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Taalbenadering en taalhouding in werk van Jacob Israël de Haan: zuiverheid, gekunsteldheid, dubbelzinnigheid, expressiviteit

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Engelse samenvatting

What does this dissertation on De Haan and language contribute to the ongoing research on De Haan? As I explain in the introduction, this dissertation does not discuss in detail the person and life of Jacob Israël de Haan himself. The focus has been on the conceptualisation of language and De Haan's use of language. By making this choice, I do not reduce De Haan to his decadent period, which is often the case, but rather consider his work from the meta-level of language. This dissertation not only shows how De Haan views the phenomenon of language and its use, but also what he is capable of with language, in which way he uses language as a flexible instrument, which language approaches he uses in the process, which language attitudes he can adopt and to what end.

To examine all this more specifically, I have made a selection from his extensive oeuvre: firstly, his dissertation *Rechtskundige Significa en hare toepassing op de begrippen "aansprakelijk, verantwoordelijk, toerekeningsvatbaar"*, that is: *Legal Significa and its application to the concepts of "liable, responsible, accountable"*. This text, on the language of law, is discussed in chapter one. Secondly, I chose his homoerotic novels *Pijpelijntjes*, (a title that is difficult to translate since it refers to a neighbourhood in Amsterdam called "de Pijp") and *Pathologieën*, or *Pathologies*, discussed in chapter two. Thirdly, I focused on *In Russische gevangenissen – In Russian Prisons* – discussed in chapters three and four. This is a travelogue and at the same time an indictment against injustice in the form of a pamphlet. I have not discussed the four works mentioned in chronological order of publication. I did not focus on the development – and then in reverse chronological order – of De Haan's thinking, but on understanding his complex use of language, language approach and language attitude. The choice of these divergent and sometimes even seemingly contradictory works gives a good indication of which language approaches and language attitudes De Haan was capable of and which he was able to adopt. I have further classified these in the respective chapters as based on the following concepts: "purity", "artificiality", "ambiguity" and "expressiveness". The tension in his work, I have shown, lies in the conscious pursuit of pure logical language in his dissertation and the opposite, which is the conscious use of seemingly illogical or "impure" language in the other works studied.

My research took De Haan's dissertation, in which he provides a theoretical and philosophical reflection on language, as a starting point. The proposition that De Haan makes at the beginning of his dissertation, namely "that we have the

certainty that we do not understand and are not understood” (15), and the reason for this, namely that the expressive capacity of language would not be sufficient to express ourselves properly – especially about matters that affect us most deeply – intrigued me and challenged me to investigate the context in which I could place De Haan’s language research. One question was: why would De Haan think about language if, as he argues, people cannot understand each other anyway and neither can they be understood? Or was that precisely why he thought so deeply about it?

The context I considered relevant concerns the social, political and scientific arena at the time of writing his dissertation *Rechtskundige Significa*. It concerns the years between 1912-1916, the period in which the First World War (1914-1918) developed and partially took place. This war brought about a change in the spiritual and cultural climate within Europe. People sought a language in which they could understand each other instead of lose themselves in the irrationality of war, to quote Jaap Meijer (De Haan’s first biographer). This eventually led to the foundation of the Signifische Kring in 1917, a society that was dedicated, among other things, to purity of speech, and of which De Haan also became a member. During this period, De Haan not only acted as an aspiring jurist, but in that capacity he was also given the opportunity to visit a number of prisons in Russia. However, when World War I broke out, contact with Russia was severed. Before starting his dissertation, De Haan, influenced by the ideas of the Tachtigers, had written two homoerotic novels, *Pijpelijntjes* and *Pathologieën*. The reception of both novels was decidedly poor, which was reason enough for De Haan to stop writing novels and devote himself to a completely different genre, that of academic research, in the context of language and law.

In his dissertation, De Haan makes frequent use of the ideas of various contemporary scholars in the fields of language, philosophy, psychology, law, mathematics and medicine. He discusses conflicting propositions of scholars, for example the international debate on whether language is logical or psychological, or whether language and thought are one, and then takes up his own position. He also adopts certain concepts from English, such as “Sense”, “Meaning” and “Significance”, all from the *Significs* (semantics) of British philosopher Lady Victoria Welby. He translates these concepts and gives them his own meaning.

