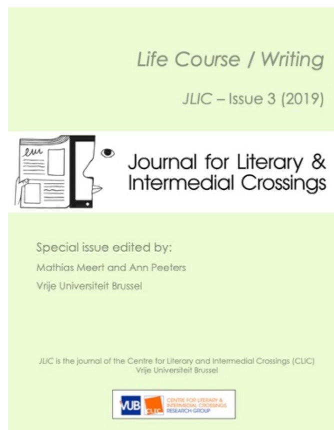

Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings

ISSN: 2506-8709

Journal homepage: https://clic.research.vub.be/journal

Submit your article to JLIC

A Prisoner's Conviction: Time, Space, and Morality in W.F. Hermans's The Darkroom of Damocles and Harry Mulisch's The Assault

Marc van Zoggel – Huygens Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis

Issue: 3

Published: Spring 2019

To link this article: https://clic.research.vub.be/volume-3-lente-printemps-spring-2019-life-

coursewriting-0

To cite this article: van Zoggel, Marc. "A Prisoner's Conviction: Time, Space, and Morality in W.F. Hermans's The Darkroom of Damocles and Harry Mulisch's The Assault." *Life Course/Writing,* special issue of *Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings*, vol., 3, 2019, pp. e1-26.

BY-NC 4.0 DEED: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/
This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International license.

A Prisoner's Conviction:

Time, Space, and Morality in W.F. Hermans's *The Darkroom of Damocles* and Harry Mulisch's *The Assault*

Marc VAN ZOGGEL

Huygens Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis

Introduction: Time, Space, and the Prison Narrative

In his landmark essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel" (1938-1939), Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin coined the concept of the 'chronotope' (literally, 'time space') in order to capture "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin 84). The chronotope, in other words, serves to describe the transformation of the physical notions of time and space into the artistic, i.e. literary categories of form and substance:

> In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (ibid.)

Bakhtin envisages the chronotope as a central concept in what he calls the discipline of 'historical poetics'. For example, in his discussion of ancient Greek romances – semi-historical adventure stories – Bakhtin shows how prison scenes are instrumental in the deceleration and freezing of plot movement: "*Captivity* and *prison* presume *guarding* and *isolating* the hero in a *definite spot in space*, impeding his subsequent spatial movement toward his goal, that is, his subsequent pursuits and searches and so forth" (Bakhtin 99; italics in original). The prison thus plays a vital role in the semi-fictional biographies presented in these stories.

The function of the prison as a narrative element has been analysed from various perspectives in literary criticism. In the introduction to the volume *Stones of Law, Bricks of Shame* (2009), Jan Alber and Frank Lauterbach distinguish four approaches to so called 'prison narratives'.[1] A first strand of criticism examines literary representations of prisons in order to investigate the "disciplining or repressive nature" (Alber and Lauterbach 8) of imprisonment, for instance with regard to oppression and humiliation of individuals and groups (e.g. Priestley; Franklin). In contrast, a second critical tradition "celebrates the potentially liberating effects of the prison on the inmate despite adverse circumstances" (Alber and Lauterbach 8) (e.g. Weigel; Duncan). A third tradition investigates the structural attributes of the prison in connection with the structure of the narrative, either sociologically and narratologically (e.g. Foucault; Bender) or metaphorically (e.g. Carnochan 381-406; Fludernik and Olson; Fludernik 226-244; Alber). Michel Foucault associated "the 'birth' of the prison" (ibid.) with the emergence of the disciplinary society in the early nineteenth century, which later literary scholars have seen as an explanation for the period's discursive choices and preference for narratological strategies such as omniscient narration. With regard to the prison as metaphor, Fludernik and Alber both have divided prison metaphors into two groups: "metaphors of imprisonment that use the prison as tenor (PRISON IS X) and proper prison metaphors that use the prison as vehicle (X IS PRISON)" (Alber and Lauterbach 11). Finally, the fourth approach focuses on the broader cultural significance of the prison (e.g. Haslam; Alber and Lauterbach). It deals with the way prison narratives inscribe themselves in other cultural discourses involving, amongst others, politics, history and identity.

In what follows, I shall discuss the pivotal function of the prison scenes in the life narratives presented in two canonical Dutch novels from the post-war era: *The Darkroom of Damocles* (1958) by Willem Frederik Hermans and *The Assault* (1982) by Harry Mulisch.

[1] Although their book mainly deals with Victorian literature, Alber and Lauterbach nevertheless stress their categorization concerns "[e]xisting analyses of Victorian and other prisons" (8).

Although both novels are explicitly non-autobiographical, they can be regarded as *life narratives* in the broader sense of the term: they cover a substantial part of the lives of the protagonists – youth, coming of age, and the vicissitudes of adult life. Thus, *life writing* in this article is not restricted to (auto)biographical writing, but defined more broadly as a written account of an individual's life, whether it be a fictional character or real-life person.[2] Nevertheless, there may always be a certain interconnectedness between a fictional character's life on the one hand and the 'self' of the author (his or her identity and opinions for instance), as it is known or inferred by the reader, on the other. From the vast body of Dutch war novels, I have chosen these specific works not only because of their national and international reputation, to which I return presently. A comparison of the life narratives presented by Hermans and Mulisch reveals striking similarities, but also an important difference in tone, which, in my opinion, can be traced back to the opposite outlook on life of their respective authors, rooted in their personal experiences during war time.

