# WAR AND/AS INITIATION

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The publication in 1982 of Harry Mulisch's novel *De aanslag*, and its subsequent appearance as a film, were rather exciting events in the little world of Dutch literature and culture. For a moment it seemed as if a whole new genre was being discovered, or a forgotten genre resurrected, as war as a literary theme was once more brought to the center of attention. Nothing could be further from the truth, of course, since one of the most enduring themes of all of Dutch contemporary literature, and one of Holland's persistent everyday preoccupations, is in fact the Second World War. *De aanslag* is only one in a long series of works of fiction dealing with this most problematic episode in Dutch history, which includes Marga Minco's short novel *Het bittere kruid* and Willem Frederik Hermans's *De donkere kamer van Damocles*. On the Belgian side, too, the war surfaces as a major theme, as evidenced by Lampo's trilogy *Oorlogsjaren* and Hugo Claus's *Het verdriet van België*.

Here, however, I would like to focus on five authors who are less well known, from different periods of Holland's post-war period, but whose works have one unifying theme which appears to me to be a crucial one. In the novels and short stories I would like to discuss, the main protagonist is a young person, whose experiences of war resemble those of a ritual initiation, or whose development into adulthood is profoundly altered by the war. The novels I propose are Alfred Kossman's *De nederlaag*, a very early and rather weak novel by this otherwise prominent Dutch author (1950), the short novels *Ik was geen soldaat* and *Val, bom* by Gerrit Kouwenaar (published 1951 and 1956 respectively), Inez van Dullemen's short story *De verrader* from her collection *Een handvol vonken* (1961), Jaap Harten's stories *Oud roest en spek* and *Operatie Montycoat* (both 1970), Ward Ruyslinck's novel *Wierook en tranen* - a Belgian perspective - and finally Hans Werner's novel *De schriften* (1970).

If we look at the idea of war as initiation and education, these stories and novels could be organized in different ways. One possibility would be the age groups of the protagonists. In the case of Werner and Ruyslinck the protagonists are children, in Harten's stories they grow up during the war. In Kouwenaar's *Val,bom* and Inez van Dullemen's *De verrader* the protagonists are teenagers, whereas in Kouwenaar's *Ik was geen soldaat* and Kossman's *De nederlaag* they are young adults. A different way of organizing them would be to focus on the period of the war covered or featured in these texts: the outbreak of the war, in fact the very first few days, is dealt with in Dullemen, Kouwenaar's *Val,bom* and Ruyslinck's *Wierook en tranen*, whereas Hans Werner's *De Schriften*, Harten's *Oud roest en spek* and Kossman's *De nederlaag* deal with the actual war years (in episodes of varying lengths). Harten's *Operatie Montycoat* describes the liberation period, and Kouwenaar's *Ik was geen soldaat* in fact even goes beyond this period, into the days of the black market and economic chaos following liberation.

However, a more meaningful way than the ones suggested (though they have some relevance for the progress of these stories), is to describe what kind of experiences these protagonists undergo, what relevance they have for the individual's past as well as the future, and finally how these experiences are symbolic for a whole generation (primarily the generation of the authors themselves, whose ages often correspond closely to those of the protagonists). It seems therefore most expedient to deal with each of the texts briefly, and then to make some general comments about war as a period of initiation and education.

One more general comment should be made before any specific discussion. Whereas the literature of the First World War was one of ordeal by fire, of life and death on the actual battlefields, of heroic and cowardly exploits in the face of the enemy, the novels under discussion - and, I believe, most such novels - are primarily novels of those who stayed home; they could more aptly be called novels of occupation than of war. The reasons for this are clear. After a brief and, in the eyes of most historians, essentially futile attempt to stop the German invasion, Holland experienced occupation rather than war. Morality and individual behaviour, in true life and in these works of fiction, were determined by conditions often not associated with military exploits, but with survival in a grinding and mean everyday existence: survival which often entailed compromise and even betrayal (the resistance is a chapter in itself, and one which, as among others Simon Vestdijk has shown, is not without its own problematic aspects). This fact has a profound influence on the kind of texts generated after the war, and, given the ever-changing political climate in the Netherlands up to our day,

creates a view of events which is often as critical and as varied as, for example, the views of Holland's colonial past.

A persistent motif in fiction dealing with war is war's association with the discovery of one's individuality and moral character. Adolescence, of course, is at the same time a period of discovery of one's sexuality. At least two authors bring together war and sex, or at least war and love or war and eroticism, in an obvious way: Gerrit Kouwenaar in *Val, bom* - though this novel is by no means primarily concerned with sex, but rather with morality - and especially Jaap Harten.

