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DIRK de GEEST

Systems Theory and Discursivity

The scope of my contribution to this volume is both limited and perhaps unwisely ambitious. On the one hand, I would like to sketch the general outline of a theoretical and methodological framework for the study of literary phenomena which may be roughly characterized by means of key-concepts like "functionalist," "systemic," and "discursive." On the other hand, I would like to indicate succinctly how those principles, subsequently, can be applied to a symptomatic cultural situation, namely literature in Flanders during the Second World War.¹ The theoretical and historical remarks presented here are based on the results of a research project examining this specific situation which has been going on in our institute for some years now.

For brevity's sake I will mainly concentrate on the component of discursivity and its methodological implications. The very collocation of "system theory" and "discursivity" may sound sacrilegious to many adherents of a systems-theoretical approach. It is indeed common knowledge that Luhmann, Schmidt, and other scholars have repeatedly and very severely — although, in my opinion, rather hastily — rejected Foucault's way of dealing with social and historical phenomena by "transforming" them into discursive events. Yet, I strongly believe that an adequate analysis of complex cultural phenomena cannot or can hardly limit itself to the exclusive research of hard empirical data. The discursive dimension which will be entirely neglected in this perspective seems crucial to the actual functioning of culture and, more specifically, of what is commonly called "literature."

THE APORIAS OF TRADITIONAL LITERARY SCHOLARSHIP

My plea in favor of a discourse-oriented systems-theoretical approach of literature attempts to take into account a number of objections which in recent

1 This article has been realized in the context of a large-scale research project on "Literature and Literary Criticism in Flanders (Belgium) during the Second World War (1940-1945)," which is currently carried out at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Department of Literary Studies), thanks to the financial support of the Leuven Research Fund and the Fund for Scientific Research of Flanders (Belgium). I would like to thank my colleagues Eveline VanFraussen, Ilse Mesdagh, and Anneleen Masschelein for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

years have been raised repeatedly against traditional accounts of literary history. Although the individual efforts of brilliant scholars to sketch the literary evolution in a particular cultural or linguistic area should certainly neither be underestimated nor be simply dismissed as outdated or invalid, previous research has not succeeded in presenting an overall picture which provides an adequate explanation of the specific dynamics of literature within its global cultural and social constellation.

These inadequacies and inconveniences are — at least in my opinion — closely related to the fact that extensive corpus areas have never been systematically taken into consideration (surveyed and analyzed). This deplorable situation seems to be mainly due to the fact that traditional literary historiography rests upon some unproblematic, yet highly problematic assumptions. Although most histories of literature begin with a kind of contextualizing introduction, the precise relationships between literature and ideology, between literature and the arts, or between a national literature and its foreign counterparts (including the impact of actual translations) have never been meticulously reconstructed. Although the relevance of such interrelations is generally acknowledged, scholars — obviously both for poetical and for methodological reasons — still prefer to think of "literature" as an autonomously functioning domain in reality.

Moreover, the scope of "literature" is in most cases "self-evidently" equated with the actual production of intrinsically "literary," i.e., symbolically prestigious texts, which means in practice that the intricate communicational and institutional surroundings are reduced to a peripheral, subordinate position. Only a restricted and more or less stable corpus is strategically selected from the global field of textual production as "genuine" literature (the effect of ongoing canonization processes), and this corpus is treated as a history of masterpieces and individual literary geniuses, as a result of the close association (sometimes even blurring) of the categories of "text," "oeuvre" and "author" (the effect of a personalizing strategy). Common as these selection procedures may be — they can indeed be considered characteristic for a widely established practice of writing histories of literature — they nevertheless render it virtually impossible to account for, not even to formulate, a number of symptomatic phenomena within the literary system: constitutive tensions, particular evolutions, certain ambivalent cases....

