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Narrative Constellations of Empathy in the Contemporary Novel

Abstract: In der zeitgenössischen Literatur aus Flandern und den Niederlanden lässt sich nicht nur ein Interesse für einen neuen affektfokussierenden Realismus, sondern insbesondere für die Art und Weise, wie Figuren ihre und die Realität anderer Charaktere wahrnehmen, erleben und beschreiben, beobachten. Dieser gegenwärtige Trend wird im vorliegenden Beitrag mithilfe von narrativen Empathie-„Konstellationen“ in den Blick genommen. Im Zentrum der Untersuchung stehen fünf Romane mit einem spezifischen Profil: ein extradiegetischer Erzähler, der große Ähnlichkeiten mit dem Autor des Romans aufweist, dokumentiert die gefühlte Realität der zentralen Figuren und reflektiert dabei über Art und Möglichkeiten von Empathie. Diese Romane kombinieren Strategien der Narration, der Charakterisierung, der Bewusstseinsevokation und der Raumgestaltung, um hierdurch einen figurenzentrierten Erlebnisraum heraufzubeschwören. Indem im vorliegenden Beitrag diese narrativen Strategien untersucht werden, wird gezeigt, dass die implizit postmoderne Prägung der ausgewählten Romane determiniert, wie darin mit dem Problem der Empathie umgegangen wird.

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After postmodernism, literature takes an affective turn. If postmodernism foregrounds the indeterminacy and fragmented nature of reality, truth and fact, subject and self, then, critics argue, beyond postmodernism we find pseudo-facts and truths that emerge from authentic feelings and from a felt reality. In contemporary fiction, critics find a “general return to realism” and “a renewed commitment to representing the emotional lives of real people”, as Rachel Greenwald Smith puts it (2011, 424). In his introduction to twenty-first century fiction, Peter Boxall concurs with scholars such as Hal Foster and Philip Tew in their thesis that contemporary literature incorporates “a new set of formal mechanisms with which to capture the real” (2013, 10). In that way, literature responds to changing conditions such as globalization and the digital revolution. Hans Demeyer and Sven Vitse (2018) argue that the contemporary novel is

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characterized by an affective dominant. In a rapidly changing political, economic, and technological context, the contemporary subject seems to long for an affective connection to reality, truth, and identity. In a sense, this can be seen as one of the many faces of the so-called post-truth age. Expanding Brian McHale's hypothesis about postmodernism, Demeyer and Vitse postulate that literary fiction moves from an epistemological dominant in modernism to an ontological dominant in postmodernism and an affective dominant in post-postmodernism (2018, 223–224). Contemporary novels ask questions regarding the affective dimension of reality: how can one feel reality, connect emotionally with reality, with the past, and with other subjects (224)? In recent years, these questions are increasingly linked to the perceived rise of deception and lies in public discourse.

This chapter goes one step further and considers not the affective depiction of reality in the contemporary novel, but the way narrators and characters *feel the felt reality* of other characters, which doubles their affective relation to the world. At issue is a form of empathy, inscribed into the narrative structure, for which I will use the phrase 'narrative constellation of empathy'. I would argue that this form of telling has become dominant in contemporary novels from the Low Countries and that it shows us what, according to the literary imagination of today, lies beyond truth and facts. In that respect, it is a critical mirror of post-truth discourse.

By 'dominant' I do not necessarily mean 'frequent'; I mean that there are several reliable indicators that the novels under investigation offer readers an attractive answer to pressing issues of the social, cultural, and economic present. These indications are favorable reviews, literary prizes, large reading audiences, high sales volumes, successful and immediate translations, and strong academic interest. Thus, for example, *War and Turpentine* by the Flemish author Stefan Hertmans – in which the character-narrator adopts the perspective of his grandfather – was a huge success in the Low Countries and abroad. It was awarded, among other national prizes, the AKO Literatuur Prijs 2014. *The New York Times* listed the novel as one of the best books of 2016 after positive reviews (Garner 2016; Smithaug 2016) and *The Guardian* advertises the novel as 'a future classic' (Mukherjee 2016).

