



The Specialism of Unspecificity: Autonomy Claims and the Authority of Modern Writers¹

Het specialisme van onspecificiteit: Autonomieclaims en de autoriteit van moderne schrijvers

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Abstract: Autonomy is often interpreted as a historical phenomenon: in field theory and other historical narratives about literature, we see the tendency to formulate a ‘starting point’ for the autonomization of the literary field and of poetics. Drawing on the ideas of Andrew Goldstone and others, this article develops a different perspective. It shows that literary autonomy also functions as a discourse, through which authors claim a social position. This position is not one of detachment and demarcation, but one of a principled lack of any specific political or ideological attachment. Some writers, including important Dutch authors such as Multatuli and Willem Frederik Hermans, use this autonomy claim to underpin their authority.

Keywords: Autonomy, Authority, Literary Authorship, Public Intellectual, Multatuli, W.F. Hermans / Autonomie, autoriteit, literair auteurschap, publieke intellectueel, Multatuli, W.F. Hermans

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Introduction

On 3 July 2012 J.M. Coetzee delivered the opening lecture of the Minding Animals Conference in the Dom Church in the Dutch city of Utrecht. He read an unpublished short story, ‘The Old Woman and the Cats’, in which a man visits his seriously ill mother. She has decided to spend the last part of her life alone, with cats as her only company.² What is significant for this article is not the content of the story but the fact that Coetzee presented not a lecture, but a fictional story to his scholarly audience. He did not give an introduction to the text either, as if it were self-evident to open a scholarly conference on the human-animal relationship and animal ethics, with *fiction*.

Coetzee could have made a different choice. From the 1960s onwards he worked as a teacher and a researcher at several universities, including Texas University, the University of Cape Town and the University of Adelaide. The J.M. Coetzee who spoke at the Dom Church, however, was not the scholar but the literary writer. Significantly, he was the only (keynote) lecturer in the conference programme who was not *specified* – all other lecturers were associated with their scholarly functions, or with the names of the organizations they represented.³ Coetzee represented only himself. Or, to be more precise, he represented the fictional character of Elizabeth Costello. She is the ‘old woman’ in the story he read, and is a well-known figure in his works: after introducing her in the book *The Lives of Animals* (1999), she also starred in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003).

The Lives of Animals contains Coetzee’s two Tanner Lectures at Princeton University in 1997 and 1998, ‘The Philosophers and the Animals’ and ‘The Poets and the Animals’.⁴ In 1997-1998 Coetzee had already surprised his listeners with a literary text in a scholarly context. However, things are even more complicated than this, for both stories describe how Elizabeth Costello, a writer of fiction herself, gives lectures to an academic audience – in which she does not limit herself to literary issues, but in which she voices strong opinions on animal rights. What we see here is a distorted mirror effect. Coetzee represents a fictitious literary writer when giving an academic lecture, but on the other hand he differs rather significantly from his fictional creation: whereas *he* did not voice his own opinion at a conference on animal ethics, *she* very clearly did raise the issue of animal ethics in a context where ‘only’ literary reflections were expected.

How can we understand Coetzee’s play with fictionality-in-a-scholarly-context? I would claim that this example illustrates a broader phenomenon in modern literature: writers explicitly rejecting the position of what I call a ‘specialist’. Rather they claim to be autonomous non-specialists, whose authority is precisely based on the fact that they do not have a definitive

² The story was published later in a catalogue of the Belgian artist Berlinde de Bruyckere: Berlinde de Bruyckere and J.M. Coetzee, *Cripplewood / Kreupelhout* (Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 2013). An audio version of the text, read for an Indian audience in April 2012 can be found at <http://literarytourist.com/2012/04/jm-coetzee-reading-his-short-story-the-old-woman-and-the-cats/> (22 October 2014).

³ See http://www.uu.nl/SiteCollectionDocuments/GW/GW_Congres/Minding_Animals/programme%20MAC.pdf (22 October 2014).

⁴ In *The Lives of Animals*, these two stories are accompanied by reflections of academics like Marjorie Garber and Peter Singer. The stories were reprinted in *Elizabeth Costello*, together with six other Elizabeth Costello stories and a postscript. J.M. Coetzee et al., *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2003).

political, scholarly or social role. By presenting ‘only’ a fictional story, Coetzee seems to distance himself from the position of the public intellectual. At the same time, this fictional form gives him the opportunity to raise political and ethical issues, put into words by a fictional character. The complex ways in which Coetzee confronts his audience with animal rights might consolidate his position as a writer.

