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Where Evil Grows

The United States versus the Netherlands in Frans Kellendonk's *Mystic Body* (1986)

It is most certainly because he visited the United States several times that some of Frans Kellendonk's works revolve around an ambivalent position towards the United States. In 1981–82 he was writer-in-residence at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. The subjects he taught included writers of his generation, literary reviews in the Netherlands, and the relationship between metaphysics and translation. During that time, he explored Florida and California. A year later, he returned to the United States, to Boston and New England, where he spent his days in libraries. A few years before he died of AIDS in 1990, he visited Minneapolis one last time, and travelled in Michigan.¹ Kellendonk's second stay in the United States, in 1983, resulted in a collection of his observations on the country called *Florida: Stories of a Peninsula*.² In the introduction, he develops the idea that the United States was invented by a collective imagination: that the explorers in the fifteenth century already had a preconceived idea of the country before they actually discovered it. The reality of the land they discovered was merely a disappointing reflection of their aspirations. Frans Kellendonk detected that this effect was still present and argued that it turned the U.S. into a suffering country, struggling with an "idolized," timeless image of itself. In *Notes from the New World*,³ in which he also describes his views on the United States, Kellendonk plays with this timeless opposition between "idolized" fictional material on the one hand, and reality on the other, between absence and presence. After dozens of pages full of reflections on what he sees around him in the United States, Kellendonk concludes with the following paragraph:

- 1) For more biographical information about Frans Kellendonk, see T. Boon's "Frans Kellendonk, leven en werk," in Boon 1998: 122–150.
- 2) *Florida. Verhalen van een schiereiland*.
- 3) *Aantekeningen uit de nieuwe wereld*.

Here, I have a car I do not use. It is a rusty heap of scrap. Now that it is covered with two months' snow, it has become an abstract car. Only its graceful streamlining remains, which, enlarged, hangs in the air, clear-cut and as light as a feather.⁴

The car looks very attractive and enormous under its coat of snow. However, it is not. The thick layer of snow hides an old rusty wreck. It is as if Kellendonk wants to warn his reader: things may look attractive, excite your imagination, but once the many layers that cover and enlarge it are removed, you could be disappointed, or at least surprised. The effects of beauty, wealth and purity can hide a "rusty heap of scrap."

The description of this car in the winter could be interpreted as a metaphor for the United States. Of course, we do not know whether this is what Frans Kellendonk really intended. The question of the author's intentions becomes even more complex when it is transposed to the analysis of pure fiction, in a novel. Almost forty years after Roland Barthes declared that the author was dead, and Michel Foucault wondered what an author was, it is my contention that an analysis of Kellendonk's own experience of the United States will not convincingly add value to my approach.⁵ At best, we could venture to talk about the intention of the author, or of any interlocutor the reader cannot resist inventing when reading. It could even be claimed that divining the author's intention, or an implied guiding presence, or even an "implied author" remains strongly dependent on the reader.

These modest reservations are especially pertinent to the analysis of Frans Kellendonk's fictional work with which this article deals. This analysis is organized according to the roles played by the United States and the Netherlands, places where the characters intentionally evolve, in relation to the internal logic of the narrative fabric, of which the narrator is the architect. This complex figure produces tensions between the fictional subjects and their deeds in the spaces in which they evolve. These characters are set in motion by a certain intentionality and behave according to this intentionality. This approach is proposed by, among others, Vincent Jouve, the French theoretician.⁶ In his *Poétique des valeurs* (2001), Jouve analyzes the ways a text constructs the values it contains, and their presentation to the reader; what he calls the "textual circuits of value transmission" (163). Jouve's first step is to concentrate on the local manifestation of values⁷: how they break out in spoken words, thoughts and deeds. The systematization of this first step makes the analysis of the ideological system of the text possible. This analysis takes three factors into account:

- 4) Ik heb hier een auto die ik niet gebruik. Het is een roestig kreng. Nu er twee maanden lang sneeuw op gevallen is, is het een abstracte auto geworden. Alleen een sierlijke stroomlijn is ervan over, die een paar maal uitgegroot, haarscherp en vederlicht in de lucht hangt (651). I use the fourth edition of Frans Kellendonk's *Het complete werk* (1993). [All parenthetical references, both in the text and in the notes, to *Het complete werk* are to this edition.]
- 5) With these statements, I only want to indicate my methodological approach. It is not my aim here to join the debate on the death and/or resurrection of a complex entity called an "author."
- 6) Jouve's approach is based, *inter alia*, on the works of the linguist Algirdas Julien Greimas and those of Philippe Hamon, who teaches at the Université Paris III Sorbonne Nouvelle. See also Jouve 2001b.
- 7) What he calls "points-valeurs."

the point of view of the narrator; the structure of the narrated story; and the text's indications of reading to its reader. The practical part of this article mainly rests on Jouve's first step.

