



## **The Morals of a Song. Ethics of Literature in W.F. Hermans's 'An Emancipation'**

De moraal van een lied: literaire ethiek in W.F. Hermans' 'Een ontvoogding'

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**Abstract:** The analysis of Willem Frederik Hermans's first short story, 'An Emancipation' (1941), faces the question in what sense this story (as well as literature in general) is able to present us something morally bad, while upholding an ethical dimension. The essay shows that, in the moment we lose ourselves in the ethically reprehensible character, we remain floating on the *beauty* of the story. This experience of beauty is not unethical *per se*. It acknowledges us in our irreducibility to the standards and ideals we nonetheless cannot miss. It recognizes our (formally) *tragic* position with respect to our ethical values and standards – a position, with which we wrestle, without ever being able to escape those values and standards or to leave them behind. That vain fight typifies an essential aspect of our humanity. The 'ethical' autonomy of literature allows us to acknowledge this.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Humanity, Literature, Evil, Beauty / ethiek, humaniteit, literatuur, het kwaad, schoonheid

I am shy, barbarous, frustrated; I suffer from self-hatred; nihilism; complexes, resentments; I have all that pedagogues condemn. Old news, idiots! I have no doubts about it.<sup>1</sup>

What do you worry about? We believe: it is only about literature. Okay, but don't believe we find this important! We just ignore it. We want solutions! We want *social responsibility*! We want *politics*! [...] We want ethics, we want morality, we want a better world, we want good consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

Beauty, too, has its rights.

Baltasar Gracián

## Hero & Ressentiment

Unlike the 'heroes' in modern novels, the one of Antique Greek literature were often real, genuine heroes. Take, for instance, the protagonists of the Greek tragedies, or Achaean and Trojan warlords facing one another in Homer's Iliad. With respect to the Homeric epic, it is interesting to notice that, in the eyes of the readers (in fact listeners), the characters presented were considered as *moral* heroes as well. In the eighth century BC, the dominant ethos in Hellas was a heroic one. The anger mentioned in the first line of the Iliad (which is the main theme of the epic) was not at all an attitude undermining Achilles's moral reputation. On the contrary, it was seen as performing an ethical virtue par excellence. How do we begin to understand this kind of heroic morality? Maybe the best way to get an idea of what this kind of ethics is all about is to relate it to the 'master morality' Friedrich Nietzsche put forward more than two millennia later.<sup>3</sup> How does this expert in antique literature explain the morality of Achilles and Agamemnon, those 'heroes' of the West's most ancient literature?

Let us first recall the central issue of the epos. During one of his attacks against besieged Troy, Achilles captured the beautiful Briseis. However, Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek troops, snatched her from him. It is not that Achilles, in his anger, wants back his rightful property at all costs. His concern is not his right of ownership. He is hurt in his *pride*. The only thing he wants is satisfaction with regard to his honor. How? Not by getting back what has been

<sup>1</sup> 'Ik ben verlegen, een barbaar, gefrustreerd; ik lijd aan zelfhaat; nihilisme; complexen, ressentimenten; ik ben behept met alles wat pedagogen veroordelen. Oud nieuws, sufferers! Ik twijfel er niet aan.' Willem Frederik Hermans, *Richard Simmilion: Een onvoltooide autobiografie* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2005), p. 187; my translation, MDK.

<sup>2</sup> 'Waar maak jij je druk over? Wij geloven: alleen maar over de literatuur. Nu, maar je moet niet geloven dat wij dat belangrijk vinden, hoor! Literatuur lappen wij aan onze laars. Wij willen een oplossing! Wij willen maatschappelijke verantwoordelijkheid! Wij willen politiek! [...] Wij willen ethiek, wij willen moraal, wij willen een betere wereld, wij willen een goed geweten.' Quote from 'Het geweten van de Groene Amsterdammer of volg het spoor omhoog'; in: Willem Frederik Hermans, *Mandarijnen op zwavelzuur* (Paris: De Mandarijnenpers, 1985), p. 175.

<sup>3</sup> On 'master morality', see Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. by Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p. 7-9; 154-156. For 'slave morality', see p. 20-22 and *passim*.

stolen from him, but by facing Agamemnon in a deadly duel. In the eyes of both Homer and his audience, this is ethically anything but blameworthy. On the contrary, Achilles's stubborn anger as well as his readiness to duel shows he is a person of high ethical quality.

Nietzsche was the first modern thinker to really understand this. What is a hero living for? Not for self-preservation, not for keeping what he has. This is what 'slaves' live for, argues Nietzsche. Like the masters, the slave's life, too, is a matter of free will, but the latter uses that will to cherish and hold that life as long as possible. This is why, for him, homicide, duel, honor, pride, anger, self-containment, unsociability, and similar attitudes, are moral vices. The virtuous, on the contrary, are those who opt for compassion, solidarity, modesty, humbleness, clemency and equality of rights – in short, those who are grateful for the gift of life and do what they can to cherish and hold on to it. This is the ethics which slaves are attached to.

