



‘Eigenschappen ohne Mann’: Madness and Introspection in Marcellus Emants’s *Een nagelaten bekentenis* (1894)

‘Eigenschappen ohne Mann’: Waanzin en introspectie in Marcellus Emants’s *Een nagelaten bekentenis* (1894)

Ernst van Alphen, Leiden University

Abstract: In the dominant discourse madness is considered as the opposite of rationality. It concerns the decline, and in extreme cases even the disappearance of rationality in the organization of human conduct and experience. In this article the author explores a more recent, modernist discourse on madness. The new discourse does not understand madness as a decline of rationality, but as an increase or intensification of reason. Madness is not the result of abundance of passions, emotions and vitality but rather of the estrangement from these. This modernist discourse on madness manifests itself in literary novels that magnify the practice of introspection to the most extreme extent. These novels feature a first-person narrator who reflects relentlessly and ruthlessly on his own conduct, feelings and experiences. In these cases the narrative device of first-person narration is symptomatic for a new attitude towards human consciousness and the faculty of reason that substantiates it. In order to better understand the radical effects of introspection through first-person narration, the author focuses on the Dutch novel *A Posthumous Confession* (*Een nagelaten bekentenis*) from 1894 by Marcellus Emants. The novel has not been read for its first-person speech act of confession; a plot that consists of a confession that is built on merciless self-analysis and introspection. In order to understand the literary and psychological impact of this activity the author compares Emants’ novel with other narratives that consist of the same speech act of relentless introspection, first of all with Robert Musil’s monumental icon of modernism, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, then with *Why I am not Mad* (*Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben*) from 1929 by the Dutch writer Maurits Dekker, and the novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* by the Russian writer Lev Tolstoy (1891). The ground of comparison is the status of the speech act as plot, and the question how it *produces* madness.

Keywords: Modernism, Madness, Introspection, First Person Narration, Marcellus Emants; Modernisme, Waanzin, Introspectie, Ik-verteller, Marcellus Emants

'Too much consciousness might be a thoroughgoing illness.'

Dostoyevsky in *Notes from the Underground*

'The growing consciousness is a danger and a disease.'

Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*

The Enlightenment discourse on rationality has defined itself through negation, by producing its Other: a discourse on insanity and madness. According to this standard vision madness is the equivalent of irrationality. It concerns the decline and, in extreme cases, even the disappearance of rationality in the organization of human conduct and experience. This notion of madness results in a dichotomy between insanity and reason.¹

There is, however, another notion of madness that does not consider it as lack – a lack of reason that is – but as plenitude. In the work of Thomas Hobbes, for example, madness is considered to be the result of a plenty of passions or desires. When one is not able to contain passions, energy or vitality, insanity is the outcome. The excess of passion, then, bursts through the boundaries set by either rationality or social constraints. These two notions of madness do not contradict each other. They mingle well and are often present at the same time.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the importance of reason in Enlightenment discourse has occasionally become an object of critique. In Romanticism and Surrealism various writers have pointed out the dangers of enshrining rationality. According to them, it may result in impoverishment, even paralysis of the imagination, and it will splinter or fragment the unity and authenticity of the human being. Nietzsche in particular proclaimed an offensive against reason in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Like many others before him he identifies reason with the Apollonian side of life and madness with the Dionysian side. He does not, however, deconstruct or reject the dichotomy between these two sides of life, or between reason and insanity. Rather, he reverses the evaluation of the dichotomy: rationality becomes a defeat of the vitality of life, whereas madness becomes a symptom of existential alertness. Madness is glorified because of its presumed spontaneity and freedom.

With the rise of Modernism, however, a radically new discourse on madness emerges – albeit one that does not necessarily replace the previous one. Now and then it has tried to articulate itself but generally it has not been recognized or acknowledged as an alternative for the over-familiar dichotomy between reason and madness. The new discourse does not understand madness as a decline of rationality, but as an increase or intensification of reason. Madness is not the result of abundance of passions, emotions and vitality but rather of the

¹ The canonical text about madness as discourse, instead of just a psychological phenomenon, is, of course, Michel

estrangement from these. In the words of psychiatrist Louis Sass, madness, especially in the form of schizophrenia, may be characterized '[l]ess by fusion, spontaneity, and the liberation of desire, than by separation, restraint, and an exaggerated cerebralism and propensity for introspection'.²

This modernist discourse on madness manifests itself in literary novels that magnify the practice of introspection to the most extreme extent. These novels feature a first-person narrator who reflects relentlessly and ruthlessly on his own conduct, feelings and experiences. In these cases the narrative device of first-person narration is symptomatic of a new attitude towards human consciousness and the faculty of reason that substantiates it.

