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Engagement for Engagement's Sake. An Ontological Rethinking of the Politics of Literature.

Author

AUKJE VAN ROODEN

Affiliation

UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

Abstract: In this article, I present a new paradigm that considers literature's current political relevance. In contrast to the 20th century idea of literary engagement, such that literature was conceived of as either autonomous and un-political or explicitly committed to some political cause, this article aims to develop a view of literary engagement consonant with our 21st century living conditions that are perhaps more complex, fluid and volatile than ever before. Using a philosophical framework inspired by Jean-Luc Nancy, I approach the question of engagement through an ontological rethinking of literature. I argue that recent developments in contemporary literature show engagement with engagement as such; that is, with the experience of being connected, rather than some explicit political cause. Taking the work of Dutch millennial writer Lieke Marsman as an exemplary case study, I articulate this 20th to 21st century shift regarding political engagement as a shift from '*littérature engagée*' to 'engagement for engagement's sake'.

I. FROM THE 20TH TO THE 21ST CENTURY

When rethinking the political relevance of literature, the first question to ask is, of course, whether literature needs to be politically relevant at all. Why would literature need to involve itself with politics? Moreover, does literature need to be relevant at all, politically or otherwise?¹ And if so, why, and for what cause? Usually, reflections and debates about the politics of literature emerge in times where literature's political potential is felt to be lacking.

And indeed, nowadays this potential seems to have minimised. It has been a while since a literary work stirred political debate, let alone set off a political movement.² In our everyday lives the book seems to have lost the battle for our attention. Even in the Parisian subway— to my mind one of the last bastions where one can catch a reading public in the act — books have largely made way for smartphones. And the books that are written and read, so to say, on the skin of time do not so much provide political direction, but rather reflect the societal confusion in which we find ourselves these days.

This holds especially for the works of so-called millennial writers, the generation of young writers born between 1981 and 1996 who debuted in the 21st century.³ There is something strange about millennial literature. On the one hand, this generation's literary works are notoriously *un-committed*, depicting privileged, narcissistic young adults who are so indulged in navel-gazing that they hardly notice the world around them. Moreover, these works are often of a highly autobiographical or at least very personal nature, which stresses their self-absorption even more. On the other hand, however, millennial authors have clearly introduced a form of social awareness into the domain of literature that is unprecedented, the awareness of a generation that is inextricably connected to a global world and whose works are naturally permeated with a critical consciousness of gender, race and climate.

How to reconcile both observations? How can the navel-gazing and self-absorbed literature of this millennial generation have at the same time a political relevance? Of course, a world can be seen in a grain of sand and we may be dealing here with a new variation of the feminist adage 'the personal is political', but these interpretations seem too easy. Though not entirely absent, identity politics, or even politics more generally, does not seem to be millennial literature's core issue. Something else is at stake, which this paper aims to articulate. Rather than being involved with this or that identity politics, or with any political cause for that matter, these authors are involved with engagement's ontological status.⁴ But what notion of engagement are we using when making this claim? And in what sense would it be politically relevant?

Since the 20th century, the paradigmatic model of engaged literature is embodied in the idea of what Jean-Paul Sartre termed *littérature engagée*, that is, literature written by writers who commit themselves to a specific political cause — emancipation of the working class, liberation of the oppressed, giving a voice to those 'without voice' — and who use their pen in an effort to bring the realisation of that cause one step closer.⁵ In his unparalleled essay 'Resistance and Revenge: The Semantics of Commitment in the Aftermath of Liberation', Tony Judt clearly describes this typically 20th century notion of literary engagement by distinguishing six common tropes generally used by engaged authors: resistance, violence, enemy, collaboration, seduction and treason.⁶ Quite apart from the typical post-war vocabulary, it is clear that he situates the core of this 20th century notion of literary engagement in

the idea of *struggle*, that is, of *agonism*. According to this view, engaged literature *resists* hostile regimes or structures, *denounces* social wrongs or *counters* dangerous ideologies. Consequently, this 20th century notion of engaged literature assumes clear friends and foes, or at least a clear status quo against which to react.