The novel used to illustrate this methodological process is *Mystic Body* (1986),⁸ which is not only considered Kellendonk's masterpiece, but is also the novel in which the United States is most extensively described. This novel is divided into three parts. The first part is called *Valse lente* (False Spring, if considered Dutch, or Slow Waltz, if considered French)⁹ and describes how Magda Gijssels, who is pregnant, goes back to the Doornhof, the estate in the Netherlands where her father, A. W. Gijssels, lives alone. The second part, *De moederkerk* (The mother church), introduces a third character, Gijssels' son, Leendert, who is an art critic in Manhattan, New York. The last part, *De geschiedenis* (The history), describes what happens when Leendert returns to the Doornhof.

This article concentrates mainly on the first two parts of the novel, in which a contrast emerges between New York, where Leendert lives, and the Doornhof estate, where Leendert grew up and where his father lives. At first glance one might expect a sharp difference between the two places since the narrator reveals that Leendert, a homosexual, and his partner went to New York "because their transcendent love could only prosper in a transcendent place."¹⁰ According to this mysterious phrase, the United States offers a homosexual couple privileges that gays cannot find in the Netherlands. In other words, this move to the New World, with the new aspirations it brings, corresponds with what Vincent Jouve (2001a: 66) would have called a new "narrative program": we have a subject (Leendert) who is looking for an object. Our subject expresses his choices and desires, what is valuable for him, according to his competences. In this case, Leendert wants to live his homosexual love in what he calls a "transcendent place." The questions asked within the framework of this analysis are therefore broadly based on the questions Vincent Jouve poses to bring to light the narrative program of the subject and the values that push the subject to act the way he does. "Broadly" based, as the line of reasoning will be adapted to the specificities of the text.¹¹

These questions include the following: 1) Why does Leendert leave the Netherlands and go to the United States, and what does he want to do in New York? 2) Can he do what he wants to do in New York, and does he succeed? 3) Is there any evaluation of his actions, and if so, who and/or what makes this evaluation? 4) Why does he go back to the Netherlands?

As already stated, Leendert and his partner went to New York because, in his opinion, their transcendent love could only prosper in a transcendent place. Here the metropolis plays its role as home/host of the Statue of Liberty, a freedom that Leendert and his friend no longer expect to find in the Netherlands. However, New

8) *Mystiek lichaam*.

9) I am grateful to Professor Dr. H. Bousset for drawing my attention to this possible translation.

10) ... omdat hun transcendentie liefde alleen op een transcendentie plek kon gedijen (376).

11) A complete narrative program is deployed in four steps: manipulation, competence, pre-station and sanction. See Jouve (2001a: 66-88) for a detailed analysis of these four steps.

York soon appears to be like Plato's mirror of heavenly ideas, the place where timeless ideas are created. These ideas are shaped by mankind for mankind, an idolatrous humanity that fully believes in the illusions it creates for itself, without reference to any transcendent entity situated outside mankind. We might wonder whether Leendert and his partner have chosen the right place for their love. Leendert and his friend live in Manhattan, which is depicted as a roofless cathedral (346), reminiscent of Bruegel's tower of Babel, a symbol of humanity's infinite pride.¹² According to Leendert, homosexual love is transcendent as it stands out from the history of time and flesh. Gays can only imitate procreation and not contribute to the continuity of history. The ideology that claims that homosexual love is a parody of the life-creating biological act does not originate from Leendert himself, but from his sister, Magda. She asserts that: "[Homosexuals] have said farewell to Mother Earth; they have gone on a sexual space travel. These people are imagined and stupid and they will die in solitude; that's where their false male illusions guide them."¹³ Her words reveal strongly conservative Catholic views according to which sex should exclusively be used to procreate. In this context, homosexuality does not fit in the space created by Magda's autonormative words and is consequently relegated to another realm.

Leendert and his partner try to ignore Magda's prophetic words. They try to convince themselves that they have left the earth, time and their flesh to live their love together in this platonic heaven. Furthermore, it should be noted that the very fact of living in this idealized heaven of timeless ideas contributes to the fulfilment of Magda's predictions.

