

“But what if the street turns loose”¹: Civilian Violence in Flemish Novels on the Second World War

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Abstract. This essay focuses on the Flemish literary image construction of the violence that took place during the so-called ‘repression period’ at the end of the Second World War in Belgium, when people accused of collaboration with the Germans were victim to fierce public outrage. This essay examines by way of historical contextualization and close reading of some select passages in what ways post-war Flemish literature has attempted to come to terms with this traumatic event and the ways it has inscribed it into the collective cultural memory. I argue that, while the phenomenon of collaboration has received nuanced discussion, trying to understand and explain the psychological motivation and socio-economic circumstances that prompted people to collaborate with the occupier, the street violence of the repression has not yet warranted a similar degree of attention. Rather, it is unanimously represented as a wholly negative event, inexcusable on both the political and the moral level. This approach to our history also shows that while Flemish literature has, in many regards, worked through the trauma of the occupation, it has not yet come to terms with the trauma of the unprecedented civilian violence that erupted at the end of the war.

Keywords: war; violence; trauma; Flemish literature; collaboration; class tension

¹ “Dat de Duitsers terugkeren van waar zij gekomen zijn, akkoord. En laat de geallieerden voor een tijdje hun plaats innemen. Maar wàt, als de straat loskomt” (Van Hecke 1953: 43).

1. Introduction

When thinking of violence in war, we commonly think of armed soldiers. They handle guns, grenades and bombs; they wound and get wounded; they kill and get killed. Their opposite is the unnamed civilian who passively awaits the end of the war at a clear and relatively large spatial distance from the battlefield. History teaches us, however, that such a clear-cut scenario is rare. Not only does the battlefield easily enter and disrupt the civilian space, but civilians often participate as active agents of violence in war-times. We find this, for example, in resistance movements, contemporary terrorism and civil war.

Yet, we continue to assign different meanings to military and civilian violence. Soldiers are trained to execute physical violence, so their relation to it – regardless of its brutal nature – tends to be habitual, predictable and recognizable. Civilian war violence, on the other hand, seems less self-evident. Civilians are by definition different from armed forces.² Not wearing uniforms, they are often unrecognizable as agents of violence. Their actions, moreover, tend to be perceived in two ways: To those resorting to violence, their actions appear virtuous and courageous since they are directed against an enemy that is stronger than them (in most cases). Their participation is, moreover, voluntary and strongly motivated by an individual belief that endows their engagement with notions of selflessness, sacrifice and heroism. Opponents or targets of this civilian violence, on the other hand, perceive it as unpredictable, associating it with duplicity and arbitrariness.

This ambivalence features prominently in the depiction of civilian violence in Flemish post-war narratives about the Second World War. Here, violence is motivated by two different impulses: On the one hand, it is executed by the Belgian or Flemish resistance movement against the Germans. Examples of novels that are strongly devoted to this civil resistance are *In het teken des kruises* (1947) by Luc Vilsen, *Action Station Go!* (1958) by Libera Carlier and *De zoveelste illusie* (1959) by Jan Ceuleers. On the other hand, civilian violence is staged in the literary representation of the so-called ‘repression,’ a term commonly used in Belgian historiography to refer to the persecution and punishment of people accused of collaborating with the Germans during the war. During this repression period, collaborators were often exposed to violence and torture executed by resistance fighters, but also by people who merely pretended to have been in the resistance, as well as by ordinary civilians indulging in feelings of revenge against those they deemed responsible for their four-year long suffering and deprivation.

² See the definition in *The Oxford Paperback Dictionary of English*: “civilian noun a person not serving in the armed forces” (1994: 145).

This essay focuses specifically on the literary image construction of this latter kind of civilian violence, which attracted far more literary attention than the acts of the resistance during the war. I will begin by offering a short historical overview of collaboration and repression during the Second World War in Flanders, followed by a general assessment of literary reworkings of these themes in Flemish prose fiction. On this basis, I shall then proceed to discuss concrete examples of literary depictions of repression violence.³

2. The war in Flanders: A homefront event⁴

Belgium's battle against the invading German army in the Second World War can hardly be considered a heroic milestone in the history of the nation. The German invasion on 10 May 1940 caught the Belgian army by complete surprise. The so-called impregnable fortress of Eben-Emael and the bridges across the Albertkanaal were conquered that very same day, and in the following days the Belgian troops found themselves mostly in retreat. On 28 May, less than three weeks after the start of the invasion, King Leopold III capitulated. The contrast with the exhausting but successful trench fighting of World War I could not have been bigger. The rest of the Second World War took place at home, during the four-year long occupation by the German army – an occupation that caused vehement ideological dissent amongst the Flemish over the stance they should adopt towards the occupiers.

According to a popular adage, a foreign occupier should pack his bags immediately if the local population refuses all forms of collaboration by systematically paralysing social life. If no one goes to work, if no public or private service is guaranteed, if supply delivery stops abruptly and completely, it seems impossible to establish a stable occupation government. Yet, history teaches that such a scenario is rare at best and for the most part nonexistent. General civil disobedience is almost never a real option when the occupier imposes his will by means of violence. After the shock of the invasion, the occupied population nearly always proceeds to the order of the day. Daily life returns to normal as far as possible, and people adapt themselves to the new situation – which naturally entails a certain degree of obedience to the laws of the new ruler.

