

The Sorrow of Belgium.
A Grotesque Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

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We do not have to be Hegelians to notice that the history of the novel is a history of anti-novels¹.

INTRODUCTION

Quite often, when it comes to literature, detours account for the most curious and surprising products.

As stated by Moretti, the traditional coming-of-age novel, which established an harmonic and successful relationship between the individual and the outside world, did not survive the horrific collective trauma of the First World War, and after 1914 was to die out and become not little more than a relic of times and ideals dead and forgotten². *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, completed by Joyce in the same year when the Great War broke out, should therefore be considered one of those late and anomalous *Bildungsromane* in which the protagonist's achievements owe more to his individualism and mistakes than to a sociopolitical picture where the adults' experience proves to be useless and the institutions, instead of helping the youth, oppress them and deny them a free development³.

There is little doubt, however, that the *Bildungsroman* as the narration of an individual's growth is bound to last as long as mankind, both because there will always be the need for a chronicle of the path of the (failed) hero, and because the genre itself is particularly apt to undergo mutations.

¹ David H. Miles, *Kafka's hapless pilgrims and Grass's scurrilous dwarf: notes on representative figures in the anti-bildungsroman*, in «Monatshefte», Bd. 65, n. 4, 1973, p. 341.

² Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, Verso, London 1987, p. 229.

³ *Ivi*, pp. 230-232.



As Joyce's novel might be regarded as one of the first illustrious examples of a deviant coming-of-age novel, there are high chances that Flemish writer Hugo Claus would think of it, however unconsciously, as a model against which to measure himself when writing his monumental *The Sorrow of Belgium* (1983) (*Het verdriet van België*), up to date his best-known book abroad. A multi-faceted and encyclopaedic novel, *The Sorrow* has been defined as a «mer à boire» where getting lost is rather easy because of its complexity⁴. While conceding that *The Sorrow's* sundry idiosyncrasies might be put in relation with different hypotexts, for the purposes of this article I will strictly focus on those major topics and issues dealt with in Claus's masterpiece that are shared by Joyce's novel. A plot summary of *The Sorrow* will be provided in the next paragraph so as to better outline characters and events.

THE SORROW OF LOUIS SEYNAEVE

The ten-year-old Louis Seynaeve spends his days in the Institute Saint Joseph in Haarbeke in the company of his group of chosen friends, the Apostles, with whom he collects books that have been put on the Index by the Church, as well as with all the others, whom he disparagingly calls «Hottentots». During an unexpected albeit short visit, his father Staf informs him that his mother Constance has fallen down the stairs, a lie which Louis believes without asking too many questions. His credulity, however, earns him laughters from the boarding school nuns, one of which later reveals to him that his mother really is in good health, although pregnant. As everybody, including his friends and the nuns, are accustomed to engaging in deception, Louis becomes convinced that lying and hiding his real feelings behind a mask, «toujours sourire» (always smile), is the only way to survive. Highly imaginative and with a knack for inventing stories, Louis intermingles the humdrum and depressing reality of the boarding school with elaborate brainchildren such as the invisible little devils Mizzlers. The narrative is thus constantly manipulated: the logger Holst, an acquaintance of his parents, is actually a guardian angel whose task is to bring to Louis the messages of his distant mother; death makes of a cow named Mary a saint which generates Mizzlers; the

⁴ Dirk Leyman, *Het verdriet van België – Hugo Claus*, in «Cobra.be», 2013, <<http://recyclezer.cobra.be/2013/02/28/het-verdriet-van-belgie-hugo-claus/>> (27.11.2014). While being extremely elaborate both in terms of plot and number of characters, Leyman states that the novel's complexity lies mainly in its multi-layered structure with its countless intertextual references as well as in the 'exuberance of the language'. For some of the myriad textual references and quotations, see Jean Weisberger, '*Het verdriet van België*' of *het gemaskerde bal*, in «De Gids», n. 148, 1985, pp. 376-386.



discovery of sexuality is a divine punishment. Born and raised in a rigidly Catholic and conservative environment, Louis merges in his reveries the sacred and the profane in a desecrating way. Back in native Walle for the Easter holidays, the boy finds himself in a strongly pro-German context. Always looking for new words or hidden meanings with the ultimate aim of mastering a perennially ambiguous reality, Louis listens attentively to his relatives' small talk as well as to the nationalists' speeches at the Café Groeninghe. Back in the Institute again, he plans and carries out with the Apostles an incursion into comatose Sister St. Gerolphe's room, to whom he steals a golden knucklebone. In the meanwhile, Vlieghe has grown more and more annoyed by Louis's fibs and exaggerated displays of affection. After spending the summer holidays at grandmother Meerke's home in Bastegem, Louis will take his revenge on Vlieghe by pinioning him into a yellow basket with help from the other Apostles and sticking the knucklebone into his anus. However, at the end of the first part of the book, *The Sorrow*, Vlieghe tells him that he has forgiven him and gives him an ivory penholder as a present.

