

“The War does not Exist” (Inner) Conflict in *The House of Refuge* by Willem Frederik Hermans

Emilia de Feyter

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Título / Titre / Titolo

“La guerra no existe”. Conflicto (interior) en *The House of Refuge* de Willem Frederik Hermans

“La guerre n'existe pas”. Conflit (intérieur) dans *The House of Refuge* de Willem Frederik Hermans

“La guerra non esiste”. Conflitto (interno) in *The House of Refuge* di Willem Frederik Hermans

Abstract / Resumen / Résumé / Riassunto

When the narrator of Willem Frederik Hermans' novella discovers *The House of Refuge*, he says: “The war does not exist (Hermans, 1952, 7)”. The following analysis demonstrates that in *The House of Refuge*, conflict does exist on several inter-related levels. On the one hand, there is the outer conflict of the war, which is inevitable and destroys the illusionist notion of order. This illusion of order could be represented as a utopia. Moreover, there are spatial oppositions, conflicting with each other: nature versus culture and dryness versus water. On the other hand, inner conflict disturbs the mind of the unreliable narrator, who struggles with the psychological conflict of the death drive and who has existentialist and absurd thoughts, who isolates himself from society, who tries to change his identity and who denies that the war exists. This modernist investigation on conflict contributes to the understanding of what soldiers went through during World War II. This analysis is therefore devoted to the recognition of the post-war work *The House of Refuge* in a broader context.

Cuando el narrador de la novela corta de Willem Frederik Hermans descubre *The House of Refuge*, dice: “La guerra no existe (Hermans, 1952, 7)”. El siguiente análisis demuestra que en *The House of Refuge*, el conflicto existe en varios niveles interrelacionados. Por un lado, está el conflicto externo de la guerra, que es inevitable y destruye la noción ilusionista del orden. Esta ilusión de orden podría representarse como una utopía. Además, existen oposiciones espaciales que entran en conflicto entre sí: naturaleza frente a cultura y sequedad frente a agua. Por otro lado, el conflicto interno perturba la mente del narrador poco confiable, que lucha con el conflicto psicológico de la pulsión de muerte y tiene pensamientos existencialistas y absurdos, que se aísla de la sociedad, que intenta cambiar su identidad y que niega que la guerra exista. Esta investigación modernista sobre el conflicto contribuye a la comprensión de lo que atravesaron los soldados durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Por lo tanto, este análisis está dedicado al reconocimiento del trabajo de posguerra *The House of Refuge* en un contexto más amplio.

Quand le narrateur de Willem Frederik Hermans découvre *La Maison du Refuge*, il dit: “La guerre n'existe pas (Hermans, 1952, 7)”. L'analyse suivante démontre que dans *La Maison du Refuge*, le conflit existe à plusieurs niveaux interdépendants. D'une part, il y a le conflit extérieur de la guerre, qui est inévitable et qui détruit la notion illusionniste de l'ordre. Cette illusion d'ordre pourrait être représentée comme une utopie. De plus, il y a des oppositions spatiales, en conflit les unes avec les autres: la nature contre la culture et la sécheresse contre l'eau. D'autre part, le conflit intérieur dérange l'esprit du narrateur peu fiable, qui lutte avec le conflit psychologique de la pulsion de mort et qui a des pensées existentialistes et absurdes, qui s'isole de la société, qui essaie de changer son identité et qui nie que la guerre existe. Cette enquête sur le conflit contribue à la compréhension de ce que les soldats ont traversé pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Cette analyse est donc consacrée à la reconnaissance du travail d'après-guerre *La Maison du Refuge* dans un contexte plus large.

