

Discussing "Wormen en engelen" by Maarten van der Graaff as a coming-of-age novel
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This essay discusses Maarten van der Graaff's novel *Wormen en engelen* [*W.E*] with regard to the Dutch literary tradition of novels in which the main character abandons their religion. This literary tradition of a coming-of-age novel, or an *ontvoogdingsroman*, typically revolves around the religious, emotional, and sexual awakening of a small-town youth. In this instance the narrative follows the development of 'eilandjongen'¹ Bram Korteweg who, like many characters belonging to this Dutch post-war genre, 'opgroeit in een beklemmende, vaak gereformeerde omgeving, die... wordt verruild voor de seculiere Randstad'². On one level, *W.E* is an example of a coming-of-age novel as the main character follows the formula by leaving home, experimenting with drugs, having sex, experiencing religious emancipation, and by moving from a sheltered island to a city. Indeed, the main character Bram does segregate himself from his religious upbringing, especially when compared to the subversion of genre expectations exhibited by the embrace of religion by Bram's father, and friend Paul. Having said this, 'de ontwikkeling in *Wormen en engelen* is... nooit rechtlijnig, zelfs niet chronologisch'³; the novel depicts Bram's non-linear separation from the religious environment of island Goeree-Overflakkee through a non-linear form. What appears at first glance, and until halfway through the book, as a story of religious abandonment becomes a stylistically layered novel in which both author van der Graaff, and Bram alike, research the pervading impact of 'het gelovige eiland'⁴. In this regard *W.E* is not a narrative in which the main character abandons his religion, but a religious exploration 'om [geen] afstand te nemen,... maar om dichterbij te komen'⁵. *W.E* thus exemplifies and subverts this literary genre. In the following paragraphs I discuss this novel by firstly contextualising the topos of coming-of-age, thereafter I discuss the examples which place this novel within, and the examples which confute this literary tradition, and finally I delve into a

¹ Maarten van der Graaff, *Wormen en engelen* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, 2017), p.51.[hereafter: *Wormen en engelen*, p.-] translation: 'island boy' [translation by Christine Sas, as all translations henceforward]

² Lodewijk Verduin, 'Het bevrijdingsverhaal doorgelicht,' in *De Groene Amsterdammer* (2017). translation: 'grows up in a restrictive, often Reformed environment, that ... is being exchanged for the secular Randstad.' (translator note: Reformed = member of the Dutch Reformed Church)

³ Daan Borloo, 'Het particuliere (als) paradigma: over *Wormen en engelen* van Maarten van der Graaff,' in *dwb.be*. translation: 'the development in ... *Worms and Angels* is never straightforward, not even chronological'

⁴ Siebe Bluijs, 'Het bovenzinnelijke tussen de zinnen', in *De Reactor* (2017). translation: 'the religious island'

⁵ *Ibid.* translation: '[not] to distance himself, but to come closer'

number of the deeper discussions that are stimulated by van der Graaff's 'buitenwereld gericht[e]'⁶ novel.

Coming-of-age novels describe 'een emancipatoire ontwikkeling van geloof naar secularisatie die vaak samenvalt met de trek van platteland naar de grote stad'⁷. The formula is simple: small-town, or island, youth leaves home in search of something more and finds him or herself encountering experiences previously unknown to them. One compulsory and obvious element of a coming-of-age novel is the influence of religion, such as can be seen within *W.E*; Bram's 'vroegste herinneringen spelen zich af in de kerk'⁸ before his move to, *de grote stad*⁹, Utrecht, for university. I find it prudent at this point to address the question of why this topos is a *Dutch* literary tradition. The decade that followed World War II was a period of cultural revolution; 'the Netherlands transformed from one of the most religious societies in the world to one of the most secular'¹⁰, and it was within this era that this post-war genre became popularised by Dutch writers who mirrored real-world cultural changes. Indeed, 'de jaren'60 waren een opvallende tegenstelling met de jaren'50; de sociale kringen in Nederland keken voor de eerste keer naar buiten'¹¹: the newly de-pillarised Dutch populace became less interested in their respective faiths and more focused on their new welfare state, materialistic possessions, socio-political movements, and sexual revolution.