This is, however, exactly what is lacking in our 21st century. Where Sartre, indeed in the aftermath of liberation, could still rely on manageable moral and social choices – the war had just been settled, collaborators had to be punished, resistance heroes honoured, the communist promise fulfilled – the socio-political situation of our 21st century is way more complex and fluid. For what cause do you want to write? The climate crisis? But what about the refugee crisis? Or religious extremism? Or unbridled market capitalism? Even the goal of human freedom that inspired Sartre’s commitment is suspect today. Within this inextricable web of social-political choices, the only manageable ambition left for today’s millennial writers seems to be the highly individual and, in a way, more modest ambition to become a ‘good’ or ‘authentic’ person. But even the roadmap to that goal is missing. For the lesson learned by this millennial generation is that nobody knows what ‘good’ or ‘authentic’ means. Add to that a non-authoritarian upbringing and the confusion is complete. As a millennial protagonist aptly put it: ‘Since I grew up without any idea, not even a religion . . . I have no native language when it comes to meaning, no connecting thread to weave through the world surrounding me.’⁷

This example, taken from Dutch millennial literature, illustrates the characteristics proper to 21st century forms of engagement. This quote stems from *Het tegenovergestelde van een mens* (*The opposite of a human being*, 2017), the debut novel of Lieke Marsman (b. 1990), who is currently the Dutch poet laureate (‘Dichter des Vaderlands’ 2021-2023). Her work is exemplary, because she both clearly represents the millennial generation *and* is very much engaged with contemporary society, both in her role as poet laureate and in her literary works. Tellingly, her debut novel is one of the first examples of Dutch ‘climate fiction’, be it in a typical ‘millennial’ way. In this novel, Ida, a young climate researcher, embarks on an internship at a research institute in Italy that plans to blow up an old dam in order to restore the local habitat. Although Ida appears to be genuinely concerned with the environment and has tried to distance herself from anthropocentric worldviews since childhood, it is all but evident that her actions are motivated by ecological concerns. Not only does she travel to Italy by plane, but her decision to work at the climate institute seems driven mainly by an egocentric motivation to pass her time. The night before her departure, she declares, ‘Tonight feels like the start of a long vacation’.⁸ Ida appears more concerned with her girlfriend Robin than climate change. Whereas a typically engaged novel would present a meticulous account of the progress or difficulties of the attempt to restore the natural ecosystem, here the reader is mainly given

an account of the progress and difficulties of Ida's relationship with Robin. When the dam finally bursts, it is not because of the climate institute's effort, but simply because of erosion.

Instead of embracing the cause of countering climate change with full conviction, Marsman's protagonist lets herself be taken away by all forms of distractions, seemingly in order to avoid rather than to assume responsibility. As we learn from the novel; however, the basis for this distraction is not her *lack* of ideological guidelines, but rather an *abundance*, whether neo-Marxism, eco-phenomenology or mindfulness therapies. As Marsman's protagonist puts it, 'Much like weather changes . . . today this [ideology] determines my activities, tomorrow another one'.⁹ Equally inspiring for her, ideologies come and go, changing from one season to the next.

For Marsman – again, her work is exemplary for the millennial generation as such – this changeability also concerns the phenomenon of time itself.¹⁰ This generation no longer holds a 20th century anthropocentric belief that time develops in a linear fashion in the direction of some utopian or dystopian end point. '*Something happened*', the protagonist of Marsman's novel says, '*and sometime later, something else happened. But these two events had nothing to do with each other.*'¹¹ This nonlinear construction of time is also reflected in the fragmentary narrative structure typical of most millennial works. In Marsman's case, for instance, prose alternates with poems, interviews and essayistic parts. Millennial literature is fragmentary, because time itself is elastic, immobile or at best cyclic. Time flies and even slips through one's fingers, yet it no longer drives human history in a linear fashion. It goes without saying that under these circumstances, literature's engagement is radically different than its agonistic form in the 20th century. Anyone looking for a clear political intervention in our new century's literature is unavailingly clinging to a 20th century view of social engagement.¹²

II. FROM AUTONOMY TO RELATIONALITY

What is needed then is a rethinking of the politics of literature in a way that better suits the 21st century. My suggestion is that we shift our attention to literature's *mode of being*, that is, its *ontology*.¹³ When it comes to recognising literature's engagement, we must ask ourselves very different questions. It's no longer useful to ask the narrow questions that guided us in the wake of Sartre's conception of *littérature engagée*, namely: What purpose does this book serve? What topic does it deal with? What audience does it address? We rather need to ask more general questions, and an even more fundamental one, namely: Why write at all? How is the existence of literature as such politically relevant? Not of this specific book or genre, but of literature as such. Why do we want there to be something like literature? What purpose does *that* serve? Or to put it more dramatically, what would a life, a time, a society look like if there were no such thing as literature?¹⁴