But not the masters. In the eyes of a master or hero, those 'virtues' are vices. His basic option is to live *sovereignly*, which means that he found his life on nothing but his free will to live. He wants to feel how life does not depend on anything other than precisely his power to will, or, as the late Nietzsche puts it, his will to power. This is why the hero looks for moments in which, facing death (and being denied any '*right*' to live'), he experiences that he *only* lives by his own will to live. 'Honor' is the name for what this type of attitude is about. What a hero lives and fights for is not life, but honor.

Both master and slave fear death. No mortal being is set free from that. The slave fears that fear, and avoids it. The master, on the contrary, does not, and deliberately seeks this fear in order to experience what it means to live, i.e. to be founded in nothing else than in an abysmal will to live, or, which amounts to the same thing, in the 'honor' he lives for. In the course of western history, as Nietzsche explains, these ideas of will and honor have received an increasingly negative reputation. If today we would meet someone like Achilles in reality, we would certainly categorize him as being among the mentally disturbed. He who is obsessed by selfish anger and hate in such a way, is anything but a moral example.

Is Achilles, then, no longer a hero in our eyes? The remarkable thing is that he still is. The *literary* Achilles is our hero, it is the *real* one we would consider a lunatic. No one analyzes this as sharply as Nietzsche. Heroes such as Achilles remain fascinating for our modern sensibilities, but the moment we reflect upon their behavior, as though it were to take place in reality, we vehemently condemn it. Nothing seems to us further away from life's truth than such a 'heroic' attitude. Nietzsche's analysis lays bare how we invented nothing less than 'truth' in order to put that 'heroism' down. For, as the first philosophers have already asked, is death not death, i.e. non-being? And is it not senseless, then, to have fear for something that does not exist? So, promoting the provocation of death as life's project turns out to be mere non-sense. This was the conclusion that had already been drawn at the beginning of western thought. A reasonable conclusion, we may still think, but this is because we do not notice the hidden motive behind it. Reason, thought and truth are things conceived for other reasons than innocent curiosity. It is 'slaves' who invented them out of jealousy with regard to their masters. Secretly they admired their masters so much for their courage to face death, but were too cowardly to do the same, i.e. to fight as – and, consequently, against – those masters. So slaves invented 'truth' to fight their masters without fighting, without any confrontation that would have forced them to face death.

Yet, once that fight was won and we had all become slaves, we continued cherishing our resentment with respect to the masters' ethics and kept on dreaming about a 'heroic' life. This is why the fictional side of our culture remained full of 'heroes' – as it does to the present day. We

are still fascinated by the will to look death into the eyes, in the same way that movie heroes such as Bruce Willis do. As we continue to be afraid of that very will, we keep it locked up in our fiction: in literature or visual culture. In real life we disqualify impetuous heroes with their swollen feelings of 'honor', while in the novels we read and the movies we watch, we venerate them.

Yet, does all this apply to 'high' modern literature as well? Are the main characters there performed as real 'heroes'? Are they not rather shaped as slaves instead of masters, to put it in the terms of Nietzsche's typology? They, too, are in a situation in which their very existence is at stake, but the difference with the antique or Nietzschean hero is that the modern hero no longer fully acknowledges this position, let alone makes a choice for it. Being a hero is something that comes over him, of which he seems to be the victim of.

Just like in the Homeric epic, the modern novel puts forward a hero, but as we reject any kind of master ethos, the hero takes the shape of the opposite of the anti-hero. The anti-hero clearly displays all the characteristics of a classic hero, but at the same time he represents the impossibility of ever acknowledging his heroism. In a way, here too, as in Nietzsche's philosophy, the hidden resentment of modern man is brought to the surface; but, unlike Nietzsche, modern novels generally stop there. They stick to this observation, but do not put forward any alternative.

In what follows I analyze Willem Frederik Hermans's first short story, entitled 'An Emancipation'. It presents a 'hero', eager to emancipate himself from the domination of his masters, but unable to openly fight them. The Nietzschean perspective is helpful to analyze the strange emancipation of Hermans's obviously 'slavish hero'. Yet, whereas his behavior seems ethically indefensible, even from a Nietzschean point of view, I defend the thesis that the hero of Hermans's story is not without a typically modern ethical interest. I more precisely show the ethical dimension of our *fascination* for this kind of 'anti-hero' (as Hermans called them).<sup>4</sup> It will finally lead me to some thoughts on the ethical dimension of literature in general.

## Gift & Emancipation

The title is telling. Hermans's 'An Emancipation' describes the way in which Bahloul, a young man in the Syrian town Aleppo, withdraws from the domination of paternal authority. As a little boy, he was fascinated by his family's pottery in the basement of their house. Being bad at school, his father gave him a job in his pottery business. However, here too he does what can be expected from a self-declared 'black sheep of the family'. He fails to become a good potter and interprets the father's silence about the matter as an incitement to 'go away, get out of his sight once and for all, the sooner the better'.