The German occupation of Belgium during the Second World War was no exception to this pattern. In accordance with the principles of national-

³ All translations of quotations from Flemish novels in this essay are mine – J.L.

⁴ This historical account of the collaboration and the repression is based on the chapter "De collaboratie: Bewuste steun aan het derde rijk" from *België tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Van den Wijngaert e.a. 2004: 173-206).

socialistic ideology, the German regime systematically deployed violence by way of securing its power. Hence, any manifestation of civil resistance was mercilessly persecuted. Moreover, Belgium became economically enslaved to the German warfare industry, which entailed both the financial plundering of local resources as well as the abduction of thousands of forced labourers to Germany. And yet, in spite of the fact that the local population did not appreciate the new rulers and their draconian measures, only a few hundred thousand people actually took part in active resistance. Millions of others cooperated, often reluctantly, but still active enough to avoid the German oppression. This 'policy of the lesser evil' was also typical for most local authorities and institutions, such as the church, the judiciary and the industry. The common assumption was that by cooperating one would avoid worse.

The reluctant obedience to German rule has frequently been labelled 'accommodation.' It is important to distinguish such 'accommodation' from the phenomenon of 'collaboration.' Collaboration is the cooperation with the occupier in order to help him realise his politico-ideological project. This cooperation is *voluntary* and presents, in sharp contrast to accommodation, no negative choice by force of circumstances. Accommodation also implies a degree of collaboration and a responsibility for the consequences of the occupation, but from a juridical perspective there is a clear difference. Regardless of the difficulties of ascertaining responsibilities at the end of the war, from a juridical point of view it was necessary to make this distinction between accommodation and the active support of the national-socialistic project. A few hundred thousand Belgians were willing to collaborate fully with the occupying forces – a group more or less as large as that actively engaged in the resistance movement.

In the Flemish collective memory, the complexities of the historical situation are reduced to the images of a relatively small group of people collaborating with the occupiers and another, small group of people actively resisting them – an opposition typically expressed by the terms 'black' and 'white,' conjoined by a large grey zone. The conception of these colours is not only a manifestation of the common western cultural conception of evil and good in terms of black and white, but originates in their metonymic association with both parties: most paramilitary collaborating formations wore black or dark uniforms, prompting the people to perceive any collaborator as 'black.' By contrast, resistance fighters were constructed as 'white.'

The outburst of joy that came with the liberation of Belgium in September 1944 was tainted by a strong resentment against those that had 'betrayed the country.' With the arrival of the allied troops, the Belgian resistance became very active in the arrest of anyone associated in one way or another with the German occupier.

While the Belgian government in London was still working on legislation regarding the repression, military and paramilitary groups started to take people into custody who had worked in the German administration as well as all those suspected of having benefited from the occupation. Without any legal basis, 55 000 people were interned and, in the absence of official regulations, exposed to abuse and torture.

In some cases, however, this internment was also a necessary measure to protect suspects from the explosion of public outrage. An insignificant rumour or accusation of collaboration sometimes sufficed for an irrational crowd, blinded by feelings of revenge after the four-year long deprivation, to lynch people of whom it was sometimes not even sure whether they had collaborated, accommodated, or neither. This so-called 'street repression' was a wide-spread phenomenon. It found its most startling iconography in images of women who had their hair shaven off, of men beaten up and dragged through the streets, and of a mad and drunken crowd cheering on as homes were demolished, shop-windows smashed and stores plundered. It is mostly these events that have persisted in the public memory of the war. Most victims would feel – rightly or not – the sharp contrast between their own perception of guilt (if there was one) and the public punishment that they underwent. It is this contrast between public stigmatization and one's own sense of guilt (or innocence) that is at the heart of much of the Flemish literary interest in the phenomenon of the collaboration and the repression.

3. De coloribus disputandum est

Generally speaking, the plot structure of novels that engage with these historical topics is – partly or integrally – anchored in the contrast between the actual crime and the degree of its subsequent punishment. It is nearly always directed towards a normative weighing of the relation between guilt and punishment. Furthermore, with respect to their contents, these novels all firmly contest the assumption of a clear-cut opposition between an inherently 'good' resistance and an intrinsically 'evil' collaboration. Distinctions within the corpus mostly depend on the aspect that receives most attention, the guilt of the 'evil' collaborator or the nature of the punishment by the 'good' resistance fighters, as well as the extent to which the conflict between both parties is brought to a head.⁵

⁵ An example of a novel that gives ample attention to the 'guilt' of the collaborator, without really going into the nature of the punishment, is *Schipper Jarvis* (1954) by Gaston Duribreux. Novels that, by contrast, focus on the punishment are, for example, *Niet jammeren, broers* [Don't sob, brothers] (1948) and *Toch lammeren, broers* [Lament anyhow, brothers!] (1950) by Piet Canneel (pseudonym for Valère Depauw) and *Aanvaard het leven* [Accept life] (1956) by Filip de Pillecyn.

The theme of collaboration is usually elaborated in the portrayal of one or more collaborators, ex-collaborators, or characters that have been accused of collaboration and that have been or will be punished. In order to present a clear picture of the nature of their collaboration, many novels make use of an auctorial narrator, who has insight into the personal traits of the accused characters, their thoughts and motivations as well as the contextual elements that have determined or furthered their behaviour. In other cases, an embedded personal narrator tells his or her own collaboration history, elaborately expanding on the process of their decision to side with the German occupier. Here, a knowledge similar to that of an auctorial narrator is suggested, as the I-narrator possesses an obvious insight into his or her own history and motivations. Clear examples of such novels are *Zwart en wit* [Black and white] (1948) by Gerard Walschap (1898-1989) and *Het Siegfriedmotief of de overbodigen* [The Siegfried-motive or the obsolete] (1954) by Paul Lebeau (1908-1982).