Healer of Man (*De mensengenezers* 2017) by Koen Peeters is another case in point. The novel immediately received critical acclaim and was awarded one of the major Low Countries literary prizes, the ECI literatuurprijs. The main story is that of Remi's life. Remi is a farmer's son who grows up in Belgium, destined to become a priest. Ordained as a Jesuit priest, he is sent to the former Belgian colony of Congo. There he tries to understand the Yaka culture from within,

through ethnographic description. In this narrative set-up it is the Western scholar of anthropology who attempts to take the perspective of a local African community. This, however, is only the first layer of empathy in the novel. The chapters in which Remi recounts his journey are embedded in the narrative of his student, who resembles the author of the novel. This extradiegetic narrator documents the story of Remi's life, meticulously piecing it together from within, and almost literally follows Remi's tracks from a farmer's village in Belgium to Congo and back. The two autodiegetic narrators, Remi and his student, are given the floor in alternating chapters. The student reconstructs the reality experienced by Remi, including Remi's own experience of reconstructing the reality experienced by the Yaka community. The reconstruction is realized in a narrative constellation of empathy.

The five novels from the 2010s considered in this chapter are all products of late postmodernism. Apart from the works by Hertmans and Peeters, I will discuss *Armour of Hansaplast* by Charlotte Mutsaers, *La Superba* by Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer and *The Convert*, another novel by Hertmans. All these authors were previously associated with the postmodern paradigm, which also leaves its traces in their more recent work. They seem to be gradually replacing postmodern narrative features such as metafictional irony, unreliable narration, language games, and the blurring of boundaries between actual and possible textual worlds. After 2000 they begin to move clearly beyond postmodernism: a poetic shift supported by a shift in authorial positioning. On the one hand there is a new interest in realist representation, and in the gravitational pull of autobiography, affect, empathy, and authenticity, which reveals itself in narrative aspects such as narrational discourse, evocation of consciousness, characterization, and space and time. On the other hand, both authors and critics make explicit statements about this interest – sometimes accompanied by an equally explicit rejection of postmodernism.

My central interest is in narrative constellations of empathy in these novels. Empathy is a cognitive and emotional state implying that you think you know or feel what another entity thinks or feels. Empathy is often conceptualized as having an intrinsically moral dimension and potentially immoral effects (as Fritz Breithaupt demonstrates in *Die dunklen Seiten der Empathie*), but I will limit the discussion to the basic cognitive and emotional understanding of empathy and its narrative architecture in contemporary fiction. Needless to say, constellations of empathy are part of the novel's ethical and ideological positioning, but here I will focus on the epistemological dimension of empathy and affect. In *Healer of Man*, for example, subjects do not gain knowledge of the world by gathering facts. Rather, the status and the nature of knowledge hinge

on the ability to understand the other from his or her own perspective and to understand oneself by taking the perspective of the other. In short: knowledge is contingent on empathy. In view of the affective dimension of empathy, this approach to knowing is very much in line with the hypothesis of the affective dominant.

As we will see, while they convey distinct varieties of empathy, showing the complexities and problems of a concept that is currently both popular and controversial (see Breithaupt 2009 and 2017; Bloom 2016), the narrative constellations in the novels under consideration are remarkably and tellingly similar: diverse concepts of empathy on the one hand can, then, be distinguished from a recurring narrative configuration on the other. I will start with the latter and discuss three structural devices that facilitate narrative empathy: (1) Narratorial empathy through distance and documentation; (2) narrative strategies of character identification; (3) narrative space as a vehicle and metaphor for empathy. These aspects partially reflect Suzanne Keen's distinction in *Empathy and the Novel* (2007) between two narrative areas associated with reader empathy: narrative situation and character identification (Keen 2007, 92–99). The novels discussed here clearly invest in these two areas as a means to shaping narrative empathy.

I differ from Keen, however, in two ways. First, I consider space as an important means for inducing narrative empathy. The description of space, especially a character's personal space, allows the narrator to put him / herself and the receptive reader into the perspective of that character (see Beyaert 2018 for a similar approach). Second, Keen's chapter is primarily concerned with the actual reader's potential empathy, while the three points I am putting forward here concern the empathy of narrators and characters within their fictional world. Still, these three narrative elements are also designed to evoke the *reader's* empathy — whether real readers actually feel this empathy is not the question here, and would also be extremely difficult to assess: it would require a reader's willingness to accept a mimetic model. Furthermore. It would depend on the personality of the reader and the immediate context of reading, as well as on the broader cultural and historical context. As Richard Walsh points out with regard to Dickens: “modern readers ought to bear in mind the cultural and social context within which Dickens was writing: his sentimentalism was perfectly attuned to the emotional needs of his age, and to condemn him for it would be a failure of historical imagination” (Walsh 1997, 307). Empathy is always also a cultural and historical construct. What I wish to examine here is not the way readers respond to texts but rather the rhetoric of narrative empathy itself in

these novels. That this rhetoric shapes and is shaped by the concepts of empathy circulating in the society of the day will become clear in the case studies.