*Val, bom* begins on the day before the outbreak of the war. The narrator, a 17-year old boy, is shown to be rather preoccupied with sexual fantasies, which, however, he primarily subsumes under the wish to change imperfect reality in general. The boy's preoccupation with sex is revealed as but one aspect of growing up. Already as a thirteen-year old, he had seen the authority of his parents crumble; his conscious use of the pronoun "je" instead of "U" while addressing his mother also indicates that a struggle for emancipation is well on its way. The narrator's view of war, on the other hand, is a function of his immaturity. Through his reading of Stijn Streuvels' war diaries, he has retained images of an essentially heroic nature - images he does not find confirmed in the present: "Nu was er weer oorlog, maar er werd nauwelijks gevochten." (8)

The discrepancy between a heroic past and a trivial present is what causes the boy to wish for war (hence the title of the novel). True, he echoes his teacher's words "Oorlog is iets verschrikkelijks, de dood is iets verschrikkelijks," but a little later on his true feelings surface: "Zou ik het erg vinden als er hier oorlog kwam? Hij schudde langzaam het hoofd, Ik zou het heerlijk vinden, dacht hij. Eigenlijk hoop ik erop... Het zou spannend zijn." (9/10)

When war does come, however, there is initially very little to indicate that the boy's life has entered a decisive phase: "Het onheil is over ons gekomen, dacht Karel, niet ontevreden,"(38) and "het heeft er alle schijn van dat mijn wens verhoord is" (41). But it is not until he takes a walk through the town's center, virtually "in search of the war", that he is finally confronted with its true face. Significantly, it is in the red-light district of his town that the great "ommekeer" takes place. While the boy is preoccupied with looking at a prostitute, a bomb is suddenly dropped. War and sex merge:

> Karel zag twee stippen vallen, hij zag de bommen vallen en hoorde een piepend geluid. Hij boog zijn hoofd en onderging het gorgelende gillen van de hoer. Zij sloeg haar vette armen uit met gestrekte vingers en haar buik was rond en dik. Karel Ruis dacht niet aan sterven. Verwonderd hoorde hij bommen inslaan...De bom is gevallen, dacht hij, de bom is gevallen, de bom is gevallen - als repeteerde hij een moeilijke themazin. (52)

A little later he realizes what has happened: "Ik wilde naar die vrouwen kijken en er viel een bom. Gisteren zei ik 'val, bom' en vandaag is hij gevallen."(55) And again, "Ik ben zeventien jaar ...en ik wilde die rotwijven achter de ramen zien en god stuurde een bom om mij te waarschuwen voor de zonde."(57)

The connection between sex and war, indicated by these passages, is given a much more elaborate treatment in what follows. Just before the outbreak of the war, Karel's uncle Robert has asked Karel to deliver a letter to his Jewish mistress, Ria Mexocos. Karel feels obliged to carry out his mission regardless of the war, and thus is introduced to two Ria's, mother and daughter, who provide the exact counterpoint to his bourgeois, boring and banal family background. The artistic, unconventional mother, who enjoys drawing naked young men, the beautiful and fascinating daughter who immediately and unequivocally states her interest in Karel, and the exotic, colourful and erotically-laden decor provide Karel with a utopia and idyll which makes him forget not only his family but also the war, "Van de oorlog was niets overgebleven dan een silhouet in de verte, dat met het donker helemaal verdwenen zou zijn."(81) No wonder that he reflects, "Deze oorlog bleek toch ergens goed voor te zijn. Hij had de oorlog gewenst, zijn wens was verhoord en de grote ommekeer in zijn leven stond voor de deur."(84) But the war soon catches up with him, and his utopian hopes are shattered when Ria and her mother flee to England. Since they make no mention of his accompanying them, Karel feels betrayed, and gives himself over to despair. "Niets biedt uitkomst. Want er is geen uitkomst. De wereld draait verder. De duitse tanks rollen verder."(93) Increasingly, moreover, the war takes on overtones of the absurd and the grotesque, rather than of the heroic à la Streuvels. How could it be otherwise, when Karel reads in an illustrated French magazine: "De voorstellingen in het Casino de Paris zijn aangepast aan de oorlogstoestand; daarbij het plaatje van een naakte juffrouw met een helm op en een gasmasker voor; op haar billen staat geschreven: Nous continuons."(95)

Of course, even in the absence of true heroism and military prowess, war has its horrors. Rotterdam is bombed while Karel is out of the city, in search of his uncle, who himself has been killed in a bombing raid. In the chaos which follows the German invasion and the defeat of the Dutch armies, Karel is forced to walk back

to town because there are no more trains. On the way back to the city he learns of Holland's capitulation. The time has come, finally, to take stock of his recent experiences:

