

Nature and Relationality in *Het Tegenovergestelde van een Mens*

Or: Onto-epist(l)emology, Cucumbers, and Writing
Aster Hoving

From within letters, Eros acts. (Carson 1998, 119)

Dear J.,

Writing about ecocriticism and experimental form, or ecology and intertextuality, seems to open up the possibility of, or perhaps even requires, experimentation in my own writing as well - though, unlike the author(s) I will be addressing, I am not a poet, nor a novelist. If I were to experiment with form, my preferred mode of writing to infuse with my paper-voice would be the letter. An epistolary exchange allows me to keep track of the I that is writing, with emotion and hesitation, instead of distancing myself from my writing, fleeing into the anonymity of passive sentence structures ('in this paper, the viability of the letter as an experimental form of academic prose will be explored' - who is doing anything here? Not me, the writing, or you). That, however, does not mean that this I pre-exists intra-action with you or the writing. It is specifically not a solitary or discrete I, shouting out into a void (this is how those passive sentence structures make me feel); with I, I refer to the I that emerges from that intra-action. This is being, letters, writing and knowing, word and world, as part of the same event: onto-epist(l)emology.

INTRODUCTION

The Opposite of a Human Being (Het Tegenovergestelde van een Mens, HTM), the 2017 debut novel of Dutch author Lieke Marsman, is characterized by engagement with other texts, intertextuality, such as citations from art, science, and journalism, and mixture of genres, hybridity, such as poetry and essays, but it is also a novel. Ida, the protagonist of the novel, is a climate change researcher who yearns deeply to save the world from environmental degeneration – but is at the same time horribly confronted with the limits of her capacity as an individual, to do so. As a child, Ida, the protagonist of *HTM* often fantasizes about being a cucumber. At the age of 29, in retrospect, Ida states that imagining oneself to be ‘a thing, a vegetable, a cucumber – a thing that admittedly grows, but does not feel’¹ means to demand the

most of one's emphatic capabilities, because it involves trying not to feel (Marsman 2017, 12). In other words, Ida, as an adult, states that as a child, she tried to be the opposite of a human being: a thing, a vegetable, a cucumber.

In this paper, I argue that Ida's conception of humans and cucumbers as opposites is important to the interpretation of the novel since it figures a more general notion of humans and nature as opposed to and independent from each other. Moreover, I explore how the novel complicates young Ida's notion of humans and nature as two opposed entities, incommensurably divided, and how this complication offers another perspective on the seeming impossibility of crossing this divide. I argue that to Ida, it only seems impossible to cross the divide because the separation between humans and nature is a faulty conceptualization of the interrelatedness of the two. I do so by firstly situating *HTM* on the intersection of ecocriticism and feminist autotheory, as eco-autotheory. Subsequently, I introduce feminist materialisms as a way of theorizing the entanglement of nature and humans. Furthermore, I discuss a method of these feminist materialisms as both related to the practice of cultural analysis as performed in this paper, and the knowledge *HTM* generates. I argue that the autotheoretical form of *HTM* allows the novel to offer a reading of one of the theoretical discourses it engages with, object-oriented ontology and that this reading shares considerations with feminist materialisms.

SITUATING *HTM*: ECO-AUTOTHEORY?

I argue that *HTM*'s hybrid structure and intertextuality should be understood as part of what Margeaux Feldman and Philip Sayers designate as the contemporary rise of autotheory (2018). Autotheory is an originally feminist concept, coined by Stacey Young in *Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics and the Feminist Movement* (1997). The concept refers to a combination of autobiography and social critique which insists on situatedness and embodiment, and to the performance of politics by shifting between the narrator as an individual and the larger social world of which they are part. This practice of combining embodied experience with theoretical analysis troubles the notion of affective/bodily disinterestedness in theoretical development (Fournier 2017). Contemporary autotheory is, however, not only associated with feminist theory but also black studies and queer theory (Feldman and Sayers 2018). Although its contemporary articulations are eclectic and at the start of being mapped, it can be said that autotheory works with or through the boundaries of autobiography, theory, fiction, and poetry.