At the beginning of Part Two, *Of Belgium*, the Germans invade Belgium and Louis's father is compelled to flee to France because suspected of collaborating with the Germans. He returns to Flanders three weeks later, when the situation has become more stable. Louis now attends the Sint-Amandscollege and has decided to become a writer. Despite the protests of both his father and his teacher and mentor 'The Rock', Louis enrolls in the National Socialist Youth of Flanders, which he will desert after being jeered at by his comrades in the showers. For one month Louis is the guest of a host family in Mecklemburg in the frame of the German child evacuation programme *Kinderlandverschickung*; scolded for his laziness, he does little more than writing in his diary and reading issues of the satirical journal *Simplicissimus*. Later on, Louis steals some money from aunt Violet's purse and his grandmother calls him «the sorrow of Belgium», an expression meaning «a pain in the neck; the last nail in the coffin». Thanks to Holst, Louis has the chance to look through an impressive amount of books banned by the Nazis in Madame Laura's home in Brussels. Enthralled by American music and literature, Louis understands that the Germans are doomed to defeat and decides to change sides. With his *The Sorrow* he participates to a war-themed short story contest organised by the journal *Het Laatste Nieuws*. As he hands in his typewritten copy after the deadline, he manages to have it accepted by passing it off as the work of his Jewish brother died in a concentration camp. Vlieghe's father tells Louis that his friend has committed suicide after having contracted a sexual disease; in a letter that Vlieghe has left to Louis, he confesses that he has always loved him. Though rejected by *Het Laatste Nieuws*, Louis's short story is published in the journal *Mercurius*.



Ultimately crowned by success, Louis says to himself, as if doubting of the importance of the attained goal, «We'll see. We'll see. Anyhow».

A FLEMISH DEDALUS

grotesque: oddly and bizarrely deformed. It refers [...] to anything that, being clumsy, paradoxical, and unnatural, provokes laughter without cheering up⁵.

If one reads *The Sorrow* and *A Portrait* attentively, it comes as a surprise how similar, in spite of their obvious differences, the paths of the two protagonists are. Possibly the first reason is that, however distant in terms of time and space, Flanders on the eve of World War Two and Ireland at the outset of the twentieth century share at least three features: the almost obsessive ubiquity of Catholicism, a long-standing conflict between two peoples one of which is in a state of real or perceived subjection to the other, an eternal linguistic tension due to the concurrence of an autochthonous language which is split into different regional variations and of an idiom belonging to the ruling class.

Indeed, Ireland seems to be regarded with a certain degree of empathy in *The Sorrow*. Whereas Grandpa's suit comes from «Ireland, land of missionaries and martyrs» (p. 507)⁶, Louis observes with his usual bitter sarcasm that the English's ceremonies include «drinking tea while [...] machine-gunning our coreligionists in Ireland» (p. 167). Louis's mentor 'The Rock' reminds him that, in countries where religion is so pervasive, «there are only three honorable vocations, those of priest, soldier, and poet» (p. 311), and sometimes they can even converge. Like Dedalus who refuses to take the habit to become a poet, initially Louis wishes to follow the path of faith and become a missionary. However, a few years later, he states that he «intend[s] to be a writer like Cyriel Verschaeve and Guido Gezelle» (p. 267), forgetting that both were also priests.

⁵ «Stranamente e bizzarramente deforme, riferito [...] a tutto ciò che, per essere goffo, paradossale, innaturale, muove il riso pur senza allegrare», in «Treccani.it», <<http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/grottesco/>> (16.07.2015).

⁶ Throughout this article I will generally refer to the English edition. However, in all those cases where a certain word or phrase is not translated or a more literal translation is recommended in order to understand the different nuances of a term, reference to the original edition will be necessary. The English edition is *The Sorrow of Belgium*, Penguin Books, London-New York 1991, trans. by Arnold J. Pomerans, while the original Dutch edition is *Het verdriet van België*, De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam 1983. Where the passage concerned refers to the original edition, the book title will be provided together with the page number.



