

Time Travel in the Forbidden Realm. J.J. Slauerhoff's *Het verboden rijk* viewed as a modernist novel

This essay on the Dutch writer J.J. Slauerhoff's novel *Het verboden rijk* (1931) analyses it as an experimental novel. I argue that the traditional view of Slauerhoff which emphasizes the romanticism of his subject matter fails to acknowledge the modernist character of this novel and its critique of European culture. This modernism is revealed through an analysis of the way *Het verboden rijk* negotiates the narrative shifts between the two main characters and between the two times in which it is set - the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries. The analysis highlights the narrative techniques used by Slauerhoff as he moves away from, and ultimately violates, the norms of realist fiction, as he fails to deliver the historical prose promised by his prologue. The history in question is the founding of the Portuguese colony of Macao, and this, coupled with the narrative process by which the sixteenth-century character 'colonizes' the twentieth-century character, invites a reading of the novel as a critique of European culture and identity.

In Dutch literary history of the last twenty years, Slauerhoff tends to feature most strongly as a poet - the Netherlands' own *poète maudit*, in fact.¹ This derives from Slauerhoff's own view of himself, comparing himself, according to Ton Anbeek,² with Baudelaire, Verlaine, Corbière and Rimbaud. Although the work of the poets referred to here can be seen as an early manifestation of modernism, the Dutch literary histories emphasize Slauerhoff's romanticism (Meijer) or neo-romanticism (Chamuleau & Dautzenberg).³ The latter literary history describes Slauerhoff's work as rooted in an earlier period. Ton Anbeek does give an account of the debate around

Slauerhoff in the 1920s: he was seen both as harking back to the nineteenth century and as offering something new, though not necessarily modern. Anbeek himself does not take a view on this.

When it comes to Slauerhoff's prose, the picture is a similar one: Anten⁴ cites Van Vriesland: 'In *Het verboden rijk* is Slauerhoff "de typische romanticus, met al de van ouds daarbij behorende kenmerken van wereldverachting [...]"'. (In *The Forbidden Realm* Slauerhoff is "the typical romantic, with all the old, characteristic contempt for the world [...]") Although van Vriesland goes on to use the adjective 'zakelijk'⁵ to refer to Slauerhoff's style, he links it to realism rather than modernism, while Anbeek describes Slauerhoff as 'zeker geen vertegenwoordiger van de "moderne bondigheid"'⁶ (certainly no representative of the "modern terseness") and his prose as 'allerminst "modern" in de zin van Bordewijk⁷; eerder past het in een lange romantische traditie van zwervers op zoek naar het geluk' (not at all "modern" in the manner of Bordewijk; but rather it fits into a long romantic tradition of wanderers in search of happiness) (p.165).

Viewed against a larger literary-historical backdrop, *Het verboden rijk*, which was first published in serial form in the literary magazine *Forum* in 1931, can be seen as part of the movement away from realism, whether or not one calls it modernism, which was rather late in coming in the Netherlands. Rather than devote space here to a discussion of modernism, I would rather view this article as a footnote to the broad picture of modernism given in Bradbury and McFarlane's *Modernism. A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* (London, 1991²) as the Netherlands do not figure in it. When designating *Het verboden rijk* as modernist, I had in mind the 'generalizations' David Lodge makes in his essay 'The language of Modernist Fiction: Metaphor and Metonymy' in Bradbury & McFarlane's book. The working definition

of modernist fiction which I constructed from the essay is that it is experimental, exhibits marked deviations from existing modes of discourse, is concerned with consciousness, with an ambiguous ending, and eschewing the straight chronological ordering of its material and the use of a reliable narrator (p.481). It was with these kinds of features in mind that I approached the text as a modernist one.

Het verboden rijk initially presents itself to the reader as a historical chronicle in the Prologue, shifting in Chapter 1 to a form of historical fiction. Gradually the participation of the twentieth century in the historical narrative increases until more of a balance is achieved between the historical and the contemporary. The novel closes with the balance having shifted again, to the modern setting this time. This refusal to present the past as closed off from the present, and the insistence on viewing the present in relation to the past and the past in relation to the present constitute one of the foremost experiments with the historical novel in Dutch literature in the 1930's, and one which anticipates later developments.