While I am not entirely convinced that *W.E* completely falls within the bounds of this coming-of-age genre, there are some characteristics that do mirror the expected protocol of this Dutch literary tradition. An undisputed example of a coming-of-age novel, or *bevrijdingsverhaal*¹², is Jan Wolkers' *Terug naar Oegstgeest* (1965). Within this novel the first-person narrator visits his childhood home and handles, among other topics, his separation from his reformed religious upbringing. A link between Wolkers'

⁶ Verduin, (2017). translation: 'oriented towards the world outside'

⁷ Bluijs, (2017). translation: 'an emancipatory development from belief to secularisation that often coincides with the move from countryside to large city'

⁸ *Wormen en engelen*, p.246. translation: 'earliest memories take place in the church'

⁹ translation: 'the large city'

¹⁰ Paul Mepschen, et al. *Sexual Politics, Orientalism and Multicultural Citizenship in the Netherlands* (New York: Sage Publications, 2010), p.966.

¹¹ Selena Geerts, *Wat zegt de beschikbaarheid van openbare toiletten over de gendergelijkheid in Nederland?* (Unpublished University College London Year Abroad Project, 2017), p.5. translation: 'the sixties were a striking contradiction to the fifties; for the first time, social circles in the Netherlands would look to the outside world'

¹² *Wormen en engelen*, p.13. translation: 'story of liberation'

and van der Graaff's novels can be established as certain chapters describe the first-person narrators' respective towns. Wolkers' narrator describes the route to his parents' house and the path by the canal that they walked on Sundays from the church¹³. Comparative is the passage in which Bram visits his childhood "city" on the island: 'ik neem de kleine wegen over de zeedijk, de mooiste dijk op aarde'¹⁴. These segments are comparable as they clearly describe the return of the main character to their place of upbringing that they have since physically and spiritually departed from. Their respective hometowns are small, picturesque, and exist within, or right next to, the bible belt of the Netherlands, an area of the most religious neighbourhoods that spans the country. Yet, there is also an apparent difference between this 'bekende ontvoogdingsroman'¹⁵ and *W.E*; Bram has no 'persoonlijk probleem met het geloof'¹⁶ and thus does not abandon his religion, but seeks to explore the phenomenon that 'nog steeds een rol [] in zijn leven [en ook in de samenleving speelt]'¹⁷.

In some senses, *W.E* is a coming-of-age novel, not necessarily one in which the main character totally abandons his religion, but one that does emulate a number of the prerequisites of this literary tradition. In the introductory chapters it is clear that religion has played an important role in the life of this main character; indeed, he even left a job because of his faith, "vanwege mijn geloof," zei ik, "ik ben gereformeerd en zondag is een rustdag"¹⁸. It remains unclear if this character quits due to his own beliefs or the 'breuk met de opvattingen van [zijn] moeder'¹⁹ that working on the holy day caused. Despite the reason, he does quit, which I interpret to mean that beliefs, either his or his mothers, were important enough to direct his decisions. Moreover, as discussed, his earliest memories take place in the church, which clearly means he spent a large amount of time there. Undeniable links to Bram's religious past continue throughout the novel, which I argue is of importance; someone cannot abandon something that never played a role in their lives to begin with. There is no one clear moment when Bram Korteweg proclaims he is done with religion, but certain remarks

¹³ Jan Wolkers, *Terug naar Oegstgeest* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1965), p.26.

¹⁴ *Wormen en engelen*, p.55. translation: 'I took the small roads across the sea wall, the most beautiful dyke on earth'

¹⁵ Bluijs, (2017). translation: 'well known coming of age novel'

¹⁶ *Ibid.* translation: 'personal problem with religion'

¹⁷ *Ibid.* translation: 'still [plays] a role [...] in his life [and in society]'

¹⁸ *Wormen en engelen*, p.21. translation: "'because of my faith" I say, "I am Reformed and Sunday is a day of rest"'

