



Autonomy Proliferates

Autonomie bloeit

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Abstract: In this article, I present a survey of the arguments put forward in the other articles in this special issue. I argue that literary autonomy is not a unitary phenomenon but highly variable according to context. Some writers consider autonomy to be essential to the nature of literature properly understood. But autonomy has a history, changing as writers choose new bases for their claims to independence or experience different forms of constraint. Even the strongest claims for literature's ontological autonomy are often oriented to particular literary modes, especially those of twentieth-century experimental modernism. To exemplify the proliferating variety of autonomy, I use the theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Pascale Casanova to address W.F. Hermans's *Beyond Sleep*. Hermans ironically registers the difference the position of the Netherlands in the world-literary system makes to that novel's invocations of the ideal of autonomy.

Keywords: Autonomy, Historicism, Modernism, Pierre Bourdieu, W.F. Hermans / autonomie, historicisme, modernisme, Pierre Bourdieu, W.F. Hermans

Introduction

Literary autonomy is a protean concept. Discussions of autonomy often proceed as though it were a matter of settling a single question: Is literature autonomous or not? Or sometimes: *should* literature be autonomous? Yet, as the contributions to this special issue testify, claims for (and against) autonomy seem to alter the concept depending on the context, raising an enormous variety of questions about literature's nature, its history, its effects, and its value. Nor does the contributors' shared reference to Willem Frederik Hermans reduce this multiplicity: whereas for Frans Ruiters and Wilbert Smulders, Hermans exemplifies the autonomy of an idiosyncratic position on the literary field, for Marc de Kesel, Hermans's autonomy stems above all from his fiction's rejection of ordinary ethical codes. Thomas Vaessens enters the autonomy debate through the question of authors' political responsibility, with Hermans as an example – in spite of himself; Arnold Heumakers describes Hermans as using his autonomy to confront readers with what they would rather forget. For Derek Attridge, literature's distinctiveness is to be found in its capacity for culturally-situated innovation, especially at the linguistic and formal levels; for Laurens Ham autonomy is about an authorial posture in relation to publics. And Aukje van Rooden uses Hermans's *Beyond Sleep* to exemplify her claim, perhaps the most far-reaching of all, for an *ontological* difference between the being of literature and that of ordinary reality. This collective inquiry, then, demonstrates how much would be lost in reducing autonomy (in Hermans as in other writers) to a single philosophical issue.

Literary schools, ethics, politics, cultural innovations, postures, ontologies: a long list of domains in which literary autonomy is to be arbitrated – and yet not comprehensive. In scholarship and criticism, autonomy has been measured along other axes too: the opposition between market value and other schemes of value; the distinction between artistic making and ordinary labor; the possibility of global rather than national or local literature; the separation of works from their creators; and the distance between literary language and ordinary meaning-making.¹ This profusion of possibilities indicates that the theoretical question of autonomy is dialectically coupled to that of literature's more-than-literary significance. In most articulations of literary autonomy since the late nineteenth century, autonomy describes *modes of relation* between literary practice and other domains of social and cultural life. In this special issue, as in all the most interesting arguments about autonomy, the question is whether, and how, those modes of relation might be said to create or uphold literature as a distinctive, self-regulating, or independent domain.

¹ To cite just a few key theorists of autonomy in or against these various domains: on economic value and labor: Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Gretel Adorno and others, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: Economic World Reversed', in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. by Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 29-73; on national culture: Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); on the connection to the author, Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 142-48; on meaning or referentiality, Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979). Each of the tendencies I mention can be traced in particular late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century writers, as I argue in my book *Fiction of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to de Man* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); see the introduction for fuller references to recent scholarship on autonomy in Anglo-American modernist studies.