Scholars in the field of language who were of particular significance for De Haan and his dissertation were mainly European. First, there was the French linguist and semanticist Michel Bréal (also the teacher of Ferdinand de Saussure), who was working on signification and meaning change, linguistic purity (that

is, the influence of foreign words on one's own language, resulting in either the rejection or integration of the foreign words) and the human influence on this. Then there is the aforementioned Lady Welby, whose *Significs* were dedicated to improving the language of the time. She felt that the development of language had lagged behind the industrialisation of the nineteenth century, and advocated avoiding (incorrect) use of imagery, and offering better education. Finally, there is the Dutch "Tachtiger", writer, general practitioner and psychiatrist Frederik van Eeden, a very close friend of De Haan and acquaintance of Lady Welby, who also explored language comprehension and the philosophy of language.

In addition to these direct or explicit influences on the thinker De Haan and his dissertation, a general atmosphere, or 'what was in the air', can also be identified, such as from scholars in the field of semiotics, Russian formalism and Prague Structuralism. I mentioned the Swiss linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure (a pupil of Bréal), who studied language as a closed sign system and introduced the binary composition of the word in signifier and signified. A second indirect influence is the American philosopher and semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce, who studied the process of signification, semiosis, as a matter of pragmatics. A little later the Russian formalist Roman Jakobson introduced the well-known model of communication, of which the poetic function, a function that draws attention to language itself, is part. A fourth figure is the Prague structuralist Jan Mukařovský, who introduced the concept pair of artefact versus aesthetic object in art, in which the process of reception and breaking through our automatic perception ("foregrounding" and "backgrounding") plays an important role. Finally, there is the German philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin, who, like De Haan, studied the essence and purity of language and man's influence on it. De Haan thus writes his dissertation in a much broader field of scholars thinking about the actual or proper use of language.

In chapter one, "Het juridisch zuiver gebruik van taal" – The pure use of language in a legal context – I explore how De Haan views the essence of language in his dissertation *Rechtskundige Significa*, how and this immediately led to a stalemate. De Haan approaches language from the perspective of its great value as a means of expression, distinguishing between the capacity of expression, the power of expression and the strength of expression of language. He describes language as a unity of opposites, giving it the qualifications of "personal" (every person speaks his or her own language), "social" (people should be able to understand each other's words), "instantaneous" (a spoken word is no longer

independently perceptible, while a word not yet spoken does not yet exist) and “ineliminable” (language does not cease to exist as long as it is passed on to the next generation). He also gives a somewhat cryptic description of the essence of the word and the essence of the thing. He argues that the essence of both is the essence of the Spirit. De Haan does not elaborate on this statement.

At the same time, and therein lies the tension, he bases his argument on the assumptions that we have the certainty that we do not understand and are not understood, that every time a word is used it has a different meaning, that for a speaker and a listener the same word does not have an equal meaning either, that every language is relatively imperfect, in short that the expressive capacity of language is deficient. De Haan blames this on man, who is said to have neglected language and thus its expressive capacity, especially when it comes to the legal language of the time. The cause of not understanding and not being understood, according to De Haan, lies both in the expressive capacity of language and in man’s inability to use and maintain language properly.

In addition, the use of imagery – Lady Welby speaks mainly of incorrect use of imagery; De Haan of “nonsensical” use – is a factor that complicates communication and can cause confusion. He illustrates this with an example. When searching for the meaning of a word, De Haan argues, the question is often “What meaning does the word meaning *have*”? The verb “have” suggests a figure of speech or imagery because, De Haan argues, a word is not a living being that can “have” something, in the sense of possessing it. A more correct formulation according to De Haan is: “What *is* the meaning of the word meaning”? Paradoxically, De Haan observed from the phrase “to *have* meaning”, that people still seem to be able to understand each other even when they use nonsensical imagery. At the end of his dissertation, De Haan will therefore conclude that a pure and logical use of language in human communication is not feasible. But justice must still be spoken. And then language purity is crucial.

