

G. VAN HOEYDONCK  
Melbourne, Victoria  
Australia

## THE DUTCH RURAL NOVEL IN FLANDERS (1900—1945)

Despite my belief in *one* "literature of the Low Countries" I shall restrict myself to a discussion of the rural novel in Flanders. I thought that I had some sound reasons for doing so.

In the first place, the North (The Netherlands) and the South (Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) have been separated both politically and culturally for two hundred years. This period, from the early 17th century to the brief reunion early in the 19th century, has been disastrous for Dutch culture and literature in Flanders. The abolition of Dutch as a language for administration and education and the subsequent introduction of French as the official language reduced the status of Dutch to that of a spoken language. Moreover, the opportunism of the upper classes, which soon became exclusively French-speaking, the high rate of illiteracy among the predominantly agrarian population and the lack of contact with Standard Dutch in the North, soon reduced Dutch in Flanders to a series of isolated Flemish dialects which were frowned upon and commonly regarded as a lingo of the lower classes.

The short reunion with Holland, from 1815, after Napoleon's defeat, to 1830, when Belgium became independent, proved decisive for the survival of Dutch in Flanders. The intelligentsia who received their training in Dutch in that period were to become the leaders of *De Vlaamse Beweging* (The Flemish Movement), which would withstand a second wave of *verfransing* (Frenchification) after the independence of Belgium, which would eventually bring about the final recovery of Dutch in Flanders and determine political life in Belgium up to the present day.

I realize I have gone far back in time but the implications of all this for my research are as follows: with the revival of Flemish literature in the mid- and late 19th century, the Flemish writers quite predictably asserted their own identity. As in other literatures, one way of achieving that goal was the use of the historical novel, depicting a glorious moment of the past (e.g. Conscience's *De leeuw van Vlaanderen*, 1838, which renders an account of the 1302 Battle of the Golden Spurs, in which the Flemish guilds defeated the French army). In other texts the author echoes the views of the Flemish Movement,

which gives them a distinct political fervour which is absent from similar Dutch novels. In other words: in the Belgian context (where nationalism is not very prevalent) regionalism can be a disguised plea for federalism, separatism, a reunion with Holland or an alliance with Germany and thus a political rather than a literary or philosophical option.

Moreover, the rebirth of Dutch literature in Flanders occurred quite independently from the Dutch literary scene. There have been of course multiple contacts between authors, and even large-scale initiatives, but, as a counterpart to the Groot-Nederlandse Gedachte (the Concept of a Great Dutch Society, combining The Netherlands and Flanders) as proclaimed by—among others—Jan Frans Willems, one can refer to Gezelle's *taalparticularisme*, his stubborn and programmatic adherence to his Western Flemish dialect. It is actually only since the 2nd World War that the literary evolution in both countries has again been running parallel.

The presence of two other variables further justifies the decision to treat the Dutch and Flemish rural novels separately.

The first consideration is that the Netherlands is predominantly protestant whereas Belgium has always been almost homogeneously Roman Catholic; the second is that Holland did not take part in the First World War, whereas this theme quite often appeared in the novels of that time. A well-known representative of this "Front-Generation" is Jozef Simons, whose *Eer Vlaanderen vergaat* (*Before Flanders perishes*, 1927) starts off as a rural novel but soon shifts to a war setting. This is one of the texts I already referred to: the linguistic situation at the front, where predominantly Flemish soldiers are commanded by French-speaking officers only, works as a catalyst in the main character's evolution towards (and in this case even beyond) the views of the Flemish Movement.

Despite the restriction of my research to a corpus of Flemish novels, it would be very rewarding to work with a control group of Dutch writers, such as Antoon Coolen (*De rauwe grond*, 1926, or *Het donkere licht*, 1929), A.M. de Jong (the *Merijntje Gijzen*-cycle, 1925—1938), Theun de Vries, Herman de Man (*Aardebanden*, 1922), Roothaert (*Doctor Vlimmen*, 1936) or Anne de Vries (*Bartje*).

The title of this paper further contains the indication "1900—1945." Apparently most rural novels were written and published in this period. And even though in Flanders the tradition of the novel does not start until 1837, with *Conscience*, who to a certain degree can be regarded as a representative of the genre, one might be able to point out some harbingers in the prose tradition of the 18th century popular novels (*volksboeken*). Due to heuristic problems and the "tyranny of distance" I have not yet been able to study this problem in detail.