In order to better understand the radical effects of introspection through first-person narration, I will focus on the Dutch novel *Een nagelaten bekentenis* (1894) by Marcellus Emants. This novel, translated in 1975 as *A Posthumous Confession* by the South African writer J.M. Coetzee, is primarily known as a naturalist novel (rather than as an early modernist one) and therefore tends to be read 'for the plot'.³ Specifically, this plot is similar to that of the detective genre. The questions informing these readings are whether the protagonist effectively killed his wife and what his motives were, or whether she committed suicide.⁴ By contrast, the novel has not been read for its first-person speech act, in which the plot is understood as a confession that consists of merciless self-analysis and introspection. In order to understand the literary and psychological impact of this activity, I will compare Emants' novel with other narratives that produced similar speech acts of relentless introspection: Robert Musil's monumental icon of Modernism, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (1930-1943); *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben* (*Why I am Not Mad*) (1929) by the Dutch writer Maurits Dekker; and the novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1891) by the Russian author Lev Tolstoy. The comparison ground is the status of the speech act as plot and the question how and in what sense it *produces* madness.

Before beginning my analysis of these novels, let me situate my approach in relation to two other studies of literature and madness. These are, first of all, Shoshana Felman's *Writing and Madness: Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis* (1978) and Lars's *De Retoriek van Waanzin: Taalhandelingen, Onbetrouwbaarheid, Delirium en de Waanzinnige Ik-verteller* (2011). In her powerful study Felman is in particular interested in the analogies and similarities between madness and literature. She reads literature through the signifier madness and

² Louis A. Sass, *Madness and Modernism. Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 10.

³ For this phrase and the theory of plot developed through it, see P. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁴ A recent example of such a reading for the plot of Emants' novel is Jos Joosten's 'Waarom Willem Termeer zijn vrouw niet vermoordde' (2008) [Why Willem Termeer Did Not Kill his Wife]. Modelling himself explicitly after television inspector Morse, Joosten argues that Termeer's wife had already committed suicide when he gave her the overdose. In order to make his point he even criticises Emants for having made mistakes that infringe the 'internal logic' of protagonist Termeer. Joosten's error is, of course, that Termeer and his wife only exist insofar as they are discursive, fictional constructions. There is no real, true sequence of events behind Emants' novel, which a scrupulous detective could uncover. The plot of the novel consists only of a confession in words. This kind of naive hyper-realistic reading has already been mocked in 1964 by L.C. Knights in his famous article 'How Many Children Had Lady MacBeth? An Essay in the Theory and Practice of Shakespeare Criticism', in *Explorations* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), pp. 15-54.

accesses madness through the special qualities of literature. They inform each other, especially by means of certain speech acts they have in common. According to Felman, madness and literature share, for example, a resistance against interpretation. Conversely, my analysis of the texts under scrutiny is not their literariness. I read them in order to better understand a relatively recent discourse on madness that distinguishes itself from the conventional discourse that opposes madness to rationality.

Lars Bernaerts's study focuses entirely on Dutch literary cases. One of them is Maurits Dekker's *Why I am Not Mad*, the novel which I also explore when comparing it to Emants's *A Posthumous Confession*. Bernaerts's starting point is, however, the all-to-familiar dichotomy between insanity and reason. Instead of questioning this dichotomy by asking whether it applies to his corpus of literary representations of madness, he uses narratology, rhetorical analysis and speech act theory to examine *how* a pre-established madness is represented in these novels. For example, his distinction between a *fou raisonnant* and a *fou imaginant*, which could have led him to a further examination of the bond between reasoning and madness, only confirms his certitude of madness, rather than questioning our certitudes. The *fou raisonnant* doesn't reason too well: his discourse appears to be replete with contradictory speech acts. His theoretical framework of cognitive constructivism makes him assume that readers of these novels construct their readings of these mad narrations on the basis of frames and reference and 'scripts' of madness already familiar to them. It is precisely this approach of cognitive constructivism that makes it impossible for Bernaerts to be open to a discourse on madness that escapes the dichotomy between insanity and reason or to learn something new from the characters, instead of projecting his rigid categories onto them. Instead, I start with a case where madness is far from clear and obvious which will help me to disengage myself from the preconceived ideas about madness.

