



## **Autonomy, the Singular Literary Work, and the Multilingualism of Hermans's *Nooit meer slapen***

Autonomie, het singuliere literaire werk en de meertaligheid in Hermans' *Nooit meer slapen*

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**Abstract:** This essay proposes *singularity* as a more useful concept than autonomy in understanding the distinctiveness of literary practice, and discusses some theorizations of this concept by Jacques Derrida and Timothy Clark. The relation of ethics to singularity is discussed, and it is argued that the responsibility of the reader to do justice to the singularity of the literary work has an ethical dimension. As an example, the multilingualism of W.F. Hermans's *Nooit meer slapen* is examined.

**Keywords:** Singularity, ethics, responsibility, multilingualism / singulariteit, ethiek, verantwoordelijkheid, meertaligheid, W.F. Hermans

## Singularity

I do not think I have ever used the word *autonomy* in print; it has always seemed to me one of those terms in discussions of art, like *imagination* or *disinterestedness* or even *aesthetic*, that carry with them an enormous amount of baggage from the past, baggage that has to be inspected and dealt with before the term can be profitably used in fresh intellectual work. If there is a term I've found useful in engaging with some of the issues raised by the discussions around the notion of autonomy, it is *singularity*. This word of course carries with it its own historical baggage, and in employing it I do have to undertake a certain amount of unpacking, but my sense is that its past uses are easier to embrace than those of autonomy, associated as that word is with a rejection or marginalization of the ethical, political, historical and biographical dimensions of the literary. Singularity and autonomy clearly have some connections, and my hope is that an exploration of the former term will show that it is the more useful concept, partly because of its implications for the ethics of literature. One resource that literary works draw on in the fashioning of singularity is multilingualism, and I will use W. F. Hermans's *Nooit meer slapen* and its translation as *Beyond Sleep* by Ina Rilke to discuss this aspect.<sup>1</sup>

Numerous philosophers, Spinoza, Kant and Hegel among them, have taken up the question of singularity, and the word has been given new life in more recent arguments by, among others, Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben. Out of these recent philosophers, it is Jacques Derrida whose use of the term that I have found most valuable in discussions of the literary work (although Jean-Luc Nancy's account of singularity is also, and relatedly, helpful).<sup>2</sup> Derrida's understanding of singularity welds it to his notion of iterability: a date or a signature, for instance, is irreducibly singular – it is a one-time-only event – yet its singularity only has any purchase outside itself, and is only intelligible, because it is repeatable (and in its repetitions, in new contexts, it is constantly a new singularity).<sup>3</sup>

Singularity in Derrida's sense is indissolubly linked to his conception of the *event*; it is not an immobile and permanent feature but something that *happens* – and thus a more accurate term might be *singularization*. In order to come about, however, the singular must partake of generality or universality: a signature, for example, must use the inscription codes of a particular language, a date must draw on a system of chronology, a literary work must engage with generic expectations, and so on. In the interview I conducted with Derrida in 1989, he gave a lucid account of this aspect of the singularity of the literary work. On the one hand, he said, 'Attention to history, context, and genre is necessitated, and not contradicted, by this

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<sup>1</sup> Willem Frederik Hermans, *Nooit meer slapen* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2013); *Beyond Sleep*, trans. by I. Rilke (London: Harvill Secker, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> See Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. R. Richardson and A. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> For valuable accounts of Derrida's notion of singularity, see Rodolphe Gasché, *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 13-16; Joseph Kronick, 'Between Act and Archive: Literature in the Nuclear Age', in *Future Crossings: Literature between Philosophy and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Krzysztof Ziarek and Seamus Deane (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), pp. 52-75 (55-59), and Asja Szafraniec, *Beckett, Derrida, and the Event of Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), chapter 2, 'A Singular Odyssey'.

singularity, by the date and the signature of the work'; on the other, 'absolute singularity is never given as a fact, an object or existing thing in itself'. He explained:

An absolute, absolutely pure singularity, if there were such a thing, would not even show up, or at least would not be available for reading. To become readable, it has to be *divided*, to *participate* and *belong*. Then it is divided and takes *its part* in the genre, the type, the context, meaning, the conceptual generality of meaning, etc. It loses itself to offer itself. Singularity is never one-off, never closed like a point or a fist. It is a mark, a mark that is differential, and different from itself; different *with itself*. Singularity differs from itself, it is deferred so as to be what it is and to be repeated in its very singularity.<sup>4</sup>

Nor is singularity only on the side of the writer and the text; the reading too – or at least a reading that can be said to do justice to the work, what Derrida calls the *oeuvre*<sup>5</sup> – must be singular, and the same apparent paradox is evident here too: 'You have to give yourself over singularly to singularity, but singularity then does have to share itself out and so compromise itself'.<sup>6</sup>

So singularity, or singularization, is something that happens over and over, each time differently, in the life of the literary work; the work, that is, comes into being only in the event of its being read, or performed, or witnessed, or translated, within particular historical contexts. If the 'autonomy of the literary work' suggests an unchanging essence persisting through time and unaffected by historical, social and cultural changes – and of course it need not suggest this – we already have a difference between the two concepts. Singularity does not imply a whole, unified work as autonomy may do; it can be a feature of a phrase, a chapter, or even the output of an entire creative life.