What is especially interesting about *HTM* is that the work engages with a discourse Feldman and Sayers do not mention in relation to contemporary autotheory: environmentalism, the environmental humanities, and, more specifically in the realm of literary studies, ecocriticism. *HTM*'s references include multiple books that think about a world without humans as a response to epistemological challenges posed by climate change, such as those by journalist Alan Weisman and object-oriented philosophers Quentin Meillassoux and Timothy Morton. An environmentalist work referenced is Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything*, in which she argues that climate change and the environment cannot be separated from the social/political/economic system of capitalism. Ecocriticism, however, has its own traditions of experimental writing. Narrative scholarship, for example, which is a term attributed to one of the foundational figures of ecocritical scholarship, Scott Slovic (Buell 2005a, 90). According to Slovic ecocritics should tell stories and use narrative as a strategy for analysis in order to produce scholarship that involves actual experience (2008, 27). A more recent term of for ecocritical performative analysis in the environmental humanities is Stacy Alaimo's (2010) 'material memoir,' in which the biographical 'I' is constituted by biological, political and economic material forces.

HTM is thus situated on the intersection of both feminist autotheory and ecocriticism: it is eco-autotheory. I propose, however, that even when it is not directly *about* climate change, autotheory is a way of thinking interconnectedness. *How* autotheory thinks is ecocritical – which means that the term eco-autotheory is perhaps a redundant neologism. The combination of feminist and environmental concerns and thinking about relationality, however, evokes a theoretical discourse that is not at all cited in *HTM*: the various feminist materialisms essential to the environmental humanities. I suggest that the formal intervention of *HTM* shares concerns with these feminist materialisms. To come to an understanding of the material feminism of the formal qualities of *HTM*, I propose to turn to a concise overview of feminist materialisms in order to emphasize the difference between these materialisms and thinkers such as Meillassoux and Morton. I read *HTM* as performing and complicating the theoretical discourse it cites and initially may only seem to draw from.

FEMINIST MATERIALISMS

Feminist materialisms can be understood as a return to matter after the linguistic turn, and its primacy of language, discourse, culture, and representation and is therefore regularly associated with scholars who adopt philosophical counter-traditions to this turn, such as Rosi Braidotti.

Several scholars, however, re-engage with poststructuralist thinkers, such as Vicky Kirby and Karen Barad. Most importantly, however, feminist materialist thinkers engage, in one way or another, with how matter comes to matter. They argue that matter is not ‘mere matter’ (a passive object opposed to an active subject), but instead always being ‘active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable’ (Coole and Frost 2010, 9). Thus, feminist materialisms are said to accomplish what postmodernism ‘failed to do’: deconstruct the material/discursive dichotomy, while retaining and equalizing both elements (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, 6).

This deconstruction of the material/discursive dichotomy has profound implications for the environmental humanities because nature is understood as not the mute, motionless, material background of culture, but instead as a complex text of semiotic actions (Alaimo, 1997). Feminist materialisms, therefore, reconsider subjectivity and the body. Concepts from multiple feminist thinkers, such as Alaimo’s ‘trans-corporeality’ (2008, 238), Barad’s ‘intra-action’ (2012, 49) and Haraway’s ‘naturecultures’ (2003, 12), all point to the inseparability of the corporeal substance of the human from the environment. Their primary unit of analysis is the relation between subject and object, human and nature. These relationships precede relations, which for example means that subject and object emerge out of a relation, not the other way around. Following feminist thinkers, thinking ecology is the thinking of interconnectedness or relationality.

There is at least one crucially important difference between feminist materialisms and the object-oriented ontologies of Morton and Meillassoux, as cited in *HTM*. I stated earlier that Meillassoux, Morton and also Weisman attempt to think the world without humans as a response to epistemological challenges posed by climate change. This thinking of the world as existing independently of humans follows the assumptions of object-oriented ontology (OOO), which argues that objects, whether they are human or nonhuman, are ‘mutually autonomous and enter into relation only in special cases’ (Harman, 12). Whereas Morton argues that ecological thought is not only about what you think, but about how you think (2004, 4), feminist materialisms emphasize that no matter what or how you think, all thought is always already ecological and inextricably interconnected with the environment. I argue that OOO is figured in *HTM* as *Ida* separating humans from cucumbers. Relating to cucumbers, however, is not something that only happens in ‘special cases’ (Harman, 12) – relations are continuous and generative, and this does not make them any less special.

