



Individual and Collective Identity – Dutch Public Intellectual Bas Heijne

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Abstract: This article focuses on the democratic debate in Dutch society and the interventions made by one particular writer. After a review of studies on the intellectual tradition, the paradox of the public intellectual is addressed: s/he has to present universal ideas and seriousness of critique and is supposed to popularize knowledge in order to reach and influence the audience. Subsequently, the work of Bas Heijne is scrutinized. By writing essays and reflecting on topics such as populism, identity and community in an era of globalization, Heijne takes up the position of the traditional and morally conscious intellectual wielding cultural authority.

Keywords: Public Intellectual, Cultural Authority, Literature, Identity, Community

Introduction

The Dutch politician Frits Bolkestein, member and one-time leader of the conservative liberal party VVD and former member of the European Commission (1999-2004), recently published a book on intellectualism, *De intellectuele verleiding, Gevaarlijke ideeën in de politiek* (2011).¹ The main argument in this book is that intellectuals are good at forming and defending abstract ideas but typically have no practical political experience, and as a consequence are easily seduced by romanticist, fascist and communist doctrines. Bolkestein, well-known to observers of Dutch and European politics, demonstrates his erudition and lifelong reading, and at the same time behaves as a man of the world, whose power and intelligence are intuitive, and who fears the unmasking of his authority by abstract principles and ideals.² Bolkestein was invited to appear on television shows to promote his book which was kindly reviewed in several newspapers and weeklies. The question arises why the debunking of intellectualism by this right-wing, respected politician – presenting himself as an intellectual *and* philosopher while simultaneously explicitly denying that he is one – is accepted so willingly. Why is the attitude [44] towards intellectualism one of resistance, and why is it that Bolkestein's negligence of any real conceptual analysis of the role and position of the public intellectual in society is accepted without question? Part of the answer lies in the fact that his book goes with the current tide of anti-intellectualism fed by a conservative discourse, typical not only of the Netherlands but also of (parts of) the public sphere in the Anglo-Saxon world, in which intellectuals are criticized because of their neglect of arguments put forward in the wider political arena – a criticism that is often especially sharp when it relates to debates on multiculturalism and Islamism. In *The Flights of the Intellectuals*, Paul Berman, one of Bolkestein's sources of inspiration, accuses left-wing intellectuals of shunning a true confrontation with the facts, failing to realize and

recognize the bad influence Muslims (such as Egyptian-Swiss academic Tariq Ramadan) have in the European public debate. It is the 'People on the Left' who underestimate the dangers of Islam and the 'new Judeophobia'. The wider context here is the intellectual negligence of the Enlightenment as 'one of the great achievements of Western civilization'.³ Bolkestein picks up this anti-Islam rhetoric and pro-Enlightenment discourse.

It is in this context that I focus on the work of the Dutch writer Bas Heijne who defends the opposite position to Bolkestein's though he is not directly speaking against or in favour of Enlightenment. More important than defending Enlightenment is the importance, as Heijne emphasizes in his essays, of intellectual deliberation, which he feels is sorely lacking at the moment. Heijne openly rejects the overload of pathos and 'token politics' currently dominating the Dutch public sphere. In his view, it is not the intellectuals but the politicians who are the treacherous species. They do not come up with sound responses to the fears and displeasures of the people. They are suffering from the 'Dutch disease': making things seem simple and focusing only on the small, happy Dutch world. 'It's not a matter of whether the ideals of the Enlightenment (...) are good and praiseworthy. What matters is whether they are feasible'.⁴

Bas Heijne is a productive author.⁵ Many of his texts first appeared in the quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* of which he is one of the editors. He can be considered a public intellectual writer, having read English Literature at the University of Amsterdam, because of his ongoing critical reflection on Dutch democracy. Heijne cannot only be found moving at the centre of the debate on topics including populism and national identity, but he also manifests his singular position as an expert in literary criticism, propagating the power of imagination and the moral commitment of literature.

Today scholarly writing about intellectuals is flourishing. From within divergent nationalist traditions and both right- and left-wing political perspectives, intellectual life has been analyzed and discussed by sociologists, literary critics, political philosophers and cultural historians. It is not surprising that the intellectual should get so much attention; the development from the openly politically and socially engaged French intellectual at the beginning of the twentieth century [45] gathering in a Paris café to the active intellectual blogger or the celebrity-intellectual in the twenty-first century is quite a spectacular one. The main question of course is how to analyze and evaluate different intellectual activities, roles and performances, how to distinguish between the clerks, the elites, the intelligentsia, the fashion philosophers and the ivory tower avant-gardists; and, concomitantly, how to decide whether the qualification 'public' should be regarded as a restriction or as an epithet to be carried with pride. This will be the central question addressed in this article that unfolds as follows. In the first part I will discuss a number of pivotal studies on the conceptualization of the public intellectual. The intriguing issue is the paradox of the public intellectual activity or performance. In the second part I will examine some of Heijne's recently published essays. In analyzing the texts, we will recognize that Heijne as a public intellectual is rooted in the modernist tradition. I will argue that his particular position in the Dutch public sphere has to do with his ability to use a trustworthy, deliberative and convincing discourse. Heijne performs the traditional role of the public intellectual.

