



Frans Kellendonk's Allegorical Impulse

Frans Kellendonks allegorische impuls

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Abstract: The work of Frans Kellendonk seems doomed to be misread. It displays a preference for tropes that signify something else than what they proclaim: allegory and irony. In this article I will first discuss Kellendonk's ideas about allegory. Next, I examine the controversial status of the trope of allegory throughout modern history, in order to gain a better understanding of Kellendonk's complex and ambivalent use of allegory. If we want to understand allegory in its contemporary manifestations such as in Kellendonk's work, we first need a general idea of what it in fact is, and why it is so little appreciated and understood today. Via a close reading of his novel *Letter en geest* I will demonstrate how Kellendonk's work is guided by the postmodern allegorical impulse. In the case of Kellendonk, allegorical meaning is not just suggested, it is explicitly stipulated what the allegorical dimension of this text concerns: the reader. He shows the construction of his allegory, the different 'worlds' that structure his fiction. It is this emphatic exposure of contractedness that makes it typically postmodernist.

Keywords: Frans Kellendonk, allegory / allegorie, postmodernism / postmodernisme, irony / ironie, Paul de Man

The work of Frans Kellendonk seems doomed to be misread. It asks for this misreading because of the two tropes that are prevalent in his fiction: allegory and irony. And those two tropes have much in common; irony itself tends to be considered as a variant of the allegorical, since 'that words can be used to signify their opposites is in itself a fundamentally allegoric perception'.¹ And to make the situation of reading Kellendonk's work even more complicated, the tropes allegory and irony occur frequently in combination; his use of allegory is often ironic.

His preference for tropes that signify something else than what they proclaim is best understood by first looking at the mode of writing he has no affinity with, namely realism. Kellendonk has expressed his aversion of realism, of representations that pretend to refer to a world outside the text. In his essay 'Idolen: Over het Tweede Gebod' [Idols: on the Second Commandment] he takes distance from realism – here, in the form of authorial expressionism – in the domain of literary criticism:

In de overzichtelijke wereld van kranten en weekbladen voelt de literatuur beschouwing die weet waar ze het over heeft zich het prettigst. Haar belangstelling gaat uit naar de mens achter het kunstwerk. Die mens is de werkelijkheid waarvan het kunstwerk de uitdrukking is.²

[In the orderly world of newspapers and weeklies the literary criticism that knows what it talking about, feels best at ease. Its interest goes to the person behind the artwork. That person is the truth of which the artwork is the expression.]

We all know examples of readings of Kellendonk's work as an expression of the identity or personality of the author, of reading him as anti-Semitic, homophobic or religious.³ For Kellendonk the world of appearances, representations, and the world of referents called reality, have an ambivalent, strained relationship with each other. It is only indirectly that they can bear each other. A straightforward relationship between the world of appearances and the world of referents, as in realism, or the radical negation of such a straightforward relation, as in notions of literature according to which a reality outside language is not acknowledged, are both equally naïve (Kellendonk is here probably referring to the simplistic caricature of postmodernism, which was preached in those days in the Netherlands by literary critics such as Carel Peeters): 'beide ontkennen het geheim, beide streven naar een inerte toestand van een kunst die de werkelijkheid heeft opgeslokt' [both deny the secret, both aim for an inert state of an art that has swallowed reality].⁴

¹ Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism', in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 52–69 (p. 62).

² Frans Kellendonk, 'Idolen: Over het Tweede Gebod', *De veren van de zwaan* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1987), pp. 149-164 (p. 156). Translations of quotes in this article are unless indicated otherwise, mine.

³ See, for example, Aad Nuis, 'Onmiskenbaar antisemitisme in sluiers van ironie', in: *de Volkskrant*, 16-5-1986; Carl Peeters, 'Briljante achterlijkheid: Nog eens Frans Kellendonks *Mystiek Lichaam*, *Vrij Nederland*, 31-5-1986; Jaap Goedegebuure, *De veelvervige rok: De Bijbel in de moderne literatuur* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005).

⁴ Kellendonk, 'Idolen', p. 157.

Whatever that secret involves, it is important for Kellendonk that the strained relationship between reality and representation continues. Irony and allegory are devices that enable him to avoid naïve realism as well as its opposite – let's call it naïve textualism.

Kellendonk expresses his ideas against realism and 'textualism' while reflecting on the second commandment, 'Thou shalt have no other Gods, no graven images or likenesses'. He does not read it as a warning directed to idolaters, but to artists.⁵ What kind of images are artists allowed to make? His answer is short and clear: 'Alleen kunst die eerlijk uitkomt voor haar kunstmatigheid is geoorloofd' [Only art that honestly demonstrates its artificiality is admissible].⁶ Continuing the religious discourse, which was the starting point for his reflections, he amplifies the scope of his reflection from the artist to the believer:

De gelovige heeft met nog wat gelijkgestemden God verzonnen, en met hun allen doen ze vervolgens alsof die nuttige fictie echt bestaat. Maar ze zouden vierkant van hun geloof afvallen als Hij binnenkwam en zei: 'Hier ben ik.'

Van ironie moeten onze beelden doordeseemd zijn. De lucht van het voorbehoud moet er overal in zitten. Dat is de dikke dogmatische punt die ik achter deze overwegingen zou willen zetten. Kunst moet nadrukkelijk onecht zijn. Ze mag niet meer geloof eisen dan ze voor zichzelf nodig heeft. Ze mag zich nooit beroepen op 'het leven', anders ontstaat er een gesloten systeem, een vicieuze draaikolk die haar opslokt.⁷

[Along with some like-minded people, the believer has invented God, and together they subsequently pretend that useful fiction really exists. But they would squarely lose their faith if He entered the room and said: 'Here I am'.

Our images must be leavened with irony. The air of reservation must be in it all. That is the fat dogmatic full stop I want to put at the end of these considerations. Art must be emphatically artificial. It may not demand more belief that it needs for itself. It may never appeal to 'life', for then a closed circuit emerges, a vicious maelstrom that swallows it.]