It is probably easier to decide on the second date, since the image of Dutch literature changes completely after the Second World War, at least as far as the main authors are concerned. Beneath that level of what is commonly

called mainstream literature, however, there is a constant undercurrent of lower-quality texts which are—even if one discards the notion of *Trivial-literatur* as a non-analytical category—slower at picking up new trends. My drawing of perimeters has thus been disturbed by the discovery that a new series of Rural Novels has been launched as recently as 1975. The books are actually labelled *streekroman*, are printed in the DDR(!), published by Amsterdam Boek and on the basis of extratextual elements such as distribution and book cover one would be tempted to classify them as *Trivialliteratur*. The titles include *En altijd weer bloeit de heide*, *Dorre Grond en De grond waarop ik groeide* (*The soil on which I grew*), which certainly sounds like the real thing...

In my introduction I have pointed out the options I have taken with regard to both the area and the period to be covered by my research. If you grant me a further extension I should like to postpone the definition of the term "rural novel." Instead, I should like to explain why I consider this research project important, if not world-shattering.

Undertaking a serious long-term research project should not come as a matter of course, nor be based merely on personal preference, as has been customary in literary criticism. Apart from its relevance to an overall scientific framework,<sup>1</sup> I can justify my proposed project on the following levels:

In the first place there is the importance of the rural novel in the period concerned. When I speak about "importance" I do not necessarily have in mind qualitative, literary factors, but rather tactical, quantitative, sociological aspects. The most important exception to this slightly depreciatory claim is without any doubt the work of Stijn Streuvels. At any rate, the rural novel plays a vital role within the context of the definitely conservative literary climate of Flanders between the two World Wars. To be sure, there has been Paul Van Ostaijen, the first truly modernist poet in Dutch literature, who succeeded in integrating in a strikingly personal manner the insights of Dadaism and German Expressionism into a poetry of European alloy. But Expressionism was not able to firmly establish itself in Flanders; its development was even thwarted (by e.g. U. Van de Voorde and the group around 'T Fonteintje") and it was not until the 'fifties that Van Ostaijen became renowned and popular with a larger audience. And authors such as Roelants, Elsschot (who broached the new themes of the city and the business world) or Walschap (who dared to attack the Catholic Church) had to associate themselves with the *Dutch* literary magazine "Forum."

In the second place there is, directly proportional to the quantitative importance of the genre, its sociological impact.

<sup>1</sup> This is an abridged version of the paper that was read at the conference. The "scientific framework" at the end of the original paper consisted mainly of a plea for a text grammar. I decided, however, to give priority to the research results, in the hope that they would be more original and informative. Also the bibliography has been deleted for reasons of space, but I shall gladly make it available to anyone interested.

During my discussion of the revival of Flemish literature I made reference to the intellectuals who received their education during the "Dutch occupation," as the period was called after 1830. Some of the most influential Flemish intellectuals of that period were probably J. B. David, J. F. Willems and, a few generations later, A. Vermeulen, each of them representing a different ideology. The first was a Roman Catholic, the second a liberal, and the third a socialist, which accurately reflects the stratification of Belgian politics. Out of recognition for their achievements, the grateful Flemish population posthumously bestowed on each of them a cultural fund which bore their name: the Willems-, Vermeulen- and Davidsfonds.

The Roman Catholic Davidsfonds, the oldest and the largest, soon began with a kind of readers' club. The aim was twofold: spiritual development of the people by providing—amongst other things—appropriate reading material as well as saturating that same reading public with their own ideology.

I realize that I frequently take an ideological stand in this paper, but the question whether that is permitted does not even arise. It is indeed both necessary and inevitable, given the strongly ideological desing of the series which the Davidsfonds was to publish.

All manuscripts were indeed initially assessed by the editorial board and often needed the approval of the ecclesiastical authorities too. In addition, they received a *zedelijke kwotering* (literally "a moral rating"), for which the Roman figures I to V were used. This rating, printed opposite the title-page, served mainly as a directive for parents and librarians and was indeed strictly adhered to. Books that were not even to be tolerated under I ("strictly for adults"), such as the work of De Sade, and later J. P. Sartre, went onto the blacklist (*de index*) at once.

Against the background of the monolithically Catholic Flemish population, the rural novel clearly had a conservative function, which perpetuated the system.

One might be tempted to regard the work of Felix Timmermans as an exception to the rule because of the vitalism in *Pallierter* and to a lesser extent in *Boerenpsalm*. The frequent use he made of symbols of fertility led however to a conflict with the Church which was not resolved until after an Italian bishop's intervention in favour of Timmermans.