The insight that is provided into characters' motivations for collaborating with the enemy serves to distinguish them from collaborators depicted entirely in negative terms, such as tattlers, ideologues and opportunists.⁶ In relating the personal motivation of individual collaborators, the above-mentioned authors strive to appeal to the reader's understanding and empathy but also to counterbalance the highly negative evaluation such individuals received during the repression days, when they were simply labelled as 'black' and stigmatized as traitors to their country by both the crowd and judicial authorities. These stories seek to demonstrate the fact that the characters' choice to become involved with the enemy did not stem from an inherent evil disposition, as often put forth in the accusations, but was derived from a long, complex, dynamic and dialectical process of decision-making. Moreover, it was motivated not by their embrace of German ideology but, first and foremost, by the will to promote one's own aspirations, whether political or personal.⁷ The characters mostly perceive these

⁶ It is important to notice that these negatively-charged collaborators are always relegated to being minor-characters, providing a strong moral contrast to the main character. They are mostly 'flat' and univocally negative characters, and no novel makes an effort to question their guilt or empathize with the sufferings they undergo during the repression days. A good example is the character of Walter Amman in Walschap's *Zwart en wit*.

⁷ Several personal reasons are mentioned by Flemish novels to explain a decision to collaborate. A character can decide to work with the Germans because of a personal frustration with the allied forces during the flight to France in 1940 (e.g. the character Fred Toorop in *De wereld verandert* [The world changes] [1948] by Frans Van Isacker), or because of a conflict within the family (e.g. the character Erik in *De duivel waarschijnlijk* [Probably the devil] [1985] by Rudi Hermans). Other reasons are the necessity to survive (e.g. Gerard Verwilghen in *Een kind voor een paard* [A child for a horse] [1975] by Lodewijk Peeters); the will to help others (e.g. *Vrouwen aan het front* [Women at the front] [1981] by Jet Jorssen); the friendship or acquaintance with a German character (e.g. the character Ward Dielen in *Alleen de doden ontkomen* [Only the dead get away] [1946] by Piet van Aken); and love for a German soldier (e.g. *Marilou* [1948] by Jean du Parc and *De zure druiven* [The sour grapes] [1952] by Gaston Duribreux). The division between these categories is not essential. They frequently reinforce each other and also often blend with political reasons to collaborate.

intentions as positive and hardly ever think of their actions as acts of collaboration. In this manner, Flemish post-war prose creates a 'counter-discourse' or 'counter-myth' to the reigning historical image-construction of the 'evil black.'

4. The representation of repression violence

While much of post-war Flemish literature is concerned with providing a more nuanced picture of the collaboration, no such attempts have been made with regard to the image of the repression. There is a general agreement on the virtue of the resistance during the war, and many novels stage good resistance fighters. Yet, the harsh judgement and negative depiction of those responsible for the punishment of people accused of collaboration during the repression days in 1945 also impacts and even overshadows such positive assessment of the 'white' side. Many authors choose to depict the executioners as 'dodgy' resistance fighters or as characters unjustly assuming the 'white' identity of the resistance. In addition, they also criticize the behaviour of the court of justice as well as the general public who was both an encouraging onlooker and an active participant in this punishment process. In this essay, I will focus on the literary representation of the latter, the general public of onlookers and participants.

The Flemish literary attention for this group and its violence has been pretty consistent throughout the entire period between 1945 and 2000. It is, for example, an important theme in Piet van Aken's *Alleen de doden ontkomen* [Only the dead get away] from 1946, and features just as strongly – if not more strongly – some 60 years later, in Jos de Wit's *Herinneringen van een Tomatenkweker* [Memories of a Tomato Cultivator] (1998). Some novels evince a degree of understanding for the feelings of revenge, explaining them as a natural result of the war circumstances,⁸ but in most cases this post-war literature fundamentally disapproves of the street violence, both in its naturalistic description of the violent acts as well as in the negative characterization of its agents.

This image construction should, however, not come as a surprise since Flemish literature, in its preoccupation with the fate of collaborators, always chooses the point of view of the victims. It tends to attribute the disproportionate relation between the inflicted violence and the actual guilt of the victims to four prevalent motives: a) personal vengeance of the antagonist and/or his desire to cover up one's own guilt of collaboration; b) blind anger of an inebriated mob; c) class

⁸ This understanding is only aimed at the underlying motivations of the perpetrators, their frustrations and fears. Their acts of violence, on the contrary, are never excused. Examples of such understanding can be found in Jean Du Parc's *Marilou* (1948) or André Demedts's *De levenden en de doden* [The living and the dead] (1959).

tensions; and d) a scapegoat reflex. In what follows, I shall discuss the literary depiction of each of these motifs in greater detail. It is important to bear in mind that the distinction between these categories is not essential; they frequently reinforce each other.