Art may never appeal to life, but it may appeal to extent images. At least, that is what Kellendonk's own practice of ironical and allegorical writing suggests. In this quotation Kellendonk uses the image of somebody who believes in God. By using this image ironically he does not only make clear that he himself does not believe in God, but, paradoxically, that belief as such is not the issue: if in anything, he believes in irony. He tells an allegorical story about believers in God, in order to defend an aesthetic position on irony.

Kellendonk has not only articulated ideas about irony, he has also expressed his ideas on allegory. In his lectures collected in *Geschilderd eten* (1988, [Painted Food]) he discusses the problematic aspects of Vondel's *Altaergeheimnissen* (1645, [Mysteries of the Altar]). In that

⁵ Cf. Kellendonk, 'Idolen', p. 151.

⁶ Kellendonk, 'Idolen', p. 162.

⁷ Kellendonk, 'Idolen', p. 164.

case allegory is no longer the device that offers the solution for realism, but in its opposition to realism it is as problematic as realism itself:

Ik wil niet beweren dat de allegorie per definitie slecht is en de werkelijke tegenwoordigheid per definitie goed, alleen dat Vondel's opvattingen hem te veel naar de allegorische kant deden overhellen. In feite leiden beide uitersten tot minderwaardige literatuur, het ene tot aangeklede theorie, het andere tot plat realisme.⁸

[I do not intend to say that allegory is bad in itself and the real presence good; only that Vondel's conceptions brought him too close to the allegorical. Both extremes lead to inferior literature, the first to clad theory, the other to flat realism.]

Kellendonk seems to counter this negative effect of allegory by using it ironically. He increases the artificiality allegory already contains by doubling this effect through irony. This compensates for the conceptual distance as the negative effect of allegory.⁹

Allegory from Symbolism to Postmodernism

In order to better understand Kellendonk's complex and ambivalent use of allegory, I will first discuss the controversial status of the trope of allegory throughout modern history. If we want to understand allegory in its contemporary manifestations such as in the work of Kellendonk, we first need a general idea of what it in fact is and why it is so little appreciated and understood today. Since allegory is a technique as well as an attitude, a perception as well as a procedure, the disentanglement of its ambiguities will require a few turns.

Although allegory was well respected from antiquity to the 18th century, during the last two centuries allegory has been condemned as an 'aesthetic aberration, the antithesis of art'.¹⁰ In his *Aesthetic* Croce refers to it as 'science, or art aping science'; and the Argentine writer Borges called it an 'aesthetic error'. This is an amazing statement for one of the most allegorical writers of the twentieth century (the other one being Kafka). Although in sharp contrast with his own practice of writing, Borges regards allegory as an outmoded, exhausted device, a matter of historical but certainly not critical interest:

I know that at one time the allegorical art was considered quite charming... and is now intolerable. We feel that, besides being intolerable, it is stupid and frivolous. Neither

⁸ Kellendonk, *Geschilderd eten* (Amsterdam/Leiden: Meulenhoff/Martinus Nijhoff, 1988), p. 62.

⁹ In Kellendonk criticism his use of irony and of allegory is sometimes noticed and discussed. However, the critics employ usually a rather common sense notion of these two literary concepts. See e.g. Tijn Boon, 'Choreograaf van het geweld: Het ironische moralisme van Frans Kellendonk', *De Gids*, 156 (1993), pp. 947-955. A profound discussion of allegory and irony can be found in Mathieu Sergier's *Ethiek van de lectuur: Frans Kellendonk en de (h)erkenning van de andersheid* (Gent: Academia Press, 2012). But also this study does not read Kellendonk's own foregrounding of these tropes in his texts; it notices his use of it. In this article I intend to elaborate a more complex notion of allegory, not only on the basis of theoretical discussions of it, but also on the basis of close-readings of allegorical moments or movements in Kellendonk's work.

¹⁰ Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse', p. 52.

Dante, who told the story of his passion in *Vita nuova*; nor the Roman Boethius, writing his *De consolazione* in the tower of Pavia, in the shadow of his executioner's sword, would have understood our feeling. How can I explain that difference in outlook without simply appealing to the principle of changing tastes?¹¹

As Owens has remarked, this statement by Borges is paradoxical in two ways. Not only does it contradict the allegorical nature of Borges' own fiction, it also denies to allegory what is most proper to it: its capacity to rescue what threatens to be forgotten.¹² Such a rescue takes place, for example, when the Old Testament becomes allegorical as it is read as a prefiguration of the New Testament. Owens comments on allegory's capacity to rescue things from historical oblivion as follows:

Allegory first emerged in response to a similar sense of estrangement from tradition; throughout its history it has functioned in the gap between a present and a past which, without allegorical reinterpretation, might have remained foreclosed.¹³

A less noble understanding of allegory considers the allegorical imaginary as an appropriating imaginary; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them:

He lays claim to the culturally significant and poses as its interpreter. And in his hands the image becomes something other (*allos* = other + *agoreuei* = to speak). He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured: allegory is not hermeneutics. Rather, he adds another meaning to the image. If he adds, however, he does so only to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement. That is why allegory is condemned, but it is also the source of its theoretical significance.¹⁴

The critical suppression of allegory is first of all the responsibility of romantic art theory. The reflections of people like Goethe in Germany and Coleridge in England contrast allegory to symbol. Whereas symbol relates organically to what it means, allegory does the same thing by means of convention, that is, artificially. According to Coleridge the symbol does not represent essence; it is essence. Because of the identification of symbol with essence, the symbol becomes the very emblem of artistic 'intuition'. For the structuralist linguist and semiotician De Saussure the symbol is emblematic for the motivated sign (*pace* Peirce), whereas allegory is its antithesis, meaning that it is arbitrary, conventional, unmotivated. Croce, in his *Aesthetic*, contrasts allegory to symbol as 'an expression externally added to another expression'.¹⁵ Allegory is

¹¹ Borges, quoted in Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse', p. 62.