Quando il narratore della novella di Willem Frederik Hermans scopre la casa vuota, dichiara: “la guerra non esiste” (Hermans, 1952, 7). L'analisi seguente dimostra che, in realtà, nella *Casa vuota* il conflitto esiste su molti livelli diversi e collegati fra loro. Da una parte abbiamo il conflitto esterno rappresentato dalla guerra, che appare inevitabile e distrugge l'idea illusoria di ordine. Questa illusione può essere definita come un'utopia. Esiste inoltre una serie di opposizione spaziali, in conflitto reciproco: ad esempio natura contro cultura, e siccità contro acqua. Dall'altra parte, un conflitto interiore turba la mente del narratore inattendibile, che lotta con il conflitto psicologico creato dalla pulsione di morte e dai propri pensieri esistenzialisti ed assurdi, isola sé stesso dalla società, prova a cambiare la propria identità, e rifiuta di accettare l'idea che la guerra esista. Questa indagine modernista sul conflitto ci aiuta a comprendere l'esperienza dei soldati che parteciparono alla seconda guerra mondiale; la presente analisi cerca quindi di leggere un testo post-bellico quale *La casa vuota* in un contesto più ampio.

Keywords / Palabras clave / Mots-clé / Parole chiave

Willem Frederik Hermans, *The House of Refuge*, 2nd World War, utopia

Willem Frederik Hermans, *La Casa del Refugio*, Segunda Guerra Mundial, utopía

Willem Frederik Hermans, *La Maison du Refuge*, Seconde Guerre mondiale, utopie

Willem Frederik Hermans, *La casa vuota*, seconda guerra mondiale, utopia

Introduction

Willem Frederik Hermans (1921-95) was a prolific Dutch author and physical geographer who wrote a considerable number of celebrated novels, poetry, novellas, plays and essays. One of his first and most famous works is the post-war novella *The House of Refuge*, published in 1952. Hermans was promoted to lecturer of physical geography at the University of Groningen before he moved to Paris, where he further drew the attention of a wider audience. Hermans won several prestigious literary awards, and he is considered as one of the three most important post-war authors of the Netherlands, together with Harry Mulisch and Gerard Reve (The Big Three). He never stopped writing until his death in 1995.

In *The House of Refuge*, Hermans depicts the desolate adventures of a partisan towards the end of the Second World War. The soldier is about to lose hope of a better future when suddenly he discovers an empty luxurious villa, still unharmed by the war, in the middle of a bathing resort. The intruder's house of refuge seems abandoned but there are clues that it is not: there is no dust on the furniture and there is soup boiling on the stove. The war has disturbed all legitimate property relations. Anxious that his salvation is only temporary, the soldier soon makes himself believe that he is the owner of the house. His escape from the war is only successful for a short period, as things rapidly change when a German officer knocks at the door, looking for a place to hide. The protagonist makes a compromise with his enemy, but he soon realizes that, despite all his efforts, one conflict follows after the other and it is a mission impossible to remain at the eponymous house of refuge unharmed.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, conflict is defined as both “an encounter with arms; a fight, battle” and “a mental or spiritual struggle within a man” (*OED.com*). This coincides precisely with the most fascinating aspect of Hermans' compelling novella: there is not only conflict on a direct level, i.e. the war, but there

are even more complex conflicts on an indirect, deeper level, i.e. the spiritual struggles of the protagonist. Therefore, this analysis demonstrates a critical investigation of conflict in *The House of Refuge* on several inter-related levels: the outer conflict of the war, which cannot be avoided, and the inner conflict of the narrator-protagonist, i.e. the psychological conflict of the death drive and his existential search for meaning in the face of a life depicted as absurd.

Literature review

Gerardus F.H. Raat (1985) wrote a study titled *De Vervalste Wereld van Willem Frederik Hermans* [The Forged World of Willem Frederik Hermans], in which he analyses three different works by Hermans in great detail. One of these works is *The House of Refuge*. Raat mainly focuses on the novella's storytelling technique and themes. Among the themes and motifs addressed are those examined below, such as the realm of the dead, identity, the juxtapositions of dryness and water as well as nature and culture and the aquarium room. Although Raat himself states that *The House of Refuge* provoked the most comments by other critics, to date his own thesis is the only comprehensive study of this novella. Another brief analysis of *The House of Refuge* has been published in an article by Kees Fens (1963-64), and is called “Buiten de gevestigde chaos” [Beyond the Established Chaos]. In his short analysis, Fens addresses the notion of chaos and demonstrates how the house of refuge represents chaos and disorder. Apart from Charlotte Verheyden's short (unpublished) essay on “Existentialisme in Het Behouden Huis” (2016), since 1985 no research has been done on Hermans' novella.