Several major differences, however, might be observed in their attitudes. Dedalus's mistrust in the values of Catholicism leads him to refuse to receive the Holy Communion (pp. 187-188)⁷. After the umpteenth squabble with Vlieghe, Louis starts doubting that Jesus Christ is contained in the wafer and, since God doesn't intervene to punish him, he concludes that God does not exist (pp. 212-213). One year later, he confesses with a blasphemous complacency alien to Dedalus, «Only yesterday I spat the Host out into my hand, rolled it into a ball, and stamped on it» (p. 271).

The idiolect of both characters, too, is affected by the pervasive influx of religion. Much as he opposes the Church, Dedalus employs and reinterprets religious terms and metaphors in his poems (p. 172), which is not unlike what Louis does. Still, even with regard to this aspect, Louis seems to be Dedalus's comic and irreverent counterpart. While mother Constance is «blessed among women» (p. 231) and the river Leie is «the Jordan of my heart» (*Het verdriet*, p. 308)⁸, Grandpa is «the biggest Pharisee of them all» (p. 45). If the gardener Baekelandt «had ever been a soldier, it must have been [...] in the shape of one of the mocking mercenaries who threw dice on Golgotha for Christ's clothes» (p. 26), while the nazi military leader Herman Göring is «a fat peasant woman (but immaculately conceived)» (p. 350).

Dedalus imagines his own funeral to be grave and solemn (pp. 16-17). On the contrary, Louis conjures up a ludicrous funeral procession with drunken nuns and hysterical mourners setting off to the cemetery to the tune of *Dies Irae* (pp. 16-18)⁹.

In the light of these considerations, it seems to be particularly appropriate that Claus chose for the book cover the painting *Muziek in de Vlaanderenstraat* by James Ensor, leading figure of the Flemish grotesque, as if to highlight his intention to fit into that vein¹⁰. In effect, Louis appears to be a Flemish Dedalus turning everything into a tragic farce.

⁷ From now on, the page numbers in brackets will refer to James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Wordsworth Editions, Hertfordshire 1992.

⁸ The phrase is not translated in the English edition.

⁹ It is also worth pointing out that both Dedalus and Louis seem to be driven by a desire for revenge. While Dedalus wants to inspire guilt in his classmate Wells for having pushed him into the school cesspool, thus causing his (imagined) death, Louis feels abandoned by his mother and accuses her of being «the widow who lost her husband and child through her own fault» (p. 18).

¹⁰ Concerning Ensor's painting, Claus himself stated: «Festive, but not joyful, even macabre: it resonates with me» (Herman de Coninck and Piet Piryns, Hugo Claus: «Hoe kun je de alpentoppen van de ziel bereiken, als je niet weet wat modder is?», in *Kleine encyclopedie van Het verdriet*, Abdelkader Benali *et al.*, De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam 2013, p. 171).



THE (PARODIC) ISSUE OF THE LANGUAGE

[Dialect] sometimes adds coloring by giving a grotesque effect [...]¹¹.

More or less markedly, all the characters in the *Portrait* speak *Hiberno-English*, that is, the variety of English spoken in Ireland. While declining to learn Irish Gaelic, the language of his ancestors, Dedalus seeks shelter in the alleged purity of Elizabethan English and mocks his friend Davin for his accent and his wide usage of regional particularisms. A conversation with the university dean, a British expatriate who does not understand the word *tundish* (funnel) (p. 146), enables him to realise that the idiom of the British political hegemony will always be a second language for an Irishman. However, Dedalus will find out towards the end of the book that *tundish* is actually an ancient British word which is much more common in Hiberno-English. As evidenced by Conde-Parrilla, in the *Portrait* Joyce perfectly manages to depict the sociolinguistic reality of his country, distancing himself from the notion of a homogenised English literature¹².

Since 1585, when the Southern provinces of the Netherlands, namely, the Flemish-speaking area of current Belgium, were separated from the Northern Netherlands, French asserted itself as the language of the administration and of the culture to the detriment of Flemish, regarded as a 'horrible jargon' by the frenchified bourgeoisie¹³. Only with the Romanticism and the longing to re-discover one's roots did the 'Flemish Movement' arise and develop, actually an abstract term referring to the joined attempts of writers, intellectuals and activists striving for the preservation of Flemish¹⁴. In 1898, following a series of legislations on the use of Flemish in criminal courts, national administrations, and schools, a first goal was achieved with the obligation to promulgate laws in French and Dutch. During the First World War, the German occupiers took advantage of the Flemish demand for greater linguistic autonomy and coaxed the activist wing of the Flemish Movement into collaboration. It was thanks to the German support that in 1916 lessons in Dutch were held for the first time at the up to then French-speaking Ghent Univer-

¹¹ Samuel Silas Curry, *Browning and the Dramatic Monologue: Nature and Interpretation of an Overlooked Form of Literature*, Expression Company, Boston 1908, p. 222.