My article will be more or less in line with the third and fourth approach to prison narratives – although there also is some overlap with the first two as well – as it focuses on the metaphorical connotation of the prison in connection with the structure of the narratives, and on the cultural and historical discourses they are rooted in. In both works, the time spent in a prison environment has a fundamental effect on the main characters' life histories, as the experience profoundly changes their view of life and what it means to be alive. I will argue that, although at first sight *The Darkroom of Damocles* and *The Assault* appear to communicate similar, pessimistic viewpoints on morality, they in fact draw radically opposite conclusions about the practical consequences of this negative outlook. These dissimilar climaxes of the novels and of the life stories they present are foreshadowed by spatial and temporal indicators and the metaphoric use of language in the novels' prison scenes. In

[2] This broadening of the definition is in line with the "awareness that lives and selves are largely, and inevitably, fictionalizations" (Cuddon 395).

addition, I will demonstrate that in both life narratives, and in particular in the respective prison scenes, to quote Bakhtin once again, “space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (Bakhtin 84). First, I will briefly introduce the authors, the novels and the relevant historical and literary contexts.

Hermans, Mulisch, and the Second World War

Willem Frederik Hermans (1921-1995) and Harry Mulisch (1927-2010) are generally recognized as two of the most important authors of modern Dutch literature. With Gerard Reve (1923-2006), they are often labelled as the ‘Big Three’ of the post war period.[3] Although the three authors were born in the 1920s, Mulisch never thought of himself as belonging to the same generation as Hermans and Reve, who grew up in the harsh 1930s, a decade of economic downfall and depression, and had reached adulthood when World War II broke out. Mulisch, by contrast, grew up *during* this war, and came of age as the war ended and times of freedom and fun lay ahead. This situation, still according to Mulisch, accounted for a fundamental difference in mentality. Because Hermans and Reve saw their teenage years dominated by hardship, and their young adult years ruined by the German occupation, Mulisch maintained that their literary work could not but be essentially *pessimistic*. The spirit of *optimism* that pervades his own work Mulisch attributed to the fact that his own youth, in contrast, was marked by the eager anticipation of peaceful times and the profound joy of freedom regained (Mulisch 1968: 32-33).

Although this logic can be contested for various reasons – for instance: Mulisch’s position during the occupation was much more complicated, since his Austrian father collaborated with the Germans while his mother was of German ancestry but Jewish – the underlying premise is indisputable: the war had a major influence on the personal as well as

[3] The notion of ‘The Big Three’ is off course a highly questionable and contested one, for instance from a Flemish perspective. It is used here in a descriptive way (the notion as it has circulated and still does), not in a normative manner.

the artistic development of writers born in the 1920s and debuting shortly after 1945. It is a truism that, when young people have to grow up in times of crisis and in an occupied country, this is bound to shape their views on the world in which they live as well as on mankind and humanity. Questions of ethics and morality, the meaning of notions of good and evil, and the value of ideals and beliefs, will have a stronger impact on their intellectual development than in more carefree times. It is therefore hardly surprising that these authors have often used the war in their fictional works as a background on which to project their views. Hermans's *The Darkroom of Damocles* and Mulisch's *The Assault* are eminent representatives of the Dutch tradition of writing that engages with the Second World War.

Willem Frederik Hermans's *The Darkroom of Damocles*, in Dutch *De donkere kamer van Damokles*, was first published in 1958. The novel's protagonist is Henri Osewoudt, a seven-months baby who is raised by his uncle and aunt after his mother killed his father, and later marries his cousin. His life story takes an unexpected turn during the war. In the first chaotic days of the German occupation of the Netherlands, his dull existence as a tobacconist suddenly turns into an adventure when he becomes involved in resistance activities. He is asked to do so by Dorbeck, a mysterious man and Osewoudt's spitting image in reverse: their faces are alike, only Dorbeck has black hair, a shady beard and a low, dark voice, while Osewoudt is blonde, beardless and has a high, girly voice. Commissioned by Dorbeck, Osewoudt takes part in several operations of the Dutch resistance. Initially, he is only developing photographs in his darkroom but soon he becomes involved in the liquidation of supposed collaborators. His hair is painted black, increasing the resemblance with Dorbeck. At the end of the war, when he reaches the liberated south of the Netherlands disguised in a nurse's uniform, Osewoudt is arrested. In the aftermath of the War, he is not celebrated as a war hero but instead accused of having collaborated with the German occupiers. He cannot prove his innocence, mainly because he is unable to prove the existence of Dorbeck, the only

person (still) able to/left who may confirm that Osewoudt was *bona fide*. Gradually, the question arises, not in the least for the reader, whether this Dorbeck has been real or just a utopian delusion of the mentally unstable Osewoudt.

Harry Mulisch's *The Assault*, in Dutch *De aanslag*, was first published in 1982. The novel explores the profound impact of war time events on the life of Anton Steenwijk. It opens on a dark winter's night in January 1945, the last winter of the war. The 12-year-old Anton is playing a board game with his parents and his brother Peter, when all of a sudden six gun shots ring out in the night. Anton peeks through the closed curtains and sees a man lying dead in front of their neighbours' villa. They recognize the murdered man as Fake Ploeg, the collaborating head of the local police force. The neighbours come outside and move his body in front of the Steenwijks' house. Peter realizes this means they are in great danger now and flees. The Germans soon arrive at the scene and, in retaliation, take Anton's parents away and burn down their house. Anton survives because he is forgotten in the commotion. Soon after the end of the war, he learns that his parents were shot dead the same night, and so was his brother, who was caught not much later. The remaining part of Anton's life, and of the novel, is dominated by his struggle to deal with the past, as his initial suppression of his memories of that terrible night in 1945 gradually develops into an eagerness to learn the details of those fatal events. As Anton progresses through life, pieces of the puzzle fall into place.

