



Listening to Céline's petite musique, Hearing Hermans as well

Luisterend naar Célines kleine muziek, daarbij ook Hermans horend

Arnold Heumakers, Universiteit van Amsterdam

Abstract: Based on an analysis of the work of Céline and Hermans this essay demonstrates a certain pattern in nineteenth and twentieth century literature, that is typical of the modern concept of art introduced by Romanticism. In this pattern aesthetic autonomy, romantic engagement as well as *l'art pour l'art* or aestheticism are closely related, yet it is no less imperative to clearly distinguish them. By doing that the analysis of Céline and Hermans suggests a possibility for aesthetic autonomy that remains even when the pattern of autonomy, engagement and *l'art pour l'art* might lose much of its actual importance.

Keywords: Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Willem Frederik Hermans, Aesthetic autonomy, Romantic engagement / Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Willem Frederik Hermans, Esthetische autonomie, Romantisch engagement, *L'art pour l'art*

Introduction

The relationship between aesthetic autonomy and politically engaged writing is problematic. The idea of autonomy in particular is a source of confusion. Aesthetic autonomy is often identified with *l'art pour l'art*, or aestheticism, and thus it appears to be the absolute opposite of engagement. But are autonomy and engagement really diametrically opposed? In this essay I will argue that the relationship between autonomy and engagement is far more complicated and intertwined than sheer opposition. I will draw on two historical examples: the French novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline and his Dutch admirer Willem Frederik Hermans. Both writers conformed to an obscure yet revealing thought pattern that in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature resulted from the modern concept of art. Autonomy, engagement, and *l'art pour l'art* are all crucial parts of this concept. Each of them conformed to this pattern in a different way, which makes the comparison all the more relevant.

Style and Collaboration

In 1957, when his work attracted attention for the first time in France since World War II, Louis-Ferdinand Céline presented himself primarily as a 'stylist'. To Madeleine Chapsal from *L'Express*, who like several other journalists visited him in Meudon, he described himself as 'a style maniac', and also someone who had 'invented' a small thing of his own. Asked what it was that he had invented, Céline answered: 'A certain music, *une certaine petite musique*, a certain little music introduced into style, that's all'. He emphatically assured his visitor that his writing had nothing to do with anything like a 'message' or an 'idea'. An encyclopaedia is full of messages and ideas, his work is not.¹ As a writer he compared himself to the impressionists for whom the subject of a painting was no longer of great importance. Colour, form, style, these were the things that mattered in art.²

For Céline, one of Willem Frederik Hermans's favourite authors, this invention, this little music, came down to the transposition of oral language into written language, a laborious technique, according to Céline, who did not want to give the impression that he was deliriously improvising while writing his books. Classical literary language is dead, he asserted, the cinema provides the stories and romance the public wanted, and the only thing left for literature is emotion. Emotion, however, is typical of the spoken word, of oral language. If a writer manages to transpose oral emotion to the written word, literature can still make sense.³

The attention Céline and his poetics received in 1957 followed the publication of *D'un château l'autre* [Castle to Castle], the first part of his so-called 'German trilogy'. This book, a chronicle rather than a novel, documents his stay in Germany during the last year of the Second World War at Sigmaringen castle, where he enjoyed the company of all major French

¹ Louis-Ferdinand Céline, 'Interview avec Madeleine Chapsal' (*L'Express*, 14 June 1957), in *Cahiers Céline II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 19-20.

² Louis-Ferdinand Céline, 'Interview avec Louis-Albert Zbinden' (*Radio-Lausanne*, 25 July 1957) in *Cahiers Céline II*, pp. 68-9.

³ Céline repeated these ideas time and again. See, for instance, his letter to Milton Hindus of 16 April 1947 in *Cahier de L'Herne: Céline* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1988), pp. 383-84.

collaborationists. Everyone knew of course why Céline spent the last year of the war in Germany. His outspoken pro-German stance and his fierce anti-Semitism, openly voiced before and during the German occupation in three substantial pamphlets, gave him reason to fear for his life had he stayed in France. After the German defeat he fled to Denmark, where he spent a year in prison while the French government unsuccessfully sought his extradition. In 1950 Céline was sentenced in absentia to one-year imprisonment, but a year later he was granted amnesty as a veteran of the First World War. In 1951 he was able to safely return to France.