The promulgation of this version of singularity has given rise in literary studies to what has been called a 'school of singularity'. Timothy Clark, who coined this term, has provided, in *The Poetics of Singularity*, a book-length account of what he regards as the four most important founders of this 'school': Heidegger, Gadamer, Blanchot and Derrida. Clark's own interpretation of singularity – what he calls 'post-existentialist' singularity – builds on this tradition. Clark's accounts of the encounter with the literary work have much in common with a certain version of autonomy:

To read a text solely as itself and on its own terms, in its singularity: no idea might seem simpler – not to make the text an example [...] but merely *to affirm it in itself and as it is*. The point is not to interpret the singularity of the text but to move towards a point, never finally attainable, at which the text is being understood only on its own singular terms. That is to say, the reading attains a space in which the text is felt to

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, "This Strange Institution Called Literature", in *Acts of Literature*, ed. by Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33-75 (pp. 67-8). The translation has been modified. For the original French text, see *Derrida d'ici, Derrida de là*, ed. by Thomas Dutoit and Philippe Romanski (Paris: Galilée, 2009), pp. 253-92.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Jacques Derrida, 'The University without Condition', in *Without Alibi*, ed. and trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 202-37.

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, "This Strange Institution", p. 69.

project itself so specifically that the terms of any mode of interpretation one might want to apply begin to be felt as inadequate.<sup>7</sup>

And again:

To treat something as singular is to move towards the idea of seeing it as irreplaceable, sole witness of what it says, an example only of itself, and thus ‘free’ in the sense of not being fully intelligible in the broadly deterministic categories of culturalism.<sup>8</sup>

How, we might ask, is the work able to impose its own terms upon the reader, irrespective of any cultural norms operative in its production or its reception? There are echoes here of the criticism of F.R. Leavis<sup>9</sup> and American New Critics like Cleanth Brooks and W.K. Wimsatt, none of whom Clark mentions, and whose massive contribution to the development of a scrupulous literary criticism was limited by their unwillingness to take into account the operation of extrinsic forces upon their, and everyone’s, literary interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

While it is not difficult to sympathise with Clark’s antagonism towards instrumentalist critical approaches that reduce the work of art to its historical or present-day social, cultural and economic determinations, this is not to say that such contexts are irrelevant. Singularity as I understand it (and I believe I am following Derrida here) is nothing but a particular constellation of cultural norms – a constellation made possible for both creator and reader by habits of interpreting, thinking, and feeling, inculcated in the course of an existence within a culture or cultures and crystallised at any given moment in what I’ve called an *idioculture*.<sup>11</sup> That it is a constellation that exceeds and challenges all existing configurations of cultural norms does not mean that it exists in some realm entirely outside culture, whatever or wherever that place would be. As Rodolphe Gasché puts it:

Paradoxically, even the most radical singularity must, in order for it to be recognized for what it is, have an addressable identity, guaranteed by a set of universal rules that,

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<sup>7</sup> Timothy Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity: The Counter-Culturalist Turn in Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot and the Later Gadamer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Clark, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Leavis’s objections to Marxist, sociological and philosophical critical approaches in the chapters of *The Common Pursuit* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952) entitled ‘Literature and Society’, ‘Sociology and Literature’ and ‘Literary Criticism and Philosophy’, and his debate with F.W. Bateson on the question of historical context reprinted in *A Selection from Scrutiny*, volume 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 280-316.

<sup>10</sup> We might even detect an affinity with Matthew Arnold’s emphasis on ‘the object in itself as it really is’ (‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’, in *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, ed. by Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 26).

<sup>11</sup> See Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 20-21. The term *idioculture* is sometimes used in sociological studies to refer to the shared knowledge, habits and beliefs of a small, relatively homogeneous group (the example often cited is a sports team). I am appropriating it for the constitution of a single subjectivity by such a set of knowledges, habits, and beliefs, though to the extent that the members of a small, homogeneous group possess a similar set, there can be no objection in using the term in this expanded way.

by the same token, inscribe its singularity within a communal history, tradition, and problematics.<sup>12</sup>

So while I am in agreement with Clark (and with Leavis and the New Critics) that, as he puts it, “Singularity” includes the provocation of what cannot be fully understood by being situated back into its historical context’,<sup>13</sup> I am by no means convinced that ‘the work itself’, without contextual references, can tell us what it is and how to read it.