In this article, I will show how authorial authority can be built on (sometimes fictional) claims of autonomy. Firstly, the article will argue that autonomy can be seen as something that can be claimed, when we view it as a discursive rather than a historical phenomenon. Secondly, the article develops a thesis on the relationship between autonomy and authority. Finally, I will briefly analyse two case studies of important Dutch authors who refused the position of being a specialist, and who nonetheless have a solid authoritative reputation: Multatuli (1820-1887) and Willem Frederik Hermans (1921-1995).

Linear Autonomization Narratives

The complexity of the term ‘literary autonomy’ can easily be demonstrated by the sheer number of recent definitions and typologies of the term.⁵ One of the conventional aspects of these typologies is that they distinguish between autonomy as an institutional concept and as an aesthetic concept. On the one hand ‘autonomy’ refers to the gradual professionalization and ‘emancipation’ of literature as an independent social field while, on the other hand, the term refers to poetical ideas about the singularity, and sometimes the self-referentiality, of the artist and the artwork. These two types of autonomy are often associated with each other, for instance in Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the literary field, one of the most influential narratives on the gradual autonomization of literature.

In one of his early articles on literature, Bourdieu already points out that the mass production of literary works (from the late eighteenth century onwards) coincides with the development of a Romantic aesthetic, in which autonomy – both of the work and of the artist – is crucial. Bourdieu wants to show that this ‘apparent paradox’ can easily be explained: the urgency of defending autonomous poetical ideas grows when literature falls victim to commercialization.⁶ His most important work on literature, *The Rules of Art* (1996; French edition 1992), presents a different history of autonomization, but again we see the convergence of aesthetic and institutional autonomy.⁷ The book describes the emergence of autonomous writers like Gustave Flaubert and Charles Baudelaire in the mid-nineteenth century French literary world. They embody the writer who lives by and for literature, but who derives his authority from his assumed position outside of the economic domain. These authors present

⁵ To mention only a few: Gillis J. Dorleijn, Ralf Grüttemeier and Liesbeth Korthals Altes, “‘The Autonomy of Literature’: to be Handled with Care. An Introduction”, in *The Autonomy of Literature at the Fin de Siècles (1900 and 2000): A Critical Assessment*, ed. by Gillis J. Dorleijn, Liesbeth Korthals Altes and Ralf Grüttemeier, (Leuven: Peeters, 2007); Sander Bax, *De taak van de schrijver: Het poëtische debat in de Nederlandse literatuur 1968-1985* (Den Bosch: Next Academic, 2007), pp. 337-53; Charles Altieri, ‘Why Modernist Claims for Autonomy Matter’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 32.3 (2009).

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Market of Symbolic Goods’, *Poetics*, 14 (1985), 13-44 (p. 16).

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l’art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), pp. 75-164.

themselves as independent intellectuals, thereby reinforcing a new, autonomous position for writers. Bourdieu shows that this aesthetic revolution causes an institutional turn as well: gradually, the French literary world develops into a literary ‘field’, more or less independent from political, scholarly or legal influences. Within this literary field, a ‘subfield of restricted production’ emerges, consisting of authors with only a very small readership who nevertheless gain considerable intellectual authority with their so-called disinterested poetical ideas. Thanks to inheritances, they are often in the (financial) position to be condescending towards their readers – this at least applies to Flaubert.⁸ They oppose their own ‘cultural capital’, a term Bourdieu uses to refer to their cultural taste and competences, to the dominant economic form of capital. It is the possession of this cultural capital, which gives them a relatively authoritative social role.

Within Bourdieu’s convincing historical argument, the link between institutional and aesthetic autonomy is ill-defined. He seems correct in observing the positioning strategies of mid-nineteenth century authors like Flaubert: they have to *claim* an autonomous position between the commercial writers and the bourgeois authors of their times. However, there does not seem to be much evidence for Bourdieu’s claim that the positioning of Flaubert and other autonomous writers has significantly and ‘objectively’ changed the structure of the literary domain in the course of the century.⁹ That is to say: there have been obvious developments within the institutional structure of the literary world during the nineteenth century and later on (a growing publishing market, the development of literary associations, et cetera), but this does not mean that autonomy has become a matter of course; it is still a position a writer needs to *claim*. Autonomy is never self-evident, it needs to be claimed actively, just as much in the 1850s as today. Whereas the autonomy of European writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was limited by laws and censorship, commercialization significantly reduced their independence from the mid-twentieth century onwards.

