Vicious portrait of landed gentry

Louis Ferron

The Adulterous Grass

In *The Adulterous Grass* Louis Ferron traces the tarnished history of the Van Lookerens, a family of 'textile barons' in the Achterhoek, a splendid, ancient, country area on the border between the Netherlands and Germany. Ferron begins his story around 1910, and continues it to the present day, when the youngest scion of the noble dynasty, called Eduard like his father and grandfather before him, is left in penury. Unlike his ancestors he does not live in the castle of Enghuizen itself, but in the hayloft of the coach-house. His parents' house has meanwhile – *o tempora o mores* – been transformed into an appalling conference centre.

Eduard van Lookeren is plagued by melancholy. As a young man he had high-flown ideas about his future status as master of Enghuizen. He wanted to remain loyal to the 'granite-hewn tradition' of his family. But soon he was forced to ask himself: loyal to what? There was some mystery about his family, some deep secret in the past that he could not unravel, until, during the Second World War, the Germans occupied the area, and the Prussian junker Von Trescow appeared on the scene.

This Trescow was made of different stuff from the tin-pot textile barons. He belong not to the minor landed gentry, but embodied 'the aristocracy of the mind'. He introduced Eduard to poets like Trakl, Hölderlin and Rilke and enchanting painters like Mantegna, Piero della Francesca and Nicholas Poussin, and he held a mirror up to Eduard, through Poussin's painting 'Narcissus and Echo'. He showed him who he really was: a homosexual, whose origins were based on lies, deceit and adultery. Eduard was branded once and for all as the 'barren heir of a doomed dynasty'.

In *The Adulterous Grass* Ferron again shows himself a full-blown Romantic. Tresckow is a true hero, with a love of things military. And in the novel art serves as a 'dam against decay'. But what applied to Tresckow's favourite poets, also applies to Ferron. Though his language may sometimes sparkle and seduce, and sometimes be gruff and recalcitrant – one must always be on one's guard. Nothing is what it seems to be , the grass is always adulterous. Ferrons' vicious and ingenious portrait of the landed gentry of the Achterhoek reveals both love and fury, and in the plot of his gripping narrative the two merge, swirling around each other till the fateful end.

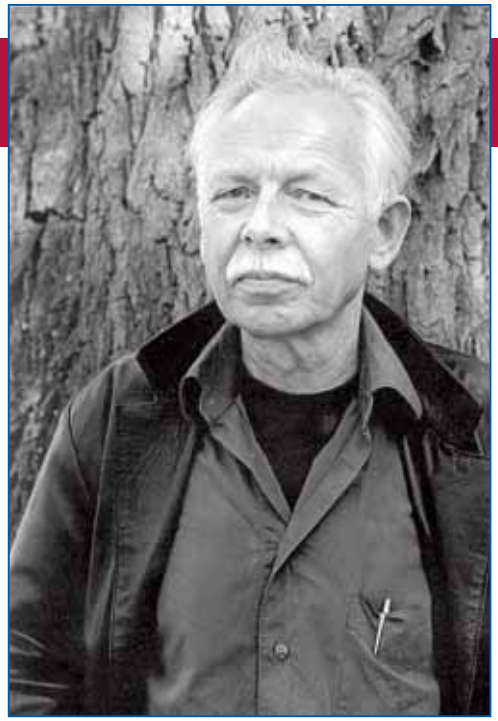

photo Roeland Fossen

Louis Ferron was born in Leiden in 1942, the son of a German Wehrmacht soldier and a Dutch mother. He made his debut in 1962 with the poem cycle *Kleine krijgskunde* (Small Theory of War). Since 1974 he has published many novels and essays. In addition he has translated novels by Baldwin and Nabokov. In 1978 he received the Multatuli Prize for *De keisnijder van Fichtenwald* (The Stone-Cutter of Fichtenwald). In 1990 he was awarded the AKO Literature Prize for *Karelische nachten* (Karelian Nights) and in 1994 *De Walsenkoning* (The Waltz King) won the F. Bordewijk Prize. In 2001 Ferron was awarded the Constantijn Huygens Prize for his novel *De oefenaar* (The Lay Preacher).

Het overspelige gras *awakens echoes of* Buddenbrooks *by Thomas Mann (...) An ingeniously composed narrative.*
NRC HANDELSBLAD

There is something unmistakably heroic in the doggedness with which Ferron, full of grit and love, stands up for these small-part players in his deeply personal Achterhoek.
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An interview with Louis Ferron

Writing Isn't All Fun and Games
Louis Ferron on modernity, loyalty and traditions

by Janet Luis (22 Feb. 2002), NRC Handelsblad)
translated by Steve Leinbach

The new book by Louis Ferron is set among the aristocracy of the Eastern Netherlands. He admires their ties to tradition and soil. "With the help of modern methods I'm attempting to work my way backwards in time," says the writer.

From his house on the outskirts of Haarlem, Louis Ferron has almost the same view of the city that Ruysdael did all those years ago when he painted his View of Haarlem. Ferron likes to imagine that Ruysdael's easel stood exactly on that piece of bleaching ground where much later his house would be built. He has a love-hate relationship with Haarlem. He has lived there, with a few interruptions, almost his whole life. He uses the city as a source of inspiration, but then he will disparage it, often in a rather witty way, in novels like *De walsenkoning* (The Waltz King, 1993), *Een aap in de wolken* (An Ape in the Clouds, 1995) and *De oefenaar* (The Lay Preacher, 2000). In addition to these autobiographically-tinted and regional picaresque novels, he also writes a weightier and more stately sort of prose, which might be called historical, inspired by Thomas Mann, as he has said himself. In these so-called German novels, like *Gekkenschemer* (Madmen's Twilight, 1974), *De stierenoffer* (The Sacrificial Bull, 1975) and *Turkenvespers* (Turkish Vespers) (1977), he widens his scope and tries to depict some aspect of history, often from the period before or during World War II.