Rethinking the politics of literature in light of the 21st century, in other words, demands that we rethink the way literature itself exists. As with outmoded modes of engagement, shifting from a 20th to a 21st century framework proves helpful. The dominant way in which literature's mode of being has been conceived, from the moment of its birth in the 18th century as a modern phenomenon to this very day, is in terms of its aesthetic *autonomy*. Literature, according to this view, is an activity, experience or work that exists, or should exist, independently from the laws of politics, science, religion or the market. To exaggerate matters slightly, according to this view, literature is considered to be a haughty being remotely withdrawn in a beautiful ivory tower, where it creates its own universe in splendid isolation. This picture of literature's autonomous status is a caricature of course – both in its utopian and dystopian form – but a caricature that has formed the *Leitmotiv* since literature's birth in the Romantic era.¹⁵

It is this autonomous ontological status of literature that 20th century theorists like Sartre attacked in order to grant literature a more political role. For them, literature should shake off its autonomous status, acknowledge its fundamental engagement with the world and assume an active position within this world, as if it were a weapon, a soapbox or a megaphone. Inspired by Sartre, William Marx, for instance, describes the autonomous ontological status granted to literature as a congenital disease that cannot but lead to literature's social and political weakness.¹⁶ In a more paradoxical vein, others have *defended* literature's autonomous status for similarly political reasons. According to this view, literature's autonomous mode as being *withdrawn* from the world grants it the unique possibility to open another world, a world that can give voice to the hitherto unheard-of.¹⁷ In granting literature its political potential, *both* 20th century perspectives connect literature's ontological status – respectively as engaged with the world or partly withdrawn from it – to the agonistic model discussed above, the model in which literary works are conceived of as reacting against clearly delineated power structures or a certain status quo. But what are we to think of this ontological status when this new generation of writers denounces a progressive unfolding of history that no longer delineates friends from foes and fails to disclose no other voice than the abundant plurivocal voice of life itself?

Indeed, novels like Marsman's *Het tegenovergestelde van een mens* neither clearly side with the cause of climate activism, nor do they carve out a socio-political stance in any other way. We should rather remark how they meticulously map and trace the social itself, the interconnectedness of ideas, persons and movements; and the going back and forth of words, looks, expectations, or 'the noise of us' as Marsman's protagonist calls it.¹⁸ Rather than autonomy or antagonism, *relationality* is central here. What one might call the 'Relational Turn' is thus a more suitable ontological framework for grasping millennial literature. Indeed, an increasing number of scholars describe contemporary literature, or art more generally, in relational terms, as

indicated by their referencing Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory, Lauren Berlant's affect theory or Karen Barad's theory of 'intra-action'.¹⁹ Central to these 21st perspectives is the realisation that we are part of an endless web of relationships and that identity exists precisely by virtue of those relationships.

This steering away from an ontological paradigm of autonomy to one of relationality stresses that literature is not the domain of splendid isolation, an ivory tower remotely withdrawn from the everyday hassle of the normal world. Literature is rather something that is in relation – like every other thing, event or action. According to a relational ontology, to *be* at all can only be understood as a *relational* mode of being. From the moment we exist, in our mother's womb, to the moment we die, we are in relation, with other beings, animate and inanimate, human and non-human. This holds not only for ourselves, but also for everything we do and produce, including literature. Rethinking literature's ontology in a relational way thus demands that we rethink literature *itself* as a way of being-in-relation. That is, it demands that we do not take literature's relationality in a *narrow* sense – as a description of what literature *depicts* or of the social network literature is part of –, but in the *broader* sense, as an experience that is *itself* one of relationality, of establishing relations.²⁰ If we want to rethink literature's politics by rethinking its mode of being, it is this broader perspective that we have to take into account. It is only in this general ontological sense – where literature as such is conceived of as relational – that we can avoid the narrow focus on specifically 'engaged' books that dominated the 20th century – and understand the political potential of literature in a new way.²¹

III. FROM SIGNIFICATION TO SENSE

When developing a politics of literature issuing from this broader perspective on the ontology of literature, the work of French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (1940-2021) proves to be particularly helpful.²² More precisely, his work is helpful in answering the question why *literature* would be of any importance in highlighting our relational mode of being. If literature, like everything else in our world is relational, then what is unique to literature's relational mode of being?²³ And *if* there is a specific mode of relationality that is proper to literature, what would be *politically* relevant about this mode? Why would reading or writing literature be of equal importance to gluing oneself to an oil tanker or organising a Black Lives Matter demonstration – or even of political relevance at all? Or to repeat this very question in Hölderlinean terms: *Wozu Dichter?* What are poets for?