At first glance, *The House of Refuge* appears to be a simple novella, but soon it becomes clear that Hermans' work is exceptionally complex and fascinating. Reading the novella contributes to the understanding of what soldiers went through during the Second World War and how the whole conflict of the war disturbed the soldiers' minds. Moreover, the story is abundantly fur-

nished with important themes that were highly topical in the 20th century: war, identity, conflict, existentialism, absurdity, death. Therefore, it is surprising that this novella received such scant recognition and has not even been translated into English.

The bathing resort as a utopia

This section considers the bathing resort of *The House of Refuge* in connection with 'Utopiary: utopias, gardens and organization' (2002), in which Gibson Burrell and Karen Dale explore utopian thought. The resort resembles a safe place with invisible boundaries that keep the conflict of war outside. A fundamental element of utopian thought is space and place, and particularly spatial organization (Burrell and Dale, 2002: 106). Hermans' novella could be labelled as utopian, having a "powerful link to geographical, physical, and spatial notions of social organization" (2002: 106). Moreover, Burrell and Dale state that the *garden*, as a setting and a motive, often plays a crucial role in utopias. Just like the utopia, "the garden is a place of mystery and power and pain, as well as harmonious enlightenment, equality and pleasure" (2002: 107). In Hermans' text, the garden of the house of refuge, described by the narrator in quite some detail (Hermans 1952, 20), is an important part of the setting. A misshaped platanus tree with the "repeatedly truncated crown" (Hermans, 1952: 17) in the middle of the deep green lawn functions as a recurring motif throughout the story: whenever the protagonist takes a bath, he sees the "truncated platanus" behind a high window (Hermans, 1952: 23), and directly before he commits the murder of a woman, she is standing across the "window that gave a view of the truncated platanus" (Hermans 1952, 48). The repetitive mentioning of the peaceful platanus is used as a metaphor of a precarious utopia about to be lost. Moreover, the garden pinpoints the conflict between nature and culture; it acts as a space that represents nature, but which is in fact constructed and controlled by human beings. The narrator's anxious repetitive gazes over the garden im-

ply that he wants to make sure that nature does not conquer culture. When the utopia collapses, the garden becomes a place of pain; the tree has turned into a gallow (Hermans, 1952: 76) and the former owner of the house now lays dead on wild grass and nettles (Hermans, 1952: 75), in exactly the same place which the narrator previously described as being occupied by rhododendron bushes (Hermans, 1952: 46). The protagonist repeatedly uses the garden for recreation (Hermans, 1952: 37) but in the end, all harmony and pleasure are gone.

In general, utopian space is always ambiguous: it is the security of reasoned and managed alternatives, but it simultaneously includes obscure forms of control and deception (Burrell and Dale, 2002: 108). The bathing resort as a whole can be analyzed as a utopia. Within many utopias, there are similar organizational features. The following list of themes, created by Burrell and Dale (2002: 108-109), suggests a coherent strategy for the realization of utopian existence. Several characteristics of the utopian existence are brought into connection with the story:

1. Protection. The bathing resort offers the narrator a "spiritual, physical and moral protection" from the war that is taking place in his surroundings. Before entering the bathing resort, there were bombs and explosions everywhere, but in the bathing resort, the protagonist is safe (Hermans, 1952: 24). The war has moved far away, it is quiet in the streets and nobody is fighting in the area (Hermans, 1952: 34).
2. Boundaries. The utopia is separated off from the non-utopian world by clear barriers. This is represented by the protagonist's recurring isolation. He does not see any other human beings (Hermans, 1952: 21), all is silent (Hermans, 1952: 32). The atmosphere can be compared with other typical utopian settings: It appears as if the narrator is completely alone in another world.
3. The 'beastliness' of the outside and the 'bestliness' of the inside. The boundary contains within it all that is perceived to be the best and it holds outside what is beastly in the world of nature. Within the

utopian refuge, everything is paradisiacal. Throughout the major part of the novella, the partisans, who are the beasts that eventually ruin the utopia, are kept outside by the boundary.