A Degenerated Species

In *A Posthumous Confession* the protagonist and first-person narrator Willem Termeer starts his confession by telling the reader that his wife is dead. Much later in his confession it turns out that he has killed her. His recently acquired freedom, however, does not give him the will to reactivate his life:

My wife is dead and buried.
I am alone at home, alone with the two maids.
So I am free again. Yet what good is it to me, this freedom? I am within reach of what I have wanted for the last twenty years (I am thirty-five), but I have not the courage to grasp it, and would anyhow no longer enjoy it very much.⁵

Most remarkable about these opening sentences is that the sequence of observations is articulated in three separate paragraphs. They don't form a convincing continuity. They are presented as isolated moments, each with its own paragraph, which gives the impression that

⁵ Marcellus Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, trans. by J.M. Coetzee (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), p. 7.

the narrator's experience is fragmented. The issue of fragmentation will become a central aspect of my further reading of this novel.

Termeer presents himself at the outset as utterly spineless. But this self-characterization is expanded throughout his confession by other qualifiers. He is also insensitive, anxious, lonely, deceitful, selfish, indifferent, cowardly, lazy, weak, ugly, bitter, introvert, insignificant and more. Altogether, Termeer's self-reflexive characterization has resulted in the critical opinion that he is an extreme example of someone who suffers from what we now call neurosis, at the time referred to as neurasthenia.⁶ This type of person is the kind of hypochondriac who attracted much attention in decadent and symbolist circles in the late nineteenth century: the anti-bourgeois. Although belonging to bourgeois culture, he is utterly contemptuous of the norms and values to which bourgeois people adhere and which give them self-esteem. In an interview with E. d'Oliveira, Emants presents Termeer as a member of a species, a species of degenerated or insane people:

You cannot imagine how many letters I have received of people who claimed to be exactly like him. It has only been three months since I received a letter from Amsterdam: you don't know how happy I am to have read this novel. I also received a letter from a lady who had a cousin who was exactly like him. She asked if I wanted to set up a society to take care of these degenerated people and help them live their lives.⁷

The insanity of this species of neurasthenics manifests itself foremost through scrupulous self-analysis. Thus, while still a young boy, Termeer fantasized about being a self-confident man:

This was – as far as I remember – my first attempt to hide my true nature under an assumed role. Later on I became so absorbed in this playacting that, no matter how badly I acted, it became impossible to ever simply be myself again. When I tried to be myself it seemed that I no longer had any self, that I was nothing but a soulless organism without a single like, dislike, opinion, impulse. As a rule, however, my likes and dislikes, my opinions and impulses shouted out at me, 'Put us away in your heart, we don't conform to fashion, we are taboo in human society'.⁸

Termeer's efforts to discover his true self behind his play-acting result in an ongoing exploration and introspection into what and who he 'really' is. The outcome is a further loss of self rather than reaching his authentic self. For the moment I will leave the question open

⁶ See e.g. the introduction to the novel by Victor E. van Vriesland in the third edition of *Een nagelaten bekentenis* (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 1951), p. 5.

⁷ Quoted by Victor E. van Vriesland in Emants, *Een nagelaten bekentenis*, p. 6. All translations are mine unless indicated otherwise (EvA).

⁸ Dit is – voor zover ik me herinner – mijn eerste poging geweest om mijn ware natuur te verbergen onder een aangename rol. [...] Beproeft ik het nog eens, dan kwam ik me voor geen zelf meer te hebben, niets anders te zijn dan een zielloos organisme zonder één neiging, één afkeer, één opinie, één drang. In de regel echter riepen mijn neigingen en afkeren, mijn opinies en drangen me toe: sluit ons op in je binnenste, want we zijn buiten model, verboden in de samenleving der mensen.

whether we should call Termeer's tendency to obsessive introspection insane or not. For now I am more interested in the way he analyses it himself.