Indeed, as Hölderlin also knew, the answer to this question lies in the fact that we live in *dürftiger Zeit*, in destitute times, not only in 18th century Germany, but again in the 21st century. Or, most accurately, we probably never left the destitute times Hölderlin was talking about. For – and here is where Nancy's broader philosophical perspective is of help – the destitute

times that Hölderlin was talking about are not to be taken in the narrow sense of a specific political, social or ecological crisis, but in the larger *metaphysical* sense. The destitute times, the times of crisis where poets are needed, is the modern secular age where an overarching direction is lacking, where the old systems of signification have lost their persuasiveness and where there no longer seems to be something like a natural course of things. What is lost – so acutely expressed in the ideological confusion of Marsman’s protagonist – is therefore nothing less than *the meaning of the world*.²⁴ According to Nancy, in all of human history, from its earliest stages, we have been driven by what he calls the ‘will to signification’ the desire for a signification that reveals the essence and purpose of the world, the search of which we have always conceived of as the main project of mankind: both the project that should be fulfilled *by* mankind, as well as the project that determines who we are – or should be – *as* mankind.²⁵ As a rule, crises, both social and personal, are moments when this signification is lacking. According to Nancy, our reflex in such destitute times has always been to try to regain the signification of the world, to restore it, in a different and preferably better form.²⁶ But given the overall *metaphysical* crisis of modernity, Nancy holds, such a will to restore the world’s signification can only end in losing that newfound signification over and over again, since the essence of modern times is that there is no such signification.

In other words, in modern times – and here again we can take literary works of the millennial generation as a very acute expression of these times – we have not only lost the old significations of the world, but in a way also the *world* itself as we thought it to be: the world as an appropriable and surveyable globe that moves in a certain direction, and whose course can be understood in terms of identifiable friends and foes. What we have lost is Judt’s and Sartre’s world understood in terms of resistance, revenge and progress. In the late 20th century, literature’s reaction to the loss of this kind of world was either to restore it by appealing to world-forming powers or to present the ruins of the world by means of fragmented narrativity and an overall sense of alienation; a sense of alienation to be sure that was still marked by the same will to signification, by the feeling of a *lack* of signification.

Interestingly, the fragmentation typical of 21st century millennial novels like Marsman’s – of the narrative form as well as that of the depicted lives of the protagonists – is of a very different kind than that of the 20th century. For instance, Marsman’s mix of prose, poetry and essay leads to the feeling of *excess* rather than lack, provides a *proliferation* rather than a disintegration of the narrative structure, and moreover, strikes because of the relative absence of the sense of alienation or inadequacy. ‘Within us, nothing is missing’, as Marsman’s novel puts it.²⁷ It is true that most millennial works, and Marsman’s novel is no exception, present an unsuccessful search for some form of belonging and fulfilment. But this unfulfilment, represented in the fragmentary narrative form, is not so much due to inadequacy or failure, but

rather to an inexhaustible dedication to the search itself. In Marsman's novel, the climate project is a failure in many respects, but what drives this novel and its protagonist is not so much this project's success or failure, but the way in which its dynamic is interwoven with the ongoing dynamics between the protagonist and her girlfriend. Ida, who writes her climate reports like she writes her text messages to her girlfriend, often in one and the same movement, finds inspiration in the inexhaustible and time and again renewed need to stay in touch, rather than the need to achieve some goal.