Bourdieu’s history of nineteenth-century France is only one example of what I call ‘linear autonomization narratives’: historical accounts of the origin and spread of the literary autonomy phenomenon.¹⁰ Of course, these narratives differ from one another, but they seem to have one thing in common: they presuppose that there is a moment when literature becomes autonomous – and stays autonomous. Quite often, autonomy is also associated with ‘modernity’.¹¹ About the moment of origin, however, opinions are divided – every scholar seems to discover the first trace of literary autonomy in his or her own period of specialization. Whereas Bourdieu believes that the modern French writer was introduced in the nineteenth century, Alain Viala situates this development in the seventeenth century.¹² Stephen Greenblatt

⁸ Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art*, pp. 124-25.

⁹ Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art*, p. 76.

¹⁰ See also Edwin Praat, *Verrek, het is geen kunstenaar: Gerard Reve en het schrijverschap* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), p. 319.

¹¹ In the Dutch context, the medievalist Frits van Oostrom often distinguishes developments or individual writers he calls ‘autonomous’ or ‘modern’. See Frits van Oostrom, *Stemmen op schrift: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur vanaf het begin tot 1300* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2006), p. 502; Frits van Oostrom, *Wereld in woorden: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1300-1400* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2013), pp. 415-16 and 482.

¹² Alain Viala, *Naissance de l'écrivain: Sociologie de la littérature à l'âge classique* (Paris: Minuit, 1985); Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art*.

calls Shakespeare a modern autonomous author.¹³ Even medieval or classical authors are associated with modernity and autonomy.¹⁴ There seems to be a persistent tendency to search for the first trace of autonomous authorship, which, according to Andrew Bennett, proves how influential the Romantic idea of the author as a unique, individualist genius is.¹⁵

Two objections can be made to linear autonomization narratives. Firstly, they lose sight of the heteronomous effects that are produced in every autonomizing field. In the twentieth-century Netherlands, for instance, important developments towards a more professional and autonomous field can be distinguished, such as the introduction of structural public funding for authors. This new development gave some authors the freedom to produce art but it also made them dependent on the state. The French literary sociologist Bernard Lahire goes so far as to claim that no autonomous literary field exists, not even today. In *La condition littéraire* (2006), a large-scale research project on the working conditions of present-day French writers, he shows that the large majority of writers today lead a ‘double life’: they need to combine writing with a more lucrative job.¹⁶ Combining this fact with the insight that the book market has a profound influence on the work of writers and publishers, Lahire concludes that it would be better to replace the concept of ‘field’ with that of ‘game’. Writing fiction is, for modern writers, often no more than a game they play in their time off, and even when they are full-time professional writers, they still function in one of the least developed professional groups.¹⁷

Secondly, one could argue that an author *claiming* his or her autonomy does not count as evidence of authors’ historical *situation*. Not only Flaubert and Baudelaire but also earlier authors such as Shakespeare or Dante are associated with autonomy because of their self-representations as independent individuals.¹⁸ However, it seems crucial to keep Bourdieu’s argument about mid-nineteenth-century France in mind: it is highly problematic to take authors’ rhetorical claims about their independence at face value. I therefore opt for an interpretation in which autonomy is less of a historical phenomenon, but more a flexible discourse, used by all players in the literary ‘game’. An important advantage of this definition of autonomy as discourse is that it makes clear how fragile and context-bound an autonomous position is. Time and time again, writers need to obtain their autonomy actively, by positioning themselves in ever-changing social, political and literary situations.

¹³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespeare’s Freedom* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

¹⁴ About the Middle Ages: Burt Kimmelman, *The Poetics of Authorship in the Later Middle Ages: The Emergence of the Modern Literary Persona* (New York: Lang, 1996); Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). About the classical period: *Classical Literary Careers and their Reception*, ed. by Philip Hardie and Helen Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ Andrew Bennett, *The Author* (New York/Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 29-30.

¹⁶ Bernard Lahire, *La condition littéraire: La double vie des écrivains* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2006), pp. 72-81; Bernard Lahire, ‘The Double Life of Writers’, *New Literary History* 41 (2010), no. 2.

¹⁷ Lahire, p. 12.

¹⁸ See notes 11, 13 and 14.