When, for that reason, he becomes a soldier, quartered in Basra, he soon makes friends with Mohammed, who treats his younger comrade with great generosity. He lets him live with him in the room he rents outside the barracks and introduces his friend to a new 'basement' which, this time, is a bar where he not only learns to appreciate wine and opium, but

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<sup>4</sup> For Hermans, the 'hero' in modern literature is also an 'anti-hero' in the sense that the writer explicitly wants him *not* to be liked by his reader. See, in this volume, the essay 'Autonomous proliferates' by Andrew Goldstone'.

Mohammed's lover as well, the beautiful Halimah, whom he is allowed to share. At night, she is Bahloul's, during the day she belongs to Mohammed.

However, he also wants to emancipate himself from this 'second father', as he himself calls Mohammed. Unexpectedly, an opportunity arises. One evening, James, an English soldier from their battalion comes along to tell Bahloul that Mohammed has been found murdered. Immediately, Bahloul brings James into the 'basement' to convince him of the contrary: as always Mohammed is sitting there, drunk and dozed off in one corner. Turned back home, Bahloul and Mohammed meet their landlady. She shouts at them: 'Of course you realize that my son did it', and at once offers them an amount of hush money. It is then that Bahloul sees the opportunity. He kills Mohammed and goes to the police, both to hand over the hush money and to denounce the landlady's son as Mohammed's murderer.

'Heroic' is not precisely a way in which one can qualify Bahloul's emancipation process. All the steps he takes excel in cowardliness and moral meanness – regardless of whether one, à la Nietzsche, uses the criteria of slave morality or of master morality. So, how can the modern reader ever recognize some ethical value in the story of this kind of 'hero'?

Let us however rest this question for a while, and take a look at the proper emancipation process that is performed in this short story.

Why does Bahloul want to become emancipated? What is so intolerable about the 'paternal authorities' he is subjected to? Is it that, during his childhood, his father was a tyrant? The supposed similarity with Hermans's real father, as mentioned in many reviews of 'An Emancipation', has no support in the text itself.<sup>5</sup> Bahloul's father is presented as being rather mild and charitable. When his son received poor grades at school and plays truant, he offers him a job in his pottery, and when he fails there, he keeps silent. It is only Bahloul himself who interprets this as a condemnation.

My father's attitude to my behaviour is easily summed up: he said nothing. But he said nothing in such a terrifying way that it became clearer to me by the day what he would have said had he spoken. I had to go away, get out of his sight once and for all, the sooner the better. What was I to him? Nothing. What he had done for me? Everything. I had not accepted his devotion. I had exhausted his patience. I had to vanish.

What problem does Bahloul have with his father? That his father has done everything for him! For with respect to his father's generous gift, he did not succeed in giving anything in return. This is why he felt as if he was 'nothing' with regards to 'everything' his father gave him. The only answer he could come up with was to approve of his father by effectively being nothing himself, i.e. to disappear. Yet, simply disappearing is what he did not dare, and he was even too proud to show this cowardice. Becoming a soldier was an excellent solution.

Bahloul's 'second father' was just as generous, also because Mohammed let him talk extensively about the difficult relationship with his real father. It made him realize that the fault was not with his father, but solely with himself.

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance: Sonja Pos, *Dorbeck is alles! Navolging als sleutel tot enkele romans en verhalen van W.F. Hermans* (Amsterdam: Vossiuspers UvA, 2010), pp. 22-23.

‘Do you really think, Bahloul,’ he [Mohammed] asked me, ‘that it would have made a huge difference to you if you had become a source of joy to your father? Do you really think that would have made you happy?’

From Mohammed, Bahloul learned that his failures were in fact brought upon him by himself; unconsciously he had strived after them. ‘Unconsciously’, indeed: ‘Striving for something means knowing what your aim is; and that is precisely what people who practice failure don’t know’, so he learns from Mohammed, who adds that he likes that kind of intellectual spinning because it reminds him of his own state of mind twenty years before. So he guarantees, “Nowadays I don’t do it at all any more, thank goodness.” “Well, I don’t envy you,” I [Bahloul] said, infuriated by the advantage he had over me. Bahloul experiences the intellectual predominance of his ‘second father’ as an overwhelming gift, which, again, he is now unable to respond to with a counter-gift. This renders him furious and desperate. Mohammed’s *erotic* gift is even worse for him – if only because the giver does not really give something and so does not want something back in return.

The morning after Bahloul’s first night with Halimah, both comrades meet one another in the room they rent. Bahloul goes into a huff when he realizes that, sober, Mohammed still grants him his girl. “She’s mine, anyway” he says, “I’m only lending her to you, see?” Bahloul is humiliated, but most of all by his own incapacity to properly react.

I was as enraged as a sleepy child by my failure to retaliate with: ‘It’s not a favour you can grant.’ Or, better still: ‘Why don’t you just give her to me? Lending is for Jews and Lombards. Small gifts keep a friendship going.’ How absurd to rebel against him now! What would be in it for me?