1 Narratorial Empathy Through Distance and Documentation

What typifies the narrative situation of an empathic constellation? First of all, in our five novels, the extradiegetic character-narrator is a writer who is unmistakably recognizable as the author of the novel, despite equally clear traces of fictionalization. In *Healer of Man*, for example, the anonymous narrator broadly speaking resembles the author, but several details of his life do not correspond with those of the author. While the character's MA thesis in anthropology, for example, examines the symbolic value of crocodiles in Yaka culture, the author's own thesis discussed the culture surrounding punk music. A similar mix of fact and fiction with regard to the narrator can be found in the other novels.

Second, the extradiegetic narrator puts him- or herself in the shoes of another character while recounting or reconstructing that character's life. In some cases, the object of the narrator's empathy then becomes an intradiegetic narrator. *Healer of Man* consists of chapters alternating between the extradiegetic narrator, a student, and an intradiegetic narrator, a professor of anthropology who was sent as a Jesuit to the former Belgian colony of Congo. In *War and Turpentine* the grandfather who is the object of the extradiegetic narrator's empathy, becomes the homodiegetic narrator in the middle part of the three-part novel. In *La Superba*, the character-narrator gives the floor to Djiby, an African immigrant in Genoa, to tell the tragicomedy of his arrival to Europe. Although the object of empathy takes center stage, the novels are always also about the narrator's empathic journey itself. In terms of numbers of pages and narrational importance, the professor is the focal point of *Healer of Man*, but the reader understands that the *Bildung* of the professor is mirrored in that of the student who is immersed in the life and works of his mentor. What is more, the empathic journey is integral to his own *Bildung*.

The narrative situation sketched here provides conditions of empathy as defined by Fritz Breithaupt in *Kulturen der Empathie* (2009). Breithaupt's default model of empathy is "*Parteinahme in einer Dreierszene*" (152): empathy means taking sides with someone in an interaction one observes between at least two other parties. The writer-narrators in the novels treated here describe a series of situations in which they observe or imagine how their protagonist interacts with

other characters. This requires a certain observational distance, but it can also generate mental proximity. In *Armour of Hansaplast*, the narrator is the sister of a deceased brother. Together with another sister, she clears out his house after his death. In that process, she is reminded of several interactions between her lonely and eccentric brother Barend and other people. In narrating all these moments, something happens: she underscores the strangeness of Barend, but also starts exploring the possible motivations, beliefs, and emotions behind his behavior. Siding with her brother, the narrator displays empathy in Breithaupt's sense of the word.

This siding-with goes hand in hand with strategies of character identification discussed in more detail in the next section, but also with documentary strategies: thus it is striking how these novels create a view from within partly mediated by an outside view based on documents, archival materials, and notes. The five novels refer to notes, notebooks, letters, pictures, historical sources, and objects that help the narrator to enter the mental world of the character concerned. In other words, a tool of *objectification* is wielded to *subjectify* the storyworld, to bring the world of the empathic object closer. *War and Turpentine* and *Healer of Man* even include photographs to achieve that effect, in a way reminiscent of W. G. Sebald's work. In that respect, the novels are part of a documentary wave in contemporary fiction interweaving factual and fictional narration in a way signally expounded by Sebald's *Austerlitz* (Festjens and Martens 2013, 146–150; De Taeye 2015).

