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***Histoire croisée* as an approach to migrant writing**

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Abstract

Although commonly understood as a monolithic entity, scholars have successfully approached the idea of cultural identity in terms of relationship, reference and binary opposition during the last two decades. This approach has consequences for the study of migrant literature. It seems the widely shared idea of ‘cultural transfer’, which implies a linear movement between mutually independent cultural spaces, is obsolete. This article instead proposes the concept of the *histoire croisée*, developed by Werner and Zimmermann, as a more fruitful model. Following Werner and Zimmermann’s suggestion that any migrant situation can be seen as culturally ‘crossed’, the article discusses two Dutch texts that mirror each other: the first text, by J. van Oudshoorn, was written at the beginning of the 20th century and reflects state violence from the perspective of a Dutch writer living in Germany; the second text, written by Mohammed Bouyeri at the dawn of the 21st century, actively legitimizes terrorist violence from the perspective of a migrant living in the Netherlands.

Keywords: *histoire croisée*, migrant literature, Dutch literature, state violence, terrorism

1.

It’s 1907. A newly arrived office clerk of the Dutch embassy is having a coffee on a terrace overlooking one of the large avenues in the capital of the German Imperial *Reich*, Berlin. He is reflecting on modern life in the city, most notably its noisy and rapid means of transportation and sees it interrupted suddenly, to make way for the *Kaiser* and his elite troops, marching back from a parade. When the emperor is gone, the Dutch diplomatic expat is surprised how quickly the city returns to normality again, as if, in his words, only a gaudy masquerade had passed by. Puzzled by this contrast between modern indifference and what he sees as a self-conscious monarch with martial looks, he describes how his vision suddenly expanded, gaining an intuitive access to the imperial brain. He depicts battle scenes, fleeing enemies and burning cities, and continues:

Een nauwbedwongen lachen speelde om de dunne saamgeknepen lippen van de heerser en ondoordringbare eenzaamheid omgaf me, zo ademloos besepte ik voor een

ondeelbaar ogenblik de hevige spanning, het geweld, waarmede een geest van voor immer verzonken eeuwen zich tegen de nuchtere leegte van het profaan alledaagse trachtte te handhaven. Maar dan was het gelukt. Een mengeling van stof en licht kwam om de dingen, hoofden, lichamen neigden zich ter aarde en onder de gouden statiehelm, in de nauwsluitende witte tunica, zong en juichte men het als voor tweeduizend jaren: *Imperator, Imperator Rex*.¹

This grand vision is interrupted somewhat prosaically: the Dutch expat asks rhetorically whether the feudal figure of the German emperor has, in modern times, become just about as ostentatious as a doorman's uniform. Nevertheless, he finds danger behind the farce. The German emperor is compared with Don Quixote, as he recalls how the tension devolving from not fitting into one's age can lead to violence. Given the tremendous power of the emperor, Van Oudshoorn points out that the potential harm this tragic anachronism can cause is much greater.

Drawing on this, the expat takes up the suppressed nature of the *Kaiser* as a symbol of German life. Yes, there is order: he remarks that Sunday evenings in Berlin pass without the alcoholic and erotic excesses he knew from his home country Holland. He also mentions a policeman who was regulated modern traffic by giving directions with a sable, seated on a horse. Yet beneath the surface of modern life, with all its orderly management, the expat feels an unbound potency. For him, the energetic expansion of the metropolis is merely the jiggling of a safety flap:

Er blijft een overschot aan energie beschikbaar waarvan niemand voorlopig weet waartoe het dienen moet. Tenzij dan om er anderen mede neer te slaan. En dat is de dreigende spanning, het gruwbaar aangezicht dat me hier aanstaart en waarvan ik dikwijls de verschrikking – ook met de beste wil – niet van me kan zetten.²

2.

This passage is quoted from J. van Oudshoorn's semi-autobiographical and epistolary novel called *Het onuitsprekelijke* ('the unspeakable'), first published in 1923. There has been some scholarly debate about whether the texts were written before the Great War, as the dates

¹ J. van Oudshoorn, *Het onuitsprekelijke: brieven*, Amsterdam 1968, p. 83. 'A restrained grin hinted the thin compressed lips of the ruler and an impervious loneliness surrounded me; I breathlessly realized for one indivisible moment the fierce tension, the violence, whereby a mind belonging to centuries lost forever struggles against the sober emptiness of the profane humdrum. But then I succeeded. A mixture of dust and light came upon the things; heads, bodies bowed down to the earth and under the golden helmet, in the slinky tunic, people sang and cried as they did two thousand years ago: *Imperator, Imperator Rex*.' This translation is mine, as are all others in the text.