His new novel, *The Adulterous Grass*, is not set in Haarlem, but it is not entirely German either. This time Ferron takes us with him to the parkland of the Achterhoek region of the Eastern Netherlands and introduces us to the local aristocracy, the textile barons as they are scornfully called: the Hardenbergs, the Van Nispens and Latums and the Van Kessenichs. But above all he zooms in on the Van Lookerens and their somewhat dirty family secrets. A rural estate called Enghuizen, a fallen elm tree, a servant, Eduard, the youngest head of the Van Lookeren family, and a German officer play important roles in the family history Ferron dishes up and which is set mainly during the war. There is plenty of drama – as well as humour.

Ferron is not the first writer to regard himself as a failed composer. Lacking musical talent, he unleashes his compositional gifts on language. He is only satisfied with a new book if, as he sees it, it is a literary symphony or sonata. Now sixty, he can look back on an oeuvre of almost forty titles, which was awarded the Constantijn Huygens Prize a few months ago. It comprises poems, novellas, essays, plays and novels. When asked if he is satisfied with his work up to this point, he answers with a whole-hearted "no." It is the eternal complaint of writers. He still has not written that one book, the brilliant capstone to an oeuvre which will explain all other books and will in fact render all other books superfluous in one fell swoop. Moreover as he has

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gotten older, he cannot help but fear that there is too little time to realize the many plans he still has. He does not feel the least bit old, but of course he is getting on in years, and that occupies his thoughts more than he would like.

"Take that dog," he says, pointing to the animal who is trotting tirelessly through the house. "I bought him not long ago with the strange idea that he would be my last dog. An animal like that will live to be about twenty, so you can do the math. In the meanwhile I've resolved to outlive him, so I'll have to live till at least eighty, since, to cite the Matthew Passion: "Ich will mein Jesus selbst begraben." So Levi is Jesus; that's his name, Levi Leipheimer, after an American cyclist."

With The Adulterous Grass, have you taken a stab at writing the ultimate book?
That's something I aim for with every book, but in one way or another what comes out always falls short of what I had in mind. Though of course I hope this novel makes clear what I wanted to say. I've been carrying the idea around in my head for about ten years now. For a time I had a mobile home in the Achterhoek, not far from Castle Slangenburg. It was there, during long walks, that I hit upon the idea of writing a book about the landed gentry.

What was it about the gentry that interests you?
I have admiration for the beliefs that the gentry believe they should have. Their ties to traditions. Ties to the soil. All of that is in decline. The country mansions of yesteryear are now conference centers, or they house government offices, or they are open to the public. I think that's a shame. I would prefer to see them inhabited by the original owners, who would have to chase me off their property with a blast of buckshot, if necessary. I think back on that time with homesickness, a time in which the world seemed so much more orderly than now. I'm not so crazy about the present. I think it's all a real shambles. The squeaky wheels get the grease. I'm completely opposed to that. Whether the time of the aristocracy was so great for everyone is debatable. Naturally I believe chiefly in a self-created past in which I have the final word on things. For that reason you should mainly see my longing for the past as literary nostalgia. Incidentally, the Achterhoek textile barons don't get such favorable treatment from me. They are the new aristocracy, the upstarts who have managed to secure money and a position. I contrast this neo-aristocracy, which is represented here by Eduard, an opportunistic adolescent, with what I call the spiritual aristocracy: the Prussian aristocracy, in the person of Tresckow, a rural Junker.

Did you want to be an aristocrat yourself?
Oh no. I'm a commoner and I'm proud of that. But I had a deep-seated need to study the Prussian mentality by putting myself in the shoes of a Junker like Tresckow. I picked up a lot from B-authors like Ernst Wiechert and Benno von Mechow, books that nobody knows, but which I just ate up. The axe scene, which comes back again and again in my book, was borrowed almost literally from Wiechert, although here I give a twist to it. Prussia has a reputation of being a place that was dominated by a stiff, militaristic and bureaucratic mindset. But that's only one aspect of things.

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Another is loyalty, the sense of duty of the landed gentry, who tried to live according to Kant's categorical imperative. You haven't got two cents to rub together and yet you continue to do what you believe is your duty, by virtue of your ancestry. Loyal to the king, loyal to your conscience. Those are not bad qualities. The opposition to Hitler was also Prussian-oriented; that's another thing I'd like to draw people's attention to.

Nevertheless things don't go very well for the Junker…
Things don't go very well for anyone, I don't think, as my readers will be accustomed to from me. But it's true. Even with all his sense of duty, he still can't get by. He is a notorious homosexual, but doesn't give in to his feelings because that would be hedonistic and contrary to the family principles. By denying himself something, he hopes to reach a higher understanding. The conclusion is that so much self-control won't get you very far in this world. But I don't pass judgment in my book. I only allow certain moralities to clash.

The title is taken from *Aanzegging* (Notice) by Ida Gerhardt, a poem about a failed harvest, which announces a grain shortage in a somber tone. The only thing that will still grow on the field is adulterous grass.

I think that's a marvelous poem. Gerhardt has become the bard of the Achterhoek. To use an expression that's now forbidden: she was a Blut und Boden poet in that respect. She wrote about the bonds between man and soil. I still think that's impressive. She acts as a tuning fork for me, just as J.C. Bloem does. They establish for me a certain key, a melancholy one. Just like them, I'd prefer things to stay the way they were. A novel like this about the aristocracy is a way for me to indulge my conservatism a bit.

It is mainly foreign writers who serve as your models: Thomas Mann, Rilke, Hölderlin, Céline, Shakespeare, Celan, just to name a few. Besides Gerhardt and Bloem do you have any kindred spirits among Dutch writers?
From time to time I'll read [Simon] Vestdijk, whom I admire for his enormous psychological insight. But I have to say that I prefer to remember his books than to read them, because I'm afraid of being influenced too much by them. I share a pessimistic world view with [W.F.] Hermans. He has written important books, but I find him stylistically weak. In the past [Harry] Mulisch was a source of inspiration. I recognize his passion for mythologizing and of course his interest in German-speaking areas as well. But we are worlds apart in terms of attitude and mentality. Mulisch sees himself as a Goethe. I feel much more like a Heine. For me Goethe is too untouchable, too classical. Heine is a full-blooded Romantic, who places very strident effects alongside melancholy and sentimental ones. An unbalanced writer, but one who is deliberately and purposely unbalanced.