In his new place where, between two quarrels, he lives with his companion, Leendert nourishes his idolatrous illusions of immortality and theoretically fights against his sister's patriarchal conservatism in two ways. First of all, he founds a school of painters, the Wild Boys School of "eternally young homosexual warriors" (350), who paint the Utopia of men's biological independence from women. Secondly, Leendert becomes an art critic in New York. In this role he acts as the theoretician of the new artistic movement and, thanks to his articles, the Wild Boys School becomes famous. His enterprise, however, does not succeed. It quickly appears that what should only take place in the heaven of completed things is inexorably pulled down towards earthly imperfection. Ideal love is not eternal, as typical human feelings interfere with their elevated vanity, and finally:

Leendert cursed this self-centered man's love. What was so great about being a shard from an ideal vase? You could glue it back together as much as you wanted; but the thing would fall to the ground again and again, in the same fragments. Why do I love you if I can't put up with you? Why do you play such mean tricks if you love me?¹⁴

¹² It is interesting to point out that Leendert and his companion live in the Big Apple, a toponym that could be associated with the Fall.

¹³ [De homo's] hebben moeder aarde vaarwel gezegd ze zijn op seksuele ruimtevaart gegaan. Ingebeeld en dom zijn ze en eenzaam zullen ze sterven dat is waar hun mannenwaan toe leidt. Dat ik mijn bloedeigen Broer zo tegennatuurlijk bezig moet zien (371). [Note that Kellendonk hardly uses any interpunction for Magda's discourse.]

The evaluation is expressed by Leendert himself. In a direct discourse, he asserts that homosexuals are not excluded but are submitted to the history of time and flesh. Homosexuals are also mortal; their bodies can get ill, fatally ill. Maybe they do not contribute to the history of flesh and blood, maybe their sexual intercourse is a parody of the divine creation, and maybe they leave no trace of life behind them when they die, but in the end they do die. "It was ridiculous to rise against the geniuses of nature and their biological advantage."¹⁵

Leendert returns to the Netherlands because, while in New York, he receives a letter from his sister informing him that she is pregnant and has gone back to live with her father. Leendert goes back to act as an uncle and mentor for Magda's baby, Victor. A new narrative program is set out, with a new object for our subject Leendert. He decides to move from a timeless, ontological way of life to a life devoted to an eschatological goal: praising the flesh submitted to time.

This was a first way of reading the second part of *Mystiek lichaam*, starting from the principle that the move to New York was motivated by a desire for homosexual timelessness in a transcendent place, namely Manhattan. Wondering whether Leendert could fulfill his desires in New York, and, if so, how, we discover that he wrote art reviews and was the theoretician of a school of young warriors depicting what Leendert himself calls the illusion of homosexual independence. We are also informed of the style he uses to write his reviews:

Later, when he wrote arts reviews, people reproached him that he so often used the words "indescribable" and "priceless." He retorted: "They may be bad style, these words, but they are aesthetically sound. I had a father who would even sell my own clothes. I hated his constant prattling. Now I feel the same hate for the crafty critics who have words for everything. When I was a child, I longed for things that could not be changed by calculations or words into whatever, that could not be evaporated into money or words, things that cannot be reached, solved, that are nothing else than themselves. And now I have found them, in the world of art. I find 'beautiful' is a synonym of 'true.' And when I meet something that is nothing else than itself, that really is, then I honor it with 'indescribable' or 'priceless' and, if I may say so, I shut up."¹⁶

¹⁴ [Leendert] vervloekte deze in zichzelf gekeerde mannenliefde. Wat was er eigenlijk zo geweldig aan, om een scherf van een ideale vaas te zijn? Je kon lijnen wat je wou, het ding viel hier op aarde toch steeds weer in dezelfde gruzelementen. Waarom hou ik van je, als ik je niet kan uitstaan? Waarom haal je zulke roistreken uit, als je van me houdt? (379).

¹⁵ Het was dwaas om in opstand te komen tegen de genieën van de natuur en hun biologisch overwicht (387).

