

'Hoop op iets vaags':

Ambiguity, Unreliability and Indeterminacy in Erwin Mortier's *Marcel* (1999)

Erwin Mortier's acclaimed debut novel *Marcel*, first published nearly twenty years ago, tells the story of a Flemish family haunted by a dark past: the involvement of several members in the wartime collaboration with the German occupier. The novel has usually been read as a narrative of reconciliation, showing the often painful process of successive generations gradually gaining some understanding of the past and coming to terms with it, before being able finally to lay its guilty weight to rest. However, a close reading and historical contextualisation of *Marcel* reveals a much more complex picture, casting doubt both on the accuracy of the characters' understanding and the sincerity of their intentions. This article is the first to offer a rival interpretation of Mortier's novel, proposing that, rather than recognising their guilty past, the characters may be unable or unwilling to acknowledge it as such, and could instead be poised to sow the seeds of its continuation and repetition.

Introduction: the Postmodern Historical Novel

In *The Second World War in Contemporary British Fiction* (2011), Victoria Stewart suggests that the novel as a literary form is structured around the unravelling of a secret that is gradually revealed through the act of reading, an act provoked by a desire to know that intensifies as the reading progresses.¹ Traditionally, once the end has been reached and the secret is revealed, the novel's spell is broken: the reader gains the satisfaction of knowledge but only by sacrificing the thrill of the chase. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, this tension between what is known and what is

not known, but suspected, can be traced back to the introduction of the private individual and private life into literature, which produces a contradiction 'between the public nature of the literary form and the private nature of its content.'² The contradiction is resolved when the private is made public, a process that Bakhtin characterises as a criminal trial 'in its direct and oblique forms.'³ This could take the shape of the inclusion in the novel of an actual criminal trial or some of its aspects, such as eyewitness accounts, confessions, court documents, evidence or clues in an investigation. Alternatively, secrets might come to light through a process of self-revelation in the form of personal letters, intimate diaries or confessions. Common to all of these is that the information is observed by a third party, more often than not clandestinely, by spying or eavesdropping, which is why Bakhtin defines the literature of private life as 'the literature snooping about, of overhearing "how others live".'⁴ Fundamentally, therefore, the transition from the private to the public reveals illicit elements at the heart of the novel, not only in the guilty secret, the unravelling of which drives the narrative, but also in the structure and sequence of this narrative unravelling itself, which often relies on covert and even underhand activity.

It is not surprising that contemporary fiction, with its postmodern sensibilities about the limits of knowledge and representation, should exhibit a particular elective affinity with Bakhtin's notion of a guilty secret as the elusive centre of the novel. However, unlike most of their nineteenth-century counterparts, postmodern novels are generally no longer willing or able to offer the reader a resolution to the secret, and any kind of *dénouement* tends to be perfused with uncertainty and ambiguity. This tendency explains the predilection for unreliable narrators, multiple and often de-centred voices, stylistic heterogeneity, self-reflexivity, as well as the fragmentary nature of both the narrative and the sources it purports to be based on. The

epistemological scepticism that is part and parcel of the postmodern condition, especially where the universalising claims of 'true history' are concerned, has combined with the trauma of twentieth-century history to form what Amy Elias termed 'a post-traumatic consciousness that redefines positivist or stadialist history as the historical sublime, a desired horizon that can never be reached but only approached in attempts to understand human origins and the meaning of lived existence.'⁵ In this reading, history has become a paradoxical *tremendum fascinans*, indescribably horrific but also – and as a result – appearing to promise a redemptive knowledge that permanently and structurally eludes us, leaving only the desire for the 'Truth that is Out There.'⁶ The way in which postmodern historical fiction confronts this historical sublime is by the repetition of narratives combined with a profound distrust of fabulation, the endless deferral of meaning, and an ironic awareness of the unattainability of History. The latter is revealed only in traces, suspicions, gaps and lacunae, its presence ephemeral, uncanny, even ghostly.

This short summary of some of the preoccupations of contemporary historical fiction could serve as a blueprint for Erwin Mortier's novel *Marcel*. It deals with what is arguably still the most sensitive episode in Belgian (and particularly) Flemish history, and one that is surrounded by painful memories, half-truths and taboos, namely the collaboration during the Second World War and its aftermath, commonly known in Belgium as the Repression. The very use of the term 'repression', as opposed to the terms *zuivering* (purification), *épuration* or *epurazione* that were used in the Netherlands, France and Italy respectively, not only suggests how politically charged this period was and remained for a very long time, but also how the narrative of the collaboration was almost instantly contested. Unlike in the Netherlands, for instance, there was no near-universal consensus narrative about

the war in Belgium, but several conflicting versions competing at multiple levels in an ideologically divided society. The initial stages of the judicial process that was meant to deal with suspected collaborators were ill-prepared, chaotic and focused almost exclusively on punishment rather than rehabilitation, resulting in the arrest and detention of tens of thousands of people. The often lengthy periods of detention while awaiting trial of so many like-minded individuals led to the emergence of a collaborationist subculture, which was apologetic at best and obstinately unapologetic at its worst. Political expediency and a changing ideological spectrum in the context of the Cold War meant that elements of this subculture were not only tolerated, but actively co-opted and allowed to achieve near-hegemonic status. The absence of a single and unambiguous national narrative resulted in the emergence of a de-centred multiplicity of voices as well as in a kind of moral equivalence (or even reversal) that made it possible for perpetrators to become victims and vice versa.⁷ Years and decades of this de-centred discourse, often relying on totemic myths, coded messages and conspiracy theories, led to the sense that guilty secrets were indeed being concealed and that 'The Truth' was definitely 'Out There.' This is also the fictional world presented in *Marcel*, one which is based on secrets that, even when apparently revealed, still seem uncertain, contradictory or even mendacious, and at best never more than partially understood. This article will explore Erwin Mortier's portrayal of the construction of memories and narratives of the Second World War and its aftermath, not only in the context of the central secret at the heart of the historical novel, but also in relation to the concepts of ambiguity, unreliability and indeterminacy as key concerns of postmodern historical fiction. The inevitable suspension of judgement that results from this will lead to a reading that not only casts fundamental doubt on the reconciliation narrative that scholars have proposed,

but also introduces the spectre of its very opposite, an uncontrollable and unredeemed proliferation of the sins of the past, all the while withholding sufficient information to confirm either hypothesis unambiguously.