In *Het verboden rijk* Slauerhoff ignores the constraints on plot, setting and character which can be considered typical of the realist novel, namely the construction of a seamless narrative with a main character with whom the reader can identify, and a motivated, understandable unfolding of events. But his most obvious and challenging violation of the realist code is the breaking of the time frame. In a realist novel, the past may be included in the narrative in the form of memories, or it may provide a background explanation for current events, but it will always be integrated into and dominated by the chosen time-setting, so that the reader always knows exactly where s/he is. When Slauerhoff's text switches to a different narrative strand, the narrative makes no concessions to the reader in the form of explicit pointers. Readers now are unlikely to find this distressing, as they are familiar with fragmented narratives, but

the reception of the novel in the Netherlands clearly demonstrates that most contemporary critics, some of whom regarded *Het verboden rijk* as a failed historical novel were not ready for the challenge.⁸

It was to be some time before the Flemish writer Louis Paul Boon experimented with combining a historical narrative and a contemporary narrative in the same novel - *De kapellekensbaan*⁹ - which appeared some twenty years later in 1953, or Hella Haasse wrote *Een gevaarlijke verhouding of Daal-en-Bergse brieven* (A Dangerous Liaison or Valmont Letters, 1976) in which a contemporary woman character addresses an eighteenth-century fictional character, the Marquise de Merteuil from *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, who 'responds' with personal musings. In *De kapellekensbaan*, the historical and contemporary narratives are apparently unrelated since they involve two distinct sets of characters, although the location is the same - a parallel with *Het verboden rijk* exists here. However, with the sequel to *De kapellekensbaan* a link is established between the two narratives, because the historical narrative proceeds at a faster pace than the contemporary one, so the gap closes and continuity is established. In Haasse's work, the time gap is part of a game with fictionality. The eighteenth-century character who reflects on her life is a twentieth-century fiction based on an eighteenth-century fiction. There is also an element of the game about Slauerhoff's past and present narratives which links it to the mystery story, as I will show further on in this article.

Slauerhoff's experiment with narrated time appears at the outset to involve two separate unrelated narratives, but in fact moves towards contact across time between the main characters of each narrative. This communication which transcends chronological time is perceived by the twentieth-century character (an unnamed ship's radio operator) as a kind of colonization by the sixteenth-century character (the

Portuguese poet Camoens) which he resists at first, but ultimately gives in to. The double time-frame, and the way it is given expression through the main characters, produces a number of interesting effects. These raise questions both about perceptions of time and chronology and also about the way time is traditionally represented in the realist novel.. Slauerhoff's foregrounding of the perception of time shows a concern which can be said to be typical of modernism as a broader cultural phenomenon. For example, the *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*¹⁰ states that modernism 'is the style of a changed space-time continuum' (p.396) which had its origins in Einstein's theories. Slauerhoff is known to have read and discussed J.W.Dunne's *An Experiment with Time* (1927). His biographer¹¹ notes that its influence on *Het verboden rijk* has been discussed: 'Albert Helman en W. Blok hebben op het zogenaamde Dunne-effect in *Het verboden rijk* gewezen: de vooruit- en terugwijzende droombeelden, de visioenen en ervaringen van een "déjà vu" werden op deze wijze verklaard' (Albert Helman and W. Blok have point to the so-called Dunne effect in *The Forbidden Kingdom: The prospective and retrospective dream images, the visions and déjà vu experiences were explained in this way*) (p.286).

Dunne's book covers the recent scientific and philosophical debate about the nature of time in relation to space, including Einstein's theory of relativity and Dunne is at pains to ensure that his own theory is not at odds with relativity theory. He develops a theoretical model which 'explains' how in dreams one can see the future as well as the past, because the dreamer is 'in a field of existence entirely different from that of ordinary waking life'.¹² What is interesting about Dunne's book is not his theory, which comes across as pseudo-science, but the indication it gives of a popular interest in exploring ideas relating to time and space. Dunne makes it clear that his book is aimed at the 'man-in-the-street' and concludes it by saying that his theory

‘points to the existence of a common-to-all field [...] filling all space (not incompatible with Relativity theory). This would provide us with, at any rate, the primary essential for the production of anything in the nature of real telepathic inter-communication’ (p.207).

It may well be that Slauerhoff offers a literary representation of these ideas rather than ideas of reincarnation, as others have thought.¹³ What interests me at this point are the ways in which the narrative represents the new conception of time. The moments of contact between the sixteenth-century character and the twentieth-century character represent a kind of modernist version of time-travel - one that, in keeping with Dunne’s theory, takes place in the mind. The unnatural or magical quality of the moments of contact emphasizes the time gap which has to be bridged by some special means. A more traditional time-travel novel, such as H.G.Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1898) to which Dunne also refers, not wishing to violate the sense of a coherent realistic fictional world resorts to science to invent special machines to make it possible to visit another time, thus preserving the overall time frame, while inserting the other time into the dominant time-frame. Dunne’s theory provides an alternative to physical transportation as a rationale for time travel, so that the realist illusion could be maintained if the reader accepts the notion of ‘telepathic inter-communication’. A modernist writer, on the other hand, who is no longer hampered by the constraints of realism, has no need of a plausible means of transportation, a prime example being Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, whose eponymous main character starts out in the Elizabethan age and ends up in the twentieth-century, changing sex on the way. Time is linear, with intervals, but the main character is impossible in a realist reading, since s/he ages little over four hundred centuries.