Both novels achieved canonical status in Dutch literature almost immediately after publication; internationally, however, they followed a different route to acclaim. *The Assault* was translated into English in 1985 by Clair Nicolas White and published by Collins Harvill in London and Pantheon Books in New York. It received positive reviews and reached a wider audience when the 1986 eponymous film, directed by Fons Rademakers, won a Golden Globe as well as an Academy Award in the category of Best Foreign Language Film. The novel is currently available in over thirty languages. Mulisch's 1992 magnum opus *De*

ontdekking van de hemel, translated into English as *The Discovery of Heaven*, received similar jubilant reviews. This international recognition made Mulisch an annual contender for the Nobel Prize in the last two decades of his life, but he was never selected as laureate.[4]

The Darkroom of Damocles only posthumously gained widespread acclaim among literary critics outside the Netherlands. The first translations of the novel in English and French, both in 1962, did not lead to an international breakthrough; Roy Edwards' translation *The Dark Room of Damocles* and Maurice Beerblock's *La chambre noire de Damoclès* received little attention. Hermans himself was not happy with either the quality of the translations or the way in which they were reviewed. The title of a French review, "Un Günter Grass néerlandais?" (1962) for instance, aroused his anger, for it compared *La chambre noire* to *Die Blechtrommel,* which had been published one year later than Hermans's novel. In his opinion, Grass should have been called 'Un W.F. Hermans allemand'. The eventual international attention for and appreciation of the novel Hermans would not live to see.[5] In 2001, the German literary press warmly welcomed the German translation *Die Dunkelkammer des Damokles* by Waltraud Hüsmert, and in 2007, exactly half a century after the novel was first published, a new English translation, *The Darkroom of Damocles* by Ina Rilke at Harvill Secker, received positive reviews. Eileen Battersby, for example, praised the novel in *The Irish Times*, and characterized it as "Kafka meets Walter Mitty with the pace of an Ionesco play" (Battersby qtd. in Otterspeer 110).

The literary representation of the Second World War and the German occupation of the Netherlands, and especially of the behaviour of individuals in this specific historical period, in the works of authors such as Hermans and Mulisch has played a crucial role in a paradigm shift that has taken place in Dutch historiography since the 1980s. In his Amsterdam University inaugural lecture of 1983, professor Hans Blom argued for a more objective and

---

[4] For more information on Mulisch and his work, see Anbeek et al. 629-630; Forst 47-53; Coetzee 39-48.
[5] For more information on Hermans and his work, see Anbeek et al. 589-590; Wolf 274-278.

analytical view on the German occupation of the Netherlands instead of the prevailing one concerned with moral issues of right and wrong ('goed' and 'fout' in Dutch). Scholars embraced this and gradually the treatment of the period 1940-45 in historiography changed. An acclaimed product of this development is Chris van der Heijden's 2001 monograph *Grijs Verleden. Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog* [*Grey Past. The Netherlands and the Second World War*], a contestation of the official multivolume chronicle *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* [*The Kingdom of the Netherlands in the Second World War*] (1969-1994) by Loe de Jong, director of the National Institute for War Studies. Contrary to De Jong, Van der Heijden was not interested in heroic or perfidious deeds of individuals, in the so-called 'goed-fout'-discussion. Instead, he focused on the vast grey area in between, hereby referring to the war novels of authors such as Hermans, Mulisch, Reve and Simon Vestdijk. In line with Hermans, for instance, Van der Heijden described the war-time situation of the Netherlands as primarily chaotic: "a laborious splattering and sputtering is typical for the behaviour of the large majority of the Dutch people during the first years of the war" (Van der Heijden 16; my transl.).

The literary contribution of Hermans and Mulisch to this historiographical paradigm shift is particularly noticeable in the earlier-mentioned life-altering prison scenes, in which the authors express their reservations about an all too moralising, black-and-white reading of the war-time events and prepare for a more detached perspective on morality that their protagonists will come to adopt in the course of their lives.

Two Prison Scenes

Daniel Cunin's new French translation of Hermans's novel, published in 2006 by Gallimard, was saved from the same fate as its predecessor when in 2007, Czech-French author and critic Milan Kundera eagerly drew attention to it. In an exultant review in *Le Monde*, Kundera

called *La chambre noire de Damoclès* a novel of "capital importance" (Kundera 2007; my transl.). Although he did not explicitly refer to it, a specific passage in Hermans's novel may have reminded Kundera of a crucial philosophical observation in his own 1984 novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The relevant passage is situated towards the end of *The Darkroom of Damocles*. The war is over and Osewoudt is imprisoned in a camp for collaborators and prisoners of war. He is watching captured Waffen SS-men exercising, when a young Dutchman, "seventeen at most", separates himself from this group and begins to talk to Osewoudt:

> You know the trouble with most Dutchmen? They never learned to think. Take me. I joined the SS a year ago. I'm a theorist, an amoral theorist. A theorist, because I can't stand the sight of blood, and besides, by the time I joined, Germany was already losing the war and there were SS men running for cover with the Resistance. It wasn't that I believed in the SS, the 1,000 year Reich, or any of the other tripe the papers say every SS man believed in. But what I do believe is that moral values are nothing but a temporary frame of reference, and that once you're dead morality is irrelevant. (Hermans 2007: 341)

He calls himself 'an intellectual,' in contrast to the other SS-men, who are 'a pack of idiots':

> You know what it is? You know what it all boils down to? It all boils down to the fact that man is mortal and doesn't want to admit it. But to anyone who accepts the reality of death there is no morality in the absolute sense, to anyone like that goodness and charity are nothing but fear in disguise. Why should I behave morally if I will get the death sentence in any case? Everyone is sentenced to die in the end, and everyone knows it.
>
> The crackpot philosophers who shaped our Western civilisation thought there was a difference between guilt and innocence. But I say: in a world where everyone gets the death sentence there can be no distinction between innocence and guilt. (Hermans 2007: 341-342)

The young man's conclusion is deeply nihilistic: "Man will have to learn to live in a world without liberty, goodness and truth" (Hermans 2007: 343). He then runs back to his group. Osewoudt has not spoken a word in return. The moral nihilism on which the young man elaborates here is not unlike that of the character Tomas in Kundera's *The Unbearable*

Lightness of Being: “We can never know what to want, because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives, nor perfect it in our lives to come. [...] What happens but once, might as well not have happened at all. If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all” (Kundera 8). The similarity between the two characters’ views on life and living may have prompted, whether consciously or unconsciously, Kundera’s critical appreciation of the novel and his recognition of Hermans as a kindred spirit.