¹² Frans Kellendonk was thoroughly familiar with the work of Jorge Luis Borges. See Meike Botterweg, 'Spoken in de bibliotheek van Babel. Over de Borgesreceptie van Frans Kellendonk', *TNTL*, 128.3-4 (2012), 332-348.

¹³ Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism', p. 53.

¹⁴ Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism', p. 54.

¹⁵ Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic: As Science of Expression and General Linguistic*, transl. by D. Ainslie (New York: Noonday, 1909 [1922]), pp. 34-35.

always in excess, it is extravagant, which is why Croce also calls it 'monstrous'. It is so because it encodes two contents within one form. But the allegorical supplement is not only an addition; it is also a replacement: 'It takes the place of an earlier meaning, which is thereby either effaced or obscured. Because allegory usurps its object it comports within itself a danger, the possibility of perversion: that what is "merely appended" to the work of art be mistaken for its "essence"'.¹⁶ For Owens this explains the vehemence with which modern aesthetics rails against the allegorical supplement; it challenges the security of the foundations upon which aesthetics is erected.

This suppression of allegory by subordinating it to the symbol was uncritically inherited by 20th century modernism. This explains that the most well known allegories of the 20th century, those of Kafka and of Borges, are usually not called allegories but parables or fables. We see Kellendonk do the same thing when in his letters he persistently calls the stories of his first book *Bouwval* 'fables', his 'nijmeegse fables'.

Although the decline of the appreciation of allegory took place in the 19th and the 20th century, very important counterarguments that point at a reappraisal of allegory were also written in the 20th century: Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Drama* (1977) and Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading* (1979). For De Man allegory is the structural interference of two distinct levels or usages of language, literal and rhetorical (metaphoric), one of which denies precisely what the other affirms. In most allegories literal reading will 'deconstruct' a metaphorical one. Recalling medieval schemas of textual exegesis, De Man identifies such rhetorical readings as tropological. But for De Man there is no absolute difference between literal and rhetorical readings, as Owens indicates: 'Yet because literal language is itself rhetorical, the product of metaphoric substitutions and reversals, such readings are inevitably implicated in what they set out to expose, and the result is allegory'.¹⁷ In De Man's own words:

The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction. But since this model cannot be closed off by a final reading, it engenders, in its turn, a supplementary figural superposition which narrates the unreadability of the prior narration. As distinguished from primary deconstructive narratives centred on figures and ultimately always on metaphor, we can call such narratives to the second (or third) degree allegories. Allegorical narratives tell the story of the failure to read whereas tropological narratives [...] tell the story of the failure to denominate. The difference is only a difference in degree and the allegory does not erase the figure. Allegories are always allegories of metaphor and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading.¹⁸

After a literal denomination has failed, and next a substitution by a metaphorical term has also failed, the next step is an allegorical reading, which does not substitute a literal term for a figurative one, but which introduces a different meaning by using the same term. De Man demonstrates the incongruence of literal and figurative language with examples from Rilke,

¹⁶ Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse', p. 64.

¹⁷ Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Part 2', p. 73.

¹⁸ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 205.

Proust, Rousseau, and Nietzsche. His reading of Yeats's poem 'Among School Children', which concludes with the famous line, 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' is, however, the most telling one. This line is often quoted as a demonstration of the indissoluble unity of sign and meaning. It characterizes the belief in symbol and the symbolic work of art as being based on an organic unity. Yet the alleged symbolic meaning of this line hinges upon reading the line as a rhetorical question, that is, as a rhetorical *statement* of their indissolubility. But what if we read it literally instead of rhetorically, de Man asks. The result is then, not surprisingly, allegory: we are then confronted with the distance, which separates signifier from signified, sign from meaning.

Owens argues that postmodernism no longer condemns allegory as monstrous, as something merely appended to the work of art. Instead, allegory is revealed as a structural possibility inherent in every work of art:

In modernism, however, the allegory remains *in potential* and is actualized only in the activity of reading, which suggests that the allegorical impulse that characterizes postmodernism is a direct consequence of its preoccupation with reading.¹⁹

With the condition of postmodernism, the organic unity of sign and meaning has become an ideological illusion; it is no longer the ultimate ideal of the work of art. On the contrary, postmodernist artists and writers will expose the artificial relationship between sign and meaning in their fundamental explorations of representation and our experience of 'the world', or 'life'.

On the basis of this account of postmodernism as fundamentally endorsing the allegorical impulse, we can conclude that Kellendonk's work is one of the prime examples of postmodernist writing in Dutch literature. His novel *Letter en geest* demonstrates most explicitly the postmodernist preoccupation with reading, as I will argue in the rest of this article. His work is, however, not read from this perspective, which is symptomatic for the misreading in Dutch studies not only of Kellendonk but also of postmodernism. Although in the 1980s the notion of postmodernism was sometimes used to characterize the authors writing in the *Revisor* – and Kellendonk was one of them – 'postmodernism' is in Dutch Studies today no longer a viable concept. One could argue that Kellendonk himself is responsible for this misreading. By relying on religious images like 'mystiek lichaam', 'letter en geest', or on Catholic texts like Vondel's *Altaergeheimnisse* in order to articulate his complex, allegorical notion of literary discourse, he is asking too much of his readers. Invoking the transcendental framework of religion, he seems to believe in an organic unity of sign and meaning. If we read images like 'mystiek lichaam' or 'letter en geest' as tropological (metaphorical), they seem to express the religious belief of the author Kellendonk. His belief then needs such figurative images because it cannot be denominated, expressed by literal language. But if we take his explicit statements that he is not religious to heart, we are compelled to read the figurative image of 'mystiek lichaam' as figurative in itself, as figurative in the second degree, in short: as allegorical. I quote Paul de Man again for explaining the complexity of the rhetorical structure in which such figurative reading in the second-degree results. This time De Man is reading

¹⁹ Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Part 2', p. 74.