These problematic aspects can be convincingly demonstrated by tackling the precarious question of literature during the Second World War in Belgium (probably in most other countries as well). Although the political and cultural importance of this period has been stressed time and again, wartime literature has hardly ever been studied as such. Quite on the contrary, there are some literary historians who briefly mention a few anecdotal events (so as to illustrate that a World War really took place), but most of them conceive of the wartime period as a cultural intermezzo, a negligible intermediate stage (vacuum)

between interbellum and postwar experimental literature. In other cases, the traumatic experiences of the war itself — and in our particular culture also the harshness of the political and cultural repression after the war — have strongly contributed to the emergence of a radical dichotomizing strategy, which contrasts the despicable "literary collaboration" with the idealized and exemplary "literature of resistance," which is in turn highly appreciated from a literary point of view as well.

Take for instance Paul de Man's controversial wartime journalism (de Man; Hamacher, Hertz, and Keenan). This case indicates in a symptomatic way the necessity of a comprehensive study of the global literary communication. First and foremost it seems that in such cases the use of posterior mechanisms of selection and of ethical and evaluative binary standards — however motivated and self-explanatory they may seem — should be avoided as much as possible, since the lack of such an open conceptual framework will inevitably result in a selective and tendentious study. The controversial four-volume study by Adriaan Venema on the literary collaboration in the Netherlands clearly demonstrates these inadequacies. Venema takes as his starting point a binary opposition between on the one hand so-called "collaboration literature" — which he considers, contrary to the political and cultural norms prevailing at that time, as "illegitimate literature" — and on the other hand "literature of resistance," the huge amount of publications and leaflets that was published and clandestinely distributed on a limited scale. However, this glaring contrast turns out to be not only inadequate from a methodological point of view, but to highlight Venema's superimposing ethical norms on his literary data.

Venema is not primarily interested in reconstructing literary life during the wartime period. He feels it his duty to separate the "right" from the "wrong" writers and ultimately even to banish the "wrong" ones from the global literary spectrum as much as possible. However, in order to do this ambivalent cases need to be smoothly "corrected" so they can be nicely fitted into the overall binary scheme. Moreover, Venema's ethical point of view entails a gradual (and mostly very implicit) metonymical movement from the literary texts in their own right towards the underlying writer as a person. In this respect, Venema takes not only recourse to a psychological concept like "personality" as the cornerstone of his accusational discourse, but he patronizingly assumes complete knowledge about the inner intentions of all actors in the literary system (authors, critics, publishers). In Venema's view, something like political naïveté or misdirected idealism simply does not exist and what is more, all posterior public statements and literary works by the alleged protagonists are systematically dismissed by considering them as mere continuation of their horrible wartime activities, leaving no room at all for ambivalences, reconsiderations, and fundamental changes of opinion. The final results of such an undertaking are, in other words, already implied in the initial, markedly normative basic assumptions, which becomes apparent when one becomes aware of the fact that

thoroughly problematic notions such as "right," "wrong," "justice" and "sincerity" are naively treated as transhistorical meta-categories, rather than investigated within their actual, complex discursive realization. In this respect, it could be argued that Venema's highly controversial attempt to reopen the debate on literary collaboration — a crucial issue in the cultural history of the Netherlands — has ultimately largely contributed to the tabooing of the very stakes of such a debate.

FUNCTIONALISM

In order to establish a more suitable theoretical framework for the analysis of complex literary phenomena and situations, it seems more appropriate to adopt a functionalist and contextual point of view. Since the concept of "literature" cannot be reduced to a fixed set of intrinsic, generally valid and a-historical characteristics or to a stable corpus of undisputed literary texts, scholars should rather endeavor to reconstruct the ways in which literature has been identified, demarcated and defined as a specific cultural, socio-semiotic phenomenon and to further analyze the different strategies that have been worked out in order to maintain its specific self-image in an optimal manner.