What is a Public Intellectual? Historical Positions

A public intellectual, a term which has been popular as such since the 1960s,⁶ is someone who reflects on critical concepts, comments on what is happening in society from a position of

detachment and takes a countercultural and engaged stance. In contemporary western societies, we observe a constant need for new ideas, explanations and theories, partly as a result of the effectiveness of public debate and at the same time often illustrating its failure. Public intellectuals (authors, academics, philosophers) are important for the health of democracy in writing opinion pieces on a wide array of (political, ethical and social) topics.

In order to better understand the public intellectual, it is helpful to briefly discuss the history and development of the concept. The ideas of French critic Julien Benda (1867-1956) discussed in *The Treason of the Intellectuals* (1927) offer a point of departure. Benda, one of the Dreyfusards,⁷ disapproved of his fellow-intellectuals whom he felt had become too politicized. His main assumption was that since the end of the nineteenth century intellectual writers and thinkers, the clerks as he calls them, no longer cared for the Enlightenment ideal of universal humanity. Benda argues that the traditional clerk sought joy in the practice of an art or a science or metaphysical speculation, thus in non-material advantages, while the modern one acts as stimulator of passion, showing a thirst for immediate results and disrespect for argument. For more than two thousand years a series of ‘philosophers, men of religion, men of literature, artists, and men of learning’ influenced society while their ideas and life were ‘in direct opposition to the realism of the multitudes’.⁸ The modern clerk, on the contrary, gets down to the marketplace and his views reveal xenophobia, the hatred for the man from outside. We find Benda’s ideas re-emerging in current discourses on intellectuals. Today’s [46] marketplace is the television show in which the public intellectual tries to get as much attention in as short a time as possible, knowing that an emotional one-liner can be more effective than an elaborate ethical appeal. Benda’s modern clerk is the pragmatic figure of the celebrity media intellectual.

When we move the camera to Britain, we observe that the word ‘intellectual’ was first explicitly used in relation to Lord Byron in 1813. In *Absent Minds, Intellectuals in Britain* (2006), Stefan Collini explains that the French tradition of intellectualism differs fundamentally from the British: the denial of the existence of ‘real’ intellectuals has always been a prominent aspect of national self-definition in Britain. The connotations of the word intellectual are pretentiousness, arrogance, self-dramatization and hubris. The same observation could be made in The Netherlands where ‘*doe maar gewoon*’ (act normally) seems to be the preferred way of life, and openly showing one’s intellectual prowess is considered immodest. However, by presenting a careful historical analysis of the debates on intellectualism in the past two centuries, Collini essentially debunks the British aversion, demonstrating a strong tradition of intellectualism in the UK that ultimately has more to do with literary criticism than with political science or sociology. He distinguishes three ‘senses’ of the noun intellectual: 1. the sociological sense (intellectuals being defined as a socio-professional category); 2. the subjective sense (having to do with the individual’s attitude towards ideas, reflexiveness and truth-seeking); and 3. the cultural sense (some individuals being regarded as having ‘cultural authority’, deploying an acknowledged position in addressing a non-specialist public).⁹ For the purposes of this article on Bas Heijne, the third sense of intellectual appears to be the most appropriate.

We can draw a line of argumentation from Benda to Collini, based on the configuration of the intellectual as someone having cultural authority on the basis of recognized expertise in a particular field of knowledge. The intellectual speaks to an audience of educated people and at the same time cultivates a position of detachment. We have to go to Italy, again in the 1920s, to see the development of another line of argumentation. Italian communist and philologist

Antonio Gramsci, locked up in prison by Mussolini's fascist regime between 1920 and 1930, wrote in his *Prison Notebooks* (1926-1937) that 'all men are intellectuals' though not all of them have the function of intellectuals in society.¹⁰ He distinguishes between the traditional intellectual (teacher, priest, literary writer and so on, with a specific profession in between classes deriving from historical formations in rural society) and the organic intellectual (the organizing and reflective element in a particular social class). The function of the organic intellectual is to conceive and express the direction of ideas and inspirations of the class to which s/he belongs. As such, intellectuals have an essentially mediating function in the struggle between classes. Although social classes are less clear-cut today than they were in the 1920s, we will see that with regard to the work of Bas Heijne, the notion of the organic intellectual can still be useful. Heijne more than once stresses [47] his typically *middle-class* family background in order to show his empathy with ordinary citizens attracted to populist ideas. This is in line with the fact that the great majority of people now identify themselves as middle-class, in fact 'European society has become one big middle class'.¹¹

In the prestigious *Reith Lectures* delivered at the BBC radio in 1993, Edward W. Said pointed out that in his view Gramsci's concept of the organic intellectual fits in more closely with today's reality and practice than Benda's notion of the clerk. Western societies have seen many new professions coming into existence and with these new intellectual positions emerge broadcasters, academics, consultants, experts, and the whole field of modern mass journalism. Everyone who works in any field connected either with the production or the distribution of knowledge is, according to Said, an organic intellectual in the sense distinguished by Gramsci. All these specialists have become members of a culture of critical discourse.¹²

From Benda and Gramsci to Collini and Said, we observe how the intellectual is linked both to universalist *and* to particular ideas and representations. We have not yet discussed the practical outcome, the point stressed by Frits Bolkestein, that intellectuals can never intervene in the public sphere on the same level as experienced politicians. This however, is exactly what Arthur Melzer underlines in *The Public Intellectual, Between Philosophy and Politics* (2003). Melzer defines the intellectual as a generalist who should also have a vital concern for the practical application of ideas in the context of the welfare of society, and this 'practice' is the deliberative expression of opinion and analysis. However, practice should not be considered as 'direct political involvement'.¹³ Being the (political) outsider is an essential part of the public intellectual's identity and self-understanding.