Narrative and Structural Indeterminacy

Marcel tells the story of a nameless nine-year-old boy and his relationship with Andrea, his strong-willed grandmother, in an unspecified East-Flemish town over the course of about a year, from Summer to Summer, during an unspecified time somewhere between the mid-sixties and the mid-seventies (although one cursory reference to photos of 'pop groups in glitter suits'⁸ suggests that it is probably towards the end of that period). The indeterminacy of the setting foreshadows the elliptical nature of the narrative, as well as the variety of ways in which the novel thematises uncertainty, ambiguity, secrecy, concealment and (partial) revelation. Like many postmodern novels, *Marcel* does not conclude with a full and unambiguous final revelation of its central secret, instead requiring the reader to use partial and subjective evidence in order to piece together a probable conclusion, which, if not exactly closure, appears at least to suggest some form of understanding of and accommodation with the novel's central secret. The admittedly complex intergenerational reconciliation ostensibly offered by this ending feels familiar and perhaps even predictable, but that is highly deceptive. It is only when the reader consciously counteracts the confirmation bias produced by the apparently predictable narrative path, however fragmentary it remains, and revisits the various staging posts on the journey, that an entirely different, far less predictable and far darker conclusion starts to come to the fore. Whereas this second conclusion

introduces elements that appear to fatally undermine the original conclusion, it does not provide the kind of compelling evidence required to establish itself as the definitive truth about the matter. Thus the two conclusions remain suspended in a state of indeterminacy, both simultaneously likely and unlikely, possible and impossible, and since the reader is unable to make the independent observations that could break this deadlock, this state of indeterminacy in *Marcel* becomes permanent.

The narrative structure of *Marcel* is one of the fundamental sources of the aforementioned indeterminacy. Mortier uses a first-person narrator who appears to be an older version of the nameless protagonist, through whose eyes the entire narrative is focalised. This arrangement is never explicitly announced, nor do we know exactly what age the protagonist is meant to be, although reviewers at the time of publication were fairly unanimous that the boy was about nine years old (based, it seems, on little more than a hunch).⁹ The register and the range of the language used by the narrator are manifestly not those of a nine-year-old schoolboy, so it is fairly clear that he is speaking from the perspective of his older self, something which is confirmed by a few rare instances of prolepsis.¹⁰ However, with a single exception these proleptic passages barely take the reader out of the period of narrated time, and the incongruity of the language remains the only way in which we know that the narrator must be an older, presumably adult, incarnation of the protagonist.¹¹ The narrator never reflects on this discrepancy, nor does he supply extradiegetic information that the protagonist would not have had access to by way of explanation, thereby sustaining the naïve perspective of the child protagonist. Since the focalisation does not transcend the perspective of the narrator's younger self, it means that he can be excluded from the action, either physically, by simply being

locked out of the room and left to eavesdrop (which he frequently does), or intellectually, as he often lacks the knowledge or the maturity to understand what is being discussed. This strategy of using an eavesdropping protagonist who is unable either to overhear everything or to fully understand all of what he does hear, combined with a narrator whose only intervention appears to be the translation of the protagonist's impressions into a more adult language, puts *Marcel* squarely at the intersection of Bakhtin's 'literature of snooping around' and the unreliability and indeterminacy of postmodern historical fiction. There are clearly secrets at the heart of the novel, and the protagonist's powerful curiosity, which even leads him to transgressive behaviour like spying and stealing, represents both the strong sense that the truth must be out there and the overwhelming desire to find and confront it. However, the information available to both the protagonist and to the reader is fragmentary, elliptical, coded or oblique (or all of the above). An informed reader may be able to decipher references to a business being registered in someone else's name or to people leaving the country to 'breed cows in Argentina'¹² as an indication that the characters in question were collaborators, or at least suspected collaborators, but the protagonist is unable to read these codes, although he is often dimly aware that they are codes of some sort, which increasingly frustrates his growing desire to know.

The protagonist's incomplete and at times erroneous understanding of events, combined with the narrator's minimal and barely noticeable interventions, effectively turns the reader into an eavesdropper and a passive witness, relying on diffuse snippets of information to piece together the background that will make sense of the narrative. Much of this information, especially about the central characters, derives from the protagonist's reports on other characters in the novel. The narrator always

refers to Andrea as ‘the grandmother,’ and it is only when the protagonist reports another character calling her Andrea that the reader finds out her name (the protagonist himself, along with his parents, remains nameless throughout). Information about other characters, especially where their guilty past is concerned, can only be gleaned from oblique references in conversations, often only partially overheard by the protagonist. Maurice, the character who first names the grandmother, is a case in point. As the novel progresses, the reader is gradually led to infer that his only son fought and died as a volunteer on the Eastern Front, and that he himself must have been convicted of a collaboration offence. Still, even this fairly indeterminate picture emerges in a very fragmentary way, requiring a great deal of interpretative work and extradiegetic historical knowledge on the part of the reader. Maurice and Andrea’s conversation is a prime example of the protagonist’s eavesdropping, as both his interest and his ability to hear and understand wax and wane, and entirely incidental impressions are interspersed with crucial but as always partial information:

They sat opposite one another at a long table by the window, where a row of sansevierias in narrow pots was lined up on the window sill.

I barely heard what they said. I had been given a glass of grass-green lemonade and a magazine with pictures of Monte Carlo to leaf through.

‘And when?’, I heard Maurice ask despairingly, ‘When, when, when?’ With every ‘when’ he banged his fists on the table. ‘Never! The shop is still in my brother’s name, damn it!’

‘Please Maurice, calm down.’

‘I’ve done my penance.’

He stared out of the window. The rain fell softly. Women in nylon coats glided past the sansevierias. He poured another drink.

‘Not too much, not too much,’ the grandmother exclaimed. ‘It goes down far too easily.’

The rain came down the window in diagonal lines. The lines merged into one another. People had opened their umbrellas. Others walked past like ghosts, holding handbags over their heads.

Maurice and the grandmother whispered. Their voices were lost in the clattering of the rain. From time to time they got louder.