I believe that even the most stridently independent forms of artistic practice depend in complex ways on relations to other social fields, and that autonomy is only ever relative and historically variable. To regard autonomy as a social practice involving writers, readers, and mediating institutions makes it possible to say how a relatively autonomous literature nonetheless bears on other aspects of culture and society. This dialectic might be summed up in two phrases from Hermans's 'Unsympathetic Fictional Characters' (1960). On the one hand, a declaration of autonomy: 'Every reader forms an enormous obstacle to the writer [...] all thoughts of an actually existing readership inhibit and, in so doing, pervert the writer's pronouncements.'² On the other hand, this rejection of the demands of a mass readership is grounded in a social relation: 'There is a deeply buried solidarity between the writer and the masses [...] based on mutual hatred, but also on a corresponding self-hatred.'³ This antipathetic, rhetorically extravagant invocation of 'solidarity' is one image for a literary autonomy grounded in social relations – or what I call a *fiction of autonomy*.

The Universalizing Views

My view about the historical relativity of autonomy is not shared by all the writers here, for some of whom autonomy is essential to literature. Van Rooden, drawing on Maurice Blanchot, argues that all literature brackets the 'facticity of reality as a whole'.⁴ De Kesel, though focusing on an interpretation of Hermans's 'An Emancipation', does not limit the domain of application of his Nietzschean claim that 'literature must be iconoclastic'.⁵ Though Derek Attridge prefers the concept of 'singularity' to that of autonomy, his argument – both here and in *The Singularity of Literature* – can be read as a further theoretical framework for universalist autonomy claims; Attridge aims to account for the aspect of *all* literature that resists, as he puts it in *Singularity*, 'instrumentalism' or the mobilizing of literature for 'political, moral, historical, biographical, psychological, cognitive, or linguistic' projects.⁶ This dimension, says Attridge, is constituted by the advent of something unexpected: literary creation (which for Attridge is experienced by readers as well as writers) only happens through an openness to the other. Though they do not discount by any means the historical conditioning of writing and reading, van Rooden, De Kesel, and Attridge all stress what they take to be a constant quality of literature as such.

² See Appendix 2: W.F. Hermans, 'Unsympathetic Fictional Characters', trans. by M. Hutchison, *The Ethics of Autonomy: the Case of Willem Frederik Hermans. Special Issue of the Journal of Dutch Literature*, 6.1 (2015), 118-128 (p.119).

³ Hermans, 'Unsympathetic Fictional Characters', p. 119.

⁴ Aukje van Rooden, 'Our Engagement with Literature: On Literature as a Way of Being', 59-67 (p. 62).

⁵ De Kesel, 'Morals for a Song: Ethics of literature in W. F. Hermans's 'An Emancipation'', 82-96 (p. 93).

⁶ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 7. In his essay in this issue, Attridge affirms that 'singularity' is meant to respond to art's 'non-instrumental relation to human actions' ('Autonomy, the Singular Literary Work, and the Multilingualism of Hermans's *Nooit meer slapen*', 17-32 (p. 24)).

Yet these views embrace a distinctively modern, or rather *modernist*, readerly disposition. For van Rooden, literature creates a Blanchotian ‘instant where everything is possible’.⁷ De Kesel argues that Bahloul’s experience of his unsingable song typifies the way readers ‘lose ourselves’ and ‘enjoy a certain distance with regard to the evil.’⁸ And for Attridge, the major ethical dimension of literature as such lies in an experience of something other to what the reader knows, expects, or can conceive, of being ‘willing to be disarmed and, if necessary dismayed, by the intimations of an otherness excluded by its [the subject’s] familiar world’.⁹ To ‘make it new’, in Ezra Pound’s much-cited tag, was the program of the self-consciously advanced late-nineteenth and twentieth-century literary movements: they sought to establish unconventionality, difficulty, amorality, and innovation as central literary values. Arnold Heumakers traces the intellectual history of this stance in his contribution here; both Ham and Ruiter and Smulders make use of Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological theory of the same disposition, which, for Bourdieu, was the product of the gradual autonomization of the cultural field in the nineteenth century.¹⁰ If we take such historical arguments seriously, we should question the apparent immediacy of any readerly experience of the new, the other, the fictive, or the ethically impossible. Though readers may sincerely feel that they have directly experienced the essential qualities of a literary work, Bourdieu denounces what he calls ‘analyses of essence’ in *The Rules of Art*:

What they have in common is to take as object [...] the subjective experience of the work of art which is that of the analyst, meaning of a cultivated person of a certain society [...] They effect, unwittingly, a *universalization of the particular case* [...] They pass over in silence the question of the *historical and social conditions of possibility* of this experience.¹¹

I do not mean to imply that any of the writers here ‘unwittingly’ universalize their view: I admire van Rooden, de Kesel, and Attridge for their clarity about the way they take a situated readerly response and put it to theoretical use for thinking about literature and ethics. Nonetheless, Bourdieu’s social critique of the ‘universalization’ of such responses is compelling: it tells us that the grounds for autonomy do not lie in the literary work as an isolated object, nor in a legitimated readerly response, but in institutions, social networks of roles and actors, and particular distributions of power and resources. Whatever ethical value a particular mode of literary autonomy might have depends on the ethics of that social configuration.¹²

⁷ Van Rooden, p. 61.

⁸ De Kesel, p. 95.

⁹ Attridge, ‘Autonomy’, p. 23.

¹⁰ In fact, though van Rooden commits to applying her argument to all texts, she too points to ‘modern literature’ (p. 61) as exemplary of literature’s freedom (and she cites yet another historical theory of these ideas, that of Jacques Rancière).

¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by S. Emanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 286; emphasis in original.

¹² De Kesel obliquely alludes to this in his references to Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, the whole point of which is to link competing moral systems to social power. In *The Singularity of Literature* Attridge grants Bourdieu’s argument about the social situatedness of art-reception, yet still insists on the value of an artwork’s irreducibility to rules (p. 12).

The Historicist View

Ruiter and Smulders attempt to reconcile an analysis of Hermans in the mode of Bourdieu with an affirmation of the more universalist, Attridgean ‘inventiveness’ of this writer. For Ruiter and Smulders, Hermans’s ‘pure and strangely enough vital negativity’ is, to be sure, part of the distinctive position he created in the field of Dutch literature; but it is also ‘singular[.]’, and potentially ‘liberating’, in our moment as well as his lifetime.¹³ In my work on English-language writers I have also found myself wanting to assert this kind of present-day power for autonomy: for example, the American novelist Djuna Barnes, I have tried to show, forges a distinctive position in the international modernist field with her novel *Nightwood* (1936), which casts a satirical eye on the cosmopolitan artistic scene in Europe between the wars. Yet Barnes’s negation of communal solidarity in that novel of the margins continues to resonate today, when writers and scholars attribute political power to aesthetic cosmopolitanism.¹⁴ My sense of the contemporary urgency of Barnes’s work seems to me, however, to be due not so much to any ‘inventiveness’, in Attridge’s sense, as to what Ruiter and Smulders would describe as ‘originality’ and which I prefer to call Barnes’s autonomy tactics. We can trace the continuities between the situation Barnes first intervened in and the contemporary situation of world literature: the same cosmopolitan modernist literature that Barnes participated in and distanced herself from has, over the last century, been fully institutionalized through the dissemination of scholarly literary criticism, the proliferation of global cultural prizes, and the circulation of a cosmopolitan reading class.¹⁵ As in Barnes’s time, so today, cultural metropolises like Paris, Berlin, or New York celebrate certain writers on the global stage but remain quite ambivalent about writers with political programs. In the 1930s Barnes made her mark on a new international modernist vanguard disposed to value her experimental, challenging style; and if I value it too, that is because I have a cultivated *habitus* produced through some of those same literary institutions, which disposes me to discover elaborate technical achievements in modernist masterpieces like Barnes’s (and to propagate my own interpretation of them as part of my scholarly activity). I do not need to invoke any imponderable quality of Barnes’s work to account – and to value – her distinctive literary achievement; instead, I can trace the connections between her historical conjuncture and my own.

The continuing importance of Bourdieu’s theory of literary autonomy is indicated by his signal position in Ruiter and Smulders’s and Ham’s contributions here. Ruiter and Smulders analyse the complexities of Bourdieu’s account of autonomy, showing that the sociologist is far from debunking the idea. In fact, they point out, for Bourdieu the artistic field is the prototypical social field: ‘Bourdieu frames the practice of social processes as such in terms very

¹³ Frans Ruiter and Wilbert Smulders, ‘Autonomy, Universality and Singularity: Bourdieu, Attridge, and Hermans’, p. 44.