4. Control. Harmony as the objective of many utopias. Harmonious living often implies that individuals need to change their behavior, in the interests of maintaining the peace. This is precisely what happens to the protagonist, when he changes from his barbarian behaviour towards civilization (Hermans, 1952: 5).
5. Patterns. Pre-determined patterns of behaviour characterize the standstill-period, symbolized by eternal repetition, which will be elaborated further in the following section.

Regarding the plot of the novella, two kinds of conflict can be discerned. First, we can observe a cyclical structure that starts with conflict turning into order and eventually turning into a dreadful situation of conflict again. Secondly, we recognize spatial oppositions of nature and culture and of the motives of dryness and humidity.

Cyclical structure

The plot of *The House of Refuge* can be divided into three different parts: the discovery of the house (Hermans, 1952: 5-17), inhabitation (18-66), and a transition (66-68) towards the destruction of the house (68-77). In the first and the last part of the novella, chaos and conflict take over, whereas in the middle, the protagonist does everything he can to maintain peace. However, this precarious state of peace soon turns out to be only an illusion.

In this section, I will elaborate on the cyclical structure of conflict-“order”-conflict and show that conflict intrudes upon order, to the point that order only seems to be an illusion. Within the cyclical structure of conflict-“order”-conflict, one could recognize other cyclical structures, too: evolution-standstill-evolution, uniform-plain clothes-uniform, partisans-Germans-

partisans, and barbarism-civilization-barbarism.

In the (relatively brief) first part of the book, the soldier is located in the middle of the war, together with the other partisans. He hears “nothing but pure sound. Booming of engines, explosions, droning of bullets, shouting of animals, rustling, crackling, banging, barking” (Hermans, 1952: 8).¹ The soldier is tortured by thirst, he thinks about death and because of the different nationalities of his fellow companions, he is not able to talk to anyone. When the partisan arrives in the bathing resort and discovers the house, the reader is already getting a clue that the order that it will bring is not a permanent one:

There was a glowing deep green lawn, with a thick platanus far from the middle. The crown was repeatedly tweaked, which caused the tree to resemble a gallows that could hold an entire family. (Hermans, 1952: 17)²

When the protagonist enters the house, he has an epiphany of sorts. He imagines the house as a solution to a riddle, denies that the war ever happened, and tries to forget every element of the trauma of war:

Imagine to never have been anywhere else but here, or imagine yourself in this house, having conquered this hill as the solution of a riddle; this, out of everything that exists in the whole world. (Hermans, 1952: 19)³

Still suspicious that the house is not abandoned, the soldier takes off his uniform and takes a bath, relaxes, and tries to make himself believe that he has escaped the war. After the bath, he changes into different clothes. He takes on a new identity and realizes he needs to get rid of his barbarian behaviour:

I who had blown my nose in my shirt, never washed my hands before eating, not to speak about brushing my teeth; I, who

¹ This and all following translations from *The House of Refuge* are by myself.

² “Er lag een gloeiend diepgroen grasveld voor, met een dikke plataan ver uit het midden. De kruin was herhaaldelijk geknot, zodat de boom leek op een galg met plaats voor een hele familie.”