The Intellectual Paradox

At this point, we are confronted with what I consider the intriguing tension in the discussion on public intellectual thinking and writing. While the defining characteristic of intellectuals is that they take a stand and deliver critique from a universal point of view, public intellectuals by the very fact of their having to present their ideas to the general audience are also forced to *popularize* their ideas and to fulfil the practice of debater and opinion maker. As such, they find themselves in the middle of a public sphere that they also once in a while consciously have to detach themselves from. Thus the term *Public Intellectual* carries a specific connotation: *public* implies translation, mediation. Public intellectuals take up a mediating position to serve the function of transmitting knowledge in the society to which they feel committed.

It was the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who defined the intellectual as both 'a paradoxical being' and a 'bi-dimensional being'.¹⁴ The paradox involves the classical

combination of pure culture and political engagement. The intellectual [48] as literary writer grounds his authority in the autonomous world of art, and on the basis of this *prestige* interferes in political life. The intellectual is a bi-dimensional being because he has to fulfil two conditions: he has to belong to an autonomous intellectual field, independent from religious, economic and political powers, while at the same time investing his competence and authority in political action which occurs outside the intellectual field proper. The paradox of the intellectual is that one is sending a *double* message: leave me alone so that I can stay detached and autonomous, and let me create opportunities to engage politically with other intellectuals. The autonomy, of course, is challenged by the very nature of journalism, the primary medium for many public intellectual writers, with its mundane criteria: legibility, topicality and novelty. The ability to come across well on radio and TV or to be visible on blogs, Twitter and in public events, has become a criterion of public intellectual competence and effectiveness.

It is this aspect that is also underlined by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas who, in his acceptance speech on receiving the *Bruno Kreisky Preis*,¹⁵ speaks about the position of intellectuals in an age of digital media and television. Public intellectuals are supposed ‘to speak out only when current events are threatening to spin out of control – but then promptly, as an early warning system’.¹⁶ This constitutes the most interesting characteristic that distinguishes intellectuals from other actors in the public sphere: ‘an Avantgardistic instinct for relevances’.¹⁷ This notion can help us to further clarify the paradox of the intellectual. The avantgardistic instinct – I am taking the liberty of filling this in because Habermas does not explain it any further – stresses the intellectual’s capacity for creative, original thinking, something that is ahead of events and necessarily experimental, that has to do with a specific talent for putting events in an imaginative frame in order to confront and persuade the audience.

The term *public* intellectual comes particularly into view in current debates on the transformations in traditional and social media. Habermas warns that the price to be paid for the increase in access due to the television and the Internet is a blurring of roles:

although the Internet has a subversive effect on public spheres under authoritarian regimes, at the same time the horizontal and informal networking of communications diminishes the achievements of traditional public spheres. For the latter pool the attention of an anonymous and dispersed public within political communities for selected messages, so that the citizens can address the same critically filtered issues and contributions at the same time.¹⁸

Before the Arab spring revolutions in North Africa, Habermas observed that contributions by intellectuals on the Internet can be subversive, though they do not always constitute ‘a focal point’ from which the democratic debate can emerge. The current turmoil in North African countries striving for democracy shows that [49] democracy does not come about merely as a result of the freedom to speak one’s mind or the possibility of sharing and discussing information. Television and social networks do provide opportunities of expression for intellectuals that were unavailable earlier, including the ability to reach a huge (inter)national audience,¹⁹ but the fact that intellectuals can now influence a broader public does not mean that the audience will be receptive to their ideas. Furthermore, in the current mixed economy of mediation, intellectuals still ‘are separated from publics by technically equipped mediators’ when we take into consideration websites such as the *Huffington Post* and *The Guardian*.²⁰ Even personal blogs and Twitter accounts are part of an institutionalized hierarchy.²¹

The addition of the term *public* to the word intellectual, underlining the activity of the translation of ideas, stressing outreach and communication, originally is an American rather than a European notion. Richard A. Posner's publication *Public Intellectuals, A Study of Decline* (2001) is of relevance here. Posner analyses public intellectuals as they appeared in the media in the United States in the period between 1995 and 2000. He emphasizes that the word public marks the fact that the intellectual makes a serious contribution to the improvement of public communication. Since the universities in the twentieth century have specialized so much, academics have become used to writing for other university specialists only and have lost interest in a general educated audience. Most academic intellectuals today hide behind jargon and do not foster the talent to express themselves well. Therefore, in this world of specializations, it is important to put weight again on general issues explained to a broad audience.