The Davidsfonds soon started working with different series, each of them directed at a specific target group. The Keurreeks mainly consisted of monographs on religious, literary or philosophical topics, whereas all rural novels appeared in the Volksreeks. The latter series started in 1875 and ran until 1948. It was interrupted during the 1st, but not during the 2nd World War, which is remarkable, especially since the establishment of the German "Cultuurkamer" (Cultural Board, a censoring body for The Netherlands and Belgium) prompted a lot of authors to spontaneously forsake all literary activity during the war years.

In all, 400 titles (or a total of 9 million copies!) appeared in the Volksreeks

alone, which is astonishing when one takes into account the high illiteracy rate and the fact that these books were distributed solely in Flanders, which at the time only had a population of approximately 3 million. It is even more amazing when one compares a first edition of 80 000 copies of e.g. *Agnes* (Emiel van Hemeldonck) with the 1000 to 5000 copies of any contemporary new release, even of relatively popular authors, such as Jef Geeraerts. Such big print runs were made possible through a subscription system similar to that of contemporary book clubs: the Davidsfonds publishers ran only a very limited risk as their members were asked to select 2 to 3 books out of an offer of 5 to 6 books in each calendar year.

Leaving aside all literary considerations and taking only into account the enormous print runs of these novels, I think it would point to an ivory tower mentality to neglect the social impact of these texts and to condescendingly push them aside as being *Trivialliteratur*. And yet this is precisely what happened.

As things stand, not one monograph has been written on the subject: this provided me with a third incentive to undertake this research project. The credentials of our German colleagues are obviously greater. I am here thinking of Ina-Maria Greverus: *Der territoriale Mensch. Ein literaturanthropologischer Versuch zum Heimatphänomen* (1972), and Karlheinz Rossbacher: *Heimatkunstabewegung und Heimatroman. Zu einer Literatursoziologie der Jahrhundertwende* (1975). These publications, however, are useful only to a certain degree: the German *Heimatkunstabewegung* (Regional Art Movement) has been a programmatic literary movement, whereas in Dutch literature the regional or rural novel should rather be seen as a mode of writing, used by various individual writers over a fairly long period of time.

Authors such as Streuvels and Timmermans have, as well-established novelists, received a fair amount of critical attention. Their oeuvre, however, covers a much wider range than merely rural novels and moreover the critical approach in all cases focused on the merits of the individual writer rather than on the systematic analysis of a genre.

All this may explain the proliferation in Dutch literary criticism of critical labels referring to this type of text production and the inconsistency with which they are applied to writers as different as Claes and Van Aken, or Streuvels and Walschap.

The vaguest and most neutral term is probably *streekroman*, which could be regarded as a literal translation and the equivalent of the English "Regional Novel", were it not for the confusion in literary criticism which undermines the monopoly the English term has. In Van Dale's *Groot Woordenboek der Nederlandse Taal* (1976<sup>10</sup>; the Dutch equivalent of Duden) *streekroman* is defined as "a novel which is set in a certain region and which tries to render the atmosphere of that region" (een „roman die in een bep. landstreek speelt en die daarvan de sfeer tracht weer te geven"). This of course is only an entry in a dictionary, but as a definition this is too vague, as highly different

novels such as *De Stille Kracht* (L. Couperus), *Zomer-te-ter-Muren* (L.-P. Boon), *Het Stenen Bruidsbed* (H. Mulisch) and *Het Verboden Rijk* (J. Slauerhoff) all meet these criteria.

The term *streekroman* is used by Donker (1947), Brandt, Corstius & Jonckheere (1959), Van Geelen (1978) and Kemp (1963), but is with the latter obviously interchangeable with *heimatroman*. The word *heimat* in Dutch is no synonym for "fatherland", but has—as in German—strong emotional overtones. Also Knuvelde (1977<sup>6</sup>) refers to the "Lierse heimat" and Lissens (1967<sup>4</sup>) devotes a whole chapter to "Bloeiende Heimatkunst en bijdrage van de frontgeneratie" without however defining his terms. He mentions the "plotseling verhevigde bloei van de regionale literatuur" (p. 150; "a suddenly intensified flourishing of regional literature") but does not attempt to explain this phenomenon and furthermore this flourishing *heimat* literature to him seems to be synonymous with only two authors, viz. Timmermans and Claes. Further the term *heimatroman* is used by Weisgerber (1956) and Van Vlierden (1969).