4.1. Personal vengeance

The acts of violence directed against alleged collaborators are frequently presented as personal vendettas under the pretext of political reasons. In these instances, the civilians that participate in the violence have a close relationship with the victim; they are neighbours, acquaintances, colleagues or (former) friends of the victims. The repression becomes a welcome opportunity to fight out a longstanding feud or simply to indulge one's jealousy. This also applies to private business owners, who use the repression as a means of eliminating their competitors. Dries Janssen's novel *De hel is om ons heen* [Hell is all around us] (1967) is a case in point. His protagonist, Maria Wilms, works as a nurse in a Catholic boarding school. When she finds out that her female colleagues indulge in sexual affairs and paedophilia, she testifies against them. But her ex-colleagues take revenge by accusing her of collaboration, which causes her to be arrested, beaten-up and imprisoned. In this manner, the novel suggests the repression is far from being directed against war criminals alone. On the contrary, in Janssen's novel the repression victim is an innocent woman while the violators are represented as cruel, selfish and lusting for power. A similar motivation can be found in *De vossejacht: een dodenboek* [The fox hunt: a book of the dead] (1977) by Willy Spillebeen, in which the protagonist witnesses the public humiliation of Suzy, a village girl who regularly had an affair with German soldiers during the war: "I saw hate and I was scared. Later I learned that this was also frustration. And maybe even jealousy. Because Suzy dared what these shrews didn't. Repressed longings had turned into adversity. One resists most strongly what one would like to do himself." ⁹ In both examples, the motivations for the punishment are depicted as disconnected from the opposition between 'black' and 'white.' The violators have only personal and no political reasons for their acts of violence.

To the punished characters these cruel personal vendettas often bespeak the underlying bestiality of human nature as well as the fragility of an artificially maintained social order. In the novel *Vijfde symfonie* [Fifth symphony] (1960) by Fanny Leys, the protagonist Lea Fierens is imprisoned at the end of the war for

⁹ "Ik zag haat en ik was bang. Later wist ik dat dit óók frustratie was. En misschien zelfs jaloezie. Omdat Suzy durfde was deze wijven niet durfden. Onderdrukte verlangens die zich omkeerden tot afkeer. Men verzet zich het meest tegen wat men zelf graag zou doen" (Spillebeen 1977: 161).

her membership in the Vlaams Nationaal Verbond [Flemish National Alliance]. Although she confessed that she was mistaken and that her membership was not ideologically motivated but influenced by the man she fell in love with, she is treated with the utmost disrespect. In her prison cell, she comes to the conclusion that "ninety-five percent of our fellow-humans are vulgar, merciless, brutal, selfish creatures and politeness is a deceptive varnish, no, a weapon in the human jungle":¹⁰ "Shall I mention the pranks of mother's lawyer, the hateful testimonies of neighbours with whom I never talked, about the sneakiness of the way a juvenile auditor cajoled a confession that would enable a verdict of guilt and the prohibition to execute my profession? This, and many other things, was the fate of many a thousand, because in malice and cowardice humans are equal."¹¹ The protagonists realize that violence is not an aberration of those individuals who punish them for their (alleged) collaboration, but that it is inherent to the human species.

4.2. Deflecting guilt

A second, prevalent motivation for civilian violence is the covering up of one's own involvement with the Germans. A good example, in which a personal conflict blends with this type of motivation, is the figure of Clement Peeters, the village grocer in Walschap's *Zwart en wit*. At the beginning of the war, he openly sides with the Germans. He delivers them groceries at half price, invites them over for a drink and lets one of the German officers flirt with his daughter. He also praises them highly for their discipline and scolds the allies for displaying such poor help. His state of mind changes, however, when the German war machine comes to a halt in Stalingrad. Instead of supporting the German invasion, he abruptly reverses his position, now ostensibly siding with the resistance. In his new role, he turns against his neighbours, the family Gillis, whose son has departed for the Eastern Front. They function as an easy target for his accusations, which are quickly spread via his customers throughout the village in the form of insinuations and rumours. Gust, the father of the family Gillis, astutely remarks, "We have to hold this scoundrel in our hands, or he has us. He wants to cover

¹⁰ "Vijfennegentig ten honderd van onze medemensen zijn vulgaire, niets ontziende, brutale, zelfzuchtige wezens en de beleefdheid is een bedrieglijk vernis, neen, een wapen te meer in de menselijke jungle" (Leys 1960: 94-95).

¹¹ "Zal ik spreken over de haaiestreken van moeders advokaat, over de hatelijke getuigenissen van burens met wie ik nooit een woord had gewisseld, over de geniepigheid waarmee mij door een piepjong auditeur na een jaar hechtenis een soort schuldbekentenis werd ontfutseld die een veroordeling moest mogelijk maken en het verbod mijn beroep uit te oefenen? Dat alles en nog veel meer werd ervaren door duizenden anderen want in de boosaardigheid en de lafheid is de mens overal zichzelf gelijk" (Leys 1960: 96).

up something and we have to serve for that.”¹² Peeters will eventually play an important role in their arrest and public humiliation.

