AUGUSTINUS P. DIERICK, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Deviance and Alienation in the Early Works of J. van Oudshoorn

J.K. Feylbrief, who wrote under the pseudonym J. van Oudshoorn, was born in 1876; he spent his schooldays in the Hague and studied in Delft, with the idea of going to the Dutch East Indies. On completion of his studies, however, he worked for five years as a civil servant in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and in 1905 was appointed Secretary to the Netherlands Embassy in Berlin. Here he spent the most important years of his career. In 1911 he became head of the chancellery, a position he maintained until 1933. In that year he left Berlin and returned to the Hague, where he led a very retired life until his death in 1951. Among his works are the novels *Willem Mertens levensspiegel*, translated by N. C. Clegg as *Alienation* (1914), *Louteringen* (Purifications, 1916), *Tobias en de dood* (Tobias and Death, 1925) and *Achter groene Horren* (Behind Green Blinds, 1943), as well as a play, *Zondag* (Sunday, 1919).

Van Oudshoorns works are confessional and autobiographical in nature; they appear to be the result of a need to counterbalance the authors extreme reticence in private life and to find an outlet for his urge to define, understand and, as we shall see, to some extent exonerate himself.[1] At the same time they are very much the product of his time, and can be seen within the context of a particular type of writing, and a philosophy of life, which has its roots in the novels of the Tachtigers, and continues into the 1920s. For one thing, van Oudshoorns works illustrate a continuation of the naturalist belief in determinism. For another, they are almost without exception stories of a disillusionment ("ontnuchtering"), according to Ton Anbeek one of the key concepts in the Naturalist novel. Names such as Aletrino, van Deyssel, van Eeden, and, in the next generation, Frans Coenen and Carry van Bruggen are representative of this larger tradition. What constitutes a special refinement and nuance in the works of van Oudshoorn, however, is the fact that they rehearse the myth of a paradise lost, an early fall from grace and innocence, followed by a life of guilt, shame and decline.

A key element in van Oudshoorns work is the importance he attaches to youth as crucial moment of personality formation, though his first novel, *Willem Mertens Levensspiegel,* gives little indication of this, since it is concerned with the result of a botched youth, rather than with youth itself. The novel documents the last few years in the life of the protagonist, his gradual descent into moral and physical decline, and his demise. Mertens story is told in the third person, but from the rigorously maintained perspective of the protagonist. The work introduces all the recurring motifs of van Oudshoorns world: alcohol, prostitution, loss of social class, alienation from work, from people, and ultimately from the self. The novels hero is in the grips of an existential "angst" which goes well beyond what the heroes of the slightly earlier novels of Frans Coenen experience. The novel is reminiscent of Coenens style and technique, however, especially in its voluntary limitations of characters, and of time and space.

As in Frans Coenens novels, e.g. *In duisternis* and *Een zwakke*, the opening passages of *Willem Mertens Levensspiegel* are already indicative of the hopelessness of the protagonists situation, and closure, it is clear, is immediately available as an option, and consequently merely a matter of arbitrary decision. Mertens lonely and empty life, of which we are informed in the very first pages of the narrative, is incapable of change, the recurring daily routine, the transparent poverty and the lack of contact with his fellow human beings, for which the rest of the narrative will provide both the pre-conditions as well as the detailed and repetitive descriptions, lead the protagonist already at the very beginning of the narrative to the conclusion: "Want dit was het zuivere ononderbroken nu, waarboven nog komend gebeuren niet meer zou uitdeinen, zoodat het evengoed het einde kon zijn" (14). There follows an extremely unsympathetic portrait of the protagonist, the image captured in the mirror of a young man who makes even Coenens protagonists appear relatively healthy and prosperous:

> Sluikharig, met het bleeke ingevallen gelaat, onaanzienlijk, in de grauwe afgedragen kleedij, gluurde het weifelend beeld schuw om, als een dier in gevaar. Het dierlijke was vooral aan de roode handen, die met de knokige polseinden erbarmelijk bloot uit de papieren manchetten staken. Een tastte met de blinde vingertoppen aan het spitse kinstuk, waarboven de stroefberustende mond scheef wegzakte in een van de vermoeide plooien, opzij van den te grooten neus. De groene, gevoellooze oogen glansden vol stil leedvermaak, en als met een paukenslag uit zijn overdenking gewekt, merkt hij zich plots te ver gegaan (14).