Drawing on Nancy's insight, we recognise how millennial literature draws our attention to *a different meaning* of the world, to one that at first seems insignificant in light of the problems we are facing today, but to one that makes sense nevertheless. Or rather, indeed, it draws our attention to the world's *sense* rather than *signification*. For in his work Nancy makes a crucial distinction between these two forms of meaning, that is between signification (*signification* in French) and sense (*sens*).²⁸ Where *signification* is the kind of meaning that gives direction, hope, and purpose to the course of things, which gets lost in times of crisis; *sense* is the kind of meaning that is inexhaustible, that cannot be lost because it is the basic, non-appropriable form of sense experienced in our daily relation to the world that Nancy calls 'the simple truth'.²⁹ This simple truth is very well presented in Marsman's novel in Ida's dream prior to her departure to the climate institute. 'Are you sure this is what you want?' a voice asks her in her dream, to which Ida answers: '*If only I had a dog*'.³⁰ If only I had a dog, a living being to take care of, then it would be immediately clear where I have to be and what I need to do. Later in the novel, in a hypothetical conversation the protagonist has with Blaise Pascal, the spiritual father of modern malaise, the shift from a lack of meaning to the experience of sense is expressed even more acutely. Quoting Pascal, the novel says, '*The eternal silence of this space terrifies me*', to which Ida remarks, 'Have a dog one would like to say to Pascal. Take a walk.'³¹ This dog, the *connection* to this dog, a being to hold onto and guide you, if only in circles, is nothing less than the centripetal force of Marsman's novel.³²

In brief, in and with this millennial novel a different kind of meaningful world seems to be pursued. Not the prospective of a better world in which an overall signification has been restored, but a form of meaningfulness that exists independently of the prospective of such restoration. We could say that it is exactly this meaningfulness – expressed in the advice to have a dog, to take a walk, to hold your loved one, granting the world *sense* though not signification – that is central to millennial literature.

IV. FROM *LITTÉRATURE ENGAGÉE* TO *ENGAGEMENT POUR L'ENGAGEMENT*

Moreover, and this is the last step in our line of argumentation, we can state that sense as such is not only central to millennial literature, but also to *all literature*. Hardly a will to signification, literature is an experience of sense, the sense that touches us in our daily being-in-relation. Or as Nancy has it, literature, and art more generally, is a way to *sense* this sense and to *expose* it.³³ Rethinking the politics of literature against the broad metaphysical backdrop suggested here, thus boils down to the claim that literature helps us rethink sense in light of the world's loss of signification. Though this is not an entirely new claim, millennial literature demonstrates in a new and acute way how sense willingly *detaches* itself from the will to signification. This is what distinguishes it from political or social activism. This detachment of sense from the will to signification is very well illustrated by the collaborative text *The Hundreds* (2019), edited by Lauren Berlant and anthropologist Kathleen Stewart, which lays bare the ontological nature of literature's existence in an exemplary way and can be understood as the 'model' of millennial literature. It consists of a large number of short fictional texts, each one only one-hundred words long and combining fiction with theoretical and essayistic elements.³⁴ With each of these 'hundreds', a world has been born, yet it never reaches completion or full signification. There are situations, encounters and conversations, all on the verge of developing themselves, engaging us in their course, but without knowing where they will lead. Attention is therefore drawn to the sense of these encounters, words and actions, rather than to their signification, inviting us to engage with them – not because of where they might lead us, but because of the sense they make.

If millennial engagement lies in the will to sense rather than in the will to signification, can we then still speak of literary *engagement*? Wouldn't holding on to the notion of 'engagement' be a devaluation of the whole idea of politically-engaged literature, or more generally, of a politics of literature? The whole point of this paper has been to prepare us for an understanding for which the label of engaged art *does* apply to 21st century literature. Better still, at the risk of overstating this, we should say that a whole new era in intellectual history is emerging in this millennium. If the 19th century introduced us to the phenomenon of *l'art pour l'art*, art for art's sake and the 20th century engendered *littérature engagée*, we are on the precipice of a whole new phenomenon, what could be called *engagement pour l'engagement*, engagement for engagement's sake, that is, engagement for the sake of engagement itself. In other words, a form of engagement that no longer engages itself with a specific socio-political cause, but one that engages itself with the phenomenon of engagement itself.

On first thought, the idea of engagement for engagement's sake sounds like a contradiction in terms: after all, engagement is always an engagement *with* something or someone else: the working class, equality or the climate. Its

value is, almost per definition *extrinsic*, located in the good cause to which one remains committed. Still, it is not entirely absurd to also assume an *intrinsic* value of engagement, that is, a value that lies in the wish, the desire or the urge to be fully engaged with something *regardless of what that something is* – a pet, a project, a lover or even a stuffed animal – this inanimate, random thing that is the center of the child's world, that makes a place habitable, not because of the thing itself, but because the thing offers the means to feel connected. This form of engagement also explains why sex plays such an important role in millennial literature, including Marsman's novel. It should not – or not only – be interpreted as a sign of this generation's self-absorbed narcissistic attitude, since sex is the ultimate manifestation of engagement for engagement's sake. For while the strive for a good cause finds a natural end when that cause is achieved, sexual passion is by definition *endless*, or only ends in order to be incited again, and again, and again. 'With sex', Marsman's protagonist says, 'the excitement always remains, even if I know exactly what is coming.'³⁵