¹⁶ Later, toen hij kunstkritieken schreef werd hem verweten dat hij zo dikwijls de woorden 'onbeschrijflijk' en 'onbetaalbaar' gebruikte. "Ze mochten slechte stijl zijn, die woorden," verweerde hij zich, "maar ze zijn goede esthetiek. Ik heb een vader gehad die mijn hemd onder mijn gat uit verkocht. Ik haatte zijn eeuwige gesappels. Dezelfde haat voel ik nu voor de gladjamussen die overal woorden voor hebben. Ik heb als jongen gesmacht naar dingen die zich niet laten omrekenen of omkletsen tot wat je maar wilt, die zich niet laten vergassen tot geld of taal, dingen die onaanstbaar, onoplosbaar zijn, niets anders dan zichzelf, en nu heb ik ze gevonden, in de wereld van de kunst. 'Mooi' is voor mij synoniem met 'echt'. En als ik nu iets tegenkom dat niets anders is dan zichzelf, wat werkelijk is, dan eer ik het door 'onbeschrijflijk' of 'priceless' en, als ik mag zeggen, ik sluit me." (387).

It thus appears that, in this new position, Leendert can also work toward an as yet unidentified goal, which puts our narrative program into a new perspective: he can use his language to confront the language of his father, who "in an old-fashioned way was generous with words and spelling that did not cost anything anyway."¹⁷ Leendert's move to New York is also an opportunity to oppose his own values to those his father stands for. In the novel, these are condensed in Gijsselhart's avarice. To his father, who likes using plenty of words because they do not cost him anything, Leendert opposes the synthetic style of his writings. We now also understand why Leendert loves art so much, because he believes that its authenticity and its beauty cannot be calculated or converted into monetary terms, and neither can they be translated into words. Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, under Gijsselhart's authority, the Doornenhof disappears. Gijsselhart is a millionaire, and he is determined that his million will remain intact. More and more parts of the estate are sold to keep Gijsselhart's million safe.

There are four other indications in the text that allow us to infer that the move to New York could be interpreted as resistance against the hold Leendert's father still had on him. First, when he reads (359) his sister's letter announcing her return to her father's estate, Leendert becomes irritated by her heavy writing style that looks too much like his father's. He comments: "Seen in that light, his father too was a kind of woman and he knew more men than were contaminated with that evil. All straight men, of course!"¹⁸ His father is also a woman, is also an enemy of gays, as we already knew from the narrative program. The next hint of his resistance is formal and is linked to the focal points of the narrative. The first part of the novel is devoted to the character of Gijsselhart and his life in the Doornenhof. The second part of the novel takes Leendert's life in New York as its main focus. This dichotomous structure invites the reader to compare both the characters and the places in which they move. Next, there is a structural indication that echoes the second hint. The relationship between Leendert and his companion is one of separation and reconciliation, just like that between Gijsselhart and his daughter. Leendert's partner turns out to be "pregnant" with a fatal disease that looks very much like AIDS. Magda bears in her womb little Victor, on whom both Gijsselhart and later Leendert will idola- trously project their hopes. In the dynamics of comings and goings on both sides of the Atlantic, the homes of father and son act as magnetic poles of attraction for the objects of their love: characters who are "pregnant" with death on one side, and with life on the other.¹⁹ The prostration mechanisms of the objects of pregnancy keep on

lijik' of 'onbetaalbaar' te zeggen en aldus bij wijze van spreken mijn mond te houden." (344-345).

17) ... was ouderwets gul met woorden en spelling, die toch niets kostten (344).

18) Zo gezien was ook zijn eigen vader een soort vrouw en hij kende wel meer mannen die met dat pek besmet waren. Allemaal heteromannen uitvaard (359).

19) It should be noted that in the last part of the novel the whole Gijsselhart family is back at the Doornenhof and it thus looks as if the attraction of the Netherlands is stronger than that of New York. However, Leendert and his sister continue acting according to these dynamics. Leendert seems to revolve around Gijsselhart's house, as he has to live in a former warehouse next to the main house and spends more time outside the estate than inside. Moreover, he is not very wel-

working until the end of the novel. When Leendert realizes that he will not find redemption in the flesh (Victor), he decides to become the servant of death. Last but not least, the second part of the book starts with the only words uttered by Leendert's father to his son: "Son, take care never to become like your father!"²⁰ Another invitation to the reader to verify whether Leendert is in fact anything like his father.