This morbid pleasure in his own misfortune does not prevent Mertens from avoiding closure for the time being, however, nor does he abandon hope altogether: "Geluk moest ergens bestaan, want het was toch niet mogelijk, dat deze opzet door het leven als een platte voor-de-gekhouderij werd uitgespeeld?" (16-17). Like Rekker in Frans Coenens *Een Zwakke*, Mertens is one of those figures who continue to exist merely, it seems, to avoid drawing the final consequence, which, however, inevitably imposes itself.

Characteristic for Mertens character and situation is a rapid oscillation between hope and despair; his mood-swings alone would qualify him as a prime candidate for madness. Like many another hero and heroine of the Dutch turn-of-the-century novel, moreover, Mertens suffers from a dualistic view of life: "dit leven was niet werkelijk en slechts het andere was," he claims, the "other" originally being some form of idealized, pristine existence which transcends the everyday, but which is gradually being replaced, as the novel progresses, by a subject-generated reality which is increasingly surreal, menacing, and finally fatal. Flights into fancy and high-minded career dreams are one type of escapism in which Mertens frequently indulges; music, art, literature are as many mechanisms adopted to come to grips with a grimy and insufficient reality. More frequently, Mertens escapes from the pressures of daily life by means of alcohol and, occasionally, prostitution. His loneliness and his sexual dependence especially cause him shame, but other reasons to feel shame and inferiority abound: his education has been a failure, his job is one of unrelieved boredom with no chance of promotion, his constant money worries lead him to theft and a form of blackmail.

Early in the novel, however, we get a glimpse of what are the fundamental reasons for Mertens failure and the root of his shame. In flashbacks, and in the guarded and

circumspect language of the period, van Oudshoorn hints at a number of key experiences which, in good naturalist fashion, are deemed to have determined Mertens life. One of them is an episode in his boyhood in which he is initiated into masturbation. The memory of this childhood sin "plaagde... hem als een giftig insekt, hem onvermoeid onzwermend, tot er geen schakel meer ontbrak aan de menschonteerende reeks van slaafsche verdolingen" (40). Another key experience is his contracting venereal disease during a drunken spell (27). Released from hospital as if expelled from the Garden of Eden, Mertens had already then felt in danger of sliding into insanity . Somewhat later in life he seduces a girl and abandons her with "het jammerlijk schuldbesef van een weerlooze onherstelbaar leed te hebben aangedaan om zoo luttelen schijn" (40). "Dit" the author writes, " waren de zwarte plekken in zijn zwart verleden, waarvan hij het kort begrip steeds als een donker flonkerend kristal in zijn bewustzijn droeg" (29).

Set in stark opposition to these dark episodes is the childhood idyll of his stay in the country with a farrier, away from his parents. During this time, "vloden de onzware dagen met het luchte gloren van zijn schuchtere ziel, in stil geluk en kinderlijke verwachting van het komende" (37). It is the only really happy time of his life, a time brutally interrupted by the arrival of his parents who have come to take him back to the city. Interpreting his expulsion from the idyll as punishment for his sin, Mertens sees the future as doomed: "Sinds was zijn leven een hopeloos, dof verzet tegen den overweldigenden vijand, die aan een prooi zoo zwak ternauwernood aandacht schonk [...] Hij sleet de ellendige, zelf-onteerende dagen vereenzaamd naast zijn ouders, die vaak in heftige onmin tegenover elkaar stonden" (39). Significantly, in his second book, *Louteringen*, and in the novel *Achter groene horren* of 1943 van Oudshoorn recapitulates this incident, suggesting not only that the experience is autobiographical, but that it is a crucial one.