¹⁴ See Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy*, chap. 3.

¹⁵ On cosmopolitan modernism in English, see Rebecca Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). On global cultural prizes, see James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), chap. 13. On the ‘reading class’, that is, the exceptionally mobile, well-educated fraction of contemporary societies that reads regularly for entertainment, see Wendy Griswold, *Regionalism and the Reading Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

reminiscent of Kantian aesthetics'.¹⁶ Nonetheless, Ruiter and Smulders, like Ham, do not simply accept Bourdieu's argument wholesale. Both essays take the sociologist's model of the 'conquest of autonomy' and translate it in order to interpret the position-takings of Hermans and Multatuli. Just as Bourdieu claims that Flaubert and Baudelaire had to negate existing positions in order to achieve their own distinctive, relatively autonomous stance – a 'double rupture', a 'concern to keep one's distance from all social roles' – so do Hermans and Multatuli devise their own postures as 'autonomous non-specialists'.¹⁷ As Ham points out, this act of translation actually entails a modification to Bourdieu's historical narrative. For Bourdieu, autonomization happens once, with the advent of literary modernism in Flaubert and Baudelaire: the actions of Emile Zola in the Dreyfus Affair consolidate the autonomy of the cultural field by 1900, after which, increasingly, 'new entrants who orient themselves to the most 'autonomous' positions may skip over the more or less heroic sacrifices and ruptures of the past'.¹⁸ Yet, as Ham suggests, locating a moment of definitive rupture is difficult to do convincingly; even in this special issue, Arnold Heumakers prefers to begin the intellectual development of autonomy with German early Romanticism, not with nineteenth-century *l'art pour l'art*. In Ham's alternate view (which I find convincing), writers continually participate in the practice of laying claim to autonomy, from the time of Flaubert to that of Hermans to the present.¹⁹

Still, this does not mean that autonomization has no history; nor does it imply that the field-theoretical perspective is useless for analyzing literary autonomy. Rather, it testifies to the provisional nature of literary autonomy, which, despite the development of specialized literary institutions in the twentieth century, is never more than relative, and always subject to renegotiation and contestation. Gisèle Sapiro has shown that twentieth-century French publishing has in fact had to continually struggle for autonomy through conflicts and shifting allegiances with the marketplace and state patronage.²⁰ As a consequence, claims to autonomy must always be understood contextually, in terms of the space of possibilities agents navigate. Often, those contexts will imply that the pursuit of autonomy is by no means an unqualified good. Indeed, in the context of Anglo-American literary studies, autonomy has acquired a bad reputation, in part because the most emphatic contemporary defenders of art for art's sake tend to be 'formalists' in the pejorative sense, and often culturally and politically conservative to boot. The shadow of figures like Céline, who, as Heumakers shows, uncomfortably combines high-modernist celebrations of autonomous poetics with repugnant right-wing politics, looms

¹⁶ Ruiter and Smulders, 'Autonomy', p. 38. On this issue, see also John Guillory, 'Bourdieu's Refusal', in *MLQ*, 58 (1997), 367–98.

¹⁷ Bourdieu, *Rules*, pp. 78–79; L. Ham, 'The Specialism of Unspecificity: Autonomy Claims and the Authority of Modern Writers', 68–82, (p. 70).

¹⁸ Bourdieu, *Rules*, p. 257.

¹⁹ Ham, p. 72. From the very same page of *The Rules of Art* I have just quoted from: 'the collective invention which produces the job of writer and artist is always to be begun again' (Bourdieu, p. 257).

²⁰ Gisèle Sapiro, 'The Literary Field Between the State and the Market', *Poetics*, 31 (2003), 441–64.

over discussions of autonomy.²¹ By contrast, literary studies has shifted its attention to the way literature participates in history, especially histories of resistance, critical challenge, and progressive change.²² In the work of the present special issue, however, autonomy emerges as a *way*, or many ways, for literature to be in history, whether as an ethical stance, a public posture, a social tactic, or a field position.