Acknowledging and working with this relationality means insisting on writers, theorists, and scientists as being immersed in materiality (Coole and Frost 2010, 7). This also means that what their affective relationships (how they feel) are interconnected with what they know and write. According to Karen Barad, this does not mean that a knower has to merely be put back into the world as if this is a container and we need to acknowledge our situatedness in it. Instead, Barad's 'onto-epistemology,' a neologism combining ontology, being, and epistemology, knowing, refers to practices of knowing as being part of the world's becoming: they are 'material engagements that participate in the (re)configuring of the world' (Barad 2007, 91). This does not mean that knowledge is necessarily subjective (this would be to assume a subject/object distinction). Instead, Barad argues that objectivity is about being accountable to the specific materializations of which practices of knowing are part (Barad 2007). Simply put, this means an acknowledgment of how humans, feelings, thought and nature are always already implicated in each other.

You know, J., that Barad is one of the more influential companions in the emergence of this I that writes you. Barad communicates a theory of existence as I experience it, a messy intertwinement of the categories the language I used to have available that required me to think separately. However, I have my reservations. In the introduction of *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad critiques Michael Frayn's play, *Copenhagen*, in which Frayn misunderstands Bohr's uncertainty principle. Barad argues that thinking about rewriting Frayn's play might be tempting, but then warns against analogous thinking, such as in a play, in general because this kind of thinking does not tell us how the binary between 'interior' and 'exterior' matters – according to Barad, physics makes us confront these issues, while analogical thinking does not (2007, 24). Why would I have to choose between either analogous, artistic, or scientific thinking, between love letters or papers? The binary of an interior and exterior to knowledge is precisely the one which *HTM* upsets. Hence, also, the onto-epist(1)emology, as addition to onto-epistemology, in order to emphasize analogical thinking and writing. I stay with Barad and renegotiate our interconnectedness from within our relationship, comparable to how I continuously try, fail, and try to make my way to you – materially and discursively, simultaneously. As Haraway writes:

Receiving unconditional love from another is a rarely excusable neurotic fantasy; striving to fulfill the messy conditions of being in love is quite another matter. The permanent search for knowledge of the intimate other, and the inevitable comic and

tragic mistakes in that quest, commands my respect, whether the other is animal or human, or indeed, inanimate (2003, 35-6).

DIFFRACTIVE READING

Barad offers a tool for thinking about practices of knowing as material engagements: a diffractive methodology. Two operations distinguish this reading. Firstly, as a metaphor, diffraction replaces the metaphor reflexivity, an optical metaphor which is founded on the idea that representation reflects natural reality and which leaves an epistemological gap between the knower and the known, and instead attends to material entanglements (Barad 2007). This means that a diffractive reading adheres to a definition of close reading which does not assume a dichotomy of a theorist and an object. This is comparable to Isobel Armstrong's (2000) theorization of close reading in which a reading is not based on an inside or outside of the text, or a Cartesian subject which is able to get close precisely by assuming a distance between reader and text. A diffractive reading thereby especially resists dichotomies of thought/feeling, knowledge/affect, or theory/art.

Secondly, because a diffractive methodology accounts for material-discursive boundary-making practices, it is per definition transdisciplinary: it does not merely draw from an array of disciplines and does not seek to argue with the specialized knowledge created in/by them, but instead seeks to question the material implications of discursive classification and organization of different types of knowledge (Barad 2007). One way in which feminist materialisms question academic disciplines is by cutting across the temporalities of scholarship (van der Tuin and Dolphijn 2010, 168). The intertextuality of the novel, the quotation of academic knowledge, can be regarded as a non-linear coding of theory when following Mieke Bal. Bal argues that quotation is an intervention into the past (the 'quoted original') through the present (the 'practice of quoting') (1999, 1). A quote, in a non-linear or non-causal understanding of the term, changes the (meaning of the) original, instead of drawing from it, emphasizing how the past and the present are continuously being made.