Put differently, we can say that engagement for engagement's sake is an engagement with *relationality* as such. Not with one specific form of relation, like an intersubjective, sexual or ecological one, but with the kind of relationality at stake in all of these cases, with the ontological relationality as such that makes up our world. In other words, in its exposition of sense a literary work is – to once again borrow a phrasing from Nancy – the *birth* of a world that makes sense between us, in all of its relations, again and again, but never reaches its completion: it presents the coming into being of the web of relations that a world is.³⁶ What matters in the case of engagement for engagement's sake, then, is the fact that the devotion involved in engagement is in itself valuable. The shift from a search for signification to the experience of sense described above in a way already emphasises the kind of value at stake. What seems to drive millennial literature is not so much the need for the fulfilment of a specific cause, but the urge to be involved in the world, again and again anew. Tellingly, more often than not, the period preceding this drive is often one of blatant *apathy*, a feeling of disconnectedness, both in the case of the protagonists and that of the writers themselves. 'No matter what you do, you feel nothing. Whatever you feel, you do nothing', as Marsman's protagonist puts it.³⁷ Indeed, when coming from a situation of apathy – that is to be sure the apathy that threatens all of us in our times – engaging oneself with *engagement*, *wanting* to do that, irrespective of its object, is the most basic responsibility one can assume for one's life and that of others, for existence as such, human and otherwise. This self-involved engagement is not an excuse to withdraw from life, a refusal to face the facts, but, on the contrary, it creates the connective tissue that is needed to feel connected at all. Engagement for engagement's sake is thus *the* form of engagement that follows from a relational ontology, since it is engagement with relationality as such.

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper's search for a new, contemporary, form of literary engagement, my main attempt was to avoid reverting to a 20th century idea of literary engagement that presents literature either as autonomous and un-political or as explicitly committed to some political cause. Instead, taking the Dutch poet laureate's 2017 debut novel *Het tegenovergestelde van een mens* (*The opposite of a human being*) as an exemplary case study, I wanted to stress that the literature of the millennial generation explores a *new* and *different* form of engagement, a form that is consonant with our 21st century living conditions that are perhaps more complex, fluid, and volatile than they have ever been.

In doing so, I have taken four steps. First of all, I have suggested that literature's political relevance should not be understood in the narrow sense, as the political purpose of this or that specific book, but in the broader sense of the political relevance of the *existence* of literature as such. Secondly, I have suggested that we reconsider the ontological nature of literature's existence, steering away from an understanding of literature's mode of being in terms of its autonomy to an understanding of this mode of being as *relational*. Thirdly, I have indicated that we must not understand this relationality in the narrow sense, that is, as a means to describe what literature *depicts* or the way literature functions within societal structures. Instead, I suggested, following the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, that we understand literature against the broader metaphysical backdrop of a modern world lacking an overarching signification. Following this lead, I indicate that we should understand contemporary literature as a search for *sense* rather than signification, a search that surpasses the 20th century discourse of lack and alienation. Fourthly and finally, I have suggested to interpret this search for sense, which is by its very nature an endless and directionless one, as a form of engagement for engagement's sake, that is, as a form of engagement that engages with our relational mode as such.

So where does this simultaneously ambitious and strikingly empty literary politics of an engagement for engagement's sake leave us? At the beginning, I think, at a construction site that is still largely unexplored, but that shows promising and exciting signs of dealing in a new way with the political relevance of literature, tracing it back to its essence, that of the intrinsic value of engagement itself.

A.vanRooden@uva.nl

NOTES

¹Especially in late capitalist times, one should be aware of the effect of finan-

cial impulses on the kind of questions asked with regards to literature. Operating within a capitalist framework, one

cannot *not* ask the question as to what the relevance (or use, or profit) of literature is. Questioning the relevance of this relevance is thus a form of, to my mind, legitimate capitalism critique. In this paper, however, I want to approach matters more broadly or fundamentally, by focusing on the existential relevance of literature as will become clear in what follows.