In *War and Turpentine*, the documentary dimension is apparent across the three parts of the novel. In the first part, a character-narrator located in the present evokes the urban life and *couleur locale* of certain neighborhoods and buildings in the Flemish city of Ghent at the start of the twentieth century. With the aid of historical sources and pictures he describes everything in great detail. However, the rhetoric of the novel is not geared toward historical representation per se, it is clear that history here is subservient to empathy. The narrator uses it as a way to bring himself and the reader closer to the world of his grandfather, Urbain Martien. When the writer-narrator sets the scene in the first part of the novel, he explains that his grandfather gave him personal notebooks containing the memoirs of his experiences as a soldier during the First World War. In the second part of the novel, the extradiegetic narrator yields the floor to the narrator of the memoirs as an intradiegetic narrator. The notebooks as well as the historical descriptions work as claims of authenticity through which the novel suggests that it offers a true understanding of the grandfather's perspective.

Similarly, the narrator of *Armour of Hansaplast* reconstructs the experiential world of her brother by quoting from little notes and letters he leaves, by com-

menting upon the objects and collections she finds in his apartment: comic books, porn, details of meals, journal-like notes and so on. However unconventional he may appear from these material traces, which are at the same time unconventional as a means of portraying him, they also make him accessible as a character, make it possible for the narrator to side with him. In other words, they allow her to know and feel how her brother experienced the world, without having to resort to moralizing categories such as normal / abnormal, which she abhors and explicitly rejects. She quotes extensively from the notes she finds in a stuffed lunchbox, in which the idiosyncratic style of Barend and his personal views seem to become knowable. He writes sentences in a peculiar grammar such as “As soon as I start a ‘real’ conversation with someone, something goes wrong?”, “More people without teeth like me?”, “Daily masturbation a compulsion?”, “Dangerous to take pushpin in mouth?” (Mutsaers 2017, 161).¹

The narrator introduces the notes in a way that demonstrates the conundrum of empathy in this novel. These writings underscore the strangeness from a normative perspective but also convey the coherence and concreteness of Barend’s world view. In that way, the strange gradually becomes familiar. In the words of the narrator:

I soon discover that, if there are enough scribbled notes available, they reinforce each other and give at least as much insight into someone’s brain as an entire book. [...] When reading these scribbles it is as if I am looking straight into Barend’s brains. (Mutsaers 2017, 160)

For more than one reason this is a revealing passage: The narrator, who is a writer herself, discovers that her brother has expressed himself in a highly creative, unconventional way. Although she can hardly identify with the content of the notes, this sheer fact brings her closer to him. And she expresses that closeness in an explicit, visual, emphatically embodied metaphor of empathy: it is like looking into someone’s brain. To her mind, personal writings are a key to empathy: in them, she assumes, one can read and understand how the writer thinks.

The student, who is the extradiegetic character-narrator in *Healer of Man*, also keeps notes in his Muji notebooks, and these are regularly mentioned throughout the novel (Peeters 2017, 82; 109; 167; ...). The notebooks figure in a rhetoric of authenticity: they convey the idea that the narrator translates knowledge and experience directly into the writings that supposedly form the foundation of the novel. When he quotes historical documents about the colo-

¹ All translations from *Armour of Hansaplast* and *Healer of Man* are my own.

nial activities of a Flemish order of nuns, for example, the narrator emphasizes that he copied “the passage literally in my notebook” (167). As a student he is advised by the focal character of the novel. Through his studies and by reading the books suggested by his professor, he is gradually better equipped to put himself into Remi’s position. To understand the world of his teacher, he consults archives (150), visits the museums (156–157) and places Remi visited, and reads the books Remi read. The narrator writes: “In that way, I started to share his fascinations. This was my investigation into Remi’s self-investigation” (52). Not unlike *War and Turpentine* Peeters’s novel, therefore, also uses objectifying, documentary strategies to reach the goal of subjectification. In *La Superba* too, we find a character-narrator who visits archives to document the history of migration in Genoa, and who fanatically fills his notebooks with the conversations he has with immigrants. These materials allow him to understand the fantasies and fictions these migrants project onto Europe and Italy. In other words, the narrator combines the empathic stance with a metafictional one reminiscent of postmodern esthetics. The narrator stresses that the experiential world of migrants and their behavior are thoroughly shaped by fiction.

To recapitulate, the narratorial empathy in these novels is characterized by a particular narrational set-up in which an extradiegetic narrator shares a range of biographical details and identity features with the author of the novel. He or she empathizes with a character based on elaborate documentation, which brings about an effect of authenticity and which opens the door to the experiential world of the empathic object. At the same time, the documentary approach involves a certain distance, in the sense that the narrator narrates from a vantage point that allows him or her to zoom in and out, to shift perspective, and to control the temporal ordering of situations. This typical combination of proximity and distance can also be recognized in the way the main character is portrayed and in the construction of narrative space, as we will now see.