In this analysis, I consider *HTM* a diffractive reading of some of the discourses it cites. As I argued, as an autotheoretical text, Marsman's work performs and complicates OOO-discourse, which assumes a separation between humans and nature. Furthermore, the novel explores the onto-epist(1)emological consequences of the assertion that cucumbers, humans, knowledge, and

analogical thinking/writing are all entangled, and that the latter three are not transcendent but immersed in affect and materiality. In order to further explore the questions and considerations voiced throughout the previous sections, the following includes a reading of *HTM*, with a specific focus on two elements of diffractive reading as described before: attention to material entanglements and non-linear quotation.

CUCUMBERS AND WRITING

During her bachelor's degree in political science, Ida becomes interested in issues related to climate change. She decides to switch to the earth sciences because she gets tired of theoretical discussions that, it seems to her, are completely ignored by politicians. In the same chapter, chapter three, two other defining moments in Ida's life are narrated as well: the encounter with Klein's *This Changes Everything* and the development of her relationship with Robin. This parallel of happenings is the first of several analogies between Ida's ecological concerns and her love life, to which I will return later. First, I attend to material entanglements and non-linear citation in *HTM*. My focus is on chapter fourteen, in which Ida attends a climate change symposium in Milan, and the chapter 'On the Course of the Celestial Bodies.'²

Ida is in Milan for an internship at an Italian climate change institute. The project itself is located close to the Swiss border and involves the removal of a dam, which is old and said to fail to generate enough energy to legitimize its existence – a statement to which I will return. At the symposium, Ida attends talks by two speakers. In the bibliography of *HTM*, it is mentioned that the arguments of these two speakers are based on works by Morton and Klein. First, a woman appears on the stage. The lecture she delivers resonates with Morton's *OOO*: 'Even though our consciousness makes us capable of thinking in subjects and objects, in which those objects are usually made submissive, it becomes increasingly clear that human consciousness is reducible to chemical processes in the brain, or, miniscule objects' (Marsman 2017, 130).³ Then, the second speaker enters the stage. The argument delivered by the man echoes the way in which Klein formulates the powerlessness caused by the idea of climate change as a natural, rather than a social problem. Because the former makes doing something about climate change very hard, if not impossible: 'Instead of looking for a way by which climate change can be made understandable, reachable, they [environmental activists] continuously threaten with the coming apocalypse. What are you waiting for? You have to act now! But also: it is already too late' (Marsman 2017, 131).⁴

I argue that while paraphrasing the work of both Morton and Klein, the narrative also interweaves these works with questions of sex and gender through play with the genders of, or gender bending, the two scholar-characters. The philosopher Morton identifies as a man, the scholar in *HTM* is described as a woman, the journalist Klein identifies as a woman, the scholar in *HTM* is described as a man. This gender bending raises the issue of the implication of gendered, sexed embodiment in the production and dissemination of knowledge – but these questions of embodiment in relation to knowing do not remain limited to the scholar-characters in the novel, they mostly concern Ida herself.

While listening to the lectures delivered, Ida reflects on the term object-oriented ontology and is reminded of the love she felt for things as a child. Ida states that, in retrospect, when she turned eleven, she became obsessed with things, which is why she started to collect many different objects: ‘I no longer thought of cucumbers, but sometimes I imagined I was a table. I didn’t have to make an effort to do so, I felt heavy and immobile like the heavy oak wood dining table, like the one the reformed neighbors have in their living room’ (Marsman 2017, 22).⁵ In this scene, Ida’s cognitive activity, her processing of the information heard, is an embodied experience. When Ida wonders how Morton’s OOO relates to her childhood memories, the novel performs the processing and development of knowledge not as a purely rational project, but as always already intertwined with personal memory. Then, Ida gets distracted by her phone, which vibrates in her pocket during a lecture. She has received a text from Robin which demands her attention. Ida replies and diverts her attention back to the stage – the combination of being in touch with her lover and attention to the lecture is a performance of the simultaneity of the existence of Ida’s emotional and academic life: both are part of the emergence of Ida as a character.