Six years later, this same man told the world that, as a writer, he had never given the world anything other than his style. He wrote for the sake of writing, he published his writings only to earn some money. No political or moral message, no ideas, literature was style and nothing else; a little trick, a little music he had invented. Understandably, not everybody believed this. Yet for many of his admirers Céline offered a welcome solution to the problem of how to reconcile their admiration for brilliant novels like *Voyage au bout de la nuit* [Journey to the End of the Night] (1932) and *Mort à crédit* [Death on Credit] (1936) with their embarrassment about Céline's anti-Semitic pamphlets *Bagatelles pour un massacre* [Trifles for a Massacre] (1937), *L'école des cadavres* [The School of Corpses] (1938) and *Les beaux draps* [A Fine Mess] (1941).

The solution Céline suggested was as ingenious as it was simple. On the one hand there was the ideologically misguided pamphleteer, who from now on could be buried under the ruins of the war (and Céline was wise enough to forbid a new edition of his pamphlets), and on the other hand there was the formidable stylist, the writer without a message, who had saved French literature from a premature death by introducing the necessary emotion in the written language of the novel. There was no longer any reason not to admire him deeply and allow him into the pantheon of French letters, Gallimard's *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade*.

I doubt that there are many serious Céline-admirers today who will defend a strict split between the novelist and the pamphleteer. One only has to read the pamphlets (they are widely available online) to discover that, when it comes to style, there is no real difference between, for example, *Mort à crédit* and *Bagatelles pour un massacre*. In both texts we find the same delirious narration, with the same notorious dots everywhere. It was a nice try.

When Céline speaks of his style as a little music, it brings to mind British aestheticists like Walter Pater, who wrote in one of his essays in *The Renaissance* (1873) that 'all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music'.⁴ When Céline suggests that the subject is no longer of importance in a novel, one can think of a French adherent of *l'art pour l'art* like Gustave Flaubert, who in a famous letter said that he wanted to write 'a book about nothing, a book without exterior attachment, that would sustain itself by the internal force of its style'.⁵ On the other hand, is there anyone who seriously believes that Céline was indeed a kind of aestheticist or himself a believer in *l'art pour l'art*? Was this not simply a smokescreen, an effort to divert the public eye from his anti-Semitic and pro-German past, and an attempt to deceive his detractors?

I would suggest that this was play-acting, although it is not impossible that Céline in the end truly did believe in his role. He convinced himself that he was the most unfortunate victim of the entire Second World War and everybody's favourite scapegoat. His writings against the

⁴ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1917), p. 140.

⁵ Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p. 31.

Jews in the 1930s (this was a bit more than just style, as he quietly admits to Madeleine Chapsal) were only an expression of his pacifism, of his fear that because of the Jews France might become involved in yet another World War.⁶ As a veteran of the first war he knew all too well what a disaster that would be. He conveniently forgot to mention that he continued his anti-Semitic pacifism during the German occupation. Céline generally played his role convincingly, hiding away in a Parisian suburb, disguised as a semi-*clochard*, a cursed hermit with only his wife, a former ballet dancer, and his parrot for company. He was a colourful figure, small wonder that in 1957 journalists found their way to his door again.

L'art pour l'art and Romantic Engagement

Céline never was and never became an aesthete like Pater or a *l'art pour l'art* fanatic like Flaubert. Yet we should not reject the connection completely, for the choice of this role after the Second World War is revealing, both for Céline and for the relationship between aesthetic autonomy and for what I would like to call somewhat anachronistically, romantic engagement. Let us reflect here for a moment on the notion of aestheticism or *l'art pour l'art*. At face value *l'art pour l'art* means that art is its own goal, art finds its justification in itself; in relation to the external world all art is 'quite useless', as Oscar Wilde, a disciple of Pater, provocatively wrote in the preface to his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.⁷ Aestheticism or *l'art pour l'art* is inextricably linked with the idea of aesthetic autonomy. Yet I think there is an important difference between aesthetic autonomy and the anti-worldly, almost autistic, stance of art and literature that goes by the name of aestheticism or *l'art pour l'art*. The latter contains a strong element of disappointment, which the former lacks, a feeling of disenchantment, with life, with the world, with society, not unfamiliar to the readers of Céline, or of Hermans for that matter. Perhaps it is not so strong in Pater and Wilde's case, although they were by no means unconditional admirers of the modern world, but in the case of the French followers of *l'art pour l'art*, who preceded them, writers and poets like Gautier, Baudelaire and Flaubert, the disappointment was patent. It found expression in an active hatred of modernity and of the bourgeoisie, the class they considered the embodiment of self-satisfied modernity.