One person helps Mertens to maintain his tenuous hold on reality, the barmaid Helene: "De invloed van haar zuiver vrouwelijk wezen, in welks natuurlijke sfeer geen zijner lage verlangens vermocht te gedijen, was als de reine droge voorjaarswind, plits stuivend door de luiken van een muf-donker pakhuis, waar het bedorven goed de jaren over giftig te stinken lag" (43). But Mertens jealousy prevents him from coping with the fact that she is forced, because of her financial situation, to accept other lovers, and he goes through a series of quarrels with her leading to breakups and reconciliations. As in most other domains, Mertens oscillates between idealization and degradation of his mistress. At one point he even considers asking her to marry him, but such an idyll is patently outside the realm of the possible. It is during one of these increasingly violent quarrels that Helene calls out to her aunt that Mertens has gone mad. And indeed, the breakup with Helene, from which Mertens had derived great hopes of a new beginning, in reality ushers in the final stages of what the author calls "ethische verkwijning" (64).

At first sight the chapter with this title appears to be a misnomer, for first there is once again a sharp change in Mertens attitude. He suddenly begins to take care of his appearance; he seems to regain his self-confidence and in fact sees himself as a superior being, who would have been capable of great things, had fate not dealt him such a poor hand: "Hij behoorde naar het uiterlijk nu eenmaal tot die sedert eeuwen zeldzaam fijn geslaagden, maar meende ook geestelijk de toppunten van alle menschelijk genie in zich verstikt te vinden" (66). A few pages further on a list of ancestors, among whom are dipsomaniacs and criminals, suggests that

heredity may have something to do with his failure to realize his potential genius. In shifting grounds from inferiority to superiority, both formulated in unbalanced and excessive terms, Mertens is clearly falling prey to a phenomenon well known to psychiatrists: that of overcompensation.

Speculations about heredity neatly shift the burden of guilt onto some sort of larger force at work, while at the same time the limits of Mertens aspirations are reinforced. Other reasons for his failure are advanced during a train journey he undertakes to visit his sister. The journey is a necessary one, for he needs money to cover the debts he has incurred by stealing from the office till. Although Mertens had drifted deeper and deeper into lethargy at his work, eclipsed by a young aristocrat, he has unexpectedly, ironically and rather paradoxically, been given an opportunity to settle in another town, as a branch manager. The change will inevitably reveal his theft, however, hence his journey to obtain funds.

Mertens asks the question "Misschien zou alles anders zijn geweest, indien men hem in die beslissende jaren niet eenzaam in zijn verderf had laten gaan?" (79) Again, the question illustrates Mertens attempt to shift responsibility for his ruin from his own actions to circumstances beyond his control. This time it is the lack of parental guidance, of love, and the bad influence of corrupted peers which are advanced as the root cause of his failure. Once given these circumstances, and once set on his particular course, there appears to be a complete acceptance on Mertens part of the inevitability of his moral decline, and an absolute passiveness which allows for little more movement than that of a perpetuum mobile. All efforts, feeble at best, to find different preoccupations, such as writing or drawing, either come to nought, or lessen even more Mertens tenuous hold on reality. His growing conviction that he is " no longer bound by reality," and that he, like his late aunt, possesses "de gave der willekeurige visie," are proof of his mental imbalance, as are his nervousness and his strange, uncontrolled gestures (86).

The final two chapters, entitled "einde" and "voltrekking", describe Mertens ultimate descent into madness in detailed and harrowing passages. Moreover, Van Oudshoorn now also documents increasingly the physical decline which accompanies Mertens mental states. Mertens feels sick, he has dizzy spells and moments of disorientation, and he is gasping for breath (89). All the same, he continues his heavy drinking, and during these bouts he begins to experience alienation from his own body: his hands seem to lead a life of their own. Increasingly also, visions of the past begin to intrude: "De vale jeugdjaren in sloopende afzondering verleefd; het maatschappelijk échec; zijn ziekte en poging tot zelfmoord; daarna de jarenreeks van geestlooze kantoorarbeid en dronkenschap" (91-2). He hears a voice speaking to him and his personality appears to be split. Finally he comes, as the text says, "voor het niets te staan" (94), and he can find relief only by getting into a drunken stupor. After three consecutive days of alcohol abuse, his body is ruined, his mind completely unsettled. In a final vision Mertens is visited by the boy, now grown up and dressed in evening dress, who had initiated him into the vice that has ruined his life. Attempting to escape from his clutches, Mertens, inspired by "een gillende afschuw van het helsch sujet," defends himself with a glass jar. "Hij zag alleen nog maar de groote witte handen aan de staalgespierde polsen, warmede het rokmensch hem opving als de eene acrobaat den ander en hem sissend van woede voor zich uit naar het venster droeg. Een gerinkel van glas bracht hem tot bezinning, één oogenblik zag hij de maan-belichte

wanordelijk-leege kamer, trachtte zich nog vast te klampen aan de gladde sponningen, toen stortte hij ruggelings, tot na een denderende stilte, de doelbewuste zweving naar het Andere begon" (123).