Do you have any thoughts on contemporary Dutch literature?
Last year I sat on the jury of one of those big prizes. For that I had to read hundreds of books. Most of the time I knew it all after three pages. There is a lot of reporting of

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daily life or cheap irony. A lot of modern navel-gazing too, albeit sometimes humorously or skillfully done. But I demand more of a book than skillfully done navel-gazing. In that sense I'm a nostalgist, but I am modern enough to think that literature is more interesting the more self-reflexive it is. Though I may yearn for the time in which my books are set, I am also very conscious of the fact that as a writer I am a man of the 21st century. I employ certain literary techniques. I am someone of the present day who is making a conscious choice for the past. With the help of modern methods I am attempting to work my way backwards in time. I also hope to encounter something similar in other writers. I want to see a literary game. For me the book that was head and shoulders above the rest in that respect was *De kameleon* (The Chameleon) by Paul Claes. It's hardly a moving book, but I think it's incomparably cleverly done. I can play along with his game, because I know what he's talking about. Literature does have to be about something, otherwise you end up with *Finnegan's Wake*, but in and of itself the story is not so important. A novel should refer primarily to itself, just as a piece of music does. The abstract structure is the foundation. A novel must be tightly composed, like a sonata, for example. Compared to what a composer does, it doesn't amount to much, but I still like to imagine that I approach writing like a composer.

Is it an enjoyable occupation?
Well…It's more that writing is something I can't help doing. Occasionally it can be pleasant, if you suddenly come up with a nice phrasing, or you combine two images and all of a sudden there's a spark. But 99% of it is toiling in the hope that that 1% of inspiration will be handed down to you from above. As you write you do get closer to it, but it's not your own accomplishment. Writing a novel isn't all fun and games, no more so than life itself. First I mull over an idea for a year and a half. Once I've got it completely worked out in my head, then I start writing. For six months I work very hard, 24 hours a day, so to speak. I always make two versions. Not on the computer – I think that's lazy – but on a typewriter. For me writing is still a physical activity. I started on an Underwood. At the time that was very modern. That's still how I do it, and I'll continue doing it that way until the end. With the second versions I polish up the composition until it's a well-constructed whole – in my own eyes, of course.

Are your efforts rewarded?
Not with sales, in any case. There's apparently a curse on me; even the Ako Prize for *Karelische nachten* (Karelian Nights) in 1990 didn't have much effect. Mind you, that wasn't such an easy book, I have to say. Even two editions is something of an achievement for me. A prize will result in a third edition at most. But ach, the way I write is not going to be a money-making venture. I write for a small public; I know that in advance. I am glad that, with government support, I can afford that luxury. In this way I'm doing my part to take art further, I think.

Sample translation from

The Adulterous Grass **by Louis Ferron (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2002)**

Translated by Steve Leinbach

Brother of grandfather	Grandfather	
Oscar van Lookeren	Eduard van Lookeren x	Aleide van Kessenich
(1876-1947)	(1865-1910)	(1866-1950)
son:	Father	
Oscar van Lookeren	Eduard van Lookeren x	Agathe Barmentloo
(1894-1953)	(1896-1962)	(1898-1960)
	Son	
	Eduard van Lookeren	
	(1924-?)	
	Daughter	
	Agathe van Lookeren	
	(1926-?)	
	Jakob	
	(1879-1960)	

Part I

1

"It's not as if you can hold it back," a still young Jakob had said of it later.

On a clear late summer's day around noontime his employer was struck by a falling tree. It was at Enghuizen Manor and little Eduard had seen it happen. First he had observed an almost imperceptible vibration in the crown of the elm. Then he had seen how the crown began to shake ever more violently, whereupon the majestic tree appeared to start turning on its own axis, only to come crashing down in a single pitiless movement and bury Eduard's father, amid the terrifying creaking of breaking branches and the rustling of leaves, a sound which filled the air like the mighty blast of a pipe organ.

Pursing his lips, which were still moist and unnaturally red from the blackberries he had just consumed, little Eduard had observed this, and rather than experiencing a rising feeling of panic, he had been astonished at the naturalness with which this drama had taken place. And the thing that lodged itself most firmly in his memory: he had been wearing a little sailor suit, as was then the custom among boys under twelve. There, in the middle of the bocage, where people knew nothing of the sea.

More curious than distressed, Eduard had run across the lawn to the still swaying mountain of leaves, which made a slight, but sharply accented creaking noise at unexpected moments. Somewhere beneath the foliage he could see his father's legs sticking out, clad in riding breeches and boots. Jakob stood there somewhat sheepishly. He was still holding the long-handled axe in his hands, staring at its blade, which flashed fiercely in the sunlight.

"It was sick," said Jakob, "and sick trees have to be chopped down." Mr. Van Lookeren had told him that himself; this piece of wisdom had been accompanied by a story, the point of which had escaped Jakob, but it had nonetheless convinced him all the more of the profound insight his employer possessed into life's questions.

It hadn't spared him this death, Jakob had to admit. "So who's going to…?"

Eduard looked from the gleaming boots to the still sparkling axe blade and from there back to the boots. His first confrontation with death had been bloodless and that surprised him. With the back of his right hand he wiped off his lips. He squared his shoulders and had nearly jumped to attention and saluted, when he realized that the sailor suit now looked silly on him.

"There has to…they have to…" he stammered.

But Jakob had already laid the axe over his shoulder and began walking in the direction of "the house," as Enghuizen was known throughout the area.

At the funeral Eduard had worn his pair of first long pants. Because his mother had also understood that it was about time for the sailor suit to be retired. She had looked upon him with a gaze, in which he was unable to distinguish sorrow from pride.

"You are the head of the family now, Eduard."

The irony was lost on him. Not on his mother though. How else should one have interpreted the smile that had played around her lips as she made this remark? She could permit herself that irony too, as Eduard would later understand. The Van Kessenichs, from whom they descended, had their roots in a much more distinguished past than the Van Lookerens, who moreover had only risen to their current position fairly recently.

So he was the head of the family, was he? That was something that should be tested.

Almost stumbling over his words in a voice that was already beginning to break, he said: "Is Jakob…?"

"I don't ever want to hear that name again."

"But he couldn't help that…"

"An ass."