The advantages of such a functionalist approach can roughly be exemplified by listing some relevant research questions:

- How are particular conceptions of "literature" articulated, both functionally and semantically? On what grounds are they legitimized and opposed to supposedly dysfunctional categories like "anti-literature" or "non-literature"?
- In what ways do new conceptions of literature emerge, and to what extent can they be related to evolutions in the political, ideological, religious or artistic constellation? How does such a more or less profound reorientation of the literary system involve a discursive, semantic and pragmatic re-interpretation of crucial concepts such as "national" and "cultural" "identity," "(inter)national" "tradition," and "literature"?
- Which elements (functions, strategies, genres, themes, stylistic devices) are explicitly propagated and which elements are on the contrary rejected or even censored? Which norms tend to structure the literary system (or specific subsystems), and how are these normative principles formulated and actually realized? And finally, what is the precise relation between the level of explicit poetical statements on the one hand, and the more implicit realization of these principles within the actual literary production on the other?

It must be kept in mind that such a comprehensive enterprise necessarily entails — apart from a fundamental re-orientation of relevant corpora — a substantial broadening of the perspective of research. Instead of merely applying a priori

normative schemes to literary phenomena, scholarly research should concentrate on the meticulous reconstruction of the actual normative principles involved, of the various mechanisms of selection and of the systemic strategies which were prevalent within the literary system in a given period. Only on these terms will it become possible both to analyze accurately the tensions and mechanisms at work within a specific cultural situation on a micro-level and to trace the constitutive mechanisms of literary evolution and the propagated self-image of (types of) literature in a given cultural constellation on a macro-level.

THE SYSTEMIC APPROACH

A very promising theoretical and methodological path of research to achieve this goal seems to me a systems-theoretical approach of literary phenomena. By "system" I mean a (relatively) separate and functionally autonomous whole which is constituted by a specific transformational and self-regulatory dynamics. The concept of "system" thus implies the existence of a number of elements, which can (at least to a certain extent) be isolated functionally from their environment on the one hand, and which possess sufficient internal coherence to be considered as a relatively closed zone, on the other hand. In this way systems become more than just random accumulations of independent facts and elements. They usually try to thematize (and, accordingly, to maximize) their inner coherence by emphasizing both the supposed similarities between their elements and the strategic awareness of intrasystemic relationships. Therefore, the stronger and the clearer (more distinct) the internal profile of a system, the easier it becomes to recognize its internal characteristics (although they often remain very implicit) and at the same time to distinguish them from those of other, neighboring systems. Consequently, one could say that a system constitutes both its inner and its outer dimension, by establishing a kind of functional borderline, or — to put it in other words — by extracting itself from the *in se* undifferentiated environment (*Umwelt*). Yet, it is essential to keep in mind that, in a functionalist perspective, "system" and "environment" have no ontological meaning, since the two notions ultimately define (and, in certain respects, structure) each other.

These succinct remarks obviously echo Luhmann's basic assumptions about systemic behavior, a functionalist position which is in my opinion largely convergent with the so-called polysystemic approach as established by Even-Zohar. A more detailed discussion of the various concepts related to systems, system-environment relations, and system-differentiation would exceed the scope of the present article.² Likewise, the difference between actor-oriented

2 Further information and a comparative discussion of the various system-oriented models in the field of literary studies can be found in De Geest 1996.

approaches of systems theory, such as Schmidt's and (at least in its recent elaboration) Even-Zohar's, and more communicational or discursive approaches, such as Luhmann's or my own, will not be extensively dealt with here either.

Yet, there is one aspect which I would like to state explicitly, since it involves some crucial divergences between Luhmann's theory and my own proposal. In Luhmann's point of view — and many of his followers as well — the borderline between a system and its environment is and necessarily has to be seen as strictly binary, constituting two complementary and mutually exclusive sets by relying on the so-called "law of the excluded third." Logically speaking, elements either occupy a systemic position, or they form an integrate part of the non-systemic environment. This basic premise enables participants to consider the systemic relevance of communications beforehand, for each specific functional system within society is essentially characterized and defined by means of its own binary code. For instance, the economic system is ultimately based on the binary code "to have vs. to have not," the political system on the code "conservative vs. progressive," science on the code "true vs. not true." In a similar way, Luhmann has proposed the opposition "beautiful vs. ugly" as the constitutive code for the artistic system. As far as the literary system is concerned, Schmidt (1989) has instead opted for the opposition "literary vs. non-literary," whereas Plümpe and Werber (1993) prefer to use the binary code "interesting vs. boring" as constitutive for all communication on literary phenomena.