³ “Zich verbeelden nooit ergens anders geweest te zijn dan hier, of zich indenken in dit huis, deze heuvel veroverd te hebben als de oplossing van een raadsel; dit, uit alles wat er op de hele wereld bestaat.”

had spit wherever I wanted for three years, and would not wipe my ass for weeks. It seemed as if I had to behave properly again [...]. (Hermans, 1952: 26)⁴

Time pauses and changes into a situation of eternal repetition. Talking to a cat, the man desires timelessness, a standstill, an escape from the changes that are ongoing around the house: "Nothing is allowed to change [...], we stay here. Everything stays as the way it is" (Hermans, 1952: 38).⁵ There is no present anymore: "The war had never really taken place" (16). And likewise, the past has been banned from his memory: "From time to time I forgot everything" (13); "I no longer knew how tennis was played" (16). This newly found order seems to be threatened when the enemy, a German officer, knocks at the door. Taking the narrator to be the owner of the house, the officer asks him if he can accommodate his soldiers in the house. The protagonist agrees, and soon he realizes that German soldiers are civilized and they are no threat to the order. The officer is a clichéd example of order, very punctual, shaving every day at 6:30 am (Hermans, 1952: 36). His soldiers are very neat, too, show respect for the house, and only play classical pieces on the piano, such as "Für Elise by Beethoven and the Turkish March" (34).

However, conflict eventually intrudes everything left over from peace, so time starts running again and the soldier puts on his uniform. The cyclical structure of the story is made explicit:

There I stood, exactly as I had started, a filthy soldier on the carpets between the marble walls of a stranger's house. Time could not have taken the slope and rolled back. (Hermans, 1952: 62)⁶

⁴ "[...] ik die mijn neus had gesnoten in mijn hemd, nooit mijn handen meer waste voor het eten, om van tandenpoetsen niet te spreken; ik die drie jaar gespuwd had waar ik wilde, en wekenlang mijn gat niet afveegde. Het leek of ik mij nu weer behoorlijk gedragen moest [...]"

⁵ "Er mag niets veranderen [...] wij blijven hier. Alles blijft zoals het is."

⁶ "De oorlog had nooit werkelijk plaatsgevonden".

⁷ "Van tijd tot tijd vergat ik alles".

⁸ "Ik wist niet meer hoe tennis werd gespeeld".

⁹ "Daar stond ik, precies zoals ik begonnen was, een smerige soldaat op de tapijten tussen de marmervanden van een vreemd huis. De tijd had de helling niet kunnen nemen en rolde terug."

An interesting association that demonstrates the cyclical structure of time can be made with a previous passage (Hermans, 1952: 19): When discovered, the space of the house was described as a "conquered hill", while now "time could not take the slope and rolled back". The notion of time could be associated with the movement of a ball, almost stopping at the top of a hill, but eventually rolling back. This cyclic structure of the novella can be read as an allusion to a specific interpretation of history in general, as a cycle of order and inevitable conflict.

Partisans enter the house, destroy everything they encounter, and kill everyone:

They had hanged [the owner] on the platanus [...] The colonel hung on another truncated branch, [...] They had suffocated him with a string of piano which had cut into his flesh up until his spine (Hermans 1952, 76).⁷

Gruesome murder has made an end to what once appeared as peace, the dark foreshadowings of the beginning have turned real. Finally, the protagonist throws a grenade in order to blow up the house, the core symbol of disillusionment: "It was as if it had always acted a part and only now showed itself as it always had been: a hollow, draughty lump of stone, full of destruction and filth on the inside." (Hermans 1952, 77)⁸

Besides the cyclical plot structure of the inevitable returning conflicts, there are also spatial oppositions in conflict with each other: the most obvious ones are nature versus culture and dryness versus water. Both nature and dryness are associated with the period before the protagonist discovers the house, whereas culture and water are associated with the soldier's inhabitation of the house.

⁷ "Ze hadden hem opgehangen aan de plataan [...] Aan een andere afgeknotte tak hing de kolonel [...] Zij hadden hem opgeknoopt met een pianosnaar die zich ingesneden had tot zijn werwelkolom."

⁸ "Het was of het ook aldoor komedie had gespeeld en zich nu pas liet zien zoals het in werkelijkheid altijd was geweest: een hol, tochtig brok steen, inwendig vol afbraak en vuiligheid".