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.246. translation: 'rift with [his] mother's opinions'

and comments do allude to the fact that his religious beliefs may not be as devout as they perhaps once were. Bram soon realises, after moving to Utrecht, that comparatively everyone on his home island is white, mostly Christian, and do nothing. Characteristics that he does not want to define him. He thus 'besloot een heiden te worden'²⁰. As I suggested I am not entirely convinced that *W.E* completely falls within the bounds of this coming-of-age genre, and yet, this declaration to become a heathen, and thus become the opposite to having religion, irrefutably exemplifies the literary tradition of novels in which main characters leave behind their religions. Bram's desire to distance himself from the *Goeree-Overflakkeers* continues as he critically describes them as 'hypocriete kleinburgers en boeren, boze arbeiders, aan speed en alcohol verslaafde racisten en vrouwenhaters'²¹. While no direct link between these negative characteristics and religion is drawn, the connotation is evident; the novel establishes Goeree-Overflakkee and its inhabitants as religious, and thus part of what Bram wants to escape²² is, the religiousness that encases this island on which these drunk hypocritical racist misogynists live.

Furthermore, *W.E* can be read as a coming-of-age novel as it 'volgt die zoektocht en meandert mee langs allerlei hedendaagse vormen van semi-spirituele sensatie: geestverruimend xtc-gebruik en de zinnenprikkeling van ASMR'²³. Like I suggested in the introduction, there is a formula to an *ontvoogdingsroman* which sees the main character leave home, experiment with drugs, and have sex, all of which are part of their religious emancipation. Bram engages with stimuli that are physically inviting, such as his first use of ecstasy at a festival: 'Felix en Lena gebruiken al jaren xtc, het was mijn eerste keer'²⁴. These experiences replace his exclusive religious entanglement and thus Bram develops as a character in accordance to this literary tradition. His experimentation with physically stimulating experiences continues as he partakes in his first sexual encounter with girlfriend Lena, and his fascination in and enjoyment of

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.128. translation: 'decided to become a heathen'

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.129. translation: 'hypocritical petty bourgeois and farmers, angry workers, to speed and alcohol addicted racists and misogynists'

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Thomas de Veen, 'De dichter, de kloof en het geloof,' in *nrc.nl* (2017). translation: 'follows that journey and meanders via all sorts of contemporary forms of semi-spiritual sensations: mind-expanding XTC/ecstasy use and the titillation of the senses of ASMR'

²⁴ *Op cit.*, p.42. translation: 'Felix and Lina had been using XTC/ ecstasy for years; it was my first time'

ASMR²⁵ videos grows. All of these experiences were alien to him before leaving the island, and thus as he moves further away from his religious roots he engages more actively with his new life. With each of these new experiences it appears as if van der Graaff's protagonist replaces his active religious engagement with distinctly "non-island" activities.

I also argue, however, that *W.E* does not completely fit into the Dutch literary tradition of a coming-of-age novel in which the main character abandons their religion, because, quite simply, Bram Korteweg does not entirely abandon his religion. Bearing the examples of the topos I discussed in the previous paragraphs in mind, this novel both is, and is not a coming-of-age novel. There are subversions of expectations with regard to the theme; multiple secondary characters engage with religion, meaning the subject of faith is continuously in Bram's mind. Indeed, he alludes to the theme of 'bevrijdingsverhalen'²⁶ by making intertextual references to *Terug naar Oegstgeest* among other novels, which shows active engagement with religion, and he researches religion. Bram is unable to entirely abandon religion as people in his life become more engaged with it. In the opening chapter his father is baptised, and thus moves closer towards religion, even if only to the 'happy-clappy christendom'²⁷ of the evangelists. Bram watches as his father becomes 'een nieuwe schepping'²⁸, an event that has a big effect on him; he realises he is separated from his father who is 'nu... een van hen'²⁹. While Bram and his father are distanced by his father's newly solidified faith, this is an example of how the main character cannot truly abandon his religion; to do so would entail abandoning his religious parents. Indeed, it is not only the character of Bram's father who delves deeper into a religious life, but Bram's friend Paul. Paul becomes a reverend, ironically on island Goeree-Overflakkee; this work 'heeft geen duidelijk product... het is een vorm van virtuositeit, performance'³⁰, a fact that entices Paul, and partly ignites Bram's thoughts about capitalism, progress, and production. Furthermore, Bram's friend Wilfried, who he poignantly meets through a religious and philosophical society "Uterque" at university, serves as a direct comparison to Bram; both live within