These discussions concerning the concept of code and its potential use within the domain of literary studies convincingly reveal several problematic issues. First of all, it seems that Luhmann — and also, albeit probably to a lesser degree, Schmidt, Werber and Plümpe — consider the code which is associated with the literary system as a kind of meta-category, a general assumption which can be applied to a great diversity of situations and contexts. However, the lack of a generally accepted notion of "literary code" already displays the poetical, and hence strongly normative, connotations associated with each of these proposals. Rather than constituting a neutral and generally valid organizational principle, they reveal particular conceptions of literature which are supposed to be prototypical for "the" literary system as a whole. As such, the strategies tentatively used to concretize and to operationalize the code as a preliminary selection program to establish the functional relevance of utterances have to be incorporated *within* the study of literary conceptions itself. Moreover, the principle of an exclusively binary code formulates a severe restriction on the possibility of analyzing and explaining complex literary phenomena.

When dealing with literary systems in particular, it seems to me that a systems-theoretical approach should be able to consider ambiguous and vague instances as well, without necessarily having to situate them either inside or outside a particular system. These instances of precarious and questionable

membership may become the symptomatic topics of polemical debates, putting different strategies of legitimization into practice. Such cases where alterity is brought into the system itself or where two or more elements actively function in two seemingly contradictory systems at the same time may eventually provoke a profound crisis within the system's assumed homogeneity and transparency. This may ultimately lead to a redefinition of the system's self-image or to a further systemic differentiation.

From the perspective of literary historiography, such highly ambivalent or apparently undecidable phenomena may not simply be owing to preliminary theoretical and methodological shortcomings, nor can they be dismissed as idiosyncratic or merely marginal (and hence irrelevant) epi-phenomena. On the contrary, they usually constitute a privileged domain of research investigating the dynamics, both synchronically and diachronically, of literary systems.

THE DISCOURSE APPROACH

In order to cope with these highly problematic, yet fundamental considerations, literary systems and subsystems — system-differentiation is considered to be one of the basic tendencies in systemic behavior — are conceived of as specific types of discourse. More precisely, they articulate what is "sayable" as "literature" (about literature and within literature) in a particular situation and what remains, on the contrary, "unsayable," under which circumstances, where and for whom. The concept of "(un)sayability" thus refers to a highly complex category, which comprises both what has to be said and what definitely cannot (or even must not) be said.

Hence, literary systems are essentially characterized (and even defined) by a set of more or less codified utterances which delimit — both topologically / institutionally (in terms of a particular discursive "space") and functionally (by means of certain functions and effects) — a kind of systemic zone, thereby situating discursive elements and events inside or outside that particular system, or, occasionally, in an apparently undecidable twilight zone.

Moreover, this way of looking at literary systems clearly indicates how the concept of discursivity is closely related to the idea of normativity. This connection hardly comes as a surprise, because all social systems are strongly dependent on their selection, structuring and legitimization abilities. Besides, cultural phenomena are inherently embedded in a complex functional context in which norms and values play an important part. However, in my view, the notion of "norm" does not have an ethical meaning, rather it refers to specific plausible strategies devised in order to avoid, or to solve, recurrent coordination problems which tend to endanger the systemic constellation. In other words, norms enable communication about and by means of literature, by anticipating misunderstanding and other discursive risks as much as possible. At the same time, they reduce complexity by providing a constructive frame for optimally

