

REPORTS — RAPPORTS

The relation between nostalgia and vitalism in 'Afscheid van Congo: met Jef Geeraerts terug naar de evenaar' by Erwin Mortier¹

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This essay elaborates on my presentation on nostalgia and postcolonial literature, as presented at the 8th symposium of the Ghent Africa Platform held in autumn 2014. During this presentation I made a short analysis of how Svetlana Boym's ideas on nostalgia, as expressed in her book *Nostalgia for the Future*, can be used to analyse Erwin Mortier's memories of traveling, as noted in his book *Afscheid van Congo: met Jef Geeraerts terug naar de evenaar* (*Goodbye to Congo: back to the equator with Jef Geeraerts*). During my presentation I also introduced the relation between nostalgia and (aesthetic) vitalism. In this paper I will elaborate on the relation between nostalgia and vitalism as a phenomenon within (post)colonial literature.

Key words: Svetlana Boym, Erwin Mortier, Jef Geeraerts, vitalism, nostalgia

Introduction

Afscheid van Congo: met Jef Geeraerts terug naar de evenaar (*Goodbye to Congo: back to the equator with Jef Geeraerts*) was written to commemorate fifty years of Congolese independence in the year 2010. In *Afscheid van Congo: met Jef Geeraerts terug naar de evenaar*, the writer Erwin Mortier (1965) reflects on the last meeting between Jef Geeraerts (1930-2015) and Congo, where Geeraerts used to be an administrator during the colonial era. At night Geeraerts still dreams of the dark forests of Congo, as Mortier writes in his travel memory *Afscheid van Congo*. 'Het ziltig, diep aroma van het woud' ('the salty, deep aroma of the jungle') still pours into Geeraerts's nose and straight into his memory (Mortier, 2010: 7). The game between memory and the senses comes into play when Geeraerts imagines his time in Congo (MacDonald, 2013: 89). *Afscheid van Congo* is a report of a memory of a memory.

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It is what Pamela Pattynama would call a ‘rememory’ (Pattynama, 2005: 6). It reflects on a previous goodbye to the former colony of Belgium, since in *Gangreen 1: Black Venus* (Gangrene 1: Black Venus) Geeraerts already said goodbye to his beloved Congo. *Afscheid van Congo* portrays the memory of the journey of Mortier and Geeraerts in Congo, which triggers all manner of sentiments; for example the life and death of Geeraerts’s mistress and Mortier’s chocolate-infused longings of Côte d’Or jungle pictures. Because *Afscheid van Congo* is a memory of a memory, sentiments such as nostalgia and the longing for a home, come into play. In this essay, the focus lies on what nostalgia means to Mortier and Geeraerts in *Afscheid van Congo* and its relation to (aesthetic) vitalism, a philosophy of life closely related to literature, art and culture, that promotes a return to nature and a rehabilitation of values linked to the romantic notion of the noble savage, such as intuition, naivety, power, health and strength.

Afscheid van Congo not only makes an interesting case because it is a travel memory, but also because it commemorates fifty years of Congolese independence from Belgium. Mortier’s book is part of a broader movement at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century in Belgium, during which several books were published and exhibitions were held to discuss the aftermath of the colonial era. Examples of such events include David Van Reybrouck’s *Congo: een geschiedenis* (*Congo: a History*) and the apologies made by the Belgian government for the way it behaved in the Lumumba-case. Despite all this, it seems as if the debate on decolonisation is limited to academic circles (Viaene et al., 2009: 185). Moreover, it seems as if the postcolonial debate is limited to the Anglo-American world. The ‘postcolonial turn’ movement tries to develop a postcolonial theory that fits the colonial pasts of the Low Countries (Boehmer & De Mul, 2012: 1-22). This brief paper hopes to make a small contribution to the ‘postcolonial turn’ debate.

In order to answer the question what nostalgia means to Geeraerts and Mortier and the way nostalgia relates to (aesthetic) vitalism in the case of Geeraerts and Mortier, I will first give a short outline of the nostalgia-discourse and the way it is linked to vitalism, before analysing Geeraerts’s and Mortier’s ideas on nostalgia in the way it is portrayed in *Afscheid van Congo*.

The concept of nostalgia

In general, nostalgia means a longing (*algia*) for a home (*nostos*) (be it physical or in time) (Boym, 2001: XIV). For several decades, the idea of nostalgia was viewed as an uncritical and ‘kitsch’ sentiment (Tannock, 1995: 453-454). According to Susan Stewart, nostalgia is an ideology, a form of utopian thinking (Stewart, 1993: 23). Christopher Lasch even called nostalgia ‘historical betrayal’ and Robert Hewison pointed out that nostalgia gives a ‘false feeling of authenticity’ (Spitzer, 1999: 91). Although one should always be careful when analysing nostalgia, it cannot be denied that nostalgia is an important social phenomenon. Nostalgia in general is a sign of modern times, where the past, present and future do not present strict borders (De Mul, 2011: 18-19). Nowadays, the past, with its many faces that surface in the present, is used to define the (uncertain) future (Tannock, 1995: 459). Moreover, some scholars argue that nostalgia is a symptom

of social dissatisfaction with the present: the (romanticised) past offers safety and security (Shaw & Chase, 1989: 1-2).