In the chapter ‘On the Course of the Celestial Bodies,’ one of the more essayistic parts of the novel, the narrator⁶ sketches a miniscule history of philosophy. Starting with Copernican revolution, the narrator states the end of geocentrism certainly did not signal the end of egocentrism: ‘Even when humanity as a whole no longer regarded itself as the center of the universe, all individual people continued seeing themselves as the center of their own universe’ (Marsman 2017, 140).⁷ The move of humanity from the center of God’s universe probed all kinds of new questions – about the end of the universe, and about meaning, about which the sky remained silent (Marsman 2017). The narrator sketches Descartes’s ‘cogito ergo sum’ as a solution to the fear of this contingency: the way to solve the frightening silence of the sky is by

arguing that human beings might not be the central beings of the universe, but that they are the most special (Marsman 2017, 142).

It is made quite explicit why Descartes' 'Copernican revolution' is such an important point in the history of philosophy for the novel: 'This Cartesian split between subject and object had far reaching consequences: it meant for example that human beings no longer considered themselves to be part of nature' (Marsman 2017, 142).⁸ The novel introduces OOO as the solution to this Cartesian split: 'To counter this problem we should end the difference between nature and culture, writes the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux' (Marsman 2017, 144).⁹ The narrator states that what makes thought experiments like these so hard is acknowledging that objects have their own lives, that they engage in meaningful relationships of which we know nothing, and that we thus have no control over (Marsman 2017). I argue that the narrator's assessment of abolishing the difference between nature and culture as a mere thought experiment, suggesting that there is an actual separation between the two, is comparable to how OOO theorizes objects as separate. Moreover, though the narrator poses OOO as the solution to the Cartesian argument that humans are the most special, this implies that OOO introduces an even more special human specimen: the OOO philosopher capable of theorizing the 'special cases' (Harman, 12) in which objects relate.

However, while narrating a conventional, anthropocentric, male dominated history of philosophy, the novel also introduces an alternative to this same history – one according to the onto-epistemological implications of the feminist materialisms I discussed earlier. This happens at the end of the chapter when the narrator notes how enjoyable she finds it to read about philosophers who were angry, scared, and who wondered. The narrator thereby phrases the activities of these philosophers as affective, and points toward their philosophical work as an embodied activity. Comparable to the scene of Ida at the symposium, while it may seem that *HTM* only linearly draws from OOO and Meillassoux, it also performs and complicates what it cites. *HTM* offers a conception of thought and knowing that is not a product of purely rational activity, but lived, embodied, infused and inspired by what the conventional history of philosophy would claim to be its opposites: materiality and affect. However, in this chapter, we are asked to reconsider this miniature history of philosophy even more, since what has not been addressed is its anthropocentrism:

But, lately, I am often conscious of history being just as much a history of things as it is of humans. Apples that fell off trees and were eaten or rotted, mountains that get covered under snow in winter, swords that killed kings, atom bombs that exploded, gigantic ships that did or did not reach a new continent, cheerfully waving flags, floods, cereal grains, and gravestones (Marsman 2017, 147).¹⁰

Whereas the emotional lives of philosophers emphasize the material and affective component of human thought, the narrator also raises questions the anthropocentrism of the history of philosophy by introducing a conception of history that does not consider humans the sole actors of historical development. History, the narrator suggests, is not one in which humankind, or philosopherkind, works progressively forward. This is how the novel both performs and questions the earlier statement regarding OOO as an effect of the Cartesian split. Even though the conversation among philosophers may have attempted to stay closed off to those not invited to it, a history of philosophy in terms of cause and effect purely related to philosophers is doubtful when historical development is not be limited to human activity. This non-anthropocentric conception of embodiment, as referring not to a closed off, individual philosopher's body but to this body's constitution by apples, mountains, and floods, and thereby the history of philosophy as consisting of a variety of actors, is a humble but intriguing start of an intra-relational or trans-corporeal history of philosophy. It is a history of philosophy from the perspective of feminist materialisms that includes cucumbers.