Jakob was hardly an ass. After all hadn't it been Jakob who had instilled in him what it meant to be head of the family and how that came about? And it was that same Jakob who, jumping from the one role to the other with the agility of an

athlete, had whittled toy soldiers for him from birch branches and imparted to him the principles of ballistics or, to be more precise, the chemistry that was the basis of ballistics: cream of tartar and flowers of sulfur and then a dash of saltpeter…Anyway, that whole world of mysteries that can make the childhood years into a truly grown-up adventure. Armed with that knowledge you could stand on your dignity.

"I want Jakob to come to work for us again."

"That's what you want?"

Eduard nodded.

"And you realize he'll then be confronted with his own folly for the rest of his life?"

This was the first time in his life that his mother had spoken to him as an adult. Any decision he would make from that point on would be one with far-reaching consequences. He felt it. In his temples. They throbbed. He brushed aside the lock of hair in front of his eyes and, in one inconspicuous movement, touched the vein on his right temple. A gesture of weakness which he has masterfully succeeded in masking. It might one day become his strongest character trait. It was enough to persuade his mother in any case. That nonchalant and yet so masculine gesture.

"Well, if you insist…" And after staring absently into the distance for a moment: "…in any case he's not a bad servant."

Old Eduard was buried in the family cemetery, a walled-in plot of land in the woods, a ten minute walk from the estate. A forest that had been planted only at the beginning of the previous century, for the timber. A lot of upright wood for the then-booming mining industry. In the meantime relative neglect meant that the forest had degenerated into a romantic tangle, which was at any rate a good spot to go hunting, a pastime on which young Eduard's father had spent the greater part of his time. You could easily imagine cheerful deer snouts peering over the wall to watch their former adversary disappear into the ground, but you did not, because Mrs. Van Lookeren, née Van Kessenich, would certainly not have appreciated it.

Like a masked, mysterious Nemesis she had stood there at the grave, watching closely to see who failed to pay her husband his due respect. After all it hadn't just been some silly accident that had claimed her husband's life, she had assured everyone who had inquired about it, with barely concealed smirks on their faces. Her husband had met his end like a true gentleman; that was the message she had impressed upon the curious.

"Standing, as befits a man. Steadfast in performing his duty."

And that duty had been none other than maintaining what in these turbulent times was worth maintaining more than ever. The house and its surrounding woods, meadows and fields. "The estate," she said, by way of emphasis, languidly placing her slender white hand on the shoulder of her son.

Upon seeing that tableau, old Count van Hardenburg, resident of the eponymous property just over the border, had brushed away a tear and mumbled something about kings and Kaisers being allowed to disappear but generals having to stay at their posts at all times, all the while staring intently at young Eduard, who was unaware of any military tradition in the family. Textile barons was what they were; the deafening noises of the mills was the closest they ever got to the roar of cannon fire. Uncle Oscar, the youngest brother of the deceased, a late arrival who had been present for that conversation, had ahemmed behind his hand, thereby rousing the permanent ire of his sister-in-law. This would become a problem for the young Eduard, who was close friends with his cousin, also named Oscar. Life was complicated enough as it was, and this practice did not make it any simpler: all sons were named after their fathers, from generation to generation, just as all daughters were named after their mothers. Sometimes, in eavesdropping on a conversation, you would not even know who was being talked about. On the other hand it made the world a bit more orderly; everything was bound up so closely, and it did not matter either if this or that activity was attributed to a junior or a senior. More than that, nothing whatsoever mattered. You felt as if you were lying on a bier, which rocked back and forth at a steady, unchanging pace. That could be a great support, especially when one had just lost his father, of all people. Indeed, little Eduard would make that insight into the

leitmotif of his life. It might also have been the reason that he had insisted on taking Jakob back. He had gotten to know the man as a young child, when Jakob, who was barely ten years older, had come to work for the family, fresh out of the village school.

There they were, standing at the grave. Eduard next to his mother, who looked beautiful and mysterious with her impassive, powdered face behind the dark veil. And all those aunts, great-aunts and whatever other ladies might have been present: all of them just as unmoved as his mother. And the uncles and great-uncles and other gentlemen, with their standing collars and, in the left eye of one of them, a monocle…That was someone from the Van Lookeren side of the family, who had evidently not yet mastered funeral etiquette. And as young as Eduard was, he could see that just as well as anybody else, since at the end of the day he was just as much his mother's son as his father's. At that moment he resolved summarily to forbid his future son to wear pince-nez or a monocle, something which, it would turn out, would no longer be necessary, since by that time the custom had deteriorated into a puerile affectation, which you only encountered among first year members of a fraternity. Or among playboys of course, but that was a race of people you were not supposed to know.

Eduard was standing to the left of his mother. The circumstances had pressed him so tightly against her that he thought he could feel the stiffeners of her corset through the wool fabric of her coat against his shoulder. It made him shiver, a reaction he ascribed to the words of the minister, who after all had been talking about the earthly vale of tears and how difficult it was to rise above it. The simple thought that all you had to do was stand under a falling tree, Eduard managed to suppress with all his might. He had understood his task as the head of the family. More than that. When he cast a furtive glance behind himself, where their servants stood crowded together in respectful attention, he glowed with pride. Because of his solitariness, they still treated him as the somewhat pathetic son of mijnheer, but from now on he would be the master of all their fates. Just as he had already decided over Jakob's fate, in a sense. Jakob, who naturally had

not dared to show himself at the funeral, because his rehabilitation had not yet taken place.

Eduard realized that he might have missed Jakob even more than his father. Once again a shiver coursed through his body. How cold the world was at a grave. It was best not to end up there.

"Already a fine young gentleman," said Uncle Oscar, who regarded his nephew with a look of approval, when everyone had assembled in the salon of Enghuizen after the funeral.

It was not an unpleasant get-together by any means. Eduard's mother seemed rather pleased with her status as a widow, which had drawn a curtain over what she had always tried with all her efforts to conceal: an atmosphere of mésalliance and cowardice, a feeling of "just good enough, but no better." And because she most definitely wanted to avoid Uncle Oscar – at least as far as propriety would allow – it required little effort on her part to engage in conversation mainly with her own family, during which she would take care to drop the slightest hint of condescension into her voice whenever the conversation touched upon the deceased. Not a Van Kessenich, to be sure, but still a huntsman who was respected throughout the Achterhoek , a man who in life hadn't even shied away from going ferreting with his tenant farmers every now and again, something you could only afford to do, after all, if the class differences were perfectly clear to all concerned.