Hugo Claus’s novel *De verwondering* [Wonderment] (1962) extends such personal involvement with the German invader to the collective level. Here, complicity and self-interest seem to be inherent in every member of society, as suggested by the following depiction of bystanders witnessing the punishment of collaborators: “To this end, all of the city’s inhabitants flocked together alongside the road, and among them, of course, not one who had declared at the barbershop: ‘You can say what you want but the Germans have discipline,’ not one who had cursed the English bombings, not one who had received a *Schein* for extra gas or food.”¹³

At first sight, the description suggests a clear separation between these inhabitants and the punished people they are about to witness. The triple use of ‘not one’ insists on their ideological purity or neutrality, which is moreover reinforced by their spatial position: They stand ‘alongside the road’; outside of both the ‘black’ category of collaborators and the ‘white’ zone of punishers. The tone of the narrator, however, hardly evinces objectivity or neutrality. Not only does the content of the statement contradict what we have learned so far in this novel, the threefold repetition of ‘not one’ produces an absurd and therefore ironic overstatement. It is highly unlikely that none of these people ever praised German discipline, cursed the Allied bombings or were in desperate need for supplies during war times. On the contrary, Claus’s choice of hyperbole implies that everyone, in one way or another, is complicit with the Germans and that a strict separation of collaborators and bystanders is an illusion.

However, this passage does not suggest that everyone is a political sinner deserving to be punished. The above-mentioned forms of complicity (praise, curse, anxiety) can hardly be seen as politically motivated acts of collaboration. Rather, what is at stake in this passage is the unmasking of the hypocrisy behind the bystanders’ alleged silent passiveness. Clearly, their avid interest in the public punishment evinces their lust for sensation and spectacle. Secondly, these bystanders are silent to protect themselves. In a time in which any form of complicity is dangerous, it seems safer to remain silent about one’s own guilt. This attitude – no matter how reasonable and understandable it may be – also expresses weakness, cowardice, and selfishness. Thirdly, and more importantly,

¹² “We moeten die deugniet in handen hebben, of hij heeft ons. Die wil iets doen vergeten en wij moeten daar voor dienen” (Walschap 1948: 55).

¹³ “Daarom troepten alle stadsbewoners langs deze weg en onder hen natuurlijk niet één die bij de kapper had verklaard: ‘Je mag zeggen wat je wil maar de Duitsers hebben discipline,’ niet één die de bombardementen van Engelsen had vervloekt, niet één die een *Schein* had gekregen voor extra-benzine of extra voedsel” (Claus 1962: 147).

this group does not intervene to protect the victims, but, by merely watching, accepts and even favours the punishment. This evinces not only cowardice, but also a degree of sadism and *Schadenfreude*.

4.3. Scapegoat effect

The instinct for self-protection that motivates the group's silence in the passage from Claus cited above is one possible reason for its passiveness. Another explanation is the fact that the victims of the public punishment function as scapegoats. Girard explains this scapegoat effect as "that strange process through which two or more people are reconciled at the expense of a third party who appears guilty or responsible for whatever ails, disturbs, or frightens the scapegoaters" (Girard 2002: 12). In the case of Claus, the scapegoaters consist of the silent bystanders and the perpetrators of the violence. They constitute 'the community' and unite in a silent agreement over who is responsible for the disturbances within that community, i.e. the alleged collaborators. According to Girard, these scapegoats now have to be sacrificed, an action through which the community "purifies itself of its own disorder" (Girard 2002: 11). In this process, a "decisive reordering" (Girard 2002: 11) takes place, which does not only imply the effective removal of those that are perceived as guilty of collaboration, but also of the entire notion of 'collaboration' from that community.

As Girard points out, what is significant in selecting the scapegoat is that the victim is not a stranger outside to the community, but 'just like' the scapegoaters themselves. The victim's 'sameness' evinces, to a certain degree, that the community is aware that the guilt it seeks to exorcise (in the body of the scapegoat) is also its own – but it cannot and will not admit this awareness. The passage quoted from Claus's *De Verwondering* illustrates this aptly. Its critique implies that, even if the expulsion of the victims is real, the effect for the community is at best symbolic and, therefore, politically motivated. It is symbolic because the reordering that takes place does not effectively ban the perceived 'disorder' of the collaboration from the community; it merely creates an illusion of purity that ends the mimetic crisis and restores order and peace. The community may, according to Girard, really believe in that achieved purity, however, in the case of Claus, the narrator's threefold stressing of the collective complicity disallows such naiveté. In fact, we can suspect this community to know its own guilt. We can therefore surmise that the punishment of the collaborators does not attempt to compensate for the *fact* of collaboration; rather it is sustained by personal motifs (vengeance, guilt deflection) as well as by the political will to reconsolidate the community after the war. By eliminating the 'collaborator' from this community, the scapegoaters are in fact attempting to exorcise their

own lack of moral integrity. In their own eyes, this endeavour appears successful, but as post-war unanimously points out, such exorcism has been far from being cathartic, but rather, the spectre of guilt continues to haunt the Flemish cultural memory.