Mulisch’s *The Assault,* published twenty-four years after *The Darkroom of Damocles*, likewise contains a prison scene, but in the first part of the novel. Shortly after the shooting of the policeman, the Germans arrive and force their way into the home of the Steenwijks. Anton is separated from his parents and then left behind in a military vehicle, from which he observes how the Germans burn down their house. Anton is transferred to a prison cell afterwards, which already holds another prisoner, a woman. It is completely dark, so they cannot see each other, but from her voice Anton gathers she must be young. She first tries to set Anton at ease, but then quickly becomes belligerent:

> Listen. They’ll try and make you believe all kinds of things, but you must never forget that it was the Krauts who burned down your house. Whoever did it, did it, and not anyone else. […] they did it because that pig had been liquidated, and they’ll blame the Underground and say they were forced to do it. They’ll tell you that the Underground knew what would happen and therefore the Underground is responsible. (Mulisch 1985: 33)

Unlike Osewoudt, Anton is quick to react, “trying to formulate what he thought about it”, and his response is surprisingly mature: “But if that’s the case, then...then no one’s ever at fault. Then everyone can just do as they please” (Ibid.). The woman, however, does not react to this and continues: “You know [...] if those Underground people hadn’t done this, Ploeg would have murdered many more, and then...” (Mulisch 1985: 34). She starts to cry for a moment, but she quickly regains her self-possession:

> ‘It’s all so horrible,’ she said in a choking voice. ‘The world is hell, hell. I’m glad it’s almost over now, I can’t take it anymore… […] Just a few more weeks and it’ll all be over. The Americans are at the Rhine and the Russians at the Oder.’ (ibid.)

The narrator then comments: “She had said it with total conviction” (Ibid.). They talk about light and dark and the woman applies these concepts metaphorically to their actual emotions:

> ‘Hate is the darkness, that’s no good. And yet we’ve got to hate Fascists, and that’s considered perfectly all right. How is that possible? It’s because we hate them in the name of light, I guess, whereas they hate only in the name of darkness. We hate hate itself, and for this reason our hate is better than theirs’ (Mulisch 1985: 38).

The perspective, too, has changed slightly: “Suddenly, without transition, she began to talk as if to a third person in the cell” (ibid.). Moreover, the person to whom the woman is actually talking, Anton, is not following anymore: “He didn’t understand a word she was saying, but he was flattered that she should be talking to him as to a grown-up” (Mulisch 1985: 39). Anton thus no longer takes part in the conversation; focalization no longer proceeds in line with his observation and cognition, so that the story is not mediated through Anton’s experience anymore. The addressee of the woman’s exposition is no longer (only) Anton, but, so it seems, the reader.

Anton, exhausted from the hectic events of the day and the fiery words of the young woman, suddenly falls asleep. When he awakes, soldiers are taking him out of the prison cell, and in the rush he is unable to catch even as much as a glimpse of the young woman.

Mortality Leads to Amorality

The Darkroom of Damocles and *The Assault* thus contain a remarkably similar scene, set in a prison environment, in which the protagonist is subjected to a fellow prisoner’s extensive monologue about morality, specifically about conventional dichotomies such as good and evil, guilt and innocence and victim and perpetrator, all with reference to World War II. In the two

passages the action of the story is halted in order to make room for a more essayistic exposition of thoughts and ideas. In both, the interlocutor is a character who has not previously featured in the story and will not feature again afterwards, and his or her appearance does not immediately influence the progress of the plot. Moreover, the action is stopped quite literally: the amoral theorist interrupts his exercising in order to talk to Osewoudt, the resistance woman talks to Anton in a dark cell, in between hectic events. Both speakers are young and self-confident, outspoken in their views on morality and ethics, and on captivity and freedom. They are introduced in prison settings, appear to the focalising main characters quite out of the blue, tell their stories rapidly but thoughtfully, only to disappear from the protagonists' lives immediately after they have spoken, as if they were simply dropped into the stories to convey a moral message and pulled out again once the assignment has been fulfilled.

In *The Darkroom of Damocles*, Osewoudt does not talk back to the young man; he merely functions as a silent recipient of the theorist's monologue. In *The Assault*, Anton is a more active listener, in that he draws, from the words of the woman, the cardinal conclusion about guilt; on the other hand, the external narrator reports that Anton soon loses track of what the woman is saying. So, it seems as if in both novels the consciousness or awareness of the protagonist is temporarily interrupted in order to make room for the revelation of what one can call the prisoner's conviction, 'conviction' both referring to *belief*, *persuasion*, and to *condemnation*, *sentencing*. Both prisoners know they are convicted to die – the amoral theorist is bound to be sentenced, and possibly even executed, for collaborating with the enemy, and the young lady is only hours away from being shot to death for violent acts of resistance – and seize what might be their last moment of interaction with another human being to pass on their holiest beliefs, their deepest convictions. As a supposed traitor in the hands of the victors and a freedom fighter in the hands of the enemy their situations could

hardly be more dissimilar, but the purport of their monologues, i.e. the meaning of their respective convictions does not differ much:

> 'I say: in a world where everyone gets the death sentence there can be no distinction between innocence and guilt.' (Hermans 2007: 342)
> 'But if that's the case, then...then no one's ever at fault. Then everyone can just do as they please.' (Mulisch 1985: 33)

In *The Assault*, Anton finds out what really happened back in 1945, when, many years later, he coincidentally meets a man who operated in the same resistance cell as the young woman. Cor Takes recalls in particular the many discussions he and the woman had had during the war, "always about morality", for "she was in her element" whenever they discussed morality: "Nights on end, we'd sit and talk about our work. Just imagine us sitting there, both of us condemned to death..." (Mulisch 1985: 141). Whereupon Anton quickly replies: "Had you been condemned to death?" Takes' answer is quite ambiguous: "Of course; aren't you?" (ibid.). This language game of being sentenced to death as the ultimate definition of being alive calls to mind what the amoral theorist of *The Darkroom of Damocles* told Osewoudt: "Why should I behave morally if I will get the death sentence in any case? Everyone is sentenced to die in the end, and everyone knows it" (Hermans 2007: 342).