Autonomy and Method

This understanding of autonomy entails rethinking the way we carry out literary scholarship. Literary autonomy has long been an important concept for professional scholars of literature because it provides a justification for the distinctive objects and methods of the field. It is conventional to point to theorists of ‘close reading’ like the American John Crowe Ransom, who made professional autonomy claims in tandem with an intensively text-focused critical method for the study of poetry.²³ Autonomy permits one to focus one’s attention on unpacking the language and form of the text without much concern for literature’s social relations or the worldly interests of authors and readers. Even as scholarship has come to doubt absolute claims to literary autonomy, the method of close reading – and its implicit fiction of autonomy – lives on. Edward Said exemplifies the transformation: a politically engaged scholar and public intellectual, he nonetheless speaks of culture’s ‘relative autonomy’ when he articulates his approach to studying empire through cultural forms like the novel, and to the end of his life defended a philological attentiveness to literary language as fundamental to his distinctive scholarly project.²⁴ Yet already in Said the tools necessary for the study of literature have changed: relative autonomy is also relative heteronomy, and a postcolonial analysis requires an understanding of history and politics, not simply a reading of a text’s putatively intrinsic features.

The same could be said of Bourdieu’s demand that sociologists of literature reconstruct the cultural field, not simply interpret texts: our scholarly attention shifts from the internal relations of part to part to the relations that reach out from the text, in all its complexity, to the world. In the work in this issue, Ruiter and Smulders, Ham, Heumakers, and De Kesel all explicitly concern themselves with authors’ social and historical situations. Attridge’s theoretical approach is somewhat ambivalent: though committed to the heuristic value of close reading or practical criticism, Attridge also asserts in *The Singularity of Literature* that the literary event always happens through a person’s ‘idioculture’, the ‘totality of the cultural codes

²¹ In the Anglophone context, equivalent figures might include T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. I discuss Paul de Man’s wartime writings in Belgian newspapers, where he defends modernist aesthetic autonomy and fascist anti-Semitism in almost the same breath, in *Fictions of Autonomy*, chap. 4.

²² Paradoxically, then, contemporary American writers who seek to lay claim to autonomy tend to do so only ironically and tactically, while simultaneously insisting on their social and cultural embeddedness. James English discusses Toni Morrison’s ‘strategy of negative affirmation’, which both critiques the moral legitimacy of cultural value in a racist culture and lays claim to the markers of legitimacy – like the Pulitzer and Nobel prizes – as an example of ‘an ongoing shift in the *illusio* of literary practice’ (pp. 244–45).

²³ John C. Ransom, ‘Criticism, Inc.’, in *The World’s Body* (New York: Scribner, 1938), pp. 327–50.

²⁴ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p. xii; Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

constituting a subject'.²⁵ If this is so, however, suddenly the study of writers' and readers' cultural codes becomes indispensable to understanding literature, even, or especially, when such literature wants to claim autonomy.

Easier said than done. Still, it is clear that the study of literary autonomy is paradoxically an interdisciplinary project – if it does not simply redefine the discipline of literary scholarship. In a sense, then, this issue's contributors join the historicist project, seeking to historicize autonomy itself without compromising its distinctiveness. Yet historicizing autonomy differs from the ordinary practice of literary historicism. The historicist turn – especially in U.S. literary studies – accommodated itself to close reading by generalizing the close-reading procedure to other cultural texts. By contrast, developing a full understanding of literary autonomy claims and practices requires understanding many kinds of social relation, even if those relations are mostly forms of distance or denial. As a result, the autonomy question draws the study of literature closer to the domain of the social sciences.