Nature versus culture

In his dissertation, Raat (1985) discusses an earlier theory of Mooij (1983), according to which there are no spatial nature-culture oppositions between the house (at the bathing resort) and the battlefield (the world outside the resort): “Both components of polarized space represent a certain attitude towards nature” (Raat, 1985: 118). This is correct, but, as Raat points out, the difference between both nature-like atmospheres should not be neglected: Before the soldier’s arrival in the spa, emphasis is laid on the wilderness, the unspoiled nature, whereas after his arrival, nature appears much more cultivated and shaped by the hands of humans.

The novella opens with a tree branch falling down, and the soldier’s feet are twisting at every step because of the hard earth-clods (Hermans, 1952: 5). Because of several explosions and crashing airplanes, the soldier’s surroundings are covered by black smoke and wreckage (9). Later on, when he approaches the bathing resort, suddenly his gun “lay on the asphalt of the road” (13). In addition, at every corner of the street, there are little fountains in the shape of snakeheads (15), he sees hotels, surrounded by park-like constructions (16). When the narrator finds himself in the house, a quite grotesque image of nature-turned-culture is conveyed:

Two deer heads hanging on the wall said nothing. I looked through the backdoors over a small terrace with a marble balustrade and a long rectangular French garden. (Hermans, 1952: 20)⁹

We can thus conclude that the contrast between culture and nature does indeed find its expression in a spatial polarity (Raat, 1985, 119).

Apart from the spatial oppositions between nature and culture, there are also symbolical oppositions after the soldier has moved into the house. The house possesses a secret, apparently dangerous room, which not only the protagonist, but also the cat seek to enter.

⁹ “Twee hertenkoppen aan de muur zeiden niets. Ik keek uit door de achterdeuren over een klein terras met marmeren balustrade en een lange rechthoekige Franse tuin”.

Later in the story, this ominous space turns out to be a room full of aquariums with an extraordinary, exclusive fish collection: The room is suddenly opened by an old man, who tells the protagonist about his passion for the exclusive fish-collection brought from Mexico to Europe, which he wants to protect with his life (55).

According to Raat, the cat represents animal instincts, and the protagonist pursues an animal lifestyle. Aquariums symbolize nature cultivated by men. This cultural feature is further stressed when the old man calls the aquariums “unique cultural objects” (Hermans, 1952: 55), “on which he has been working for 80 years” (57). In this view, the cat symbolizes wild nature in conflict with culture. On the other hand, the dangerous secret room full of animals could be regarded as a symbol of nature, which remains secret and indestructible for a big part of the story: culture is never fully overcoming nature. In both cases, culture turns out to be on the weaker side.

Furthermore, like Fens, Raat discusses that both the old man and the earlier mentioned German officer represent a particularly *weak* culture. The old man’s life goal is to safeguard “unique cultural objects”, but he is physically weakened, since he “has been on the road for 14 days and has not eaten” (Hermans, 1952: 57). The German colonel, in turn, merely uses the term in a superficial, clichéd, and ultimately ridiculous sense: “As long as I’m in service, I have shaved myself every morning with hot water, exactly at half past six, war or no war! That is what I mean by culture!” (Hermans, 1952: 34).¹⁰ This monotony is complemented by his habit to play the same piano pieces times and again. While the protagonist is yet cultivated at a different level than the old man and the German officer, the three men have one thing in common: they all try to impose their own order on a chaotic reality through regularity and immutability, and ultimately, through denial of reality (Raat, 1985: 118).

¹⁰ “Zolang ik in dienst ben heb ik mij elke ochtend geschoren, precies om half zeven, met warm water, oorlog of geen oorlog! Dat is wat ik onder cultuur versta!”

Dryness versus water

The fact that the story is based on the contrast between desert and oasis was first noted by Fens (1962), later picked up by Mooij (1983) and elaborated on by Raat (1985). In the beginning of the story, everything is described as dry and hot. The soldier is almost dying from thirst: The thirst alone makes him unable to walk on (Hermans, 1952: 5), "the sun was shining bright and it had not rained for days" (6). Right before discovering the bathing resort, however, he crosses "an almost ripe vineyard" and "stuff[s] his mouth with sour grapes" (Hermans, 1952: 13). In front the café, a group of partisans is standing "with bottles in their hand", and when the protagonist puts his head beneath the fountains, "the water ran down at his back underneath his clothes" (15). The contrast is clear.