"Ferreting," said that nuisance Oscar, butting into the conversation, "…that's a fancy word for rabbit poaching. But you can't very well call something poaching if it takes place under the watchful eye of the boss on his own estate."

With a certain relish in his voice he had explained the relevant technique. He didn't have to tell Eduard; he had done it often enough with Jakob. You sent a tame ferret down a rabbit hole and closed off the entrance, whereupon some time later the ferret would emerge on the other side of the hole with the rabbit in its teeth. But, Jesus, thought Eduard, how utterly crass to give a extended

explanation of that here, in this company. Now he suddenly understood why it was that his mother preferred to keep her brother-in-law at a distance.

There was more that Eduard learned that afternoon. Namely that he still had a great deal to learn. But to get that knowledge, he was fully prepared to attend the school of hard knocks. And somewhere, in one of the upper classes of that school, he would learn in passing the reason he had not really grieved over his father's death, and at the same time he would also learn not to give it another moment's thought. Anyone who worried about such matters was a sissy, and the Van Lookerens were the salt of the earth, guardians of a tradition that had been carved out of granite, a tradition which stood for everything that was in danger of being stifled by an overactive emotional life.

Puer, pueri, puero…oh, there was nothing to it. What Eduard really enjoyed were the daily rides to Doetinchem and back. Through a landscape, over which he was truly lord and master, all the way to Hummelo, and where he could at least imagine this was the case on the stretch of road which led past Kruisberg Forest. Whenever the weather permitted, he would sit next to Jakob on the coach box of the gig. Jakob, who now had to address him in the formal and, preferably in the third person, as "the young master." The latter was naturally a game that they played with a certain irony. But did the young master know that irony could conceal an almost painful yearning for that which could no longer be recovered?

As it was, Jakob's manner of speaking was enough to make you make you burst out laughing. No, Eduard had to phrase it differently: it was the language of that very fragile and vulnerable love which, as far as the Netherlands was concerned, could only still exist to the east of the river IJssel, which marked the beginning of Asia, according to Treitschke.

"Ever heard of Treitschke, Jakob?"

They had just ridden onto the Keppel Road; from there you could see Groot Zande, where Uncle Oscar lived.

Jakob had shrugged his shoulders.

"A famous German historian."

“If the young master says so…” He had bent over and cracked the whip over the back of the horse.

“No, Jakob, not if the young master says so. Then you ask if I wouldn’t mind explaining it to you, in detail. And do you know why, Jakob? Because people like you ought to be very eager to learn. You people should keep us on our toes, as it were, because otherwise we’ll end up like my father ended up, as an oafish landowner whose only heroic deed…”

Jakob had grown accustomed to these little talks. Indeed, he had developed tactics with which he unfailingly succeeded in provoking them. At any random moment, even if Eduard had no need for it. Or if, on the contrary, he was in search of moments of intimacy, which he felt he was more likely to find with Jakob than with his mother.

Like that time he had wanted to tell Jakob about Agathe, a girl from the vicinity of Neede who lived with a great-aunt in Doetinchem where she was a class below Eduard at the gymnasium. Not about the fact that she was a true Barmentloo – an Achterhoek family whose ancestors could be traced back to the Middle Ages. It was something very different he had wanted to talk to Jakob about, something that was connected to what Jakob had taught him years ago. But the servant did not fall for that anymore. The puer, pueri…had come between them – the puella, puellae…whatever – and let us not forget the fact that it had been Eduard who insisted that Jakob come back to work for them again. And then there was another thing. Something only Jakob knew, something which had elevated his capacity for discretion to almost seigniorial heights. Something in the twilight area between master and servant where the hybrids and phantasmagoria hopped around as merrily as bunny rabbits in the world of ordinary mortals.

So, if it rained on the way to school, Eduard chose the shelter of the hood more and more often so that he could watch Jakob’s muscular back. When Eduard passed the tenth grade, albeit barely, he made a definitive choice for the passenger’s seat.

And did anything ever happen between him and that Barmentloo girl? If Eduard were honest, he would have to confess that it had been a whim, inspired more or less by the intoxicating atmosphere of the classroom, where his school friends had whispered all sorts of things in his ear; sometimes having to do with themselves, something projecting their own secret desires onto Agathe. For Agathe was a pretty girl, almost a woman already. And – you could see it in her gaze – already so much more mature than the boys. When the whispering about her biological proportions began to increase, Eduard hardly dared to show his face to her again, though something like a comradeship had developed between them. He had even stayed over a few times in Neede, and Agathe in turn had spent a few weekends at Enghuizen. Primarily at the instigation of Eduard's mother to be sure, but still…

"All that fuss about women," he boasted to his friends, what was the point of it all? As far as he was concerned you would do better to spend a night spying on fallow deer, ultimately to bring one down with a well-aimed shot. And, if you were still so fixated on "all that biological stuff": one long slit from the throat to the abdomen and a quivering mass gushed out, and you only had to stick your hand underneath it and you felt the still warm blood flowing between your fingers. "That, gentlemen, is life."

By now his comrades were much too old to laugh at him openly for such pronouncements. After all the one had already done it with the maid, while the other had been given an official introduction by his father in an Arnhem brothel.

Well, they could say what they liked. In the meantime Eduard had bought himself a bicycle and in his free time cycled around all the estates in the area. From "Keppel" to "De Baak," from "Hackfort" to "Hardenburg." Where he sucked in the various family histories like so many pieces of evidence of his own excellence, or at any rate, that of his own family. Not that there was any difference, of course, since as an individual one was nothing more than what one's own ancestors allowed.

