

The Dimension of ‘Play’ in the Autonomous Meaning of Literature¹

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The concept ‘literary autonomy’ is as important as it is tricky. No matter the way one is scholarly engaged in modern literature, sooner or later one is confronted with the phenomenon that the liberation and emancipation of literature culminates around 1800. According to some scholars autonomy is the distinguishing feature of the *work*: from then on literary texts became more and more hermetic. Others stipulate that autonomy is a characteristic of the social position of the author, who from then on situates himself on the border of the social and moral frameworks of the bourgeois culture. Others think that autonomy is caused by the raise of the phenomenon ‘subject’, who from then on doesn’t anymore recognize any authority outside itself and sets its own frameworks. In discussions about autonomy usually one of those characteristics is made absolute, mostly the social and the poetical one. I try to do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon ‘autonomy’ by accepting the three characteristics as its three *dimensions*, constantly playing in a dynamic interaction. I try to show this interaction and try to concretise this rather abstract phenomenon in view of the modern Dutch literature, especially the authorship of Hermans.

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THE DIMENSION OF 'PLAY' IN THE AUTONOMOUS MEANING OF LITERATURE

In our research project we focus on literary artists whose work and behaviour seems to reject any social commitment, but have nevertheless a considerable cultural impact. Nevertheless or therefore, that's the question. The French art sociologist Nathalie Heinich calls this type of artists, whose origin lies in the Romantic Movement, '*grands écrivains*'. The factual given that the so called autonomy of the '*grands écrivains*' in modern literature hides a considerable amount of engagement and implies a moral impact on the community of their readers, is a puzzling paradox. The question is: how takes this hidden effect place? How does this cultural machinery work? Our project tries firmly to tackle these questions. Consequently we are eager to get a grasp on theories that can enlighten the paradoxical process. Our approach is threefold: a search along the line of sociological, epistemological and aesthetic theories.

In this lecture I will concentrate on the concept of *play*, put in the centre of aesthetics by for example Hans-Georg Gadamer, who for his part takes at this point the slipstream of the famous study *Homo Ludens*, written by our compatriot Johan Huizinga. The problem being highly abstract I will try to be as concrete as possible. Therefore I will present a short prose text by Willem Frederik Hermans, one of the '*grands écrivains*' in post war Dutch literature, for this occasion translated by myself in collaboration with my honourable colleague Sven Vitse. It follows below. After a brief introduction of Gadamer's concept of *play* I will tackle Hermans' text, interpreting it along two lines: as a thematic unity and as a play within its threefold context of reader communities.

'BEHIND THE SIGNPOSTS NO ADMITTANCE'

Few people know how much I feel attracted to what is concealed behind the signposts No Admittance. Even people who have publicly spilt the beans on me and who have complained that I did not explain all about myself beforehand don't know that, because I have never brought it up. But ever since I was fourteen years old I have spent many days at those isolated places from where merely some rumbling and smoke reaches passers-by. And often not even that. Only a Private Road where only those people go who are entitled to, leads to those places, from the public road which is nothing more for its part than a side-road of the main road.

It is there that monstrous draglines, pneumatic drills and dynamite destroy the illusion that our world should be an 'inhabitable world'. It is here where it becomes clear what kind of planet our world really is: a huge stone, pure at the inside, solid and clear, dirty at the outside, mucous and worn out.

That dirt, that wear material, those grindings, left behind as the wear and tear by ice, snow, rain and wind, has produced everything: the microbes, the vegetation, the animals and the human race. Sometimes this huge stone is cleaned up a little by nature. She breathes upon it, scratches it, knocks on it or strikes a match to it. The newspapers speak of catastrophes: tornados, floods, avalanches, forest fires, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. It causes cries of distress, but in fact nothing happened: the huge stone is still perfectly intact.

Cut a splinter of the stone and it will show its pure cosmic colours, its minerals called jewels and gems if they are hard enough to withstand the wear and tear and do not contribute to the world's habitability.

Behind those signposts No Admittance dusty labourers need brute force to cut a little fragment of our huge stone. There the material is being mined of which we build our houses, the coal that warms us and the ore of which one forges weapons.

Sometimes I walk around those abysses without doing anything, considering how man,

frantically straining himself, gnaws crumbs off the enormous meteor he is helplessly tied to, upon which he roars through the universe like a shipwrecked person on a raft, without the prospect of nearing other shipwrecked people on other rafts.