To sum up, when discussing the development of the concept public intellectual, we run into different forms and understandings of the concept but the main point is that a contradiction is involved in regard to the critical issues of theory and practice, specialism and generalism, contemplation and action, and engagement and withdrawal. The public intellectual is supposed to have cultural authority and is considered to be a generalist. Benda, and in his footsteps for instance Frank Furedi in *Where have all the intellectuals gone?*,²² underlines the universal perspective of the intellectual, which means that one should be able to address things from a certain distance. Both Bourdieu and Habermas underline the autonomous and avant-gardistic (cultural) ground from which the intellectual operates. On the other hand, from Posner and Melzer we picked up the public intellectual's ability to popularize and translate ideas to an audience of lay people. Having an opinion, the public intellectual performs the role of mediator, taking care of sound argumentation and adding 'truth value' to the debate.²³ Being public implies having a responsible and visible task. [50]

Public Intellectual Writing: Essay, Column, Micro-Blog

Now that we have constructed an outline of the public intellectual, I will concentrate on the particular performance of one author. In the second part of this article, I will focus on Dutch intellectual Bas Heijne and I will mainly discuss two of his essays, *Should We Love Each Other? Populism Dissected* (2011)²⁴ and *To Really See, Literature in the Media Era* (2011).²⁵ An analysis of the argumentation and structure of these texts will lead to a reflection on (social and political) conjunctures in Dutch society.²⁶ Before starting the analysis, I will briefly introduce the essay as a typically hybrid genre of current public intellectual writing.

The prose essay has been rightly characterized as 'one of the most flexible and adaptable of all literary forms'.²⁷ Literary form, however, is a very broad category here. The German scholar Peter M. Schon²⁸ pointed out the multifarious textual phenomena defined as essay: philosophical or moralistic treatises, scientific investigations, belles-lettristic or journalistic products and texts ranging from a few pages to entire books. All these texts can be considered essay once a personal opinion or ethical conviction is articulated.²⁹ It is not always easy to distinguish the essay from the column (more polemical and specifically defined by topic), the journalistic account (informative), the manifesto (programmatic) or the short story (imaginary narrative). The essay is characterized by political and philosophical reflection and habitually expresses a literary, *singular* style.³⁰

The French philosopher Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) coined the notion *essai*, positioning his writing against the systematic philosophical text. Three typical features of Montaigne's essay can be stressed: 1) the distrust of final judgments and the resistance towards closure of the text, 2) the attention to *physical* influences on thinking and writing (Montaigne's suffering of kidney stones reappears in his work again and again) and 3) the self-presence in the texts, which can be considered 'recordings of the thoughts of a particular man living a particular life'.³¹ The essay is a 'project of self portraiture'.³² What we see in Montaigne, writes philosopher Simon Critchley, 'is something utterly modern: an attempt to write in such a way that captures and evokes the wanderings of the mind, its digressions, its assertions and its hesitations'.³³ Montaigne strives to formulate a logical response to the inconsistent world surrounding him. This response is constructed in the writing; writing implies the examination of a certain phenomenon.

The hybrid nature of the essay genre lies in the connection of discursive writing and thinking on the one hand *and* poetic or suggestive writing and thinking on the other. Individual beliefs and imagination are intermingled with general statements and political observations. Where literary fiction is often marked by an invitation to the 'willing suspension of disbelief', a concept we have been familiar with since S.T. Coleridge coined it in his *Biographia Literaria*, essayistic writing could be characterized as being marked by 'the willing postponement of final judgment'. An essay is diagnosis and meditation at the same time; the essayist [51] tries to convince his public, and shows that his thinking is personal, contingent and open to debate. This makes the essay the perfect genre for the public intellectual.

In the Dutch context in which populism, token politics, and moral and economic crises are constantly giving rise to both heated and flaky debates, Bas Heijne steadily keeps on trying to argue meticulously on various topics, showing in the deliberation process that logical thinking as such does not immediately lead to clear answers. Heijne's essays are the reworking and argumentative expansion of his (bi-) weekly columns in Dutch quality newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, and thus show in-depth reflection. In an interview with Coen Verbraak in the political and cultural weekly *Vrij Nederland*³⁴ (January 2012), Heijne explains that what is typical of the type of column he writes is a sincere, moral commitment. Columns are like performances, Heijne clarifies, 'I perform before a dark audience, they are there, but I cannot see them'.³⁵ Thus he is aware of his particular public role. Writing columns is a way to keep in touch with what is happening in society: 'It is in these current affairs, in this turmoil and bickering, that I collect my loot and drag it to my lair. And in this lair I turn it into something that digs deeper than the current affairs themselves'.³⁶ Here we are confronted with the public intellectual paradox: whilst developing a *Fingerspitzengefühl* for what is happening, the intellectual realizes that he also has to take some distance. It is from this detached position that the writing is done and the political begins. Before he became a columnist, Heijne by his own confession was not very interested in politics. But writing confronts him with the issue of 'Where do I stand as an individual in society?'.³⁷