In the final chapter of *The Assault*, set in 1981, the now 49-year-old Anton joins a mass demonstration against the nuclear arms race between the US and the Soviet Union. In the crowd, he stumbles upon his former neighbour Karin Korteweg, who in 1945, together with her father, dragged the body of the liquidated policeman in front of the Steenwijks' house. Anton finally has the possibility to ask her why they had done it that way, why they had not dragged the body in front of the house on the other side, for instance. Karin reveals they made that fatal decision because they knew those other neighbours were hiding three Jews in their house. Anton is puzzled: "The three Jews […] had unknowingly saved themselves and the lives of two others, and instead of them, his own father and mother and

Peter had died”. As in prison, he formulates his conclusion in the form of a question: “Was everyone both guilty and not guilty? Was guilt innocent and innocence guilty?” (Mulisch 1985: 184). The attentive reader immediately is reminded of the younger Anton’s reply to the lady in the prison cell. Moreover, the resemblance with the amoral theorist’s declaration in *The Darkroom of Damocles* becomes even more striking:

> ‘I say: in a world where everyone gets the death sentence there can be no distinction between innocence and guilt.’ (Hermans 2007: 342)
> ‘Was everyone both guilty and not guilty? Was guilt innocent and innocence guilty?’ (Mulisch 1985: 184)

Both novels thus seem to arrive at a deep awareness of the amorality, the incomprehensibility of human existence: *morality* is an empty shell, for the *mortality* of a human being already is an irrevocable death penalty, a sentence that renders obsolete every clear moral distinction between good and evil, between innocence and guilt.

The Ironical Viewpoint

Should one gradually conclude that Hermans and Mulisch were after all like-minded writers, or maybe even that Mulisch was more or less an epigone of Hermans? The latter, in fact, did accuse Mulisch of “from time to time having the unpleasant tendency to copy Hermans without acknowledgement” (Hermans 2011: 432; my transl.). Hermans quoted the line “Even if we had heaven on earth tomorrow, it couldn’t be perfect because of all that’s happened” (Mulisch 1985: 146) from *The Assault*, suggesting Mulisch had stolen it from Hermans’s “Het sadistische universum” [“The Sadistic Universe”] (1964): “Even if one day heaven on earth would dawn, then that would still not make up for the fact that it has been different for hundred thousands of years” (Hermans 2008: 31; my transl.). With this allegation, Hermans was responding to Ton Anbeek, a professor of Dutch literature who had observed that the optimistic tone of Mulisch’s non-fiction and public speeches contrasted with the pessimistic

tone of his novels, which he considered almost as pessimistic as Hermans's works. Hermans stressed he and Mulisch had actually nothing in common, and if there were any signals of the opposite being true, the copycat behaviour of Mulisch would be the logical explanation for the supposed discrepancy in tone between Mulisch's public statements and his fiction (Hermans 2011: 433). In a 1970 interview, however, Hermans implicitly confirmed Mulisch's hypothesis that his pessimistic nature resulted from the unfortunate coinciding of his coming of age with the five long years of the German occupation of the Netherlands:

> When the War broke out in 1940, it was the very year I graduated from high school and became a university student. So, my college years were completely ruined by it. When the war had finally ended, I was 23. Oh well, I have to admit I have obtained in that period a very curious viewpoint on the human condition that has never abandoned me afterwards. And I still consider it a big advantage. All these people plodding the streets nowadays to save humanity give me a sense of pity. I know it is impossible. Man is way and way more malicious than these young folks believe. (Hermans qtd. in Kooiman and Graftdijk 237; my transl.)

Such a demonstration of people plodding the streets to save humanity is exactly what the older Anton Steenwijk gets caught up in in the last pages of *The Assault*. But while mass demonstrations only strengthened Hermans's belief that humanity is beyond redemption, the way in which the march is described in *The Assault* suggests that Mulisch reads such a public display of protest as confirming that all is not lost.

When Anton joins the mass demonstration, the city is so crowded that he feels as if he is locked up again: "The parade had come to a stop again. The street was completely blocked, because all the separate demonstrations were now trying to join the main one" (Mulisch 1985: 181-182). Importantly, also his *sight* is obstructed again: "Anton and Karin stood behind a wide banner which was not held taut, so that it obstructed the view" (Mulisch 1985: 182). It is precisely in this situation, when he is rendered almost as motionless and blind as he was in prison, that Karin puts the last piece of the puzzle in place by giving the above paraphrased explanation of why she and her father had moved Ploeg's body in front of Anton's house.

Now that the mystery has been revealed, Anton is able to move and see again: “He joined a part of the parade that was still moving, or was once more on the move, and let himself be carried along by the crowd” (Mulisch 1985: 183). This giant human organism is now no longer confining him, but literally propelling him forward: “It was as if these hundreds of thousands of people, these endless streams of human lives, were helping him, crossing bridges and canals in front of him and behind him” (Mulisch 1985: 183-184).