That same evening, Bahloul recalls a crucial conversation, in which Mohammed instructed him to always stay mindful of his parents’ advice.

‘Do you ever think of your father, Bahloul? Not that I’m against it, no, on the contrary, I’m all for it. Truly, the efforts of parents are not in vain. There are things you can learn from them – only they’re not what they have in mind. You can learn how to subjugate, humiliate, betray, oppress. That is what they instill in you when you’re young; it’s the only way children can grow up to be fathers, both oppressors and oppressed. *That* is what we learn from the English. We still lack experience, but that will get better. Your parent or guardian is your best teacher: the less you obey him, the more you take after him. You called me your second father, if you remember, so you probably think it rather audacious of me to tell you all this, no? You may already be thinking: aha, he realizes that I’ll get the better of him one day.

Here, from Mohammed, Bahloul is informed about the counter-gift with which one could reply to the overwhelming gift of his father. You have to follow and to obey your father, not by doing what he says, but precisely by *not* doing it. Only by being disobedient, you yourself become a father. Only by emancipating yourself from your guardian, you become one yourself.

Yet, how to obey a guardian who precisely imposes *this*? How to be faithful to one who asks you to be unfaithful? The fact that the story ends with Bahloul killing Mohammed is not a mere

coincidence. Murder seems to be one of the few answers possible to the paradoxical obedience Mohammed asks from Bahloul. At the end of the day, the guardian/father calls for patricide. With respect to the overwhelming gift by one who offers everything, 'nothing' is the only adequate counter-gift. And of that 'nothing', murder is the most radical kind. Yet, Bahloul does not immediately proceed to the act. At that moment, in his mind, his 'new father' is already dead for him. 'I put Mohammed out of my mind. I wouldn't let on, but he no longer existed for me.'

A little further on the same page, things again are all about gift and giving. Bahloul complains about his persistent lack of money, in spite of Mohammed's infinite generosity. The reason for this is the numerous presents he buys for his girl 'on loan'. He has no choice but to approach her in that way. He explains:

It was true: I only had her on loan from him. There was nothing I could give her that was really mine, aside from my veneration. She had nothing of mine. Sometimes I felt an urge to sing a very tender and new song for her, to a tune which would stay with her forever and which was so strange that she wouldn't even be able to hum it, so that nobody else would ever hear the melody.

But the tune I found was so unearthly that my voice couldn't keep to it, so I never sang for Halimah.

The only thing that was mine I wasn't able to give her.

The only present *of his* that Bahloul can give her is a song, so beautiful, but so particular too, that he is not able to sing it, and that even if he were able, it would enter into her without it being possible for her to appropriate or even to hum it. A counter-gift leaving the gift he is living on intact; a counter-gift remaining forever unacceptable, impossible to react upon in an adequate way. In all its particularity, it is *his* gift, the only one that is *his*, be it that he is not even capable of owning it himself, let alone of giving it away.

When at the end of the story he finally reacts 'adequately' upon the advice of his guardian/father figure and kills him, something of that other 'adequate' counter-gift which imaginarily he had reserved for Halimah, keeps persisting. After having strangled Mohammed, he completes his act by manipulating things in such a way that his landlady's son got blamed for the murder. The passage in which this is described contains two references to gift giving: a 'pitcher' and Bahloul's 'song':

The soldiers were rallied, and we set off with me leading the way as the guide. The woman threw up her arms, dumbfounded, when I burst in with the gang. But I took no notice and slashed her wrist with my sabre. So swift was the blow that she seemed unconscious of it, and stood there extending the stump like a pitcher gushing red water. The son, with three soldiers restraining him, was led by me in triumph to the guard-house. I didn't know what I was doing, didn't think of the consequences; all I heard was the song for Halimah singing loudly in my head, with ample percussion accompaniment.

‘An Emancipation’ raises the issue of ‘gift, reception and counter-gift’ – to refer to the threefold concept from Marcel Mauss’s famous *Essai sur le don* (1923-24).<sup>6</sup> It performs emancipation as a process in which the ‘hero’ tries to escape the dominance of a unilateral gift. For a proper functioning of gift giving requires supposing the gift to have an addressee capable of accepting it and, in a second moment, of responding to it with a counter-gift. The ‘hero’ of the story fails in both: he does not succeed in finding a way to fully accept the gifts he lives on, and his attempt to come to a counter-gift ends up in murder.

The structurally tragic discrepancy that, according to Mauss, is inherent to the relationship between gift, reception and counter-gift, is brought to a head in this story. Here, the incapacity of accepting the overwhelming gift, and of responding to it as generously takes the shape of a counter-gift which is as absolute as the all-giving gift itself: a radical ‘nothing’ being the euphemism for the murder committed on the giver. However, besides the killing ‘nothing’, the story suggests yet another counter gift: the song Bahloul intended to sing for Halimah.