In addition to this hatred of modernity, their disappointment with the world went hand in hand with disillusionment regarding the possibilities of art and literature. Here the enemy was not so much the modern bourgeois 'philistine', as the illusion of aesthetic revolution and regeneration that romantic art and poetry had planted in their minds. Why would Flaubert in *Madame Bovary* (1856) be so cruel to his heroine, who tries to live her romantic dreams with such disastrous results? We know, as Flaubert himself confessed, that 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi'. This suggests he was punishing his own romantic inclinations through his poor unfaithful Emma.⁸ Unlike Flaubert, Gautier and Baudelaire briefly surrendered to their repressed belief in the salutary potential of romantic art during the Revolution of 1848 until Louis Napoléon's

⁶ Louis-Ferdinand Céline, 'Interview avec Madeleine Chapsal' (*L'Express*, 14 June 1957) in Céline, *Cahiers Céline* II, p. 26.

⁷ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 22.

⁸ For an insightful analysis, see Jacques Rancière, 'La mise à mort d'Emma Bovary. Littérature, démocratie et médecine', in *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007), pp. 59-83.

coup d'état shattered all hopes. After that they returned to their earlier *l'art pour l'art* stance. Yet romantic engagement in the name of art, poetry and creativity always remained a living temptation at the back of their minds and paradoxically fed their disillusionment.⁹

L'art pour l'art, one could say, was the culmination of aesthetic autonomy, aggressively refusing all direct attachment to the rest of the world. When, in the 1780s, Karl Philipp Moritz and Immanuel Kant invented the idea of aesthetic autonomy and, in doing so, laid the foundation for the modern concept of art, several essential elements were already in place: the opposition between beauty and usefulness, the emphasis on the formal qualities of a work of art, the independence of beauty and art from ethics, politics, and religion.¹⁰ Both thinkers, though, were not adverse to the possibility of aesthetic experience having a beneficial moral effect. In this respect their idea of aesthetic autonomy differed from the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*, which Théophile Gautier developed (in the preface to his 1835 novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*), drawing on aesthetic autonomy. Aesthetic autonomy, unlike *l'art pour l'art*, was definitely not at odds with the idea of literary or artistic engagement. On the contrary, I will argue that it not only leaves the possibility of engagement open but that aesthetic autonomy, as the foundation of the modern concept of art, is a prerequisite for any form of engagement. That is to say, any form of *voluntary* engagement. I am not speaking about the way in which artists and poets have always been involved in the projects of politics and the truth of religion. The idea of aesthetic autonomy created the possibility of engagement as a deliberate and intended choice of the independent artist or poet.

Other possibilities for autonomous art emerged for the first time in Friedrich Schiller's influential letters of 1795 on 'aesthetic education'. In Schiller's view, art and poetry can be valuable for the modern world and inject it with the necessary moral qualities precisely because, thanks to their inherent autonomy, art and poetry do not completely belong to the modern world; in the ninth *Aesthetic Letter* Schiller speaks of their 'absolute immunity'.¹¹ In a more radical version, this idea of engagement on the basis of autonomy was part of the German *Frühromantik*. It inspired poets and thinkers such as Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel with a desire to make society 'poetic' and to 'romanticise' the world in order to recover the higher 'sense' that had been lost in the course of modern history. Optimistically they predicted that the future would bring the return of earthly paradise, of what the ancient Greeks used to call the 'Golden Age'.¹² They associated these extreme hopes with poetry's creative potential, which they believed could create or fundamentally change civilisation. Their engagement was not an engagement to something external to poetry, to some political or social ideal. On the contrary, it

⁹ See Arnold Heumakers, 'Aesthetic Autonomy and Literary Engagement', in *Aesthetic Autonomy: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. by Barend van Heusden & Liesbeth Korthals Altes (Leuven: Peeters, 2004) and Arnold Heumakers, 'Eldorado met en zonder vensters: Théophile Gautier en de dubbele agenda van *l'art pour l'art*', *Tirade* 435 and 436 (2010).