Slauerhoff’s experiment with time and the narrative in *Het verboden rijk* has

elements both of the time machine and of ‘telepathic inter-communication’, but disrupts the illusion of reality with the multiple viewpoints of two first-person narrators in addition to the third-person narrator(s). The two time frames supersede one another as the narrative switches to and fro, before being forced into a brief marriage in the closing chapters. The two distinct time settings are the sixteenth century which frames the story of the Portuguese poet Camoens's (Camoës in the novel) exile in Macao, and the twentieth century which frames the story of an unnamed ship's radio operator. In what follows I shall be examining the nature of the relationship between the two characters and the two settings and linking this to my reading of the novel as a critique of European culture.

Over and above the two time frames which as two distinct narratives might each be expected to have their own narrator, there are at least two other narrators. This further complicates the reading experience. Some contemporary reviewers certainly found the novel difficult to follow and the Dutch novelist and critic Herman Robbers regarded it as evidence of lack of craftsmanship on Slauerhoff's part.¹⁴ Even a reasonably positive reviewer seems to suggest that the narrative complexities are taxing:

Koloniale historie uit de zestiende eeuw, brokstukken uit een ‘vie romancee’ van den Portugeeschen dichter Luiz de Camoes en een modern zeemansverhaal van een tragischen, afgetakelden marconist, liggen bont dooreen. En alsof er aldus nog geen afwisseling genoeg is verkregen, zijn Camoes zelf en de beschrijver van zijn ongelooflijke lotgevallen beurtelings aan het woord.¹⁵

Whereas the two first person narrators are easy to identify - in retrospect, at any rate -

as the characters of Camoës and the radio operator, the third-person narrator is much harder to pinpoint. Francken (See note 8, p.26-34) distinguishes various third-person narrators in addition to the two first-person narrators. I distinguish between the third-person narrators of the historical and the contemporary narratives, but also note that the narrative voice of the historical novel shifts. The effect of the two first-person narrators is to increase the tendency on the part of the reader to draw parallels between the two main characters, partly by inducing uncertainty about who is speaking. This prepares the ground for what happens in the final chapter when the twentieth-century time-frame is merged with that of the sixteenth century.

Throughout the novel the reader remains conscious of the four centuries separating the two first person narrative voices. The time frames occasionally come into contact when one intrudes on the other: one character 'receives' impressions of the other. This effect is gradually increased until both characters and time frames eventually coincide in the last chapter. At this point the apparently single narrative has a dual function, contributing to the development of both plots. The story of the radio operator's journey back to Macao after being in the Chinese desert functions also as the narrative which brings Camoës back to Macao from his enforced journey into the interior of China. When the radio operator falls over in a ruined church in Macao and gets up to find himself fighting off an attack from outside the new cathedral of Macao, Camoës's heroic defence of the cathedral is simultaneously being narrated. These two episodes are told in the third person. The novel finishes with the radio operator's own account of leaving Macao and going back to work, feeling better fitted for survival. The journal makes it clear that he has, in some way, also lived through the dramatic events in the church, and some kind of catharsis has been brought about by the participation in another life in another age in such extreme circumstances.

The time structure of the novel can be summarized as follows:

chapters 1-5 are set in the sixteenth century;

chapter 6 is set in the twentieth century;

chapter 7 is set in the sixteenth century;

chapter 8 is set in the twentieth century until the final page (p.130) when the twentieth and sixteenth centuries merge.

Chapter 9, section I is set in twentieth century, although it is not clear that the main character belongs wholly to this time; section II opens in the twentieth century with the main character's 'spirit' travelling back through time until he reaches the sixteenth century where he becomes involved in a fight to defend the cathedral of Macao against invaders; section III is set in the sixteenth century immediately after the invaders were repelled through the actions of a stranger, later identified as Camoës; section IV is set unambiguously in the twentieth century - the radio operator has come to himself, as it were. His brush with the past has been put behind him as he advances towards a new existence in the forbidden realm of China.

There is one major difference between a story of time travel and the 'journey' the radio operator makes through time: in *Het verboden rijk*, there is no attempt in the text to view the past through the eyes of the present. The twentieth-century character is not imported unchanged into another time in order to view and comment on it. The confrontation between past and present is not an explicit theme of the narrative. So what is it that the double time frame gives to the reader? Eep Francken is of the view that it is a kind of game which the reader can perhaps only enjoy on a second reading of the text. *Orlando*, too, was conceived as a game, or a joke, as Rachel Bowlby stresses in her introduction to the novel.¹⁶

The element of game-playing in *Het verboden rijk* is akin to that of a mystery

story in that there are 'clues' as to what will happen which build up to a climax: the anticipated, but impossible leap across the time gap does actually take place. The first clue to the existence of a parallel character to Camoës comes in a recurrent dream during Camoës' sea journey to Macao, narrated in Chapter 4:

[...] ik ben een mindere onder de mensen en moet werken en gehoorzamen voor een gering loon. Toch ben ik machtiger dan in de tijd toen ik moeizaam woorden bijeenzocht en op het papier rangschikte. Nu slinger ik mijn woorden het luchtruim in; zij bereizen oneindige afstanden, op een trilling die ik achteloos wek met mijn hand [...]