The term *heimatroman* is actually somewhat unorthodox linguistically—it isn't proper Dutch but rather a borrowing from German. Personally however I prefer this term, precisely because of these connotations, implying correspondences with German and Austrian *Heimatliteratur*.

Apart from these two terms I have also come across *dorpsroman* (lit. "village novel"; cf. Van Vlierden and Weisgerber) and *boerenroman* (lit. "farmers' novel"; cf. Donker, Van Vlierden, and Lampo, 1961), but as farmers happen to go to the village every now and then, this distinction seems fairly tenuous, and the above pair can easily be replaced by *landelijke roman* ("rural novel").

This is the term which I have decided to use in this paper, without, however, considering the debate as closed. I realize that these terminological problems, which I here have merely touched upon, have to be studied in greater detail, preferably also beyond the framework of Dutch literary criticism.

I thought the following aspects would be characteristic of the rural novel:

1. The setting is consciously geographically limited to one particular region (this excludes accounts of travels and the accidental importance of the setting).

2. This region is predominantly agrarian (which excludes the urban novel, which in a sense is "regional" too) and may have some further distinctive characteristics (of. e.g. Streuvels' landscapes to those of Timmermans).

3. The region is part of the Netherlands or Flanders and is—at least to the characters—part of their fatherland. This sounds tautological, but it excludes for example colonial literature and various other possibilities.

4. The text contains emotive aspects, expressing a strong link with the region, which goes further than Van Dale's "rendering the atmosphere of the region." The region is definitely idealized, contrary to rather naturalist

“regional” novels by authors as Buysse, Boon, Van Aken. The tie with the region can be strengthened by the author’s use of the dialect of that area, either throughout the book, as in Timmermans’ *Pallieter*, or occasionally, say in the dialogue, as in *Wroeters*.

5. The text implies a closed, spatially limited and a-historical world view, where the border of the village often coincides with the limit of the universe.

Even the casual reference to sociological phenomena such as mass migration to the cities does not challenge the one-dimensionality of these views. There is more of a tendency to plead for the unconditional preservation of the timeless universe of which the author has offered the blueprint, by making a conscious and rather exaggerated use of folklore, even if it does no longer reflect social reality, and by the use of language as a mystifying, concealing device.

6. As a result of this, the ideology of these texts is definitely conservative, literally and figuratively. Nothing ever seems to change. I take it you are familiar with Gussdorf’s definition of myth: „a prototype for the restoration of balance within the closed world view” (my translation).

7. This conservatism is also present on the technical level: the traditional novel is the evident vehicle for the communication of these ideas.

See below for more precise observations.

The next section of this paper deals with what I have come to call my “pilot study”: a short project which was the backbone of an Honours Course I gave at the University of Melbourne in 1979. The course, designed for 3rd and 4th year Dutch students, focused on the detailed analysis of two regional novels.

I had selected *Boerenpsalm* (1935) by Felix Timmermans, who is well-known, and *Wroeters* (1945) by Alois Blommaert, who is a completely unknown author, judging at least by the fact that his name was not mentioned in even one of the twenty-six literary histories which we checked for this purpose. One of the grounds for selecting precisely these texts was that it enabled me to confront my students with the question: „Why didn’t Blommaert make it?” A second interesting aspect was that *Wroeters* was published in the Volksreeks of the Davidsfonds.

“Boerenpsalm,” by the way, means “Farmers’ Psalm” or “Hymn”; “Wroeters” means something like “Labourers” or “Strugglers”—the verb “wroeten” literally means to drudge, to grub, to scrape along, and has connotations of strong physical work and leading a very harsh existence.

As my aims are somewhat different in this paper, I will not keep myself to a strictly parallel treatment of both texts, but will rather focus on the analysis of *Wroeters*. In the discussion of the results I would like to keep basically to the same order of the aspects of the rural novel that have already been specified above.

The novel is set on the heath, in what the reader can easily identify as

the "Kempen" (the Campine), an impoverished agrarian area in the North-East of Belgium which is notorious for its desolate but somehow charming landscape and its barren, infertile soil. Keersmaekers (1978) identifies the region as the area around Wuustwezel and declares—off the record—that the cigar factory referred to in the novel is no other than that of the firm Verellen. The text itself however does not allow such topographical precision. It is not until p. 209 that the author himself uses the label "Belgium". And generally—contrary to e.g. naturalist novels—one could not imagine that Blommaert would ever summarize the area's history or even mention the size of its population. Verifiable references to extra-textual reality are thus restricted to a minimum.