¹² For this linguistic analysis of the *Portrait* I am indebted to Maria Àngeles Conde-Parrilla, *Hiberno-English and Identity in Joyce's 'A Portrait'*, in «Language and Literature», vol. 22, n. 1, 2013, pp. 32-43.

¹³ Guy Janssen – Ann Marynissen, *Het Nederlands vroeger en nu*, Acco, Leuven 2003, p. 142.

¹⁴ Roland Willemyns – Wim Daniëls, *Het verhaal van het Vlaams*, Standard Uitgeverij, Antwerpen 2003, pp. 209-211.



sity. In the years of the Second World War, collaborationism was even more widespread among Flemish nationalists as it seemed to provide the opportunity for laying the foundations of an independent Flemish state. It should be pointed out, however, that from 1950s to 1980s two distinct myths linked to two allegedly different historical and cultural identities arose and spread in Belgium. Whereas the French-speaking Walloons tried to convince themselves that everybody had taken part in the Resistance, from a Flemish standpoint, collaborationists, whose only guilt had been to be too naive and trust the Nazis' promises, had fought for their people, oppressed by the other half of the country from time immemorial¹⁵. Several passages in *The Sorrow* testify to such ideological convictions. As Staf remarks, «when push comes to shove our fine Belgian state doesn't think twice about stamping out us Flemings» (p. 254), while Raspe grimly admits, «The Germans have taken us for a ride. They don't give a damn for our idealism. Flemish legion, that's easily said, but we were actually commanded by Prussians and Bavarians [...]» (p. 471).

Regarding Flemish, this long and tormented process has two consequences: firstly, the language borrows or adapts a large amount of French terms; secondly, unlike the variety of Dutch spoken in the Northern Low Countries, Flemish becomes an official language only in the thirties of the twentieth century and is therefore less standardised. The representation of Flemish nationalism, tainted with collaborationism, and its preoccupation with the purity of language are major issues in *The Sorrow*. After all, as Staf says, it is always «a matter of language» (p. 103). It is easy to see how the attempt to replace each gallicism with a purism, sometimes purposefully invented, and always speak «good Flemish» (p. 10), is so pervasive and excessive as to become ridiculous. While exhorting both Louis (p. 1) and Staf (p. 10) to use the Flemish word for «thumb-tacks» instead of *punaises*, Grandpa himself commits a no less serious sin when he says «il y a la manière», thus provoking Staf's angry reply «In Flanders, Flemish!» (p.16). Louis, too, makes a terrible blunder when he toasts Mr Leevaert at the Café Groeninghe and calls out «Santé» instead of «Gezondheid» (p. 101). At the same time, certain French terms and expressions appear to be so deep-rooted in spoken language that even when bidding farewell to the right-wing Flemish National League, the artist Geerten Gallens cannot help mixing French and Flemish: «*Al-lee*, friends, *au revoir* and *Houzee!*» (p. 319). During an argument, Staf threatens his wife by telling her, «Ik ga u arrangeren» ('I'm going to fix you'). Constance replies with a guffawing laugh, «Als ge dat een keer kon doen, mij arrangeren» ('If only you could do that for once, fix me')

¹⁵ *Collaboration with the Nazis: Public Discourse After the Holocaust*, ed. by Roni Stauber, Routledge, Abingdon-New York 2011, p. 96.



(*Het verdriet*, p. 457)¹⁶, utilizing the Flemish verb *arrangeren* in the sense of ‘having sexual intercourse’ as sometimes *arranger* is used in French¹⁷.

As Flemish is a still-evolving language, another important issue is the contrast between apparent standard language and dialect. As ‘The Rock’ slips into his native dialect, he obtains involuntarily a comical effect: «It sounded vaguely like Ostend, and he, the shepherd of souls, had turned into a fisher [...] of whiting, fried herrings, sprats, pickled skate. Louis’s mouth watered» (p. 425). When talking to his wife, even the giant of Flemish literature Herman Teirlinck suddenly resorts to dialect: «Ere, me ol’ dear, come and ’ave a drink. Them gents are from the Free Schools. But gi’ us a kiss first» (p. 18). The war is lost also because «the couriers carrying the tactical rescue plans are boys from Limburg who understand not a word of West Flemish, keep losing their way, and end up wandering in the fields, munching salami» (p. 248).