And speaking of families and ancestry…Horse breeding, that was definitely something for him. Yes, once he had his degree, in whatever vague subject, then

he would breed horses. He had read breathtaking stories about it. About Junkers from Mecklenburg and East Prussia who had, as it were, sprayed the barren landscape of their forefathers with the seed of Trakehners and Hannoverians, of Oldenburgers and – how exotic – full-blooded Arabians. Rather than the corny love stories about Parmesan Carthusian nuns and Norman hysterics, he read dry breeding records, for example Die mecklenburgische Jahrbücher für Pferdezucht, or the Pomeranian or Mazurian equivalents. And if Agathe wanted to lay any claim to his interest, then she would at least have to share his primary obsession.

Someone who did not fail to notice that was Aleide, Eduard's mother, who since the death of her husband suddenly seemed to have taken an interest in everything. She had even let herself be talked into viewing a demonstration of ferreting, the uncontested specialty of Jakob.

Yes, the two of them had since made up. Wounds inflicted in the countryside healed somewhat more quickly than elsewhere; that was a time-honored law.

Naturally Eduard ended up going to Leiden to study law, and it was there that he lost his virginity. It happened as follows: between Oude Vest Canal and Mare Canal lay a neighborhood which you did best to avoid. It smelled of unwashed linen, perspiring armpits and worse. It was a neighborhood in which the dregs of two centuries of moral and material decay had accumulated. A syphilitic system of alleyways and corridors which would have succumbed to itself years ago had it not been supported by the gentlemen students. And now a rumor was making the rounds that a fresh wind was blowing through the neighborhood. That is to say, a wind that was, if possible, even more asphyxiating that the one that was already there. A breeze that smelled vaguely of bonbons and French hair lotion. Wafting in from Belgium, where a war was raging, bloodier than any that had ever taken place before. Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands had fled over the Belgian border; they were taken into internment camps where the discipline was, if possible, even stricter than that which the enemy had subjected them to. Anyone who loved his life, sought refuge

elsewhere. As a man you had few options. The weaker sex, by contrast, knew of ways that were unfathomable for a man, because they were those very ways that led to his heart. That heart which is hidden behind his fly. No one had to explain that to these Belgian women. With that half-French gibberish of theirs they had understood enough of those French novelettes to figure out what their tastes were. And thus a number of them ended up between the Mare and Oude Vest. The rumor proved to be true.

And though you could dream of Jakob's broad, muscular back, of blood lines and nervously quivering jugulars, you also understood that you could only permit yourself that luxury if you also fulfilled that most banal of all dreams. Come to think of it, what was so banal about it, if that dream was indispensable for preserving the name of the Van Lookerens? Whether he wanted to or not, Eduard had to enter the depths. And if the idea of going to the whores of Arnhem had been anathema to him – that vulgar dialect, the chance of running into a girl who might be the daughter of one of their tenant farmers – here he had been given the chance to put the whole thing in a cosmopolitan perspective, an angle which was indispensable for those who wanted to assess the things in terms of their ties to the soil.

The first thing he did was get good and drunk at Minerva. That was part of the ritual, as his friends had told him. Afterwards he would have preferred to go back to his room and jerk off, as he did most of the time if he had been hanging around the club. But now he had to cross the Galgenwater, the Gallows Water. He had not invented this route. It was a topographical fact.

"Tant mieux," he called out overconfidently, doffing his hat with an exaggerated flourish when he passed the Hartebrug Church. Nothing in that city was without meaning. But once he reached the Mare and then turned left, his heart sank into his boots. The sporadic gas lamps bathed the neighborhood in a macabre light, from which the deathly pale face of a woman would emerge now and then, looking at him mockingly with kohl-rimmed eyes. He lacked the good Haltung of a neighborhood regular; they could see that at once. "Bonbons and French hair lotion," he mumbled, "bonbons and French hair lotion," and he tried

to imagine the corresponding smells. And verily, he felt something rub against his fly, and his gait became a touch more self-assured already. And when he tried to imagine the word "prolapse" – not in letters so much as its content (gleaming pink and light purple protuberances) – there was no holding it back. He leapt upon one of the ghosts that haunted this neighborhood, and, more cheerfully than he had expected and perhaps hoped, she took him by the arm and coaxed him along to her room.

It turned out that she was not a Belgian. She was just one of those Leiden tarts who had not stopped at her first student. Without much ado she hiked up her skirts, fell backwards onto the grubby box bed and knocked invitingly on the mattress. "Come on, kid, you don't have to be afraid when mother's around."

It was the first time in his life that he had seen a woman's genitals, and he looked down, ashamed.

"Don't be embarrassed, cutie, it's only a pussy, just like the one that pooped you out."

That was just the point…And then the ordeal with his fly…two flies, as if he had to pull himself out of the depths of himself.

"In general," said the woman, "the gentlemen have somewhat less difficulty with it."

She said it so impertinently that he fled the blood rise to his cheeks in anger. That filthy slut deserved a good smack in the face. Two smacks, left and right. So that the blood spurted out of her ears.

With trembling hands he undid his suspenders and, in one gesture, slid his trousers and underpants over his hips and threw himself on her, wailing. He felt it flow out of him even before he entered her.

But everything was going to be all right, she had said to him when he had turned away from her with tears in his eyes. She would make it up to him that very evening, she had comforted him, if he'd just pull himself together a bit. And surely money wasn't a problem, was it? She could see very well that mijnheer didn't come from the street. "Fine blood," she had said, "maybe just a little too blue."

The week after that he had appeared at Enghuizen with more swagger in his step than ever before. His mother, at that very moment engrossed in a bunch of wildflowers, had looked up in surprise. Had it finally happened? She had been worried about her son. Because, fair was fair, although he was his father's son, there was most definitely something abnormal about him. For a short time she had even feared that he might have been harboring scholarly aspirations. All that business with horses went well beyond what was expected of the landed gentry. But, hardly reassured by his choice to study lawyering, her doubts were revived by his lack of interest in the female sex. With all the more fanaticism however she had kept up her contacts with the Barmentloos. Although it was only because she wanted to banish what she feared as far from her thoughts as possible. And as far as Agathe was concerned, she sensed faultlessly with all the women's intuition she possessed that Eduard's problematic interest in the girl only irritated Agathe.