‘That lot made money from other people’s misery,’ the grandmother huffed, ‘but who’s now driving around in a Mercedes? In a Mercedes, Maurice. A Mercedes.’

It stayed quiet.

Then Maurice said something odd.

He said: ‘Hee.’

Silence.

Again he said: ‘Hee.’

When I dared to look up, I could just about see him stuffing a handkerchief in the pocket of his dust coat. His bloodshot eyes stared helplessly at the grandmother. He took the cork out of the bottle and poured another drink.

The grandmother declined, putting her hand over her glass. Maurice downed his in a single gulp, fell silent and sucked air through his teeth. One last stifled sob made him shudder.

The grandmother rose, straightened her hat and patted the creases out of her skirt. ‘Aye, Maurice, aye,’ she finally said, ‘they won’t be coming back.’¹³

Having been parked on the side with a lemonade and a magazine, the protagonist tunes in and out of the adults’ conversation. He barely hears what they are saying as their voices are intermittently drowned out by the sound of the rain. Andrea and Maurice whisper most of the time, which clearly piques the boy’s interest, and the fact that he keeps his eyes down for a while when he hears Maurice say ‘something strange’ suggests that he senses the subject of their conversation is in some way charged, illicit or forbidden. Maurice’s angry outburst followed by racking sobs adds further urgency to that impression, but the substance of the secret remains entirely hidden from the protagonist. A clue to the reasons behind the adults’ fraught conversation is provided by Maurice’s remark that the shop is still registered in his brother’s name. To a well-informed reader, this suggests that he lost the right to own

a business, a sanction widely used for a range of collaboration offences under the infamous Article 123sexies.¹⁴ However, the widespread use and inevitable abuse of this sanction led to a number of amnesties, beginning in 1948 and concluding in 1961, when even those sentenced to more than 20 years imprisonment could request the restitution of most of their rights (including the right to own a business), provided they were no longer serving their sentence. Not only did these heavy sentences represent less than 10% of the total number (57,254), the majority of convicted collaborators who had not done so previously did in fact make use of the 1961 amnesty.¹⁵ A small minority of requests were turned down and a small number of people refused to apply on principle. Given that the novel is set in the mid-sixties to mid-seventies, this leads us to conclude either that Maurice's case was so grave that his request for amnesty was turned down, or that he refused to apply, a course of action usually taken only by (ex-)collaborators who still firmly believed in the New Order ideology. In either case, it makes Maurice's anguished repetition of the word 'when?' rather puzzling. Unless, of course, the emphatic 'Never!' and the statement that the shop is 'still in my brother's name, damn it' should be read as an expression of defiance rather than a mournful plea. Unlike the (admittedly very well-)informed reader, the boy remains ignorant of the real significance of the adults' conversation, mirrored by the fact that all he can make out through the rain-strewn window are ghostly figures. He is clearly aware that whatever his grandmother and Maurice have been talking about has had an intense emotional effect on the latter, but rather than responding to Maurice's helpless look, the grandmother appears to literally brush it off, closing and cloaking the conversation with a well-worn cliché: 'Aye, Maurice, aye, [...] they won't be coming back.' The older characters frequently talk in clichés, phatic communication that has been emptied of conscious signification, reflecting a desire

for the safety of tradition and familiarity. These clichés include folk sayings about plants and the weather, truisms about life and death, but also myths about the repression, such as the one used by the grandmother, endlessly reproduced by the collaborationist subculture.¹⁶

Mortier uses the same strategy to address the collaborationist past of his characters, raising similar questions but nearly always leaving them unresolved. Until the very last pages, the boy is unable to function as a counterweight to what he witnesses, as he appears to know next to nothing about the war that has not been mediated through his grandmother and her network of family and friends. This initial impression is confirmed when it becomes clear that he does not know what a swastika is, or what it stands for. The boy's nameless parents only make a few cursory appearances and are credited with very little agency. His father seems to be aware of the kind of people the grandmother takes his son to meet, complaining (in her absence) that 'they fill his head with crazy things,' to which his wife replies, neither convincingly nor seemingly convinced: 'I'm sure there's no harm in it, [...] at least it gets him out of the house.'¹⁷ The boy's father maintains that the grandmother 'thinks the child is hers to do with as she pleases,' which is clearly the case, yet he and his wife remain passive bystanders in the face of it.¹⁸ The grandmother does indeed move in suspect circles, which the novel reveals gradually, but only ever partially, as it demands a considerable amount of interpretative work and historical background knowledge from the reader throughout. In fact, the closer we move to the centre of those circles, the grandparents themselves, the sparser the information becomes and the greater the indeterminacy and unreliability of the narrative. Thus, on a visit to 'the city' we find out that the grandparents met in a café during a 'zangfeest' or folk song festival.¹⁹ In Juli 1938, the Flemish nationalist *Vlaamsch*

Nationaal Zangfeest took place in Ghent, and the train ride through Halewijn and Drongen does indeed place them there, but even though this tells us that they quite probably would have had Flemish nationalist sympathies, it does not reveal how far those sympathies might have gone.²⁰ In one of his rare proleptic moments, the narrator tells us that he would find out ‘years later’ that the grandfather had spent some time in an ‘internment camp.’²¹ The grandfather himself does not use the word, but at one point tells the boy a story about how he was taunted and savagely beaten by ‘those pigs’, a story the boy has heard so often that ‘its fragments had been swirling around in [his] head for years.’²² After the war, tens of thousands were interned, often for weeks and months, on suspicion of collaboration or ‘*incivisme*’ – unpatriotic behaviour, for want of a better translation – and the vast majority were later released without charge. The fact that the grandfather spent some time in an internment camp does not in itself tell us very much about what he stood accused of, whether he was ever formally charged, and least of all whether he was guilty or innocent. Andrea’s cousin Cyriel is another case in point: like Maurice before him, Cyriel is first introduced with an oblique reference to the legal sanctions brought against him after the war. He is described as an intellectual who could have gone far, ‘professor, engineer, [...] architect [,] [m]aybe even minister,’ but he ended up ‘lugging around bricks and mortar,’ presumably banned from the professions by sanctions imposed under Article 123sexies.²³ Cyriel’s son Wieland later shows the protagonist photographs of his father as an *Oberscharführer* in the SS during the war, and says he still considers those to be the best years of his life.²⁴ The amnesty conundrum is the same as in Maurice’s case, but here we appear to have a clearer suggestion that Cyriel is entirely unrepentant. This encounter is also the first time the

protagonist sees evidence of his great-uncle Marcel's activities during the War, as he flanks Cyriel on one of the photographs, dressed in a 'dark, matt uniform.'²⁵