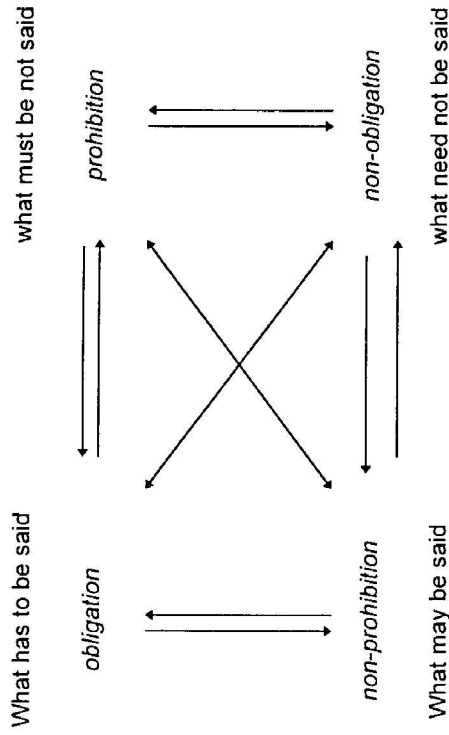
processing (producing, interpreting, evaluating) new information.

This rather broad concept of normativity entails a substantial extension of the perspective of research in several respects. First of all, the concept of norm, as it is understood in this paper, comprises not only the traditional intermediary level of technical norms but the "surrounding" levels of more general laws on the one hand and mere idiosyncrasies on the other hand as well. Even the so-called free choices of individual authors are to be inscribed in the global zone of normativity. More precisely, they fit in the general scheme as (canonized or non-canonized) instances of relative freedom.

A second extension concerns the degree of explicitness of normative statements. So far, most scholarly research has dealt with explicit normative statements, by relying on meta-texts such as literary criticism, manifestoes, polemics, and anthologies, in short: texts that stipulate how "literature" should ideally be mostly of categorical formulations, as the straightforward expression of what is prescribed (i.e., obligations produced and evaluated). Next to this level of explicit poetics, however, there is the equally important dimension of the actual production itself i.e., the mostly implicit internalization and realization of the propagated norms in the literary works themselves. At this level, things very often appear to be totally different and extremely complex. In fact, the confrontation of explicit and implicit poetics — the way in which authors and literary critics are said (expected) to behave, and the way in which they really behave — may provide excellent information as to the degree of closedness and codification of the system, and may reveal some crucial contradictions and discrepancies, which are nevertheless vital for the system's survival and internal evolution.

Finally, the proper semiotic scope of norms has to be broadened as well. Until now, normative statements have — for instance in the context of reconstructing conceptions of literature — mainly been studied in their most categorical formulations, as the straightforward expression of what is prescribed (obligations) and what is, on the contrary, explicitly forbidden (prohibitions). Although these two categories of norms provide indeed the most outspoken information regarding normative aspects of discourse, a functionalist and dynamic theoretical model should definitely take into consideration (and, accordingly, try to account for) the less stringent instances of normativity as well: everything which is not explicitly prescribed (non-obligation) and everything which is not explicitly forbidden (non-prohibition). Only in that way can a comprehensive analysis of normativity and the inner dynamics of a discursive system be realized.

These programmatic extensions of the normative field of research finally result in a complex Greimasian semiotic square of normativity:



Although this diagram still requires much refinement — especially insofar as the discursive manifestation of its structural components is concerned — it already reveals considerable theoretical and methodological advantages.

First of all, the problematic status of Luhmann's concept of "code" — as a preliminary systemic strategy for effectuating and facilitating communication — is somehow accounted for. Instead of having to opt right from the start for one definitive and specific discursive code — before actually discussing discursive behavior — the semiotic square enables us instead to define discursive "places" in a formal (so to speak, "pre-discursive") way. The intense discussions following Luhmann's original proposal to consider the "beautiful-ugly"-code as constitutive for the artistic system have demonstrated the inconveniences of such particular, historically- and artistically-bound proposals. Moreover, these polemical discussions actually belong to the level of the systemic discourse itself — the level of alleged cultural participation — they are not divergences on a theoretical level of conceptualization. In my proposal I am attempting to account for these tensions by articulating the problem of "discursive actualization" as such, the way in which basic components and categories are constructed and thematized within actual discourses.