Clark devotes his first chapter to the question of *freedom*, and freedom, of course, is one of the accompaniments of notions of autonomy. But it is precisely the idea of freedom as autonomy that he opposes, tracing it back to Kant and associating it with liberal and capitalist notions of individualism. One can agree that a notion of autonomy that presupposes a creator and a reader free from all constraints is clearly untenable; to speak of the work’s freedom is therefore to speak of a freedom that goes no further than its ability to have effects that exceed explanation in terms of cultural determinism. It seems problematic to link this to an argument about ‘the work itself’, however. If writer and reader have a certain freedom, it is not owing to their autonomy as individuals, but to their ability to deploy the cultural resources available to them in such a way as to allow otherness to enter the familiar sphere of thoughts and feelings – in other words, their *inventiveness*. In the case of the writer, the result is an inventive work of literature; in the case of the reader, it is a modification of his or her habitual mental and emotional worlds. Clark acknowledges this:

At issue in reading a literary text, however gently, is the force of a possible discontinuity, that the understanding achieved by the minute discipline of following its terms is not a kind of continuous progression of insight, but – somewhere – a jump. In other words, such ‘understanding’ (if that is still the best word) is not the modification or enhancement of an underlying consciousness or identity that would end the text as it began it, bar a little increase in its mental stores, but a becoming-other of that consciousness itself, whether minutely or significantly.<sup>14</sup>

I’m not sure that what happens is always a jump – I think the transformation can happen more stealthily than this – but I’m in agreement with the general point being made here.

In discussing a concept whose constitutive feature is its resistance to all conceptuality one runs the risk of falling into a kind of mysticism. To speak, for example, of ‘the text itself’ refusing all interpretative strategies may make it sound as if each literary work (or perhaps each literary work worthy of the name) possesses an unreachable, ineffable core that we can respond to but that we cannot analyse. It is important to remember Derrida’s statement that singularity is ‘never closed like a point or a fist’ (he’s punning here on the French homophone *point/poing* – a characteristically literary device which exemplifies, while it addresses, singularity): it is precisely in its openness to alteration in new contexts that singularity manifests itself. And its

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<sup>12</sup> Gasché, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Clark, p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> Clark, p. 304.

openness to the future stems from its having no unchanging core: it is constituted by the very norms and rules that it exceeds. Singularity is not universal or transcendent. In this lies its difference from particularity: a particular is the other face of a universal – this pen is a particular, the concept ‘pen’ is a universal, and what distinguishes this pen from other pens can also be specified as particulars all relating to the universal. But the singularity of a *novel* – which is to say, its singularization in an attentive reading – although it is produced by various kinds of generality such as generic codes, habits of interpretation, and so on, can not be subsumed under a concept. (This is only true of the novel *as literature*, however; there are many other legitimate ways of reading it which are not matters of singularity – for instance, as a linguistic text, as a historical record, as an autobiographical expression, as a moral treatise, or as a philosophical argument.)

There’s a danger that describing singularity, as I do, as the welcoming of alterity may sound like an ascent (or descent) into the mystical. But the other is not some other-worldly, alien existence: it is that which is other *to* an existing way of thinking or configuration of knowledge or habitual emotional response, it is what those familiar modes of being exclude in order to be and remain what they are – and it is what the artist, often without being fully aware of how it is happening, is able to apprehend by re-forming and re-articulating the forces that are excluding it. Thus the truly inventive artist is someone who is unusually alert to the tensions and fractures in the *doxa*, and can exploit these to make the unthinkable thinkable, the unexperienceable experienceable. To read a poem and feel one is entering a new world of thought and feeling, to find oneself laughing at a surprising passage in a novel, to have one’s breath taken away by a speech on stage – these are experiences of alterity, of the impossible suddenly made possible, of the mind and the body being changed by new configurations, new connections, new possibilities.

## Ethics

Where, then, are we to situate ethics in this account of singularity, inventiveness and otherness? A term that is useful here is *responsibility*, which I take from the work of Emmanuel Levinas, and from Derrida’s interpretation of Levinasian ethics. Or, more accurately, I want to stress the importance of the phrase ‘responsibility *for*.’ The preposition is significant, since we tend to think more readily of responsibility *to* – to one’s family, one’s country, or whatever it might be that demands our loyalty. To be responsible *to* is to be answerable *to*: to be willing to account for one’s actions vis-à-vis family, country and so on. And perhaps there’s a further implication: to be responsible *to* someone or something is to act in such a way that one is able to give a satisfactory account if called upon. But to be responsible *for* one’s family involves a stronger obligation: it is to take upon oneself the duty of protecting, safeguarding, keeping alive, acting in the best interests of. The writer who succeeds in creating an inventive work that welcomes the other – let us say an author who writes a poem that enacts, for the first time, a particular affective-intellectual complex challenging the barbarism of war – writes out of a responsibility *to* that other but also, more importantly, *for* that other, in giving it verbal realization and in allowing it the chance to live across future generations. The reader who responds inventively to the poem, who finds her own singularity reshaped through the event of reading, is one who accepts a responsibility *for* the poem and for the complex of thought and

feeling it embodies. Through repeated readings of this kind, the poem is kept alive in its singularity. (The readings need not be sympathetic to what the poem does: a reader who is angered or upset by the poem, but whose response stems from an openness to the poem's effectivity, is still acting out of a responsibility to and for the work, and still helping it to survive. Laughter, too, is a responsible response when it is appropriate, when it signals an intimate involvement with the words, their movements and meanings, their feints and surprises.)