¹⁰ Moritz was the first to express his ideas in the essays *Versuch einer Vereinigung aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften unter dem Begriff des in sich selbst Vollendeten* (1785) and *Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen* (1788); Kant, who probably was well aware of Moritz's texts, followed with his *Kritik der Urteilskraft* in 1790.

¹¹ See Friedrich Schiller, 'Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen', in *Sämtliche Werke V* (München: DTV, 2004), p. 593. Schiller also included science in this 'immunity'.

¹² On the invention of aesthetic autonomy, the modern concept of art, and German early romanticism, see Arnold Heumakers, *De esthetische revolutie: Hoe Verlichting en Romantiek de Kunst uitvonden* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2015).

was an engagement to poetry itself. Moreover, it was this engagement or, to be more precise, its failure to truly better the world, that caused the disappointment and disillusionment hidden in the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art*.

Céline's Utopianism

We now seem to have moved far away from Céline, who in his own time had, and still has, a solid reputation for sordid misanthropy and bleak pessimism. Yet this pessimism does not tell the whole story and we have to look at Céline's anti-Semitic pamphlets to find the missing part. Contrary to what he himself declared after the war, his pamphlets are not only a pacifistic cry of distress, they also contain a rather familiar form of cultural criticism, in this case with international Jewry as the major source of evil.

The romantic phrasing of Céline's cultural criticism strikes one immediately. Well before the end of World War II Céline raised the subject of style, as well as music, rhythm and melody, in his pamphlets, although here any association with aestheticism or *l'art pour l'art* is out of the question. In *Bagatelles pour un massacre* Céline complains that the world has 'no melody anymore' because of a general 'robotisation' and 'standardisation'.¹³ Most people have lost their 'petite musique' but not Céline, who is working hard to transpose the spoken language, the emotional language and the only one that is truthful and sincere, into written language in order to stimulate the original but almost vanished music in his readers. In *L'école des cadavres* this appears to be the explicit goal: 'to recover a trust, a rhythm, a music for this people, a lyricism that will deliver it from Jewish gibberish'¹⁴. Céline rants and raves against the 'materialist imagination' which destroys a nation, convinced that 'the unspiritual, unpoetical masses' ('les masses déspiritualisées, dépoétisées') are 'cursed'.¹⁵

In *Les beaux draps*, written and published during the German occupation, the same themes appear, but now Céline allows himself a rather surprising measure of optimism, reminding his compatriots of the traditional French 'gaiety', 'the precious magic that rises from the soil and from the things and from the men who are born out of that'. Songs and dances are required. 'Let's cherish, let's celebrate our music, ours!', Céline exclaims full of joy, before exposing his 'petit bourgeois utopia', his so called 'communism Labiche', named after the popular nineteenth-century writer of comedies and vaudevilles.¹⁶

Céline briefly sketches the financial and social details of this communism (maximum and minimum wages, no unemployment, nationalised banks and industries), but something else seems to be more important, namely the mental revolution that has to be achieved through an 'aesthetic' reform of French education. 'Le salut par les Beaux-Arts!', redemption through fine art, Céline writes, with an exclamation mark. 'Without continuous, artistic creation, and by all, no society is possible, durable' – a new aesthetic education will have to stimulate this creativity,

¹³ Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (Paris: Denoël, 1937), pp. 191, 183.

¹⁴ Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *L'école des cadavres* (Paris: Denoël, 1938), p. 73.

¹⁵ Céline, *L'école des cadavres*, pp. 79-80.