As he starts writing his short stories, Louis is undecided between using native Flemish or the Dutch spoken in the Northern Netherlands¹⁸. It should be noted that, although in a broader sense, this is the same issue that Claus has to grapple with, that is, how to portray the spoken language and at the same time be understood by as many people as possible. In view of this, the author creates a fictitious language in which «barbarisms, archaisms, provincialisms and other rarities»¹⁹ as well as their standard equivalents occur. This procedure, however, provokes what Stéphanie Vanasten defines a «grotesque distortion» which disorients the reader²⁰. Vlieghe accusing Louis of being a *kwiestebiebel* (*Het verdriet*, p. 52) (only 31 results on Google, among which 13 on the passage concerned), namely, «a queer fish» (p. 40) in Zeelandic dialect, takes one aback

¹⁶ In the English edition the passage is translated as follows: «I’m going to teach you a lesson, Constance, I’ll show you what’s what once and for all!» «If only you could that for once, teach me a lesson!» (p. 361).

¹⁷ For a different interpretation of *arrangeren* as ‘getting pregnant’ see Niels Kleiss, *Taal en politiek in ‘Het verdriet van België’*, Universiteit Utrecht, <<http://hugoclaus.wp.hum.uu.nl/taal-en-politiek-in-het-verdriet-van-belgie/>> (29.11.2014).

¹⁸ Guido Geerts, *De taal van ‘Het Verdriet van België’*, in «Ons Eerfdel», vol. 30, 1987, pp. 555-562, here p. 557. Geerts’s essay is the most exhaustive treatment of this subject. See also Guido Geerts, *Taalproblemen in ‘Het Verdriet van België’*, in «Verlagen en mededelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse taal- en letterkunde», 1987, pp. 1-12.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Stéphanie Vanasten, *Groteske interfaces in ‘Het verdriet van België’*, in «Colloquium Nederlandicum», n. 15, 2003, pp. 365-375, here p. 371. After providing an overview of the different definitions and kinds of ‘grotesque’, Vanasten proceeds to analyse the several techniques deployed by Claus with the aim of obtaining a grotesque effect. In addition to the juxtaposition of dialect and standard words, she identifies free association, the frequent use of polysyndetons in extended sentences, oxymorons, rhymes, alliterations, hyperboles and platitudes.



because the unusual word occurs in a situation where standard words are mainly used²¹. As Louis uses the West-Flemish word for 'slice' *schelle* while confessing himself (*Het verdriet*, p. 283), the effect is both baffling and hilarious. Equally grotesque is Louis's attempt to summarise Doctor Bühlen's speech by resorting to a bizarre mish-mash of German, Dutch and German words adapted to Dutch spelling (*Het verdriet*, p. 395).

As similar as Claus's ambition is to that of Joyce, that is, fitting into the canon of Dutch literature while retaining regional particularism, in *The Sorrow* the issue of the language takes a parodic turn.

THE (NON)EPIPHANIC IMAGE AND THE PERTURBING DREAM

the grotesque: an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world²².

On the banks of the river Liffey Dedalus has a vision of his more famous Greek homonymous soaring like a hawk in the sky (p. 130). Shortly after, he sees a girl on the beach and imagines that she is a sea-bird or an angel suggesting that he forsake spiritual love and welcome carnal love (pp. 131-132). As, standing on the library staircase, he realises that the birds flying overhead are swallows, he has overblown visions of oceans, sunsets and vowels splashing like waves (pp. 173-174).

The other Dedalus, the one strolling along the Leie, is equally devoted to daydreaming, but his fantasies are far from being idealistic and romantic. As much as his mother, a cow is endowed with the ability to procreate and bear in its womb a creature whose origin Louis cannot account for, thus the cow soon becomes a symbol of the unknown and of the uncanny²³: as a result of this, Louis imagines it giving birth to «a red lump of flesh [...], a battered and blood-spattered babyface [...]», later deciding that he has seen none other than «the queen of the Mizzlers» (p. 51). Unable to find his friend Bekka at home, Louis says to himself that Holst, now in the shape of a «gigantic angel of death», has appeared to her, and has a vision of the dead girl's teeth rolling on the floor like the

²¹ See also Piet Meeuse, *Kwiestebiebel*, in Abdelkader Benali *et al.*, *Kleine encyclopedie*, cit., pp. 79-81. According to Meeuse, *kwestebiebel* comes from the French word *cuistre* ('prig', 'pedant').