At times in the novel his condition and inclinations are explained in a typical naturalist, deterministic way. After his erotic fascination for the schoolteacher's daughter Mina fizzled out because of his cowardly inability to take any initiative, he explains his passivity as follows: 'Many animals can be tamed by force, that is mistreated under duress, but only after many generations of breeding can old appetites die out and new ones take their place.'⁹

Also, in several instances Termeer acknowledges similarities between his own behaviour and character and that of his father. Not only was the latter as indifferent towards his surroundings as Willem is, they also share fits of anger, which turn out to be symptoms of madness. When he spends a summer in Switzerland with his parents, his father is suddenly overcome by homesickness. Back home Termeer witnesses his father's tremendous rage and the next day he is told that his father has been committed to a mental institution.¹⁰ When Termeer realises that his nature craves for pleasure at the expense of others but that, instead of joyous fulfilment, it derives listlessness and fatigue from it, he tries to understand his own character as follows: 'In heredity I thought I would find the explanation for this.'¹¹

These cases of deterministic thinking do not, however, provide any clue to the nature of Willem Termeer's alleged insanity. They only suggest similarities between him and his family members, especially his father. His father can clearly be called insane, for he had been hospitalized in a mental institution. From a naturalistic perspective this implies that Willem himself also deserves a diagnosis of madness because like father, like son. But this is hardly the whole story.

Too Much Thinking

Willem Termeer is in many respects the opposite of their new neighbour, the ex-minister De Kantere. According to Termeer De Kantere is handsome, with nice manners, and has articulate ideas about how one should live. Termeer's wife adores De Kantere since he has all the qualities she misses in her husband. This makes the latter jealous and gradually he becomes convinced that behind De Kantere's pleasant façade, a hypocrite lurks. Most significantly, this character, which becomes more and more his adversary in life, formulates ideas about desires, will and reason that embody the enlightenment ideas concerning rationality versus madness. In answer to Termeer's question about what to do with desires, the fulfilment of which makes one resentful and sad rather than happy, De Kantere says the following:

You must mean the depraved need for sensual pleasure, the impulses of a thief, and so forth. But I was not speaking about *all* our desires. It is not the task of our reason to winnow the chaff from the wheat? Just as we can cultivate, refine, purify our desires, so

⁹ Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, p. 20.

¹⁰ Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, p. 34.

¹¹ Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, p. 60.

we are capable of suppressing them, even of killing them. That is the purpose of our will, which must be directed by the intelligence!¹²

In the same conversation De Kantere described Termeer's nature in terms of intellect, but in response to this Termeer considers intellect not as a guiding adversary of feelings and passions, but as their seat:

After a long pause De Kantere said, 'you seem to be a cerebral.'

'What do you mean, a cerebral?'

'Well... a man of intellect rather than a man of feeling.'

'O yes – if you put the question like that, I am a cerebral. Feeling is a blind guide; I believe more in a guide with sight. Otherwise I do not think that the word cerebral means a great deal; for the brain is after all as much the seat of the feelings as of the intelligence.'¹³

Termeer refuses to understand feelings in binary opposition with the intellect. Instead, to him they are a special manifestation of it. De Kantere replies by suggesting that Termeer thinks too exclusively about himself, to which Termeer objects instead that he 'thinks too much':

'I see, Mr. Termeer, that you have read and thought about the difficult problems of our spiritual life.' [...] 'Haven't you argued too exclusively with yourself?'

[...] 'Perhaps,' I said, 'but what difference does that make? After all, what one thinks the truth, is wholly true for oneself only.' [...] Von Fuechtersleben says in his *Spiritual Hygiene*: 'When man reflects on his physical and moral condition, then he feels that he is sick through and through. He is suffering from life.' That is true, if instead you say: *reflects too much*.'¹⁴

Challenged by De Kantere, Termeer continues deconstructing the opposition between rationality and feeling or passion:

'Only a fool can be happy. For happiness consists of two contradictory elements: contentment and pleasure. Enjoy pleasure and you have no contentment; be content and you have no pleasure. For this reason happiness is conceivable only for those who enjoy themselves without thinking that they will always want more and thus be disconnected, or for those who are content without thinking that they have no pleasure. Whoever reflects can never be happy, unless...' [...]

'Unless...' repeated De Kantere; and growing all at once more reckless again, taking malevolent pleasure in wounding this plainly not unhappy man, I stuttered out, "Unless

¹² Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, p. 109.

¹³ Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, p. 107.

¹⁴ Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, pp. 107-8.

he is a fanatic and thus blinded ... thus exercising control over his intelligence with his feelings, instead of the other way round.¹⁵

Termeer sees reflexivity as contributing to contentment, whereas pleasure is un-reflexive, or instinctive. As a result, rationality cancels out happiness because the implied reflexivity negates pleasure, hence happiness. This explains why Termeer *suffers* from (too much) rationality; it undermines the option of happiness. It is not too far-fetched at this stage to equate his obsessive rationality with the condition of madness or insanity.