² p. 84. 'A surplus of energy remains available and nobody knows how it can be used. Unless, to knock down others. And that is the threatening tension, the horrendous face that is staring at me here. Often I cannot shake off its horror, even with the best intentions.'

above the letters in the book suggests.³ But even if it is impossible to tell whether Van Oudshoorn's image of imperial Germany as a potentially explosive force brooding underneath an orderly surface was prophetic or merely well constructed in the aftermath of the Great War, I think that any scholar would consider this passage to be both a literary and a historical goldmine: writing as a migrant, Van Oudshoorn delivers an outsider's view on German society at a crucial point in European history.

However, in approaching this passage, some of the more familiar models we use to analyse migrant literature seem to fall short, the idea of transfer in particular. Of course, some elements are easily explained as resolving from the perspective of an outsider, someone who is accustomed to a different cultural context. At least until 1945, military parades in the Netherlands have always been slightly less grand than in Germany. It is therefore easy to understand how a celebration of Prussian militarism could both impress and frighten someone coming from a neighbouring country with limited military means and ambitions. More or less the same can be said for what Van Oudshoorn considers to be another syndrome of brooding Teutonic force, namely the industrious expansion of Berlin. Urban expansion in early twentieth century Holland was a different story both in extent and pace, and so was industrialization. A third and rather obvious example of cultural transfer is the remark about alcoholic and erotic excesses on Sunday evenings: basically, Van Oudshoorn observes that in the German capital, things aren't like back home when it comes to sex and drinking. But one should ask whether the oppositions along which Van Oudshoorn has developed his narrative can all be reduced to a Dutch and a German pole. At least in the first part of the passage, the contrast between modern urban life and feudal institutions seems to be of equal, if not more importance. This contrast by no means runs parallel to the opposition 'Netherlands-Germany': both the image of modern Berlin and that of the military parade are unmistakably German. A further contrast can be found between the untimely, but imaginative and heroic figure of the emperor on one side, and the indifferent and anonymous masses. So the opposition between the Netherlands and Germany is undoubtedly there, but it is entangled in other oppositions. Along with the idea of a single binary cultural frame, the passage also challenges the notion of departure and arrival that comes along with the idea of a cultural transfer. Van Oudshoorn seems to keep moving. In one way, he never arrives, for he seems to remain an outsider, contemplating Germany as a whole in which he does not take

³ As Wam de Moor suggests in his epilogue to the 1968 edition of the work, Van Oudshoorn used letters from his first years in Berlin in writing *Het onuitsprekelijke*. Unfortunately, these letters are lost, which makes it impossible to tell to what extent the letters were rewritten after 1918.

part. However, one can question whether it really is imperial Germany he is contemplating. In the first longer quote, Van Oudshoorn describes how he, for one moment, participates in the imaginary world by which the emperor stands firm against the indifference of everyday modern life. At first, he experiences this world as being fuller of meaning, more enchanted and, in a paradoxical way, more *real* than the world in which he is having his coffee. In combining this epiphanic experience with the figure of an ancient ruler, Van Oudshoorn takes up a motif that can be found in the works of two key figures in Dutch literature at the turn of the century, Herman Gorter and Lodewijk van Deysse. In fact, Van Oudshoorn seems to be echoing the poem ‘Een koning’ (‘a king’) of Gorter here, in which a feudal figure ascertains his total power over his subjects, sees burning cities at the horizon and eventually experiences his situation as one of splendid isolation:

Ik zat heel stil en recht,
mijn onderdanen zijn slecht,
dacht ik, ik ben alleen –
ik voelde me trotsch en tevreên.⁴

Of course, one cannot disentangle the figure in Van Oudshoorn’s text from the historical figure of Kaiser Wilhelm II completely, but it is telling that the figure is invoked by means which are identifiable as Dutch. Up to a point, Van Oudshoorn not only never arrives in Germany, he also never seems to have left the Netherlands.