²² Wolfgang Johannes Kayser, *Das Groteske: Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung*, Gerhard Stalling, Oldenburg 1957, trans. by Ulruch Wesstein, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1963, p. 179.

²³ With regard to the cow embodying the uncanny, see also Willem Claassen, *Melkfabriek*, in Abdelkader Benali *et al.*, *Kleine encyclopedie*, cit., p. 93.



peas that she was shelling (pp. 107-108). Perplexed over his brother's death, the boy sees with the mind's eye a «baby, pudgy and all wrinkled», holding his breath «until his porcelain eyes popped and bled» (p. 152). In one of their manifold forms, the Mizzlers are «bugs or specks of dust, snorting, splitting up, scattering fear and despair, bursting their way straight through Dondeyne's sick ear into his brain» (p. 218). Because the pullover of infected Vlieghe is «teeming with Mizzlers, wriggling, invisible, voracious bacilli», Louis immediately gets rid of it, throwing it into a gutter (p. 561). Terrified by the possibility that, while running barefoot on the grass, «tiny creepy-crawlies» may «get stuck between your toes and multiply there, hatch little eggs there and then forge a passage through your flesh before settling in your spinal cord», the younger Seynaeve rushes home and dries his feet carefully (pp. 408-409).

Dedalus compares both the girl who jilts him (p. 170) and a woman who tries to seduce his friend Davin (p. 141) to bats. Much more oppressive are the images evoked by Louis, who compares the Institute nuns to «gigantic bats plastered against the chapel wall» (p. 209), whereas Sister Chilly is a «beanpole with a long, leaden face, not unlike that of the Black Eagle, world bicycle racing champion Marcel Kint, [...] pressed with folded back wings against the wall beside the confessional» (p. 213). Starkly different from Dedalus's grandiose epiphanies, Louis's reveries are unsettling, angst-provoking, and sometimes even grandguignolesque.

A similar process is observable in the oneiric universe, where Dedalus's soothing dreams of chocolate cream-filled trains taking him home (pp. 13-14) or statues of forgotten kings apparently asking him to develop in his own soul a novel national consciousness (p. 193) are replaced by Louis's dark and disturbing nightmares. As Louis refuses to help the gardener Baekelandt with a pregnant cow named Mary and the animal dies, his remorse triggers the following nightmare:

Toward morning a fat, bloated white cow charged at Louis. He ran for the barbed wire, but it wouldn't give way, refused to yield. The cow lowered her head, her accusing, bloodshot eyes wreathed with white lashes, then jumped weightless into the air and landed on Louis's stomach with hooves of marble and iron (p. 28).

In another dream, the truculent image of a dead rabbit, animal which also symbolises corrupted innocence in the novel²⁴, blends *eros* and *thantos* in a shocking way:

²⁴ Carel Peeters, *Toujours sourire*, in «Vrij Nederland», 26 March 1983. According to Peeters, the main theme of the novel is the corruption of innocence embodied by the figure of the rabbit. Surrounded by people who behave immorally, Louis feels compelled to lie, using the same weapons that his opponents have used against him.



It was Sister Imelda who was sitting in Louis's room, because although her face had been replaced by a featureless, pumicelike tumor, he recognized her peasant bosom, her smell of manure. She spread her knees, and from between the black billows she carefully pulled a skinned rabbit [...] she stroked the naked, blood-spattered carcass to which tuft of fur still clung, the pupils were not slit-shaped but round, like little pink pills (p. 392).

Struggling with both an unsolved Oedipus complex²⁵ and a hardly latent homosexuality, Louis inserts female features and Marian iconographies into the pluri-decorated body of the nazi marshall Hermann Göring, thus creating images which are perturbing and ridiculous at a time:

He crept back into bed and almost at once found himself sitting on the squeaking white Institute merry-go-round, which, screeching, began to spin [...] But it was not the Institute merry-go-round [...], it was a toy magnified a hundred times and made of vividly lacquered little tin airplanes [...] – he let go of the swelling, creaking crate, his parachute opened and turned into a bellying bright bed that he sank into without ever having touched ground, and, sinking, he heard: *Komm*, right in front of his nose one fold of the parachute began to billow, turning into a breast with amber-colored makeup, the breast bulged inside a tunic of the same color whose buttons burst off but continued to cleave to a body with neither head nor legs, the tunic was studded with decorations, Louis recognized the Iron Cross, the Palms, the Oak Leaf, the Pour le Mérite, the nipple is the softest of pacifiers, sweet and redolent of almond milk, Louis recognized [...] the breast of *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Wilhelm Göring, a fat peasant woman (but immaculately conceived) squeezed into a uniform that grew ever paler and paler until it was as white as snow. «*Komm, sündensklave Mensch*», Come, slave of sin, says the *Reichsmarschall* (p. 350).