In those places, behind the signposts No Admittance, the grass is grey with dust, the trees are damaged by lorries scraping against them, large pits are filled with green water, beneath dead bushes broken cog-wheels and bottomless enamelled jars lie. There is a stench as if only the lowest forms of life would venture here.

No one comes here but the dusty workers and me. The workers pay no attention to me. No-one will come and look for me there, in that thundering loneliness where I belong although I never discuss it with anyone.

The rattling of the machines sounds to me like the music of the revolution. Here the pointless heroism with which man digs himself into his rock thumps in dark alleys, which proportionally cannot even be compared to a pin-prick.

Here the trampling of a prisoner on the concrete floor of his cell resounds, amplified a thousand fold.

[W.F. Hermans, born in Amsterdam September 1st 1921. Poet, author and doctor in geology. Has been member of the editorial board of several literary magazines. He published *Ik heb altijd gelijk*, *Tranen der acacia's*, *Moedwil en misverstand*, *Het behouden huis*, *Paranoia*. His *Mandarijnen op zwavelzuur* (merciless critical pamphlets against colleague authors) spur friend and foe on to criticize on their turn.]

GADAMER'S AESTHETIC CONCEPT OF 'PLAY'

Gadamer discerns three aspects of 'the beautiful': play, the symbolic and celebration. As I have already said, I'll confine myself in this lecture to the aspect of 'play'.

What is to play? For Gadamer to play is a self-representation of being. To play amounts to a self-movement without purpose. Also lifeless things do play (the moving patterns of light or of the waves) and the same goes for animals (young dogs are playing).

The human being is a rational animal. He plays also but he is gifted with reason and reason forces him to set himself at an objective. When the human being plays he involves the reason in his play, but the play overrules his on an objective directed reason. Man disciplines and organizes his playing, *as if it should have an objective*. The objective of his play may be behaviour without objective, but this behaviour-without-objective is nevertheless *meant to be* that behaviour-without-objective.

The work of art has, what Gadamer calls, a hermeneutic identity. This means, in the first place, that I understand it as something with a meaning, and secondly that I understand it as something that only means to be what it produces, as just that what it is. In the art work the play converges with what Gadamer means by the symbolic. Like the play is a self-representation, the symbolic refers to something that it hides at the same time. Like the play is behaviour without any objective, the symbolic embodies what it means. What an art work has to say, is to be found in the art work as a material body. The indeterminateness of its reference is essential.

And last but not least, according to Gadamer playing is a communicative event. It is impossible to play on your own. To play creates automatically fellow players. When you see someone play you can't back out of it. The sight of a playing person involves you without fail.

BEHIND THE SIGNPOSTS NO ADMITTANCE: AN EXPLORATION OF THE TEXTUAL FACTS

What is told to whom? What is the profile of the player? Which play is at stake? What are the rules and who are made fellow player? The text presents us several moments of displacement: as regards genre as well as content.

On the level of genre there is a displacement from column to story:

* Column: casual kind of communication by an informal discursive text, on a confidential tone, stating a personal view on everyday subject matter or on more serious or even ponderous subject matter, but then with heavy ironic undertones.

* Story: artistic kind of communication by the formalities of a fictional text, on a dramatic tone, stating a universal view on existential subject matter.)

On the level of content: the writer is complaining to the reader about the critics of his work. They want to grasp the meaning of his work in the easy way and complain on their turn that the author does not give them insight in that what is behind his fiction. In other words: the critics complain that the writer does not let the cat out of the bag, and the writer complains...yes, about what is the writer actually complaining? What is he driving at, with his complaints about their complaints about, their (in his opinion) misplaced curiosity?

