 207.
67. Idem, p. 302.
68. Idem, p. 212.
69. Apart from references to Arthur Issendorf and to 'Hvalbiff', Enter's novel returns to the image of the earth's disquietingly thin protective atmosphere. See p. 29, p. 39 and p. 140.
70. Stephan Enter, *Grip* (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 2012 [2011]), p. 138.
71. Idem, p. 121.
72. Idem, p. 159.
73. See Rob Schouten's blurb on the back cover of *Grip*. I am particularly interested in such 'eternalizing' strategies, seeing that they go against the effect of contemporaneity I have obliquely studied in an article on new media and popular culture in recent novels. For further details, see Ben De Bruyn & Pieter Verstraeten, "De revanche van de populaire cultuur. Literatuur, nieuwe media en smaak", *TNTL* 128.2 (2012), 160-82.
74. Idem, p. 23.
75. Idem, p. 25.
76. Idem, p. 119.
77. Idem, p. 115.
78. Idem, p. 130.
79. Idem, p. 117.
80. Idem, p. 24.
81. Idem, p. 27.
82. Idem, pp. 69-70.

83. Idem, p. 152.
84. Idem, p. 163.
85. Idem, p. 59.
86. The same argument might be made by considering Willem Frederik Hermans' short story 'The Fossil', which is not set in an exotic location abroad, but again connects geological timescales to an awareness of human frailty. Looking at a fossil he has found in a nearby stone quarry, the aptly named protagonist Erdsieck (phonetically close to 'earth-sick' in Dutch) notes: '[h]e felt [...] as if it had only been preserved those millions of years to be held by his already failing, forty-year old fingers' (p. 512). Like the novels I will consider in this section, this story deals with a clash between what I call 'personal' and 'impersonal' geologies.
87. Idem, p. 126.
88. Idem, p. 42.
89. Idem, p. 38.
90. Idem, p. 45.
91. Idem, p. 33.
92. Idem, p. 182. [89]
93. Not to mention the fact that the mute 'pebble' may well be the 'pebble' Vincent had thrown into the sea a couple of pages earlier. In this sense as well, then, the sea may be seen to defy human wishes and actions.
94. Jerown Brouwers, *Geheime kamers* (Amsterdam: Amstel (Eldorado), 2009 [2000]), p. 18. There are many similar passages (see, inter alia, p. 185, p. 249 and p. 420).
95. Perhaps Nico, like Jelmer, should read more poems. For, in contrast to his former friend's distant concerns, his rival opts for the intimate focus of love poetry; Jelmer is not only associated with poetry (p. 82) but also courts Daphne, Paula and Gonneke with classical poetry (p. 240, p. 251, pp. 278-9, p. 287, p. 333).
96. Brouwers, *Geheime kamers*, p. 18.
97. Idem, p. 328.
98. Idem, p. 185.
99. Idem, p. 329.
100. Idem, p. 185.
101. Idem, p. 93.
102. Idem, p. 186.
103. Idem, p. 14.
104. Idem, p. 144.
105. Idem, p. 251.
106. Idem, p. 465. Geological and cosmological images also crop up in the descriptions of Paula and her lover, but I will focus on the main characters here.

107. Idem, p. 458.
108. Idem, p. 242.
109. Idem, p. 50.
110. Idem, p. 80.
111. Idem, p. 157.
112. Idem, p. 106.
113. Idem, p. 110.
114. Idem, p. 173.
115. Idem, p. 269.
116. Idem, p. 252, p. 414.
117. Idem, p. 441.
118. Idem, p. 29, p. 339.
119. Idem, p. 33, p. 63.
120. Idem, p. 467.
121. Idem, p. 30 – emphasis added.
122. Idem, p. 169.
123. Idem, p. 243.
124. Idem, p. 64.
125. Idem, p. 37 – emphasis added.
126. Pleysier, Dieperik, p. 32.
127. Idem, pp. 107-8.
128. Idem, p. 65.
129. Idem, p. 29.
130. Idem, p. 94. [90]
131. Idem, p. 65-6 – emphasis added.
132. Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History', 197-222 (p. 206).

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