Secondly, the disadvantages of Luhmann's strictly binary approach have mostly disappeared. Without denying the strategic importance of simple binary schemes for the functional processing of discursive events, unclear and ambiguous cases convincingly demonstrate that these binary oppositions are closely related to systemic strategies as such, more specifically strategies the system has to develop in order to handle communicational information in an economic, transparent (at least in appearance) and unambiguous manner. In this respect the semiotic square makes it possible to consider and to analyze both these oppositional mechanisms and their problematic implications. Because the interactions between the upper and the lower level of the scheme are explicitly taken into account, it is possible to come to a more productive and dynamic

approach.

In fact, whereas the upper zone mainly stresses the explicitly normative codification of the system, the lower zone leaves much more room for implicit norms and for individual creativity and artistic experiments. Especially this latter zone — which comprises both what is accepted (non-prohibition) and what is merely tolerated (non-obligation) — is susceptible to changes and renewing tendencies (e.g., the introduction of exogenous elements). Moreover, the gap between non-prohibition and non-obligation is obviously easier to bridge than that between prohibition (the explicitly forbidden or even impossible anti-models) and obligation (the established canon and its models). As a result, the bottom zone of the scheme constitutes, so to speak, a privileged realm of relative freedom and flexibility within the system.

Following this line of reasoning, it can be argued that so-called closed systems almost exclusively concentrate on the explicit formulation and the imposition of prohibitions and prescriptions, in an attempt to control the existing elements of the system (and eventually the production of new elements) as much as possible. Such "strong" codification does not allow for a great number of creative variations. Moreover, the small amount of "freedom" remains secondary and uncanonized in relation to the promoted production.

As important as this synchronic reading of the schema — which results in a more refined and detailed analysis of the discursive system — is its diachronic interpretation. The semiotic square of normativity proves to be an extremely useful tool for the analysis of tensions and evolutions within a literary system. The onset for transformational phenomena is in most cases situated in the so-called "subcontrary zone" of a given system, since these discursive places tend to escape the controlling principles and the codification of the system. Especially the subcontrary places in the scheme involve the possibility, as intermediary stages, to introduce new elements into the system. At first, the presence of new tendencies is hardly noticed at all, or else it is passively tolerated (non-prohibited) as a marginal or exogenous (maybe "exotic") instance. In other situations such "foreign" elements may be considered as dysfunctional factors which threaten the fixed identity, and ultimately even the existence, of a system. In a further stage, however, they may be re-interpreted as interesting and stimulating new models for the system as a whole, and accordingly they may be explicitly propagated and eventually turned into prescriptions. Next to this process of gradual canonization, however, the opposite direction is possible as well. In that case, a particular device gradually loses its functional literary relevance, becomes obsolete (the zone of "non-prohibition" or mere "toleration") and in some instances may even be deleted from the system (or at least from its productive centre). This process of marginalization may of course be combined with the functional re-interpretation of former elements or their becoming an integrate part of another, competitive system.

A final remark concerns the vertical dimension of the semiotic square. The

two vertical deixes — obligation and non-prohibition versus prohibition and non-obligation — are conventionally — but in most cases axiologically as well — referred to as the positive deixis (on the left) versus the negative deixis (on the right). The predominance of utterances on either side, both quantitatively and qualitatively, may symptomatically indicate the global (positive or negative) orientation of the normative poetics. A negative type of poetics will mainly concentrate on the limiting power of the existing norms by explicitly stating the borders that must not or, at least, preferably need not be neglected. More specifically, it tends to emphasize the distance between the accepted and propagated canon on the one hand and the risk of a threatening transgression on the other hand. This defensive attitude often takes the form of statements which explicitly warn against any excessive or extravagant experiments (e.g., "a (genuine) literary text must not be X or Y (too much)"). A positively oriented poetics, on the other hand, will probably interpret the subcontrary zone of non-prohibition as an essentially fruitful area for creative experiments, which may enrich and strengthen the system.