When De Kantere loses control over their conversation and runs out of arguments to counter Termeer's, he ends it by pronouncing a final judgment or diagnosis about Termeer:

You paint yourself far too black, and you brood too much. Thought is a good and beautiful thing, but it must remain a means and not become an end. One must think to be able to act, not think just for the sake of thinking.¹⁶

The Estrangement from Feelings and Emotions

Termeer has suffered from a propensity to obsessive introspection since early childhood. It leads to an extremely sophisticated insight into human consciousness, how it works, what it does, and how it relates to other human faculties. His understanding, which continues to increase over the years, has some negative effects, however, as it fragments the self and increases his passivity. These negative effects are best summarized as 'loss of self'. His self is less and less unified, as a result of which he is no longer able to act effectively and energetically. This fragmentation of the self happens from the inside out: his inner reality increasingly consists of overwhelming, autonomous events. Although these events are inner experiences, they are experienced as if from the outside, as if belonging to somebody else. This transformation from inner to outer results from his practice of introspection. By reflecting *on* his inner feelings, thinking *about* them, they shift from subjective to objective. It is from the objective view on his feelings and emotions that he increasingly suffers.

Of course, every act of consciousness can result in estrangement. For to become aware of something is to relate to it as to an object, which implies its separateness or 'its non-identity with the knowing self that one feels one-self to be at that very moment'.¹⁷ The act of perception casts that what is being seen outward into the domain of the 'not-me'. This is true for consciousness, which is a form of perception. Therefore, it also applies to the consciousness of consciousness, namely introspection and self-awareness. In the words of Louis Sass:

To know my own self is, inevitably, to multiply or fractionate myself: it is to create a division between my knowing consciousness and my existence as a perceivable individual who interacts with others or subsists as a body of flesh and blood.¹⁸

¹⁵ Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, p. 108.

¹⁶ Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, p. 112.

¹⁷ Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, p. 75.

¹⁸ Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, p. 76.

In the case of Willem Termeer, however, the separation established by the act of introspection is taking enormous proportions. It is traced in all its details and consequences.

So, in this novel, there are many instances that exemplify his estrangement from what and who he is. When the young Termeer enters adolescence and his erotic feelings begin to develop, he scrutinizes in detail the transformations taking place in him. He notices for the first time that each different influence can arouse totally different persons within him:

If I am generally cold, indifferent, bent on sensual pleasure, beyond the reach of altruism, nevertheless a few bars of Wagner, a glass of champagne, a beautiful painting, the echo of church music, can – or rather could – fill me with enthusiastic, voluble friendliness, cerebral reverence, self-denying love. At such times I feel as if my sluggish blood suddenly begins to flow faster, a tension arises in my slack nerves, and it becomes light, colorful, lively in my exhausted, gray, drowsy brain. I feel a revulsion for my ordinary sober self, with its indifference toward what interests people, what holds them together, and its singular desire some day to cause pain, particularly to women.¹⁹

Termeer does not experience these new positive feelings as his own. Rather they feel like an invasion of energies that do not really belong to him. Although they transform his self-experience into something more positive, at the same time he describes them as from a distance, as if estranged from them.

After his interest in the schoolteacher's daughter Mina has faded away, he is no longer interested in the woman he was in love with, but solely in the emotions she prompted in him:

The totally inward life that diverted my attention more and more from the outside world had already taken root in me. I made no attempt to fathom her, but immersed myself exclusively in the emotions aroused in my heart by the sight of her, by her touch, her words, her kisses. *I enjoyed myself*: in other words, I endured the gnawing of my sensual desires or the strain of my self-denying worship.²⁰

Termeer's use of the English words 'I enjoyed myself' (both in the English translation and in the Dutch original) is symptomatic of his objectification of the emotions invading his inner self. These words are not his own, they are not Dutch but stem from a foreign language. By using them, he indicates that his enjoyment is not embodied but estranged.

Termeer's scrupulous introspection does not only result in a fragmentation and, ultimately, a loss of self; the external objectification of his self also causes every human activity, including his own, to be observed with an extremely cold, external gaze. Whatever his introspective gaze focuses on, it is without any empathy. For example, after his father was committed to a mental institution, the memories of him fade away rather soon. This troubles Termeer, since it proves that his feelings are very shallow to non-existent:

¹⁹ Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, p. 14.