¹⁶ Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Les beaux draps* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Françaises, 1941), pp. 128-37.

natural to everyone, since every human being has his own inborn 'little music'.¹⁷ Céline already wrote in *L'école des cadavres* that communism, the real, non-Jewish, non-Marxist communism, above all else, was a 'poetical calling'¹⁸.

Reading these aesthetic-poetical sections of Céline's pamphlets, one is inadvertently reminded of the German *Frühromantik* and its 'aesthetic revolution', its desire to 'poeticise' or 'romanticise' the world through aesthetic *Bildung*. And Novalis wrote: 'Take away the rhythm of the world and you take away the world. Everyone has his individual rhythm'.¹⁹ 'Every organic being has its own organic sound', Friedrich Schlegel said in a letter.²⁰ It was time to reawaken man's inner creativity, the 'God within us', as both Schlegel and Céline used to call it, in order to save the world.²¹ The only difference is the anti-Semitism and the special brand of communism Céline cultivated, which is absent from early German romanticism.

Although some scholars consider anti-Semitism to be the source of Céline's 'totalising' poetical politics of style,²² it seems more plausible that his typical romantic engagement was the real source to which anti-Semitism was added at a later stage. In major novels like *Voyage au bout de la nuit* and *Mort à crédit*, for instance, both published before the pamphlets, the anti-Semitic message is absent. Céline's engagement was, like that of the *Frühromantik*, first and foremost an engagement with poetry itself, poetry as a creative force that can change the world through the particular quality of its language. His colloquial style, which was to bring about this change, dates from before his explosion of anti-Jewish hatred, and so his literary mission to reintroduce emotion into the written language, and thus into the consciousness of the French, had started well before he identified the Jew as the archenemy. Perhaps the idea that there was a mission to accomplish had already entered his mind while sketching the portrait of Ignaz Semmelweis, the Austrian discoverer of puerperal fever and the subject of Céline's medical thesis of 1924.²³ The young doctor Destouches (Céline's real name) honours Semmelweis with remarkable empathy as a quasi-poetic and romantic yet unacknowledged prophet and saviour; one is inclined to say, a role model for his own career to come.

Anti-Semitism, however, did make a difference when it appeared in the 1930s pamphlets. As a result he not only lost the sympathy of the Left and gained some sympathy from the Right but, alongside excess hatred, it introduced an unmistakable element of optimism in Céline's work: now that the forces of evil were identified, the cause appeared not to be utterly hopeless after all. During the German occupation, as we have seen, his optimism even went so far as to

¹⁷ Céline, *Les beaux draps*, pp. 172, 170.

¹⁸ Céline, *L'école des cadavres*, p. 100.

¹⁹ Novalis, *Schriften* III (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1968), p. 309.

²⁰ Friedrich Schlegel, Letter of 23 December 1795 in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe* XXIII (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1987), p. 264.

²¹ Céline, *Les beaux draps*, p. 87; Friedrich Schlegel, 'Über die Philosophie. An Dorothea' in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe* VIII (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1975), p. 48. In his notebooks Schlegel equates God with 'creation' and 'education' (*Bildung*). 'Philosophische Lehrjahre', in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe* XVIII (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1963), pp. 306, 237.

²² David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism. Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 193-94.

²³ Louis-Ferdinand Céline, 'La vie et l'œuvre de Philippe Ignace Semmelweis', in *Cahiers Céline* III (Paris: Gallimard, 1977).

produce a 'petit bourgeois' but at heart *aesthetic* form of utopianism. As a consequence of the eventual failure of this very romantic engagement, pessimism only returned in its full gloomy glory after the German defeat.

The Case of Willem Frederik Hermans

The romantic core of Céline's engagement explains why he chose a quasi-aesthetic attitude to express his disillusionment and to answer his detractors. In many other cases *l'art pour l'art* was the common form of romantic disappointment. Witness Gautier, witness Baudelaire, but we can also think of Céline's contemporary, the German poet Gottfried Benn, who in 1933 exchanged his strictly neutral, anti-political 'formalism', a variety of *l'art pour l'art*, for a surprising willingness to actively participate in Hitler's 'national revolution'. The Nazis did not accept his offer and a few years later Benn more or less returned to his former 'formalism'.²⁴ This should sound rather familiar by now. Listening to Céline's *petite musique* we recognise a pattern: romantic engagement and aestheticism or *l'art pour l'art* appear to be two sides of the same coin.