The region—as ill-demarcated as it may be—becomes however a major thematic (and structuring) element of the text. The heath is "like a beautiful, whimsical woman, who promises a lot but turns adorers down with empty hands" (p. 78). To Wortel, the main character of Timmermans' *Boerenpsalm*, the field is "a gigantic female" with whom he has to "engage in a constant love-hate relationship until she finally becomes submissive and surrenders herself passionately."

Personifications such as these are plentiful. The heath becomes an inner landscape in these novels, the very core of existence, the organizing principle of a way of life. The following quotation illustrates clearly enough what I meant by "strong ties with nature":

Maar de heikrotter mest het stoffige stuk met zijn laatsten druppel zweet en wisch iedereen avond het bloed uit zijn handen, om zijn eigen aardappels te zien gedijen en zijn eigen rogge te kunnen dorschen. De heide kent haar kinderen. Ze vraagt alles van hen en de heiwroeters weten het. Ze geven zich ook helemaal. Van de hei immers kregen ze hun breede schouders en hun gezond rood bloed. En wie de spade niet schuwt en het laabeur niet vreest, groeit aan de heide vast en wil er niet meer weg (p. 95).

Just as space is essential in the rural novel, but remains largely undefined, time is also of crucial importance, though usually unspecified.

In this respect *Wroeters* can be easily placed in time: it is a *Bildungsroman* covering a period of 50 years (1895—1945). A similar placement would not be possible for *Boerenpsalm*, and even Blommaert is not too accurate: the outbreak of the 1st World War is suggested by a vague reference to "war" and "the borders", but it takes a few more pages before the reader is informed of the enemy's nationality. In itself, this could of course be interpreted as a literary device designed to increase the tension, but despite this reference to the 1st World War, the text remains basically a-historical. It treats war in a very abstract way, as if it were a mere natural phenomenon. It consistently disregards the social and historical superstructure of events and focuses on the microlevel instead: how is the family unit affected by a series of external threats?

In contrast to this I might refer to F. de Pillecyn's *Mensen achter de dijk* or A. M. de Jong's *Merijntje Gijzen*-cycle, where the occasional hint at so-

cialism, by referring to a set of recognizable social or political views, also offers a temporal point of reference.

In the rural novel, vagueness is generally equated with timelessness, which in its turn is a prerequisite for the creation of a mythical universe.

Also the use of the *Bildungsroman* as a way of presenting one's views has to be considered in this perspective. For the *Bildungsroman*, tracing a character's evolution "from the cradle to the grave," inherently contains a view of history. It can proclaim either a linear or a cyclic view of history. In the linear view a causal link between the events is often implied; the cyclic view on the other hand is more determinist and is based on a fundamental disbelief in the effectiveness of our actions. In a *Bildungsroman* such a cyclic view is reinforced or often merely illustrated by the long time span. It gives the author, who of course knew it all from the start, the sadistic pleasure of wryly telling the reader "see, I always told you" or "there's no getting away from it," if I may echo Joseph Heller.

The aptitude of the *Bildungsroman* to express a cyclic view of time would also explain the popularity of this device within the rural novel.

In *Wroeters* the cyclic view is expressed in several instances: Marten Neelaerts, Tooje's father, dies of a wound to his leg. Tooje decides to keep his crutches as a remembrance of him, in the same way as she kept her mother's rosary. When several years later her son's knee is crushed under falling debris, there's not only the similarity of the injury, but also Gustje's question: "Do I get grandpa's crutches now?" (p. 117).

After an initial period of progress, Tooje and Koob have to move to Marten Neelaerts' old shack again. And by the time they are old, they have their children Marten and Marieke living on the heath, in great poverty but with a brood of children. Moreover, the novel starts with the death of Tooje's mother and ends with her own—clutching the rosary in her hands. In both cases, death is regarded as a liberation from misery. The "happy smile [...] on the peaceful face" (p. 231) echoes the description of her mother's corpse (p. 9).

Any possibility of change is further reduced by tradition—the children for example are systematically named after their grandparents or, as the need arises, after more remote ancestors. In daily life, there's the imitation of parental behaviour: Trien Weggels, the midwife, passes her skills on to her daughter Leonie, and after her mother's death Tooje, being the "second in command," immediately assumes her role in looking after the younger children (see p. 8). This nine year-old spontaneously adopts the same pattern of behaviour, automatically carries out the same procedures in a way which is quite reminiscent of the visual but unintegrated memory which ensures the survival of the primitive tribesmen in Golding's *The Inheritors*.