Nu eens had hij een klemmende kap om zijn hoofd, dan weer voelde hij hoe het schip niet meer van hout maar van blakerend ijzer was [...]

Nu drongen vele gele mensen in de nauwe hut [...] (p.64)¹⁷

If the reader is at first puzzled by the reference to words being hurled into space, the cumulative references to such anachronistic elements of the dream, such as wood being replaced by steel in the ship's construction, and the strange close-fitting clothes worn by those on board soon make it clear that Camoës' dream represents some kind of vision of the future. This is an example of the twentieth-century timeframe permeating into the sixteenth-century setting.

The functioning of the 'clues' depends on the reader developing a sense of their reliability, achieved through recognition of their veracity at a later stage of the narrative: what is sensed by Camoës in one chapter, is realized by the radio operator in another, and *vice versa*. This is achieved by the repetition of a particular situation, and of certain key words. So, for example, in Chapter 6, narrated by the radio

operator, we read: 'Radio? Hoe lang was het geleden dat ik in een smalle hut zat met een kap om mijn oren en mijn hand aan de sleutel?' (p.96) Distinct echoes of Camoës' dream. There is a cumulative effect to these echoes, which builds up expectation and a sense of excitement in the reader. When we read the closing sentence of Chapter 7, which concludes the account of Camoës' dangerous journey into China, there is no doubt about its special significance. 'Hij verhaastte zijn tred, zag niet meer om, maar had het gevoel dat spoedig iemand zijn plaats daar bij de steen zou komen innemen, dat hijzelf teloor zou gaan in de woestijn' (p.114)(He hastened his step, stopped looking round, but had the sensation that someone would quickly take his place by the stone, that he himself would be lost in the desert). The reader's expectations are not disappointed, and it is not even a complete surprise when the radio operator finds himself repeating the journey into China in Chapter 8.

The 'clues' are not the only way in which the narrative prepares the reader for the climax. There are also broader parallels between Camoës and the radio operator, such as the fact that both are shipwrecked and become ill with a fever. Both have an image of a paradise garden by the sea with a cool house in it. Although this clearly refers to the Ilha Verde where each character found respite, to the radio operator it also evoked the garden of his childhood on the west coast of Ireland, and to Camoës, the garden of Santa-Clara where as a young man he had pursued Diana, the name he gives to the woman he loves, but who is intended for the Portuguese king's son, the Infant. Perhaps the most significant characteristic which Camoës and the radio operator share is their position in society: both find themselves outside the society in which they grew up, although for different reasons. Both seek exile which is an outward expression of their alienation from their immediate family and the society they were born into. Neither manages to belong to a new group, but remains isolated and leads a

lonely adventurer's existence which involves extremes of physical suffering. There is perhaps also a playful contrast in the fact that one has a traditionally elevated occupation - that of poet - while the other has the very lowly job of radio operator, although to Camoës in his vision (p.64), the ability to send words all over the world made the radio operator seem powerful. On the other hand, in the novel, as opposed to Camoës' dream, both are without power and influence and at the mercy of others.

What seem like chance parallels soon develop into a powerful affinity between the two characters, and once they find themselves in the same physical places - the Ilha Verde, the Chinese desert and the cathedral of Macao - they seem to seek each other out, and the limitations of chronological time are overcome.

Part of the climax of the novel is the sense of danger which the radio operator, and perhaps also the reader, has as the dissolution of the time barrier becomes inevitable. The radio operator's encounter with the historical past is not something which he embraces willingly. In fact he rejects his own personal past forcefully, and that is the reason for his isolation. On the other hand, when his life reaches its lowest point (Chapter 6), he rejects the present and future, withdrawing into what he refers to as a 'schimmenrijk' (p.94) (realm of shades), linking the negation of time with existence after death. He recognizes his state of spiritual emptiness as dangerous: 'Een geest in deze toestand, veer voor invloeden van buiten, wordt een gemakkelijke prooi van demonen die als saprofiet willen teren op een levende' (p.100)(A spirit in this state, susceptible to external influences, is an easy prey for demons which will feed saprophytically on a living person). And yet at the same time, he actively longs for 'iets waaraan ik mij hechten kon, een ander leven [...] Nu begon ik te haken naar een macht die bezit van mij nam' (p.100)(something I can become attached to, another life [...] Now I began to crave a force that would take possession of me). So the character

is receptive, and the reader expectant, but when the approach from the past comes, it unexpectedly inspires a strong reaction of fear. After a strong sense of *déjà vu* in the garden on the Tung Sjang peninsula which the reader suspects to be the Ilha Verde where Camoës stayed with the Procurador's daughter Pilar, the radio operator pulls himself back from the brink: 'Ik had nog maar een stap te doen, de tijd zou splijten, ikzelf zou een ander zijn, met ander gelaat, andere handen, ogen, bloed, toch ik, maar zelfvergeten. Angst, als om duizelig te worden [...] omving mij, ik deinsde terug [...]' (p.116)(I only had to take one more step, time would split, I myself would be someone else, with another face, other hands, eyes, blood, still me, but without awareness of myself. Fear, a kind of vertigo [...] closed in on me, I shrank back [..]) On his next visit he is drawn in against his will, sees Camoës sitting writing, attempts to leave, but cannot find himself. In this moment of danger he again rejects the union with Camoës, smashes the glass of the window through which he had been looking, and escapes a second time.