As a future legal scholar, De Haan became aware of complaints about the status of the legal language, not only within the Netherlands but also abroad. The legal language had been neglected – too incomprehensible for the layman and too imprecise for the jurist – resulting in confusing terminology. It also became clear to De Haan, from his involvement with the compilers of Dictionaries, that descriptions of jurisprudential concepts such as the terms “liable, responsible and accountable” were deficient. In his dissertation, De Haan investigates the causes of this deficiency and strives to establish the correct meaning of the three words

mentioned. He bases this on the premise: “Better Language is Better Law”. The correct meaning is, in De Haan’s words, the Sense, the most literal, original meaning of a word. The language that De Haan had in mind here is in a sense similar to paradisiacal language, as Benjamin names it. Every word has originally received only one fixed meaning from man and as such is understandable and usable for everyone. The language approach that De Haan adopts in his dissertation is thus that of a meaning based on purity and logic of language use.

The possibility thus created, according to De Haan, leads to better jurisprudence. He is convinced that the *meaning* of the words used (legal terms, in the context of this dissertation) can lead to a purer judgement and thus ultimately to an ethically stronger administration of justice. Indeed, for the jurist, language is the means of expression par excellence: after all, jurisdiction comes from Latin, with *juris* meaning law and *dictio* meaning the act of *speaking*. Language is pre-eminently performative here. The difficulty with this, however, according to De Haan, is that lawyers explain words with words and these words are again explained with words, in an endless process. A pure and logical legal language, De Haan argues, could improve the process of exercising *jurisdiction*. To this end, De Haan offers the methodology he developed, the *Signifiek*, or *Significs*: the systematic theory of the capacity of expression. The main premise within this methodology is that legal experts use the original meaning of a word (in our case: a legal term) as much as possible, i.e. its *pure* form, and either reject or use any changes in meaning, in both cases accompanied by a thorough argumentation as to why that meaning was chosen.

The reception of De Haan’s *Signifiek* by jurists of the time was moderately positive. They found his methodology, based on the study of language as a closed system of signs in line with De Saussure’s approach, a step back in time and preferred a psychological view of language, which involves several factors other than language alone. They ultimately believed that a logical and pure use of words would add nothing of substance to a judicial decision. De Haan, on the other hand, examined on the one hand how words acquire or have meaning (and then distinguished between Sense, Intention and Value of a word); what they refer to (e.g. whether they are referring to a concrete reality or not); what causes meaning change and shift; and what is needed to communicate. On the other hand, De Haan emphasised the role of man, who has language, as a powerful means of expression, at his disposal. Man, according to De Haan, is the main culprit of the neglect of (legal) language and paradoxically, man is also precisely the one who can protect

language from neglect. De Haan sees his language philosophy, the *Signifiek*, the systematic theory of the capacity of expression, as a scientific methodology to counter this neglect, to make language flexible and keep it at the desired level.

After the starting point provided by De Haan's dissertation, I then examined De Haan's language approaches in the novels *Pijpelijntjes* and *Pathologieën* and the language attitudes in the travelogue *In Russische gevangenissen*. I partially left aside the difference in genres. In a dissertation, for instance, factuality plays an important role, in a novel this is not the case (at all). Within the framework of my dissertation, it was more relevant to examine how language in both novels and the travelogue acquires meaning in relation to the way the process of meaning production is pursued in De Haan's dissertation. My analyses show that the difference could not be greater.

In chapter two, "Het primaat van taal: De Haans flexibiliteit ten opzichte van taal" – The primacy of language: De Haan's flexibility vis-à-vis language – purity of word usage gives way to artificiality of language, shifting the emphasis from language as a *means* of expression to that of *capacity* of expression, another aspect of language that De Haan mentions in his dissertation. This observation led to the question: What can and what does De Haan do with language, here, and why? Here I use a concept developed by Ernst van Alphen, in line with Roland Barthes: the reading-attitude. This is an attitude the reader can adopt to read a novel according to a different literary tradition than the usual one. For instance, a realistic novel can be read in a postmodernist way, or a postmodern novel realistically. Especially in *Pijpelijntjes* and *Pathologieën*, I read characteristics from various literary movements, such as realism, naturalism, the decadent movement, impressionism and modernism, which De Haan has consciously or unconsciously incorporated in them. As a result, his language use and approach constantly enable different reading-attitudes, or provoke them.