Rousseau's essay *Of the Social Contract, Or Principles of the Political Right*, as a narrative of its own deconstruction:

[...] it (Rousseau's text) resorts to the principles of authority that it undermines. We know this structure to be characteristic of what we have called allegories of unreadability. Such an allegory is metafigural; it is an allegory of a figure (for example, metaphor) which relapses into the figure it deconstructs. The *Social Contract* falls under this heading to the extent that it is structured like an aporia: it persists in performing what it has shown to be impossible to do. As such, we can call it an allegory.²⁰

I contend that the same can be done with Kellendonk's *Mystiek Lichaam* and his *Letter en geest*. If this persistence 'in performing what it has shown to be impossible' is not recognized, Kellendonk's work will not be considered as postmodernist. The most serious attempt in Dutch Studies at understanding postmodernism within the Dutch context, Bart Vervaeck's *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman*, suffers from this failure. Although Vervaeck has clearly struggled with the question how to read Kellendonk, he does not consider Kellendonk to be a postmodernist:

Kellendonk ziet literatuur als een manier om feiten zinvol te ordenen (1979: 125) en personages en decors als allegorieën voor diepere realiteiten (1977: 91). Dat geloof in een grond en een vooraf bestaande feitelijkheid onderscheidt hem van het postmodernisme. Ook zijn geschiedenisopvatting behoudt het vooraf bestaande en de traditie. Er is niet alleen een beginpunt, namelijk de vrouw, maar ook een continuïteit die doorloopt tot in bijbelse tijden. Kellendonk handhaaft verder een duidelijk grens tussen fictie en realiteit, dat wil zeggen tussen het universum van de roman en 'de andere wereld die het boek omringt' (1982: 278). Bij de bespreking van postmoderne romans zal duidelijk worden dat dit alles indruist tegen postmoderne opvattingen en technieken.²¹

[Kellendonk considers literature as a means to order facts meaningfully and characters and backdrops as allegories for more profound realities. That belief in a ground and a pre-existing factuality distinguishes him from postmodernism. Also his notion of history sticks to the pre-existing and to tradition. There is not only an origin, namely woman, but also a continuity, which ends in biblical times. Kellendonk sticks to a clear border between fiction and reality, which means between the universe of the novel and 'the other world which surrounds the novel' (1982: 278). In the discussion of postmodern novels it will become clear that all this goes against the grain of postmodern notions and devices.]

The solemn tone of Vervaeck's characterization of Kellendonk's poetics aptly demonstrates his blind spot for Kellendonk's ironic and allegorical impulse. The problem of Vervaeck's accounts

²⁰ De Man, p. 275.

²¹ Bart Vervaeck, *Het postmodernisme in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse roman* (Brussel: VUBPress, 1999), p. 206.

of Kellendonk's work and of postmodernism as a whole is not only his misreading of Kellendonk's poetic statements or 'confessions', but also his construction of postmodernism, which is, in many ways, a plain reversal of a realist one. Unaware of postmodernism's allegorical impulse he reads both Kellendonk and postmodernism as expository prose. However, Kellendonk's writing, exemplary for postmodernist practices in many ways, forces us to think in correspondences, to proceed through allegorical images rather than through expository prose.

Correspondences of Allegorical Images

In the rest of my article I will demonstrate, through a close reading of his novel *Letter en geest*, how Kellendonk's work is directed by the postmodern allegorical impulse. In an article that I wrote in 1991, I already argued that the interpretations of *Mystiek lichaam* as containing homophobic and anti-Semitic ideas was the result of reading this text as expository prose.²² The allegorical and ironical nature of this text was not recognized, as a result of which critics did not see that Kellendonk's text 'resorts to the principles of authority that it undermines'.²³ What is more, *Letter en geest* forces its readers to think through the correspondences of allegorical images. The failure to do so, results not in a postmodernist text, but a gothic realist one, of which the author, relying as usual on religious images, is not postmodernist but religious.

The opening paragraph immediately indicates that the reader is not entering a horizontal, realist text. Introducing us to the place where the narrative will unfold, this place is described by vertical concentric circles:

Een geleerde man, Van de Kerckhove genaamd, heeft ooit betoogd dat de gracht waaraan ons gebouw ligt de langste van de wereld zou zijn, want verderop verandert ze van naam, loopt door tot in de Rijn en de Rijn mondt, zoals bekend, uit in zee. Ze zou ook de mooiste gracht van de wereld zijn, want ze is de mooiste gracht in de fraaiste stad van de prachtigste provincie van Nederland en zoals bekend is Nederland de parel van Europa, dat, op haar beurt, de keizerin der continenten is. Helaas kan ons gebouw zelf op geen enkel superlatief aanspraak maken.²⁴

[A learned man, called Van de Kerckhove, once claimed that the canal where our building is situated is the longest in the world, because a bit further down its name changes, continues as far as the Rhine and the Rhine flows into the sea, as is well known. It is also supposed to be the most beautiful canal in the world, because it is the most beautiful canal in the most beautiful city in the most beautiful province of the Netherlands, and as is well known, the Netherlands is the pearl of Europe, which, in turn, is the empress of continents. Unfortunately, the building itself cannot lay claim to any superlative.]

²² 'Mystiek Lichaam: Een geschiedenis tegen allegorie', in: *De Revisor*, 18.1/2 (1991), 34-40.

²³ De Man, p. 275.

²⁴ Frans Kellendonk, *Letter en geest: Een spookverhaal* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1982), p. 7.