Heijne not only appears as a columnist and essayist in the Dutch public sphere, he also regularly acts as a speaker at conferences and in public debates, he was a television host/interviewer in the 2008 edition of the VPRO one-on-one talk show *Zomergasten*, and he is active on Twitter. His account has more than 15,000 followers, while he himself follows (only) 37 twitter-accounts, from media-colleagues such as Petra Stienen (expert on the Middle East), Peter Vandermeersch (Chief-editor of NRC), Marike Stellinga (NRC columnist on

economics), Heleen Mees (expert on economics), Arnon Grunberg (literary author) and Femke Halsema (former political leader of the Dutch Green Party). Most of Heijne's tweeting activities seem to focus more on the announcements of his own columns, essays and books, rather than on presenting and inviting new critical opinions on social issues, though he also discusses with his followers, 'the public' – not just the famous people he follows himself.³⁸ Obviously, his tweets do not show the kind of 'writing and thinking' we have become used to in his essays; Heijne recognizes the limits of the medium but endeavours to use it as a forum.³⁹ [52]

Essays on Populism and Literature

Heijne's essay *Should we love each other?* explores the sense of community in Dutch society. It is an appeal for morality as well as an attempt to unravel the glorification of Enlightenment. The essay opens in the footsteps of Montaigne with self-presence: Heijne recollects the seaside trips he enjoyed with his family when he was a child. The description of the beach scenes and the videos his father made establish a nostalgic memory, bringing back 'the promise of life never ending'. This personal *Erfahrung* leads to an exposé on memory and the identification of the fear of losing everything, a general fear dominating Dutch society today, recognizable in the ongoing emphasis on notions such as 'our own', 'authentic' or 'national identity'. Heijne analyses this fear as itself a cultural change and responds to it by asking the penetrating question: 'How do we relate to each other and how can we love each other?'.⁴⁰ This particular question implies the underlying opinion that rationality is not sufficient to analyze and change the societal discontentment: we need a new moral and emotional commitment.

After the opening chapter, Heijne offers eight chapters (or eight separate essays) on various Dutch societal topics causing friction of some kind. The first one, 'Identity is a Mystery', is about a trip to Bosnia that the writer made at the end of 2010 and during which he discovered that the hopes of Bosnian liberal youngsters were centred on the European Union. Again the chapter opens with the narration of a personal observation (the Bosnia trip), followed by a general statement on a political issue and culminating in a discussion of a book. In this composition (self-presence – general issue – reading experience), we see the style of discourse switching from personal story (pathos) to rational argumentation (logos). In this chapter, Heijne reflects on Eliza Griswold's book *The Tenth Parallel, Dispatches from the Fault Line between Christianity and Islam* (2010), in which she describes her travels through Africa and Asia. This book is relevant in the context of Heijne's observations in Bosnia, since Griswold's account marks the bigger global context in which issues of identity and religion play an important role. With Griswold Heijne observes that the lack of a strong national identity leads people to embrace religion as something ultimately incomprehensible and thereby attractive. Heijne's writing is interwoven with reading and vice versa; analytical reflection is not regarded as an individual enterprise, but implies the sharing and rethinking of the ideas of another writer.

A subsequent chapter, entitled 'One World? Or: a World of One's Own?'⁴¹ discusses technological (internet) changes in contemporary Dutch society. Heijne observes the cultural shift from the world of the *artist as genius* to the world of *celebrities*. Today we live in a culture of Stars. For a correct assessment of this phenomenon it should be placed in conjunction with two concurrent developments: subjectivism (understood as the personal making of reality as in Idols programmes) and *wikinomics* (the belief in a worldwide collaboration in knowledge). [53] Heijne singles out two opposing cultural developments: 'On the one hand, the impersonal is

welcomed, on the other all that counts is the personal. On the one side, there are those who believe in the glorious, public, global interactivity, on the other side we find the advocates of the primacy of the world of personal experience, welcoming the subjective and rejecting any determining agency outside themselves'.⁴² Both developments are interrelated with the two dogmas of our time: the world is without binding narratives, and the world is made by individuals each constructing their own sphere.

These dogmas are further discussed in the chapter 'Two Modernities' in which Heijne articulates an analysis of populism in Dutch society as a reaction to the supremacy of the Enlightenment ideals. Enlightenment implies equality, tolerance, justice (variants of *égalité*, *liberté*, *fraternité*) and these have been the dominant principles of Western democracies since the end of the Second World War. However, these humanist principles have been eroded by progressive elites, preaching 'anti-fascism', while at the same time turning away from the ordinary men in their relentless multicultural ideal of 'loving each other'. Feeling neglected and ignored, the common man has lost interest in society and politics. Again reading the work of another writer offers Heijne a new critical perspective to sharpen his ideas. French-Israeli historian Zeev Sternhell describes in *Les Anti-Lumières* (2010) a tradition of anti-Enlightenment influenced by romanticists such as Edmund Burke and Johann Gottfried Herder, not stressing rationality but feeling, *das Volk*, organics and national culture. Sternhell considers this anti-Enlightenment as a dangerous strategy, finally leading to fascism, but for Heijne the two ideas of Enlightenment are strongly related: 'Individual and ratio on the one side, community and feeling on the other: it does not take a great deal of insight into human nature to realize that people will keep on being swung back and forth between these two extremes'.⁴³ Thus a *rational* response to populism cannot be regarded as appropriate, since it is defensive, self-satisfied and ineffective. The annoyance of the common man is an existential one, the citizen longs for community and his irrational desire does not fit in the world of economic efficiency and flexibility. The assumption of two modernities leads Heijne to an understanding of what is happening in Dutch society. Post Second World War humanism celebrated Enlightenment ideals, just as the populist political party PVV (Party for Freedom) seemed to do, though its 'freedom' was not really based on universal equality. Geert Wilders uses the discourses of both Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment. On the other hand: most of the humanists defending universal values, in fact defended their own superiority and failed to examine the ideals of freedom, tolerance and equality in the context of globalization. The two modernities frequently collide with each other.