Like in the case of culture and nature, the opposition between dryness and water returns in several variations. Escaping from reality, the soldier is still anxious that dryness will come back. When a woman enters the house, who he assumes to be the wife of the house owner, the danger she poses for him is conveyed through an image of dryness. "The woman was wearing a rain coat, buttoned up to her chin" (Hermans, 1952: 47); "her skin was white-hot and evaporated everything at once" (49). Finally, despite all desperate efforts, the idyll will not last any longer, which is symbolized by fire and returning dryness. Everything is literally back to square one when the Spaniard asks the protagonist if he is still thirsty (Hermans, 1952: 66), exactly like at the beginning of the story.

The narrator's inner conflict

The conflicts discussed above are interrelated with inner conflicts of the protagonist. He struggles with psychological issues such as the death drive, searches for meaning within the absurdity of life, isolates and alienates himself from society – thus, he is confronted with a number of central crises which have been discus-

sed extensively in Existentialist thinking. Existentialist literature always pays special attention to issues of time, with human beings bound to time and temporality (van Bork et al, 2012). Furthermore, Existentialism focuses on problems such as fear of failure or death, isolation, alienation and the absurdity that results from the illusion-reality opposition. Van Bork states that the resonance of existentialism was reinforced by World War II. As one of the most celebrated Dutch post-war writers, Hermans is mentioned as an example of existentialist literature.

In one of his essays, "Thoughts on war and death" (1957: 289), Sigmund Freud discusses the 20th century attitude towards death. According to him, death was seen as the necessary outcome of life and it was "natural, undeniable and unavoidable". Because of war, death is no longer denied and the people are forced to believe in it; people no longer die one by one, but in tens of thousands on a single day (Freud, 1957: 291). Likewise, the novella puts a lot of emphasis on the notion of death and the impossibility to deny it in the face of war. The protagonist associates many things with death, but his thoughts rather imply a death drive than actual fear of death: At a certain moment, he wants to solidify (Hermans, 1952: 49), and towards the end of the story, he believes that if a bomb were to fall on the house, he would be very satisfied (58).

The bathing resort could be identified as a transition between life and death. Mooij (1983) called the bathing resort "the realm of the dead, i.e. [...] a symbolic representation of the Jenseits (the hereafter), the spirit world" (Raat, 1985, 111). Sometimes the protagonist seems to find himself in a situation between life and death. It appears as if the protagonist does not exist, e.g. when dogs are running right through him: "It made me feel as if I were dead, like I could see them, but they did not see me" (Hermans, 1952: 16).¹¹ These dogs could be characterized as "the traditional guardians at the entrance of the underworld" (16). This impression

¹¹ "Het gaf me een gevoel of ik dood was, of ik hen wel kon zien, maar zij mij niet".

is accentuated when the colonel acts as if he cannot see the main character (72), and likewise the house owner acts as if the protagonist does not exist (44). The house is associated with a dying body: “As long as there is no dust in a house, it still lives, just as a body is not dead as long as it perspires” (21).¹² And when the narrator takes one of his many baths, he gets the impression that the bath has a “petrifying effect” (22) and that his body is turning into a “sulfur-yellow mummy” (23). The house of refuge, in the paradisiacal bathing resort, could be represented as the entry into the underworld and the protagonist has an eternal and unchangeable existence (Raat, 1985, 112). This apparent paradise, ironically even including paradisiacal exotic fish (55) and deep green grass (17), however also has an uncanny side: water tasting like sulphur coming out of snakehead fountains (15).