The Mystery of Marcel

The hidden past of the eponymous character is the novel's central secret. Yet, much like the other, auxiliary secrets, it is revealed in fragmentary and indirect ways, and ultimately remains incomplete, its underlying motivations profoundly and disturbingly ambiguous. Marcel's story is stitched together from decontextualised fragments and snippets of information, some of which even appear to be wrong, either by accident or, more disturbingly, by design. Marcel is introduced in a passage about Maurice's son Léon, with a brief description of a photograph that depicts the two of them at the beginning of the war, both in their early twenties, with the narrator adding: 'They were pals, life could still go in any direction.'²⁶ Beyond the fact that Marcel was the grandmother's youngest brother, that Léon was an only child and that they are both dead, the reader knows nothing about either character, so in narrative terms the comment is also quite apposite. The next piece of the puzzle comes during a visit to another family member, Soeur Cécile, a sanctimonious nun related to the grandmother, who says in an unguarded moment: 'That boy has been lying there on his own for so long. [...] He saved us from bolshevism.'²⁷ The narrator adds that he thought bolshevism was some kind of strange disease, so he is as yet none the wiser, but to the reader it is quite a clear indication both of Marcel's past and of the way in which at least some of his his family think of it. One innocuous photograph notwithstanding, Marcel then disappears from view until the boy eavesdrops on a conversation between the grandmother and his teacher, Miss Veegaete, after having

tried to spy on her while she was being measured for a dress. He hears Miss Veegaete say: 'Marcel was old enough to know what he was doing, Andrea. Twenty-four. He was no schoolboy.'²⁸ The protagonist now suspects that Marcel did something that he possibly should not have done (just as he himself is doing something he should not be doing), but he is still in the dark as to what it might have been. When the grandparents take the boy to see Cyriel and his family in Ghent, Marcel's level of involvement in the collaboration becomes clear for the first time, at least to the reader. Although Wieland shows the protagonist photographs of rows of uniformed men, marching and with their right arms outstretched, with telling captions such as 'on the steps of the stock exchange, the erstwhile bastion of Jewry and plutocracy, the leader surveys his troops,'²⁹ the boy still does not appear to understand exactly what this means. During this visit Cyriel gives the grandmother a bundle of letters from Marcel, and on their return home, the boy steals one of them and takes it up to his attic room, fascinated by 'the bird on the envelope, his curved beak, his powerful claws, his fanned tail.'³⁰ The fact that he does not recognise either the Nazi eagle or the swastika it is perched on indicates that he does not have a frame of reference with which to interpret Marcel's actions or his family's guilty past.³¹ When the boy is finally forced by another family member to admit the theft to his grandmother, the latter avoids any confrontation with him, but the atmosphere in the house becomes charged with tension, recriminations and ultimately heated arguments amongst the adults, which the boy partially overhears from the attic, but again does not understand. Afterwards, he and his grandmother are reconciled, although he still believes that the commotion was all about the fact that he stole something. He is allowed to keep Marcel's letter as the grandmother prepares the house for a big family gathering later that day. The letter is rendered *verbatim* in the

final pages of the novel as the boy reads it one last time, before putting it in a biscuit tin with one of Marcel's shirts, a rosary and a devotional card, and burying it in an overgrown patch in the garden.

After the revelation of the letter's contents to the reader, it seems that Marcel's secret, or a plausible version at least, is finally out in the open: he was a volunteer in the Waffen SS who fought and died on the Eastern Front. However, the revelation goes beyond these bare facts to supply Marcel's underlying motivation, as the letter also suggests that he was a Flemish nationalist rather than a committed Nazi, which is reflected in his statement that he is thinking about refusing to swear an oath 'directly to the führer.'³² Compared to the passing remarks and half-overheard conversations, the letter supplies a very high level of detail, which has the effect of enhancing its credibility as a (historical) source, bringing the reader closer to the 'real' Marcel and apparently providing a resolution to his story. Yet on closer inspection, this purported historical document contains a series of narrative and historical anomalies that fundamentally call its reliability into question. The first anomaly is the fact that the narrator quotes the letter word for word, including such fine detail as the exact date, place and even Marcel's *Feldpostnummer*, in spite of the protagonist having buried the letter in his grandmother's garden. There are no proleptic comments, as there are when other (photographic) documents are mentioned, clarifying how the narrator still has access to the letter, nor is there any suggestion that the boy copied it out or, at a push, memorised it. This implies a certain level of unreliability on the part of the narrator, as the letter was potentially never buried, was dug up and retrieved, or was imperfectly, or rather all too perfectly, reconstructed from memory. The letter is headed 'Milowitz, 28 August 1943,'³³ which allows the reader to identify the unit that Marcel would have been attached to as the

6. *SS-Freiwilligen-Sturmbrigade "Langemarck"* (previously the Flemish Legion), a formation specifically for Flemish volunteers, which was indeed based in the training ground at Milowitz, or Milovice, in Czechoslovakia from August 1943 onwards.³⁴ However, the abovementioned *Feldpostnummer*, given as 01496E at the bottom of the letter, corresponds to a different unit, the *SS-Wach-Bataillon 4* of the *SS-Panzergranadier-Ersatz-Bataillon Ost*. This bataillon was mustered in the Polish town of Breslau (Wrocław), which is also where wounded Flemish legionnaires were sent to rest and recuperate.³⁵ It is possible that Marcel was a veteran who would have been sent to Breslau to recover from fighting at the front, but in that case he would not have given his location as Milowitz. Conversely, if he was indeed in Milowitz, he would have needed to use a different *Feldpostnummer*, or no incoming mail would have reached him.³⁶ This incongruity, as trivial as it may seem, begs the question of why the narrator would provide this level of detail in the first place if it is not actually accurate. Yet the unreliability does not end there: in the opening paragraph of the letter, Marcel suggests to his addressees, Cyriel and his wife, that he is in fact in Russia, guarding harvesting farmhands to whom he refers as 'Ivans.'³⁷ Why he would claim to be in Russia when the heading of the letter puts him unambiguously in Czechoslovakia is a mystery to which there does not appear to be an innocent solution.