2 Strategies of Character Identification

In the previous sections we caught glimpses of how, in our novels, the narrators use certain rhetorical strategies of character identification. With regard to the *reader’s* identification with characters, Suzanne Keen explains that “Character identification often invites empathy, even when the fictional character and reader differ from one another in all sorts of practical and obvious ways” (Keen 2010, 70). This is a point also made by Breithaupt in *Kulturen der Empathie*: resemblance between the observer and the observed is a flexible requirement.

Identification is not a narrative strategy or technique in itself, but the result of certain textual strategies in a particular narrative context and is further contingent upon the background of the observer and the context of the observation. According to Keen such textual strategies include: “naming, description, indirect implication, reliance on types, relative flatness or roundness, depicted actions, roles in plot trajectories, quality of attributed speech, and mode of representation of consciousness” (72).

Although the audience of the novels under discussion is certainly invited to take an empathic stance, what is interesting in the context of empathic narrative constellations and the double affective stance is the narrators’ own empathy. They are aware of the rhetorical effects of their writings, indeed they sometimes turn out to be at the receiving end of those effects. By narrating the story and portraying the thoughts and emotions of their characters, they start to empathize. This is especially interesting in the tension between the narrating and the experiencing self. Can we say that the experiencing self – e.g. the character clearing her brother’s house – experiences the empathy that is then voiced by the narrating self? Or do the feelings of empathy stem from the act of narrating? The latter option, which co-occurs with the former in all of these novels, supports the narrativistic interpretation of empathy, according to which empathy is always the (by-)product of narrativization. Moreover, it is in keeping with the postmodern notions of self and other that surface in the novels now and then.

In our corpus, the narrators’ identification with the focal characters is expressed in the whole variety of strategies summed up by Keen, but a few stand out: favorable direct characterization, a sensory style supporting internal focalization, and intricate procedures of evoking consciousness. The *how* rather than the *what* of direct characterization reinforces the impression that the narrator empathizes with the main character. In *Healer of Man*, the student at several points in the narrative explicitly describes his professor as conscientious and courageous, frequently framing these personality traits with his own admiration: “Yes, I wanted to know all about him. I admired his courage, his self-contempt” (Peeters 2017, 52) or: “I admired Remi’s young bravado. His choice to enter the convent had nothing to do with obedience, but with a need for radical change” (2017, 163). It is telling that in the first example the *what* of the characterization is not entirely positive, while the *how* presents negative traits as positive ones. Self-contempt is turned into a laudable quality. In the second quotation too, the narrator reinterprets a trait that is negative within the value frame of the novel – obedience – as something positive: agency and activism. The direct characterization of the other and indirect self-characterization together contribute to the empathic constellation. The extradiegetic narrator of *Healer of*

Man portrays himself as an open mind, susceptible to cultural differences and not inclined to moralize or criticize the behavior of others. This general attitude provides the backdrop for the more individual affective investment in Remi.

Through internal focalization, the narrators of the corpus suggest their ability to put themselves into the cognitive, emotional and ideological position of the focal characters. In some cases, the rhetoric of empathy is heightened by a sensory style that transgresses conventional boundaries of the assumed ability to empathize at all. What I mean by this is demonstrated in *War and Turpentine* and *The Convert*. In both novels, the narrator has the power of authentication (Doležel 1998) – his statements about the storyworld create that world – even though he shares the same ontological universe. He is a marginal witness in the storyworld, who knows the focal character personally (*War and Turpentine*) or travels through the same spaces (*The Convert*). From his authenticated position, he imagines how his protagonist thinks and feels.