Grounding Authority on an Autonomy Claim

I base my discursive approach to autonomy to a large extent on Andrew Goldstone's *Fictions of Autonomy* (2013).¹⁹ Goldstone shows that a large number of literary phenomena boil down to questions of autonomy, at least in the modernism period he focuses on. He suggests using the term autonomy broadly to indicate a tradition 'among literary writers, who found many ways to assert or suggest that their art was a law unto itself'.²⁰ One can see how wide he casts his net when looking at the different topics he includes in his book, such as the discourse on literary cosmopolitanism and the literary figure of the servant, which around 1900 was sometimes related to the autonomous artist. Goldstone considers autonomy practices as 'fictions', fictional 'inventions of narrative, poetry, and criticism', which nevertheless have the ambition to influence literary institutions and the social order.²¹

This means that Goldstone does not see autonomy practices as aiming for radical isolation from society. Such a splendid isolation sits uncomfortably with the development of a commercial literary market in the modernism period. More generally, Goldstone maintains that it would be better to understand autonomy in relational and relative terms than in an absolute sense: 'I propose that we understand modernist autonomy as a specific *relation* between one kind of literary practice and other aspects of social life, one which seeks to cultivate a certain aesthetic distinction and a level of relative independence by means of its engagements'.²² This discursive, relative interpretation of autonomy is, I believe, not only applicable to Goldstone's modernist, Anglo-Saxon corpus of texts, but also to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Dutch literature. Following Goldstone, I do not interpret the claim of authorial autonomy as an act by which authors detach themselves from society at large, but as an effort to take up a relatively independent position against social and political issues. This type of autonomy claim may even result in an authoritative position vis-à-vis the socio-political issues raised, as can be seen in the cases of Multatuli and W.F. Hermans, which will be discussed in the next paragraph. The latter in particular claimed not to set out to trigger social change, yet his provocative writing guaranteed social impact – and literary fame.

My claim that autonomy often underpins a writer's authority only works once we stop equating autonomy with 'detachment'. This tendency can be seen in *L'adieu à la littérature* (2005) by the French literary historian William Marx. He famously claimed in this book that the autonomization of western literature between 1700 and 2000 led to a devaluation: whereas eighteenth-century *philosophes* played an influential role in society, the trend toward

¹⁹ Benoît Denis also defines autonomy as 'a *representation* elaborated within the literary field by agents such as writers, critics and so on': Benoît Denis, 'Criticism and Engagement in the *Belle Époque*: The Autonomy of Literature and the Social Function of the Writer during the Third Republic', in *The Autonomy of Literature at the Fin de Siècles (1900 and 2000): A Critical Assessment*, ed. by Gillis J. Dorleijn, Liesbeth Korthals Altes and Ralf Grüttemeier (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), p. 29.

²⁰ Andrew Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to de Man* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 9.

²¹ Goldstone, p. 4.

²² Goldstone, p. 22; emphasis in original.

detachment and *l'art pour l'art* steadily undermined this social role.²³ As literature became increasingly autonomous, the readers grew increasingly tired of literature. This claim is no longer as strong when we accept that autonomy is largely a *discourse* of 'relative independence', one which many authors combined with an emphatic involvement in social issues. In any event, it can hardly be maintained that literary writers since 1700 did not play an active political and social role.²⁴ This is particularly true with regard to the two writers who will be discussed next. They both combined an 'autonomous' positioning with an involvement in several important social-political issues of their time.

Two Dutch 'Autonomous' Authors: Multatuli and Hermans

Multatuli (the pseudonym of Eduard Douwes Dekker) and Willem Frederik Hermans are among the most important Dutch writers and both claimed authority through their nonconformist attitude. Multatuli is often interpreted as a prototypical engaged writer: Benedict Anderson, Edward Said, Pramoedya Ananta Toer and others praised *Max Havelaar* (1860), with its alleged stance against the oppression of the local population under Dutch colonial rule.²⁵ The novel introduces a highly complex narrative construction with several narrators, with the intention of first drawing the readers into the Dutch colonial world and then exposing the brutal oppression of the regime. Max Havelaar, the hero of the story, works as an 'assistant-resident' in the Dutch Indies, where he tries to stop the population from being exploited by both the local leaders and the Dutch administrative system. He realizes eventually that his attempts to reform the colonial regime will never succeed, which compels him to resign and lead a poor existence as a 'martyr' in the Netherlands. The last pages of the book reveal that *Max Havelaar* is actually the story of Multatuli's life: he was the one who reinvented himself as Max Havelaar, in order to manifest himself now as Multatuli, a writer who has made it his mission in life to unmask the immorality of the colonial regime.