Finally, I arrive at the discussion of the theme of relationality in *HTM* in perhaps the most anthropocentric notion of the term in the novel - the relationship between Ida and Robin. If intra-relationality points out that humans are enmeshed in what they think is an environment separate from themselves, they are also enmeshed in or with each other. Perhaps, *HTM* suggests, we tend to consider other people, the people to whom we are not affectively attached, to be a mute environment as well. Ida:

The strange thing about old lovers is that everything they once meant to you seems to have become contingent, while you know that at the moment itself you almost succumbed under the necessity of your intertwinement. For a brief moment, a few months or years, someone steps to the foreground, to then just as easily become part of the mass again, a mass of which you from the perspective of that person are just as much a part (Marsman 2017, 44).¹¹

Ida's black- and white sketch of existing or completely non-existing affective attachments, or the implication of a clear break between the past and the present, foreshadows the theme of a foreground and a background in human (and human and non-human) relationality, which returns in the chapter 'The Difference.'¹² This chapter consists of a list of one- or two sentence scenarios which are all variations on the theme 'difference.' The last scenario is as follows: 'The difference is that you are at the foreground' (Marsman 2017, 47).¹³ Ida does not just put her lover on the foreground: she even puts Robin on a pedestal. In chapter 3, Ida wonders what would remain of Robin if she would no longer place her above herself. Consider the following fragment of *HTM* followed by a fragment from a book by Morton that is not explicitly mentioned in the bibliography of the novel, *Ecology Without Nature*:

I am the pedestal. To place someone on a pedestal is to: place that person above yourself, but within reach (without a pedestal, no statue: without me, no you). What I do is ascribe to her my knowledge, things that allow her to understand me more completely, let her see all that I see, and consequently adore her for what does separate this made-up-her from me: the fact that she is not me (Marsman 2017, 93).¹⁴

Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration. Simone de Beauvoir was one of the first to theorize this transformation of actually existing women into fetish objects (Morton 2007, 24).

The way in which Ida thinks about Robin is comparable to how humankind has conventionally thought about its environment – as an object from which actors are independent. The conception of nature as a passive object is an essential step in the configuring of nature as something to be appropriated. Merely theorizing that we should take nature off that pedestal, and how nature, lovers, and other objects have a life independent from us, as Morton and Ida do, does not help us in thinking beyond appropriation.

Thinking beyond nature as a resource to be extracted is yielded by the feminist materialisms which argue that nature is not a background to history. It is tempting to feel powerless in the face of climate change and to accept that the consequences of climate change are unequally

distributed as long as we do not consider human systems as inseparable from nature. In other words, instead of theorizing independence, we need to theorize interdependence, considering how humans both on the level of the individual body and their social, political and economic systems are entangled with nature – which means to question how we relate to cucumbers, but also to dams, or any other entities, for example by questioning whether we think they only legitimize their existence when generating enough energy, or, value to extract.

Though Ida and Robin's relationship seems mostly defined by Ida's OOO-affiliated ideas, the final chapter of *HTM* offers an alternative to Ida's reductive conception of love. In 'Two Holes',¹⁵ perhaps instead of the three holes of OOO, the narrator refers to Carson's *Eros the Bittersweet* (1998) and states that both language and love exist involve a sense of discrepancy, lack, or - the metaphor in *HTM* - a hole: language involves a distance from reality, and love involves a distance between lover and loved. 'But is this a lack? Who ever said that the space between you and your lover is in your way? Or that this space is empty?' (Marsman 2017, 169).¹⁶ The narrator concludes that it is actually through this hole that language and love exist, not despite it (Marsman 2017). What is theorized here, by sense of analogy to the scale of human experience, is intra-relationality. This formal inquiry into relationality through an intertwining of theory and analogous thinking, an 'energy-exchange or interconnection of thinking/composition' (Snyder in Buell 2005b, 13), is how *HTM* shares essential concerns with feminist materialisms, rather than with some of the other theoretical discourses it cites. *HTM* encourages us to strive to fulfill the messy conditions of loving the environment with which we are entwined – loving humans, nature, and cucumbers.

CONCLUSION

In my reading of *HTM*, the autotheoretical novel voices onto-epist(ol)emological concerns as shared by feminist materialisms in three interrelated ways. Firstly, in the scene where Ida attends a conference, the novel emphasizes the embodiment of knowledge, and therefore the intertwining of affect and knowledge. Secondly, while narrating a conventional, anthropocentric, male dominated history of philosophy, *HTM* performatively introduces an alternative to this history of philosophy according to the onto-epistemological implications of the feminist materialisms discussed in this paper. Thirdly, the novel offers a formal theorization of (intra-) relationality by performing Ida and Robin's relationship as an analogy to the theoretical concerns of material feminisms. This reading suggests that forms of writing not

conventionally associated with academic knowledge, such as autotheoretical novels and love letters, can be fertile ground for onto-epist(1)emological methods.