Pijpelijntjes is a novel referred to as naturalistic within Dutch literature. In clear language, the reader is presented with a picture of a social reality governed by laws of *race*, *environment*, and *moment*. In *Pijpelijntjes*, the banal realities of everyday life and the working-class environment in which the two main characters Joop and Sam move are prominently featured. But, as I pointed out, there is more to it. The vernacular language used by De Haan and its phonetic rendering not only seem to emphasise this everyday reality, but also add additional characteristics to the genre of the novel, which it did not have according to the conventions of the time. Joop and Sam's homosexual relationship, for example, is taken for granted in

the working-class setting depicted. History shows that at the time when De Haan wrote *Pijpelijntjes*, a homosexual relationship was anything but commonplace and acceptable, and was sometimes even punishable. By describing this relationship “ordinarily”, in the context of a working-class environment, and without much fuss, De Haan also makes the relationship ordinary and commonplace.

On the other hand, a sense of alienation (for instance the process of “foregrounding” and “backgrounding”, as introduced by the Prague structuralists) is created by strange and sometimes surprising combinations of words, also called neologisms. These linked words, though often from the same paradigm, not only *describe* a reality but also evoke it, sensitively and performatively. Social reality as we know it in the naturalistic novel thus acquires an extra dimension in *Pijpelijntjes*, namely that of artificiality, through the emphatic use of the literary, linguistic capacity of expression. Thus, the novel *Pijpelijntjes* can be read according to the conventions of the naturalist novel, but the neologisms provoke a different reading attitude.

In *Pijpelijntjes*, De Haan thus abandons his conviction of pure and logical language use. Instead, he opts for flat vernacular on the one hand and a language approach based on artificiality on the other. In the novel, the frequent use of neologisms, strange word combinations combined with vernaculars and their phonetic rendering, distract from the need for meaning of a word in its most original form, as is central to De Haan’s dissertation. Words are linked together in an original way, which also links meanings of words. With this “unusual” (or a-grammatical) linking of words and meanings, De Haan creates a reality that is almost tangible to the reader, such as that of a cosy get-together in a working-class neighbourhood, but also that of frightening death throes. The artificiality of words draws attention to the language itself. The aim then is less to describe an everyday reality, but rather serves a performative purpose: language must intensify the experience of a reality.

Écriture artiste is also at play in *Pathologieën*, but here from the perspective of the protagonist Johan describing reality in the utmost detail, almost to the point of nervousness. Johan’s impressions (a characteristic of impressionism) and his subjective perception of a complex reality (a characteristic of modernism) are captured in language here. De Haan’s language approach hinges on a *preciosity* of words here. The preciosity of word use gives precious value not only to objects but also to their experiences. Here, language works both constatively and performatively.

But, besides Johan’s refined style, another important aspect at play in the novel *Pathologieën* is Johan’s homosexual relationship with his sadomasochistic

lover, the painter René. This relationship is anything but flawless, or loving, and is cruelly manipulated by René's use of language and behaviour. Out of a sense of boredom, the Baudelarian *ennui*, also known as *spleen*, René pushes the limits on Johan, not only in terms of physical and mental abuse, but especially in terms of language use and communication. René often says the opposite of what he means and thus invalidates his words, with the result that Johan cannot defend himself against this and is silenced: his language falls silent. René's language turns out to be extremely powerful and performative. His language eliminates itself and ultimately the relationship between Johan and himself, and even Johan's life, through a possible suicide. The language approach that De Haan takes here for both Johan and René is partly that of clear and unambiguous use of words. When Johan describes the environment, he uses grammatically sound sentences and only a few times a strange word combination. When René asks Johan to take his own life by ingesting poison offered in a precious box, he does so in clear wording that is not open to multiple interpretations. De Haan's language approach here is related to that of the decadents in three ways: on the one hand, clear language describes something pernicious, on the other hand, language is an unreliable instrument of pernicious manipulation, and thirdly, neologisms make it possible to realise a new or refined sensibility.

Thus, in both novels we find both a language that has the expressive capacity to describe subjective impressions with extreme precision (e.g. in Johan's case), and a language that can eliminate itself by refuting what is said at the same time (e.g. in René's case). In *Pathologieën*, René's language proves more powerful than Johan's, and ultimately very effective. Language as a means of expression, or the expressive capacity of language, shifts in this case towards expressive *power*, another aspect that De Haan names in his dissertation in relation to language as a means of expression.