Multatuli uses the complex form of this work, and of his later books, to first lure his readers into the story and then to suddenly alienate them from the ideas they are comfortable with. However, one could also say that this form complicates the author's 'message'. He overwhelms his readers with an abundance of literary tricks (mixing fictional and nonfictional fragments; using several characters who seem to represent aspects of his personality), which seem to contribute more to a Derridean *dissémination* than a straightforward dissemination of his ideas.²⁶ Why would someone with a clear-cut political message muffle his cry of distress? Perhaps because he does not want to present this message in the same way a politician or opinion-maker might. Throughout his career, Multatuli kept affirming his autonomy in socio-political matters by emphasizing the non-conformity of his positioning.

²³ William Marx, *L'adieu à la littérature: Histoire d'une dévalorisation, XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Minuit, 2005).

²⁴ I have developed this claim in far greater (historical) detail in: Ham, *Door Prometheus geboeid*.

²⁵ Saskia Pieterse, "I am not a Writer": Self-Reflexivity and Politics in Multatuli's *Max Havelaar*, *Journal of Dutch Literature*, 1.1 (2010), 55-6.

²⁶ See for a Derridean reading of Multatuli's *Ideën* (Ideas, 1862-1877): Saskia Pieterse, *De buik van de lezer: Over spreken en schrijven in Multatuli's Ideën* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2008).

One of the ways in which Multatuli claims autonomy in the mid-nineteenth-century context he works in, is by denouncing specialists, or ‘specialties’ as he calls them, in his 1871 essay *Duizend en eenige hoofdstukken over specialiteiten* (A Thousand and Some Chapters About Specialties). According to this essay, too many people say that they are experts, thus gaining authority in colonial, political or other matters. Multatuli thinks that this authority is completely void, as none of them have really worked in the colonies and experienced the colonial conditions. The Dutch word he uses here, ‘ondervinding’, means both to experience or to live through things and to sense something.

The author introduces two fictional characters in his essay to demonstrate his point: Baron Something Or Other and his son Frits. They symbolize the middle classes who ‘lay no other claim to experience than that he [Frits, LH] did not claim the slightest touch of experience’.²⁷ The baron presents himself as an expert in colonial and maritime affairs, because his son, a sub-lieutenant, works in the colonies. In the book, we see Frits sitting sleepily in a boat, sailing down a river in Surinam. He has mastered a few words of Sranan Tongo to make himself understood: ‘mi no sabi’ (‘I don’t know’). Because of this colonial experience, his father finds himself qualified to express his opinions about colonial issues in the presence of his friends and colleagues: ‘Frits himself now had a footboy with thick lips and white teeth. Wouldn’t that make young Frits’ father an expert in slavery?’²⁸

Multatuli’s answer to this rhetorical question would be that Frits’ father does not have any ground to meddle in colonial affairs. Anyone seeking to speak and write with authority needs to closely study his field of interest. But in fact, defining a ‘field of interest’ is in itself an odd thing to do, for Multatuli thinks that it is every human’s duty to act as a generalist in all affairs. One of his most famous maxims, which concludes *Duizend en eenige hoofdstukken*, is: ‘The mission of Man is to be *Human*.’²⁹ Even Frits, who indeed works in Surinam, does not fulfill this high moral mission: he does nothing to develop his *own* political and social ideas. Multatuli presents himself as a moral and autonomous individual by mocking bourgeois characters like father and son Something Or Other – whereas he has a broad experience as a colonial officer.

It is clear that Multatuli strongly opposes unfounded claims of expertise. His ideas about the foundations of authority, however, are highly ambivalent. On the one hand, he seems to think that ‘onderzoek’ (investigation) and ‘ondervinding’ (experience) must underpin any claim of authority. Many opinions, he argues, are based on ‘deliberate and explicit decoration, on a proposition, which is accepted for the sake of convenience, although unproven and often incorrect, in one word: on *fiction*.’³⁰ He seems to suggest that there are also solid forms of authority, based on ‘common sense’ and ‘Reason’, ‘a trained mind and a good heart’.³¹ In *Max*

²⁷ Multatuli, *Volledige werken*, 25 vols. (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 1950-1995), vol. 5, p. 513: ‘Op onderscheiding had hy geen andere aanspraken dan dat hy niet de minste aanspraak maakte op onderscheiding’. All translations from Dutch in this article are mine.