Now, what kind of ethics is this? It is not difficult to see that the artist who is responsible for the marginalized or excluded possibilities of thought and feeling that characterize his or her time and place is acting ethically, even though this may take the form of a certain kind of passiveness, a willingness and an ability to perceive the pressure of alterity upon the habitual world and to allow the words to shape themselves accordingly. (And we must remember that this passiveness is possible only as the outcome of a process of intense activity – the activity of becoming profoundly familiar with a language, a genre, a tradition, a culture, techniques of composition, procedures of reading, and so on.) This responsibility to and for the otherness that arises from a culture's exclusions is also often a responsibility to and for individuals and groups – those who have been silenced, disempowered, deprived of social and individual goods. The ethical responsibilities engaged with by, say, Coetzee or Ishiguro or Walcott or Pinter are clear, and even writers less obviously fired by evident injustices are often exploring hidden areas of social existence or individual lives that form part of a pattern of exploitation, oppression or exclusion.

However, I think we would agree that it is not so easy to see where the act of reading a literary work abuts on the ethical. Responsibility for complexes of thought and feeling, responsibility for sets of words – this is not what we usually consider the domain of ethics. Do I have an *ethical* responsibility to read carefully, without skipping or letting my thoughts wander, to keep my mental and emotional receptors open to the advent of the other as I experience the words? Isn't this to empty the word *ethics* of all its serious content in a world of injustice, oppression, misery, and inequality?

I accept that this is a danger, and I certainly do not want to say that reading quickly, or putting a book down after reading a few pages, are irresponsible acts, that such a reader is somehow ethically at fault. But I do want to argue that reading a work of literature (or listening to a symphony or taking in the details of a painting) with the kind of attention and commitment I have described has an ethical dimension. Like the writer who finds a way to be open to the otherness obscured by the society in which he or she works, so the reader who is able to respond to the alterity made available by the literary work – which is to say to its singularity and inventiveness – is acting ethically, both in relation to that alterity and to the writer who has introduced it. And in order to do this, the reader must bring to the work an alertness to his own sociocultural environment, for though the work may be experienced as an address to the singular individual who is me, my singularity is the product of my own history in a particular temporal, geopolitical, social, and cultural space. The reader who is detached from the forms and circumstances around her, who attempts to read in a vacuum (an impossibility, of course), is unlikely to be able to do justice to a literary work that speaks to those forms and circumstances. The freedom of the reader – like that of the author – is a curious freedom, as arises not from the actions of a sovereign, autonomous self but from a subject willing to be disarmed and, if necessary dismayed, by the intimations of an otherness excluded by its familiar world. It is close to what Heidegger called *Gelassenheit*, a will-less thinking, and to

*hineni*, 'Here I am', the utterance of Biblical patriarchs in response to divine appearances adopted by Levinas as a statement of readiness to do whatever is demanded by the other.

I must stress, though, that I'm not talking about the ethical value of bringing new *knowledge* into the light: literary works may well do this, but in so doing they are not working as literature. I may learn a number of facts about Indian caste divisions from reading Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, but it is my living through the vivid representations of those divisions as they impact upon individuals, and the shifts in my grasp of what happens in the world (shifts that are partly affective, partly intellectual), that constitute the ethical experience. (There is a great deal to be said about the astonishing fact that works written hundreds of years ago can still operate in this way, a phenomenon I have discussed elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>)

I need to add one further clarification: the ethics of openness to alterity does not imply that the outcome of this openness will, in every case, be good. This is not a utilitarian ethics. Otherness is otherness: there is no way of knowing in advance whether its advent will be beneficial or disastrous. The writer who brings into the world hitherto unavailable ways of thinking may be doing a disservice to humanity; the reader who undergoes a powerful experience of new possibilities may be led into terrible crimes. Fortunately, otherness can never enter as a pure force: as I stressed earlier, in order to be apprehended it has to become part of a system of norms and conventions, and these will usually be sufficient as a guardrail to counter malignant effects. Openness to the other is a form of hospitality, and hospitality, as Derrida observes, though it is informed by an unconditional openness to whatever may come in the door, is, in actuality, always conditioned by limitations and rules.

## Multilingualism

Singularity, then, as I conceive it, names a feature of the literary work that acknowledges both its specific mode of being – realized as an event of reading – and its close engagement with two contexts: that within which it was created and that in which it is read. The ethical importance of literature, which I understand as the apprehension of otherness through an inventive event of writing and of reading, lies in these contextual engagements. This ethical importance is not, however, to be understood as the conveying of moral maxims or the representation of moral truths; it is a matter of an experience that brings about an unpredictable alteration in individuals (and, perhaps, through individuals, the collectives they constitute). Like the notion of autonomy, then, the conceptualization of singularity is a response to the distinctiveness of the making and receiving of art among all human productions, and its non-instrumental relation to human actions. But unlike most versions of autonomy, it recognizes the inseparability of the work of art from its contexts of production and reception, and the freedom it implies is not a freedom from the constraints of economics, politics, culture or society but rather an ability to exploit those constraints as resources to enable what they occlude to be heard and seen.