The expressive power of language, in turn, leads to the linguistic *strength* of expression. This aspect is discussed in chapters three and four of this dissertation. Chapter three, titled "Het politiek-retorische doel van taal" – The political-rhetorical aim of language – focuses on the travelogue *In Russische gevangnissen*, showing that De Haan's language approach here is based on irony. Rather than being pure, or artificial, the use and meaning of his words is ambiguous. The expressive strength of language is therefore linked to the theme of "ambiguity" in this chapter. The use of the ambiguous meaning of language, which De Haan so vocally

argues against in his dissertation, seems justified in the context of the precarious situation of Russia's political prisoners at the time.

Here, De Haan was directly influenced by the Russian prince Kropotkin, an anarchist who fled to England and whose book *The Terror in Russia*, among other things, draws attention to the miserable conditions of political prisoners in what was then Russia and calls for universal solidarity. Unlike Lady Welby, whom De Haan knew from her work but never got to speak to personally, De Haan did meet Kropotkin in person and also stayed in written contact with him. Kropotkin's descriptions of the situation of political prisoners within the Russian justice system prompted De Haan to undertake several trips to Russia to see for himself what Kropotkin writes about. The purpose of these trips is to be able to investigate for himself (also in the context of his dissertation) how the Russian legal system works and what the situation of political prisoners is like, in reality. In what seems to be merely a travelogue, a transformation appears to take place in terms of language use and language attitude. That is, several *personae* are introduced, each with its own form of language use, and its own language attitude.

De Haan begins his journey and investigation into the situation in Russian prisons as an objective scholar: his language use conforms to the conventions of a scientific investigation, focusing on factuality, with or without providing figures. The facts are given to the reader based on two official documents given to De Haan by the Russian government, abbreviated *Démenti* and *Notice*. These documents are said to reflect the real situation in Russian prisons, according to the Russian government. De Haan takes these documents as a starting point for his own experiences and gradually comes to the conclusion that the writings are far from accurate representations of what he himself sees and experiences. His position as an objective scholar forces him to relate himself to the distorted representation of reality in Russian texts. And because of what he sees and experiences, his feelings and emotions start to play an increasingly important role and this changes his position and, by consequence, his language attitude.

In this travelogue, De Haan acts as whistle-blower, prosecutor, aid worker, philanthropist, pleader and believer. These various roles can ultimately be subsumed under two major *personae*, those of (*liberal*) *ironist* and *parrhesiast*. The common denominator of the liberal ironist and the parrhesiast is truth, but this simultaneously creates a tension between the two. The persona of parrhesiast compels one to tell the truth unflinchingly, this time not about oneself and for one's own sake, but about a collective of political prisoners and for their sake. The

words should therefore be unambiguous and, following De Haan's dissertation, pure and logical in structure. However, to avoid harming the position of political prisoners, a different tactic is needed. And that other tactic, or use of language, as I have described, is that of the liberal ironist. His starting point is to tell the truth without harming himself and others. His tool for doing so is the stylistic device of irony, making the concept of "ambiguity" of language a reality.

In disguised language, in the persona of liberal ironist, De Haan can still make his voice heard, without harming political prisoners, or openly accusing the Russian government. Irony, like a persona, acts like a mask. In other words, the original meaning of words (their pure meaning, as per De Haan's dissertation) acts as a mask behind which the meaning ultimately intended is hidden. It is up to the reader to discover the meaning and impact of the irony. In part, this process resembles the aforementioned *reading* attitude, with the possibility of constantly reading a different meaning in a text. The difference is that with irony, the ambiguity is used as a weapon by the author and should preferably be discovered by the reader, if he or she is susceptible to it, whereas with a reading attitude, it remains to be seen whether the things a reader recognises in a text have been deliberately put that way in the text by the author.

The expressive strength of language should be present in the use of irony. However, De Haan notes, the use of irony does not prove ultimately effective when it comes to the seriousness and the experience of the issues. Here he is confronted with his own thesis stated in his dissertation, namely that the expressive capacity of language is inadequate to express our deepest feelings. In this context, De Haan opts for yet another strategy: the use of the stylistic device of repetition and the lyrical form of songs and a poem. Here, the expressive strength of language shifts (back) to the expressive *capacity* of language. This is the subject of chapter four.