> De hele boel is kapot, dacht hij, ze hebben mij allmaal belazerd met hun verrotte geheimzinnigheid. Ze hebben mij geimponeerd omdat ze oud of mooi of oprecht deden. Ze hebben mij van alles beloofd en niemand heeft woord gehouden. Ze zijn stilletjes dood gegaan of gevlucht...(117-18)
>
> Is alles mijn schuld? Waarom hebben ze mij geen god gegeven, geen geloof, geen ideal? Ze hebben mij niets gegeven. Niets dan mijn leven. Waarom hebben ze mij niet verteld wat oorlog was? Zouden ze het zelf niet geweten hebben? (112)

Suddenly he realizes that all those who have played their role in his recent drama had for a long time already prepared themselves for war. Referring to his parents' bourgeois life, his fashionable uncle's adulterous affairs, and the artistic pretentions of the two Ria's, he now launches an all-out attack:

> Zij hebben immers zelf de oorlog gemaakt, dacht hij. Zij hebben jarenlang gewerkt en gezwoegd in fabrieken en laboratoria om de allerbeste bommen te maken. Ze zijn jarenlang van hun kantoren naar huis gewandeld en hebben blikjeszalm gegeten, ze hebben lichtblauwe interlock, jaeger en lange haren gedragen, hun huwelijken verpest, hun kinderen verpest, muziek en lapjesschilderijen gemaakt, en ze waren blind en daarom kwam de oorlog. (122-123)

And so he is found in a ditch by the first invading Germans, crying uncontrollably, ready to be beaten or even killed: "Er schluchzt, der Junge," zei de Duitser tot zijn metgezel, die zijn lamp nog dichter bij bracht om dit schouwspel te kunnen zien. "Mein Lieber, was ist denn geschehen?" zei de Duitser." (124)

Karel Ruis's agonizing questioning at the end of Kouwenaar's novel is echoed by the nine-year old protagonist of Ward Ruyslinck's novel *Wierook en tranen.* Once again we experience the collapse of values and the loss of innocence; once again, a temporary idyll - in this case of love and nature - is finally destroyed by the realities of war. But Ruyslinck adds to Karel's questions about the sense of war, the question of God's role in allowing evil in the world, a question absent from Kouwenaar's novel, where the question of good and evil is a human one, and answerable only by humans.

Ruyslinck's novel deals with the first few days of the German invasion of Belgium. Obviously, we gain a different perspective of historical events from that offered by Kouwenaar's novel; and yet there are many parallels. The opening scenes describe the flight of Belgian civilians to the French borders, a kind of "volksverhuizing" of which the child protagonist might hitherto only have heard through history books. At first, the child's fears are only of unknown spaces, of the dark, of strange characters encountered in small villages, rather than of that faraway event called war. But when the fleeing masses are pursued by planes, and when the boy's parents are killed close to the French border, war suddenly shows its terrifying face. With great economy of style and profound insight into the character of a child, Ruyslinck suggests that the knowledge of death is effectively suppressed, and reality denied its claims, in order for the child to survive. The child's refusal to come to grips with death is reinforced by the nun who takes care of him in the hospital to which he has been brought after the bombardment: she exhorts him to be "mature".

During a short pause on the way to being transported to a refugee camp on the coast, the protagonist meets a fifteen year old girl from his former neighbourhood, Vera, who has lost her mother during the chaotic flight, and whose father is in the army. Vera, though quite a bit older than the boy, nevertheless is meant by Ruyslinck to symbolize piety and innocence. The two children continue their journey, first into the forests, then on their way to Vera's uncle. It is by living in the proximity of Vera that the child not only discovers love, but also, and consistent with it, his own mortality:

> De oorlog was niet langer een avontuur, een opwindende en ongevaarlijke gebeurtenis, iets waar ma en pa en ik zelf in schuldeloosheid buiten stonden... De toverspreuk, die ons de onkwetsbaarheid en onsterfelijkheid verleende, had plotseling haar kracht verloren...Ja, ik wist nu dat ook ik sterven kon zowel als iedereen, dat men op zijn negende levensjaar evengoed door de dood kon weggehaald worden als op zijn zeventigste. (52-53)

This cruel lesson, this loss of innocence, will be reinforced by the central episode of the novel, but Ruyslinck builds towards the climax of his novel by first introducing a retarding moment when the two children enter nature which seems - no matter how ephemerally - to guarantee peace and happiness. Like Karel's brief encounter with the exotic and erotic realm of the two Ria's in Kouwenaar's *Val, bom*, the realm seems to promise an idyllic and utopian existence far removed from the war:

In de blauwe bossen, die zich soms in de verte

> vertoonden, hoorden we de roep van de koekoek. Opeens was er geen oorlog meer: de lieflijke lente, die met glans en kleuren in de lucht en in het landschap uitzette, die zacht en zonnig als het begin van een nieuwe en schone tijd over de aarde lag en de vogels deed zingen, kon niet vergeleken worden met de lente in de stad...Hier was dat betoverend anders en, ware het niet dat we voortdurend het verwijderd gedreun van de kanonnen in onze oren hadden, de oorlog zou een boze droom geweest zijn waaruit we zoëven ontwaakten.(58)

But in this novel too, war catches up with fantasies of peace. A group of Germans on motorcyles take the children into the woods; there they rape Vera and make the boy drunk. When the latter awakens, he finds Vera morally and physically destroyed. She is transported by ambulance to a hospital in Gent, but dies there before the boy catches up with her.

This child too, like Karel in Kouwenaar's novel, now knows "dat het leven anders is dan wat de sprookjesboeken ervan maakten. Ik was negen jaar en reeds ontwaakte in mijn hart deze bittere onkinderlijke wijsheid: dat het leven heel wat anders was dan een verhaaltje met kleurige droomplaatjes." (152) And like Karel, he asks the question of the sense of war, and struggles to understand God's plan for the world: "Ik wist zo bitter weinig van Hem af en daarom begreep ik misschien ook niet om welke reden Hij me Vera ontnomen had, waarom Hij dit alles gedoogde, deze tranen, dit nutteloze leed, dit voortdurend afscheid nemen van wie men liefhad."(154) No answer is provided, and war remains a mystery in the scheme of things.

Kouwenaar and Ruyslinck give a picture of initiation and education which is profoundly pessimistic. The discovery of the self is intimately linked with the discovery of an imperfect, even an evil world, in which tradition, parents, the love of others, even God fail to provide sufficient protection. The individual discovers himself naked and alone, threatened from all sides; war is symbolic of human existence as such. Most of the novels of the immediate postwar period seem heavily influenced by the then popular philosophy of Existentialism.

That the war and its consequent discovery of the self and of one's true nature can also have a positive value, despite all the sufferings it brings, is demonstrated by the two stories of Jaap Harten, *Oud roest en spek* and *Operatie Montycoat*. Harten plays on the fact that the loosening of morals, the calling into question of values, may under certain circumstances have a liberating effect. Whereas Kouwenaar clearly sees in the collapse of the moral order a consequence of the false and hypocritical attitudes of the previous generation, and Ruyslinck interprets war as a mystery, not accessible to mere humans, Harten sees war as a destruction of the old which allows the individual to come to terms with what traditional views hold as deviant behaviour. Specifically, it is in the chaotic times of war that Harten's protagonists (alter egos of the author) discover and affirm their homosexuality.

In *Oud roest en spek* the first person narrator describes his journey to Friesland in search of food during the "hongerwinter" of 1944/45. During this journey he visits a friend of his father's, a man he calls "uncle Allard." Allard Spilker receives the narrator dressed in a somewhat strange fashion. His face is powdered, and the narrator also notices a drawing of a naked young man on the wall, by Aubrey Beardsley. These are for the readers presumably sufficient indications of the "uncle"'s homosexuality. Soon, moreover, Allard launches into a story about his experiences during the First World War, and particularly his experiences with Frisian soldiers: "Het waren jongens van metaal, gespierd als boksers. Soms's nachts gingen ze door mijn dromen; ik zag hun marmeren profielen, hun korte borstelige haren die die hoofdlijn zo goed laten uitkomen. Het zijn grieken, ging er door me heen..."(57) Among these young men, certain friendships flourish, and one of these young men finally approaches Allard. Realizing that in the Holland of those days there is no room for them, the two young men escape, first to Paris, then to Sicily, where Hielco, the young lover of Allard, meets with violent death when some young Sicilians quarrel over him.