²⁸ Multatuli, *Volledige werken*, vol. 5, p. 515: ‘Frits-zelf had nu een *footboy* met dikke lippen en witte tanden. Zou dan Fritsjes vader geen verstand hebben van slaverny?’

²⁹ Multatuli, *Volledige werken*, vol. 5, p. 635: ‘De roeping van den mens is *Mens* te zijn.’ Emphasis in original.

³⁰ Multatuli, *Volledige werken*, vol. 5, p. 539: ‘[...] voorbedachtelyke en uitdrukkelyke versiering, op ’n gemakshalve als wáár aangenomen maar onbewezen en vaak onjuiste stelling, in één woord: op *fiktie*.’

³¹ Multatuli, *Volledige werken*, vol. 5, pp. 492 and 630. ‘[...] gezond verstand’, ‘Rede’; ‘’n geoefend verstand en veel hart’.

Havelaar, for example, the eponymous protagonist bases his opinions on the misuse of authority in the colonies on substantial investigations, the narrator claims.³² In the play *Vorstenschool* (School of Kings), the exemplary Queen Louise takes her duty so seriously that she intervenes incognito in her citizens' affairs.³³ By adopting the pseudonym Multatuli, the author makes the 'groundedness' of his authority a key aspect of his posture: the Latin verb 'multatuli' literally means 'I have carried much' or 'I have endured much'. Often, this is interpreted as 'I have suffered much' or 'I have *experienced* much'. In Multatuli's ideas about authority, we recognize an Enlightened and rather traditional ideological view.

Yet Multatuli realizes that all authority claims are tenuous. A recurring Multatulian 'trick' is the presentation of opposing fictional characters, Max Havelaar and 'Multatuli', who not only play a role in *Max Havelaar*, but also in later texts like *Minnebrieven* (Love Letters) and *Wys my de plaats waar ik gezaaid heb!* (Show Me the Place Where I Sowed!).³⁴ At first sight, Max Havelaar appears to be the most bona fide and authoritative of the two: he is portrayed as a veteran of the colonial experience, one who has personally endured and experienced much in his struggle against amoral political powers. However, in the closing pages of the novel *Max Havelaar*, we learn that Havelaar is robbed of his social position and that his martyrdom will not bring him any actual authority. 'Multatuli' then becomes the one in power: in *Max Havelaar*, he is a forceful narrator who distances himself at the end of the novel from the martyr-like Max Havelaar, as we saw earlier. We could say that the author Multatuli bases his own authority on denouncing 'weak' figures like Max Havelaar *in a fictional text* – which means that his authority is just as much based on fiction as that of Baron Something Or Other or his son.

It is not enough to only discuss the works of a committed writer such as Multatuli through the *literary* techniques with which he positions himself and his characters, both in the fictional and in the outside world. However, it is important to realize that Multatuli's commitment lies predominantly in this literary positioning. He never succeeded as a politician, but if he had, it would have changed the nature of his positioning significantly.³⁵ It would then have been impossible for him to phrase his critique on Dutch 'specialties' in the same furious way he was used to, as membership of parliament would 'automatically' make *him* a specialty as well. So, it is only by speaking from a 'literary position' that Multatuli can emphasize his autonomy and phrase his political critique at the same time.

Willem Frederik Hermans's view on literary authorship is in some respects similar to Multatuli's, although he was active in a rather different publishing climate. In *Mandarijnen op*

³² Multatuli, *Max Havelaar, or, The Coffee Auctions of a Dutch Trading Company* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987 (1860)), for example pp. 204 and 226.

³³ Multatuli, *Volledige werken*, vol. VI, pp. 77-90.

³⁴ I use quotation marks to distinguish the pseudonymous author Multatuli from the fictional narrator/character, which plays a role in several of his books. See for an interpretation of *Show me the place where I sowed!*: Laurens Ham, 'Occasional Writer, Sensational Writer. Multatuli as a Sentimental Benevolence Writer in the 1860s', in *Texts, Transmissions, Receptions: Modern Approaches to Narratives*, ed. by André Lardinois et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 295-311.