"Expressiveness" is the central concept in chapter four: "Het apostrofisch-humanitaire vermogen in taal" – The apostrophic-humanitarian capacity in language. Here as well, I focus on De Haan's travelogue *In Russische gevangenschap*. This expressiveness of language is emphasised by the songs and poem that De Haan introduces in the narrative text. It is the poets par excellence, Lady Welby says, who are able to use language in all its flexibility and bring it to expression. In the personae of poet and singer, De Haan repeatedly expresses himself passionately in his poem and 'sings' with fervour in his songs about the pitiful humanitarian condition in which political prisoners have to live. Sometimes the impressions are so intense that De Haan becomes silent, his song ceases, his language stutters

and lapses into repetition. Everything he wants to say seems only possible to be expressed in the lyrical apostrophe.

Besides lyricism, De Haan makes frequent use of the stylistic device of repetition in *In Russische gevangenissen*. The repetitions are at the level of the narrative text, of the songs and the poem, and merge into each other. As a result, repetitions in the narrative text can be recognised in the songs and the poem and vice versa. The many repetitions De Haan uses in *In Russische gevangenissen* might give the impression that the capacity of language here is really too limited to formulate other words or phrases. However, by repeating a message – in this case, a call for solidarity and justice for political prisoners – over and over again in almost the same words and phrases, the repetitions act as refrains. The refrains allow for the recurrence of a particular core message towards the reader. They make a clear appeal to the reader's attention, in my reading analogous to Schlegel's parabasis, and in this way are extremely functional.

The language used by De Haan in *In Russische gevangenissen* is thus a combination of prose, lyricism (songs and a poem), stylistic devices (irony and repetition), and fundamentally theatrical figures (apostrophe and parabasis). De Haan shows what the expressive capacity of language is capable of, even if, in his own words, that capacity would never be sufficient to express our deepest feelings. Like irony, the refrains can also be interpreted as masked speech: behind the repetition of the same message over and over again in often the same words, lies the actual meaning of De Haan's message. The reality he wants to evoke within the context of *In Russische gevangenissen* is that of a world in which political prisoners are treated fairly. Just as De Haan argues in his dissertation for logical and pure language use, not only for the language of law but also for other professional languages, so he argues in his travelogue for the just treatment of the political prisoners of the time, and through the reader, of all those suffering from injustice. This is, well ahead of its time, in line with Richard Rorty's utopia, which is also about all people who are wronged in one way or another.

Although De Haan himself doubted the expressive capacity of language, he realised at the same time how powerful language could be as a means of expression. Chapter one focuses on the power and effect of a logical and pure legal language: better language would lead to better jurisdiction. In chapter two, language proves capable of elevating an everyday reality, such as life in a working-class neighbourhood, into art through neologisms, vernaculars and their phonetic rendering, and of describing something unusual for the time, such as Joop and Sam's

homosexual relationship, in such a way that the relationship also becomes ordinary. At the same time, De Haan's language use here intensifies a perception of reality or lifts it to another plane. In chapter three, De Haan uses language as a weapon. Using the stylistic device of irony and the specific language of the personae *liberal ironist* and *parrhesiast*, De Haan is able to name and criticise humanitarian grievances, such as he saw in some Russian prisons, in veiled terms. In chapter four, through the stylistic device of repetition and the lyrical forms of a song and a poem, the language appeals to the reader's sense of solidarity in improving the humanitarian conditions of political prisoners.

In the four works I have examined, I have discovered in De Haan's language approaches and language attitudes a language that has the capacity and flexibility to be pure, artificial, ambiguous and expressive at the same time; to create and evoke banal and harrowing realities; to intensify the experience of them; to denounce truths and make them debatable; to describe and thus create beauty; to appeal to the imagination; to make appeals for justice; and to partially dissolve it by speaking. Given the versatility, contradiction and flexibility of De Haan's language, embodied in the various language approaches and language attitudes I have described, it is not adequate to reduce De Haan, as author who first and foremost belongs to the decadent tradition. Based on language approaches and language attitudes, he is given a well-deserved place in a renewed light within the De Haan research. This does not exhaust my proposed approach. Based on the insights obtained within this dissertation, it would be worthwhile to investigate language approaches and language attitudes of other writers who are considered part of a certain, more or less fixed literary tradition – such as Louis Couperus, for example – in a similar way.