The effect of this story, as we hear from the narrator on the way back to his home town, is that he has come to the realization that there are different categories of heroism: " Deze man heeft in zijn leven meer moeten vechten dan mijn vader, denk ik, en veel meer tegen zere schenen getrapt als het erom ging zijn fata morgana te verdedigen."(64) Moreover, what the narrator has experienced on this journey has yet another, even more important consequence: "Ik zal ze nooit kunnen zeggen wat ik beleefd heb...dat de ontdekking van mijn tocht niet lag in de barre reis door sneeuwlandschap...of in de spannende race tegen de spertijd door een desolaat Amsterdam. Ik zal ze nooit duidelijk kunnen maken dat deze ervaringen al verbleekt zijn, vervaagd tegen de achtergrond van dat andere..."(65)

Harten provides a kind of epilogue to this experience in a later story, entitled *Operatie Montycoat*, in which he describes the experiences of a young Dutchman with

a Canadian soldier shortly after liberation. The story is once again one of discovery of one's homosexuality, in which the war, because of its ability to question previous values, allows the young man to find an identity, no matter how problematic this may be. Harten is not a great writer, and the use of war for such private statements of faith is perhaps questionable, but I felt I ought to include these stories to indicate the range and scope of which the theme of war as education is capable.

Far more frequently, however, war forces the individual to realize that what he had considered" moral behaviour" or proof of "character" is no more than conformity, and that once the moral fibre of a society is loosened and moral principles called into question, individuals are left to their own resources. This is the conclusion reached by the young Dutch hero of Kouwenaar's novel *Ik was geen soldaat.* Mink, who at the outbreak of the war is still going to high school, admires his friend Harm, who is two years older. Both join the resistance, but, as Kouwenaar states in his laconic style: "Op een novembermorgen van het jaar 1944 werd Harm Visser doodgeschoten nadat zijn boezemvriend Mink had doorgeslagen."(13) Only much later we are given some details of the events leading up to Mink's treason; we learn that he was tortured and had simply been unable to remain silent. He ends up in a labour camp in Germany, where he loses his left hand, which refused to heal after the torture. He is then put on a transport to Paris, where he falls in love with the schoolteacher Alida. In the chaotic times following liberation, Mink makes a living in the black market, forever postponing his return to Holland for fear of prosecution. His career as a black market dealer for Alida's brother Pierre is cut short when the latter is arrested, and Mink is deported back to Holland. Ironically, here as already in France he is celebrated because it is assumed that he has lost his left hand through his heroism. In vain, Mink tries to convince himself that he is safe from prosecution and that he has gained freedom: the missing hand remains a symbol of his failure.

In an attempt finally to find forgiveness from a higher authority, Mink visits a girl who was in the resistance with him and Harm. Helene Blaat has known the truth all along, however, and throws him out of her flat. Only his parents will never refuse their love, but their love is habit, not worth anything to Mink: "Ze hebben altijd alles uit liefde gedaan, ze hebben mij uit liefde misleid. Ik ben drieëntwintig en verder niets, volkomen niets."(170) Like Kouwenaar's hero in *Val, bom* Mink puts the blame at least partly on the previous generation: "het ging om de inzet, zei hij tot zichzelf, en ik had geen inzet. Er was alleen een abstract vaderland en dat was alles. Ik had een principe, maar dat werd mij met zoete liberale pap ingegoten, het kon onmogelijk bestand zijn tegen een lichaam, dat pijn deed. "(192)

And yet Mink cannot completely reject the value of self-discovery, even when it leads to the knowledge that he is capable of betrayal, for he has realized that the truth cannot be attained by never being put to the test: "...als er geen oorlog geweest was, also de Duitsers mij niet hadden opgepikt, als ik Harm niet had verraden, dan zou ik zijn blijven doorlopen in de vanzelfsprekende overtuiging van mijn eigen kracht - ik zou nauwelijks hebben nagedacht over kracht en zwakheid. Ik zou me op mijn borst geklopt hebben zodat de medaille rinkelde. Ik zou niet geweten hebben, niet begrepen hebben, waar ik ophoud en begin..."(154) The others, especially people like his parents, live in an illusion if they believe that they can close out evil, cowardice and moral degradation: "...men geneest in elk geval nooit in een huiskamer met gesloten gordijnen, dacht hij, men wordt er op zijn hoogst vatbaar gemaakt. Een huiskamer, een radio en buiten is de wereld, koud, lelijk en vol ziektekiemen...Een lichaam groeit schots en scheef op tussen een theelichtje, een kachel, het Straatje van Vermeer, de AVRO-kunstkalender, een rij geraniums, twee glimmende fauteuils, waarop je niet met je gummihakken mag krassen."(143) Precisely such a sheltered, unexamined existence is subject to attack, for "Je zit op een avond in de huiskamer en er wordt gebeld en daar komen drie dikke nederlandse rechercheurs binnen en stompen je tegen het perzische tapijt en nemen je mee."(144)