Aleide had completely unraveled the family tree of the Barmentloos. For a woman who had herself been brought up with family trees, this was no problem. So that she could also point out to Agathe's parents that, although the genealogical background of her late husband might be somewhat dubious, this shortcoming was more than made up for by her own family history. They were Van Kessenichs, after all, and via all sort of alchemistic combinations related to the Hardenbergs, who for hundreds of years had produced bailiffs and reeves on the other side of the border, where, as was universally known, they placed higher demands in matters of lineage than here. And family lines could even be drawn to the Droste-Hülshoffs from the area around Münster. Yes indeed, the same family as the famous poetess, although she did not want to emphasize that too much. By which she wanted to say that, as regards her share in the eternal waltz of the families, the blood, to be sure, might set the tempo, but the role of the muses surely mustn't be underestimated.

"You sound like an old military bandmaster," old Barmentloo had ventured jokingly. But Aleide had responded with such a withering look, that from then on

he rid his mind of the idea of putting even the slightest obstacle in the way of her attempts at matchmaking.

She looked at her boy in admiration. The world was a shambles, and yet there the lad stood, undaunted: dressed in the latest fashion, gleaming patent leather shoes, a cravat, which was perhaps a bit too cheerful; but all right, he was a student and moreover that confirmed her story about that poetess – what was her name again? And then that striking head. So utterly her father. That golden blond hair, though it was now forced into a smooth helmet, which curved tightly over the skull. And then those eyes, steel gray with a hint of green. A hint of sensuality, she thought. But above all, that jaw, that came sailing up towards you like the tremendous bow of a ship. Her son. Whom she had paid her first tribute to when she had consented to allow that village boy from Hummelo, Jakob, to come to work for them again. A tribute to him, yes of course, whatever underlying motives might also have played a role. Her son, to whom she would continue to pay tribute, now that he had proven himself to be a man. For, oh, she was quite certain of it now, as if she had read the bouquet of wildflowers Jakob had picked like an oracle: her son had shown himself a son. He had proved to be capable of begetting sons who in turn would beget sons, and so on until infinity. So that the worst of it was over now – the shortage of food, the mutinies in distant Russia, the clouds of gas drifting along the horizon – and in no time it would shrivel up to the proportions of a peccadillo, committed in the exuberance of youth, and in the end nothing more than evidence of the everlasting force of a strong family, of which her son was a worthy representative. Her Eduard was a man, and he would marry Agathe. Upon her death, she, Aleide, would know herself to be secure in the warm, nurturing lap of tradition.

2

He sat in front of the window with a three day old newspaper on his lap. He did not think that subscribing to a daily paper was worth the trouble any more. He did not have the money for it, as a matter of fact. Once a week or thereabouts, if

the memories threatened to overwhelm him, he would shuffle over to the conference center and ask the concierge for "something readable." The concierge, who knew the ins and outs of the matter, would then give him a newspaper from the previous Saturday, a nice thick pack with supplements so that he knew for certain that it would last "the old man" the week.

No, the world had not become a happier place. Thus he had read, after a slumber that seemed to last for ages, that the parents of a baby that had died in 1969 had accused the University Hospital in Groningen of not cremating their child's remains but sending them to a waste disposal plant to be incinerated. It certainly wasn't the first time he had come across a mini-massacre like this. It was actually what followed that had caught his attention. "This will never happen again," he had read with growing astonishment. In the future the hospital in question would give its "emotional refuse", as the spokesman had termed it according to the paper, a proper cremation. Whereas during his childhood you had to be degraded from man to louse before being consigned to destruction, now you had to have reached at least the status of "emotional refuse." It was a form of progress, whatever way you looked at it. But he had never really believed in all that stuff about progress.

His childhood home was now a conference center. The stables, which had been built by his father, had been torn down and bulldozed to make a parking lot for the conference center, where they no doubt considered the definition of "emotional refuse." On the location of the elm under which his grandfather had perished and where his grandmother had had a bronze statue of Nimrod built, in memory of her husband, there now stood a construction of stainless steel and Plexiglas. That was, the concierge had once told him, the symbol of the concept "corporate identity." Nimrod had been a mighty hunter, but who wanted to hear about that in this day and age? People nowadays were even stupider than he himself seemed to be. He, who hadn't the faintest idea what the concept "corporate identity" meant!

The world had changed in other ways as well. It had already been a short forty years since good old Jakob had died. Jakob, who had remained faithful to

him till the bitter end of his innocence. Fortunately, Jakob hadn't lived to see Enghuizen in the hands of new owners, who had allowed his boss to retire to the coach house with a small annuity from the scant profit that had remained after the debts had been paid off. He had been allowed to live here. A favor. Misfortunes often come in groups. The lion's share of the fortune had been squandered away by his father. His mother, who was said to be a strong woman from a strong family, had died far too young from a heart ailment. Not long after that, his father, who had sunk deeper and deeper into the past that haunted him, had followed her. To the walled cemetery in the woods. Which was now, as a monument, in the hands of the city government. "With a view to recreational use," as it had said in the deed of transfer; it seemed that anyone could let his dog out there, or copulate, if they chose to.

There Eduard sat now, on the second floor of the coach house facing the window, in front of which hung an old horse blanket, stretched a third of the distance to the top in order to keep out the draft. Since it was cold; it was the dead of winter, and even on its highest setting the oil heater was not capable of warming the room adequately .

He had tossed the paper aside, onto the stack of its predecessors, and thought about his sister Agathe, who had looked so much like her mother. The same pronounced nose, the same exotic, black hair, the same Nike-like profile. A hockey girl in body and soul, although to his taste she had always moved with the grace of her stick. Nevertheless she was his sister. And he had no idea where in the world she was living. After mourning the death of Uncle Oscar for a few years, she had taken control of her life. That is to say that she hit the road. To Australia, it was said, in the company of a dissipated English lord. No one however knew the particulars.

Eduard looked out at the meadows which were in the grip of low-lying fog, and in the distance he heard the sounds, deformed by the mist, of the traffic between Doetinchem and Zutphen. Towns that he had not visited in years. He had spent his school years in Doetinchem; in Zutphen he had been a law clerk. One of his predecessors in the latter position had been the poet Bloem. It had once been a

source of comfort for him. For he loved the poet of futility, a fate to which Eduard seemed to be condemned even then. But even his love for the poet had not been able to prevent his decline. The reason must be, he had thought from time to time, that his own poetic ability was too poorly developed to arrange life as he saw fit. But the fact that there were other reasons lurking behind this reason was something he carefully managed to exclude from his considerations. What a bloody mess it all was. And yet: if poets – as it was said about Bloem – could be found in a broom closet with a bottle of gin, then Eduard's new hayloft accommodations were not so crazy, all things considered. If you could open your nostrils very, very wide, you could sometimes still smell it: the scent of the past, when the horses still stood in their stalls and in the space below, next to the Wanderer two-seater, there was still the gig in which Jakob had driven his father to school all those years ago.