With love,

A.

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NOTES

¹ ‘een ding [...], een groente, een komkommer – een ding dat weliswaar groeit, maar niet voelt.’

² ‘Over de Omloop van de Hemellichamen’

³ ‘Hoewel het bewustzijn ons in staat stelt te denken in subjecten en objecten, waarbij men objecten doorgaans aan subjecten ondergeschikt maakt, wordt steeds duidelijker hoezeer ook het menselijk bewustzijn te reduceren valt tot chemische processen in de hersenen, oftewel: tot minuscule objecten’

⁴ ‘In plaats van een manier te zoeken waarop klimaatverandering inzichtelijk, grijpbaar gemaakt kan worden, dreigen ze voortdurend met de ophanden zijnde Apocalyps. Waar wacht je nog op? Je moet nu handelen. Maar ook: het is nu al te laat.’

⁵ ‘Aan komkommers dacht ik niet meer, maar soms stelde ik me voor dat ik een tafel was. Daar hoefde ik geen moeite voor te doen: ik voelde me log en onbeweeglijk als een zware eikenhouten eettafel, zo een die onze gereformeerde burens in de woonkamer hadden staan.’

⁶ I am switching from ‘Ida’ to ‘the narrator’ here, because I consider it unclear who is narrating here – Ida, an unidentified narrator, Marsman herself? Several of the essays in *HTM* appeared elsewhere, as essays under Marsman’s name. This confusion of autobiographical, fictional and theoretical narrators is, as I have argued, precisely the point.

⁷ ‘Ook toen de mensheid als geheel zichzelf niet langer als middelpunt van het heelal zag, bleven alle individuele mensen zichzelf wel als het middelpunt van hún universum zien.’

⁸ ‘Deze cartesiaanse tweedeling tussen subject en object had verstrekende gevolgen: het zorgde er bijvoorbeeld voor dat mensen zichzelf niet langer zagen als onderdeel van de natuur.’

⁹ ‘Om dit probleem tegen te gaan zouden we het onderscheid tussen cultuur en natuur moeten opheffen, schrijft de Franse filosoof Quentin Meillassoux.’

¹⁰ ‘Maar de laatste tijd sta ik er steeds vaker bij stil dat de geschiedenis evenzeer een geschiedenis van mensen als van dingen is. Appels die van bomen vielen en gegeten worden of weggroten, bergen die ’s winters onder een dik pak sneeuw lagen, zwaarden die koningen doodden, atoombommen die ontploften, reusachtige schepen die wel of niet een nieuw werelddeel bereikten, vrolijk wapperende vlaggen, overstromingen, graankorrels en grafzerken.’

¹¹ ‘Het vreemde aan oude geliefden is dat alles wat ze ooit voor je betekend hebben willekeurig lijkt geworden, terwijl je weet dat je op het moment zelf bijna ten onder ging aan de noodzakelijkheid van jullie verbintenis. Heel even, een aantal maanden of jaren, stapte iemand naar de voorgrond, om zich vervolgens gewoon weer bij de massa te voegen, een massa waar jijzelf vanuit het perspectief van diegene net zo goed bij hoort.’

¹² ‘Het Verschil.’

¹³ ‘Het verschil is dat jij op de voorgrond staat.’

¹⁴ ‘Ik ben het voetstuk. Iemand op een voetstuk plaatsen wil zeggen: diegene boven jezelf plaatsen, maar wel binnen handbereik (zonder voetstuk geen standbeeld: zonder mij geen jou). Wat ik doe is diegene al mijn kennis toedichten, dingen die haar ertoe in staat stellen mij vollediger te begrijpen, diegene alles willen laten zien wat ik zie, en haar vervolgens aanbidden om wat deze bedachte-haar wél scheidt van mij: het feit dat ze mij niet is.’

¹⁵ ‘Twee Gatens.’

¹⁶ ‘Maar is het eigenlijk wel een gebrek? Wie heeft eigenlijk ooit gezegd dat de ruimte die zich tussen jou en je geliefde bevindt in de weg zit? Of dat deze ruimte leeg is?’