Betrayal is also an important motif in Alfred Kossman's novel *De nederlaag.* In a style which now strikes the reader as somewhat old-fashioned, but which in 1950 made enough of an impact to earn for Kossman the Van der Hoogt prize, the author describes the gradual physical and moral deterioration of a group of Dutchmen in a labour camp in Germany, among them Johannes Honigmond, who is more of an observer than an active participant in the daily drama of survival in this demeaning and dehumanizing context. Kossman pays particular attention to the various attitudes adopted by the Dutchmen to the German authorities. One in particular, because of his "padvindersmoraal," soon ingratiates himself with the camp authorities, becomes their "vertrouwensman", first as interpreter, then as supervisor. It is through Bill's intrigues that one of his fellow countrymen is falsely accused of murder and executed. Once again, as in Kouwenaar's novel, betrayal is not caused by evil intent as such, but through weakness, in this case a limited moral viewpoint, and through sycophantic behaviour and the desire to establish

order in a world which is by definition chaotic. Bill's actions, contrary to those of Mink, are not even dictated by the struggle for survival; the consequences are none the less equally tragic.

Betrayal of a different sort, and prejudice, the impulse to proceed on unexamined insinuations, are the themes of Inez van Dullemen's short story *De verrader*. The opening scenes of the story show many parallels with Kouwenaar's *Val,bom*. As in that novel, the outbreak of war is described as if it were a holiday, and the narrator, a thirteen year old girl, also feels somewhat disappointed with the lack of action and violence in these first few days of war. Consequently, the nationalistic rhetoric produced by the schoolteachers is neatly debunked by the girl's comment that the city was full of "heldhaftige kabouters." (9) Still, she decides to start a new notebook, in which she will enter anything of interest.

For the moment, however, war remains a seemingly trivial cat-and-mouse game, in which the fear of fifth columnists is all-pervading: "Overal loert het verraad."(14) For the girl's father the situation threatens to become extremely dangerous once Germany's victory is assured, since as a civil servant he is presently in charge of prosecuting "landverraders." The "pact" between the narrator and her best friend Ingrid, to exchange information about the events of the day, therefore appears particularly hazardous for the father, as the girl's older brother maintains.

Dullemen is a subtle writer: her depiction of the various stages of adolescence and degrees of enlightenment and initiation is particularly clever in this story, and of crucial importance. The slightly older brother, for example, has an already more mature view of events, and his character has been profoundly altered, not only by the war, but also, one assumes, by the process of growing up: "Ik keek naar hem, ik voelde dat de oorlog in hem gegroeid was, lange tijd al. Dat donkere aan hem was de oorlog, een verschrikkelijker oorlog dan de mijne die slechts een paar dagen geleden begonnen was."(17) The girl herself is still, in her own words, "onnozel," but "De oorlog is een snelle leermeester."(14) Soon she too is confronted by the uncertainties brought on by war, in particular by the uncertainties concerning her father's safety.

The latter, despite deteriorating conditions, despite the bombardment of Rotterdam and the fact that more and more people flee to England, has decided to stay at his post. Unable to remain in suspense about the potential threat posed by Ingrid (whose German-sounding family name suggests to her that she would welcome the invasion of the Germans), the narrator finally decides to visit her friend at home, a place she has never seen because Ingrid was rather secretive about it and never invited her there. The visit proves to be a revelation. Despite the alienating rather than enlightening perspective provided by the uninformed girl, the reader is able to paste together the truth long before Ingrid's father states it unequivocally, namely that Ingrid's family are in fact Jews. Now the learning process is complete: "Terwijl ik naar hem staarde, drong het geleidelijk tot me door dat de zwartheid van zijn gestalte, de scherpe flikkering van zijn lorgnet niet de zwartheid en de flikkering waren van het verraad. Het verraad maakte plaats voor een ander soort getekend-zijn. Want er was toch iets van doem aan hem - alleen, de verraders bevonden zich aan de ene kant van de doem, en hij aan de andere." (38-39)

The reader is therefore not surprised by the ending of the story. While the narrator's father on the first day of the German occupation takes leave of his family as if it were for ever, and for the occasion even has put on his best suit, the second day already sees him relaxing. "Na een week ging mijn vader weer op de fiets. Hij was degene die steeds zou terugkeren."(41) But not so Ingrid: "toch zou de vijand zijn werk doen. Want op een dag moest Ingrid vertrekken en hoe lang ik ook op haar wachtte, zij kwam niet meer terug." (41)