Camoës is only successful in his colonization of the radio operator when the latter's life is in the balance, at the point where he has been led into the Chinese desert to die by the Chinese who had attacked his ship. The radio operator is desperate, in a state of altered consciousness through the extreme conditions, and in exactly the same spot as Camoës had been some four hundred years before. In fact, his only means of escape, it seems, is through Camoës who, the reader learns later, did get out of the desert alive against all the odds.

The circumstances surrounding the integration of the characters, and thus also the temporal integration, are laden with symbols. The radio operator enters a tomb in the desert in search of shade and cool. The tomb is a multiple symbol: as an enclosed, protective space it represents a pre-natal state which in turn could indicate a kind of

rebirth. The radio operator is protected from the world enclosed in the tomb with its 'baarmoedervorm' (p.129). To the reader, a tomb initially indicates death, but must now be seen as suggesting a beginning as well as an end. Of course, if the character remains in the tomb, he will never be found and will die there, but his instinct for survival expels him into the hostile conditions of the desert again.

The tomb is more than a symbol of death and birth: like the stones that mark out the road (to survival), it is itself a survival from the past, a piece of history, a refuge in the present. Like the narrative, it too has a double function. The character himself gives expression to this:

Het graf was de poort, waardoor ik mijn eigen leven verliet en het verleden binnenging. Ik hief mijn hoofd en zag door de opening, mijn blik stiet op een zeskantige steen, zoals ik tevoren had gezien. Ik moest het graf weer verlaten, het diepe eeuwigstille verleden waarin ik nog niet thuishoorde, ik richtte mij op die steen uit een nabij verleden, om uit mijn eigen tijd te ontkomen. (p.129)¹⁸

In the passage, the character seems to distinguish between ancient history which has acquired an eternal character, and the more recent past of the sixteenth century, represented by the stone, and of course placed there by Camoës (Ch.7, III).

It seems as though the encounter with the past, or the lifting of the barrier between past and present, requires an identity of space, or perhaps even a special physical locus. Perhaps after all, the tomb can be viewed as a kind of time machine. The difference between this magic box and Dr Who's police box, for example, is that the latter, like Wells's time machine, actually travels to the new time zone, whereas Slauerhoff's remains immobile. The travelling occurs in the characters' minds. From

this point in the narrative, the 'I' character becomes a blend of the two main characters. He understands Portuguese, but speaks English; he carries old coins and some of the words he utters are Camoës' (p.133). At this stage, the action is taking place in the twentieth century, and the effect is one of colonization of the twentieth-century character by the character from the sixteenth century, or the visitation of the former by the latter.

The culmination of the narrative game with the double time-frame comes when the twentieth-century character journeys back in time to the sixteenth-century battle fought in the cathedral of Macao. The narrative is quite specific that it is his 'geest' (mind, or spirit) which 'was zelf op verkenning uitgegaan in de stad' (had itself gone out to reconnoitre the town). The 'time machine' this time is depicted as a mine shaft down which the character, or rather his mind, travels:

En zo vond hij gemakkelijk de weg naar het verleden. Het was of hij in een mijn afdaalde, de boven elkaar liggende lagen in vaal licht ziende. Eindelijk kwam hij terecht bij de tijd, waarin het kasteel en de eerste cathedraal werden gebouwd [...] Verder kon hij niet komen. Wel zag hij in de diepte nog een landing, een paar tenten op een strand, grafkruisen, vissershutten, een rotstempel, maar alles bleef schemerig en hij ging terug. (p.135-6)¹⁹

The last sentence is a reference to section IV of the Prologue, which depicts Macao before the arrival of Farria and the founding of the city. So the twentieth-century character can move backwards through time to the period when Camoës was in Macao, but although he can see an earlier time, it remains in the distance and he cannot reach it. It is not the case, therefore, that all time barriers have dissolved for the

radio operator. He seems to be restricted to Camoës's consciousness, which could include the history of Macao since its foundation as a Portuguese colony, since some of the founding fathers were still alive when he arrived there. This explains both the glimpse of an earlier stage in the development of Macao and also why it is out of reach: it had not been experienced directly by Camoës. When the radio operator tries to return to the present, he cannot:

[...] hij wilde verder opstijgen, kon niet, worstelde, van alle kanten aangegrepen, ontwaakte op het harde bed, doornat van angstzweet. Nu waren hem de stank en het lawaai onverdragelijk, hij wierp zich om en om en toen de duisternis begon, verliet hij de herberg.²⁰

A realist reading can still interpret this as a bad dream, after which the character wanders through the city. But who is he? He seems to possess the memory of both men²¹ so that he enters the ruined cathedral in the twentieth century, falls and gets up in the sixteenth century. This time the stone edifice where the character is taken back in time is the cathedral. Whereas the double character had until now acted in a twentieth-century setting, he now finds himself some four hundred years back in time. The third-person narrator of this part of the narrative (Chapter 9, section II) relays events as they happen, from the perspective of the 'hij' character who does not understand what he is doing or why. The third section of chapter 9, told by the third-person 'historical' narrator, confirms that the events narrated in section II did take place with Camões as actor. Through this device, the novel offers an ironic view of heroism: Camoës is treated as a hero for his courage in battle in the historical narrative, but the other account reveals the total absence of heroic characteristics - the

whole episode was an accident. Intriguingly, in section III which is set wholly in the sixteenth century after the battle in the cathedral, Camões himself is in a similar 'vacant' state as the radio operator, having lost his memory. By the time the narrative shifts again to the twentieth century in the fourth and final section of the last chapter, the radio operator is wholly in the present with a sense of liberation, although he wonders whether he and the other might have changed places.

The ambiguity of the ending contributes to the way in which the text undermines a realist reading. As a structural element, the mental time travel cannot be dismissed as a bad dream. Rather, this complex text represents an unacceptable and treacherous reality which does not conform to received ideas and which is presented as a narrative game. The analysis of the time structure and the characters given above shows how highly structured and sophisticated the novel is with its many repetitions and cross-references. But it demands a level of active involvement on the part of the reader which a realist novel does not. Passivity, or a refusal to co-operate with the text might well lead to the response quoted by Francken: 'Ik begrijp er niets van' (p.70)(I don't understand a word of it). Acceptance of the game dispenses with the necessity of posing certain questions, such as What is going on? How could the characters merge? and shifts the focus to a question like How do I read this novel? How do the narrative complexities relate to my interpretation of the novel?

Het verboden rijk offers a view of both past and present to the reader which is mediated from various perspectives. When considered from the perspective of place - Macao - comparisons between then and now are invited. The perspective of the characters shows a blurring and shifting of temporal boundaries which is closely associated with a blurring and shifting of identity, both personal and cultural. The effect of these two perspectives, coupled with the contrasting relationships of the two

main characters to the forbidden realm of China, is to question and challenge European identity and culture. While the immediate focus in Slauerhoff's novel is on the alienation of the individual in a hostile world, there is also a political dimension, in the depiction of colonialism, and the negative view of European culture.

The two main characters find themselves on the other side of the world from where they were born: exiles not just from their country of birth, but also from European civilization. However, while Camoës and the ship's radio operator have a great deal in common as exiles from Europe, the fundamental difference between them, I shall argue, is their attitude to the forbidden kingdom of China. When seen in the light of the novel's shift from the sixteenth century to the twentieth, and of its ending, the contrasting attitudes to China can be said to reinforce the critique of colonialism.

Camoës makes the dangerous journey by sailing ship from Lisbon to the Far East where he is shipwrecked just off Macao near the Ilha Verde. He has not chosen to leave Europe, but is banished from Portugal, and is held prisoner for part of the journey. In Macao, too he is deprived of his freedom, tortured by his fellow countrymen and forced to join the fated embassy to Peking. Instead of finding refuge Camoës is treated brutally by the colonial rulers. Although he is physically weak, and not an obvious threat, the mentality of the Portuguese colonists in Macao is such that they seem to have become conditioned to be suspicious of all outsiders. They are afraid that he possesses knowledge which they do not have. This is also why they torture the Dominican friars. On the surface, Camoës has become a victim of his own kind. This was already the case back in Portugal when he posed a threat to the seat of power - the future king - by competing with the Infant for the attentions of the same woman.

The encounter with Pilar, the daughter of the ruthless and brutish Procurador of Macao, who has sought refuge with her Chinese nurse on the Ilha Verde, highlights Camoës's role as a representative of Portugal. As the son of a nobleman he speaks 'pure' Portuguese whereas Pilar speaks only the local dialect which is only partly comprehensible to Camoës. It is not only the language he speaks, but also the manner of speaking which emphasizes the differences between Camoës and the colonists:

Toen hij weer aanving te praten, verwonderde Pilar zich weer; zij had deze toon nog nooit gehoord: haar vaders stem was altijd luid en bevelend, die van Ronquilho pralend en schel, de monniken spraken zalvend en vol wijding [...] (p.85)²²

During the trip into China with the embassy to Peking which they fail to reach, Camoës loses all sense of his Portuguese identity, particularly when in the extreme conditions of the desert. By the time he reaches Macao again he has no identity and does not recognize other people. For example: 'Maar Camoës sprak helemaal niet en staarde wezenloos door de pater heen' (But Camoës did not speak at all and stared vacantly through the priest). His only response to his surroundings is to recognize the manuscript which Pilar brings and to start writing. The residual identity is perhaps that of a universal figure, the poet. 'Hij leefde binnen wat hij schreef en zodra hij daarbuiten was en in het donker zat, hield hij op te bestaan' (p.140) (He lived in what he wrote and as soon as he was outside it, sitting in the dark, he ceased to exist).