In the last paragraph of *The Assault*, an auctorial narrator takes over, oversees the situation, and poses a rhetorical question:

> But what does it matter? Everything is forgotten in the end. The shouting dies down, the waves subside, the streets empty, and all is silent once more. A tall, slender man walks hand in hand with his son in a demonstration. He has ‘lived through the War’ as they say, one of the last, perhaps, to remember. He has joined it against his will, this demonstration, and there’s an ironical look in his eye, as if he finds the situation amusing. (Mulisch 1985: 185)

This ‘ironical look’ is, in my opinion, of crucial importance to reject the proposition that Mulisch had merely imitated his colleague Hermans, and Anbeek’s suggestion of a discrepancy in tone between Mulisch’s public statements and his fiction. Although both novels seem to arrive at the same pessimistic conclusion about guilt and innocence, the ending of *The Assault* differs fundamentally from the final passages of *The Darkroom of Damocles*. Osewoudt has become desperate because he has no prospect other than death and is shot by the prison guards when he makes a half-hearted attempt to escape. Anton, on the other hand, is presented as a character with an ironic viewpoint, someone who is able to use the distance created by irony to place the cruel events of his life in a broader, almost cosmic perspective. At the end of *The Assault*, Anton is no longer the centre of focalization: the camera zooms out of Anton’s head and provides us an overview of the crowd, the city, even humanity. Osewoudt was unable to deal with the amoral theory that man “will have to learn to live in a world without liberty, goodness and truth” (Hermans 2007: 343). The narrator of *The Assault*

suggests that Anton, in turn, acknowledges the bizarre entanglement of guilt and innocence and is therefore able to deal with it.[6]

Anton's psychological status at the end of the novel can be regarded as the result of a decisive shift in his way of dealing with the traumatic past. In terms of Dominick LaCapra's model of how trauma can be dealt with, Anton has moved from 'acting out' to 'working through'. Before his conversation with Karin, his mode of remembrance had been one of 'acting out'; he had been "haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes – scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop" (LaCapra 21). The 'feedback loop' is represented by the circular structure of the demonstration in which he is walking: it has become a vicious circle, its beginning is its end, and vice versa. Karin's explanation finally sets the process of Anton's 'working-through' his trauma in motion; he now knows what happened back in 1945, "while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future" (LaCapra 22). This recalls the prologue of the novel, in which a young Anton is startled by the movement of a man standing on a barge in the canal in front of their house:

> the man remained on deck and walked forward along the side of the barge, dragging the pole behind him through the water. When he reached the bow, he planted the stick sideways in the bottom of the canal, grasped it firmly, and walked backwards, so that he pushed the boat forward beneath his feet. This especially pleased Anton: a man walking backwards to push something forward, while staying in the same place himself. (Mulisch 1985: 5)

Anton's self-reflexive attitude at the end of the novel is quite effectively mirrored by this. While being stuck in a dense crowd, he has moved back into the past and learned the

[6] In *The Nazi Conscience*, her 2003 book on "the powerful sense of right and wrong" of the Nazis, Claudia Koonz includes *The Assault*, along with George Steiner's *The Portage to San Cristóbal* (1981) and Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985), in a list of novels that "in very different ways, relativize the evil of Nazi rule" (Koonz 280). In my view, this 'relativization' occurs largely by means of irony.

circumstances of the cruelties, after which he is able to move on with his life. This relatively positive ending is thus interwoven with the structure of the novel on different levels.

Charged Space

A closer reading of the prison scenes further stresses the crucial importance of temporal and spatial experience for the mental (in)stability of the protagonists. As I briefly mentioned, in *The Assault* the darkness inside the prison cell heavily influences Anton's perception. The link between space and cognition is also thematized in his conversation with the woman. She tells him how she was walking home after curfew on a pitch-dark night, absolutely unable to see anything, but relying on her visual memory: "I really saw absolutely nothing, but all along I knew exactly where I was. At least, so I thought. I visualized everything in my memory, I had walked along here at least a thousand times, I knew every corner, every hedge, every tree, every stoop – everything" (Mulisch 1985: 36). But all of a sudden, she lost her orientation and was unable to move another step: "I knew there were lots of people all about, but everything had disappeared. The world stopped at my skin. My fear had nothing to do with the War anymore" (ibid.). The story stirs Anton's imagination – "It was as if here in the pitch dark, he could see whatever had been invisible then, too" (ibid.) – and stimulates his memory: "'Something like that happened to me once!' said Anton, who had completely forgotten where he was, and why. 'When I was staying with my uncle in Amsterdam'" (ibid.). The reminiscence that is invoked in Anton's memory involves the strange experience of feeling substance where empty space is expected, and vice versa: "I woke up and wanted to go to the bathroom. It was pitch-black. At home I always step out of my bed on the left side, you know, but here there was suddenly a wall. On my right, where the wall usually is, there wasn't anything" (ibid.). This spatial confusion initiated a derangement of the senses and, by extension, of the conscience: "I was scared stiff. It was as if the wall was much harder and

thicker than an ordinary wall, and on the other side where there was no wall, it seemed like a canyon" (ibid.).

In *The Darkroom of Damocles*, Osewoudt's natural day and night rhythm is disturbed by the nightly interrogations he is subjected to in prison. In a letter he writes: "I am not badly treated, but I rarely, if ever, see daylight. The interrogations sometimes go on all night, but I still can't sleep on the other nights" (Hermans 2007: 365). His health deteriorates and he ends up on the prison ward. A couple of days before Christmas, Father Beer, a catholic pastor of souls who tries to convert the doomed prisoners to Christianity, enters the ward, making small talk about the fact that a white Christmas has not been forecasted. All prisoners complain along, but Osewoudt can only cynically consider the fact that the ward has a glass roof: "'I'm Father Beer,' he said. 'Such a shame we won't be having a white Christmas this year.' 'Yes, a shame,' said Osewoudt, pointing up at the ceiling of toughened glass. 'We'd get snowed in'" (Hermans 2007: 375). Prison is for Osewoudt already a place where time and space seem to have blended into one coagulated 'timespace', and a snow covered glass roof would cut off even his last connection with the outside world. Moreover, in his conversation with the priest, Osewoudt defines his innocence in terms of light and dark: "You don't need to do anything for me. Once Dorbeck turns up, I won't need anyone any more. My innocence will have been proved, clear as daylight" (Hermans 2007: 376).