4.4. The mob

The predominance of the scapegoating mechanism in a number of these novels (such as Claus's *De Verwondering*, Walschap's *Zwart en wit* or Jet Jorssen's *Vrouwen aan het front*) shifts our reading of the repression from the personal to the collective level. While personal reasons play an important role in the punishment process, Flemish novelists seem to consider the collective an equally strong, if not stronger force in the eruption of this street violence. The collective is both a resentful bystander as well as an active force that takes the opportunity of the repression to fight out a long-standing social feud; it is the lower class finally having its chance to rebel against what's above them. The following explanation by André Demedts in his novel *De levenden en de doden* [The living and the dead] (1959) is illustrative in this regard: "Once every hundred years, maybe, the masses had the opportunity to deal with its masters, with the hunger, the humiliation, sickness, fear and grievance, and then they didn't have to look for victims, because they could blame everyone for something, which they could not take out on life, on the being of things in their unperturbed self-evidence."¹⁴

In this passage, the reasons for the eruption of violence are situated outside the historical circumstances of the Second World War. Public violence is defined as a universal sociological phenomenon caused by the master-slave relationship that is here depicted as inherent in social structures. As René Girard notes in *Stereotypes of Persecution*: "In normal times the rich and powerful enjoy all sorts of protection and privileges, which the disinherited lack. [...] Crowds commonly turn on those who originally held exceptional power over them" (Girard 2002: 113). The passage from Demedts suggests some sympathy for lower-class suffering, but at the same time it clearly attributes the violence to their wilful blindness and ignorance. The masses seem not to have a clear understanding of the complexity and specificity of the war circumstances, but look for an accessible cause that will appease their chronic frustration and their subsequent appetite for violence. This means that their judgement is disconnected from the guilt of their victims and hence wilfully oblivious to the concrete circumstances

¹⁴ "Eens in de honderd jaar misschien kreeg de massa de gelegenheid om met haar meesters af te rekenen, met honger, vernedering, ziekte, angst en verdriet, en dan moesten zij niet zoeken naar slachtoffers, want aan iedereen had zij iets te verwijten dat zij niet op het leven, op het zijn der dingen in hun onverstoorbare vanzelfsprekendheid, kon verhalen" (Demedts 1986: 231).

of collaboration. Post-war novels, such as Demedts's, hence seek to unmask their self-imposed moral authority for punishment as hypocritical and unjust.

Aside from a stress on the wilful ignorance of the general public, Flemish prose furthers the negative image construction of the latter in its description of the public's appearance, behaviour and actions. Here four elements are prominent: the synecdochic association of the people with the street; the semantic fields of bestiality, inebriety and madness; irony and the grotesque.

To begin with, we find a recurring synecdochic link between the masses and the concept of the street, such as in the phrase "[t]he street ruled"¹⁵ in Stephanie Claes-Vetter's novel *Vrouwen zonder betekenis* [Women devoid of meaning] (1952) or "[i]n the streets the howling goes on. The scum roars"¹⁶ in *Als het weer lente wordt* [When spring returns] (1954) by Renaat Van Hecke. In the latter novel the protagonist also explicitly points to this group of people as the most dangerous of all: "I agree with the fact that the Germans should go back where they came from. And let the Allied forces take their place for a while. But what if the street turns loose."¹⁷ The street functions here as a *pars pro toto* for the people who live in that 'street,' which metaphorically stands for an environment of transience, poverty, dereliction and crime. Several meanings can be derived from this trope. Firstly, the generic concept of the 'street' consolidates a specific group of individuals into an anonymous and unanchored entity. It, furthermore, strips these people of their human nature, aligning them instead with the insensitive and cold matter of pavement or dirt. Secondly, through the *pars pro toto*, the speaker avoids a direct reference to the people, endowing them instead with the aura of the unspeakable, the taboo, and thereby situating them outside of society. This functions to create a clear distance between the narrator (and his own kind) and the people belonging to this street. Thirdly, this reference not only reflects differentiation, but also the fear of the invasion of the street into the speaker's own realm, the bourgeois home, causing the breakdown of social structures, of physical, spiritual and material integrity. Moreover, by using the open-ended image of the street, the danger represented by its inhabitants takes on an ominous and ubiquitous quality.

A second element in the negative image construction is the wide-spread literary consensus on drawing one's vocabulary for the depiction of the masses from three interrelated semantic fields: inebriety, hysteria and bestiality. Van Aken's *Alleen de doden ontkomen* describes the people in the street as

¹⁵ "De straat regeerde" (Claes-Vetter 1952: 88).

¹⁶ "Op straat gaat het gehuil zijn gang. Het schorremorrie brult" (Van Hecke 1953: 35).

¹⁷ "Dat de Duitsers terugkeren van waar zij gekomen zijn, akkoord. En laat de geallieerden voor een tijdje hun plaats innemen. Maar wàt, als de straat loskomt" (Van Hecke 1953: 43).

a “hysterical mob”¹⁸ from which an “insane exultation”¹⁹ arises. In *Canto flamenco* (1974) by Marc Andries, this becomes “an infuriated raging gang, they are blind drunk, they are wild beasts.”²⁰ *De eerste sneeuw van het jaar* [The first snow of the year] (1976) by Hubert Lampo describes them as “that gruesome bunch of streetscum” and “the wild gang [...] with aggressive roar.”²¹ The bestiality of the masses is suggested by descriptions of the noise of this group of people as “howling” and “roaring,” and we find it also in explicit comparisons with animals. In Frans Van Isacker’s novel *Maar er is een uitweg* [But there is a way out] (1949), the mob is labelled as a pack of “wolves”; in Hugo Claus’s *De verwondering* one of the leaders of the mob is called “a raging buzzard”; and in *De eerste sneeuw van het jaar* this type is referred to as “the gorilla.”²² In the preface to *De hel is om ons heen* [Hell is around us] (1966), Dries Janssen goes even further by stating, “After the war things have happened that are unimaginable among animals.”²³ In *Het tijdloze verzet* [The timeless resistance] (1984), Jos Smeyers adds an explicitly grotesque dimension to this by describing these characters as “bait animals, creatures from the paintings by Jeroen Bosch.”²⁴