But then again, one can also argue that Van Oudshoorn did arrive in Germany and that some elements of his narrative are distinctly German. One telling example is that, after the epiphany has drifted off somewhat, Van Oudshoorn calls the Emperor a ‘Hans Wurst’, in order to illustrate his obsolescence. The figure of ‘Hans Wurst’ can be traced back as far as 1492, when a theologian named Sebastian Brant published a book called *Ship of Fools* in which Hans Wurst first appeared. He has a long history in German literary culture – Goethe wrote a small play about him – and the word ‘Hans Wurst’ became a byword for a somewhat doltish figure. By using this word, along with comparing the Emperor to a doorman, Van Oudshoorn seems to be drawing on the broadly held view among German literati of the German Emperor as an obsolete and even farcical figure.⁵

3.

⁴ Herman Gorter, ‘Een koning’. In: *De nieuwe gids* 5 (1890), p. 392. “I sat very still and straight,/ my subjects are bad,/ I thought, I am alone -/ I felt proud and pleased.”

⁵ Peter Sprengel, *Geschichte der deutschsprachigen Literatur 1870-1900: Von der Reichsgründung bis zur Jahrhundertwende*. München: C. H. Beck, 1998, p. 705.

In short, the idea of cultural transfer falls short in analysing this passage, which I consider to be exemplary for migrant literary writing. The narrative of the migrant cannot be grasped fully when understood as a linear movement between mutually independent, monolithic cultural contexts.⁶ As an alternative, I would therefore like to introduce the model of the so-called *histoire croisée*. The model of the *histoire croisée* was developed by Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann in the context of comparative history and transfer studies.⁷ Its basic characteristics can be drawn from the term itself: instead of fixing its object in a framework of fixed oppositions, it allows its object to be approached as a ‘crossed’ phenomenon, in which dissimilar entities mutually interact. And it understands this interaction not as something which can be analysed as an outcome of such interaction, but as a *histoire*, a process in which new formations resolve and dissolve from this interaction continuously, without producing a formation that can be considered as conclusive.

Applied to Van Oudshoorn’s narrative, the *histoire croisée* allows recognition of the fact that the images of Dutch and German culture are created in relation to one another and even *through* one another: as we have seen, the figure of the German *Kaiser* is articulated through Dutch as well as German intertext. Elements by which both these images are invoked can be subject to identification and rejection – the figure of the German Emperor is both embraced and ridiculed, and parallel to this the image of the German masses both frightens and fascinates. And when confronted with German custom, Dutch drinking and harlotry becomes excessive. So instead of a departure and an arrival, there is a to-and-fro movement that never comes to a solution. Furthermore, in reading the narrative as *histoire croisée*, we can understand this discontinuous process of cultural interaction as intersected by other discourses, such as those on the relation between the artist and the masses, and on modernity. As a history of entanglements, the narrative can thus be analysed without its dynamics and complexity being reduced.

4.

In order to illustrate the possibilities of the *histoire croisée* further, I shall discuss a text which in three respects provides a counterpoint to Van Oudshoorn’s text. Firstly, because as Van Oudshoorn’s text, it is a letter, albeit a contemporary one; secondly, because its author

⁶ For a theoretical critique, see for example Jürgen Kocka: Comparison and Beyond. In: *History and Theory* 42 (2003), p. 39-44.

⁷ Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann: Beyond Comparison: *histoire croisée* and the challenge of reflexivity. In: *History and Theory*, vol. 45/1 (2006), p. 36-47.

can also be seen as an outsider – or at least as a person who has what is commonly understood as a ‘migrant background’ –, but within Dutch society; thirdly, because instead of reflecting both the appeal and the horror of political violence, the text actively seeks to legitimize political violence. It is the note Mohammed Bouyeri attached to the knife with which he killed the Dutch filmmaker and writer Theo van Gogh in 2004. The note is primarily addressed to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Dutch MP with whom Van Gogh had made the film *Submission*.⁸ It contains copious allusions to the Qur’an and other Islamic texts from end to end and therefore commonly understood as an attempt to legitimize Bouyeri’s deed as a reaction to the harsh criticism of the position of women in Islam displayed in *Submission*. Correspondingly, Bouyeri’s Islamic faith has been seen as barbaric and alien to Dutch culture.