This localization of the library where the plot is situated prefigures the image of the Jacob's ladder, which is used later to describe the structural universe of the library and of language as such:

Klip klap klip klap klip klap, gaat het jakobsladdertje. Een brein in een brein om een brein is hij, een bibliotheek in een bibliotheek om een bibliotheek, een ondoordringbaar solipsistisch systeem, een huiveringwekkende parodie op Plato's grot, waar de schimmen die je ziet door jezelf geworpen worden, waar niets verwijst naar de zekerheid van transcendenten ideeën, noch van de knie die over de straatsteen schaaft, de tong die, uitgesproken, in een kus een andere tong ontmoet. Inderdaad, Van Uffel, er is geen groter eenzaamheid dan die van de taal.²⁵

Click clack click clack goes Jacob's little ladder. A brain inside a brain around a brain it is, a library inside a library around a library, an impenetrable solipsistic system, a chilling parody of Plato's Cave, where you cast yourself the shadows that you see, where nothing indicates the certainty of transcendental ideas, nor of the knee that scrapes on the sidewalk's stone, or the tongue that, when stuck out, encounters another tongue in a kiss. Indeed, Van Uffel, there is no greater loneliness than that of language.

The Jacob's ladder is a biblical image from the Book of Genesis. It is a staircase to heaven that the future patriarch Jacob dreams about during his flight from his brother Esau. Whereas the biblical image describes the access to transcendental ideas, to the ontology of heaven, the image of the Jacob's ladder is here used with the opposite intent. It describes language as a solipsistic rather than a transcendental medium. Language is understood in its failure. It is not able to refer to transcendental truths, nor to bodily, physical experiences. It does not deny the existence of those truths nor of the body; it describes the difficulty of language to transcend the appearances for which it is itself responsible.

There are other vertical movements in *Letter en geest* that symptomatically embody the allegorical impulse of postmodernism. The final paragraph is as telling as the one that opens the story. Protagonist Mandaat is sitting in a train, which brings him home after he has resigned from his position as librarian. When he arrives at his destination, we read the following:

Werktuiglijk komt Mandaat van zijn plaats en stelt zich op voor het portier. Schuddend gaat hij over de wissels, zoals de lezer nog wat in zijn vaart gestuit wordt door de laatste verrassingen in een laatste alinea – de trein staat stil – Mandaat, of liever de macht der gewoonte, drukt op het knopje naast de pneumatische deuren, die gedwee vaneenwijken – hij stapt over de treeplank en staat op het perron.²⁶

[Mechanically Mandaat leaves his seat and goes to stand in front of the door. Shaking it rides over the change, like the reader a bit arrested in its speed by the final surprises in a final paragraph – the train stops – Mandaat, of rather, the force of habit presses the

²⁵ Kellendonk, *Letter en geest*, p. 35.

²⁶ Kellendonk, *Letter en geest*, p. 92.

button next to the pneumatic doors, which obediently open – he steps over the footboard and finds himself on the platform.]

Whereas allegory usually takes the form of an extended metaphor, in this quotation Kellendonk exposes the allegorical structure emphatically by giving it the form of an extended comparison. The motif of the comparison, the compared and that what it is compared to are all explicitly provided. Mandaat's arrival at his destination is compared to the reader who has almost finished reading the story. In the very last sentence, protagonist and reader become one, forming a kind of mystical body:

De landloper zwaait langs hem heen. Wapperend met zijn jaspenden zwalkt hij richting uitgang, keert dan min of meer terug op zijn schreden, boert vol overgave, onderwerpt de inhoud van een gele vuilnisemmer aan een vrijblijvend, visueel-aftastend onderzoek en voor hij zich definitief naar de uitgang begeeft grijnst hij nog eens vriendelijk naar Mandaat, die op dezelfde perrontegel is blijven staan, onbeweeglijk als een punt.²⁷

[The tramp swings past him. The tails of his coat waving he drifts towards the exit, then more or less returns, burbs with abandon, subjects the contents of a yellow waste bin to a non-committal, visual-scanning examination and before he moves definitely to the exit he grins to Mandaat in a friendly manner, while the latter has remained on the same tile of the platform, immobile like a full stop.]

Mandaat's immobility can no longer be distinguished from the reader who has reached the final dot after the final sentence of the story. This turns the story of Mandaat into an allegory of the reader. This allegorical movement is a vertical one; the horizontal movement through Kellendonk's story is transposed to a meta-level of the text, to the reader reading this text and arriving at the end.

Not only the first but also the last paragraph of Kellendonk's text is concentric and based on a vertical movement. This alone, and ignoring everything that happens in between those two paragraphs, suggests that we should read this novel as fundamentally allegorical. But there is more to this last sentence. Not in the bibliophile edition of *De roos* (1994), from which I have been quoting so far, but in the original first edition by Meulenhoff (1982) the immobile dot, of which is spoken in the last sentence, is verbalized but the graphic symbol itself is strikingly missing. The literal '.' is replaced by the figurative expression 'punt' – figurative, because the graphic symbol is substituted by the alphabetically written dot. The expression 'punt' can be read allegorically because by using one single expression it produces two different meanings: the graphic symbol as well as the immobile point.²⁸

²⁷ Kellendonk, *Letter en geest*, p. 93.

²⁸ According to this reading of only the first and the final paragraph, *Letter en geest* is an allegory of reading. In that respect it has strong similarities with the work of the American postmodernist writer William H. Gass, especially his *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife* (1968). Kellendonk was familiar with Gass's work since he translated one of his short stories for the *Revisor* ('Binnen in het binnenland'). In *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife* the wife is an allegorical image for the literary text, whereas her husband, who neglects her and is not able to satisfy her sexually, is the reader. In his *Ethiek van de lectruur*, Matthieu Sergier, too, has argued that Kellendonk's work should be read as an allegory of reading.

In his study *Postmodernist Fiction* Brian McHale has explained why allegory is such a privileged trope in postmodernist literature: 'The fictional world of an allegorical narrative is a topological world, a world within a trope. Its ontological structure is *dual*, two-level, one level that of the trope [...] the other that of the literal'. Allegory 'offers itself as a tool for exploring ontological structure and foregrounding ontological themes'.²⁹ Postmodernist allegories differ from the rare modernist allegories by exposing the allegorical structure emphatically. Kafka's texts, for example, seem to promise an allegorical meaning without providing any indication of specific allegorical content. In the case of Kellendonk allegorical meaning is not just suggested, it is explicitly stipulated what the allegorical dimension of this text concerns: the reader. He shows the construction of his allegory, the different 'worlds' that structure his fiction. It is this emphatic exposure of contractedness that makes it typically postmodernist. In the rest of this article I will provide more examples of the allegorical structuring of Kellendonk's *Letter en geest*.