One possible reading is suggested in the second paragraph of the letter, in which Marcel describes his immediate surroundings. Their camp is an old school and the most beautiful building in the village, whereas the other buildings are mudhuts 'no bigger than a doghouse.'³⁸ He concludes the paragraph: 'So you can rest assured, what they say is not just propaganda, but also raw reality.'³⁹ No amount of poetic licence would allow for a large and well-established military base such as

Milowitz to be described as an old school building in a village, and the images used to describe the poverty 'here in Russia' (even though the location given is in Czechoslovakia) could have come straight from a German newsreel. Not only did the Flemish Legion have its own embedded *Propagandakompanie*, as did all Wehrmacht and SS divisions, Milowitz was also the kind of military training ground that was often used by these propaganda companies to film fake battle footage of the Eastern Front.⁴⁰ By providing such an explicit and unbidden disavowal of any propagandistic intention in a letter that is demonstrably full of incomplete and inaccurate information, as well as outright untruths, suspicions are raised about the reliability of the letter and its author, as well as the narrator. It also casts doubt over subsequent sections of the letter, which deal indirectly with Marcel's motivation for volunteering for the Waffen-SS. He writes that they will soon have to swear another oath, 'this time directly to the führer,' but that some Flemish soldiers are protesting and that he himself 'do[es]n't like the idea either.'⁴¹ Marcel writes that one of his friends who initially considered refusing to swear the oath was called into the Hauptmann's office and accused of being 'Politically Unreliable,' at which point he changed his mind.⁴² The letter insinuates that Marcel stood firm and that he was transferred to the grenadiers (and to the front line) as a result. He continues, directly addressing Cyriel: 'I will be able to see those Russians properly when the battle begins. And at least I know what I'm fighting for. For our Flanders, and not for the moustache. Politically Unreliable! I'll take that as a badge of honour! I hope you will join us soon, Cyriel. We need men like you. There aren't many idealists here.'⁴³ Again the letter presents an intriguing mixture of demonstrable fact and unexplained fiction: the historical references correspond to a series of events that took place in the ranks of the Flemish Legion as it was reorganised into the *6. SS-Freiwilligen-Sturmbrigade*

“*Langemarck*” in the Summer and Autumn of 1943. Towards the end of July, Flemish Legionnaires were told that the unit they had volunteered for would cease to exist, that they would formally become part of the Waffen-SS, and that they had to swear a new oath. A fair number of veterans of the Legion, based in Breslau where they were recovering from fighting around Leningrad, protested against what they (correctly) identified as a move to sideline their Flemish identity and integrate them fully into the SS ideology. These Legionnaires had volunteered as members of the nationalist and collaborationist *Vlaams Nationaal Verbond* (VNV), whose aim was to establish an independent Flanders in a Europe dominated by Germany, and they ended up having heated discussions with those Flemish volunteers who had joined the Legion as committed, pro-German national-socialists through the *Deutsch-Vlämische Arbeitsgemeinschaft* or *DeVlag* (and who were often of superior rank). The *DeVlag* loyalists reported their VNV comrades to their SS superiors, which resulted in a number of them being marked as ‘politisch unzuverlässig (PU),’ or politically unreliable.⁴⁴ When the veterans were transferred to Milowitz, where they joined the new recruits for the formal creation of the *Sturmbrigade*, tensions ran even higher. In an attempt to suppress the protest, seven PUs were sent back to Breslau to spend the next six months in isolation. Even so, on the day that the oath was to be taken, between 100 and 200 volunteers still refused and were called in to see their commanding officer, Konrad Schellong.⁴⁵ However, Schellong held a conciliatory speech that placated the rebels, and soon news reached them from Belgium that the political leadership of the VNV did not in fact support their resistance to the oath, after which the rebellion fizzled out without further reprisals. It is worth noting that the rebels did not in fact object to swearing an oath directly to the Führer, because they had already done so upon joining the Legion. Instead their objections focused

exclusively on dropping the reference to fighting bolshevism (which meant that they could potentially be asked to fight anywhere) and on the great-Germanic SS ideology that was being forced on them.⁴⁶

Not for the first time, the letter confronts the reader with a narrative that partially corresponds to an underlying historical reality, but that also clashes with it in crucial ways. Most significant is Marcel's main objection that he does not wish to swear an oath directly to Hitler, which is something that as a volunteer of the Flemish Legion he would unquestionably have done already. Similarly, his claim to have been 'transferred to the grenadiers' by way of punishment does not match the reprisals that the Germans took against those volunteers who rebelled against the oath. In fact, the title 'grenadier' simply designated a heavy infantry soldier in the Waffen-SS, so all of the volunteers of the Flemish Legion would have been referred to as grenadiers. Thirdly, the closing lines of the letter rather dramatically announce that it may be a while before he is able to write again, as they have received their marching orders and 'the Eastern Front is calling' (*Marcel*, 151). However, the Sturmbrigade was still in the process of building up its strength and training its new recruits, and would not in fact receive their marching orders until 26 December, a full four months after the date on the letter.⁴⁷ Finally, concluding this catalogue of half-truths and untruths, there is one contextual aspect that serves to remove the last vestige of verisimilitude from Marcel's letter, and that is the fact that it arrived at all. *Feldpost* was subject to severe censorship, and any passages that were deemed unacceptable, because they contained rumours, sensitive information, or language that undermined morale, would be made illegible. However, letters that contained criticism of the army and the government would be intercepted and their authors punished with internment, prison or even death. Although highly unlikely, Marcel's