"Over de vervreemding als existentiële ervaring," writes Wam de Moor in *t Is vol van schatten hier...*, "is in onze literatuur zelden zo indringend geschreven als door de lange tijd vergeten en thans herontdekte J. van Oudshoorn" (169). What is, however, this alienation according to van Oudshoorn? The question is not so easy to answer. For one thing, alienation has become a catch-all in several types of discourse, from psychology and sociology to literature. The term has become so broad that it can do any sort of service. Nevertheless, at least in van Oudshoorns view, alienation is understood to refer to the creation of distance, be it from others or from the self. A similar distance is sometimes experienced in the relation to objects, though it is indicated several times in the text that "things" have a way of reasserting themselves.

More important, I think, is the distance experienced in relation to the self. Since much of our identity is derived, according to both recent narrative theory and psychology, from "narrating" our past to ourselves, the sense of removal from the past, as experienced by Mertens, is a major indicator of alienation. The clear and often reiterated break in Mertens past creates a barrier which divorces his present, here-and-now identity from that which existed somewhere, at one time, but which is, in a trivial sense, irretrievable. While the healthy individual maintains a link with this "lost" identity through memory, and can establish at least a modicum of agreement with it by an act of the imagination, Mertens can see the past only in terms of "otherness," as contrast, as that against which his present identity must constantly be re-created. Mertens is obsessively preoccupied with providing the scaffolding for his identity. Writing, drawing, giving himself airs of superiority serve this purpose, but they serve it badly, because the "norm" against which they are measured is an absolute one. Childhood innocence, earthly paradise are concepts with which adults operate, but which they must — however reluctantly — abandon, in order to mature and live in the real world. Of this Mertens, like the protagonist of van Oudshoorns next novel, *Louteringen*, is incapable.

Louteringen has been called a mere variation on van Oudshoorn s first novel. There are good reasons, however, to dismiss this idea. Not only is it, in my opinion, a better novel; by emphasizing the main characters childhood, it provides a better psychological motivation for the heros malaise, which is similar to that of Willem Mertens. In addition, the novels tripartite structure is meaningful and very effective. Part one narrates a crucial youth experience in three tightly knit chapters. Part two, consisting of four "transitional chapters," is of a more episodic nature; several scenes are strung together to convey important stages in the process of growing up of the main character, Eduard (Eddie) Verkoren. These chapters indicate a growing disillusionment with education, career, and interpersonal relations. Part three, finally, is very close in tone and motifs to *Willem Mertens Levensspiegel* in its depiction of the mental and physical deterioration of the protagonist.

Several chapters, and the novel as a whole, show the structure of anticipation and subsequent disillusionment which is typical for the naturalist/impressionist novel between 1880 and 1920. Especially the first chapters demonstrate the authors acute psychological observations, rendered in a masterful, mature impressionist technique, with considerable

insight into the workings of the childs mind. These first three chapters recount an episode which determines the rest of Eduard Verkorens life: the idyllic summer spent as a nine-year old child with an uncle and four cousins. Especially impressive, and reminiscent of the short stories and novels of Carry van Bruggen, is the way van Oudshoorn describes the childs discovery of the external world. The child's sense of both wonder and dread is associated particularly with certain spaces, which acquire a quasi-symbolic meaning. There are forbidden spaces such as the attic, private spaces needed for flute playing and daydreaming in solitude; and then there are the public spaces, such as those occupied by the assembled family and, beyond the house, the street (shown consistently as lying in a blazing summer sun), and the town itself. In line with the restricted world in which the child lives, important room is given for the description of the dynamics of family life, which is seen, at least in the initial stages, as happy and free. There is, however, one slight dissonance: the uncle is a true pater familias, against whom Eddie cannot assert himself sufficiently, particularly and most urgently vis-à-vis the cousins, with whom Eddie maintains quite varied relationships, according to their quite different characters. There is the mysterious Johanna, the jolly Cornelia, the childlike Betty and, most importantly, the beautiful and idealized Cato.