Slauerhoff's portrayal of Camoës is particularly striking to a twentieth-century reader who knows that Camoës has, in the intervening centuries, become Portugal's national poet, a symbol of Portugal and its culture. In the world of Slauerhoff's text, the poet is shown as alienated from the Portuguese culture into which he was born,

and also from the Portuguese colonial culture to which he is banished. A far cry from the symbolic Camoës, although the historical Camoës did indeed have conflicts with the Portuguese authorities.

The radio operator is also alienated from his country of birth, Ireland. By his own account, this was a result of rejection by the community in which he was living. He and his family were felt to be different and were not recognized as truly Irish:

Wij waren geen Ieren. Wij waren de laatste loten van het vervloekte heidense Keltische ras dat hier vóór Christus had geleefd, zei de parson. Neen, afstammelingen van schipbreukelingen van de Armada, dus lafaards die niet gevochten hadden, maar om Schotland heen gevlucht waren...zei de meester. (p.92)²³

This passage shows the constructors of the local identity, the priest and the schoolmaster, fostering the notion of his family's otherness by providing 'historical' explanations. In Slauerhoff's novel, national identity is problematic and exclusive, and exclusion can occur because of perceived otherness, but also because of a refusal on the part of individuals to conform. This can even affect a figure like Camoës who was born into the Portuguese elite.

Issues surrounding nations, nationality and nationalism were at the root of European unrest in the interbellum, so Slauerhoff's preoccupation with national cultures is not particularly surprising. In his journalistic writing, he seems to accept the historical differences between European cultures, while rejecting a fixed national identity for the individual. In this flexible view, an individual is capable of being shaped by contact with other cultures. Slauerhoff's text offers three types of culture: European, colonial and the forbidden 'other'. The contrast between the characters of

Camoës and the radio operator in the way they respond to the forbidden realm, i.e. Chinese culture, can be interpreted as a judgement in favour of embracing other cultures.

Before discussing the two main characters it is interesting to look at the range of attitudes to China in *Het verboden rijk*. In order for the colonial enterprise to succeed, it is necessary for the early colonists to see the Chinese as ‘de listigste en wreedste duivels’ (the wildest and cruellest devils) so as to have no qualms about wiping them out. The figure of Pedro Velho stands out: ‘Velho was de enige die goed begreep dat wapengeweld en heldendaden de Hemelingen niet imponeerden, doch met minachting vervulden’ (p.43) (Velho was the only one who well understood that armed violence and heroic deeds did not impress the Chinese, but filled them with disdain). As a result of taking an interest in Chinese ways and customs, Velho becomes the most powerful merchant. Instead of respecting this, his fellow colonists are deeply suspicious. Velho's Chinese silk robe symbolizes his approach to Chinese culture: ‘Men bespote hem om dit huisgewaad; de Portugezen behielden allen hun ongemakkelijke en zware kleding, maar Velho borg zijn zwaarlijvigheid in de losse zijden stof, verdroeg de hitte beter [...]’ (p.44) (He was ridiculed because of this house robe; the Portuguese all kept their uncomfortable and heavy clothing, but Velho covered his corpulence in the loose silk fabric, bore the heat better [...]). Furthermore, Velho is not a Christian, and he reads Confucius and other oriental philosophers. When he is finally made a Senator of Macao, Velho dictates his will: ‘Velho maakt zijn vermogen aan Macao, op de dag, dat het zich losmaakt van de kroon van Portugal en een onderdeel wordt van het Chinese rijk’ (p.55) (Velho leaves his fortune to Macao on the day that it declares its independence of the Portuguese crown and become part of the kingdom of China). He then rejects the colonial culture, leaving

Macao for China and is never seen again.