²One could think of a number of contemporary novels that stirred some form of political debate or at least attention, like the Dutch Lale Gül's *Ik ga leven* (*I am going to live*, 2021) in which she criticises her strict Turkish-Islamic upbringing, Édouard Louis' *Qui a tué mon père?* (*Who killed my father*, 2018) in which he criticises the French attitude towards the working class and also addresses the topic of gay or queer rights, as did for instance Maggie Nelsons' *Argonauts* (2015). Another example would be the genre of 'revelatory' novels in the wake of #MeToo, like *Le Consentement* (*Consent*, 2000) by Vanessa Springora and *La familia grande* (2021) by Camille Kouchner. Nevertheless, one could wonder to what extent it were the novels themselves that stirred the debate. It rather seems that their authors voiced issues that were already clearly on the agenda. Also, one can wonder whether the *novelistic* form played an important role in the debates stirred by these novels. Without exception, these are explicitly autobiographical accounts of the specific socio-cultural position of the writers. It is therefore likely that they would have evoked the same social effects when they would have produced a non-literary work, like a documentary or podcast. On the other hand, we should perhaps consider the strong autobiographical nature of contemporary literary works as a revision of the literary form that is in some sense related to a regained relevance, as we will see in what follows.

³Most 'millennial writers' published their first literary work after 2010.

⁴See also Van Rooden 2020 of which this paper is an extended version.

⁵Sartre 1988 collects four essays – 'What is Writing?', 'Why Write?', 'For Whom Does One Write?', and 'The Sit-

uation of the Writer in 1947' – that were published in 1947-1948 in *Les Temps Modernes*, a platform for socially engaged literature founded by Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Significantly for the decline of this form of literary engagement, *Les Temps Modernes* published its latest issue in 2019.

⁶Judt 2011.

⁷Marsman 2017, 23. All translations of the novel are mine. In Marsman's novel, called *Het tegenovergestelde van een mens* (*The opposite of a human being*), the desire to simply be a good human being is made into an overarching theme. Since she has learned that human beings are intrinsically bad, the protagonist's aim in life is to become 'the opposite of a human being' as the novel's title has it.

⁸Marsman 2017, 76.

⁹Marsman 2017, 23.

¹⁰In Van Rooden 2020, I have investigated a larger group of Dutch millennial writers, including not only Lieke Marsman, but also Niña Wijers, Nina Polak, Hanna Bervoets, Maartje Wortel, Hannah van Binsbergen, Bregje Hofstede and Philip Huff. Internationally, very similar characteristics can be found in the works of millennial writers like Sally Rooney, Ottessa Moshfegh, Halle Butler, Luke Kennard, Catherine Lacey, Luiza Sauma, Ling Ma, Candice Carty-Williams, Lara Williams and Joe Dunthorne. See also Sudjic 2019.

¹¹Marsman 2017, 118, italics are Marsman's.

¹²To be fair, my presentation of agonistic engagement as outdated is not shared by everyone. The vast majority of scholars see agonism as literature's main social role. See Marchart 2019. In the Netherlands see for instance Demeyer and Vitse 2014; Ieven and Op de Beek 2019.

¹³See also Van Rooden 2015; and Van Rooden 2019. As said, some contemporary scholars hold on to a Sartrean agonistic view on the political engagement of art (mostly without mentioning Sartre, but more generally following neo-Marxist theorists like Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau or Jacques Rancière). Sketching the

larger philosophical picture, one could say that this view is to be placed in the *dialectical* tradition of Hegel and Adorno, or more broadly, historical materialism and critical theory, in which works of human freedom are conceived of as a way to *negate* the immediately given in order to (critically) relate to it. In contrast, the specific ontological view put forward in this paper stems from the *phenomenological* tradition of Heidegger, and to some extent Levinas and Blanchot. In this tradition, literary works are not conceived of as a negation of the immediately given (and therefore not as ‘works’ properly speaking), but rather as a specific *expression* of this immediacy, be it in a way that at once reveals and conceals it.

¹⁴As is often the case, Sartre’s own position is more nuanced than its reception has it. In some respects, Sartre’s existentialist view on literature is quite close to the Heideggerian tradition mentioned in the previous note. In *What is Literature?* Sartre develops a quite nuanced view on the particular ontological status of literary works as such – also expressed by his questions ‘What is writing?’ and ‘Why write?’ –, a status that according to him does not reside in the work itself but rather exist in the co-creation between writer and reader.

¹⁵Here, I very briefly summarise what I have described in more detail and nuance in Van Rooden 2019. See for a more extensive elaboration of the notion of literary autonomy especially the first chapter of that book.