It was understood that he would study law; by that time that had become a family tradition, and tradition was, if nothing else, a family tradition. But something petulant in him, caused by God knows what – he had always found psychological snooping to be utter claptrap – had made him decide to take more than just a perfunctory interest in his course of study. He had wanted to become a legal historian and, more particularly, a specialist in Roman law, for the very reason that it did not tolerate the slightest trace of psychological explanation. Legal arithmetic, which was even distantly related to the eternal genetic bookkeeping of his father and his horses.

"If that's any comfort to you, pa."

"We Van Lookerens have never had much to do with books, let alone with Romans. We are people of the land. I would have preferred you chose to join the cavalry if you felt such a need to run away."

"They use tanks nowadays, pa"

"Tanks…tanks…all that modern nonsense. Have you ever seen a tank fucking?"

In remembering that Eduard had been unable to suppress a smile. That more or less light-hearted argument had been one of the last happy moments in his life.

He had become a knight of the pandects, a devourer of digests. Ulpanianus held no secrets from him, and for him even the glossators of the late Middle Ages spoke a clearer language than his fellow students. They preferred to speak the language of the liberators, a braying sort of English which, in Eduard's opinion, was more reminiscent of mating calls.

He wrote his thesis on the mancipatio as described by Gaius, who, with reference to the Law of the Twelve Tables, observes how the object that is to be transferred changes owners by a symbolic laying-on of hands. He had graduated cum laude as well. That doctoral examination. But then his resistance to what had been pursuing him had broken down. He worked on his dissertation for another four years – something which, from a financial perspective, he could easily afford to do then …and in every footnote he saw an accusatory outstretched finger…

The war years had left their mark on him; there was no escaping it. Well, what about practicing law professionally? His knowledge of civil law was a joke.

"If we're going to have to teach to you the basics, Mr. Van Lookeren…"

Very naïvely he had voiced the view that with his specialized knowledge he could lend some depth to the gentlemen's pleas, rejoinders and replications.

"Depth, Mr. Van Lookeren…who cares about depth? A case has to be won."

"And ethics?"

Then they had laughed him out the door. And, still standing in the doorway, he had felt so humiliated that he was prepared to sink even deeper in order to undo the humiliation. He had mentioned his name, that of his family, even that of his mother, Barmentloo and – he was on a roll, he didn't care anymore – that of the Van Kessenichs, yes, even that of the Hardenbergs. He could not have handled the situation more stupidly. They had arched their eyebrows and coughed politely behind their hands.

During one interview a prospective employer had whispered to his confrere that it might have been wise to call in the political investigation service.

“Oh, no…they’ve already abolished that, of course,” he had said, turning to Eduard with a grin. “But watch what you say, young man. Even here in the Achterhoek we now know which way the wind is blowing.”

It was a cowardice that was familiar to him by now . But that sort of knowledge did not bring him any closer to a job.

Why not just follow in the footsteps of his father? With the principles of the mancipatio you could manage a rural estate very well. And with the tricks that he had learned from old Jakob, you could even bring an estate that had seen better days to a state of reasonable prosperity. Over his dead body, so to speak!

In desperation he then applied for work at the office of the public prosecutor in Zutphen. A name apparently still mattered there.

And because neither he nor his father dared show himself in the Wanderer, which was still sitting in the coach house. Henceforth he would bicycle past Toldijk and Baak to Zutphen and back every day. In the course of his trip, between the Baak Bridge and Vierakker, he would ride right alongside the IJssel; only on the other side of river, so his father had taught him, did the West truly begin. He, Eduard, seemed to be doomed to live in Asia forever.

Rain, hail, fog…it did not matter. Astride his metal steed, his trouser clips fastened, heading to Zutphen, to Bloem’s broom closet. Or in the scorching heat: always neatly attired in his dark blue suit, his tie tied tightly around his neck. Peddling through the Asia of his childhood years, that continent which had once had him in its stranglehold, which would never again let go of him.

It was the years of the reconstruction. Even in the Achterhoek the dirt roads were asphalted or at least given clinker brick paving. The tenant farmers became independent farmers. Who was interested in a fine trotter, an elegant saddle horse?

Things were going badly with his father’s stud farm. They had to sell off the one horse after another. Reparcelling. The primeval bocage, embroidered on the map in fine cross-stitching by generations of Hardenbergs, Barmentloos, van Nispens and Lathums, and ultimately by the Van Lookerens, had been wiped

away in one rough stroke. Large-scale agriculture. Grain and feed silos replaced the steeples, which had in fact already been leveled by stray bombs. Eduard saw it happen. With those steel-gray eyes, which he was said to have inherited from his mother's side.

He saw the world split and fall apart. He felt pressure from his father, who pleaded wordlessly for him to intervene, to put an end to this decay. Not because he, the father, would gain any material benefit from it, but because, when the time did come, he wanted to be buried in his own soil. For even though, a short distance away in Asia, the cry of the revolutionaries might have been, "Junkerland in eigen Hand," he was playing out his own revolution in his mind: that "eigen Hand" was his hand.

Old Hardenburg had stoically remarked that the processes of decay moved more quickly than those of creation and had handed over his property to the new government, who had kindly permitted him to continue living there, as long as he opened his gardens to the public. But Hardenberg had always been essentially a weakling. There were too many black bends running through his coast of arms. Van Lookeren's son had to prevent them from ending up like the Hardenbergs one day. As a matter of fact, did Eduard know that Hackfort was now in the hands of a new owner? "An Amsterdam speculator, it seems."

With that remark Eduard saw the face of his father crumble just as quickly as the world around him. And he, the future head of the family, was unable to hold it back. Unwilling to hold it back.