Intertextual Rhyming: Proust, Gorter, Vondel, and the Bible

There are many passages in the story that suggest such an allegorical reading. The second chapter 'Het persoonlijk vlak' uses a Proustian image to describe how Mandaat experiences the world as an allegorist. To begin with, the title of this chapter is allegorical as well as ironic. 'Het persoonlijk vlak', the personal level, is not plain or horizontal at all. It rather describes his experiences again as vertical, concentric circles. This vertical movement came about when he was lying on his back on a quiet spot between the reeds along the river, and later, like Proust's protagonist Marcel, on his bed:

Wanneer de zon onderging en er een trilling trok over zijn lichaam, dat zat was van de zon, ziek van gezondheid, stond hij op en slenterde hij terug naar de stad. Het rivierwater was dan van zilver, hij trad op de golfjes, zilveren zomen, er klonk een ruisen als in een balzaal, wanneer de muzikanten hun instrumenten inpakken, de gasten zich naar de garderobe spoeden. Die vergelijkingen! De isomorfie van alles! Elke verschijnsel rijmde op een ander verschijnsel, in een eindeloze motonomie, zoals de golf rijmt op golf en in een woordenboek elk woord weer verwijst naar andere woorden. Alles schikte zich in een concentrische cirkels rond dat ene middelpunt: Mandaat. Alles en iedereen was naar zijn beeld en gelijkenis geschapen. Wie zich zo verheft brengt de wereld ten val.

Mandaat is nu hier om zichzelf ten val te brengen.³⁰

[When the sun set and a vibration traverse his body that was sick with good health, he stood up and ambled back to the city. The water of the river was then silvery; he walked on small waves, silver seams, a murmur as of a ballroom could be heard, as when the musicians pack their instruments, the guests rush to the checkroom. Those comparisons! The isomorphic nature of it all! Each phenomenon rimes with another phenomenon, in an endless monotony, as the wave rimes with the wave and each word

²⁹ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), p. 141.

³⁰ Kellendonk, *Letter en geest*, pp. 19-20.

in a dictionary refers to other words. Everything and everyone has been created after his image and likeness. Whoever rises up like this brings the world asunder. Mandaat is now here to bring himself asunder.]

Like Proust's Marcel who recreated his whole life on the basis of similarities, with a Madeleine soaked in tea physically bringing in memories, and like the God Balder in Herman Gorter's allegorical poem *Mei* (1889) who privileges musical resonances above Plato's world of appearances, Mandaat becomes like the divine procreator of his own world.³¹ This creation of the world does not take place through the narration of a horizontal story as Genesis 1- 3 where one thing happens after the other, but is done by a vertical movement of which the Jacob's ladder is the primary example; by concentric circles of allegory and through establishing intertextual relationships to Proust, Gorter and Vondel. The monstrous nature of such allegorical signification is pointed at by comparing Mandaat to the figure of Lucifer who toppled himself and fell out of heaven.

The vertical movements of allegory in a narrative text result in a mode of signification that slows down and complicates a horizontal realist reading for the plot. I quote Owens again to explain this 'obstruction' performed by allegorical signification:

Allegory is the epitome of counter-narrative, for it arrests narrative in place, substituting a principle of syntagmatic disjunction for one of diegetic combination. In this way allegory superinduces a vertical or paradigmatic reading of correspondences upon a horizontal or syntagmatic chain of events.³²

The disjunction of the syntagmatic, horizontal structure leads to an arrest of realistic, narrative flow. Such a disjunction is explicitly thematized in the chapter 'Phaëton'. Phaeton, son of Helios, God of the Sun, steals the sun carriage of his father and creates great havoc on earth by approaching it too closely. Zeus intervenes and kills Phaeton with a flash of lightning. The best-known version of this story appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* but Vondel also based a play on it: *Faëton of Reuckeloze stoutheit* (1663). Kellendonk's chapter is a remarkable intermezzo in the novel because here Mandaat tells a story, or better he tries to do that. In the cafeteria of the library he feels compelled to tell his colleagues a story that will be about his grandfather, because he refuses to tell a story about himself. Not exactly knowing in what kind of events he will let his grandfather, who is riding a motorcycle, play a role, he digresses when he lets him divert to heaven where he encounters different constellations.

³¹ Gorter's poem *Mei* represents allegorically different aesthetic positions through the figures of Mei, the internal narrator 'the poet', and the blind God Balder. Whereas Mei and the poet believe in the production of similarities through images, Balder's only aesthetic principle is musical resonance, based on similarity without the ghostlike appearances of images. But even that position he ultimately rejects. Mei focalizes the God Balder with whom she is in love as follows: 'Waren de beelden van zijn zielsmuziek; / In hem zijns lieds geruisch op zijn rhytmiek, / Maar buiten hem de levendlichte schemer, / Schimmenafbeeldsels in een spingewemel' (142). Balder's ultimate refusal of representation as such, makes it also impossible for him to love other beings, which makes him utterly lonely. Like Mandaat, he experiences loneliness as a result of a notion of language and representation. For an allegorical reading of *Mei*, see my chapter 'Gorter's *Mei* dankzij Brakman' in *De toekomst der herinnering: Essays over moderne Nederlandse literatuur* (Amsterdam: Van Genneep, 1992), pp. 199-221.

³² Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism, Part 2', p. 81.