remarks about the discontent surrounding the oath might possibly have made it past the censor, but his proud boast of being classed as Politically Unreliable, his enthusiasm for the Flemish cause and lack of enthusiasm for the German one, together with his denigrating description of Hitler as 'the moustache' would certainly have stopped the letter's onward journey and would have landed him in prison or facing a firing squad.⁴⁸ It is thus abundantly clear that the letter itself, along with the way its content and eventual fate are reported by the narrator, raises far more questions than it sets out to answer. Marcel's demonstrably fallacious accounts of traceable historical events, flagged by even more obvious discrepancies in time and place, combined with his unprovoked defence against (unmade) accusations of propaganda fundamentally undermine his reliability and objectivity. It may suggest that he never was where he claimed to have been, that he might have taken others' experiences and related them as his own, and imperfectly so, as a result. It could also signal that the exculpation that is clearly implied in the letter, namely that he is not a committed Nazi but a Flemish idealist who fights for his country, is itself nothing but propaganda. This apologetic narrative was quite common in collaborationist circles after the war, and it became very widespread in Flemish public opinion from the mid-sixties onwards, predominantly in catholic and conservative circles. However, research has revealed that Flemish SS-volunteers did not motivate their decision to fight on the Eastern Front exclusively in terms of Flemish idealism, at least not at the time. Aline Sax's book *Voor Vlaanderen, Volk en Führer* (2012) uses court files, containing diaries, letters, witness statements, interrogations and judicial proceedings, to investigate the motivation and ideology of Flemish SS-volunteers. She not only concludes that, predictably, there were many different reasons for volunteering, and that these often intersected, but also crucially that political

motivations such as Flemish idealism or anti-bolshevism were always accompanied by an ideological commitment to the New Order or even outright Nazism.⁴⁹

Undependable Witnesses and Unreliable Narrators

It is possible that the apparent errors, inconsistencies and incongruities in Marcel's letter are designed to make the reader re-evaluate the character from a rather one-dimensional innocent Flemish idealist, whose memory is revered by his sister and her relatives, to an ideologically and historically more complex (and more compromised) figure, whose family are either ignorant of or perhaps wilfully blind to this darker side. This ambiguity introduces a degree of semantic and moral uncertainty into the intergenerational reconciliation that appears to be proposed at the end of the novel, as it is unclear whether the darker side of Marcel's past is not properly understood, or whether it is trivialised by the grandmother's misplaced sense of moral equivalence that seems to be suggested by the ambiguous phrase: 'You mustn't think that everyone is as good as they make out.'⁵⁰ Of course, this phrase could very readily be applied to Marcel himself, whose letter seems to show him as an unreliable character at best. However, the narrator's relationship to Marcel's letter, both as a young boy and as his older self, raises enough suspicions to question his reliability too. At this point, it becomes plausible that the level of uncertainty and indeterminacy cannot be attributed solely to the protagonist's naïvety, but that more sinister motives may be in play. If the letter was indeed buried in a biscuit tin all those years ago, it is very hard to believe either that the young protagonist would have been able to memorise all of its details, the true meaning of which he could not yet fathom, or that the older narrator would still somehow

remember them word for word, number by number. The boy's initial impression of the letter, when he first opens it, is that 'it's about tomatoes', as he can barely read the faded pencil scrawls.⁵¹ When the letter is finally rendered in full, there is indeed a line about the sweetness and abundance of the tomatoes in Russia. It is conceivable that this remained the only line that the boy remembered, and that the narrator supplemented the historical information himself years later, guided by how he wanted to present Marcel. Another possibility is that the letter was either never buried or that it was recovered at a much later stage. In any case, there seems to be little doubt that the narrator is withholding something from the reader. The narrator may be intentionally portraying Marcel as an ambiguous figure, but in an extremely covert and almost coded way, or he may be uncritically reproducing one of the major exculpatory myths of the collaboration, but in such an inept way as to unintentionally reveal how deeply disingenuous and discredited that myth really is. Crucially, *Marcel* does not offer the reader anywhere near enough information about the narrator to come to a firm conclusion, leaving the novel in an ostensibly indefinite state of narrative and historical indeterminacy.

The narrative node represented by Marcel's letter can be read as the novel's approach to the historical sublime, which, true to Elias's definition, holds the promise of a redemptive knowledge that nevertheless forever eludes us. However, in the case of *Marcel*, the promise of redemption also appears to carry a threat of damnation, as the pursuit of the novel's narrative thread reveals the possible presence of increasingly dark elements. The moment of redemption seems to be within reach towards the novel's end, as the protagonist comes down from his attic room to meet his grandmother halfway up the stairs after having stolen Marcel's letter. The grandmother says she is no longer cross with him for purloining the letter

and acknowledges that other characters were also at fault, both in the theft and, more or less implicitly, during the war and its aftermath. Responding to this conciliatory overture, the boy promises to look after the letter and to find Marcel's grave in Russia, clearly still unaware of the full extent or implications of the family's wartime past. Wearily, but with some relief, the grandmother indicates that life goes on, but also emphatically instructs her grandson to keep the letter to himself: 'It's not for everyone else's eyes. Do you hear?'⁵² Jan Lensen interpreted this passage as a form of intergenerational understanding and reconciliation, a mutual coming to terms with the events and the memories of the Second World War, even if the understanding on the part of the younger generation can only ever be incomplete.⁵³ The boy's subsequent reading and burying of the letter with the final words 'more than enough rooms in the earth' then signify a more comprehensive uncovering and laying to rest of this guilty past.⁵⁴ However, these very actions also signal the narrator's profound unreliability, this time based not so much on the protagonist's lack of knowledge, but on the suspicion that the narrator in fact knows more than he lets on. This shift from an unreliability based on indeterminacy and uncertainty to one grounded in what appears to be a very selective representation or possibly an intentional misrepresentation invites a different reading of the novel and its conclusion, opening up new interpretations of what seemed to be innocuous phrases. However, while enough information is supplied for the reader to consider these alternative readings, the novel never reveals enough to settle on any one interpretation conclusively. With increasing intensity, *Marcel* hints that the truth is indeed out there, and that it is a vitally important one, while at the same time denying the reader any firm grasp of it.