Associated with Cato is the first crucial incident narrated — an incident which is turned into a leitmotif throughout the novel. Upon his arrival at his uncles house, Eddie catches a glimpse of Cato at her dressing table mirror. Unexpectedly, and in contradiction with her behaviour of the previous summer, Cato closes the door, causing in Eddie a feeling of exclusion; it signifies an end to their earlier free and easy relationship. Eddie realizes dimly that Cato is ahead of him sexually; she is "different; " for the first time her beauty strikes him. This episode functions in a number of contexts in the novel, obsessively intruding into Eddies consciousness at times of mental and emotional stress. It can be interpreted as denoting the boys fall from grace, and his exclusion; because of this, he begins to idealize Cato as the pure, chaste ideal, the goal of his longing, which life prevents him from ever realizing.

A second crucial episode has to do with the "Kermis" which has come to town. A "Bakhtinian" carnival atmosphere is conjured up, in which the usually staid and straight-laced inhabitants of the little town "let go". There follows a visit to a variety show, in which series of tableaux vivants is performed . One scene shows a nymph at a brook. The child is convinced that the young girl is naked, and he is bowled over by the idea that nakedness can be associated with purity and beauty. It is worthwhile to quote the passage extensively, to get some idea of van Oudshoorns subtle method of conveying information, and to suggest significance:

> Het schoone beeld verbleekte voor de hatelijk nuchter-lichte zaal. Maar zoo ongelooflijk als het ook leek, hij had voor het eerst een naakte vrouw gezien. Het was doodgewoon en het mocht. Het bracht zoon zoete innige bevrediging, dat hij zich plots als ouder voelde en voor de verdere beelden niet veel aandacht meer overhad ... Jawel, thans begreep hij. Cato had zich dien morgen slechts om haar meisjesondergoed geschaamd. Maar wanneer zij naakt geweest was, had zij de deur niet toegeworpen. Hoe dan ook, hij wist nu en de vreemd-koortsige onrust van het begin van den avond had deze zuivering gebracht. Want toen het licht al een poos weder op was, bemerkte hij hoe de vreemde scherpte, die de laatste dagen tusschen hem en hen als een scheidende damp was opgestegen, helder verloren ging (142-3).

The episode ends in disillusionment, unfortunately. The girl, Eddie is told, was merely wearing a flesh-coloured tricot, and the child is made fun of by the family. It is Cato, in fact, who begins this process: "Toen

kon hij niet langer zwijgen en Cato tot zich trekkend, fluisterde hij haar pardoes in het oor: Maar ik wist niet dat het mocht. Wat dan jongen, vroeg zij, lichtelijk geschrokken van zijn ontstuimigheid. Wel, zoo nakend, antwoordde hij, zonder eenige aarzeling. Toen staarde Cato hem tergend bot aan en voelde hij, dat dezelfde teleurstelling van dien eersten morgen met haar op handen was." (143).

The link which the child has established between the naked nymph and his cousin Cato is nevertheless reinforced a few pages later, when the episode is relived in his memory: "Hoe wonderlijk zacht speelde thans de muziek. Alle twijfel week. Er kwam plotseling leven in de slanke figuur. Hij lachte met haar onbevangen alles milderende lach en strekte vol warm verlangen de armen uit. Zij hielden elkander zwaarteloos omvangen en het was Cato" (147). Like the scene depicting Cato at her dressing table, it acquires the character of an *Urerlebnis*, and functions as a leitmotif in pivotal scenes of the novel.