Prior to Anton's imprisonment, in that terrifying final scene at his house, the darkness of the fated winter night makes a strong impression on the young boy. After his brother has run away, his father remains seated at the table, entirely motionless, while his mother nervously walks out to call Peter back in. In the image that is frozen in Anton's mind the snow and stars are merely points of contrast that highlight the darkness of the scene:

> Anton saw and heard everything, but somehow he was no longer quite there. One part of him was already somewhere else, or nowhere at all. He was undernourished, and stiff now with cold, but that wasn't all. This moment – his father cut out in black

> against the snow, his mother outside on the terrace under the starlight – became eternal, detached itself from all that had come before and all that would follow. (Mulisch 1985: 22)

Moreover, time and space illuminate or even materialize the reality of appearances: "Nothing stirred. There was the garden, and beyond it the barren, snow-covered lots. Anton, too, stood motionless. Everything stood still – and yet time went by. It was as if everything grew radiant with the passage of time, like pebbles at the bottom of a brook" (Mulisch 1985: 23). For Osewoudt, the darkness, materialized by the charged space of the darkroom he uses to develop films, more than once turns against him. A first roll of films Dorbeck asks him to develop appears to be empty; a second roll of films only contains irrelevant images, such as a snowman with a helmet and a carbine, and the photo that should depict Dorbeck is ruined when Osewoudt's old mother enters the darkroom and switches on the lights. When the photo camera with which he had taken a photograph of Dorbeck and himself in front of a mirror is finally found, it fails to prove Dorbeck's existence, because, again, there is nothing on the actual photo. Osewoudt's darkroom has been his death cell all along.

Conclusions

The Darkroom of Damocles and *The Assault* appear to contain similar viewpoints on morality and on the problematic, not to say untenable distinction between guilt and innocence, but they are at opposite poles in the practical conclusions drawn out of those views. I have shown how space in the two novels both affects and is affected by, in Bakhtin's words, "the movements of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin 84), in particular the life histories of the protagonists. In the prison or in prison-like settings, which are more or less cut off from the flow of time, the protagonists delve into more 'timeless', i.e. existential questions. The prison is a concrete space of captivity, but it also bears metaphorical connotations with regard to the possibilities and impossibilities of human freedom in a world that never seems to provide general criteria

for good and evil. Man is thus kept in a captive state, caught within the boundaries of his day and age, his environment, his limited knowledge of reality and his limited insight into the motives behind other people's words and actions, not to say his own.

The fictional life narratives of Henri Osewoudt and Anton Steenwijk can be regarded as testimonies of how specific historical circumstances – in this case the impact of war and occupation – have decisively shaped a young generation of writers' image of man and of human nature.[7] Ultimately, however, both authors present a different outlook on the practical consequences for those who become convinced of this essentially 'captive' state. The difference lies not simply in the supposed opposition between a pessimistic blind alley and an optimistic freeway. Against Hermans's pessimism, Mulisch seems to suggest the option of an *ironic* perspective that enables one to place one's individual fate in a broader perspective, where distance leads to acquiescence or the possibility of changing one's life course.

The aforementioned paradigm shift in the historiography of the German occupation of the Netherlands has to quite a large extent been inspired by authors of war fiction such as Hermans and Mulisch. Their fictional representations of this historical period problematize the assumed existence of clear boundaries between right and wrong or between good people and bad people, and instead focus on the chaotic and the obscure, "the doubts, uncertainties, the grey between black and white" (Van der Heijden 15; my transl.). Although both authors play a prominent role in raising awareness of the false illusion of a clear demarcation between right and wrong, the fact that *The Assault* appeared almost 25 years later than *The Darkroom of Damocles* may well explain the detected difference in tone between the two novels, the opposite outcome of the life narratives of the respective protagonists and the problems they encounter in dealing with the chaos and its *greyness*.[8]

---

[7] This type of life writing can be considered a modern variant of nineteenth century fictional narratives in which the life histories of the protagonists were often attempts "to understand how their past experiences formed them as social subjects" (Watson and Smith 11).
[8] On *The Darkroom of Damocles* and the paradigm shift in historiography, see also Kegel et al. 268-270.

The Darkroom of Damocles, published within the first decades after the war, witnessed directly and grimly of disillusion and pessimism. By the 1980s this type of war novel had receded into the background and had been replaced by a more contemplative and distanced type, of which *The Assault*, as the final chapter of the novel beautifully demonstrates, is an example. Although in both novels the prison is a place of insight where the protagonists are confronted with the inextricable entanglement of right and wrong and the insolubility of moral issues, the young men draw different lessons from the insights they have gained, so that, ultimately, the prison has a different metaphorical function in *The Darkroom of Damocles* and *The Assault*.[9]

Hermans, whose literary motto was "creative nihilism, aggressive compassion, total misanthropy" (Hermans 1967: 224; my transl.), adopts an ultimately pessimistic perspective in *The Darkroom of Damocles* and shows how the unaccountability of reality dominates Osewoudt's life history. The question whether Dorbeck exists or is just a figment of Osewoudt's imagination remains necessarily unanswered and Osewoudt perishes in despair and total confusion, torn by his conviction that reality is incognizable and therefore unliveable. Human life is a form of captivity, and for Osewoudt the prison metaphor is of the negative vehicle type: life is a prison, is death row, and there can be no salvation. This viewpoint is reflected in the final lines of the novel, in which Father Beer tries to staunch the bleeding of Osewoudt, but "the fingers on Father Beer's hands numbered fewer than there were bullet holes in Osewoudt's body" (Hermans 2007: 390).