A rather different methodological shift appears, however, to be underway in literary scholarship. The new research program of so-called 'distant reading' in literary studies, which revives the quantitative and interdisciplinary interests of the *Annales* school with new computationally-assisted methods, regards close reading as inadequate to grapple with the sheer scale of cultural production. Particularly since the development of mass markets for literature in the nineteenth century, many more works in all the literary genres (poetry, fiction, drama) have been produced than any single scholar could hope to read closely. Digitization has now made many formerly obscure works easier to access, however, so scholars can turn to computational approaches to reconstruct the field.²⁶ The potential of such work to upend existing literary histories is enormous; it remains to be seen, however, whether such work will provide new ways of grappling with the problems of autonomy, or whether it will reinstate existing categories. In particular, will the question of autonomy continue to be associated with high-cultural texts, an expanding but selective canon of 'major' and exceptional figures – figures like Hermans, or Baudelaire, or Djuna Barnes? Or will the vast bulk of production for large-scale audiences turn out to invite us to discover new forms of autonomization, new fictions of autonomy? In her philosophical essay, van Rooden makes the striking argument that literature's ontological distinctiveness is quite general: 'from fairy tales to historical novels, from avant-garde poetry to literary thrillers'.²⁷ For van Rooden, autonomy should not be associated with high-status genres or works but is inherent in the act of creation. This is a striking challenge to the tendency to link autonomy with literary honour – a tendency shared by everyone from Bourdieu to Cleanth Brooks. A historical approach, too, bolstered by the new methods for studying popular literatures, might uncover new terrains for autonomy. In particular, it seems very likely that distinctive forms and fictions of autonomy are developed

²⁵ Attridge, *Singularity*, p. 22.

²⁶ See, for example, Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), and *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013), and Matthew L. Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013). In a more explicitly sociological, and Bourdieu-inspired, vein, see Nathalie M. Houston, 'Toward a Computational Analysis of Victorian Poetics', *Victorian Studies*, 56 (2014), 498–510, and Andrew Goldstone and Ted Underwood, 'The Quiet Transformations of Literary Studies: What Thirteen Thousand Scholars Could Tell Us', *New Literary History*, 45 (2014), 359–84.

²⁷ Van Rooden, 'Our Engagement', p. 61.

within subcultures associated with particular genres (e.g. science fiction), audiences (e.g. ethnic minorities), or publishing circuits (e.g. internet fiction).

Expanding Contexts: Autonomy's Geography

Once we accept that autonomy is necessarily (and productively) contextualized, we confront the challenging question of *which* contexts matter. To put the question in terms of Bourdieu's theory, is the literary field always national? Bourdieu's work on culture is largely focused on France (and within France, Paris); autonomy is worked out, for him, on the scale of the nation. Comparative approaches challenge this methodological nationalism: Heumakers's genealogy of autonomy, for example, is of necessity pan-European, and links Céline and Hermans across national borders as well as ideological positions. But the nation is a problem in another way, as precisely one of those heteronomous forces against which writers seeking autonomy might define themselves. As Pascale Casanova has argued, though writers from cultural centers like France or England might imagine themselves to operate free from the bonds of nationality, writers from culturally dominated spaces often do not share this illusion. Casanova draws our attention to a key form of autonomy – a *cosmopolitan* or *world-literary autonomy*, which can only be produced through struggles for recognition in globally-acknowledged institutions.

In *Beyond Sleep*, the narrator's friend Arne delivers a pessimistic assessment of Norway's cultural autonomy:

‘If you're a small country,’ he says, ‘where politics and fashion and films and cars and machines and practically everything else is imported from abroad, and if beyond that practically all essential books [...] are foreign, then the countries producing them will regard you the same way as colonial powers regard their colonies, and city folk regard the provinces. Colonies and provinces, they're on a similar plane—not up to date, unsophisticated, always getting the wrong end of the stick.’²⁸

Arne's account resonates very strongly with Casanova's description of the workings of the ‘system of literary timekeeping’ that works to ‘exile from literature’ those deemed not to be up to date with the latest innovations.²⁹ This relegates the periphery of the literary system to cultural dependence and backwardness, so that ‘all essential books’ seem to come from somewhere else. Hermans's irony, however, is that Arne is far more self-sufficient than the novel's anti-hero Alfred, who is dependent in everything, from mountaineering to scholarship.

But it is Alfred's mother who exemplifies heteronomy to a satiric extreme. Holland's ‘foremost essayist’, Alfred tells his friend, is in fact a hack, transcribing the judgments of the leading English and French journals – ‘the *Observer*, the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Figaro Littéraire*. My mother only bothers with books that have already been reviewed in those papers’ – for an equally craven audience.³⁰ Casanova's theory of global autonomy accords a

²⁸ W. F. Hermans, *Beyond Sleep*, trans. by I. Rilke (Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 2006), pp. 80–81.