Does Heijne provide an answer or solution once he has dissected Dutch populism as the outcome of two conflicting modernities? In the final chapter of his essay, he takes us back to his youth, this time describing lunches at his neighbour-friend's [54] house, during which the father used to read from the Bible. The small boy Heijne realized then and there that he could never belong to the community of believers, but to this day acknowledges his *longing to belong* to a community. I think this is a particular answer to the often analyzed political problem of discontent in Dutch society. This is an affirmation of the position of the intellectual as *in-between*, between progressive politicians and populists, between rationality and emotion, between universal humanity and community. The narrative context in which the childhood memory is placed at the end of the discursive essay opens up the way for the writer to imagine, play and openly doubt both abstract ideas and practical solutions, both personal obsessions and common sense beliefs.

In *Literature in the Media Era*, the next essay to be scrutinized, Heijne portrays himself as a literary critic and examines the place of literature in today's society. The central question of the text echoes Tsvetan Todorov's *La littérature en péril* (2006): 'Does literature need to be saved – Is literature necessary?' This question is based on three interlinked observations. First, literature is not real life. This observation comes from an interview with the famous British author Tim Parks. Parks, a former writer of modernist, experimental novels, recently discovered that 'experiences of detachment' are much more real than reading books. To live a real life, no literary book is needed. However, he keeps on writing them. A second observation, Heijne puts forward, is that he himself is reading fewer novels than before, realizing that it is not worth spending time reading hundreds of pages when so many other things are asking for one's attention.⁴⁴ In fact it seems that only dead authors are still worth reading: Joseph Conrad, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Henry James and Dutch author Louis Couperus (1863-1923). Their fictional work teaches us how to evaluate and recognize our own experiences. The writers describe the gap between individual consciousness and the world, stressing the ability of a conscious *perception*. Heijne quotes Conrad's artistic credo: 'to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see'.⁴⁵ The third observation focuses on the social and humanist codes of reading, the codes of symbolic capital (see Pierre Bourdieu) on the one hand and High Culture (see Lionel Trilling) on the other. Bourdieu understands reading as social distinction and Trilling sees it as self-fulfillment. However, average readers are not interested in literature anymore and the university specialist is unable to explain its relevance. Moreover, contemporary novelists do not really make a difference in public culture anymore.

The next part of the essay, 'The Global Imagination', deals with the issue of fiction versus reality. In our mediatized lives, our view of the world has become more and more virtual: 'this daily avalanche of images being poured out over us has made our idea of reality unstable and ephemeral'.⁴⁶ The fictionalization of reality, the disintegration of historical consciousness and the lack of coherence in knowledge, result in the perception of Culture as a continuation of *personality*, and [55] not as something strange and confronting. Not 'Erfahrung' but 'Erlebnis' has become imperative, and in this context literature seems no longer capable of grasping or getting across the real complexities of life.

In the third part of the essay, 'To Really See', Heijne further develops the idea of literature as enabling to see (perceive, understand and criticize) reality. Gabriel Josipovici, one of Heijne's sparring partners, underlines an important ambivalence: modernism in literature means the recognition that reality cannot be accommodated in a tale, but at the same time, he underlines the urgency of imposing order on life which will result in telling and retelling of stories. Literature offers consciousness and moral commitment, and as such does not reduce life, stigmatize or schematize it. On the contrary:

Human imagination is constantly pulling veils in front of reality; it is literature that tears away these veils, paradoxically through fiction, by means of stories. It is literature that demythologizes the myth, renders the cliché invalid, sheds a different light on easy thinking in terms of good and evil.⁴⁷

Josipovici's poetics suits Heijne well, because it offers both the possibility of fictional experiment and of moral input. It is literature's difference from reality and its power to *reframe* reality that could be the unique and necessary potential in today's culture which is characterized as an excess of personal experiences and a lack of shared values. In this context it is more and more difficult to decide what a community consists of. Although Heijne's

preoccupation with literature seems to be less urgent from a political, sociological and ‘practical’ point of view – since literature as such can be distinguished from everyday life as he has pointed out – and emphasises his sophisticated position, the combination of aesthetics and politics is the basis of his intellectual authority. Heijne’s work underlines Bourdieu’s concept of the bi-dimensional intellectual.