I do not want subscribe to the all too reassuring view that Bouyeri’s note has nothing to do with the Islamic faith, but the question can be raised as to what Islam Bouyeri refers to in his letter. As the Belgian philosopher Frank vande Veire pointed out, Bouyeri displays a keen interest in the destruction of the Ummah, the community of Muslim believers. In fact, he puts forward the idea that any Muslim who does not wish to die instantly is unfaithful. This fundamentalism is not only unorthodox. It also entails a great deal of heresy: instead of the common image of Mohammed as the teacher of Allah’s laws and thus the founder of the Ummah, Bouyeri draws an image of the prophet as ‘the laughing killer’. This image can be related to apocalyptic passages from the Qu’ran, yet for Bouyeri, the apocalypse is not an event which takes place in a far distant future – as it is in Islamic tradition –, but a goal which is to be immediately realized.⁹

Vande Veire points out that Bouyeri’s faith is essentially nihilistic: it rejects the whole of life and experiences death as the only possible authentic experience. As such, parallels can be drawn to certain ascetic Christian ideals, but even more to a modern, antibourgeois tradition that is rooted in Baudelaire. This tradition also plays a significant role in the thinking of Nietzsche and Heidegger and finds its most horrible political appliance in fascism. That is not to say that Bouyeri is a fascist.¹⁰ But Vande Veire’s analysis does seem to suggest that Bouyeri’s ideas should at least partly be seen in a Western cultural context.

⁸ Hirsi Ali fled her home in Somalia after her father tried to force her into a marriage. She was an MP in the Dutch parliament, first for the Social Democrats and later for the Liberal Party. In the aftermath of the murder of Van Gogh, she lived in hiding for a while. Currently she works for the American Enterprise Institute.

⁹ Frank vande Veire, ‘Op goede voet met de dood, over Bouyeri, Picabia, Danneels, Christus en anderen’. In: *Yang* 44/3 (2008), p. 509.

¹⁰ Although one might consider his ideas as a kind of Islamic fascism.

The same conclusion can be drawn from the interpretation by literary critic Jeroen van Rooij.¹¹ As he points out, Bouyeri's note contains rhythmic and lyrical elements that can be traced back to the structure of the *gangsta rap*. Moreover, due to the fact that it directly addresses Hirs Ali, the note can be read as a so-called *diss track*, a specific genre in the *gangsta* tradition which aims at disparaging a specific person or a group – the word 'diss' is an abbreviation of 'disrespect'. Furthermore, Bouyeri follows the *gangsta* persona in his glorification of violence, which is legitimized because it is deemed to be a result of as resulting from societal oppression. Aside from the note, the way in which Bouyeri staged his assault, namely as a drive-by-shooting, can be seen as a reference to *gangsta* as well, albeit in a Dutch modulation: Bouyeri rode a bike. In fact, the main difference does not seem to resolve from beliefs – much like Bouyeri, the *gangsta* persona is a nihilistic figure –, but from the lack of artistic irony. The *gangsta* persona finds his fulfillment in what is best described as an obscene parody of capitalist society – wasting money, showing off with luxury goods, sexually consuming women. Bouyeri however takes his denial of any positive meaning of life literally and seeks to die as a martyr.

This probably makes Bouyeri pretty much an outsider to most of us, but not in the sense that his beliefs are completely alien to Dutch culture. His 'outsidership' results from an entanglement of a variety of cultural discourses, which cannot be fully traced back to either Islamic tradition or to 'Dutch' or 'Western' cultural contexts. In its ability to grasp this process, the *histoire croisée* offers analytical advantages over other models when it comes to understanding migrant writing. As the examples of Van Oudshoorn and Bouyeri have shown, this better understanding can serve both historical and political aims. In fact, the model of the *histoire croisée* seems to be a promising strategy in reading text in a cultural context that is increasingly global; or as Werner and Zimmermann phrased their goal: 'to apprehend in a more satisfactory way the complexity of a composite and plural world in motion, and thereby the fundamental question of change.'¹²

¹¹ Jeroen van Rooij, 'Martelaarsdiss. Mohammed Bouyeri en de poëtica van de *gangsta rapper*'. In: *nY* 5, apr. 2010, p. 61-67.

¹² Werner and Zimmermann, *Beyond Comparison*, p. 36-47.