As much as in *The Sorrow* dreams are similar to actual dreams in that they utilise and rework elements of real life in an arbitrary and incoherent

²⁵ With respect to the central role played by Oedipus complex in the novel, see Hanneke van Buuren, *Oedipus in Vlaanderen: Over 'Het verdriet van België' van Hugo Claus*, in J. Goedegebuure, «Kritisch akkoord», 1984, pp. 133-144. Obsessed by 'mother figures' and unable to be fully independent, all the male characters in the novel lack the necessary strength of will to do the right thing. Louis's decision to become a writer is also a consequence of that, as writing enables him to threaten the female figures of the novel, thus exerting his masculinity over them. See also Paul Claes, *Hugo Claus. Het verdriet van België*, in *Lexicon van Literaire Werken. Besprekingen van Nederlandstalige literaire werken 1900-heden*, Woolters-Noordhoff, Groningen 1989. According to Claes, Oedipus complex accounts for Louis's neurotic traits such as castration anxiety, tranvestitism, and hallucinations.



way, they are always shot through with some sense of menace. In the following dream, Michèle, Louis's short-term lover, the American soldier of Jewish origin Jay-Dee²⁶, American movies, Uncle Omer's stutter, and the English word 'congeners' shifted to the French false equivalent *congénère* are assembled to form an estranging picture. Since the French term is usually applied to animals or plants, a chain of association is activated according to which the carcass of a *congénère* ends up embodying the extermination of the Jews, Jay-Dee's congeners. This hypothesis seems to be supported by the fact that the duck is devoured by the glutton germanophile Staf:

That night Louis married Michèle. They sat at a table covered with snow-white linen in the shade of an apple tree, surrounded by excited wedding guests. In front of Papa stood a golden dish with a gold-roasted duck. He eyed it gloatingly. Jay-Dee's dark figure rode slowly by on a gray charger, and when he had disappeared to the left of the screen, Michèle said, stammering with emotion like Uncle Omer, «Le con, le con, le congénère». Louis was shocked, he thought his bride looked common in her white hat, he turned away from her, and on the sparkling dish there now lay the gnawed carcass of a duck, Papa was regarding it gloatingly, with goggling eyes and a lipless, open mouth (p. 545).

This dream seems thus to voice a repressed sense of guilt towards the Jewish people. As Louis's mother wonders how to dispose of the myriad shells of the crabs Staf is going to gorge himself on, Louis darkly broods: «Smash them up, crash them up like human bones after an overhasty cremation, after which the ashes are strewn like fertilizer over the fields around the toy factories» (p. 595)²⁷.

Another nightmare appears to express similar feelings of guilt. As his classmates Ceusters and De Coene are deported because allegedly of Jewish origin, the younger Seynaeve is unable to do anything to save them from probable death (p. 424). After spending the night skimming through books banned by the Nazis, some of which by Jewish authors, no sooner is he back home than he falls asleep. The illustrations of *Le règne animal* merge with the execution of Ceusters and De Coene and the oppressive figure of his mother:

²⁶ It is interesting to note that in the original edition the name is spelled 'Djeedie' as a Dutch speaker would write it. However, in the Italian edition (*La sofferenza del Belgio*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1999, trans. by Giancarlo Errico, rev. by Luisa Cortese) the original spelling 'Djeedie' is retained.

²⁷ With regard to the frequent contrasts between the obsession with food and anti-Semitism, see also Suzanne Ruta, *The Artist is a Pest*, in «The New York Times», 1 July 1990. The review is also available online: <<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/07/01/books/the-artist-is-a-pest.html>> (14.09.2015).