In *The Assault*, the mystery of the events responsible for the protagonist's trauma is unravelled and Anton's adoption of an ironical *modus vivendi* allows him to move on. In Mulisch's fictional life narrative the prison metaphor is rather of the positive tenor type:

[9] Stephanie Pfeffer, who compares the role of "confined creatures" in the terrariums in *The Assault* and the aquariums in Hermans's novella *House of Refuge* ['Het behouden huis'], similarly concludes that "the presence of confined creatures in the two works is not coincidental. The authors introduce animals into their stories to convey important messages about war and its emotional effects on humans" (Pfeffer 34).

prison is eventually a place of catharsis. Irony is therefore essentially a creative force, a means to come to terms with life’s cruelties. Anton ultimately arrives at a certain peace of mind. Only by adopting a self-reflexive and ironical viewpoint on his own life course, and on the ultimate insignificance of all human endeavour, he is able to continue with his life. This ‘ashes to ashes’-viewpoint dominates also the final lines of this novel, in which Anton walks away from the demonstration, “dragging his feet a bit, as if each step raised clouds of ashes, although there are no ashes in sight” (Mulisch 1985: 185).

Works Cited

Alber, Jan. *Narrating the Prison: Role and Representation in Charles Dickens' Novels, Twentieth-Century Fiction, and Film.* Cambria P, 2007. Print.

Alber, Jan, and Frank Lauterbach (eds.). *Stones of Law, Bricks of Shame: Narrating Imprisonment in the Victorian Age.* U of Toronto P, 2009. Print.

Anbeek, Ton, Anne-Marie Musschoot, and Liz Waters. "The Postwar period, 1940–." *A Literary History of the Low Countries*. Ed. Theo Hermans. Camden House, 2009, pp. 573-656. Print.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. U of Texas P, 2004, pp. 84-258. Print.

Battersby, Eileen. "Ambivalent reflections in a wartime hall of mirrors." *The Irish Times* 6 June 2007. Print.

Bender, John. *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England*. U of Chicago P, 1987. Print.

Carnochan, W.B. "The Literature of Confinement." *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*. Eds. Norval Morris, and David J. Rothman. Oxford UP, 1995, pp. 381-406. Print.

Coetzee, J.M. *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays, 1986-1999*. Viking, 2001. Print.

Cuddon, J.A. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. 5th edition. Blackwell, 2013. Print.

Duncan, Martha Grace. *Romantic Outlaws, Beloved Prisons: The Unconscious Meanings of Crime and Punishment*. New York UP, 1996. Print.

Fludernik, Monika. "Metaphorics and Metonymics of Carcerality: Reflections on Imprisonment as Source and Target Domain in Literary Texts." *English Studies* 86.3 (2005), pp. 226-244. Print.

Fludernik, Monika, and Greta Olson, eds. *In the Grip of the Law: Trials, Prisons and the Space Between*. Lang, 2004. Print.

Forst, Graham N. "'Shall We Talk About Light?' Fate and Freedom in Harry Mulisch's *The Assault*." *Modern Language Studies* 24.4 (1994), pp. 47-53. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Gallimard, 1975. Print.

Franklin, Howard Bruce. *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist.* Oxford UP, 1989. Print.

Haslam, Jason. *Fitting Sentences: Identity in Ninetheenth- and Twentieth-Century Prison Narratives*. U of Toronto P, 2005. Print.

Heijden, Chris van der. *Grijs verleden: Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog*. Contact, 2001. Print.

Hermans, Willem Frederik. *Een wonderkind of een total loss*. De Bezige Bij, 1967. Print.

Hermans, Willem Frederik. *The Darkroom Of Damocles*. Transl. Ina Rilke. Harvill Secker, 2007. Print.

Hermans, Willem Frederik. "Het sadistische universum." *Volledige Werken, 11*. Eds. Jan Gielkens, and Peter Kegel. De Bezige Bij, 2008, pp. 15-34. Print.

Hermans, Willem Frederik. "Harry de spreker." *Volledige Werken, 14*. Eds. Jan Gielkens, and Peter Kegel. De Bezige Bij, 2011, pp. 431-438. Print.

Jong, L. de. *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*. 14 volumes. Martinus Nijhoff, 1969-1994. Print.

Kegel, Peter, Marion Prinse, Matthieu Sergier, and Marc van Zoggel. "'BaBié, zivoublé!' Ideology and Cultural Transfer: *De donkere kamer van Damokles*." *Doing Double Dutch: The International Circulation of Literature from the Low Countries*. Eds. Elke Brems, Orsolya Réthelyi, and Ton van Kalmthout. Leuven UP, 2017, pp. 267-285. Print.

Kooiman, Dirk Ayelt, and Tom Graftdijk. “Willem Frederik Hermans, een vraaggesprek.” *Scheppend nihilism: Interviews met Willem Frederik Hermans*. Ed. Frans A. Janssen. De Bezige Bij, 1983, pp. 235-261. Print.

Koonz, Claudia. *The Nazi Conscience*. Harvard UP, 2003. Print.

Kundera, Milan. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Faber and Faber, 1984. Print.

Kundera, Milan. ‘La poésie noire et l’ambiguïte.’ *Le Monde* 26 January 2007. Print.

LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. Print.

Mulisch, Harry. *Voer voor psychologen*. De Bezige Bij, 1968. Print.

Mulisch, Harry. *The Assault*. Transl. Clair Nicolas White. Pantheon Books, 1985. Print.

Otterspeer, Willem. *Dorbeck, waar ben je? Een biografisch essay over De donkere kamer van Damokles*. De Bezige Bij, 2012. Print.

Pfeffer, Stephanie. “Trapped in glass: an examination of the aquariums in ‘House of Refuge’ and the terrariums in ‘The Assault’.” *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies* 19.2 (1998) 31-34. Print.

Priestley, Philip. *Victorian Prison Lives: English Prison Biography 1830-1914*. Methuen, 1985. Print.

Watson, Julia, and Sidonie Smith. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd ed. U of Minnesota P, 2010. Print.

Weigel, Sigrid. *‘Und selbst im Kerker frei…!’ Schreiben im Gefängnis. Zur Theorie und Gattungsgeschichte der Gefängnisliteratur (1750-1933)*. Guttandin & Hoppe, 1982. Print.

Wolf, Manfred. “The Dark World of Willem Frederik Hermans: Some Themes in the Major Novels.” *Books Abroad* 41.3 (1967), pp. 274-278. Print.