This gift is not insignificant. In that song, the story talks, in a way, about itself. Bahloul not only can give ‘death’, he can also give a song, a story, literature. And, as is suggested, literature has something to do with the described incapacity of giving an adequate response to the all-giving instance, which is life. In that sense, Bahloul’s murder and his imaginary song are in line with one another. It is as if literature is given the hint to recognize itself in Bahloul’s heinous deed.

It might be that the muse that inspired the writer in the spring of 1941 told him something like this. It is not that she whispered that literature and manslaughter were the same, far from it. Literature is not murder. It is a gift, in this case a tender gift to the beloved, expressing the hope that she will stay forever. However, this gift is put in line with the macabre gift of murder – thus suggesting the tragic structure of gift and gift-giving as such.

‘An Emancipation’ is not simply the report of a murder, but also of the song accompanying that murder (‘all I heard was the song for Halimah singing loudly in my head, with ample percussion accompaniment’), *and* it is the report of the murder that gives that song its frame and context (and, who knows, its truth).<sup>7</sup> If Bahloul’s ‘song for Halimah’ does stand for literature *as such*, then, literature is performed as an impossible – because it is an unacceptable – gift; be it that, contrary to murder, this unacceptable gift does not destroy the one accepting it. Even if Bahloul had ever sang that song for Halimah, it would not have killed her. But it would have remained the unacceptable song it was. In the same way literature is unacceptable, not in the sense that it cannot be read, but that, being read, it burdens the reader with something escaping him, something that repels and attracts him at the same time – endlessly, in a rhythm of both irritation and delight, without being able to ever straighten out.

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<sup>6</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. by W.D. Halls, Foreword by Mary Douglas, Routledge Classic (New York / London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 16-18, and *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> Already the first moment Bahloul dreams of singing ‘a very tender and new song for her [Halimah], he immediately associates it with violence and homicide. The passage already cited here, goes further as follows: ‘The only thing that was mine I wasn’t able to give her. At first this made me sad, but the lazy life I was leading under Mohammed’s resolute tutelage made me resign myself to the situation. Often, though, when I lay back, half asleep, I couldn’t stop thinking of knives and death, and I would see the butcher’s single stab turning a warm, quivering beast into a fountain of blood.’



## Good & Evil

All this could be a description of the way in which all novels and stories of Willem Frederik Hermans have been received as well. The polemics that always accompanied their reception only confirm this impression. It was Hermans's way to feel assured that what he had launched into the world was unacceptable.

Presenting the reader with a gift that in the end he cannot accept: this is perfectly in the line with what Hermans meant with all his works. And, according to him, this intention coincided with that of literature *as such*.

Was this, too, the intention of the nineteen-year-old man who, in the late days of April 1941, locked himself up in his room to write 'An Emancipation'? Is the topic of the story not all too far away from the reality of that time in order to be really unacceptable for the contemporary reader? The scenario plays out in the Middle East, in Aleppo and Basra, which in those years were not exactly cities that occupied people's minds in the Netherlands.

Is that so? Is 'An Emancipation' really so far away from the world in which Hermans was writing? According to Ewoud Kieft, the situation of occupied Holland is obviously present in the background of the story, including the choice that each citizen had to face in those days: to collaborate or to join the resistance. According to him, Bahloul is

the factual equivalent of a Dutch SS-man who gives away a person in hiding to the Germans, accepts money from the latter's mother telling her that she will be left in peace, in order, then, to kill one of his SS-friends and to blame the mother's son for that very crime. It is not easy to come up with something more unscrupulous.<sup>8</sup>

The story's background is a military occupation (similar to the one under which the Netherlands then suffered), where the 'hero' is a collaborator in the service of the English occupying forces, who, in a perfidious way, makes use of the situation in order to come to terms with a problematic fight *contra* his father figures and *pro* his emancipation.

The private biography of the author is not absent in the story's background either. In the years he started writing, the young Hermans was still in the midst of his own emancipation fight. He had not yet freed himself from the narrow minded, low middle class family in which he was raised. Was he not, in that two-child family, forced to always feel surpassed by his older sister whom his father could be proud of, who was more diligent, more obedient and more promising than her younger brother who in all those domains had only showed failure?

The difficulty of Hermans's own emancipation process is also due to a traumatic event which, a year before, had troubled his mind decisively and which is reported in many of his novels and short stories. On the day of Holland's capitulation, May 14, 1940, his older sister had been found dead after committing suicide. It was a real shock for her younger brother and it disturbed the then very actual fight with his father decisively. In an interview, Hermans states:

Although I was really not on good terms neither with that sister nor with my parents, I had an immense compassion with my parents. I felt a kind of pressure in the sense of: make

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<sup>8</sup> Ewoud Kieft, *Oorlogsmitythen. Willem Frederik Hermans en de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2012), p. 88; my translation, MDK.

them not lose their last child. I was then eighteen years old, the age when you better struggle out of the grip of your parents. The circumstances of the war as well as this tragic event made that grip much stronger instead.<sup>9</sup>

The circumstance under which his sister committed suicide is as much a decisive factor in the complex sensibility, which, since, has never left the author. That sister maintained strong ties to an older nephew, a police inspector and one of the few regular visitors of the house. He was a cheerful, open man whom the young Hermans admired a lot. Quickly he became a kind of alternative father figure for him.<sup>10</sup> On the fourteenth of May, both that man and his sister were found dead in a car parked on a secluded alley. It was a complete surprise when it turned out that his sister had been the mistress of that married man. That night the couple had decided to commit suicide: fear had overwhelmed them, now that the kingdom of the Netherlands had surrendered.