³⁵ In 1860, shortly after the publication of *Max Havelaar*, he made an unsuccessful attempt to be elected member of the Dutch Parliament. See Dik van der Meulen, *Multatuli: Leven en werk van Eduard Douwes Dekker* (Amsterdam: SUN, 2003 (2002)), p. 424.

zwavelzuur (Mandarins in Sulphuric Acid, 1963), a collection of polemical essays, Hermans discredited some fellow authors as ‘mandarins’: writers who according to Hermans were more concerned with their central position in the literary field than with the quality of their literary works. ‘Mandarins’ are writers who, Hermans says, sell out as authors by making anthologies, joining literary juries or posing as public intellectuals by writing articles in news magazines. Hermans, by contrast, presents himself as a radical individualist writer, who wants to guarantee at all costs his financial and ideological independence – but who is nonetheless expressing his social critique all the time.³⁶

One of Hermans’s opponents in *Mandarijnen* is J.B. Charles (pseudonym of Willem Nagel). This former member of the Dutch resistance during World War II became well known in the 1950s with his memoirs *Volg het spoor terug* (Follow the Traces Back, 1953), in which he claims to expose the neo-fascist tendencies in the postwar Netherlands. No doubt Nagel derives his authoritative position from his war experiences, which he highlights by using one of his resistance aliases as his pen name. He is also quick to judge his fellow writers, suggesting that their contribution during the war was often inadequate:

To us, in the art world after 1940, it was of no importance whether someone was a great writer or a world-famous musician; that is irrelevant when considering what he is, first and foremost: a man, who let us down and betrayed us, when we had to die for what could be the only value of art: humanity.³⁷

His fear of a Third World War led him to oppose the rearmament of West Germany, which according to many people in Europe was necessary to put up a barrier against the dangers of communism.³⁸

In an essay in *Mandarijnen*, first published in 1955 as a separate pamphlet, Hermans criticized Charles’ opinion as ‘extremely stupid’: when countries do not arm themselves, they make the same mistake as in the years before the Second World War, when governments stood idly by, watching the Germans initiate crimes against humanity.³⁹ In the end, Hermans’s aversion to Charles seems to stem to a great extent from Charles’ prominent role as a moral quibbler. In the conclusion of his essay, Hermans represents a group of ‘right-minded Mandarins’, who criticize the narrator for his lack of interest in ‘*social responsibility*’, ‘ethics’, ‘morals’, ‘a better world’ and ‘a clear conscience’.⁴⁰

³⁶ Willem Frederik Hermans, *Mandarijnen op zwavelzuur* (Amsterdam: Thomas Rap, 1976), pp. 10-3.

³⁷ J.B. Charles, *Volg het spoor terug* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1954), p. 294: ‘Zo geldt voor ons in de wereld van de kunst na 1940 niet meer of iemand een groot litterator was of een wereldberoemd musicus; het doet niets terzake bij wat hij in de eerste plaats is: een man, die ons in de steek liet en verried, toen wij sterven moesten voor hetgeen alleen de waarde kon zijn waartoe alle kunst strekt, de menselijkheid.’

³⁸ He defended his opinion in an article in the magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer* of 8 January 1955. See Kees Schuyt, *Het spoor terug: J.B. Charles, W.H. Nagel 1910-1983* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2010), pp. 261-3 and 307.

³⁹ W.F. Hermans, *Mandarijnen op zwavelzuur no 1: Het geweten van de Groene Amsterdammer of Volg het spoor omhoog* (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 1955), pp. 14-20.

⁴⁰ Hermans, *Mandarijnen no. 1*, pp. 31-2: ‘[...] weldenkende Mandarijnen’, ‘*maatschappelijke verantwoordelijkheid*’, ‘ethiek’, ‘moraal’, ‘een betere wereld’, ‘een goed geweten’. Emphasis in original.

Indeed, one could say that this narrator, just like his creator Hermans, speaks from an amoral position and does not consider himself responsible for society. However, Frans Ruiter and Wilbert Smulders have concluded in their article on Hermans's essay 'Antipathieke romanpersonages' ('Unsympathetic Fictional Characters') that the metaphor of the 'ivory tower' is not sufficient to characterize this writer's position in society. He is well aware that he is 'inextricably connected' to the masses he despises⁴¹ – only he does not consider it his task to appear in the guise of the political or social authority to bring his readers a 'positive message'. Instead, he presents his critique as an 'aggressiveness of emptiness', as Ruiter and Smulders call it: a critique that deliberately eschews all ideological specificity.⁴²

Conclusion

Both Multatuli and Hermans refuse to take the position of the author as a public intellectual, by denouncing 'specialists' or 'Mandarins' who base their authority on their moral and social roles. Nonetheless, both writers were constantly involved in the political and social discussions of their times: Multatuli in debates about just colonial policy, women's rights and worker's rights, Hermans in issues about the war, defamation and political protest movements (which he rejected). We can understand this apparent paradox better once we know that these two writers saw their social function primarily as offering their readers a *negative* 'message'. They wanted their readers to question their certainties, or so it seems, without aspiring to propagate a new ideology. This literary position emerges from their non-fictional texts, but also from their fiction.