One alternative to the reconciliatory reading is that Marcel's guilty past is not so much processed as passed on: rather than eventually coming to an understanding of the gravity of his great-uncle's thoughts and actions, the protagonist-narrator ends up internalising the collaborationist exculpation and possibly even its fascist ideology. Several times in the novel, the boy is identified by other characters as bearing a striking resemblance to Marcel, both in terms of his appearance and his impetuous and headstrong character. When his great-uncle Cyriel follows up one such remark with the hopeful question 'You will become a good Fleming too, won't you?', the grandmother confidently responds 'it is starting to look that way.'⁵⁵ There may be some truth in the suspicion on the part of the boy's father that the grandmother and her circle are attempting to mould him in their image, and that this enterprise may well be more successful than at first it appeared. The grandfather's chosen method of cultivating his grandson's interest and experience is gardening. He hands a small patch of his garden over to the boy and attempts to make him shape it according to how he believes it should be with the words: 'I will teach you how it should be done. [...] This is our path.'⁵⁶ The lesson concludes with the grandfather drawing furrows and sowing seeds, holding his head close to the soil and pulling his grandson's level with him as he does so: 'He did not let me go. One hand sprinkled the seed in the furrows, the other bended me into the line of his expectations. He dug ditches in my soul and sowed hope for something vague, not for me, but for himself.'⁵⁷ In spite of the grandfather's efforts to get him to tame it, the boy's patch remains wild and uncontrolled, but abundantly fertile. It is in this patch that the boy buries Marcel's letter in a biscuit tin with a few of his personal belongings, quoting the words of the Latin requiem mass: '*In paradisum te deducant angeli*.'⁵⁸ Marcel the SS-volunteer, an emblem of the most radical manifestations of

the Flemish collaboration, is thus symbolically laid to rest but also, it seems, forgiven and exalted, the narrator expressing the wish that he should be led to heaven by a host of angels. The unruly and rebellious fecundity of the patch also suggests that the boy may be planting as much as he is burying, which begs the question as to what this particular seed would yield. The notion of a soldier's body, or its symbolic representation in this case, being planted as one would a seed has a very particular resonance in the context of radical Flemish nationalism, occurring as it does in Cyriel Verschaeve's couplet 'Hier liggen hun lijken als zaden in 't zand, hoop op de oogst o Vlaanderenland' (Here lie their bodies like seeds in the sand, hope for the harvest, oh Flemish land').⁵⁹ Already a controversial figure during the Interbellum, Verschaeve himself was wholeheartedly committed to the Nazis' cause during the war, extolled the virtues of their fight against the godless communists and actively recruited volunteers for the Flemish Legion. Verschaeve's lines adorned the Yser Tower in Diksmuide, a monument to the Flemish soldiers who died in the First World War as well as a focal point for (fascist) Flemish nationalist gatherings during the Second World War, when those who died on the Eastern Front and other collaborators were venerated as heroes of the Flemish cause alongside the dead of the First World War.⁶⁰ Along with a statue of the Virgin Mary, Andrea keeps a replica of the Yser Tower in the glass cabinet with photographs of 'her dead,'⁶¹ and Verschaeve's verse is explicitly referenced in a letter that Miss Veegaete sent to the grandmother after Marcel's death, stating that the Lord Jesus 'knows where each and every one of them fell, like so many seeds in the ground [*zaden in 't zand*].'⁶² These repeated echoes of well-known radical nationalist and collaborationist symbols and tropes combine to give the final burial scene a much darker inflection,

opening up the possibility that the boy is in fact on the way to becoming a 'good Fleming' in the mould of his alter ego Marcel.

Without a clear insight into the protagonist's actions or the narrator's motivations, the reader does not know whether the recalcitrant collaborationist past has been laid to rest or whether it continues to grow, not so much in the carefully cultivated beds designed for public consumption, but hidden in wild and uncontrollable patches. When several characters state that the boy looks just like Marcel or has been cast from the same mould, some of them clearly hope that the likeness will extend to politics and ideology as well as to physique and character, but whether or not that will eventually be the case remains an open question. The notion of a reconciliation or coming to terms with the past, as represented by Andrea and her grandson sitting halfway up (or down) the stairs to the attic, is of course still there, but no longer unambiguously so. Linking Flemish literature about the Second World War to the public debate on Flanders' war past, Jan Lensen writes: 'The confrontation with the past is no longer avoided, and the writing appears in a therapeutic way to call for openness. [...] What the future brings is unknown, the past, on the other hand, is gradually yielding up its secrets'.⁶³ However, as this article has demonstrated, the secrets that *Marcel* yields confuse rather than clarify the final picture, and what we are left with is less a therapeutic sense of openness than an unsettling feeling that so much still remains withheld and suppressed. In this context, the boy and the grandmother's indeterminate position on the stairs is not so much an image of reconciliation as a symbol of the uncomfortable oscillation between two poles and the inability to conclusively attain or escape either of them. *Marcel* represents several rival truths that may be out there, but the evidence it provides is not quite enough for any one of those to be substantiated, yet just enough for the

other ones to become tenuous or even untenable, leaving the secret at the heart of the novel in a state permanent suspension. The cryptic final sentence, declaring that the earth has more than enough rooms, suggests that readers will have to make their peace with the concurrent existence of all of these truths, and confirms that all the boy and *Marcel* have sown is doubt.