Zo komt van het ene woord het andere. Dat was trouwens geen slecht idee, om de sterren erbij te halen; daardoor heeft het verhaal iets kosmisch gekregen. En middels die verborgen toespeling op de mythe van Phaëton en zijn zonnwagen bovendien iets van alle tijden. Zo kan hij er nog alle kanten mee op. Maar *welk* verhaal dan? Het wordt tijd er eens iets gebeurt. Mandaat mag zijn gehoor dan geboeid hebben, de boeien waarin dat gehoor hém gevangen houdt knellen aanzienlijk pijnlijker.³³

[So from one word flows the other. And it was not a bad idea to invoke the stars; because of that the story received something cosmic. And via the hidden allusion to the myth of Phaeton and his sun carriage, moreover, something eternal. So it remains open in all directions. But *which* story then? It is time that something happens. Mandaat may have entertained his audience; the manacles in which it confines him are far more painfully.]

His colleagues, however, want a story that tells the truth. For Mandaat truth is of no importance when you tell a story. Truth can be found in an encyclopaedia. It is in a lie that someone bears his entire soul.³⁴ When he is aware of the fact that his listeners are waiting for a realistic ending of his story, he has more and more difficulty making up a closure. Colleagues begin to leave. When he finally decides to end the story with the deathly fall of his grandfather, he screams:

‘Ik heb het!’, roept hij uit.

Hij roept dat in een kantine die geheel verlaten is, op mevrouw Cornelissen na. ‘Zo hebt u het?’ zegt ze. ‘Nou, houdt u het maar.’³⁵

[‘I have it’, he exclaims. He yells this in a cantina that is entirely deserted, except for miss Cornelissen. ‘So, you have it?’, she says. ‘Well, you keep it.’]

It is especially the horizontal movement of narrating one event after another that makes it so difficult for Mandaat to tell a story. The only moment he feels comfortable with his story is when he digresses vertically into heaven, following Phaeton on his father's sun carriage. But it is especially then that he loses his listeners, who are expecting a realistic, truthful account about his grandfather. This failed attempt to tell a horizontal story provides the readers of Kellendonk's novel with an allegorical image of how to read *Letter en geest*. In other words, this allegory functions as a *mise en abyme*. It stipulates that we should not expect a story about one event after another. The movements the reader should focus on are vertical ones: those of the Jacob's ladder, of Phaeton, and of allegory.

Descriptions of the place of action, the library and then especially the space where the books are stored, are other examples of such a disjunction of the syntagm. The storage room is

³³ Kellendonk, *Letter en geest*, p. 78.

³⁴ Cf. Kellendonk, *Letter en geest*, p. 79.

³⁵ Kellendonk, *Letter en geest*, p. 82.

in the former chapel of the building, a former monastery. It is, however, mentioned as the Chapel, with a capital, indicating the holy nature of this place. But the Chapel contains more than just a collection of books. It is holy because it is an allegorical image for the human brain and for the role language plays in that brain. It is an allegory for human thinking.

Een brein, heeft van Uffel gezegd, de Kapel is net een menselijk brein. Wanneer Mandaat helemaal bovenin staat ziet hij dat het Kapelgewelf inderdaad net een reusachtige schedel is; de miljoenen boeken in deze doolhof van loopgangen en stellingen zijn grijze massa, hersencellen, de miljarden drukletters engrammen, de noten en literatuurlijsten synapsen, dendrietten, neutrietten, een kluwen van tentakels waardoor al die boeken met elkaar in verbinding staan, de magazijnmeester en zijn knechten elektrische potentialen die pas slaafs in werking treden bij impulsen van buitenaf. Maar wiens brein dan? Andermans brein, waarin hij niet meer is dan de gedachte aan een zekere Mandaat? Of misschien loopt hij rond in zijn eigen brein dan, op het gevaar af tussen eindeloze verdubbelingen verdwaald te raken, als in een spiegeltent op de kermis. Op dit moment, nu de uitleen gesloten is, is het in elk geval het brein van een slaper. Is hij zelf dus een droombeeld, of een bloedprop, een virus misschien.³⁶

[A brain, said van Uffel, the Chapel is like a human brain. When Mandaat stands at the utmost top he sees that the vault of the Chapel is truly like a gigantic skull; the millions of books in this labyrinth of corridors and racks are grey matter, brain cells, the millions of printed letters engrams, the footnotes and readings lists synapses, dendrites, neutering canes, a tangle of tentacles that connects all those books to one another, the warehouse manager and his minions electrical potentials that only begin to start their slavish operation upon external impulses. But whose brain is this? Someone else's, in which he is nothing more than a thought of a certain Mandaat? Or perhaps he walks around inside his own brain, at risk of getting lost amongst endless duplications, as in a mirror maze at the fair. At this moment, now that the lending window has closed, it is at any rate the brain of a sleeper. So, he is himself a dream image, or a clot of blood, perhaps a virus.]

The library is not only an allegorical image for the brain, hence, for human thinking, it also resonates with the archival qualities of language: 'Zoals die een opslagplaats is voor taal, is de taal zelf weer een bergplaats voor gewaarwordingen' [Just as it is an archive for language, language itself is an archive of sensations].³⁷

Being immersed in language is ultimately the final signification of this resonating sequence of allegorical images. This immersion into language and representation is the central thematic of postmodernism. Kellendonk articulates it allegorically in the most physical and bodily way:

Maar terwijl de bloembollenvelden en poldervaarten voor de honderdtweeëntigste keer aan zijn oog voorbijtrekken voelt hij zijn gemoedsrust weggezogen, weggeslorpt

³⁶ Kellendonk, *Letter en geest*, p. 34.