In the eyes of Hermans, the ideas of the Dutch critic Menno ter Braak had brought them that far. During the past ten years, in numerous publications and lectures, Ter Braak had explained his criticism on fascism and Nazism. He, too, committed suicide on the day of May 10, 1940, when the Germans invaded the Dutch territories. On many pages in his oeuvre, Hermans attacks Ter Braak (who, then, models for one of the novel's characters). It is not that he rejects Ter Braak's criticism of fascism on the level of content, but he reproaches him with the idealistic nature of his thinking, which drives him away from concrete reality. In Ter Braak's speeches and writings, fascism and the resistance against it become an apocalyptic battle between Good and Evil. This way, he falls into idealistic grandiloquence similar to the one he reproaches fascism with.

According to Hermans, his sister – the most clever member of the family, who had studied law, had political ideals and attended lectures by intellectuals such as Ter Braak – had become the victim of the same type of high-flown ideas with which she fed her ego, just like her lover had done, the older nephew whom her brother admired so, and who showed him the way out of the cage of paternal imperatives. Both cherished and preached big ideas, but kept their amorous liaison behind the curtains of common decency and, in the moment when the matter of really starting the fight arose, chose the most cowardly way out.

According to Hermans, his sister and her lover overestimated the Nazis and took the delusions of the enemy's propaganda machine too easily for granted. They saw in the Nazis the malicious messengers of a diabolic truth that was untouchable by ordinary mortals. Against those devils of Evil, people such as his sister and her lover elevated themselves into angels of the Supreme Good. And when Evil struck (read: when the Netherlands surrendered after only four days), their despair left only one way out: suicide. As if the omniscient enemy would immediately be there to ransack their houses and to arrest them on the basis of their dissident ideas. As if they were not able to see the Nazis as human beings who, too, were cursed with short-sightedness and failures, inclined to cheat, and to betray their comrades when they felt the need for it.

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<sup>9</sup> Hans van Straten, *Ze zullen eikels zaaien op mijn graf: Terugggevonden gesprekken met Willem Frederik Hermans* (Amsterdam: Bas Lubberhuizen Uitgever, 1995), p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Thinks of Bahloul who, in Mohammed, finds his second, more positive father.

Instead of idealists like his sister or Ter Braak, Hermans shows *real* people in his novels who, in the given circumstances, can keep themselves on their feet only with their greatest efforts and most of the time not even that, since they do not succeed in escaping real life's confusion, the one between good and bad, noble and cowardly, clever and naïve. This is what, in his eyes, literature has to do: to depict man not as an idea, but as he is, in all ungraspable concreteness. 'Realism': this is the requirement literature has to meet. In this, it must recognize its basic call. Not the realism of science as promoted by the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, but the one of that which, according to the same Wittgenstein, '*sich zeigt*', 'makes itself manifest' – thus escaping the grip of big ideas and intellectual schemes.<sup>11</sup> In Hermans's essays, this is called 'chaos'.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear now why, indeed, literature is often unacceptable. It is so *almost by definition*, since man all too willingly likes to live in idealities, inclined as he is to find his bearings in big ideas, in 'standards and values' transcending concrete reality. If literature offers the unacceptable, it is because human reality is unacceptable, in the sense that it is never as we wish it would be. Hence our indestructible inclination to prefer ideality over reality, and to qualify things contradicting that ideality as unacceptable. The task of literature is to go against that idealistic view on (read: denial of) reality. Things as they *really* are can never be touched but in *second order*, only *after* an iconoclastic move, *after* the experience that humans first of all live on images rather than on things as they are. Being a hands-on expert in images and imagination, literature has to destroy the images in which we like to keep ourselves locked up with obstinate eagerness.

'It is not easy to come up with something more unscrupulous', Kieft writes about the ending of 'An Emancipation'. Hermans allows his first exercise in literature to present a clear-cut flirt with evil. Bahloul is put forward as an errant knave and the cowardice he lives his wickedness through, makes it even worse. If he faces death, it is definitely not as a Nietzschean 'hero' or 'master'; he is no doubt a 'slave', jealous of the power and the freedom he recognizes in the other but unable to fight his fight with him openly. Hermans's 'hero' is an evil one, in both the classical and Nietzschean sense of the term.