The alienating vision of the child, such as is used in Inez van Dullemen's story, is particularly well suited to convey the emotional and intellectual shock which war causes by upsetting assumed truths, by reversing familiar structures and patterns and by correcting prejudices. This device is a major feature also of Hans Werner's novel *De Schriften*. The child's perspective specifically on war is so effective because it brings out its absurdities and contradictions. The inadequacies of perception and interpretation of the child's narrative force the reader to read between the lines and provide the corrective, while at the same time making him aware that this "corrective" is by no means capable of eliminating all contradictions and absurdities associated with war. Two examples may be cited, which also show another major feature of the novel, one which stands in sharp contrast to the other works I have discussed up to now: the role of humor. The first passage is a description of the newsreel in a cinema:

> Soldaten in witte pakken holden door de sneeuw en lieten zich allemaal tegelijk vallen. Ze keken opzij en lachten naar de mensen in de bioscoop. Daarna de begrafenis van helden. De doodskisten stonden in een lange rij onder vlaggen met het kruis van Hitler. Een pastoor zwaaide met een kwast en de muzikanten speelden een droevig lied. Negers die door de Amerikanen werden

> gedwongen matroos te worden op hun oorlogsschepen gaven zich dansend over aan de bemanning van een U-boot. Vrouwen in Rotterdam breiden truien voor de Winterhulp. De leider van de Nationaal Socialisten kwam even kijken of er goed gebreid werd. In Westfalen vierden meisjes in jurken uit het Bronzen Tijdperk het oogstfeest. Tussen huizen die nog bezig zijn in te storten zoeken moeders naar hun dode kindjes.(63)

The second passage describes an issue of the magazine Signaal:

> Het Duitse leger wint op alle fronten. De Duitse soldaten zijn onoverwinnelijk door de wil van hun Führer. Voordat de soldaten vertrekken naar de fronten worden er grote parades gehouden. Hitler loopt langs de soldaten en hij kijkt iedere soldaat diep in de ogen. Daarna laat hij ze gaan. Ze zijn onoverwinnelijk geworden. Op de oceanen varen Duitse kruisers en slagschepen met de bezem in de mast. Onder de golven glijden U-boten. De matrozen liggen in hangmatten en spelen op Hohner-mondharmonica's. In Berlijn worden overwinningsfeesten gehouden. De soldaten lopen in rijen van twintig naast elkaar. Ze houden de benen stijf. Hitler staat uur na uur met stijve arm...Hij is de grootste van alle Duitsers. Hij geeft zijn soldaten wapens. Hij stuurt zijn soldaten naar Afrika en Rusland en de soldaten zijn blij dat ze zo ver mogen reizen. (71-2)

There are several sources for humor in this novel. There is first and foremost daily life during the occupation itself, which provides ample material for absurd situations. The domestic scenes in this novel will inevitably remind the reader of Reve's novel *De Avonden* in their banality and keenly observed mean-spiritedness. There is also Catholicism, with its rituals and dogmas which either remain uninterpretable for the child or are misinterpreted in a comical way. There are the fantasies of the child-narrator, products of his overheated imagination resulting from his constant reading of stories of travel and discovery of exotic realms, above all of the South Pole and of Tibet. The child-narrator is in fact constantly "playing war"; he imagines himself to be a spy for the nationalist cause, and writes down information on the movement of German vehicles in his notebooks (the "schriften") in order to pass them on to resistance characters with names like Prins Maurits or Frederik Hendrik.

All this does not prevent Werner from giving the reader a fairly accurate picture of life during the German occupation, especially in its more objectionable aspects. There is for example the father, a printer who is tyrannical in some ways, but a coward towards his mother in whose house he is living. Nightly we witness his stealing coal from the terrain of the contractor Roelofs, who is doing a flourishing business with the Nazis. We see the chaplain, in rhythm with the church's year, preaching the coming of the liberator/redeemer, the "Verlosser." We hear of the narrator's friendship with Dolf van Dommel, whose father is a member of the NSB; and we learn of the tragicomical *péripéties* of the hero's growing up, of his terrors before the dangers of nudity and the cinema, his secret readings, his innocently acid comments on the family which has arrived from the town of Erpel, in Brabant, to stay with them during the "hongerwinter."