Conclusion

The public intellectual is not a politician, as Frits Bolkestein stated, and that is exactly what gives him or her the opportunity to react, criticise and reflect on political and societal issues from a more distanced position. The intellectual has been linked to the dialectic of modernity providing a basis for both the democratization of knowledge and the control of knowledge.⁴⁸ When examining Bas Heijne’s position as public intellectual in the Dutch public sphere, it is important to distinguish a sociological, political and cultural dimension in his work. His essay on populism offers an analysis of the political debates and sociological developments in Dutch society, of the frictions between the elites and the common people, left wing and neo-conservative opinions, and rational and emotional argumentations. The cultural dimension is coloured by his interest in the arguments [56] in favour and against Enlightenment. His essay on literature emphasizes another cultural dimension by focusing on authors’ and readers’ negligence of the singular potential of literature: the power to de-mythologize, to show the complexities of reality, to stress perception as consciousness. In combining the societal, political and cultural focus, Heijne occupies a significant position in the Dutch public sphere. The organic intellectual role and the traditional role of the autonomous writer (clerk) are intimately intertwined.

At the end of *Absent Minds*, Stefan Collini comments on the common perception that there has been a decline of the public intellectual debate at the end of the twentieth century. This decline should be seen in the context of the rise of celebrity culture and the overspecialization of academic thinking. Collini underlines that the cultural authority of an intellectual requires both an achievement in a particular intellectual or creative activity and the acquisition of a certain reputation for addressing a non-specialist public. Bas Heijne shows that this decline has to be qualified. He can be considered as one of the most authoritative Dutch intellectuals today, on account of his potential to reach the public on several levels: from the elite newspaper forum to popular platforms like Twitter and public lectures. We want our intellectuals to engage with the world, Collini remarks, but we also want them not to be tarnished by the vulgarity of the world. Rephrasing this with an eye on the Dutch situation, we could say that the intellectual who criticizes populist phrases in a quality newspaper is also one who is deeply interested in the (multicultural) community and who makes a plea for the moral commitment of literature. It is the intellectual who takes the responsibility to speak up for those whose use of words prevents them from speaking out convincingly in public (the populist voters: Henk and Ingrid, comparable to Joe the Plumber, are more or less invisible), who picks out the clichés in both progressive and populist discourses and lays bare the sincere (or lack of) emotion behind them, and who is able to both clarify complex issues and put his own position as a member of the intellectual elite into perspective. Although we can follow him on Twitter and occasionally see him on Dutch public television, Heijne is not the ‘celebrity-intellectual’ privileging entertainment over information⁴⁹ but he is well known to a broad educated audience for his interventions in the public debate.

Heijne shows that the Dutch intellectual debate is based on a dilemma: how should we live as individuals in a national community that does not feel like a community anymore? How can we understand the falling back on individual experiences which affect feelings of insecurity? How can we find our way amongst too many different opinions? The various answers offered by Heijne deal with a paradox, showing caution in choosing between poles, preferring doubt over certainty. At the same time big questions and big words (identity, community, nationality, Europe, literature) are not avoided, and Heijne acts as the traditional intellectual who, on the basis of his deeper insight into the nature of reality and the purposes of human life, is able to give guidance to others about what to [57] believe and how to live.⁵⁰ He is the intellectual guide taking his moral responsibility seriously. In doing so, he belongs more to the Anglo-Saxon than to the French intellectual tradition defined by pragmatic empiricism against abstract rationalism.⁵¹ The Dutch public intellectual still anchors himself as the boy growing up in a middle-class family in Zwanenburg (a village near Schiphol Airport), with both the local and global within reach.

Notes

1. The Intellectual Seduction, *Dangerous Ideas in Politics*. The book was written in English and translated into Dutch by Roland Fagel. Parts of the book were published before as articles and lectures.
2. See the discussion on Bolkestein by Heynders and Oudenampsen at <<http://www.dereactor.org>>.
3. Paul Berman, *The Flight of the Intellectuals* (New York: MelvilleHouse, 2010), p. 273.
4. 'Het gaat er niet om of de idealen van de Verlichting (...) goed en prijzenswaardig zijn. Dat staat niet ter discussie. Het gaat erom of ze haalbaar zijn', Bas Heijne, *Onredelijkheid* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2008), p. 80.
5. He has written two novels, *Laatste Woorden* (1984) and *Suez* (1992), volumes of stories (*Vreemde reis* (1987) and *Vlees en Bloed* (2008) and several (volumes of) essays: *De werkelijkheid* (2004), *Hollandse Toestanden* (2005), *Onredelijkheid* (2008), *Harde Liefde* (2010), *Grote vragen [Interviews]* (2006), *Moeten wij van elkaar houden*, *Het populisme ontleed* (2011) and *Echt zien*, *Literatuur in het mediatijdperk* (2011).
6. Barbara Misztal, *Intellectuals and the Public Good, Creativity and Civil Courage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 22.
7. The first manifestation of intellectual power at the end of the nineteenth, early twentieth century was the open letter Emile Zola published on the frontpage of *L'Aurore* on 13 January 1898. This 'J'accuse' was addressed to the Président de la République and written in defense of Captain Alfred Dreyfus against the accusation of treason.
8. J. Benda, *The Treason of the Intellectuals* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2009), p. 43.
9. Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds, Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 46-7.
10. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowel Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 9.