Why does Hermans allow literature to flirt with evil? For the sake of realism. This is the basic motive here. What Hermans tries to show is not a human being insofar as he corresponds to conscience and law, but precisely in so far he does not – or, more precisely, insofar as he fails in doing so, struggles with that, and goes down in that struggle. This failure is not a deviation from human reality, as the systems of big ideas used to tell us; it is not even a deviation of the Nietzschean hero-morality. This failure is shown as human reality itself, man's reality insofar as it does not fit in the moral systems, not even the Nietzschean one. The 'hero' performed in literature appears as an 'anti-hero' in all senses of the word. The kind of human reality he represents seems to need literature – fiction, imagination – in order for it to be acknowledged

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<sup>11</sup> See proposition 6.522 in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: 'There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical'. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, introduction by Bertrand Russell (London / New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 89.

<sup>12</sup> In the 'Preambula' of the collection of short stories entitled *Paranoia*, he writes: 'Man thinks in terms of words that do not really exist, and is blind to original chaos. *There is only one real word: chaos*', in: Willem Frederik Hermans: *Volledige werken 7* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij & Van Oorschot, 2006), p. 218 (my translation, MDK).

as it is. It is as if, in our so-called most realistic time ever, human reality is only reachable via fiction, via literature.

## Ethics and Aesthetics

Does literature have an ethical function? Does Hermans write stories such as ‘An Emancipation’ so that we can draw moral lessons from them? Is Bahloul a ‘hero’ to be taken as an ethical model? The main character of ‘An Emancipation’ is certainly not a moral model; neither is he an anti-model to show how one should *not* act. It is clear that the author entirely disapproves of Bahloul’s behavior and that the exhaustively depicted background and context of the murder is not meant to call upon mitigating circumstances in favour of the murderer or to stir up sympathy with the reader.

Yet, does the author have no moral intentions at all within his writing? One can expand the question to literature in general: asking if it is ethically indifferent. Why, then, is literature full of ‘evil’ scenarios and moral badness? The last question already has an answer. As explained above, literature must be iconoclastic. It must interrupt our spontaneous – and in that sense usually *good* – ideas about reality. Which is why it cannot offer us the reliable, familiar good, but only something that is unreliable, unacceptable and in that sense bad.

Yet, the latter is not without any ethical dimension. Although a product of the imagination, literature is a matter of truth, and for that very reason it has something inherently ethical about it. Bahloul is a soldier and, in that quality, he keeps guard over the line that separates good from evil. Yet, the very fact that he does this as a soldier, implies that this line has no undisputed foundation, for it is intrinsically linked to power, in this case to the power of the British occupying forces. The story shows the sad truth that, in the context of that unstable situation, man has to settle his accounts and, therefore, determine right and wrong. Within this ‘chaos’, he uses what seems to be good as a veil to cover how he settles his dirty affairs. Laying bare that this ‘human, all too human’ truth is, as such, already an act of ethical courage.

Is this, however, a sufficient answer to the question of literature’s ethical dimension? For the fact that literature is a matter of truth does not answer the question of whether showing that truth is ethical *per se*? Even if, as with the character of Bahloul, the human is performed in all its singularity and beyond all that idealism could tell about him, the question persists. What we can do with it, if this has some ethical value – even, in a negative way (*via negativa*): as showing us the bad things we should not do? Does literature not rather deliberately opt for leaving the ethical untouched and gliding on moral indifference?

If the latter is the case, Nietzsche may have been right asserting that the moral indifference shown in literary truth is nothing but a veiled cover for the resentment secretly cherished by modern man – a cover for the jealousy with regard to the real hero hidden in the literary one: the ‘master’ who is not afraid to be afraid of dying, and dares to live right on the edge of the line that separates life from death. Of course, Hermans’s main character is a sly coward, but is this not a concession of the author in order to let his modern reader enjoy Bahloul’s misconduct and his victory over the fear of death shown in his crime? And was the ‘father’ the real target of Bahloul’s murder? From a Nietzschean point of view, it is not the fight against the father that renders someone free. This is how the morality of slaves sees it. The battle which makes one a master or free man is one in which he faces death and carries with mortal fear. Not the

disobedience with respect to the paternal law, but the readiness to murder, including patricide, makes Bahloul a truly emancipated man. In that sense, Hermans's story functions as a veil to hide precisely this. All this is only told 'under the skin' in order to *not* bring to the surface the resentment that modern man lives on.

So the question is: what is an ethics like which is *without* resentment? In other words: is it possible to defend a story in which Bahloul does the things he does, but (unlike the way in which Hermans paints him) without any trace of cowardice? Does this not imply a completely 'sadistic universe' (to use one of Hermans's favorite expressions)?<sup>13</sup>

Even if he does typify the universe we live in as 'sadistic', Hermans does not opt for a Nietzschean analysis. However sadistic – because it is chaotic – our universe may be, it is not Hermans's intention to call people to accept and affirm this, and to create a new ethics on that very base. From a Nietzschean perspective, Hermans remains strictly within the limits of the morality of slaves. Averse to big ideas with which people feed their egos, Hermans also suspects ideas such as 'morality of slaves' or '*Übermensch*' (i.e. the shape the late Nietzsche gives to the master: man beyond man as he is now).<sup>14</sup> Hermans's somewhat Nietzschean perspective sticks to a merely analytical position and rigorously refuses to consider any kind of alternative. This, too, would be but an idea; and to think man adhering to ideas implies sacrificing him to them. You only find man's truth where he does not coincide with his ideas.