All these different strands of action and characterization are subtly interwoven by Werner eventually to bring us to a rather surprising first crisis - a crisis whose seriousness suddenly seems completely out of line with the rather humorous tone adopted up to that point. Following a search for illegal pamphlets supposedly printed on the presses of the narrator's father, the latter is arrested, not because any evidence is found, but because he enters, at the crucial moment of the investigation, into the living room with his stolen coal. He is taken to a concentration camp in the area, and now the plot becomes even more complex. The contractor Roelofs, from whom the coal was stolen, presents himself as the father's protector and manages to get him free; the NSB neighbour van Dommel helps the boy retrieve his father from the camp. The father is in a state of collapse with fear, and a complete reversal of roles in the father-son relationship now takes place: "We liepen zwijgend en hijgend naast elkaar. Ik hoopte dat hij zou zeggen: 'Gerard, ga jij op de slee zitten, dan zal ik je trekken.' Mijn vader bleef staan en greep zich vast aan mijn schouder. Ik voelde hoe hij trilde. Hij keek me smekend aan en zei: Gerard, mag ik op de slee zitten? Ik kan niet meer. Wil je me trekken?"(105)

The tyrant is revealed as having feet of clay. Moreover, all the actors in this mini-drama seen to have their own hidden agenda, each more selfish than the other. This is revealed in a discussion about the future of Holland and of themselves after the war, which takes place over a cognac between Roelofs, van Dommel, the teacher Beets and the narrator's father, all gathered in the boy's home after the father's safe return. While each of the participants interprets the end of the war differently (the NSBer bemoans the fate of Hamburg and Dresden, the teacher points to Russia as a greater danger than Germany, and Roelofs defends his war record by hinting at

humanitarian actions) it becomes clear that nothing will change, that all have, in Sartre's words, dirty hands, and that one hand will continue to wash the other. Total relativity of values and extreme cynicism now come to be the prevailing tone of the novel.

Werner has yet more tricks up his sleeve, however; he saves two strange twists of fate for the ending, a double catastrophe. The one catastrophe is caused by ignorance and meanness. The child's grandmother, who throughout the story is the very image of selfish greed (she hides food for herself and so becomes the only one in the family who is in danger of falling ill because she is too fat!),is in the habit of warming her room with a miniature stove. One day, lacking firewood, she is about to destroy the father's cherished chess set, when the boy comes upon her and stops her so violently that she falls down and dies.

The second catastrophe is caused by the boy's naiveté. In the last few months of the war, the boy has seen a bearded figure behind glass in one of contractor Roelofs' storage areas. In his fanatical religious blindness, the boy associates this figure with Jesus. In despair over the killing of his grandmother, he sets out one day to speak to this man, on whom he pins his hopes of redemption and liberation: "Daarginds achter het glas was iemand die alles wist, die alles wilde, die alles beter maken zou."(130) Caught by the Germans, he confesses that he was on his way to the bearded man. Soldiers surround the area, and the boy realizes that he has betrayed someone whom the reader, given several hints in Roelof's own story, assumes is a Jew in hiding.

"Oorlog is iets verschrikkelijks", Kouwenaar's hero of *Val, bom* claims, yet his ignorance of the true character of war is revealed at every turn. In this he is typical of most of the protagonists presented in these texts. What war was for the Dutch, according to these texts, was not an opportunity to gather military honours. It was a test: a test of the values held before 1940. For Kouwenaar, those values were hollow. Bourgeois liberalism and non-committed nationalism did not, in the event, provide enough in the way of principles for his two heroes to acquit themselves with honour. Other elements previously held to provide stability proved themselves equally untrustworthy. Religion, in Ruyslinck's novel, cannot provide answers about the existence of evil in the world; war brings the child protagonist of his novel to the realization that the world is a cruel and lonely place in which he will never feel sheltered again. Similarly, as Kossman's novel *De nederlaag* shows, a lack of genuine solidarity to their nation or class prevented the Dutch forced labourers in Germany from presenting a united front against their oppressors. Everywhere one looks, one finds collaborators, traitors, weak characters who fight amongst themselves rather than against the common enemy.

Indeed, my reading of these few novels dealing with the Second World War and with the occupation have left me with an overwhelming impression of the non-heroic aspects of this period in Dutch history. If we are to believe the authors of these works, it was a period in which many people showed an appalling lack of moral courage; a period in which many, faced with danger, faltered like Mink in Kouwenaar's novel, or chose to collaborate with the occupying forces, like the NSBer van Dommel in Werner's *De schriften*, or Bill in Kossman's *De nederlaag*. It was also a period during which it was "business as usual" for people like Roelofs in *De schriften* or Mink the black marketeer. In most cases there were no lessons to be learned: the end of the war would bring different circumstances, but no difference in behaviour. Few, and then only socially marginal figures such as Jaap Harten's protagonists, drew any kind of positive lessons from the war. Clearly, one of the most vexing questions in dealing with any kind of literature, namely to what extent literature reflects reality, is once again posed in these problematic texts. The answer to that question, however, must necessarily lie outside the scope of this paper.

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