Willem Frederik Hermans is a very special case. One could say that for Hermans disappointment is the object of his engagement. With him no promise of bliss or salvation, as with Céline,²⁵ but a grim confirmation of a human condition that consists mainly of malevolence and misapprehension; a fatal combination that turns the world into a 'sadistic universe', to quote the title of one of Hermans's collections of essays. Humankind does not want to hear this truth. On the contrary, time and again humans turn to prophets and saviours who promise heaven on earth, always with catastrophic results according to Hermans. In his novels and stories, he shows this in convincing detail. As a writer, Hermans expresses a worldview full of uncertainty and futility, the only positive element being the aesthetic quality of the expression itself. The only comfort in this bleak depressing world is art, not as a source of redemption or regeneration, as with Céline in *Les beaux draps*, but as a special form in which truth can be experienced without fatal consequences and in which formal beauty might offer at least some counterweight to disenchantment, if not some comfort.

This is how Hermans shows his so called 'grote medelijden', his great compassion, according to the title of the most revealing story about his alter ego Richard Simmillion.²⁶ There is a striking resemblance here with Schopenhauer, for whom *Mitleid* was the ultimate ethical

²⁴ See Arnold Heumakers, 'De verwording van het volmaakte. Gottfried Benn en de kunst van het Derde Rijk', *Feit & Fictie* II, 3 (1995).

²⁵ The difference with Céline has been made clear by Hermans himself in an interview in 1971. When asked whether he was 'monomaniacal' in his pessimism 'like Céline', Hermans answered: 'But Céline was not at all such a pessimist. He was much more of an optimist than I am. Céline thought there were certain categories of bastards that could be destroyed. He definitely was a fascistic person, passionate enough to write two books of 600 pages [sic, A.H.] in which he put the blame, or the bigger share of all the misery in the world, on the Jews. I would never do something like that. For the Jews are no more to blame for all the trouble in the world than other groups or tribes'. *Soma*, 2 (1970-1971) 10-11, reprinted in Willem Frederik Hermans, *Scheppend nihilisme: Interviews Willem Frederik Hermans*, ed. by Frans A. Janssen (De Bezige Bij: Amsterdam 1979), p. 238.

²⁶ 'Het grote medelijden', in Willem Frederik Hermans, *Een wonderkind of een total loss* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1967), pp. 171-224.

stance and whose idea of art as the only domain where the ruthless 'world will' could be contemplated in relative calm and resignation match Hermans's ideas about the role of literature in a sadistic universe.

Resignation, however, does not quite fit Hermans's belligerent character. We also meet him in the role of a fiercely engaged author, an anti-prophet fighting with literary means to convey his depressing truth. In *Het grote medelijden* Richard Simmillion demands the recognition of his fellow humans for the 'empty hands' he offers them.²⁷ In a debate in 1969 with his colleague Harry Mulisch, who had strong left-wing sympathies at the time, Hermans admits that he does have 'a mission' as well: a mission *against* the revolutionary optimism that only leads to destruction and waste.²⁸ Hermans's disillusioned worldview was not the outcome of a romantic engagement gone wrong; from the outset his engagement was based on a pessimistic vision of human life and on an aversion of the naive optimism mankind seems addicted to. Yet, in his own peculiarly unruly way, Hermans combined aestheticism and romantic engagement in the same vein as Céline, Benn, Baudelaire or Gautier.

Unliveable Truths

Today this whole constellation might seem somewhat outdated, now that we have our doubts about aesthetic autonomy and romantic engagement. Things are no longer self-evident, if they ever were. We have to reflect on them, and reconsider. Maybe we will then discover that, thanks to the relative freedom granted by the idea of aesthetic autonomy, one can now read an author like Céline not only in spite of his anti-Semitism but also because of it, because of the forbidden, unacceptable, taboo-like character of his work. Taboos or bans tend to provoke temptation, curiosity and often an uneasy ambivalence. What better place than art and literature to give in to temptation, satisfy curiosity and explore the ambivalence? I am convinced that Céline's attraction as an author will undoubtedly have benefitted from the murky side of his work, even though most readers probably concentrate on the novels in which anti-Semitism is absent or covert.