³⁷ Kellendonk, *Letter en geest*, p. 34.

worden door een gat diep in zijn borst. Het vergaat hem zoals de lezer die in zijn linkerhand een flink pak papier houdt en tussen de vingers van zijn rechterhand nog maar een paar velletjes. De lezer voelt voor het eerst papier, niet meer dan papier. Hij betrapt zich erop dat hij leest zoals een kat televisie kijkt: hij ziet enkel letters, zwarte drukinkt. Hij merkt dat hij op een stoel zit, in een kamer met witte muren. Er tikt een klok. Zijn been tintelt. Memento mori! Zo meteen is het verhaal afgelopen. Wat hij heeft gelezen is een boek, een ding, dat hij straks zal dichtklappen, met een tik zal bijzetten in zijn boekenkast, tussen andere banden, gerangschikt volgens alfabetische willekeur, misschien om het er nooit meer uit te pakken. 'Nog niet! Laat die woordmagie nog even doorwerken! Laat de taal mijn lichaam zijn!' Maar in zijn longen verzamelt zich al adem. Straks zal hij met een zucht overgaan tot de andere wereld die het boek omringt, zoals de dood het leven.³⁸

[But while the bulb fields and the polder canals pass in front of his eyes for the one hundred and forty second time he feels his peace of mind be sucked away, absorbs by a hole deep inside his breast. He is like a reader who is holding in his left hand a good stack of paper and between the fingers of his right hand has just a paltry few sheets left. For the first time the reader feels paper, nothing but paper. He catches himself reading the way a cat watches television: he only sees letters, black printing ink. He notices that he is sitting on a chair, in a room with white walls. A clock is ticking. His leg tingles. Memento mori! In a minute the story will be finished. What he has read is a book, a thing, which he will snap shut in a bit, and put back with a tick into the book case, between other volumes, ordered according to the arbitrariness of the alphabet, perhaps never to take it out again. 'Not yet! May the word magic continue just a bit longer! Let language be my body!' But in his lungs breath is already collecting. Soon, with a sigh, he will proceed to the other world that surrounds the book, like death surrounds life.]

The world of the text and of language is described as an ontology, which differs in fundamental ways from the ontology of the world we live in. These ontologies differ as death and life do. The phrase 'Let language be my body!' varies on the biblical 'The word became flesh'. It beautifully describes the postmodern explorations of the ontology of language. Language is then not a medium or instrument for communication, but once one is immersed into it, it creates realities as real and sensual as the experience of our body is. In a letter of 8 August 1987 to Klaas Vos, Kellendonk describes his fascination for this kind of religious images in such a way that it is more than clear that this fascination does not stem from religious feelings. On the contrary, he is fascinated by these images because of their physical, bodily nature:

Ik ben eindeloos gefascineerd door de zinsneden 'in den beginne was het Woord' en 'Het Woord is vlees geworden', maar ik heb geen idee hoe ik die Logos moet opvatten. Dit is belangrijk i.v.m. mijn duiding (die weer gebaseerd is op Vondels duiding) van de H. Communie: als een ritueel van de stofwisseling.³⁹

³⁸ Kellendonk, *Letter en geest*, p. 84.

³⁹ Kellendonk, *De brieven*, p. 435.

[I am endlessly fascinated by the phrases 'in the beginning was the word' and 'the word has become flesh', but I have no idea how to understand that logos. This is important in relation to my interpretation (in turn based on Vondel's interpretation) of the Holy Communion: as a ritual of metabolism.]

'The Word that has become flesh' is described as a form of metabolism, a circulation of matter, not a transcendental transformation. So, reading a text, being immersed in language is for Kellendonk also an example of metabolism. The nature of this metabolism, in other words, the specific ontology of the world of text and language, has already been described in a passage I quoted earlier: 'Those comparisons! The isomorphic nature of it all! Each phenomenon rimes with another phenomenon, in an endless monotony, as the wave rimes with the wave and each word in a dictionary refers to other words. Everything orders itself in concentric circles around one centre: Mandaat.' In this quote Kellendonk understands language as fundamentally allegorical. Allegorical 'rhyming' is then a form of metabolism, a circulation of matter; it is not understood as a medium of expression or of communication. This circulation of matter, this 'magic of words' is as real and physical as his body is. Kellendonk understands language as fundamentally performative – it does not mean something outside of it but it does what it says. It does not express, mediate or communicate, but it makes him incarnate in an ontology as real as his own body.

What's in a Name?

So far, one major allegorical element in *Letter en geest* has not been taken into consideration. Like in *Mystiek lichaam*, names of the protagonists are not arbitrary; they are allegorical. Like e.g. Pieternelleke Degelijk and Sara Burgerhart in Betje Wolff and Aagje Deken's *Sara Burgerhart* (1872), the name 'Mandaat' is tellingly allegorical.⁴⁰ A mandate is an authorization, especially, but not exclusively used in politics. In French, however, the term mandate is also used for a remote control: a 'mandat à distance'. The protagonist Mandaat can be understood then as a remote control of language and text. As a librarian, he is in control of the world of text and language. He is in the centre of that universe. But there is more to it. Let me quote once more the passage already quoted twice: 'Those comparisons! The isomorphic nature of it all! Each phenomenon rimes with another phenomenon, in an endless monotony, as the wave rimes with the wave and each word in a dictionary refers to other words. Everything orders itself in concentric circles around one centre: Mandaat.' Mandaat is the centre out of which the

⁴⁰ Goedegebuure, too, discusses the name Mandaat as an allegorical name: 'De held van *Letter & Geest* die de programmannaam Mandaat draagt, probeert zich zonder al te veel success te onderwerpen aan het evangelische gebod van zelfverloochening en dienstbaarheid' [The protagonist of *Letter and Ghost* who has the programmatic name Mandaat, tries to submit himself without any success to the Biblical commandment of self-denial and servility], in Jaap Goedegebuure, 'Over Willem Jan Otten: Niet zijn waar je bent', *De Revisor*, 27 (2000), 42-52 (p. 44). Whereas his allegorical reading results in the biblical message of self-denial and subservience, mine results in the foregrounding of allegory as a mode of reading.

ordering of allegorical rhyming originates. It is not God, but Mandaat who is in control from a distance, or who is authorized, to create the world. It is in and through language that he transforms Word into Flesh. The fact that he uses biblical imagery to articulate these postmodern ideas of the performativity of language should, however, not be understood as an expression of Kellendonk's religious feelings. It is rather a form of sacrilege to use biblical expressions as the 'dieptestructuur'⁴¹ [depth structure] on top of which the metabolism of allegorical language and imagery can grow and multiply.

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⁴¹ Kellendonk, *De brieven*, p. 458.

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