In the text he formulates an answer to their complaints, but his text is not directed to them, that is to say: to the critics. No, it is someone else: the reader of this little, informal text he is directing to. He takes him into his confidence and tells him a secret, something which *he has never brought up* (line 4-5), something *he never discusses with anybody* (l. 34-35). The secret is unfolded by a confession about his fascination *ever since he was fourteen* - that is to say: ever since the age one becomes aware of the mysteries of life - by the places in the public space cut off by signposts *No Admittance*. He has the habit to surpass those borderlines in the public space, walking without any goal. Wandering through those *terrains vagues*, lost spaces, marginal areas, he has a strong sensation of the sublime: the world as an overwhelming abyss, an endless space and time, a universe consisting of material, whose secret and meaning is that there is materiality, nothing but materiality. He describes this tremendous chaos with the poetic topoi of an inverted paradise (l. 29-32), which is awe-inspiring and fills him with a healthy respect, but at the same time tortures him with the feeling that he himself, as a human being, is mere nothing, an absolute futility. It takes him in captivity and even gives him the physical reaction of trampling, as the bodily symptom that the sensation is unbearable or only bearable in pain. His presence behind the signposts *No Admittance* is an exclusive experience and having been inaugurated to that experience results in a totally isolated position. Witness the fact of his trembling: he is nevertheless forced to give evidence of it, involuntary, as in a reflex, unconsciously, maybe even unwilling or against his will. This tangible way of giving evidence refers back to the writership of the I. The painful trembling is the author, rattling in despair on his typewriter.

I present a schematic figure with the thematic lines of the text.

COLUMN	
writer	STORY
	critics
<i>I character</i>	<i>everyone (=nobody)</i>
<i>Pain by truth</i> <i>Isolation</i> <i>Prometheus</i>	<i>Wellness by illusion</i> <i>Community</i> <i>mankind</i>
Signposts 'No Admittance'	
BEHIND	BEFORE

Obviously the text bears the romantic scheme of the artist as prophet, a solitary holy man, tortured by his knowledge of higher things. The artist as a modern Prometheus, having stolen the fire right under the noses of the gods, that is to say having stolen the secret of the physical world from the metaphysical field, and now being punished in an awful manner, every day again. This is the play of man against the Gods.

But we can also discern another scheme. And that is the hide-and-go-seek play between the writer and the reader. The writer tells the reader a secret, but by telling it he makes it public. But what would be left then of his secret? His confidential talking really is paradoxical. To whom he is talking? To the everybody (who is obviously excluded from inauguration) or to the nobody he says he is talking to. Is there any difference between the two categories of nullity? Nothing points out that he feels any obligation or even respect towards them. Why would he cross the border by yelling out his painful secret? Why doesn't he shut up and keep the secret for himself?

And besides, what if the reader should really listen to the trampling of the writer and should consequently cross the border, why would the writer then want him to do that? What would happen if they all would join the holy isolation of his Promethean vocation, if the all would solidarize with his position and share his unique knowledge? Would that not automatically lead to another paradox: the banalization of his unique sensation of the sublime?

No, it really is hide-and-go-seek, but played in another respect. What is at stake is that the writer tells the reader that there is a secret and that the reader has to look for it, trace it and pin it down. At stake is a secret that lies out in the open and has yet to be traced. The questions are now: where can we draw the line between secret and public, between being prisoner and being free, between being inaugurated and excluded and between having your eyes wide open and having your eyes shut or being blind?

What is at stake in this play is the opposite of what is called *a public secret*. A public secret presents the situation: everybody knows about it, but nobody talks about it. The opposite presents the situation: nobody knows it, but everybody is affected by it. The opposite of the public secret is the *blind spot*.

The blind spot is the little, but extremely important area in our retina where the nerves of our perception system come in and go out, resulting in the paradoxical result that exactly that area cannot perceive. The blind spot cannot see but is also the very condition to see. All those who can see, possess a blind spot and no one of them has the faintest idea of what he would observe if he would be able to perceive with that spot. The secret is that the blind spot tells the truth about seeing: it tells us that you are indeed able to see, but also that you are unable to see

your seeing. It tells us that we can see things, but that there is no *behindness*, if you will excuse me inventing this new English word, that there is nothing behind the things we perceive, that behind the silent material there are only huge amounts of more material.

This is what the blind spot is telling us on the level of the story. On the level of the column the blind spot tells us the aesthetic equivalent of the geological truth. On that level it tells us that there is no 'behind' in literature. A story is just what it is: it hides what it refers to. Don't look for the meaning behind the story, don't ask the writer what he meant, don't expect him to give you background information. In literature there is no background, no objective. There is meaning in literature, oh yes, sure there is, but only insofar it embodies what it refers to. This bodily aspect of art is the location of its meaning. That is why the I in the story is trampling. This is not his bodily reaction on the sublime sensation, on the contrary his bodily reaction is the meaning of the sensation he is going through.