All this suggests, also independently from Céline, which function the idea of aesthetic autonomy can continue to perform, even in a world that no longer cares much about romantic engagement nor about its specific disillusionment in the form of *l'art pour l'art*. Whether this will really be the case, of course, is not certain and remains a matter of debate. Yet regardless of the outcome of this debate, art and literature, thanks to their autonomy, their possible *Unzeitgemässheit*, or untimeliness, can be viewed as mirrors reflecting our civilisation and history and confronting us with an aesthetic version of the aspects of our civilisation and history or, even, of our being, that we normally prefer to suppress, disregard, or conveniently forget. Céline's anti-Semitism is only an extreme example of what I like to call the 'unliveable truths', which art and literature are able to reveal by turning them into a genuine experience during our involvement with a work of art.

²⁷ Hermans, *Een wonderkind*, p. 177.

²⁸ Hermans, *Scheppend nihilisme*, p. 179.

Willem Frederik Hermans once wrote: ‘the writer disputes what the masses think and reveals what they do not dare to think’.²⁹ I sympathise with this idea, fully aware that Hermans and any other contemporary writer has this ability only as a consequence of the modern concept of art and literature, for which the idea of aesthetic autonomy constitutes the indispensable foundation.

Bibliography

- Carroll, David, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).
- Céline, Louis-Ferdinand, *Cahiers Céline II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).
- , *Cahier de L’Herne: Céline* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1988).
- , *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (Paris: Denoël, 1937).
- , *La vie et l’œuvre de Philippe Ignace Semmelweis*, in *Cahiers Céline III* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977).
- , *Les beaux draps* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Françaises, 1941).
- , *L’école des cadavres* (Paris: Denoël, 1938).
- Flaubert, Gustave, *Correspondance II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).
- Hermans, Willem Frederik, *Een wonderkind of een total loss* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1967).
- , *Het sadistische universum I* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1967).
- , *Scheppend nihilism: Interviews Willem Frederik Hermans*, ed. by Frans A. Janssen (De Bezige Bij: Amsterdam 1979).
- Heumakers, Arnold, *De esthetische revolutie: Hoe Verlichting en Romantiek de Kunst uitvonden* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2015).
- , ‘De verwording van het volmaakte: Gottfried Benn en de kunst van het Derde Rijk’, *Feit & Fictie*, II, 3 (1995).
- , ‘Eldorado met en zonder vensters: Théophile Gautier en de dubbele agenda van *l’art pour l’art*’, *Tirade*, 435 and 436 (2010).
- , ‘Aesthetic Autonomy and Literary Commitment’, *Aesthetic Autonomy: Problems and Perspectives*, ed. by Barend van Heusden & Liesbeth Korthals Altes (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), pp. 21-36.
- Novalis, *Schriften III* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1968).

²⁹ Willem Frederik Hermans, ‘Antipathieke romanpersonages’, in *Het sadistische universum I* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 1967), p. 111.

- Pater, Walter, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1917).
- Rancière, Jacques, *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007).
- Schiller, Friedrich, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*, in *Sämtliche Werke V* (München: DTV, 2004).
- Schlegel, Friedrich, *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe VIII* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schönigh, 1975).
- , *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe XVIII* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schönigh, 1963).
- , *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe XXIII* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schönigh, 1987).
- Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).

About the author

Arnold Heumakers is one of the most influential literary critics in the Netherlands. Besides his critical work for the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, he writes essays on a broad range of topics in the history of ideas, with a special interest for the Enlightenment and the Romantic Movement. He is guest lecturer at the Department of Cultural Studies at the University of Amsterdam. He published several collections of essays, under which *Schoten in de concertzaal* (1993), *De fatale cirkel* (1997) and *De schaduw van de Vooruitgang* (2003). His most recent publication is *De esthetische revolutie. Het ontstaan van het moderne kunstbegrip in Verlichting en Romantiek.*(2015).