Louis dreamed of two pastel-colored armadillos rooting among paradisiacal bushes and then awkwardly mounting the wooden scaffold that had been erected beneath the Belfry in Walle, a wobbling platform with flags and wreaths on which stood Ceusters and De Coeneem chewing gum, wearing their Boy Scout belts with the fleur-de-lys buckles. Drums rolled softly. An overture. He wanted to go to them, since they were throwing him imploring looks, Mama said, «Right, off you go, you may go to their aid, but first you must comb your hair, come, let me do it». Louis could not resist this, he laid his head on her lap as on a chopping block. From beneath her peacock-eye dress she brought out a pair of red-hot curling tongs. «Mama, I'll be too late. Listen, the drums are getting louder! Please! Let me go!». But she went on curling his hair, the hair oil sizzled (p. 437).

Another dream narrates the American military and cultural victory over the Germans both in reality and in Louis's mind by utilising Walt Disney cartoons, comic strips and satirical cartoons. Even the military roles and ranks of the Nazis are affected by the triumph of the Allied forces: Hermann Göring, Rudolf Hess e Joseph Goebbels are respectively, in English, *Fieldmarshall*, *traitor*, *Head of the Ministry*. As an undefined mass turns into Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the description seems to parody a caption to the transformation of a Marvel superhero. The gymnastic exercises which Louis was compelled to perform as recruit of the National Socialist Youth of Flanders become ridiculous and senseless:

Much as Mickey and Minnie in the animated cartoons shown at the Youth Fellowship Hall in Haarbeke would move jerkily about in star-shaped explosions, so three little manikins, one fat, one thin, and one short, were dancing inside the thick black lines outlining their silhouettes. They were skipping through a storm-tossed wood, Snow White's twisting, lashing kingdom of branches. The fat *field marschal* with all his medals, the rake-thin *traitor* Rudolf Hess with a smear of hoe polish for eyebrows, and the *Head of the Ministry*, the skeletal little dwarf with arms reaching down to his ankles, were running, running, running, [...] playing tag, Goebbels was the nimblest, color flowed into the drawing (by David Low, the collection of cartoons that had startled Louis in the Avenue Louise book cellar). [...] there was something happening on the tennis court of the Flandria, something was surging out of the changing rooms, [...] it was Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his wheelchair, jaw-bone, white-toothed smile, cigarette holder, and all. On his broad back sat a rabbi. The three fled in panic, Goebbels overtook the lumbering, laboring Hess, Göring hid in a windowless cellar full of kindling. At long last Goebbels [...] reached the Chancellery and was aghast to find his *Führer* lying there dead. [...] Phosphorescent smoke, light-green like young oats, rose from the *Führer's* clothes. Goebbels whispered,



«Who art thou, *mein Führer*, Christ or John?». Answer came there none, Goebbels lay down, reached his long arms behind his shoulders as in a gymnastics exercise, pulled his legs up [...] (pp. 525-526).

In *The Sorrow* the dream is therefore an outlet for desires, obsessions and more or less conscious regrets. Elaborate and astonishing, Louis's oneiric visions fully highlight unconfessed torments and repressed tensions through the use of the grotesque image, thus giving psychological depth to the character.

CONCLUSION

a serious text calls for an ironic hypertext²⁸.

It is unquestionable that a detailed knowledge of the hypotext is never necessary to comprehend the hypertext. Yet, this comparison of *The Sorrow of Belgium* and *A Portrait*, albeit not exhaustive, authorises us to speculate that Hugo Claus was more or less conscious to be misreading Joyce's book²⁹. Indeed, the Flemish author seems to transform all those features that his work has in common with Joyce's book into grotesque subject-matter, as if that were his way to deal with it and its role model status. As a matter of fact, whereas in the *Portrait* the irony of certain passages was subtle and implicit, Claus chooses to adopt a strategy of amplification. Openly resorting to caricatural images, blasphemous humour and bloody fantasies, he produces unprecedented and disturbing mixtures which destabilise the reader. Everything in *The Sorrow* seems to indicate the other side of the coin, a negative 'other'. This, however, can be understood only in the light of a comparison with the hypertext.

On the basis of what has been said, one way to look at such a complex work as *The Sorrow of Belgium* is to regard it as an all-embracing and ferocious *Bildungsroman* which cannibalizes *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and transforms it into a disquieting comedy.

²⁸ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La Littérature au second degré*, Seuil, Paris 1982, trans. by Channa Newman – Claude Doubinsky, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Nebraska Press, Lincoln *et al.* 1997, p. 324.

²⁹ For the notion of 'misreading' as the performance of literary influence from earlier to later writers, see Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, Oxford University Press, New York 1957.