This means that literature *is* the embodiment the blind spot. The writer gives shape to the signpost No Admittance. His work and behavior incarnate what 'No Admittance' means in Polynesian language: *taboo*. Literature breaks no taboos, on the contrary: it gives us a faint idea of it, that is to say, of its 'unimaginability'. The reader is invited to tune in with this deafening silence and to share the 'thundering loneliness', as the text says, of a world without 'behindness'.

PLAY IN CONTEXT 1: THE JOURNAL

This column/story was published in a newspaper. It was printed in 25th January 1956 edition of *Het vrije volk*, the national social-democratic newspaper, in those days the newspaper with the widest circulation in the country. Please note that it was printed on the front page. But it is cut off from the other text on the front page by a frame, that - revealingly enough - is called *Vrij spel*: free play. In that period Willem Frederik Hermans published several times similar texts in the frame *Vrij spel* in the front page of this newspaper. For example this one on the 22nd November 1955:

President Kubitschek blijft Braziliaanse leger zet Cafe Filhs af

W.F. HERMANS: Ik voelde de hete adem van de Etna

VRIJ SPEL

Scholier pleegt serie inbraken

Europese functies voor Ad. Vermulden?

Tachtig Soedanesez gefuileerd

Directeur-generaal: Rijwielkartel nu zaak van ... zijn ernstig

ZEEBEVING TROF 'SPOOKSCHIP'

Hemo

Luksusauto's

Vulpaanhouder

In this text he describes his trip climbing up the volcano Etna on Sicily. Reaching the top and looking deep down into the crater he compares the sublime sight of that permanent eruption of pieces white-hot material with the flood in Holland, a national disaster that took place not long before, and having read *Behind the signposts No Admittance* you can guess what he prefers: the sight of the fire in the volcano or the water flood over de Low Countries. You guessed right: for Hermans the volcano presents the truth, the washed away dikes present the broken illusions.

The front page of the newspaper presents a play: it reveals what nobody knew until then. It is a play in a world where people aim for objectives (for example: the social democratic utopia). It is about reality and its texts are discursive.

The frame presents another play: a free play. It reveals something everybody is acquainted with, but nobody is fully aware of. It is a play without objective, stating the taboo of aimlessness, sketched as an inverted paradise. It is about imagination and its texts are fictive. The text on the front page is anonymous and claims to be objective, the text in the frame is on behalf of one individual and accentuates its subjectivity.

The play on the front page is about the facts out of the world of facts, the free play in the frame embodies a refuge in the world of facts. The front page discloses the sphere of public nature, the frame the sphere of secret nature. The front page presents the truth, the frame the truth about the truth.

The front page ignores nature, unless it causes catastrophes. The frame ignores everything except nature.

We could say: the front page is before and the frame is behind the signposts 'No Admittance'. The front page sticks to the idea that there is always something behind everything: hidden truth, that is to say news. The frame tackles the whole idea of behindness.

The text in the newspaper refer to states of affairs, the text in the frame has no reference unless to everything.

We can say: the frame is not a window, but a blindfold. You want to pull it off your face, but it sticks to your eyes, unless you leave the frame and withdraw to the other play, the front page as a window to reality. The frame in the front page is the blind spot in our perception of reality. But it does not function as such, unless it is published right in the middle of the front page of the newspaper, our retina for the news. The frame tells us, not only that literature has no meaning besides what it embodies, but also that literature cannot present that meaning, unless it is published in the center of the referential communication of the news, as a void on the screen. It may be true that the frame unmasks the newspaper, but the frame needs the context of the newspaper to be visible in its quality of a framed body of text.

PLAY IN CONTEXT 2: *HET SADISTISCHE UNIVERSUM*

Nine years later, in 1964, *Behind the signposts No Admittance* appeared unchanged in a collection of essays, published by Willem Fredrik Hermans. The collection is called *Het sadistische universum* and the text is a part of the section called *Kleine protocollen*, 'Small protocols', which means: accurate notation of an actually happened event of little importance. The 'Etna'-text is also present as a *Klein protocol*.