One could wonder whether Leendert succeeds in resisting his father's hold on him. At first glance, the answer might seem to be affirmative: the synthetic language Leendert uses in his reviews is a reaction against the language of his father. It testifies to the impossibility of words to express the indescribability of real masterpieces. But, very soon, we read that money "was the idea of ideas, in this heaven of ideas. No greater idealist than the miser. The miser does not care about color, texture, all the characteristics that really make the painting. He only sees the sole heavenly appearance of a piece of art, the figures glowing on his pocket calculator."²¹ Gradually, Leendert realizes that in the country which he chose as a refuge from his father's avarice, art is bought and sold according to its "value of the day," like shares on Wall Street. Leendert starts speculating about the value of the pieces produced by his Wild Boys, and in his art reviews, the words "indescribable" and "priceless" are more and more often replaced by words like "price increase" and "return on investment." Leendert even invents the "nominal painting," by signing contracts with gallery managers for paintings that have not yet been painted, but that are sold to the gallery at the price the painter was worth the day the deal was made. So, in the end, Leendert gets infected by this New York attitude which is only concerned with the monetary value of paintings.²² Surprisingly, Leendert's father appears to be a monetary idealist too, working in the heaven of ideas, converting solid matter into its monetary value:

Gijsselhart's face translated possessions into money, money into possessions, the figures in it were always drifting, they extended optimistically, shrank somberly, and the old lips imitated these movements. ... He loved money because it was different from any temporal possession that we love more before we possess it than afterwards. Money keeps desire intact, it is having and desiring at the same time, it gives to the miser the eternal youth the poet gets from his words. Gijsselhart

come. As for Magda, she eventually flees from the Doornenhof again, leaving behind Gijsselhart and his son like two opposite hands which are part of the same watch.

20) "Jongen, zorg ervoor dat je nooit wordt als je vader!" (343).

21) [Geld] was het idee der ideeën, in deze hemel der ideeën. Geen hogere idealist dan de geldwolf. Kleur, vlakverdeling, textuur, alle eigenschappen die een schilderij werkelijk maken, kunnen de geldwolf gestolen worden. Hij ziet alleen de hemelse gedaante van het kunstwerk, de lichte cijfers op zijn zakcalculator" (351).

22) We might wonder what the "activator" of this fall from the "indescribable" into the "calculable" was. Bearing in mind the many mirror effects that contribute to the incessant dynamics of the novel, and the fact that Leendert's change of behavior can be considered as an infection, I would argue that it must be when Leendert realizes that his boyfriend is infected by a fatal virus. This passage in the novel corresponds to a rewriting of the biblical Fall.

firmly believed money came from heaven. If not from God's heaven, then from the heaven of ideas.²³

There is yet another similarity, that is, between the description of Manhattan as a roofless cathedral, and the Doornenhof estate that is also incomplete. Manhattan is the roofless cathedral whose pillars stretch towards the sky but "have stopped halfway, as if soon they would stretch even higher,"²⁴ and the Doornenhof is looking for a second half too. The two places are not as antithetical as expected, and are submitted to the same idealistic desire:

The house looked like half a house, as if the immobility in stone longed for a lost half. But that half had never been there. The house gave such an incomplete impression because in the past it had been used as part of a farm, of which the outbuildings, over time, had been demolished and the land sold off piece by piece. Each time more expensive, the pieces of land had been sold to the garage owner on the left and the recreation area on the south. The Doornenhof was turning into money.²⁵

It is as if Leendert, in his great enterprise to react against his father, gradually takes over his father's ideas. But while father Gijsselhart only acts at the level of the Doornenhof, a small estate in the Netherlands, Leendert is threatened with legal proceedings by three different states in the U.S. at the same time because of his fraudulent art trade. Ironically, the idealist of indescribable artistic authenticity has become even more corrupted by financial idealism than the father he rejects.

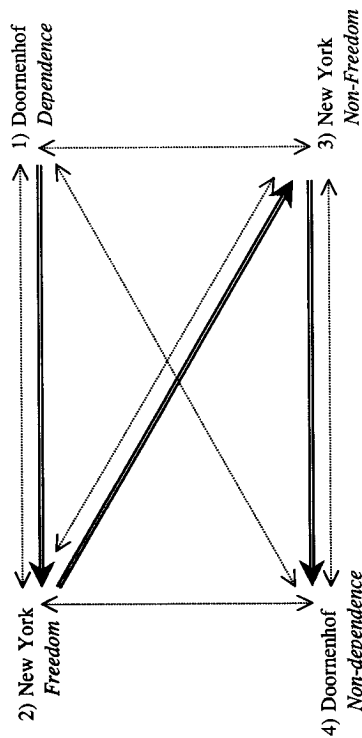
What was presented at first sight as an escape from the reign of women, the world of time and flesh, can also be interpreted as a flight from the world embodied by the father and the space that is an extension of him. It is a move to an idealistic world that cannot keep its promises, because the dreams it is made of are dictated by mankind for mankind, and thus do not belong to any transcendent world of ideas. What once remained unspeakable can now be expressed in simple words and in money. In the U.S. Leendert has become, above all, part of a mirror that is not the opposite of the situation he wanted to destroy, but an enlargement of it, the place where evil grows.