Based on scant historical evidence, the extradiegetic narrator of *The Convert* imagines how the medieval woman Vigdis Adelaïs perceives the world. When she converts to Judaism, for example, we learn how the young woman experiences the party:

The guests include many Spanish-speaking Jewish intellectuals. She understands little of their abstruse conversation, feels exhausted and ill at ease, eats almost nothing, drinks the sweet fruit juices, looks around in a slight fuddle, watches the sun sink behind the swaying myrtles by the wall in front of the old house. Her nose is red with sunburn. (Hertmans 2019, 106)

The passage is indicative of the scope of the internal focalization: it covers perception, emotion, and cognition. In that way, the narration suggests that the narrator knows the character from the inside and understands how she perceives the world. A key role is played by the evocation of the senses: by conveying what the character sees, feels, hears, and even tastes (the sweet juices), the experience of Vigdis becomes palpable.

Internal focalization goes hand in hand with the presentation of consciousness, which equally communicates the narrator's empathy with the focal character. Consider this passage in *War and Turpentine*:

One thing sticks in his [my grandfather's] mind in the days that follow: the sight of the animal heads in the gory courtyard. In his memory, the gentle glow of afternoon is falling over that heap of breathtaking ugliness, and what he sees are colours, tones, the subtlest transitions of light and shade [...]. He thinks back to one of the old books he's seen his father leafing through – more specifically, to one painting that made a strong impression on him even as a small child [...]. It slowly dawns on him, as he stares into the roaring stoke hole in the iron foundry and the sparks dance around him like fireflies, that his shock of

revulsion at the sight of that apocalyptic heap of rotting flesh filled with gaping dead eyes has awoken something that tugs at him, that hurts, that opens a new space inside him – that for the first time he feels a desire that seems greater than himself. (Hertmans 2016a, 83)

Not only are the thoughts of the grandfather presented from the inside by the grandson in a detailed thought report, the narrator also penetrates the mental world of his grandfather by focusing on sensory experience, memory, and imagination. This kind of consciousness evocation contributes and testifies to the far-reaching empathy of the narrator. In fact, it reaches so far that, irrespective of the realist style of the novel, it goes beyond conventional mind-reading.

In that respect, the evocation of consciousness in *War and Turpentine* is an intricate part of the empathic constellation. In the following passage, the narrator imagines how the grandfather perceives the character-narrator at a younger age:

His grandson will soon become a father. He lives on a small farm somewhere near the Dutch border; they rarely see each other. Going off to university really changed the boy; once God-fearing and obedient, he's now become rebellious, mocking God and his commandments and causing his parents no end of distress. (Hertmans 2016a, 232)

The passage summarizes the grandfather's thoughts and feelings about his grandson, suggesting that the narrator has an authentic, privileged access to the former's consciousness. What is more, empathy allows the narrator to turn the tables. Instead of presenting the grandfather as an object of focalization the experiencing self becomes an object of focalization through the eyes of the grandfather. Rather than using the first-person ("I would soon become a father") the narrator switches to a third person ("His grandson"), demonstrating his empathic abilities. Conspicuously, the empathy contrasts meaningfully with the presumed views of the grandfather, who does not at all attempt to take an inside perspective on his grandson.

In sum, the empathic constellations call into play a number of distinct strategies of character identification. The empathic objects are characterized in favorable terms by the narrator, suggesting solidarity rather than critical distance. Also, the narrators display their knowledge and understanding of the mental world of the empathic object by sketching a detailed perceptual experience and summarizing thoughts and feelings. Despite the postmodern undertones of these strategies, the prevailing rhetoric is that of authentic understanding.

3 Narrative Space as a Vehicle and Metaphor for Empathy

Finally, the five novels unmistakably exploit narrative space to advance the rhetoric of empathy. The description of character-related places and the narrator's appearance in those places support the narrator's attempt to put him- or herself into the perspective of that character. As an intrinsic part of a narrative scenario, space can also support the type of empathy that does not so much depend on identity categories (as in categorial empathy), but on recognizable situations (as in so-called situational empathy).²

In *La Superba*, the city of Genoa is what binds all the immigrants together. The city becomes the novel's central metaphor for the significant, life-shaping fictions that are both tempting and forever unattainable, however hard one tries to mould life to make it resemble those fantasies. In *The Convert*, the narrator in the present follows the same route as the medieval Christian woman who is on the run. In the English edition of the novel (Hertmans 2019) a detailed colored map on the inside of the book jacket already shows the protagonist's flight from Rouen to Egypt, which is repeated by the narrator. By entering the same physical and sensory environment (although it has changed a lot), he attempts to feel what it was like to be in her situation.