This is not to say that man can do without ideas, and that he could exist only *on his own*, *apart from* ideas. On the contrary, according to Hermans, man is as attached to his ideas as to himself. It is by means of them that he builds up his identity. He lives on the ideas, images, and dreams he has about himself and his world. It is not a coincidence that, on the first page of *Moedwil en misverstand (Willfulness and Misunderstanding (1949))*, the volume of short stories which opens with 'An Emancipation', the motto borrowed from Arthur Schopenhauer reads: 'Life and dreams are pages of one and the same book'.<sup>15</sup>

However, the dreamer of the dream named life is an obstinate sleeper: although he cannot do without dreams, he nonetheless resists them, however vain this might be. A kind of ineffective resistance only based on imagination: this is what defines us as human beings. We only *really* find ourselves in that place where we resist the ideas or dreams we have about ourselves, i.e. where we, who live entirely on those ideas and dreams, do *not* coincide with them.

In this resistance, man has no solid ground beneath his feet. It is there that he sees, in his most intimate self – in the 'self' that does not coincide with anything else – that he is but imagination. To 'keep' that self and to give it a shape, he has to hang on to imagination, more precisely to the material imagination works with. In Hermans's case this is language. As the twentieth century Dutch poet Lucebert puts it: 'I therefore turned / to language in her beauty'.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See his collection of essays on that title: Willem Frederik Hermans, *Het sadistisch universum* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1964).

<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, ed. by Adrian Del Caro and Robert Pippin, trans. by Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, Volume I*, ed. and trans. by Judith Norman, Alister Welchman, and Christopher Janaway, with an introduction by Christopher Janaway (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> The first lines of the last stanza in *I seek in poetic fashion* (translation Diane Butterman):

Hermans's story follows his 'hero' until the moment in which he breaks and loses himself. In Bahloul's case, however, thanks to his calculated cowardice, this loss turns into its reverse. On the level of content, the story presents a sordid affair of the 'banality of evil'. If you realize this, you may understand why the story relies entirely on its *beauty*. The more language is styled and pressed into the straightjacket of beauty, the further language can go on telling the unacceptable and morally intolerable emancipation fight of the one named Bahloul. Beauty seduces us to go too far and encourages us sympathize with the 'hero', who at the end of the day appears to be, morally, the lowest of the low.

This is why, in the story, the 'song of Halimah' is so crucial. Precisely in the moment of Balhoul's crime – or, which amounts to the same thing, of the loss of his 'self' – he clings to that song: 'I didn't know what I was doing, didn't think of the consequences; all I heard was the song for Halimah singing loudly in my head, with ample percussion accompaniment.' The story goes the same way for the reader: the moment we lose ourselves in the ethically reprehensible figure, we remain floating on the beauty of the 'song' which supports our fascination with him and his crime. Where we lose ourselves in fascination with evil, where our ethical judgment is suspended in order to keep on empathizing with a morally low person, the 'ground' that allows us to go on is beauty.<sup>17</sup>

Never longer than for a while, beauty lets us enjoy a certain distance with regard to the evil literature presents us with. This is beauty's moral indifference. However, allowing this distance and cultivating the morally indifferent beauty is not unethical *per se*. It acknowledges us in our being irreducible to the standards and ideals we nonetheless cannot miss. It recognizes our *tragic* position with respect to our ethical values and standards, a position in which we wrestle with them, without ever being able to escape them or to leave them behind. That vain fight typifies the essence of our humanity or, so to say, of what is more essential than our essence (i.e. than the idea to which we necessarily have to reduce ourselves).

Man is not a 'hero' in the sense Nietzsche defined the term. He, however, is not without the *wish* to be so, and in this, Nietzsche was quite right. Hermans's intention is not to satisfy that wish, but to recognize it and to lay it bare. It is not to say that man adamantly should go beyond the good, but he has to take his will to do so seriously. He is marked by recalcitrance against the ethical law without which he nonetheless cannot live, and it is his ethical duty, too, to bring that recalcitrance into cultivation. For solely the latter presents the whole of his truth. Only, this presentation can be but a matter of literature, imagination, fiction – and, consequently, will always be in some way or another in vain. The ethical dimension of literature relies on this vain truth.

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I therefore turned  
to language in her beauty  
heard there that she had nothing more human  
than the speech impediments of the shadow  
than those of the deafening sunlight

(<http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poem/item/20673/auto/03.-I-look-in-poetic-fashion>); read November 12, 2014)

<sup>17</sup> The function of that song in Hermans's story can be compared with what Céline – another writer whose stories deal with moral evil – called '*une certaine petite musique*, a certain little music'. See, in this volume, Arnold Heumakers, 'Listening to Céline's *petite musique*, hearing Hermans as well' (97-107).

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