From the beginning, the soldier feels isolated from everything. He left the Netherlands a long time ago and now he does not speak the same language as any other soldier. There is a clear lack of communication: he says that he has no one to talk to (Hermans, 1952: 8) and that perhaps he has even completely forgotten how to speak (9). When one of his companions dies, the narrator does not even know his name, although he has seen him every day for three months (9). In this context, Fens discusses the position of the protagonist as a partisan. Partisans fight in between the lines of the official armed forces, in an area that temporarily belongs to nobody. His position as a partisan further emphasizes the fact that he does not belong anywhere: connections with the past have been cut off and there are no connections with the present either (Fens, 1963: 64, 25). The narrator suffers a crisis of identity when he moves into the house, isolated from the horror of reality. He feels like a hybrid person; neither quite himself, nor the other. While shaving, he fantasizes about turning into another person, because being the other is the solution: “Seeing yourself as someone else would mean salva-

tion, but you always remain on the wrong side” (Hermans, 1952: 25).¹³ He does not transform into another person, but he claims that he has changed too much to wear his old clothes and uniform again (25). The narrator acts as if he is alone and against everybody, he romanticizes himself. This aspect is strengthened by the fact that through the narrative perspective, only his vision and thoughts are presented.

Verheyden (2016: 2) explains that formal elements and literary techniques such as the narrative perspective reinforce existential readings, making elements such as isolation and alienation from actual reality (even) more prominent. A crucial literary technique in Hermans’ text in this respect is the use of several metaphors, which tone down the horror of the war. The planes become advertising writers and write Coca-Cola in the air (Hermans, 1952: 6-7), when he shoots the soldiers, he compares them with butterflies “being pinned up (14), and he describes the war as “a big sick body that has got a morphine injection” (6). Another literary technique is the description of the cold-blooded murders in a non-sensational way (Verheyden, 2016, 4). It creates a distance between the narrator and the cruelty of reality, because it is described objectively, no emotions are involved. What further contributes to the alienation is the unreliability of the narrator. An example is his statement “I did not see the old man in the hallway” (Hermans, 1952: 60)¹⁴, an obvious self-contradiction, since it is clear that the narrator does acknowledge the old man’s presence. This unreliability increases the distance between the narrator and reality and contributes to the illusions of the story. The narrator lives in an illusion in which the chaos of the war is not as close as in reality, but it can be easily punctured by the observant reader. Finally, there is also a strong distancing element in the narrator’s ex post-perspective: For instance, when he remembers that he conversed with a Spanish soldier and did not know the word *yesero*: “I have now looked

¹² “Zolang er in een huis geen stof ligt, leeft het nog, zoals een lichaam niet dood is zolang het transpireert.”

¹³ “Jezelf als iemand anders zien kan de redding betekenen, maar toch blijf je altijd aan de verkeerde kant”.

¹⁴ “De oude man zag ik niet staan in de gang”.

it up in a Spanish dictionary, it means plaster burner" (12).¹⁵

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that *The House of Refuge* presents conflicts on several inter-related levels: the motive level of utopia, which keeps the conflict away by an invisible boundary; the inevitable returning conflict of the historical reality of war; the conflicting spatial oppositions; and the inner conflict of the narrator.

The cyclical structure of the plot shows a period of conflict, followed by avoidance of conflict, which ultimately fails. Moreover, spatial oppositions like nature versus culture and dryness versus water underline the narrative's contrastive structure. The bathing resort can be examined as a utopia: providing protection, having clear boundaries, control and patterns and leaving the beastliness outside and the bestliness inside (Burrell and Dale, 2002: 108-109). Inner conflict of the main character is demonstrated in regards to basic Existentialist crises. Special attention has been paid to the notion of death and the death drive, isolation and alienation. The main character struggles with his identity – he does not know who he is anymore, which relates to the trauma experienced by many soldiers during the war. The protagonist has done everything to avoid conflict, but in the end, conflict will always be there, despite all his efforts to make himself believe that "the war does not exist" (Hermans, 1952: 7). This exceptionally complex post-war novella by Frederik Hermans is thus an excellent example of the representation of multiple interrelated inner and outer conflicts in the face of Europe's historical trauma.

¹⁵ "Ik heb het nu in een Spaans woordenboek opgezocht, het betekent gipsbrander."

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