²⁵ autonomous sensory meridian response

²⁶ *Wormen en Engelen*, p.13. translation: 'stories of liberation'

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.80. translation: 'happy-clappy christianity'

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.9. translation: 'a new creation'

²⁹ *Ibid.* translation: 'now... one of them'

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.99. translation: 'doesn't have a clear product... it is a form of virtuosity, performance'

two worlds: religious and secular. During Bram's research Wilfried explains 'ik heb in twee werelden moeten leven, een kerkelijke wereld waarin het not done is om homo te zijn en een seculiere wereld waarin het belachelijk is om te geloven'³¹. In this regard van der Graaff employs Bram and Wilfried to discuss the forced nature of individualism, in which all must relinquish their faith and join secularism. As the novel more widely critiques the nature of prescribed individualism, it is clear that this main character cannot abandon his religion, just like Wilfried; he has 'grote moeite om buiten het emancipatiesjabloon te denken'³².

W.E makes reference to *Terug naar Oegstgeest*, among other coming-of-age novels throughout. Due to this intertextuality van der Graaff produces a 'roman waarmee hij zelf zijn poging doet om een ander verhaal te vertellen'³³, a story that is self-aware of the literary traditions surrounding it. Van der Graaff uses this intertextuality and his character's positioned interest in *ontvoogdingsromans* to dismantle 'die traditie (within Dutch literature)'³⁴. Van der Graaff, and by extension Bram, is aware of:

'het [] bekend Nederlands recept: verwijdering van ouders en familie, heimwee vermengd met triomf, ontluikend kunstenaarschap... een nieuwe familie van interessante vrienden en geliefden..., seksuele emancipatie en opwaartse mobiliteit volgen, gesymboliseerd door muziek, feesten, romans, exposities [en] films'³⁵.

This narrative cannot directly follow the "rules" of a coming-of-age novel therefore; it is too aware of itself, as is the main character. I thus echo Siebe Bluijs's argument that 'van der Graaffs roman beschrijft niet zozeer de pijnlijke afrekening met een religieus verleden, maar de worsteling om aan dit overbekende emancipatieverhaal te ontkomen'³⁶. Further to this, the novel is a project that participates in the discussion of religion through Bram's research; 'ik wil iets groters begrijpen... Paul als dominee... Wilfried in een woongemeenschap, mijn vader tussen zijn nieuwe zusters en broeders,

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.250. translation: 'I have had to live in two worlds, an ecclesiastical one in which it is not done to be gay, and a secular one where it is ridiculous to believe'

³² Bluijs, (2017). translation: 'he struggled hard to think outside of the emancipation template'

³³ Verduin, (2017). translation: 'a novel in which he attempts himself to tell a different story'

³⁴ Borloo, in *dwb.be*.

³⁵ *Wormen en Engelen*, p.91. translation: 'the well-known Dutch recipe: distancing from parents and family, homesickness combined with triumph, emerging artistry... a new family of interesting friends and lovers..., sexual emancipation and upward social mobility follow, symbolised by music, parties, novels, exhibition [and] films'

³⁶ Bluijs, (2017). translation: 'van der Graaff's novel does not describe the painful reckoning with a religious past as such, but rather the struggle to avoid this overly known emancipation story'

Lena en ik in a koffietent'³⁷. Bram therefore does not abandon his religion, I argue instead that he becomes more involved with religion through his research and visiting of the island. Indeed, the topos of coming-of age 'dat in andere boeken wijst op een radicale breuk luidt hier echter een schipperen tussen twee domeinen in'³⁸: Bram's embrace of his new secular life with intellectual friends, and his involvement in "theologisch werkgezelschap"³⁹ and by extension, religion itself.