One of the most important contexts within which the singular work is constituted is *language*: the particular language a writer uses brings with it a host of resonances and

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), chapter 1.



implications, including the ethical and political resonances and implications arising out of its role in the power relations that necessarily operate in relation to other languages (and, behind languages, cultures). This fact alone prevents the literary work from having impermeable boundaries; it is always engaged, overtly or covertly, with the larger world of linguistic relations. A work in a minor language may seem to ignore the major languages of the world, but in so doing makes a claim about the relationship between them; and if the work is translated into a major language (with or without the author's involvement) the relationship becomes all the more evident.<sup>16</sup> If, on the other hand, a writer in a minor language chooses to foreground the interplay between that language and others, the singularity of the work will reside partly in these linguistic operations, while the ethical responsibility of the reader – and the translator – lies in doing justice to the complexity of its handling of languages. An outstanding example of a work, which achieves singularity in this manner, is Hermans's *Nooit meer slapen*, and the challenge its multilingualism poses to the translator highlights this achievement.

The novel begins with an epigraph: Isaac Newton's famous account of his self-image as 'a boy playing on the sea-shore', diverting himself with pretty pebbles and shells. Or to be more precise, the novel begins with Newton's account *in English*. So much the easier for the translator, one might think, who has no work to do at all on this page. This is not the case, however, as becomes evident as soon as we contemplate the difference between a book in Dutch that begins with an epigraph in English and a book in English that begins with an epigraph in English. It certainly wouldn't do to translate Newton's English into Dutch in order to preserve the distinction between the languages. Hermans thus alerts us at the outset to the importance in his novel of the status of English, and of the question of language difference more generally; and the translator simply has no way of conveying this feature of the original to her readers. We can see immediately that the translator's responsibility to the work of the author is an impossible one – though, as Derrida has argued, the impossibility of ethical responsibility could be seen as what makes it possible at all.<sup>17</sup>

The novel proper opens as follows:

De portier is een invalide.

Op het eikehouten bureautje waaraan hij zit, staat alleen een telefoon, en door een goedkope zonnebril staart hij roerloos voor zich uit. Zijn linkeroorschelp moet afgescheurd zijn bij de ontploffing die hem verminkt heeft, of is misschien verbrand toen hij neerstortte met een vliegtuig. Wat er van het oor is overgebleven lijkt op een slecht uitgevallen navel en biedt de haak van de bril geen houvast.

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<sup>16</sup> 'Minor' and 'major' are not, of course, objective categories, but it wouldn't be contentious to say that Dutch and Norwegian are minor in terms of global use and importance, while English is major. German is a more questionable example.

<sup>17</sup> See, in particular, Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. D. Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), chapter 3 and 4. Derrida is building on Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* in arguing that the ethical decision is one that occurs beyond all calculations of right and wrong. Translation that remains within the realm of the possible – translation that could be undertaken by a computer – does not involve ethical responsibility. See Derek Attridge, 'Contemporary Afrikaans Fiction in the World: The Englishing of Marlene van Niekerk', *Journal of Commonwealth Studies* 49 (2014), 395-409.

- Professor Nummedal, please. Ik heb een afspraak met hem.
- Goodday, sir. Ik weet niet of professor Nummedal binnen is.<sup>18</sup>

The singularity of this opening includes the immediate uncertainties into which the reader is plunged, notably the question of who is narrating this story and from what perspective we are witnessing this scene. For it is clear at the outset that this *is* the view from someone's perspective: to refer at once and without preamble to 'De portier' is to imply that a person through whose eyes we are looking has arrived at a particular building and is now face-to-face with the individual controlling entry. And the rest of the sentence registers the most salient fact about this porter. Literature is full of odd figures creating obstacles to admission, from the drunken Porter in *Macbeth* to Browning's 'Childe Roland' ('My first thought was, he lied in every word, / That hoary cripple') to the gatekeeper in Kafka's 'Before the Law' with his 'large pointed nose and his long, thin, black Tartar's beard'. And beyond these resonances lie the many mythological figures that combine power with disability, such as the various versions of the wounded Fisher King.

What makes the sentence resonate all the more is its shortness and its placement as a separate paragraph (in fact, as one of the book's super-paragraphs, signalled not by indentation but by a line's worth of white space). The sentence itself functions, that is, as the guarded entryway to the novel; and if the individual who lets us in is not whole, what deformities may lie within? We note, too, that the statement is in the present tense; we are invited to look at the disabled porter at the same moment as the focalizer does.<sup>19</sup> All this happens as an event in the reading, a little explosion of meaning and affect (apprehension, curiosity, anticipation?) that already takes us to a mental place not quite like any we have experienced before.