A third crucial episode deepens Eddies sense of alienation from his childhood innocence. As part of the fairs entertainment, Gypsies have come to the town. Eddie has heard stories told of the Gypsies abducting children. On the edge of town he discovers a Gipsy wagon in whose proximity there lies a young child sleeping, her shift pulled up. When he catches a glimpse of the girls genitalia, Eddie is convinced that the girl has been mutilated. An important counter-image to the idealized Cato is thereby introduced: sexuality in its dark and incomprehensible nature; a further falling from grace is indicated. Van Oudshoorn leads up to the discovery of sexuality through a masterly handling of atmosphere; the walk through town and the description of alienating spaces sets the tone for what Eddie thinks is a gruesome discovery. No wonder that upon return to his uncles house he sees the servant girl Annas room with different eyes: "De achteloos weggeworpen kam, haar afhangend-zwarte haartooi; een doosje met rozig poeder, de geheimzinnige aanraking harer warme huid; en een doordringende reuk van goedkoope zeep, haar jonge naakte meid zijn" (150) disturb him greatly. He feels an urge to confess his troubles to Cato, but fears losing her. In fact, he is doubly afraid because after his uncle falls ill, Cato is preoccupied with a young man who comes to help out in the bakery. The holiday episode ends, therefore, with a virtual expulsion from paradise. Eddie is cruelly set upon the long road towards self-knowledge, his childhood innocence gone forever, adolescence awaiting him: "Zoo bracht het einde van de vakantie een donker begin van wreede zelfkennis" (163). Eddie develops several strategies to cope with his confusion of sentiment: he attempts to draw both the Gypsy girl and Cato and thereby discovers the ability to create his own reality; he gives in to temptation and begins to masturbate — a sin and a curse in his mind which permanently damages his relationship with the surrounding world — and he withdraws into loneliness. Nevertheless, he maintains as yet the hopeful attitude that, once back in the city, life will "happen to him."

After the three youth episodes there follow four episodes which Frans Coenen has characterized as "beads in a necklace." These episodes are not chosen arbitrarily, however, and Wam de Moor has demonstrated that on several occasions they're-introduce important materials and motifs from the youth episodes (cf. the afterword to the Salamander edition of *Louteringen*).

In the first episode, which follows Eddies exploits in school, space is again used as metaphor: Eddie hides in the toilet, and later in the "tekenkamer," to smoke. He is clearly described as an outsider, his physical ugliness is emphasized, he is characterized as a

"gluiper" (171). A second expulsion from paradise, or at least childhood innocence, has taken place in the meantime; his father has died and Eddie and his mother have consequently experienced a decline in social status and financial security. Eddie still sees himself as superior to his fellow classmates, however, whom he describes as dull and ordinary. His outsider status is reinforced by his frequenting another peripheral figure, a Dutch East Indian friend whom the boys call De Banaan. It is de Banaan who introduces Eddie to prostitutes. Since his behaviour causes him almost unbearable shame, the need to hide his private life from others becomes an obsession with Eddie. He has now shifted to writing as a way to sublimate his problems, and a short prose sketch wins some praise. But flashbacks of the happy past lead to the realization that life has already passed him by: "de hoofdzaak komt nooit in orde" (195). In addition, as episode five shows, his material conditions have deteriorated significantly.

Episodes six and seven provide more strategies to cope with growing disillusionment and alienation. Eddie has escaped from the small provincial town and is now living in the capital. His life is basically unchanged, however: brothels still play a major part in his life and he has given up his futile struggle against"geilheid." He is being treated for venereal disease and has thoughts of suicide. Eddies mother has now also died, and he has taken a job as a clerk in a government office and is permanently bored. Nevertheless, he continues to sublimate his sexual troubles by writing. He even has visions of himself as a prominent "decadent" writer like Lodewijk van Deyssel or Huysmans. Throughout this phase, Eddies moods oscillate between a longing for the realm of the ideal, for which the image of the chaste naked girl serves as leitmotif, and a resigned, fatalistic acceptance of the sordid reality in which he lives. Although he has been promoted, Verkoren has consciously limited his social life, in order to hide away his sexual secrets. He has in the meantime transposed his contempt for his fellow school mates to his fellow citizens. Their emphasis on "fatsoen" by definition makes them unfit for greater things: normal citizens are "leege schedels" (214). As Wam de Moor notes correctly, Verkoren is fooling himself throughout the later episodes of his life; he is of course over-compensating for his deeply rooted sense of inferiority and his feelings of guilt; yet these passages nevertheless throw an interesting light on the problem of artistic creation. After all, not only does van Oudshoorn make references to such writers as Huysmans and van Deyssel; his own novel is undoubtedly a similar attempt to come to terms with his own problematic existence. In this sense, the confessional nature of the work presents considerable interest from the point of view of a nascent psychology of difference (as evidenced in the contemporary writings of both Frederik van Eeden and Sigmund Freud), and as a contribution to the psychology and psychopathology of art.