A CASE STUDY: LITERATURE IN FLANDERS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In the final section of this paper, I would like to briefly exemplify the manner in which the preceding theoretical and methodological principles may offer considerable advantages for the investigation of a complex cultural situation, such as the literary life in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) during the Second World War. In contrast to former attempts, our research project has been established to cope with complexity and the paradoxical tensions within a literary system which at the same time tries to establish and maintain its own identity and yet is, to a certain extent, functionally re-interpreted in terms of social and political needs.

In most of the traditional research about the period, a distinction is made between on the one hand "legal" literature — i.e., literature propagated by the occupying instances — and on the other hand the segment of "illegal" or "illegitimate" texts. In reality, the case of Belgian (Flemish) literature during the Second World War proves to be much more complex and complicated. It is important to keep in mind a tremendously important difference between the literary life in the Netherlands and that in Flanders. In the Netherlands, the foundation of a German-oriented *Kultuurkamer* (Chamber of Culture) inevitably led to the emergence of a — both quantitatively and qualitatively — flourishing "clandestine" or "resistance" literary circuit, which even seemed to occupy a prominent position within the whole cultural system during the wartime period. In Flanders, however, initiatives to establish similar organizations were not at all successful in controlling the literary production and communication. Consequently, political and ideological censorship was not very effective in

cultural matters, and the so-called "legal" literature comprised almost the entire body of the literary production. At least as far as literature was concerned, the resistance-component proved in Flanders virtually non-existent. Of course, on the level of politics and ideology a large number of leaflets and small periodicals were being distributed by various oppositional groups, but these publications were not particularly interested in literary (or even cultural) matters. On the one hand, this lack of interest may be partly explained by the resistance movement's almost exclusive interest in military and political action. Literature, along with other kinds of cultural phenomena, was thought to play a very minor, subordinate role in the fight against the German occupier, unlike the Netherlands, where literature and art were considered important forces to keep the people's sense of identity alive. On the other hand, however, this remarkable absence of an institutionalized resistance literature has to be accounted for by the complex and essentially ambivalent structure of the literary system itself.

A systematic analysis of the whole literary production during the wartime period — based on an extensive, non-selective bibliographical research — convincingly reveals a very large quantity of publications, both literary and para-literary sub-corpora. This empirically confirms a great mass of statements by literary critics during the wartime period who stressed this quantitative publishing boom time and again. In general, the flourishing literary production was evaluated in an overall fairly positive manner, although the low moral and artistic value of a number of peripheral texts was sometimes deplored. In this respect, one regularly finds a distinction between on the one hand "genuine" literature, which was supposed to cultivate both high moral standards and a stylistic mastery, and on the other hand the large segment of "low" literature, mainly produced for entertainment only without any artistic ambitions at all, for which only moral claims were made.

Yet, this broad field of "legal" (or, in any case, not "illegal") literature can — in contrast to what is generally acknowledged (cf. the case of Paul de Man) — by no means be equated with active literary collaboration, i.e., the production and the distribution of texts which explicitly attempted to propagate the literary and ideological norms governing national-socialist literature. Such norms were often explicitly propagated as innovative and valuable principles for the re-organization and the re-vitalizing dynamics of traditional literature, especially by writers and critics who participated actively in the activities of organizations such as the DeVlag — the *Deutsch-Flämische Arbeitsgemeinschaft*, an organization which was active both in the political and cultural realm — or the SS. They promoted a conception of literature which was closely associated with heroism, and the cult of people, race and tribe, an "essence" described in terms of blood and territory. However, the actual novels and poetry in which these principles were realized in a programmatic way were in most cases (and even by the same critics) judged negatively or rejected as mere authoritarian,

pamphlet-literature (*Tendenzliteratur*): too explicitly political and hence unsuccessful as literary works of art.