²⁰ Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, p. 21.

It seriously disturbed me that I forgot so soon, and thus, it would seem, had only such superficial feelings. But though I did my best to recall that original horrible vision of my father, it was in vain. I tried to immerse myself in the possibility of seeing him no more; but the memories materialized more and more faintly, more and more grudgingly, and when after several months news of his death came, I sought fruitlessly in my heart for any trace of feeling.²¹

It is not only his father whom he thinks of without any empathy. When his daughter dies at eighteen months, he reflects on his feelings for her as follows:

I never felt one moment of love for the child. I never felt an urge to so much as take it up in my arms. Many will call it a shame, and I understand that it is their duty to talk like that; but whose shame is it? [...] Rabbits are especially unfeeling animals. Is that their fault and therefore also a shame?²²

Her death makes him even slightly happy, a feeling he dissects at length:

I have tried to analyse these feelings. How complex they were! Relief about having escaped the responsibility, deliverance from having to go on playing the hypocrite, the illusion of rejuvenation, avenged jealousy, yes even compassion for the baby which I thought destined for much suffering – all these played a part.²³

Here, the predominant experience is one of relief.

The Madman as Artist

Termeer suffers from his tendency to relentless introspection. For, so he feels, this activity makes him insensitive, lonely and cold. He does not, however, consider his suffering as merely negative. His madness and the suffering resulting from it are experienced as ambivalent, since they also make him akin to an artist. At various points in his confession, Termeer compares his condition to that of artists and he often wondered whether the abnormalities he had discovered in himself indicated an artistic nature:

Times when artists were the healthiest, the simplest, the strongest, the most intelligent, the noblest children of a nation and an age are – assuming they ever existed – long past. Nowadays every artist is to some extent sick, highly complex, neurasthenic, in some respects of unsound mind, in other respects perverse.²⁴

²¹ Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, p. 34.

²² Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, p. 95.

²³ Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, p. 96.

²⁴ Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, p. 53.

What the artistic nature and his own have in common are a striving for truth, a search for what lies at the heart of all things, for what connects them, a will to make one understand the subtlest shades. This makes him, like artists, different from ‘the conventional, conformist product of a long hereditary civilization’.²⁵ Mad and artistic can no longer be disentangled.

This is confirmed when Termeer tells us about his earlier ambitions to become a literary author – ambitions that, however, were too weak and faded. They flickered up again while watching a theatre play with his wife. Using a postmodernist device *avant la lettre*, Emants stages one of his own plays in the novel, i.e. the piece *Artiest (Artist)* (1895). While his wife Anna found the play revolting, it made a deep impression on Termeer because of the many resemblances he spotted between himself and the artist on stage. Both he and Gérard, the protagonist of the play, suffered from ‘artistic impressionability’.²⁶ He noticed only one fault in the play. Gérard had many features he recognized in himself or desired for himself. He was, however, not represented as a hypocrite. Hypocrites play roles, as Termeer also did, but this actor did not seem to play roles. Who, then, is the artist – the narrator or the actor?

Modernism and Madness

In his study *Madness and Modernism. Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*, Sass traces many analogies between the psychic condition of schizophrenia and modernist art and literature. In psychiatry schizophrenia is considered the most severe and the most enigmatic of mental disorders. According to Sigmund Freud it cannot be cured by psychoanalysis, since people suffering from psychotic afflictions such as schizophrenia are incapable of transference, which is a condition for psychoanalytic success.²⁷

To understand this enigmatic mental disorder better, Sass looks at connections with modernist art and literature. He never considers these connections as influences or as causal relations – ‘for example, that modern culture or the modern social order actually *causes* schizophrenic forms of psychosis’.²⁸ Nor does he suggest that modernist culture *is* schizophrenic. He assumes modernism and schizophrenia to be phenomena sharing elements and moving on parallel paths that, from time to time, cross and converge. This assumption enables him to understand schizophrenia better *through* a reading of modernist texts and artworks.

A prime example, Sass alleges, which describes the transformations of selfhood that recall crucial aspects of schizophrenia, is the modernist novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften (The Man Without Qualities)* by Robert Musil. This novel from 1930-32 contains, for example, the

²⁵ Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, p. 53.

²⁶ Emants, *A Posthumous Confession*, p. 90.