Notes

1. Stewart, *The Second World War in Contemporary British Fiction*, 9ff.
2. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 123.
3. *Ibid.*, 124.
4. *Ibid.*, 123.
5. Elias, *Sublime Desire*, xviii.
6. *Ibid.*, xviii.
7. See Seberechts, "Beeldvorming over Collaboratie en Repressie"; De Wever, "Van Wierook tot Gaslucht"; Beyen, "Zwart wordt van langs om meer de Vlaamsgezinde massa"; Aerts, "De Bestraffing van de Collaboratie in België"; and Mertens, "From perpetrator to victim".
8. Mortier, *Marcel*, 60. The fact that *Marcel* is a semi-autobiographical novel and Erwin Mortier was born in 1965 provides further support for situating it in the early to mid-seventies. *Marcel* was translated into English by Ina Rilke, but because this translation is frequently problematic, all translations in this article are my own, with references to the Dutch original unless stated otherwise.
9. Cyrille Offermans estimates the protagonist is a boy of 'eight, nine' ("Een verdwenen wereld," 584), Lucas Vanclooster is less ambiguous in calling him 'a nine-year-old boy' (*De Standaard*, February 25, 1999). At the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the boy was in the third grade (Mortier, *Marcel*, 134), so he is in fact eight, rising nine.
10. At one point late in the novel, the narrator foresees rebelling against Norbert, who would become his new teacher, 'two months later' (Mortier, *Marcel*, 112). In the same episode, he prefigures a visit of 'Linda'tje', Miss Veegaete's niece, to his grandmother's house (*Ibid.*, 116-8). This subtle but crucial discrepancy between the narrator and the protagonist eluded at least one reviewer, who complained about a lack of psychological accuracy in the portrayal of the child (Vanclooster, *De Standaard*, February 25, 1999).
11. The one exception is a short passage at the end of the third chapter in which the narrator reflects on photograph of his grandmother which he found 'Years later [...] when everything was cleared out' suggesting that this episode takes place after the grandmother has died (Mortier, *Marcel*, 59).
12. Mortier, *Marcel*, 43, 66.
13. *Ibid.*, 15-6.
14. Article 123sexies of the Belgian penal code has a long list of rights of which convicted collaborators were stripped, effectively removing them from participation in public life and, to a degree, society. According to Luc Huyse and Steven Dhondt, 20,652 citizens were still affected by this measure at the beginning of 1950, although by 1959 more than 10,000 of those had made use of one of the amnesty laws to regain their rights (Huyse and Dhondt, *Onverwerkt Verleden*, 28, 167).
15. An indication of the success of the first amnesty laws is the fact that of the 8,600 collaborators who could have been in prison in 1952, only 770 effectively still were. By 1960, that number had gone down to 99 and by 1965 only 3 people were still serving a sentence (*Ibid.*, 165-6).
16. Huyse and Dhondt found that the literature on the repression published between the late forties and early eighties incessantly reproduced the same often decontextualised anecdotes garnered from no more than two or three 'mother texts,' and lament the influence this had on the public perception of the repression (*Ibid.*, 13-4). This impression was later confirmed by Seberechts ('Beeldvorming over Collaboratie en Repressie'), De Wever, ('Van Wierook tot Gaslucht'), Beyen, ('Zwart wordt van langs om meer de Vlaamsgezinde massa') and Aerts ('De Bestraffing van de Collaboratie in België'). This is

of course not to say that these collaborationist myths were entirely fictional, but they did and do represent a highly selective, unreflexive and often ideologically driven narrative of the past.

17. Mortier, *Marcel*, 63.

18. *Ibid.*, 64.

19. *Ibid.*, 67-71.

20. Apart from serving as an example of the indeterminate nature of the historical information in the novel, this episode also introduces a demonstrable factual inaccuracy. The grandfather puts the event 'in the year thirty-nine,' but in that year the *Vlaamsch Nationaal Zangfeest* took place in Bruges, not in Ghent (*Ibid.*, 71). Towards its highly charged conclusion, historical inaccuracies become an important source of the novel's profound sense of ambiguity towards sincerity of the characters and indeed the very knowability of history.

21. *Ibid.*, 59.

22. *Ibid.*, 55-6.

23. *Ibid.*, 66.

24. *Ibid.*, 88.

25. *Ibid.* 81.

26. *Ibid.*, 16-7.

27. *Ibid.*, 24.

28. *Ibid.*, 45.

29. *Ibid.*, 80.

30. *Ibid.*, 88.

31. Jan Lensen persistently refers to the Nazi eagle as the 'Dubbeladelaar', double eagle ("Een half weggevaagd gezicht," 34, 50), or 'dubbelkoppige adelaar', double-headed eagle (*De Foute Oorlog*, 173), which had in fact fallen out of use as a German national symbol after 1871. The Nazis' *Reichsadler* and *Parteiadler* did look over different shoulders, but never at the same time.

32. Mortier, *Marcel*, 150.

33. *Ibid.*, 150.

34. De Wever, *Oostfronters*, 98.

35. *Ibid.*, 98.

36. Trigg, *Hitler's Flemish Lions*, 58-60 and 112-6 respectively.

37. Mortier, *Marcel*, 150.

38. *Ibid.*, 150.

39. *Ibid.*, 150.

40. Uziel, *The Propaganda Warriors*, 249.

41. Mortier, *Marcel*, 150.

42. *Ibid.*, 150-1.

43. *Ibid.*, 151.

44. De Wever, "'Rebellen' aan het Oostfront," 87.

45. *Ibid.*, 88.

46. The Legion's oath in full was as follows: 'Ich schwöre bei Gott diesen heiligen Eid dass ich im Kampf gegen den Bolschevismus dem obersten Befehlshaber der deutschen Wehrmacht, Adolf Hitler, unbedingten Gehorsam leisten und als tapferer Soldat bereit sein will jederzeit für diesen Eid mein Leben einzusetzen.' (*Ibid.*, 85-6). The only difference with the standard Waffen-SS oath is that the latter left out the reference 'im Kampf gegen den Bolschevismus' and designated Hitler as 'Führer des Reiches'.

47. Trigg, *Hitler's Flemish Lions*, 121.

48. De Wever, "'Rebellen' aan het Oostfront," 90.

49. Sax, *Voor Vlaanderen, Volk en Führer*, 118-26.

50. Mortier, *Marcel*, 112.

51. *Ibid.*, 89.

52. *Ibid.*, 148.

53. Lensen, "De zoektocht naar het midden," 125-6 and *De Foute Oorlog*, 174-5.

54. Mortier, *Marcel*, 152.

55. *Ibid.*, 86. The phrase is 'Dat legt er al naar aan,' which Ina Rilke translates as 'it depends' (Mortier 2014, 66), presumably confusing the phrase with 'dat ligt er aan' and ignoring the presence of the preposition 'naar', which is redundant in her version. This is not the only example of manifest errors in Rilke's translation, but it is one of the most egregious ones, given how radically it changes the meaning of the source text.

56. Mortier, *Marcel*, 55.

57. Ibid., 56.
58. Ibid., 152.
59. De Wever, "Diksmuide: De IJzertoren," 61.
60. Ibid., 70.
61. Mortier, *Marcel*, 9.
62. Ibid., 147.
63. Lensen, "'Ten paradijze geleiden U de Engelen'," 92.

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