Note that the collection contains three sections: 'Black Sheep', 'Small Protocols' and 'Wittgenstein's Form of Life'. 'Black Sheep' contains the headlines of Hermans' poetic theory. In the essay this section opens with, Hermans stands up for Marquis De Sade as 'one of the greatest geniuses of his time' and 'the most remarkable literary phenomenon ever', a synthesis of Nietzsche and Freud. Hermans quotes De Sade: 'It should be impossible, my friend, that the true morality could deviate from nature; the principle of our ethical rules is only to be found in nature and - as a result - because nature inspires all of our mishits nothing

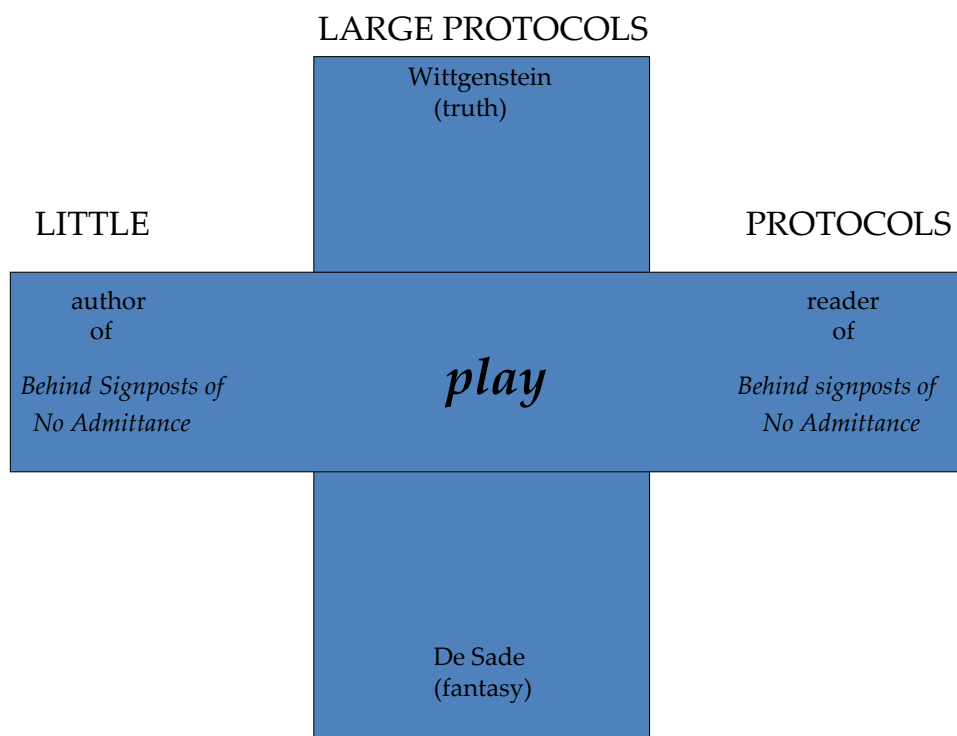
can be immoral.’ The motto of Hermans’ essay on De Sade goes: ‘The philosopher should say everything’ (This is what Juliette says in De Sade’s novel *Justine et Juliette*). To say everything means for De Sade to say: ethics is identical with nature.

As you also can see Hermans rounds off his essay collection with an essay about the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, whom he introduces to the literary public in the Netherlands of that time, called ‘Wittgenstein’s Form of Life’. Wittgenstein can be situated at the other extreme of ideas about what is true and what is false. Wittgenstein ensures us that, as far as subject matters like morality and ethics is concerned, we know nothing with any certainty. He therefore pleads: ‘One should keep silent about things that cannot be spoken of’.

De Sade is not an empiricist, but a rationalist. He had a rich fantasy and has imagined the consequences of an idea. Wittgenstein is a logical positivist. He tries to distinguish between significant and meaningless propositions. Probably Wittgenstein has judged De Sade’s novels as a collection of interesting but meaningless propositions, just as De Sade would not have rejected Wittgenstein scrutiny - supposed that he would have been able to read him.

Which play is at stake in *this* context of *Behind signposts No Admittance*? What are the rules here, who is the player and who is made fellow player?

Hermans is the player, De Sade and Wittgenstein are pawns, and the character of *Behind the signposts No Admittance* as well as the reader are made fellow-players. The play ground is a text, which is the intersection of two kinds of protocols: on the one hand what I for this occasion would call *Large Protocols*, that is to say the ideas of De Sade and those of Wittgenstein, and on the other hand the *Small protocol*: the text about the down to earth, everyday situation of the character of *Behind the signposts No Admittance* and its reader. In scheme:



The hermeneutic identity of the play within this textual intersection is twofold. First: There must be something behind everything; and second: the story about every something is circular and contains nothing but tautological cries.