In *Healer of Man*, the student travels to the professor's home town and then to Congo to better understand his world of experience. The five parts of the novel are named after the respective settings. *Armour of Hansaplast* is entirely structured as a guided tour in the brother's house. Most of the chapters are named after the room the first-person character is clearing and in which she is confronted with additional aspects of her brother's experiential world.

Both *Healer of Man* and *Armour of Hansaplast* explicitly state that the places of your childhood and the places where you live determine the way you experience reality. In the opening of *Healer of Man* the intradiegetic narrator, Remi, starts by describing the "essence" of the region where he grew up, a quality he terms *genius loci*, an ungraspable ghost that permeates everything and everyone in that region. In *Armour of Hansaplast*, the house is a key motif. The narrator pencils a portrait of someone detached from any social environment and traces this observation back to her own and her brother's childhood. She shows how the brother's house – which was also the parental home – represents the lack of

² The distinction between categorial and situational empathy is made by Patrick Colm Hogan in *The Mind and its Stories* (2003, 140).

a sense of security during those early years. As the title of the novel indicates, Barend needed protection (“Armour”) to cover that wound (“Hansaplast” is a brand of band-aid). In a subtle and powerful gesture, the narrator posthumously restores the sense of security her brother missed out on by uploading, as it were, one room after the other with her understanding. In both *Healer of Man* and *Armour of Hansaplast* the movement through space deliberately accompanies and symbolizes empathy. Space is not merely a metaphor for the felt reality of a character: these places are also a direct road to empathy within the fictional world.

4 Complex Varieties of Empathy

The narrative strategies examined above give rise to several types or concepts of empathy. In fact, each novel sketches its own theory of empathy, and in each novel empathy is a problematic, ambiguous concept that challenges the simplistic notions circulating about it in society. The emphasis is on the distance empathy can (or cannot) bridge: a distance that may be cultural, historical, or ideological and that takes us beyond the in-group domain that Keen categorizes as “bounded strategic empathy”. The empathy elicited in the novels is what she terms ambassadorial or broadcast:

Ambassadorial strategic empathy addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end. [...] broadcast strategic empathy calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing common vulnerabilities and hopes through universalizing representations. (Keen 2007, 142)

The transcultural empathy in *Healer of Man*³ is characteristic of the discourse of the multicultural and postcolonial novel. Roy Sommer has pointed out that character constellations evoking empathy are “widely used [in multicultural novels] as they allow writers to counter stereotypical or even racist representations of ethnic groups very effectively by means of ‘strategic ambassadorial empathy’” (Sommer 2013, 164). This is also the case in Peeters’s novel. In particular, the novel suggests that both the extradiegetic narrator and his empathic object, neither of whom belongs to the in-group of the Yaka culture in Congo,

³ Note that Peeters’s novel also makes room for trans-species empathy. After a spiritual experience the young Remi feels, and indeed cannot help feeling, what animals feel (Peeters 2017, 78).

can adopt a perspective from the inside through anthropological practice. The novel uses the kind of careful attention to symbolic action that the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) has called “thick description”. By patiently observing the behavior, language, rituals and interactions in that culture, Remi and his student understand what it means to be part of that community, even though the gap is never fully bridged.

In *Armour of Hansaplast* the narrator explains early in the novel that empathy in itself is not unproblematic. After reading the famous article “What’s it Like to Be a Bat?” by the philosopher Thomas Nagel, she realizes that one can never objectively grasp anyone else’s phenomenal world. “A surprising and even shocking observation”,⁴ the narrator observes, “because the meaning of empathy is undermined, which most people including myself regard as quite worrying. On the other hand: empathy is not just beatific. It has the disastrous tendency to shoot up and lead to situations from which no one benefits” (Mutsaers 2017, 28). This leads her to a very careful and balanced approach to her brother, in which she recognizes her unmistakable similarity to him in certain respects but also portrays him as very different:

Despite big differences – I had a quite cheerful nature and he did not – there was a fundamental attitude that bound us: an aversion to groups, a dislike of noncommittal behavior, a moderate community spirit, a big fear of dangers, the inclination to take everything seriously and the inclination to go ad fundum. We also had the same parents, partly the same genes, and we grew up in the center of Utrecht. Does the city matter? Without any doubt. (Mutsaers 2017, 24)

While stressing the potential in their relationship for categorial empathy, the narrator recognizes the “big differences” that will play a major role in the rest of the novel, where distance is emphasized over any unequivocal promotion of empathy. Empathy is on the horizon, but it is not easy to reach and it has to acknowledge distance as well. Even someone who is almost as “in-group” as possible (a brother), is narrativized as an other to whom one cannot gain easy access; hence the need to write the novel in the first place. The length and complexity of the narrative itself testify to the problematic nature of the affect.