On the other hand several novels and poems were highly appreciated, although they explicitly violated the literary conceptions that officially prevailed at that time. Even novels which were largely based on naturalistic premises of Freudian psychology, or which neglected the basic laws of race and territory by introducing foreigners as positive characters, were published without any considerable difficulties. In some cases, they were even explicitly praised as exemplary texts by collaborating critics or awarded prestigious literary prizes, sometimes as a result of being interpreted in an allegorical manner, as symptomatic accounts of the degenerate past and, hence, as warnings in view of the future to come.

The same ambivalences and contradictory tensions are found within the spectrum of periodicals which explicitly participated in the politics of "New Order," proclaimed by the Germans. In our recent book *Collaboration or Culture?*, we have analyzed the discourses on culture, history, art and literature in an influential Flemish wartime periodical, *Volk en Kultuur* (*People and Culture*). All in all, the periodical was clearly in accordance with the principles of the German occupation. Its principal aim was precisely to provide a forum for the organization of all kinds of cultural activities. These programmatic issues were repeated over and over again, very often by means of evoking a blatant contrast between the past era — conventionally associated with negative elements, such as internationalism (which involved, among other elements, Jewish influences), the hegemony of the French-speaking bourgeoisie, capitalism, democracy and the degenerating movement of modernity — and the new times to come, an optimistic teleology with the Flemish people as a whole in the role of protagonist. It was a firm belief that the Flemish people's consciousness of its own collective identity, its prestigious past and its glorious future would gradually increase and develop to the full. This ongoing struggle between "right" (and hence intrinsic) and "wrong" (mainly extrinsic) forces dominated the entire political discourse in *Volk en Kultuur* and the same antagonistic mechanisms pervaded the discourses on art and literature as well.

A closer consideration, however, reveals that the idea of a fundamental discontinuity between past and future — and the conclusive role of the German occupation in this respect — was partially undermined by the strong stress which was put on the permanent, quasi-mythic essence of the Flemish people. The general revival and renewal of the Flemish people was primarily perceived as the manifestation of an already latently present inner popular force. Thus it becomes clear that national-socialism and the occupation were discursively thematized in a fundamentally ambivalent manner. On the one hand, the installation of the New Order had adequately fulfilled the role of an enormous catalyst, which created the optimal means to realize this evolution. On the other

hand, however, it was the inner value of the people which was emphatically stressed as the ultimate factor in this (re)new(ed) vitality of the Flemish nation. So, the exemplary function of the German "Reich" was by no means considered to be opposed to the nationalist Flemish project, which was formulated in terms of the conservation of its own identity and the final establishment of an own, independent nation.

A few writers were very enthusiastic about the German ideology and the concrete results of the new regime, but others were much more reticent about such an active collaboration. Instead, they preferred a strategy of accommodation or non-collaboration, which means that they continually stressed the specific orientation of the Flemish people, on its own or in a greater union with the Netherlands, without explicitly opposing the occupational establishment. This more or less indirect strategy involved, among other elements, the frequent use of the adjective "Flemish" (instead of the use of "German"), and the reinterpretation of the theory of *Blut und Boden* by transforming its racial basis into the concept of a historical tradition and a rather abstract folk essence.

Such a tension between "identity" (the Flemish essence) and "alterity" (the negative influences from outside, including implicitly even the German nation) is very apparent throughout the discourse of *Volk en Kultuur*. For instance, international expressionist tendencies were rejected as degenerate and immoral deformations of the idealized reality, but at the same time the Flemish expressionism of the so-called "Lathem-school" (Servaes, Permeke) was strongly legitimized by stressing its "national" and "essential" impact and by transforming the problematic deformation of reality into a kind of inner necessity. Similarly, the German people-oriented literature was considered valuable for the endogenous literary production, but critics repeatedly warned against the risk of a too political, authoritarian fiction and stressed the necessity of a religious (i.e., Catholic) dimension in literature.

These preliminary results already reveal that from a discursive point of view collaboration and accommodation (non-conflict) have to be meticulously distinguished. A systemic and discursive approach seems promising in tackling such precarious questions, but it still requires complex research procedures, an elaborate methodology, and a lot of patient scholarly research.

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