A third recurring element in the depiction of violators is the use of irony, aimed at ridiculing them from an authorial point of view. We have already seen how Claus uses irony in *De Verwondering* to unmask the hypocrisy of silent bystanders. In *Zwart en wit* by Gerard Walschap, the harsh depiction of an arrest is mixed with an ironic description of the people watching: “The neighbours rushed to the scene, shoving each other to listen in the hall, and they were lying on top of each other at the windows.”²⁵ A similar tone can be found in *Dwarssluggers* [Thickheads] (1957) by Frank Liedel. While the novel touches upon the events of the street repression only *en passant*, it denies the acting civilians any credibility through highly ironic descriptions: “Nothing was stolen. A lot was taken along. Most of the times, this happened peacefully. One only has to mention the salesman who crumbled under a bag of sugar of one-hundred kilo and that other one who slipped on some peas and got trampled by thirty-seven others....”²⁶

¹⁸ “hysterische menigte” (Van Aken 1969: 71).

¹⁹ “dolzinnig gejoel” (Van Aken 1969: 71).

²⁰ “het is een dolle razende bende, ze zijn bezopen, het zijn wilde beesten” (Andries 1974: 13).

²¹ “die gore troep straatschuimers” and “de wilde troep die haar met agressief gebrul begroette” (Lampo 1988: 575-576).

²² “wolven” (Van Isacker 1976: 159), “een razende buizerd” (Claus 1962: 151), “de gorilla” (Lampo 1988: 575).

²³ “Na de oorlog zijn inderdaad dingen gebeurd die onder dieren ondenkbaar zijn” (Janssen 1966: [5]).

²⁴ “aasdieren, gestalten uit de schilderijen van Jeroen Bosch” (Smeyers 1984: 29).

²⁵ “Buren schoten toe, ze drumden luisterend in de gang, ze lagen op mekaar aan de ruiten” (Walschap 1948: 177).

²⁶ “Er werd niet gestolen. Er werd veel meegenomen. Meestal verliep dit erg vreedzaam. Men moet enkel gewag maken van de winkelier die ineens tuikte onder een zak suiker van honderd kilo, en van een andere die uitgled op de erwten, en door zeven en dertig anderen vertrappeld werd...” (Liedel 1957: 85).

We can recognize this irony in the euphemistic description of "stealing" as "taking along," in the blatantly improbable representation of the looting as a peaceful event, and in the use of slapstick in the depiction of the salesman as a silly victim of his own greed and in the looters' act of slipping and trampling. The narrator not only makes fun of these characters; he also creates a clear distance between them and the reader.

Last but not least, the use of the grotesque recurs frequently in the negative descriptions of the mob. Here we have to take note of a crucial gender distinction. While men are shown to carry weapons, to lead the pack, to be merciless and lusting for power, it is the female figure that bears the brunt of the writer's negative depiction of the mob. On the one hand, women are depicted as ill-tempered and raving, such as in Lampo's *De eerste sneeuw van het jaar*, which refers to them with the derogatory idiom "wijf" [shrew] (Lampo 1988: 575). On the other hand, they are frequently portrayed as grotesque figures. A good example for this is the following passage from Andries's *Canto flamenco*, in which the mob attacks the village teacher Ferdinand Uytendaele:

They screamed their alcohol-stenched breath in Uytendaele's face, poked with sticks and a single gun stock between his ribs. A young woman with blonde curls and a deep red mouth grabbed his hair and swung his head back and forth, which caused his hair roots to be torn from the flesh, and she tossed a whole tuft in the air. Two other women, older, more shapeless with protruding fat humps under their shoulders, followed her example, so that soon blood was gushing from Uytendaele's ripped skull skin, and he staggered blindly, tripped and flailed his arms around wildly.²⁷

The hyperbole and excessiveness of this description are fundamental attributes of the grotesque style. The crowd is here depicted as satyr-like, inhuman creatures. But even more important is that the grotesque description symbolizes the dominancy of the crowd over its victim, displaying his utter defencelessness and the concomitant extinction of his physical integrity. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, "the grotesque is looking for that which protrudes from the body, all that seeks to go out beyond the body's confines" (Bakhtin 1984: 316). We see this element of protrusion at several points in this passage. In the image of the bodies of the women, their "protruding fat humps under their shoulder" transgress their

²⁷ "Ze gierden hun naar alcohol stinkende adem in Uytendaeles gezicht, porden hem met stokken en een enkele geweercolf tussen de ribben. Een jonge vrouw met blonde lokken en een helrode mond graaide hem volop in de bos haar en schudde zijn hoofd heen en weer zodat de wortels uit het vlees gerukt werden en zij krijsend een hele pluk opgooiden in de lucht. Waarop de twee andere vrouwen, ouder, vormelozer met puilende vetbulten onder de schouderbladen, het voorbeeld volgden, zodat al vlug het bloed uit Uytendaeles verscheurde schedelhuid stroomde en hij verblind wankelde, struikelde en met de armen om zich heen zwaaide" (Andries 1974: 21).

bodies' confines. The transgression of physical boundaries is likewise present in the shapelessness of their bodies as well as in the sticks and the gun stock through which the grotesque body prolongs and links itself to other bodies or to the world outside. The grotesque female body connects itself in an aggressive way to Uytendaele's body by intruding between his ribs and into the very skin of his skull. The focus on the mouth is likewise typical for literary depictions of the grotesque. In the passage from *Andries*, it serves to enhance the aggressive linking of bodies via the direct focus on the red mouth of the young women and her alcohol-stenched breath by which the physical integrity of the protagonist's body is violated and undermined.