In order to discover what I called the definitely conservative ideology of the rural novel, one only needs to trace the social or ideological markers in the text. Imagery, pieces of dialogue, authorial intrusions, implicit value

judgements and the very choice of lexical elements all contribute to what Berger & Luckmann (1971) have called *The Social Construction of Reality*.

The imagery is generally stereotyped and based on the comparison with points of reference out of the immediate surroundings: nature. In *Wroeters* Tooje is regularly compared to a flower (p. 46, 60), not only because of her uncomplicated beauty, but also because of her fertility. "A good tree has to bear a lot of fruit" Timmermans states (p. 5). Sexist thinking is—quite predictably—inherent in all rural novels, as was already apparent from Timmermans' metaphor for his field. And Blommaert apparently holds the belief that all boys are sturdy and dark, and all girls soft and fair (cf. p. 96, 115, ...).

The next aspect I wanted to concentrate on is the social stratification as represented in the novel. Which dolls did the author take off the shelf to play with and which houses did he put them in?

In all, the social landscape in *Wroeters* consists, apart from the workers in their shacks on the heath, of the village itself, a cigar factory and an unnamed faraway city. Furthermore, society apparently consists of an army and a clergy, exemplified in the context of the family by Miel becoming a soldier and Rieneke a nun. On the village level, the civil, professional and clerical authorities are of course represented by the town clerk, the doctor and the priest.

In this narrow but well-structured authoritarian society everybody has his or her neatly defined function, and the profession often becomes part of a nickname: "Garde Jan" for the constabulary or "Beesten Sjaar" for Richard, the cattle merchant. Social status determines all interaction—the priest is of course respected and gets more than his fair share of each animal that is slaughtered. The village secretary, a bureaucratic intellectual, is generally despised and ridiculed, even in the author's descriptions. From p. 88 to 91 Blommaert refers not less than five times to his red face and thin hair—apparently a sign of degeneration with this "learned man"—which almost makes it a fixed epithet in the best Homeric tradition.

Where the intellectual's pride is tempered by physical weakness, the stereotype of the wretch is compensated for his mental or physical shortcomings by the possession of extraordinary gifts. After his accident, Gustje starts to develop spiritually and artistically, and eventually makes a living as a diamond-polisher (cf. p. 158 and 172—173).

Strangers and gypsies are generally mistrusted—in *Boerenpsalm* the death of Wortel's first child is attributed to the visit of a pedlar immediately before. Occasionally however a pedlar or tramp, such as Seevie den Binder in Streuvels' *Levensbloesem* (*Life's Blossom*, 1937), is accepted by the rural community. But then again Streuvels stresses the regularity and the predictability of Seevie's visits by means of a double tautology, just to make sure: „de man die alle jaren, regelmatig, met's schieten van't blad in de wijk verscheen" (p. 7). Note, once more, the recurrence of events in the static society, given extra

emphasis by the parallelism between human activity and the rhythm of the seasons.

Another recurrent theme in the rural novel is the opposition between the village and the city. The following quotation from *Wroeters* makes clear how the city stands for a physical and ethical counterpart to the rural community:

Tooje rilt even als zij denkt dat hij de stad zal betreden, de dompige benauwde stad, met de lange smalle straten en de eindeloze rijen huizen, waaronder een buitenmensch stilaan vermachten moet. [...] "Is het waar [...] dat in de stad de mensen slechter zijn dan hier?" vraagt ze angstig (p. 58).

A variation on this theme is, on a smaller scale, the opposition between the hamlet and the village. Whereas the city is associated with a more sophisticated decadence, the hamlet usually stands for corruption through a more anarchistic, heathen lawlessness. Cf. the first pages of *Levensbloesem*, where Streuvels sketches in a traditional but very professional way the tension between the rough and marginal *Leegemeersch* and the village. Tooje's fears (cf. also p. 171 and 189) are confirmed when the only son who has a relationship with a city girl ends up in a "shotgun wedding," and in *Boerenpsalm*, which is almost an anthology of rural graffiti, Wortel's son Fons falls in love with a gypsy-like girl from a rundown hamlet, „den Plattekeeshoek, een hoop arme huizekens achter 't dorp, waar al het schorriemorrie bijeenkoekte" (p. 65)—the first step on the path to his eventual downfall and suicide.