Our questions about the focalizer receive no answer in the paragraph that follows; instead we learn more about the porter and his setting. But our sense of the consciousness we inhabit grows stronger, as we are made privy to its speculations – 'moet afgescheurd zijn' suggests a process of deduction on the part of the speaker, as does the alternative explanation introduced by 'misschien'. And the scene before us is an unsettling one: our focalizer cannot keep his or her eyes off the misshapen ear, so much so that the small detail of the unsupported glasses hook dominates his or her attention. Then without further introduction we're given an utterance, which we must assume is spoken by the narrating presence to the porter, and which is, surprisingly, in English. (We normally expect a novelist to represent speech in the novel's own language, even when we're aware that it is 'really' being uttered in a different language.) Hermans is clearly relying on the familiarity most of his Dutch readers will have with the English language. However, the speaker moves from English to Dutch, as does his interlocutor, which puts us in a quandary – are these Dutch sentences meant to be understood as English too? Or are we in a linguistic environment in which a speaker may freely switch from English to Dutch? The name Nummedal doesn't immediately support this second hypothesis, though there's nothing to prevent a Scandinavian professor from moving around the world.

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<sup>18</sup> Hermans, *Nooit meer slapen*, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> I follow the convention of using 'the reader' and 'we' when, it will be obvious, I am recording my own responses in the hope that my own reader shares them. If this claim provokes disagreement at certain points, this difference of view will itself be of interest; criticism thrives on such clashes.

When we turn to the English translation of this opening, the language problem disappears – but so does the experience of linguistic uncertainty that is part of Hermans's writing.

The porter is disabled.

The oak reception desk at which he sits, staring through cheap sunglasses, is bare but for a telephone. His left ear must have been ripped off in the explosion that caused his disfigurement, or possibly it was burnt in a plane crash. What is left of the ear resembles a misshapen navel and offers no support for the hook of his dark glasses.

'Professor Nummedal, please. I have an appointment with him.'

'Good day, sir. I don't know if Professor Nummedal is in.'<sup>20</sup>

Readers of the translation have no way of knowing what language is being spoken here: it may be English, or the English may represent another language. Once more, translation is impossible.

A surprise is in store as we read on, however, for the next sentence is: 'Zijn Engels klinkt langzaam of het Duits was' ('His English sounds slow, as if it's German'<sup>21</sup>). It seems, then, that the two people have been conversing entirely in English, but that this is not the porter's native tongue. From the comment, we might conjecture that the scene is taking place in Germany. After another remark from the narrator about his appointment, however, we are given a sentence that clears up part, at least, of the mystery:

Onwillekeurig kijk ik op mijn polshorloge dat ik gisteren bij aankomst in Oslo gelijk gezet heb op Noorse zomertijd. (Automatically I glance at my watch, which I adjusted to Norwegian summer time upon my arrival in Oslo yesterday.)

So: we're in Norway – Oslo, to be precise, it is summer, and the voice we've been hearing all this while is the first-person voice of a narrator, narrating events (impossibly) as they happen. He (we now know his gender from the porter's 'sir') is not Norwegian, and in fact six lines further on we learn that he was given a letter to bring with him by his professor 'in Amsterdam'. At last we understand the use of English: it is a lingua franca that makes communication possible between a Dutch individual (we won't learn his name until the end of chapter 6) and a Norwegian individual. In this scene, then, when a Dutch character is represented as speaking Dutch, we are to take it that he's speaking English (though his thought-processes, recorded in the narrative, presumably take place in Dutch).

This Babelian juggling with languages is not a momentary game to keep us on our toes at the start of the novel but reflects a concern of the whole work, which will keep coming back to the question of what language is being spoken and how languages relate to one another – itself part of a larger question the novel explores about the role of small nations (like the Netherlands

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<sup>20</sup> Hermans, *Beyond Sleep*, p. 1. I do not intend to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of Rilke's translation, but it is perhaps worth noting that something of the singularity of Hermans's prose is lost when the second sentence is rearranged from two statements about the telephone and the porter to one about the desk; especially regrettable is the disappearance of 'roerloos' from the English version.

<sup>21</sup> Hermans, *Beyond Sleep*, p. 1

and Norway) in relation to dominant ones. Leaving the porter – who turns out to be blind as well as maimed – the narrator reaches Professor Nummedal's office and knocks:

In de kamer roept iemand een woord dat ik niet versta. Ik open de deur, met gesloten, maar mummelende mond repeterend wat ik zeggen moet. Are you professor Nummedal... Have I the pleasure... I am...

...Where are you, professor Nummedal?<sup>22</sup>

(From inside a voice calls something I don't understand. I push open the door, rehearsing my English phrases under my breath: Are you Professor Nummedal . . . Have I the pleasure . . . My name is . . .