One strategy, shown in episode seven, and which is very much of the times, is Verkorens transformation into a "gentleman" and a dandy. We might think here of some of the figures in Proust, or of Louis Couperus in Holland. At one point in the narrative van Oudshoorn indulges in a long and detailed description of Verkorens outing into the country in a hired carriage; typically, however, the passage rehearses in miniature the basic structure of each larger episode, and of the novel as a whole: Verkorens mood during this outing shifts from exaltation to darkest despair.

Not unexpectedly, Verkoren has become an atheist, the illusions of religion having been left behind like all others. Nevertheless, he still oscillates between hope and despair. On the one hand, his sexual impotence has led to

complete abstinence — "zonder het vrouwelijke" he leads a calm and resigned life — and he has given up alcohol and tobacco. On the other hand, despite the claim that his "levenskunst" consists in waiting for the end, the continuing obsessive intrusions of his happier childhood days suggest that he still has not given up hope altogether. Two complex scenes, very modern in their combination of subconscious and subliminal elements, afford some insight into the workings of Verkorens mind, and the symbols which his superficial argumentations hide. Both these scenes suggest that in music lies a means to obtain a glimpse of the ideal so sorely missing in his daily life. In the one scene this ideal is once again associated with the motif of the beautiful naked girl, and, consistent with previous appearances of this motif, with Cato. In the other scene, at the end of his outing into the country, as Verkoren returns to the city and hears a performance of Mendelssohns violin concerto, the motif suggests the power of music as a form of emotional communication (240). Perhaps in line with Schopenhauers thinking, Verkoren seems to view music as constituting the purest manifestation of the will, which, however, is a source of suffering. However, by the end of the concert, in predictable fashion, "geilheid" has been established as "het absolute" (243). If he must love a girl, Mertens tells himself, it had better be a "galant avontuur." Once again, however, Verkoren is deceiving himself, for the latest relationship he has entered into suggests the opposite. He has fallen in love with the fifteen year old Paula, with whom he entertains a non-sexual relationship. Once again Verkoren idealizes his partner, and once again also his idealization is misplaced. Paula is little more than a coquette, as her subsequent career as the mistress of a highly placed government official shows.

In episode nine Verkoren has shifted back to an interest in drawing, since his literary efforts met with little appreciation from the "fatsoenlijke" burghers. Literature, according to Verkoren, is now, after a brief period of true revolution and creativity, a bourgeois phenomenon. In his capacity as artist, Verkoren continues to nurture a sense of superiority, but when one of his drawings is criticized severely for its amorality, he is devastated and indulges in a scathing attack on the critics, whose limited moral viewpoint prevents them from recognizing his genius. It seems probable that van Oudshoorn is describing his own art and the reception he received or anticipated. If Verkoren nevertheless continues to draw, this is because he is always searching for a way to render adequately the image of Cato which he retains unsoiled in his memory.

This recurring image of Cato anticipates the frequent occurrence of regressive passages in the finale of the book. As Verkorens health is failing, memories constantly intrude into his mind. There is in these pages a continuous dualistic oscillation between happy childhood episodes — those depicted in the first three chapters, augmented by new ones — and increasingly morbid descriptions of the protagonists states of mind. Dreams of an artistic existence mingle with memories of youth and earlier experiences. Verkoren, van Oudshoorn tells us, is involved in the unnatural destruction of his body by means of thought, just as he had earlier destroyed it by sexual excesses. Life has turned away from him, and he in turn has given up on life. In a last desperate attempt to re-establish contact with his childhood, he has become interested in small children; despite the fact that he forces himself to see this interest as pure and innocent, it seems clear that this interest is yet another form of deviance. The very last passages of the novel in fact indicate as much, while at the same time they reiterate the basic structure of the novel, and once more suggests the naturalist determinist thesis from

whose perspective Verkorens story is written:

> "Nog worstelde hij om zij het ook een zweem van eigen leven uit deze platte tenietdoening van zijn persoon te redden, ergens een zwak begin van ophef tot het goede te ontdekken. Maar bevestiging volgde telkens verpletterender op bevestiging. Het kon niet anders en was doodgewoon. Van die eerste kinderjaren, van het schandelijk tekort zijner opvoeding, uit zijn willoos verval aan het verborgen kwaad, uit de te late inkeer, leidde het zóó alles bevattelijk tot hier, als were het met één enkel woord te zeggen ... Het was alles voorbij en weerstand nutteloos" (288).

In *Louteringen*, then, van Oudshoorn in essence presents a structure which is very similar to that of his first novel. Again, the story is one of a disillusionment, though the sense of an inevitable closure is not present from the start, as in *Willem Mertens Levensspiegel*. Moreover, van Oudshoorn seems much more concerned with tracing the roots of his protagonists disillusionment: the relatively large space allotted to the childhood episodes reveal that it is this phase of the protagonists life which holds the key to all further developments. Van Oudshoorn also explores more thoroughly than in *Willem Mertens Levensspiegel* the link between alienation and deviation. Verkorens loneliness is at the same time the cause of his deviance (which consists in the early phases in masturbation, in later phases in dependency on prostitution and pedophilia) and its result. Once again, lack of contact is the consequence of an excessive sense of guilt; at the same time, self-abuse is the concomitant of that lack of contact. Verkorens love, pure in its initial drive, finds no goal. When Cato, perhaps unwittingly, excludes him from the realm of unspoilt and natural sexuality, a sexuality which professes itself in the nakedness and beauty of the variety show (even if this beauty contains the dross of reality), Verkorens sexual urge is deflected. From an urge which is unified and whole, personified in the unbroken image of his childhood sweetheart, Verkorens concept of sexuality is shattered into two contradictory elements: love is perceived as an unattainable ideal, pure and chaste, but devoid of any relationship with life and reality; sex, on the other hand, is interpreted as base though necessary, a curse and a sin, but eminently real. Between these two realms there are no bridging links in Verkorens mind. The basic dualism of *Willem Mertens Levensspiegel* is reaffirmed in *Louteringen*, but in more specific terms, as the opposition between chastity, associated with childhood, and vice, the result of the fall from grace. Verkoren ultimately does not indulge in self-love, but in self-abuse, and he must destroy himself as inevitably as Mertens. When, at the end of the novel, Verkoren goes once more in search of a mere child, we know that his fate is sealed.

N. C. Clegg has written that what lifts van Oudshoorns writings above that of the majority of his contemporaries, and explains its influence on many modern Dutch novelists, is his masterly power of observation and analysis, especially of emotional conditions; "abnormal states of mind and their underlying causes were the particular subject of his probing investigation, and he plumbed their depths with uncanny perspicacity" (105). I am not sure that this is van Oudshoorns major contribution. Frans Coenen, and before him Frederik van Eeden and Lodewijk van Deyssel, had already explored this territory. What van Oudshoorn adds, I think, is the specific role sexuality plays in the larger context of disillusionment and alienation. To what extent van Oudhoorns novels can be read as texts documenting the specific problematic of sexuality in the restricted religious and moral environment of a Calvinist Holland around 1900 has at this point to remain an unanswered question.

NOTE

[1] The issue of *Tirade* 20, nr. 219/220 (no date) is

entirely devoted to van Oudshoorn. Besides some interesting but perhaps peripheral material, notably some correspondence, sketches as well as lettters by van Deyssel and Coener. and documentation by Harry G.M. Prick, there are more substantial assessments of van Oudshoorns achievement by fellow writers such as F. Bordewijk, Simon Vestdijk, Willem Frederik Hermans and Maarten t Hart.

Especially van Oudshoorns self-interpretations in the autobiographical pieces "Paraphrase" and "Een schrijver over zichzelf" give insight (albeit still with some reticence) into the themes presented in the two novels under discussion in the present article.

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