¹⁶Marx 2005. In the Netherlands a similar claim has been made by Vaessens 2009. The contemporary ‘post-critical’ turn can also be placed within this vein. See eg. Felski 2015.

¹⁷Quite different traditions meet in this claim, amongst others the Adornian view on aesthetic autonomy and certain deconstructivist views that see literature as a way of giving a voice to the ‘Other’, but also the (mostly analytical) ethical view that sees literature as a way to foster empathy, or the one that sees novels as cognitive or ethical thought experiments.

¹⁸Marsman 2017, 162.

¹⁹To mention just a few: Felski 2015;

Demeyer and Vitse 2020; Roelofs 2020. See also the last chapter in Van Rooden 2019.

²⁰For a more extensive elaboration of this point see the last chapter in Van Rooden 2019. The relational paradigm developed here goes one step further than most other relational theories of literature. Most theories focusing on literature and relationality stick to one of the first two approaches, that is, to a representationalist or a sociological approach.

²¹For a similar view see Nelson 2021.

²²Strictly speaking, Jean-Luc Nancy is both a predecessor – or even ‘founder’ if you like – and representative of the relational ontologies that have gained popularity in the past decade, especially in the ecological humanities, like those of Karen Barad, Lauren Berlant, Bruno Latour or Anna Tsing. In Nancy’s case, this relational ontology is not so much based on contemporary physics (as it is Barad’s case), sociology (as it is in Latour’s), feminism (as it is in Berlant’s) or ethnography (as it is in Tsing’s), but on a radical elaboration of the Heideggerian idea of *Mitsein*. See especially Nancy 1993; Nancy 1997b; and Nancy 2000. For Nancy’s philosophy of literature see Nancy 2018.

²³This is the question of literature’s or art’s *exceptionalism*, that is closely linked to its historically claimed autonomous nature. As I show in Van Rooden 2019, this question has caused an ongoing debate, since eighteenth century Romanticism, between ‘autonomists’ (or ‘exceptionalists’) and anti-autonomists (or ‘anti-exceptionalists’). The first ones want to attribute an exceptional status to literary art and situate its societal value in this exceptional status. The other ones, on the contrary, deem this exceptional status to be the hindrance for literary art to have a societal value or influence and plea for abolishing this claim. See for a recent representative of this second position De De Boever 2019 and Vermeulen 2021. As will become clear below, the present paper does proclaim a form of exceptionalism, be it one that abandons exceptionalism’s central claim, namely that literary art is detached from the world.

²⁴Nancy 1997b. The loss of this meaning of the world and the way to deal with it in the 21st century is what Nancy's philosophical oeuvre is all about.

²⁵See Nancy 1997a, § 4 'The Will to Meaning' and § 6 'The Project of the Subject'. In Nancy 1993a he calls this idea of mankind producing itself as the producer of mankind 'immanentism'.

²⁶See Nancy 1997a § 3 where he calls this reflex 'The Schema of the Return'.

²⁷Marsman 2017, 169.

²⁸Nancy 1997b. Note that the translators of Nancy 1997b translated the French *sense* with 'meaning'. Since 'sense', rightfully, has become the dominant translation of Nancy's *sense*, I opt for this translation.

²⁹Nancy 1997a § 11 'The Simple Truth'.

³⁰Marsman 2017, 63.

³¹Marsman 2017, 147.

³²See also Van Rooden 2020.

³³This would, in brief, be a summary of a Nancyan poetics. See for a more elaborate account of Nancyan poet-

ics Van Rooden 2007; Van Rooden 2021; and Van Rooden 2022.

³⁴Berlant and Stewart 2019. I would thus say that today's millennial works, with their abundantly fragmentary and directionless nature, are generally tailored to this model of the 'hundreds' even if these novels are much longer. Tellingly however, most millennial works have a very limited page number.

³⁵Marsman 2017, 39. Also this focus on sex can be very well explained by reference to Nancy, who has, over the years, described sense more and more explicitly in sexual terms, culminating in Nancy 2021.

³⁶More precisely, as I indicated with reference to the model of the 'hundreds', the web of relations lets a world emerge even before it is experienced – and without it having to – as 'my' world, a world where I am at 'home' or 'belong' to. This is where Nancy's account of sense differs from that of the phenomenological tradition.

³⁷Marsman 2017, 73.

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