...Where are you, Professor Nummedal?<sup>23</sup>)

Hermans underlines the awkwardness felt by his character not only by means of punctuation and layout but by representing his hesitant English in English. Nummedal replies in English – recorded in the text as English – and the narrator explains his mission 'in het Engels'. Nummedal's next utterance is given in Dutch – 'Mijn secretaresse?' – but this is followed immediately by the comment, 'Zijn Engels is alleen met grote moeite te onderscheiden van Noors dat ik niet versta,' so we know that he has actually used English (the translation has "My secretary?" His English is very hard to distinguish from Norwegian, which I don't speak').

Nummedal's speech in what follows, though presented largely in Dutch, is sometimes given in poor English, to remind us that he is speaking English and that his command of it is not good: 'Where does you come from?'; 'You is a Nedherlander, you is...'<sup>24</sup> (These remarks are unchanged in the translation). The second of these statements includes a Dutch word (the normal English text would be 'Dutchman'), pronounced, as indicated by the inserted *h*, in the Dutch manner, something of which the narrator shows his appreciation. But then there is another linguistic twist:

—Kunt u mij volgen? Of wilt u misschien liever dat wij Duits spreken?  
—Dat... dat is mij hetzelfde, zeg ik in het Engels.<sup>25</sup>

('Can you follow me? Or do you prefer to speak German?'  
'It is... all the same to me', I say.)<sup>26</sup>

That our narrator answers in English, and somewhat hesitatingly, suggests that he is not in fact quite at home in German; nevertheless Nummedal responds in that language (rendered, of

<sup>22</sup> Hermans, *Nooit meer slapen*, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Hermans, *Beyond Sleep*, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Hermans, *Nooit meer slapen*, p. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Hermans, *Nooit meer slapen*, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Hermans, *Beyond Sleep*, p. 4.

course, as Dutch on the page), praising the Dutch for their grasp of 'alle talen' ('all languages'). An attempt to switch back to English on the part of the narrator fails, and Nummedal continues in German, a fact that is both stated and enacted at the end of his little speech by the sudden insertion of a German sentence.

In translation, as we have seen, almost all of this happens in English, although the sentence in German is retained unchanged. By a convention of translation, the translator's task is to turn into English only the Dutch words, on the assumption, presumably, that English readers will respond in the same way as Dutch readers to other languages in the text. (To the extent that Nummedal's praise of the linguistic ability of Dutch speakers is true, this might be an unsafe assumption.) There is one anomalous moment in the translation when Nummedal's word 'Nederlanders', in Dutch on the page but said to be uttered 'in het Duits' ('in German'), is rendered by the translator directly in German as 'Niederländer'. In the original, their conversation is rendered continuously in Dutch, with only one reminder in this chapter that it is actually taking place in German: the narrator says, 'Ik weet niet of wat ik gezegd heb correct Duits mag heten'<sup>27</sup> ('I am not sure what I just said rates as correct German'<sup>28</sup>). The following chapter provides another reminder of the language in which the conversations are taking place, when the narrator thinks of a reply to Nummedal, but doubts that he could express it in German. We might wonder why Nummedal, in a little speech mocking Holland, gives the wording on the airport control tower in English (see p. 18: 'Aerodrome level thirteen feet below sea level', unchanged in the translation); is it really in English, or is he switching from German to English because he doesn't know Dutch?

There is more linguistic comedy in chapter 3 of the novel, when the couple enters a restaurant and Nummedal shouts (in Norwegian) for a waitress and for the cured salmon he is seeking: 'Frøken!' and 'gravlaks!' He has little success, and suddenly switches to English with '— No gravlaks in this place' (the normal English word would be 'gravlax', though the translation has 'gravlachs'<sup>29</sup>) and then offers an apology in German, rendered in the text as German, for speaking English: 'Entschuldigen Sie daß ich englisch gesprochen habe. Kein Gravlachs hier!' The narrator replies that he has understood the English statement, but does so in German — again rendered as German: 'Ich verstehe. Ich verstehe'.<sup>30</sup> A few moments later, a local customer approaches, speaking in English (rendered first in English and then in Dutch) and, assuming the visitor is from Britain, apologizes for the poor quality of Oslo restaurants. He reappears at the end of the chapter, uttering a speech, which is given in a hilarious mixture of English and Dutch and continues the theme of the inadequacy of Norwegian culture, now in comparison with New York and Paris as well as London. The translation loses much of the comedy of this chapter, since everything is given in English apart from a couple of phrases in German. (The translator goes against convention in not keeping the original German for Nummedal's apology, assuming, presumably, that at this point the English reader's facility in foreign languages will be insufficient.)

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<sup>27</sup> Hermans, *Nooit meer slapen*, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> Hermans, *Beyond Sleep*, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Hermans, *Beyond Sleep*, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Hermans, *Nooit meer slapen*, p. 22.