²⁷ Contemporary analysts do not always accept this verdict, because it condemns psychotics to life-long hospitalization and/or drug use. They claim that it suffices to change the conditions of the cure to achieve transference. See Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière, *History Beyond Trauma*, trans. by S. Fairfield (New York: Other Press, 2004) and for a theoretical fiction elaborating this argument, Françoise Davoine, *Mother Folly: A Tale*, trans. by Judith Miller (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

²⁸ Sass, *Madness and Modernism*, p. 9.

following description of transformations of selfhood that are taking place at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

What has arisen is a world of qualities without a man, of experiences without someone to experience them ... probably the dissolution of the anthropocentric way of relating, which has held the human being for so long at the center of the universe... has finally made its way to the self; for the belief that the most important thing about experience is the experiencing of it, and about deeds the doing of them, is beginning to strike most people as naïve.²⁹

Most relevant in Musil's diagnosis of his time is the reversal of the novel's title, qualities without a man, and how it opposes these 'qualities without a man' to the standard example of Enlightenment thinking, namely Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*; it is always this quote from a vulgar Cartesianism that is held responsible for locating the human being at the centre of the universe.

The phrase 'qualities without a man' seems to offer a much better diagnosis of Musil's protagonist Ulrich than the actual title does. This novel is so famous because it is a monumental example of what is called 'modernist relativism' and of the weakening of personality in which this relativism results. It is because of the relativism that the personality, in other words 'the man', dissolves. Like Willem Termeer Ulrich suffers from excessive rationality and self-consciousness. Ulrich's excessive rationality makes it difficult for him to make any decisions, whether it concerns choosing a career, deciding what to eat or furnishing his house, because he can find arguments for all possible choices. In his hyper-reflexive thinking nothing seems to exist in itself, only as a product of the mind that views it:

Nothing is stable for him. Everything is fluctuating, a part of a whole, among innumerable wholes that presumably are part of a super-whole, which, however, he doesn't know the slightest thing about. So every one of his answers is a part-answer, every one of his feelings only a point of view, and whatever a thing is, it doesn't matter to him what it is, it's only some accompanying 'way in which it is', some addition or other, that matters to him.³⁰

Although both Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* and Emants' *Posthumous Confession* demonstrate brilliantly that insanity is – or can be – a result of hyper-self-reflexivity – a major difference between the two novels is the kind of narration through which this is performed. Musil's novel is told by an external narrator with character-bound focalization. Not only Ulrich's but also other characters' focalizations are presented by an external narrator. The dialogues between the characters are quoted by the external narrator as well. In this respect this eminently modernist novel is comparable to most realist novels. What makes it modernist is an extreme relativism that is expressed through character-bound focalization. Emants' novel is narrated from the beginning to the end by the first-person narrator/protagonist Willem

²⁹ Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, vol. 1, trans. By E. Wilkins and E. Kaiser (New York: Capricorn Books, 1965), p. 175.

³⁰ Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, p. 129.

Termeer. It is through his speech act of introspective confession that the story is told. This means that the dissolution of subjectivity, his madness, is not just demonstrated by his focalization, but also by the speech act he performs. It is this speech act that performatively destroys his subjectivity as the embodiment of the qualities he is talking about. Although *A Posthumous Confession* is usually considered to be a prime example of naturalism or realism, because of its consistent demonstration of the production of madness through first-person narration, I would like to call it modernist. Although it has naturalist elements as well, it is, thus, one of the first modernist novels written in Western literature.

A brief comparison can demonstrate how radical this link between modernism and madness in Emants' novel really is. Another Dutch novel that uses this speech act by means of a first person narration to produce madness is Maurits Dekker's *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben* (*Why I am not Mad*) from 1929. Here, the narrator/protagonist's denial of his madness in the title of the novel is the ultimate proof of his madness. Like Willem Termeer he has killed his wife. And like him he has artistic ambitions; he writes poems, rather successfully. But more importantly for my argument, both characters' first-person narrations reveal extreme introspection and hyper-self-reflexivity. The name of Dekker's protagonist is Vladimir Stephanowitch Wirginszki. His speech act is not a confession but the opposite, a defence: after being locked up in a mental hospital after having killed his wife, he wants to convince his doctors through relentless introspection that he is not mad. In the opening chapter, he begins by addressing his doctors: 'Gentlemen', (Mijne heren), explaining to them how they should read his defence:

Don't read my defence as the one of somebody who is mad and who tries to show that he is intelligent; read it as the work of somebody who is completely normal and look if you can find something illogical, a contradiction or other kind of significant symptoms that indicate some kind of confusion in the mental abilities of the writer.³¹

Rational and hyper-reflexive as he is, in contrast to Willem Termeer and in relation to what he is trying to accomplish via his defence, Wirginszki makes one major mistake in his thinking. He opposes madness to being intelligent. It is precisely because of this mistake that he proves the opposite of what he intends. Although his rationality is extreme and relentless, he is not able to convince his readers of his sanity. I should now, however, reformulate this in accordance to the modernist discourse of madness: it is because of his extreme, relentless rationality that he is insane.