23) Het hoofd van Gijsselhart vertaalde bezittingen in geld, geld in bezittingen, de getallen erin waren voortdurend op drift, ze dijen optimistisch uit, krompen somber ineen, en de oude lippen boosten die bewegingen na. ... Hij hield [van het geld] omdat het verschilt van alle tijdelijk bezit waarvan we meer houden voordat we het in handen krijgen dan daarna. Geld houdt het verlangen heel, het is hebben en verlangen ineen, het verleent de vrek de eeuwige jeugd die de dichter ontleent aan zijn woorden. Gijsselhart geloofde vast dat geld uit de hemel komt. Zo niet uit Gods hemel, dan toch uit de hemel der ideeën (302, 304).

24) ... halverwege de hemel onaf ophielden, als om binnenkort nog hoger te gaan (346).

25) Het huis leek een half huis, de stenen roerloosheid leek te verlangen naar een verloren wederhelft. Maar die wederhelft was er nooit geweest. Het pand maakte zo'n onvolledige indruk omdat het vroeger gediend had als woonhuis bij een boerderij, waarvan de bedrijfsgebouwen in de loop der jaren waren gestopt en het land stukje bij beetje was verkocht. Stukje bij telkens duurder beetje was het land gevoerd aan het garagebedrijf links en aan het recreatieterrein aan de zuidkant. De Doornenhof ging langzaam op in geld (301).

Visually articulated in a semiotic square inspired by Greimas,²⁶ the semiotic implication of Leendert's moves could establish the following process:



Each topological movement could be interpreted as a transition from one pole to its contrary, all poles representing a value — for example a move from "dependence" (which is represented by Leendert's father and materially embodied by the Doornenhof as an estate) to New York and its semblance of freedom. In the square, the values are never fully reached, which means that Leendert is, for example, never completely free, never entirely dependent. These values should rather be considered as tendencies towards which the character evolves and/or to which he/she is receptive. These values also work paradigmatically in a coordinated chain. In essence, there is an analogical relationship between the following values: life as opposed to death; freedom as opposed to dependence; movement as opposed to immobility; communication as opposed to solitude. Some of these contradictions and their implications speak for themselves, others less so. An analysis of some of them can be used as an outline for a dialectical deepening of Leendert's topographical transitions.

The (lack of) action depicted on both sides of the Atlantic expresses a longing for immobility that the characters in their idolatrous attitude try to achieve through timeless ideas: immortal homosexual love, money as the highest of ideals, Gijsselhart's million that must remain intact. This explains why New York necessarily had to reveal itself as "non-freedom." This attitude, however, reveals another facet: solitude. A solitude caused by the distance between living in one's own projections and living in a community where everybody understands their fellow members and where

26) I have tried to remain as faithful as possible to the inner (il)logic of the narrative. Consequently, it could rightly be argued that the square depicting the process is not the classical Greimasian scheme according to which, *inter alia*, it would be the negation of a value that would generate its "contrary" term (Greimas and Courtès 1979: 29–33). The classical placing of the four poles had to be adapted, too.

efficient communication is a fact: a true *Mystic Body*. Maybe Gijsselhart is fully devoted to his million that must remain intact, but he maintains this interest while waiting for his daughter's return home. In the novel, the Doornenhof estate appears as a place from which Magda and Leendert continually want to flee, but to which in the end they always return, like faulty satellites.²⁷ The epicenter of this place is the immobile Gijsselhart, who never leaves his home. Leendert too has a great fear of solitude, and returns to the Netherlands after his friend has died. He also realizes that by speculating on a drop in prices, he will be a solitary rich man in a world where everybody else will have become poor. The distance between the individual and the ideal he is longing for also explains the many parodic effects the novel contains, such as homosexuality as the reflection of some authentic attitude i.e., the heterosexual. This element of parody coupled with its reflection can be infinitely multiplied:

[Women] martyr themselves with new social behavior schemes, intercourse calendars/schedules, morning-after and evening pills, pessaries, coils, sterilizations, abortions, an entire technology is developed, just in order for them to be able to share in the paradise of gays. Those in whose eyes we exist want to take us as a model. The imitators are going to imitate their imitators. Again, it comes down to the decay of taste. The final victory of the artificial. The whole world is going in voluntary exile to that devil's island Manhattan, the capital city of the twentieth century.²⁸

It is possible that all these characters, who together form a family, embody what is left of the dismembered mystic body. Maybe they all expect from one another something that does not need to be spoken in order to be understood in the spaces where words have lost their meaning: shared love. So in the end Kellendonk's novel not only deals with the absence of platonic transcendence, but also with the impossibility of mutual interpersonal relationships. There is a very existential question in this narration: how can meaning be imparted to life in an era in which all ideologies have lost most of their consistency, an era in which the words of one's prayers reach no further than the edge of one's lips, an era in which heaven's door seems to be closed for ever and everyone is alone with their idealistic dreams from a different age?

27) This satellite movement takes on a new dimension when Leendert lives at the Doornenhof after his return from the U.S. This makes me qualify his situation then as striving towards "non-dependence" (Position 4 in the semiotic square). The father wants his son to live in an empty warehouse adjoining the house; Leendert only enters the house from time to time, for example for meals. The rest of the time, he appears quite free: he goes swimming, has social contacts, reads in libraries. Since he enjoys an edge position on the Doornenhof and the ontological legislation of the place, Leendert does not seem so infected by the evil the estate radiates. In the third part of the novel, his back-and-forth activity draws a dynamic star around the Doornenhof and Gijsselhart, its immobile nucleus (see also note 20).

28) [De vrouwen] kwelden zich af met nieuwe rolpatronen, ontmoetingsroosters, ochtend- en avondpillen, pessaria, spiraaltjes, sterilisaties, vruchtafdrivingen, een hele technologie wordt er ontwikkeld, alleen opdat ze het paradijs van de homo deelachtig mogen worden. Degenen in wier oog wij bestaan spiegelen zich aan ons. De geïmiteerden gaan hun imitators imiteren. Het komt eens te meer neer op de teloorgang van de smaak. Het is de eindzege van de kunstmatigheid. De hele wereld gaat in vrijwillige ballingschap naar dit duivelseiland Manhattan, de hoofdstad van de twintigste eeuw (39).

The novel ends with a canticle by Leendert; a canticle dedicated to death. Solomon's song is not far away as death is depicted as the fiancé(e) Leendert was looking for, without realizing that "all that time [she] was leading [him] to the altar."²⁹ Furthermore, the song characterizes death as immortal, a "loyal friend to everybody" and a "not being" that, much more than anything else, "is."³⁰ The numerous oxymoronic phrases illuminate the ambivalent status of death, what could be called its "simultaneous bipolarity"; as in the semiotic square depicted above, each polar tendency should be considered as potentially being determined by and potentially containing the addition of its contrary terms and its contradictions. The completion of Leendert's journey could only be contemplated by considering its evolution through the different points of the semiotic square and the paradigmatic coordination of the values, however much one might be tempted to think that the story ends where it began, in the Netherlands, and that the U.S. brought nothing to Leendert's quest. Death appears as the only certitude in this era of uncertainty, but (in the fourth step of the semiotic square) it becomes "non-death" in the mortal environment of the Doornenhof. The trip to the U.S. was necessary so that Leendert's attitude towards death in its original state (embodied first by the Doornenhof estate and later by Manhattan as "non-life") and his illusory domination of it,³¹ became an open attitude tending towards submission: accepting death as non-death and an ever-present fiancé(e). Nevertheless, even then, the "overpresence" of oxymoronic content in Leendert's canticle and the tension it provokes remind us that this system, in addition to its never-ending dynamism, needs to remain a split system, and that a value is never fully reached, nor acquired forever.

29) Ik zocht naar jou en vond je niet en al die tijd heb je me naar het altaar geleid (451).
30) ... trouwe allenansvriend, niet-zijn dat meer dan wat ook, is ... (451).

31) In Leendert's view (inherited from Magda) gays stand outside the chain-like history of time and flesh. According to him, ironically they should thus be immortal and dominate death. In the first part of our reflection we have seen that Leendert changes his mind about this while evaluating his stay in New York.

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