Interestingly, Svetlana Boym offers two definitions of nostalgia that both seem to do justice to reality, namely restorative nostalgia and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia emphasizes the return home, instead of longing (Boym, 2001: 44). This type of nostalgia presents itself as static and unchangeable, and presents the past in a selective way. It is the form of nostalgia that Stewart, Lasch and Hewison have in mind when analysing the way nostalgia is used. To Boym, restorative nostalgia poses a threat because of its two outcomes: preservation and conspiracy. Preservation means that the past is restored in such a way that it feels brand new, while conspiracy entails the exclusion and marginalisation of groups of people, which can be a violent process. Black Pete (*Zwarte Piet*) is an example of restorative nostalgia. People who criticise the phenomenon of Black Pete are being presented as aliens who try to break up a community, even though this sense of community is false and only comes into play when it is threatened. Reflective nostalgia, however, stresses the 'longing' part of nostalgia. This longing entails a sense of loss, since a true return to the past (and the sense of belonging that comes with it) is no longer available (Boym, 2001, 41). However, reflective nostalgia is aware of this. It is a patchwork of longings, memories, hopes and wishes. An example of reflective nostalgia is the Belgian musician Baloji. In his music he fuses (among other things) traditional music and hip hop. His lyrics contain references to his troubled youth, his Congolese and Belgian roots, and socio-political issues. These different styles and stories are the patchwork of longings that Boym refers to with her concept of reflective nostalgia.

Although Boym offers an interesting framework to analyse nostalgic sentiments, there is an issue that needs to be dealt with before I can turn to the case study of Mortier's *Afscheid van Congo*. Boym uses strict lines to divide restorative and reflective nostalgia. It seems as if restorative nostalgia has a negative connotation, while reflective nostalgia is morally good. However, with this dualistic thinking Boym reduces emotions to one dimension. Restorative nostalgia, if it stays within its boundaries, can offer peace and unity (see, for example, the unification of Germany and Italy during the Romantic era), while reflective nostalgia can be a personal tragedy (see, for example, writers in exile, notoriously Vladimir Nabokov, a writer often cited by Boym). This 'black and white' thinking fixates emotions, while in reality they work in flux. Even though Boym's ideas on nostalgia are more nuanced than other viewpoints on the concept of nostalgia, Boym's framework remains an issue when analysing Geeraerts's and Mortier's concept of nostalgia, as is shown in the following paragraph.

Afscheid van Congo and vitalistic nostalgia

For Geeraerts and Mortier, nostalgia means a 'Lust for Life' that they hope to find in the jungle (Mortier, 2010: 7-12). In the case of Geeraerts and Mortier in *Afscheid van Congo*, nostalgia, a longing for a return home, is a search for authenticity, for the origin of life. What Geeraerts, and also Mortier, really long for, is not to be reminded of the former role of Belgium as a coloniser, but a lust for life that they hope to find in the jungle. Both

Geeraerts and Mortier want to distance themselves from old, rational Europe, and want to be part of young, wild and sensual Africa/Congo. They are looking for authenticity and the origin of life. Here, nostalgia is a longing for the first man, or the first woman, in a paradise-like setting. It recalls Rousseau's noble savage. It is what Renato Rosaldo would call imperialistic nostalgia: the Westerners are looking for an authentic experience and are saddened when that is no longer available, even though they themselves are the very cause of this change (Rosaldo 1989: 108). René Girard calls this sense of authenticity, the feeling of uniqueness, a 'romantic lie', since authenticity and uniqueness are invented as a Romantic vision on the world (Girard 1961). However, Mortier and Geeraerts eventually do find their authentic experience.

Although Boym acknowledges that there is a relation between nostalgia and the romantic idea of life-affirmation, her view is limited to Friedrich Nietzsche's landscapes in his work: 'The Nietzschean 'perfect moment' (...) is a soulful recollection on a mountaintop', according to Boym (Boym, 2001: 25-26). Unfortunately, Boym does not elaborate on her notion of the relation between nostalgia and vitalism. The written memories of Geeraerts and Mortier, however, can provide us with some perspective on this vitalistic form of nostalgia. The type of nostalgia found with Geeraerts and Mortier represents a vitalistic urge, in the sense that both Geeraerts and Mortier try to overcome the cold hand of the mind and draw closer to nature and its powers (Westerlinck, 1972: 85). The program of vitalism is to affirm life in its totality (F. Nietzsche). Vitalism is what the poet Hendrik Marsman shows in his poem 'Lex Barbarorum': 'Ik erken maar één wet: leven' ('I acknowledge only one law: life'). In Nietzsche's philosophy, in vitalism in general and in aesthetic vitalism specifically, life is seen as a higher power, as health and as a will to power (Amrine, 1992: 133-134). However, Nietzsche does not regard vitalism as a reductionist biological model, but as a way to define culture and as a cultural critique, in the sense that vitalism is a way to restore the imbalance between the mind and the body in Western Christian society (Amrine, 1992: 133-134). Nietzsche's ideas on vitalism stem from the Romantic era, where vitalism was regarded as a source of 'imagination and creativity' (Abrams, 1971: 431-432).