These more complex, self-reflexive and problematic conceptions of empathy circulate in all the novels under consideration here. In *La Superba*, empathy

⁴ Thomas Nagel does see a role for empathy and the imagination, but they are part of a subjective understanding of someone else’s experience. “At present we are completely unequipped to think about the subjective character of experience without relying on the imagination—without taking up the point of view of the experiential subject” (Nagel 1974, 449).

is integrated in a metafictional construction and presented as the result of projected stereotypes, desires, and fantasies. Although Djiby's story is rendered as intradiegetic narration, it is filtered through Djiby's, as well as the narrator's, presuppositions about immigrants and immigration. Even more than in *Armour of Hansaplast*, empathy here becomes a self-reflexive notion. In *The Convert*, the narrator self-reflexively bridges a historical and cultural distance when evoking the motives, fears and desires of his main character. While the narrator is a male Flemish writer in the twenty-first century, his empathic object is a medieval woman, Vigdis, who converts to Judaism. One of the instances in which the narrator reflects upon this distance is the scene in which the Jewish boy and the Christian girl meet for the first time:

[The Jewish man] David Todros's fine words must have failed him completely. Vigdis can't have understood half of what he said. To her, it must have sounded exotic and a little over the top – not that an ironic, culture-specific concept like 'a little over the top' could have existed for her. We are groping in the seductive dark. (Hertmans 2019, 43)

The narrator, who foregrounds himself as a character on an extradiegetic level, is aware of the challenges and pitfalls of transhistorical empathy. In this moment of historiographic metafiction – a gesture so characteristic of postmodern poetics (Hutcheon 1989, 62–92) – he admits that his empathy is an illusion and a projection. The historical distance can only be bridged in the imagination. In that way, the novels combine a belief in empathy with critical metafictional reflection.

5 Conclusion

One of the tendencies deemed dominant in contemporary fiction is the return to realism and affect. Fiction has always offered room for the representation of felt realities, but in recent decades this affective experiential dimension has been foregrounded as epistemic access. In much contemporary fiction that is currently attracting attention, feelings and personal experiences seem to represent a preferred access to knowledge of both world and self. Against this background, the present chapter has examined narrative constellations of empathy in contemporary novels from the Low Countries, which pave the way for sophisticated reflection upon the perceived rise of deception and lies in public discourse. I have argued that these novels offer a special perspective on the hypothesis of an affective dominant (Demeyer and Vitse 2018), since they (1) double the affect, (2) have a narrative design consistently geared toward empathy, and (3) neverthe-

less integrate strategies and ideas that are best understood from a postmodern perspective.

In these narrative constellations of empathy, extradiegetic narrators create illusions of empathy between themselves and a central character, while also sometimes deliberately breaking those illusions. The strategies the character-narrators use to achieve this are tellingly similar. In the five novels I have considered, the extradiegetic narrator is an authenticated instance. His or her force of authentication is strengthened by the fact that he or she is associated with the author. In addition, documentary strategies support the effect of authenticity and thus the affective trustworthiness of the narrative. As the discussion has shown, the narrative composition is oriented toward empathy: the experiential world of the central character is brought into focus through spatialization, evocation of consciousness, focalization, and characterization. What recurs in all these components is the tendency toward proximity and acceptance (e.g. internal focalization, favorable narratorial comment, lack of irony, spatial proximity).

Yet the novels also show how empathy can become suspect and impossible. Empathy exists in complex varieties and is never fully transparent. In a sense, empathy is never what it seems to be, namely access to another instance's mind. In the corpus discussed in this chapter, these complexities of empathy can be seen as a postmodern residue, and they can also be read as a new synthesis of postmodernism and the return to realism. However much contemporary readers may long for straightforward affective access to the world, the self, and the other, the "empathy" solution is not unequivocal.

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