The grotesque seems to fulfil two functions in the representation of the street violence. On the diegetic level, such grotesque extensions and transgression illustrate the violator's lust for dominance (here indirectly depicted as sexual lust) as well as to enhance the victim's sense of physical violation and social humiliation. On the authorial (the non-diegetic) level, it serves to ridicule and denigrate the perpetrators of violence. For the grotesque does not only reveal in naturalist fashion the gruesome details of violence but it also undermines the very humanness of its agents, reducing them to carnivalesque figures. However, the preference in some Flemish post-war novels for channelling the blind aggression, bestiality, inebriety and hysteria of the masses through the female body also bespeaks a deeper anxiety about the undoing and reversal of established political, social and gendered structures that the carnivalesque reign of the grotesque might bring about. As Andreas Huyssen has pointed out, "The fear of the masses [...] is always also a fear of woman, a fear of nature out of control, a fear of the unconscious, of sexuality, the loss of identity and stable ego boundaries in the mass" (Huyssen 1986: 52).

A last element that is typical for the depiction of the people in the street is that their aggression seems to result from passivity rather than active decisions. The masses are presented as unthinking about their motivations and deeds, they blindly follow those that take charge in the repression and, in general, are slaves to their animalistic drives, the influence of alcohol, their lust for sensation and their greed. Walschap, for instance, writes in *Zwart en wit*, "When there was nothing left that could be carried, most of them [the people] drifted towards the patisserie Geus."²⁸ The verb "drift" associates these people with inanimate objects that are carried along by currents of air or water. As such, their movement is disconnected from their own personal will, but linked to an outer force that is beyond their control. With this, *Zwart en wit* confirms the stereotype of the unthinking 'mob' or the 'masses' that is prevalent in many post-war novels on these topics.

²⁸ "Toen er niets draagbaars meer was dreven de meesten af naar de patisserie Geus" (Walschap 1948: 197).

5. From perpetrator to victim

The ubiquity and crudeness of the civilian violence that erupted with the liberation at the end of the Second World War begs to be addressed in post-war literature. Yet, literary reworkings of this phenomenon serve more than the purpose of documentation. Most of them, in fact, seek to nuance the guilt of the collaborators, and the strong literary focus on the violence executed upon them functions within that effort of nuance. First, since the agents of violence tend to be depicted as an anonymous, hypocritical, inebriated, mad and grotesque mob, the motivation for this violence must by necessity lose all moral or political validity in the eyes of the reader. Devoid of access to the rationale behind this street violence, let alone a point of identification with one of its agents, the reader inevitably perceives the suffering inflicted by the mob as 'unjust' and 'disproportionate'; hence extending his empathy to the 'undeserving' recipient of this violence.

Second, such empathetic identification with 'undeserved' suffering brings about a radical change in the moral status of the punished persons. They are no longer perceived as 'perpetrators' (of acts of collaboration) but rather as victims (of excessive violence), whose very innocence is brought out in their disproportionate suffering. This is very similar to the logic that operates in melodrama. As Linda Williams has shown, it is in the suffering that one recognizes the essential innocence of a person that might have temporarily been misapprehended: "[w]hat counts in melodrama is the feeling of righteousness, achieved through the sufferings of the innocent" (Williams 1998: 62). The stronger these sufferings are, the more this innocence and moral recognition shines through.

This does, however, not mean that Flemish novels on these topics strive to whitewash the collaborators from their political mistakes or seek to justify collaboration. The protagonist's decision to collaborate is mostly presented as naïve, and every novel contains the presence of negatively-charged collaborators. Yet, notably, the critique these novels deliver on the collaboration is grounded in arguments and explanations, and they attempt to understand this mistake as resulting from an essential purity of motifs and intentions. The critique of the repression, by contrast, is not. It is portrayed as a wholly negative event, carried out by prejudiced and merciless members of the lower classes. Consequently, the message seems clear: the decision to collaborate is a mistake that can be understood (and hence be forgiven); the violence that serves as a punishment for it, on the contrary, cannot be excused.

In this manner, Flemish novelists have consistently expressed the belief that a political choice matters far less than the moral behaviour that guides it. To that end, collaborators with 'good' intentions have repeatedly been recuperated at the expense of the lower classes, who are denied political reasoning and instead represented as incarnations of immorality. Moreover, the lower classes have frequently been subject to authorial scapegoating in Flemish literature. The predominant treatment of the street repression as an undifferentiated mass, a volatile and lynch-happy mob, bespeaks not only the point of view of the protagonist-victim but also a certain authorial anxiety of a large force immanent within the community that, if not properly controlled, can all too easily erupt into violence and blast away existing social and moral boundaries. This force seems as dangerous (if not more so) to Flemish novelists as the blinding ideals and false promises brought into the community by a foreign invader. Notably, however, they refrain from dealing with this group (with its actual constituency, its psychological, economic and social motivations) but instead, just like the scapegoaters they portray, prefer to exorcise it from the community they imagine.

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