Pilar, the Procurador's daughter, represents the tension between the colonial and the 'other' culture. Her mother was a Chinese woman, and she looks Chinese. There is conflict between Pilar and her father, who wants her to marry the brutish Ronquilho. Pilar is drawn in two opposing directions when she seeks refuge, first with the monks and their Christianity, and then with her Chinese nurse with whom she has fled to the Ilha Verde. It is 'de Mongoolse helft van haar ras' (the Mongol half of her stock) that gives her the detachment that helps her live with the restrictions placed on her. When removed from the colonial atmosphere of the town, her Chinese nature comes to the fore: she adopts Chinese dress and habits. Although she is part Chinese, Pilar will never be able to adopt Chinese culture fully, because, in contrast to Pedro Velho, she is female and therefore lacking the power to live in accordance with her personal wishes in the colony. Pedro Velho might have been disliked for his positive attitude to Chinese culture, but as a male he belonged to the dominant group and there was no attempt to control his behaviour. Violence and violation are used to make Pilar submit to the dominant colonial culture.

For Velho and Pilar, their cultural identity shifts, and in the clash between colonial and Chinese culture, they both gravitate towards the latter. On the other hand, Pilar's father and Ronquilho, her violator turned husband, are closed to Chinese culture and reject it forcefully, and those who represent it. This is why Pilar must be conquered. Interestingly, the dominant group is also opposed to the priests who represent one of the cornerstones of European culture - Christianity. As colonists, they have begun to forge their own culture, with its own secular rituals surrounding the governing of the colony. When one of the elders dies, the new Senador has to take the staff from the dead man's grasp and must drink wine from the ship which brought the

very first colonists to Macao, even though it is bitter.

As outcasts, Camoës and the radio operator are alienated from their European roots. Camoës's position remains the same in Macao where he is literally cast out into China. The journey through China is a horrific ordeal which almost costs him his life and leaves him a physical wreck and strips him of his personality and identity, leaving only the essential, the poet. Although Camoës had made his way back to Macao from China against all the odds, and has made a vital contribution to the defence of the colony when under attack, he is again cast out: 'Een paar dagen later zette Campos hem op een schip, het oudste en wrakste, dat nog bij de vloot hoorde' (A few days later Campos put him on a ship, the oldest and most dilapidated one left in the fleet). The colony cannot accommodate the poet.

In the twentieth century, the colony is uninterested in the radio operator who can wander around anonymously. The text stresses that the colony is at the end of its life, and the process of cultural confrontation has become one of virtually total intermixing. The Portuguese colonial culture of the historical novel has dwindled to a trace. There is a suggestion that the state of Macao influences the state of mind of the radio operator:

Zijn geest had zijn heerlijk lichaam daar zolang laten liggen en was zelf op verkenning uitgegaan in de stad, die al een eeuw geleden begonnen was te sterven, nu nauwelijks meer bestond. [...] Chinese en Portugese stadsdelen gingen voortdurend in elkaar over, zo innig gemengd als het bloed van beide rassen in de aderen der Macaensers. (p.135/6)²⁴

Although he is attracted to Macao, the radio operator decides to leave since

Macao represents 'het rustig, rottend verleden' (the quiet, rotting past) which he shook off during his fight in the cathedral at the end of his spell as Camoës. The past is rejected, the present affirmed, and the future looked to: the novel ends with the radio operator preparing to embrace the 'other' culture and enter China. He wishes to be absorbed into China's millions of people: 'Een der nimmer bewusten van de miljoenen te zijn - welk een geluk; of als dat onbereikbaar is, een die alles weet, alles achter zich heeft en toch voortleeft' (p.148) (To be one of the millions and unaware of it - what happiness, or if that is unattainable, one who knows all, has it all behind him and yet lives on).

The most striking contrast between Camoës and the radio operator is that the former shows no interest in Chinese culture. To do so, like Pedro Velho, would be to have become an enemy of the Portuguese. Camoës's response to his journey into the Chinese interior is to withdraw into himself, thus rejecting all cultures whether European Portuguese, colonial Portuguese or Chinese. All three are represented as cruel and inhuman in different ways, a stark contrast with the feminine culture which attracts Camoës and provides him with a haven on the Ilha Verde where he is cared for by Pilar and her *amah*. It is clear in the novel that the feminine is closely connected to poetry: it is Pilar who preserves Camoës's manuscript for some five years while he is absent on the Chinese embassy, and who returns it to him when he has retired to the cave. Both Camoës and the radio operator ultimately choose a non-European identity. Camoës's ordeal leaves him with a residual identity as poet - but nowhere does Slauerhoff's text remind the reader of Camoës's *Lusiades*, an epic poem which constructs a Portuguese national story, providing a focus for national identity. And the radio operator takes the conscious decision to enter the other culture.

In conclusion, *Het verboden rijk* thematizes cultural identity, rejecting history as

a formative influence because it belongs to a community who can use it to marginalise individuals. The text itself abandons the quasi-authoritative historical narrative of the prologue for the dual narrative of past and present. The past is a powerful influence when encountered, or lived, by an individual. It liberates, enabling the individual to move on towards exploring a new culture, no longer a forbidden realm. In its portrayal of the early colonists as brutish and ruthless in their treatment of the 'other', whether it be the Chinese, the feminine, or the poet, the text condemns European colonial culture, and through the character of the rootless radio operator chooses encounter with the other culture.

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