The factory can have the same function of a morally less fortunate environment (cf. *Het donkere licht*). In *Wroeters* however the cigar factory remains in the background. It is never used as the setting for a single scene, despite the fact that Koob Eiken eventually makes a living there. It is probably not allowed to take on a more definite shape, as that might disturb the harmony of the rural landscape. It certainly remains highly abstract and its presence has a merely explanatory function: its shutdown (p. 150) is another external threat to the family.

Labour itself is of course a central concept too. Note how close the following passage is to the Nazi rhetoric of the 'thirties:

Het maakt hen sterk; het bindt hen aan elkaar; het smeedt hen vast aan grond, huis en gezin [...] Zij aan zij staan ze gereed, den kop omhoog en de oogen klaar als spiegels (p. 103).

"Prepared they stand, next to one another, the head held high and the eyes as clear as mirrors." Arbeit macht frei...

The sexual roles are—as any other role—clearly defined in the rural novel, as is already apparent from the descriptions: "Koob glimlacht en is fier om de bloeiende vrouw aan zijn zij. Tooje straalt en is blij om de groten, goeien reus, die haar hebben wou" (p. 46). This polarisation leads to a certain feeling of uneasiness which hampers or impedes communication. When Tooje receives a fairly sentimental letter from Rieneke, the nun, Koob states

that "these things make one weak" and that he prefers reading the letters of his brother, who is a soldier—"Dat is mannenkost!" (p. 124).

Verbal communication generally remains very unsophisticated. At the beginning of the novel, Koob Eiken is described as "not very talkative and of a simple nature" (p. 5) and it sounds downright pejorative when Nardus is labelled "een prater" ('a talker', p. 98). As a result of this attitude conflicts are often resolved through violence rather than verbally.

In my card system the entry "sex" only contains the reference "cf. reproduction"... The woman is referred to as a mate, a comrade (p. 77, 94) and the basic aim of marriage is to establish a family, the backbone of the closed society: "ze heeft zijn geheimste verlangen voldaan, en de tocht naar een schoon gezin is begonnen" (p. 70). It is suggested even that Tooje becomes pregnant during their first night together (p. 50).

As I already pointed out, natural imagery is very common in referring to fertility: "Hij heeft kinderen gekweekt als jaarsche bloemen, elf op elf jaar tijd" (he has grown children as annual flowers, eleven in eleven years' time). Children are called cabbages (p. 76, 152) and crops (p. 67) or, in *Boerenpsalm*, savoy, fruit, a bunch and turnips. They are also described in economic terms: as "open beaks that need to be filled" (*Boerenpsalm*, p. 5) or as an investment:

De kleinen groeiden en werden kloek en sterk, en ieder jaar dat Neelaerts t'einden vocht, bracht hem vier jaar winst in de kinderen (p. 33).

Having children is regarded as self-fulfilment, as woman's ultimate destiny:

Tooje voelt haar vertrouwen in het leven groeien. Nu eerst wordt ze vrouw en moeder. Nu eerst krijgt ze medezeggenschap in den huiskring, op de hei en in 't dorp (p. 70).

Where having children is self-evident, death in a similar way becomes a natural phenomenon and hence less tragic. In *Boerenpsalm* Wortel lightheartedly describes how he had to break his father's corpse in order to fit it into the coffin.

Despite the fact the big size of the family is the main cause of all adversity, this conclusion is never drawn and the main characters maintain a self-destructive and almost obscene optimism throughout the novel. Similarly, Koob never criticizes the system which expropriates his house and robs him of his superannuation in an act of blatant bureaucratic injustice. He regards it as part of the "bad luck" that is to be expected and the thought of a revolt against these measures would never occur to him.

In that sense *Wroeters* takes a definite ideological stand. It can be regarded as one long refutation of (social) change, as a plea for acceptance of the "natural" (?) order of things.

One should also bear in mind that such mystification becomes greater as the rural novel nears its end as a genre. Whereas Streuvels' *De Vlaschaard* (*The Flax Field*, 1907) and *Het Leven en de Dood in de Ast* (*Life and Death*

in the *Oast-House*) still depict social reality, Timmermans' *Boerenpsalm* (1935) has become escapist literature, though not less manipulatory. And just as Cervantes' *Don Quixote* dealt the death-blow to the knight's epic, G. F. Jonke's *Geometrischer Heimatroman* (1969) is the final send-up of a genre which has equally lost contact with social reality.