There are a number of deeper discussions about religion in which Bram is integral, which supports my argument that *W.E* does not entirely fit into the Dutch literary tradition which sees the main character abandon their religion. This narrative 'wat begon als een studentenroman wordt een onderzoeksverhaal'⁴⁰, and as Bram is the investigator he undeniably does not abandon his religion, the subject he studies. There is indeed a link between van der Graaff's novel and the intentions of Bram; 'ik wil iets met deze interviews. Er wordt bijna nooit serieus over religie geschreven... Ook niet in fictie, trouwens'⁴¹. This novel is therefore self-aware within this literary tradition: coming-of-age novels exist in the Dutch literary cannon, but this novel is more, this novel does more than tell a simple story of religious emancipation. This *conversation*, which attests to the fact that Bram does not abandon his religion, appears halfway through the novel. This is in part created by the evolving style of the narrative; 'het verhaal wordt steeds fragmentarischer weergegeven waardoor de tijdslijn niet meer eenvoudig te reconstrueren valt'⁴². Indeed, Lena's poetry *Dood Werk*, the same name as one of van der Graaff's poetry bundles, is representative of the progression and literary style of the novel; there are different voices and non-standardised segments of text such as one-page chapters, emails, interviews, poetry, and mass repetition. The novel, like Lena's poetry, evolves into a conversation that links to post-Fordism cognitive labour as the novel searches for meaning and intimacy in an individualist and capitalist society. The idea that mass individualism, secularisation, and the ultimate loss of community is

³⁷ *Op cit.* translation: 'I want to understand something larger... Paul as a vicar Wilfried in his commune, my father between new sisters and brothers, Lena and I in a coffee bar'

³⁸ Verduin, (2017). translation: 'that in other books points towards a radical break, is here announcing a hovering between two domains'

³⁹ translation: 'theological work group'

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* translation: 'that started as a student novel is becoming a story of exploration'

⁴¹ *Wormen en Engelen*, p.206. translation: 'I want to do something with these interviews. Religion is very rarely written about seriously... Also not in fiction by the way'

⁴² Bluijs, (2017). translation: 'the story is rendered ever more fragmented and it is not easy to reconstruct the timeline as a result'

the norm is iterated by Wilfried: ‘je mag niet afwijken van een liberale, seculiere geschiedenis van gay pride’⁴³. This suggests that these emancipation narratives are in fact the exact opposite; becoming individual cannot be achieved if everyone does the same. In this regard *W.E.*, and by extension the main character, is thoroughly engaged with a post-modernist discussion in which religion, both generally and Bram’s own beliefs, is integral.

To conclude, this essay discussed Maarten van der Graaff’s novel *W.E.* both as, and not as an example of a coming-of-age styled novel. I do not suggest that this novel entirely fits into the Dutch literary tradition of novels in which the main character abandons their religion as Bram Korteweg, quite simply, does not abandon his religion. Indeed, as discussed in this essay, I argue that Bram contrarily gets more involved with religion both as a subject he studies and as an important element in the lives of his friends Paul and Wilfried, and his father. This multi-layered and stylistically evolving novel is van der Graaff’s debut and it undeniably does more than just tell a simple story of a small-town island boy; it analyses the theme in which it participates, it presents intertextuality about coming-of-age novels and poetry, and it stimulates further discussions about post-Fordism and the loss of true individualism in an orchestrated individualist society. This essay discussed what a coming-of-age novel is, the formula, or “rules”, and why this type of novel is a *Dutch* literary tradition. I contextualised this post-war genre by highlighting the changes that took place in the Netherlands in the ‘60s, I also drew parallels between *W.E.* and Jan Wolkers’ *Terug naar Oegstgeest* to further contextualise what is encompassed within this topos. Thereafter, I discussed examples from *W.E.* which do exemplify the literary tradition, such as Bram’s move to a city, sexual experience, drug experimentation, and separation from a highly religious environment. To contrast, I discussed the subversions of the theme that occur by making reference to Bram’s father’s baptism and Paul and Wilfried’s religiousness, drawing a parallel between Wilfried and Bram who both exist between two worlds: religion and secularism, the island and the city. To end this essay I discussed the self-awareness of this novel and the non-linear form it takes as it progresses from a simple narrative to a multi-layered discussion about loss of community, mass individualism, and societal stagnation. Overall, *Wormen en engelen* both is and is not a coming-of-age

⁴³ *Op cit.*, p.252. translation: ‘you are not allowed to deviate from a liberal, secular history of gay pride’

novel; the main character partly emancipates from his own religion, and more widely the novel continually discusses religion, both within the narrative and as a self-aware piece of literature that researches religion's impact.

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