²⁹ Casanova, *World Republic*, p. 94.

³⁰ Hermans, *Beyond Sleep*, p. 170

productive role to the cultural intermediaries who transmit global literary culture, the ‘great, often polyglot, cosmopolitan figures’; by contrast, Hermans’s Dutch broker of ‘Hemingway, Faulkner, Graham Greene, Somerset Haugham, Sartre, Robbe-Grillet’ converts world-literary activity into mere piecework, and literary judgment into an empty ritual of ‘parrot[ing]’.³¹ Hermans calls attention to this pattern of literary provincialism, and, perhaps, through his satire, attempts to work around or against it. Yet the novel hardly offers a salutary alternative: neither the macho philistinism of Mikkelsen and Qvigstad, the other members of the expedition, nor the piety of Alfred’s sister Eva, nor even Alfred’s own dream-life, seems like a viable path to autonomy.³² Though the novel might exemplify what Ruiter and Smulders label Hermans’s empty-handed gift or universal negation, the novel’s own representations of cultural dependence seem to offer no way out for the provincial intellectual. The only possibility that remains is that the very distance between the savagely ironic author and his characters constitutes Hermans’s fiction of cosmopolitan autonomy.³³

This very brief remark on *Beyond Sleep* is meant only to suggest that the analysis of autonomy in Hermans, as in many another twentieth-century writer, leads to a great variety of questions about the social life of literature. For my own part, I think the question of an intrinsic literary ethics of autonomy is but one such, and perhaps not the most compelling: yet even those who disagree will, I think, wish to grant to all the contributors in this special issue their sense of the breadth of analytical possibility literary autonomy offers, especially when taken in comparative and historical perspective. Autonomy is many things, but it is not *easy*: it is not a simple starting axiom but a matter for struggle, a term of celebration or abuse, the prize put at stake in many overlapping fields (national, subnational, supranational; literary, intellectual, cultural), a vexed and contradictory program articulated not only through explicit statements but through all manner of aesthetic and other tactics.

If this holds for literature, it holds all the more for those who study it. Scholarship fails when it uses ideas of autonomy as an occasion for self-congratulation or complacency about ‘the humanities’ and high-cultural values, or when it substitutes a socio-cultural particular for the universal. That substitution is often in the service of the dominant powers, who would always prefer that no one looked into culture’s relative *heteronomy* to processes of stratification, exclusion, marginalization, and exploitation. By the same token, however – and here I follow Ruiter and Smulders in taking up the call for the ‘corporatism of the universal’ sounded by Bourdieu in *The Rules of Art* – literary autonomy, precisely because it cannot be taken for granted, precisely because it is meaningful only as a mode of relation to other social domains, is worth taking seriously.

³¹ Casanova, *World Republic*, p. 21; Hermans, *Beyond Sleep*, pp. 21, 169. The gender of the contrast between derivative feminine scribbling and masculine creation is a familiar trope of the culture of literary autonomy, whose archetype might be the difference between Flaubert and Emma Bovary. Only one of the Euro-American cultural figures Alfred lists is a woman. But Hermans’s irony encompasses this as well, since we recognize, with Alfred, that at least Alfred’s mother has managed to forge a career, whereas he appears perpetually unable to create.

³² At the symposium in Utrecht on The Ethics of Autonomy in February 2014 from which this special issue emerges, Odile Heynders took up the question of Hermans and cosmopolitanism through his move to Paris and his later novel *Au pair*. Unfortunately – in a testament to the unequal structures of literary circulation analyzed by Casanova and by Hermans himself – that novel is not available in English, so I, lacking Dutch, cannot myself pursue this line of inquiry.

³³ Compare Bourdieu on Proust: ‘It is not by chance that Proust is not the absolutely unproductive writer who is the narrator of *À la recherche du temps perdu*.’ *Rules of Art*, p. 104.

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