Throughout the remainder of the novel the reader is made aware of the shifting relationships among languages, and often of the power disparities that these arise from and entrench. Alfred – we can now give him his name, revealed on a postcard he writes – has been sent to Trondheim in search of the aerial photographs he considers essential for his venture into the far northern territory of Finnmark. He encounters one Professor Oftedahl, whose English is flawless and who finds Alfred’s English good enough not to suggest another language. Again, the occasional English sentence, easy enough for Dutch speakers to deal with, reminds us that the Dutch we are reading is a representation of English: ‘It must have been a very quick story!’; ‘We are very sorry’. And again, there is no way the translator can convey the same information; we just have to remember that the English we are reading is English, not, as it was with Nummedal, German, or, as with Alfred’s postcard, Dutch. (Though, interestingly and surely unjustifiably, Rilke ‘translates’ the English word ‘story’ in the original as ‘business’.) Norwegian, however, which is as obscure to Alfred as it is, presumably, to the average Dutch or English reader, remains Norwegian, as when Alfred overhears Oftedahl on the phone (after which we receive a little lesson in the linguistic complexities of Norway, with its three versions of Norwegian).

If the importance of language relationships and translation to *Nooit meer slapen* were not already evident, it would become unmissable in chapter 10, which is largely taken up with a conversation between Alfred and a fellow Dutch passenger on the flight to Tromsø about the difficulties of the English language for Dutch speakers. It would take a long time to analyse the toing and froing of languages in this passage, but it is worth noting that even when Alfred tries to explain English word-order to the other man, he gets it wrong: ‘Als de Engelsens iets vragen, dan vragen ze niet: “Gaat Alfred naar de races?”’, maar “Doet Alfred naar de races gaan?”’.<sup>31</sup> Of course, ‘Does Alfred to the races go’ is as incorrect as ‘Goes Alfred to the races?’ (The fact that Dutch uses an English word for ‘races’ is not commented on.) Faced with this linguistic knot, the translator gives up, simply writing: ‘When the English ask something, they use “do” to activate the verb. Not like the Dutch.’<sup>32</sup>

Language difference continues to be foregrounded throughout the novel. Amundsen’s note left for Scott at the North Pole is said to have read ‘*De groeten van Amundsen and good luck to you, sir*’<sup>33</sup> (it was actually a longer note and presumably all in English – as it is in the translation). The American woman Alfred meets in Tromsø chatters on in what we know must be English, though only a couple of phrases are given in this language (see p. 73-5). The different degrees of competence in English displayed by Alfred’s three Norwegian companions on the journey are noted, and at one point – though only one – Mikkelsen’s poor pronunciation is indicated by spelling: ‘—Of course, zegt Mikkelsen, you may look at ze pictures if you like. Iet ies my pleasure’.<sup>34</sup> (In the second sentence, the translator uses the spelling more usual in

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<sup>31</sup> Hermans, *Nooit meer slapen*, p. 66. No mention is made of the coincidence of names between the character and the example in the book; it is one of many curious correspondences – and failed correspondences – that befall the hero (actually an anti-hero if ever there was one) in his strange odyssey.

<sup>32</sup> Hermans, *Beyond Sleep*, p. 59.

<sup>33</sup> Hermans, *Nooit meer slapen*, p. 71.

<sup>34</sup> Hermans, *Nooit meer slapen*, p. 207.

English representations of foreign pronunciation, 'Eet ees'.<sup>35</sup>) Arne, the most sympathetic of Alfred's companions, laments the unimportance of Norwegian and the dominance of English (see p. 87). There is a conversation with Qvigstad, the third of the group, in which the challenge of representing one language by another is revealed: Alfred notes that Qvigstad, though speaking English, has used the Norwegian word 'bensin' instead of 'gasoline', but on the page we have just read 'benzine', the Dutch word, since his speech is given in Dutch; and there follows a conversation about the origin of the Dutch word. (The translator substitutes the rare spelling 'benzin' for both words). When Alfred, after a terrible ordeal in the rugged emptiness of Lappland, returns to civilization, the language issue is not foregrounded; he speaks to a doctor and a girl on the bus with ease, and so presumably in English, but there are no indications of this. Only when he meets the American woman again is language highlighted: she speaks 'Amerikaans', and gives a short lecture on the unwarranted hegemony of English.

One of the major themes of *Nooit meer slapen*, as I suggested earlier, is the vexed relation between 'minor' and 'major' cultures, a theme not only stated at several points but enacted in the play between languages we have been tracing. The singularity of the novel, then, lies not in its self-enclosed autonomy but in its openness to a number of languages and the cultures they embody and support. It brings into the world a fresh insight into language difference, not as knowledge we have acquired when we have read it, but as an experience we undergo during the reading. As we have seen, translation is already an active process in the text, and the kind of translation undertaken by Ina Rilke is not a conversion of one single, discrete object into another one, but a continuation of an internal process. The responsibility of the translator is to be open to the text's strangenesses, including its inventive dances with languages, and to create a work that provides the reader who has no access to the source language with some sense of those strangenesses. Where the dance takes place between Dutch and English, the translation into English inevitably fails to do justice to the singularity of the original. Is this Hermans's way of fighting back on behalf of languages like Dutch and Norwegian against the apparently all-conquering power of English?

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<sup>35</sup> Hermans, *Beyond Sleep*, p. 199.

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