Another illuminating comparison is Lev Tolstoy's novella *The Kreutzer Sonata*, published in 1891, three years before Emants published his novel. In this case the speech act of narration is less radical than in *A Posthumous Confession*. The novel is told by a first-person narrator who is engaged in a conversation with some fellow travellers about women and marriage. A man called Pozdnyshv joins the conversation and confesses that he has killed his wife. After the other travellers have left, he tells his whole story in the first person to the first-person narrator,

³¹ '[...] lees mijn verdediging niet als die van een krankzinnige, die zich inspant om verstandig te schijnen, maar beschouw haar als het werk van een volkomen normaal mens en beproef dan of u iets onlogisch, een tegenstrijdigheid of ander kenmerkende tekenen ontdekken kunt, die wijzen op een storing in het denkvermogen van de schrijver'. Maurits Dekker, *Waarom ik niet krankzinnig ben* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1960), p. 8.

who interrupts him only now and then. Although the confession is made within a conversation, because of its length it resembles a monologue and is therefore comparable to Willem Termeer's confession.

Again the introspective nature of Pozdnyshev's confession is significant. He mercilessly analyses his erotic passion for women and for the woman he finally marries. When he becomes jealous of a violinist called Trukhatchevsky, with whom his wife plays Beethoven's Kreutzer sonata, his own jealousy becomes more intensely the object of introspection than his wife's or Trukhatchevsky's conduct:

Ah, what torture! It is not to a hospital filled with syphilitic patients that I would take a young man to deprive him of the desire for women, but into my soul, to show him the demon which tore it. The frightful part was that I recognized in myself an indisputable right to the body of my wife, as if her body were entirely mine. And at the same time I felt that I could not possess this body, that it was not mine, that she could do with it as she liked to do with it as I did not like. [...] In short, I could not say what I desired. I desired that she might not want what she MUST want. It was complete madness.³²

Tolstoy's novella establishes a close link between introspection and madness. It is, however, not so much the speech act of first-person narration that produces the madness. In fact, the reader is already aware of the fact that Pozdnyshev must be mad on the basis of how the first-person narrator describes him early on:

His face, while he was talking, changed several times so completely that it bore positively no resemblance to itself as if it had appeared just before. His eyes, his mouth, his moustache, and even his beard, all were new. Each time it was a beautiful and touching physiognomy, and these transformations were produced suddenly in the penumbra; and for five minutes it was the same face, that could not be compared to that of five minutes before. And then, I know not how, it changed again, and became unrecognizable.³³

At this moment at the beginning of the story, the madness of Tolstoy's protagonist can also be seen as the result of his erotic passion, too big for containment by his rationality or social conventions. It is only later, when he begins to tell the story of why and how he killed his wife, that his madness is produced by the introspective speech act used to tell that story.

Whereas Dekker's protagonist remained trapped in the opposition between madness and reason, and Tolstoy's madman is described as *looking* mad, Termeer, so I argue, is mad through his speech act. Thanks to Emants' novel, published some thirty years before the first and three years after the second, we can now see this and, hence, better understand the link between modernism and madness.

³² Chapter XXV, <http://gutenberg.org/files/689/689-h/689-h.htm>.

³³ Chapter III, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/689/689-h/689-h.htm>.

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Author's biography

Ernst van Alphen is Professor of Literary Studies at Leiden University, The Netherlands. His publications in English include *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in Times of New Media* (Reaktion Books, 2014), *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), *Armando: Shaping Memory* (NAi Publishers, 2000) *Caught By History: Holocaust Effects In Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory* (Stanford U.P., 1997), *Francis Bacon and The Loss of Self* (Harvard U.P., 1995), and *De Toekomst der herinnering: Essays over Moderne Nederlandse Literatuur* (Van Gennep, 1992).