11. Peter Rietbergen, *Europe, A Cultural History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 464.
12. Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual, The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).
13. Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinberger and M. Richard Zinman (eds), *The Public Intellectual, Between Philosophy and Politics*, (Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham MD, 2003), p. 4.
14. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Universal Corporatism: The Role of Intellectuals in the Modern World', *Poetics Today* 12 (winter 1991), no 4, *National Literatures / Social Spaces*, 655-69 (p. 656). [15]
15. Entitled 'An Avantgardistic Instinct for Relevances: The Role of the Intellectual and the European Course'.
16. J. Habermas, *Europe, The Faltering Project* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), p. 55.
17. *Ibidem*, p. 55.
18. *Ibidem*, p. 53.
19. Amitai Etzioni and Alissa Bowditch (eds), *Public Intellectuals, An Endangered Species?* (New York / Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), p. 18.
20. Patrick Baert and Josh Booth, 'Tensions Within the Public Intellectual: Political Interventions from Dreyfus to the New Social Media', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, published online September 2012, <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10767-012-9123-6>>, [accessed on 21 October 2012].
21. Even Twitter with its following/followed and retweet infrastructure and as such a relatively democratic medium is a commercial platform with filters. Twitter Inc. is based in San Francisco.
22. Frank Furedi, *Where have all the intellectuals gone? including 'A Reply to My Critics'* (London / New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 34.
23. Richard A. Posner, *Public Intellectuals, A Study of Decline, With a new Preface and Epilogue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 83.
24. *Moeten wij van elkaar houden? Het populisme ontleed* (2011).
25. *Echt zien, Literatuur in het mediatijdperk* (2011).
26. Lawrence Grossberg, 'Does Cultural Studies Have Futures? Should it? (Or What's the Matter with New York?)', in *Cultural Studies* 20 (January 2006), no. 1 <http://www.colum.edu/Academics/Humanities_History_and_Social_Sciences/Cultural_Studies/Colloquium/Readings/Grossberg_KeynoteCS20-1.pdf>, [accessed on 22 March 2013].
27. J.A. Cuddon, *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London / New York: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 286.
28. Peter M. Schon, *Vorformen des Essays in Antike und Humanismus* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1954), pp. 7-8.
29. R. van Gorp et al., *Lexicon van literaire termen* (Groningen and Deurne: Wolters Plantyn, 1998), p. 147.
30. Maaïke Meijer, 'Denken over het essay: inleiding tot het thema', *Nederlandse Letterkunde*, 6 (2001), p. 279.

31. Ulrich Langer, *The Cambridge Companion to Montaigne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 1-2.
32. Thomas M. Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 74.
33. S. Critchley, *The Book of Dead Philosophers* (London: Granta Books, 2008), p. 132.
34. Coen Verbraak, 'Bas Heijne: "Ik wil er zelf iets aan hebben"', *Vrij Nederland*, 21 January 2012, pp. 32-6.
35. *Ibidem*, p. 32.
36. *Ibidem*, p. 35.
37. Coen Verbraak, 'Bas Heijne: "Ik wil er zelf iets aan hebben"', *Vrij Nederland*, 21 January 2012.
38. See: <https://twitter.com/Bjheijne/status/271960845368569856>. [59]
39. See for example <https://twitter.com/Bjheijne/status/272385248220815360> or <https://twitter.com/Bjheijne/status/272380129525780480> or <https://twitter.com/Bjheijne/status/271973893563109376>.
40. Bas Heijne, *Moeten wij van elkaar houden? Het populisme ontleed*, p. 17.
41. 'Eén wereld? Of: een eigen wereld?'
42. 'Aan de ene kant wordt het onpersoonlijke gehuldigd, aan de andere kant juist alleen maar het persoonlijke. Aan de ene kant staan zij die geloven in de zaligmakende, openbare, mondiale interactiviteit, aan de andere kant de pleitbezorgers van het primaat van de persoonlijke belevingswereld, die het subjectieve huldigen en geen bepalende instanties buiten zichzelf dulden.', *ibidem*, p. 50.
43. 'Individu en ratio aan de ene kant, gemeenschap en gevoel aan de andere: je hoeft niet over een groot inzicht in de menselijke natuur te beschikken om te beseffen dat een mens voortdurend heen en weer geslingerd zal worden tussen die twee uitersten.', *ibidem*, p. 109.
44. 'Waarom zou ik opnieuw (...) vijfhonderd bladzijden beslag op mijn gedachten laten leggen, terwijl zo veel andere dingen mijn aandacht opeisen?', *ibidem*, p. 15.
45. *Ibidem*, p. 76.
46. 'die dagelijkse stortvloed van beelden die we over ons heen krijgen heeft ons idee van de werkelijkheid instabiel en vluchtig gemaakt', *ibidem*, p. 46.
47. 'De menselijke verbeelding trekt voortdurend een sluier voor de werkelijkheid; het is de literatuur die die sluier afrukt, paradoxaal genoeg door middel van de fictie, het verhaal. Het is de literatuur die de mythe ontmythologiseert, die het cliché ongeldig maakt, het gemakzuchtig in goed en kwaad denken in een ander licht zet.', *ibidem*, p. 96.
48. Tania Lewis, 'Embodied Experts: Robert Hughes, Cultural Studies and the Celebrity Intellectual', *Continuum* 15:2, 233-47 (p. 234).
49. *Ibidem*, p. 234.
50. Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds, Intellectuals in Britain*, p. 473.
51. *Ibidem*, p. 69.

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