Already in *Black Venus*, the vitalistic nostalgic sentiments are noticeable. According to Geeraerts, *Black Venus* is a portrait of a man who is 'homesick to a wild and romantic age far beyond his grasp' (Geeraerts, 2012: 104). It is clear that long before Geeraerts's return to Congo, he already wanted to distance himself from cold and rational Europe (Hellemans, 1991: 21). As a young man, Congo offered him sensual retreat in the form of a mistress: '(...) twee mensen, een man en een vrouw, de man toevallig blank en vervuld van duizenden jaren cultuur, de vrouw toevallig zwart en dochter van menseneters, strekten zich samen uit op een bed (...) ('two people, a man and a woman, one happens to be white and representant of thousands of years of culture, the other black and a daughter of cannibals, lie together in bed') (Geeraerts, 2012: 136). Geeraerts's nostos (home) is the jungle, the Congolese women and the hunting fields. In Mortier's travel memories, Geeraerts comes to speak of his Congolese mistresses, in particular the young and beautiful Julie, who also played a huge role in his book *Black Venus*. For Geeraerts, Julie 'embodied hope, promises of sensual and sexual liberation of catharsis' (Mortier, 2010: 54)). Julie represents all Congolese women as depicted by Geeraerts:

women who have an ‘animal-like attraction’, according to Geeraerts (Mortier, 2010: 53-54). Sensuality and power are the primal emotions of Geeraerts’s inner (post)colonial landscape. However, the promises of Julie are never redeemed. Instead, they continue to lurk, calling Geeraerts to come back for more.

For Mortier, Congo embodies sentiments that are similar to those Geeraerts has towards the former Belgian colony. Mortier too searches for an authentic experience and finds it in the people and urban planning of Kinshasa: *‘Welke bruisende, jeugdige, energieke, gevaarlijke, driftmatige cultuurvormen bloeien hier, in het verborgene? (...) (H)un jeugd verrukt me’* (‘What kind of youthful, energetic, and dangerous urges are hiding here in the dark? Their youth entices me’) (Mortier, 2010: 50-51). The women of Kinshasa in particular give Mortier a sense of untamed wildness: *‘Het straatleven in Kin (Kinshasa) heeft iets vrouwelijks, een cultuur van bitter overleven (...), ze vernielt wanneer ze het overleven in de weg staan’* (‘Streetlife in Kinshasa is feminine, it is all about survival. She destroys everything that gets in her way’) (Mortier, 2010: 80-81). This quote evokes an image of an urban jungle full of youth and risks. It is the same atmosphere that Mortier finds in the natural jungle of Congo, a mysterious and mythical landscape that welcomes its guests by strangling them to death in ecstasy (Mortier, 2010: 176-177). It is clear that both Mortier and Geeraerts see Congo as the promised land, a land that truly belongs to the young and wild, to innocence and sensuality. It is this imagined scenery that makes vitalistic nostalgia interesting, in the sense that it can be intoxicating in both an aesthetic sphere as a political sphere.

Discussions and recommendations

The mythical return as seen by Geeraerts and Mortier might be an attractive one, however, it is also laden with stereotypes, such as the noble savage, sensual women and other exotic images. These images create a colourful painting, but they also have a dangerous side. This vitalistic form of nostalgia contains restorative elements, in the sense that both men use romantic stereotypes (S. Boym). But vitalistic nostalgia also contains reflective elements, in the sense that it deals with longing, or rather searching, instead of presenting an immediate availability, like restorative nostalgia (S. Boym). Somehow the firm distinction made by Boym between reflective and restorative nostalgia does not do justice to the vitalistic vision of Geeraerts and Mortier on literature, on life and, moreover, on beauty. It is difficult to draw clear lines because the search for authenticity has an aesthetic dimension as well as a socio-political dimension. The longing for the first man, or the first woman, in a paradise-like setting is not only a thing of beauty, it is also what Rosaldo would call ‘imperialistic nostalgia’ and what Girard would call a ‘romantic lie’.

Although vitalistic nostalgia is based on romantic and even political notions that have the potency to become dangerous (vitalism is often linked, however not always rightly so, to fascism, rascism and eugenics), in the sense that they reduce reality and reinvoke stereotypes, it is an important social phenomenon. Both nostalgia and vitalism offer a critical stance. Western society with its technical, rational and disciplined outlay clearly does not offer enough to satisfy the human need for romantic notions such as innocence, wildness and sensuality. Vitalistic nostalgia offers an escape from old and

rational Europe. However, it would be a mistake to view vitalistic nostalgia as an uncritical safe haven, since it also criticizes society. Geeraerts and Mortier are not the only exponents of vitalistic nostalgia. The body of (post)colonial literature is infused with these sentiments and concepts. In order to explore the full impact of vitalistic nostalgia as a (literary) phenomenon it is necessary to analyse the origin and use of vitalistic nostalgia in (post)colonial literature. The challenge lies in searching for methods, insights, theories, and literature that do justice to the power structures as well as to the aesthetic dimension of 'vitalistic nostalgia.

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