The resemblance between these two authors can be demonstrated by two quotes, in which they write about the relation with their readers in similar terms. Multatuli presents a fictional dialogue between Max Havelaar and his readers in *Minnebrieven*, in which the readers ask Havelaar: '[W]hat kind of other lie do you put in front of us, instead of the dish of lies you take from us?' Havelaar answers: '[N]one... I know nothing! I have no poison to offer you, to replace the poison which, roughly but with good intentions, I slapped out of your hands that clench to a fist out of ungrateful irritation about emptiness.'⁴³ In Hermans's fascinating autobiographical story 'Het grote medelijden' ('The Deepest Compassion'), the fictional author Richard Simmillion claims that, his marginal social position notwithstanding, he has something to bring his readers:

For a moment they come under my influence, but they misunderstand me. My unbelief magnetizes them, in turn they start to disbelieve and conclude that they cannot believe in someone who believes nothing.

⁴¹ Frans Ruiter and Wilbert Smulders, 'The Aggressive Logic of Singularity: Willem Frederik Hermans', *Journal of Dutch Literature*, 4.1 (2013), 4-42 (p. 13).

⁴² Ruiter and Smulders, 'The Aggressive Logic of Singularity', p. 13.

⁴³ Multatuli, *Volledige werken*, vol. 2, p. 46: "[W]elke andere leugen zet gy ons voor, ter vervanging van 't leugengerecht, dat ge ons ontnemt?" [...] "[G]een... ik weet niets! Ik heb geen gif te bieden, in plaats van 't gif, dat ik, ruw maar welmenend, u sla uit de hand, die zich balt tot een vuist, uit ondankbaren wrevel over leegte".

They aren't aware that they should humbly accept and spread the message I do not bring, in their ears the thud of the same anvil on which I hammer without forging anything. They don't understand that my empty hands are able to release them from the terrible fullness in which they suffocate the world.⁴⁴

This quote is surprisingly similar to Multatuli's. We even recognize the same metaphor about empty hands, although in this quote Simmillion is the one with empty hands instead of the readers. However, Simmillion does the same as Multatuli did in the former quote: he denies having anything positive to offer, whilst claiming that the negative things they do bring can offer a escape from the ideological, demarcated position people occupy.

Paradoxically, it is this idea of demarcation that is often employed to characterize literary autonomy. When the autonomization of the literary field is discussed, for instance in the works of William Marx and Pierre Bourdieu, the autonomization process is characterized, as we have seen, as a development towards an ever-growing 'specialization' and the gaining of independence by literary writers and institutions. This assumption accounts for Marx's statement that autonomization alienates writers from society. A definition of autonomy as a discourse, as I have developed in this article, makes it possible to see the *productivity* of autonomy for a committed writer. It is more convincing to view autonomy not as a social situation by which the writer is simply determined, but rather as an active positioning strategy which guarantees the specific authority of writers.

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⁴⁴ W.F. Hermans, *Richard Simmillion, een onvoltooide autobiografie* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2005), pp. 143-44: 'Een ogenblik raken ze onder mijn invloed, maar ze begrijpen mij verkeerd. Mijn ongeloof magnetiseert hen, op hun beurt gaan zijzelf niet-geloven en zij komen tot de conclusie dat ze niet geloven kunnen in iemand die niets gelooft. / Zij weten niet dat ze de boodschap die ik niet breng nederig hebben te aanvaarden en gediensig moeten verbreiden, in hun oren het gedreun van altijd hetzelfde aambeeld waarop ik hamer zonder iets te smeden. Ze begrijpen niet dat de lege handen waarmee ik bij ze binnenkom, hen kunnen verlossen van de verschrikkelijke volte waarin zij de wereld willen laten stikken.' I have borrowed the second part of the English translation from an article by Ruiter and Smulders: Ruiter and Smulders, 'The Aggressive Logic of Singularity', 1.

⁴⁴ Odile Heynders, *Voices of Europe: Literary Writers as Public Intellectuals* (Inaugural Lecture Tilburg University, 2009), p. 8.

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