The decline of a genre is often marked by the infiltration of metalanguage into the text: in a more than one anti-novel a considerable part of the book is taken up by the author's comments on his own enterprise. In a similar, though less spectacular way, *Wroeters* explicitly describes the process of name-giving in the rural novel (p. 126—127).

I am well aware of the danger that some unexpected extrapolations in the above remarks might suggest fragmented and superficial research or even a biased attitude on my part. A short survey paper is probably not the best way to demonstrate the coherence of one's insights. Hence this section of the paper is to be seen rather as a sampling of results than as an exhaustive description of even one novel. Consequently, I have had to neglect several parameters. Class consciousness in the rural novel the significance of concepts such as "fate," "innocence" or "initiation," the function of superstition as a system complementary to religion and the (quite predictable) numerous ideological statements in support of Catholicism in *Wroeters* will not be dealt with here. I will end the paper with a discussion of technical and stylistic aspects of the novel.

Technically the following elements are of importance: extratextual information is provided by the suggestive cover drawing, the serial number of the book within the *Volksreeks*, by the "moral rating" (IV) opposite the title page, the label "novel" on p. 3 and a note from the author on the fourth page, in which he situates the novel in the Campine-area, claims the story is authentic and dedicates the book to the "brave people from the good days," who should be regarded as "an example for us, modern people, who like to have it the easy way." The book consists of 231 pages and is divided into six chapters of uneven length. The chapters also carry a title ("Children of the Heath," "Darkness over the house," etc.) and are divided by means of numbers into three or four subsections.

Stylistically, *Wroeters* is consistently told from an olympian point of view. This rather clumsy effect is enhanced by the fact that Blommaert throughout the novel avoids the use of personal pronouns to refer to his main characters and instead uses their Christian names and very often their family names as well. Apart from a short flash-back early in the first chapter, all events in this *Bildungsroman* are narrated in strict chronological order. The rhythm of the narrative is fairly constant, apart from a few instances where the story is sped up by a sudden condensation of narrated time: for example p. 76—77, which covers a period of six years (as well as the birth of six children). Real elliptical structures, however, can only be found in the transition from one chapter to another, where a certain lapse of time is clearly implied. *Wroeters*

has all the features of a traditional novel, and an unsophisticated one at that. The traditional novelist's authoritarian attitude towards his characters (see Robberechts, 1968) often coincides with a similar treatment of his reader. This is obviously the case with Blommaert, as his note at the beginning of the book already indicated. The numerous authorial intrusions throughout the text are equally manipulatory, in the sense that they too compel the reader to adopt the author's views (cf. p. 59).

A last detail: it has been a very rewarding exercise for the students, in the sense that we actually discovered an error in *Wroeters*, the very text which was supposed to be inferior. It at once restored their confidence in literary history. A detailed analysis of the chronology, based only on internal references and not on any inference, indeed showed that Koob Eiken must have been born around 1875, which makes him nine years older than his wife, which contradicts the author's claim in the beginning of the book that Eiken would be four to five years older than his wife.

#### HOLENDERSKA POWIEŚĆ WIEJSKA (1900—1945)

#### STRESZCZENIE

W streszczeniu, będącym pewnego rodzaju podsumowaniem rozprawy, autor chciałby zaakcentować charakter programu swych badań.

Po pierwsze — chodziło o wyjaśnienie i usunięcie niemało nieporozumień i zamieszania terminologicznego i o zaproponowanie (naturalnie w wypadku takiej konieczności) nowych definicji z zakresu pojęć literackich, uprzednio jedynie wzmiankowanych, opierając się na analizie określonych tekstów oraz na studiach porównawczych wtórnych źródeł materiałowych, zaczerpniętych z holenderskiej i obcej nauki o literaturze.

Po drugie — autor pozwolił sobie zaproponować badania o charakterze tekstowym i międzytekstowym, a mianowicie:

a) klasyfikację elementów wędrownych, powracających i szczególnie dynamicznych oraz określonych układów występujących w badanych powieściach (takich jak stereotypowe charaktery, tematy, sytuacje narracyjne, ideologia, stosowanie dialektu, retoryki i tym podobnych),

b) w miarę możliwości również formalizację tych zabiegów i układów w obrębie „opisowej gramatyki tekstu” oraz w taksonomii gatunku. (Chodziło tu o cel podobny do tego, jaki autor zdołał osiągnąć w dziedzinie „parametru nazewniczego”).

Po trzecie — autor, wskazując owe międzytekstowe układy, zwrócił uwagę na ważną podstawę do dalszych badań socjologicznych.

Przełożył Jan Trzynadłowski