CHAPTER THREE

VONDEL'S DRAMAS: WAYS OF RELATING PRESENT AND PAST

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Interest and Anachronism

It is a question that can be asked for any writer, but still: why read Vondel? Of course, one possible answer could be that a figure such as Vondel – more famous than Rembrandt in his own times – should not be forgotten. History, however, is not fair. Lots of historical figures who were famous in their own times are now forgotten. Vondel is not. The question why we should still read him or, by extension, Dutch Renaissance literature in general, was central to Eddy Grootes, one of the towering figures in the study of seventeenth-century Dutch literature, when he said his farewells to the Academy in 1997.¹ Tellingly, the work of Vondel sparked controversial comments. But the very controversy was a sure sign that Vondel (metonymy for his work) was not dead. His texts are very much 'present', for instance on the much-visited website of DBNL, the Dutch on-line wealth of literature from the recent and distant past. His texts are evidently with us, there, among many texts from different times: they exist simultaneously, *now*.²

When we address the question as to what the relevance may be of this historical work for our present, one question is already answered, then. To the question 'how can the work still be with us?', the straightforward answer is that, apparently, there is something in the work that has kept it alive throughout the centuries as a point of interest. It survived the literary market that is in perpetual development over time, as George Orwell formulated it.³ Vondel survived the test of time.⁴ This is

¹ Van den Berg and Pleij, *Mooi meegenomen?*

² <http://www.dbnl.org/>. On the presence of historical texts on the web, see McGann, *Radiant Textuality*.

³ George Orwell in his essay 'Lear, Tolstoy, and the Fool', in which he dealt with the arguments concerning this issue by Samuel Johnson and David Hume.

⁴ Savile, *The Test of Time*; note that Savile is the first to contend that in the field of art mere survival is not the most relevant issue.

not all that self-evident, nor does it need to be something special. More artefacts are lost than there are artefacts preserved, for a host of reasons, and lots of artefacts survived that might as well have been lost. We can only salvage and safeguard so much. Anyone who has ever had to decide what to do with all the goods accumulated by deceased parents during their lifetime knows that more is thrown away than kept. So, in a rather simple sense, relevance is proven when the work is still preserved, studied or performed.

Talking about the dead, one could argue that they speak to us, and we speak with them. In the Low Countries, this has been one of the major points of concern in the work of Jürgen Pieters.⁵ His work, inspired by scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt, Lisa Jardine, Catherine Belsey and Jerome McGann,⁶ can be seen as an ongoing exploration of the relation between past and present. It is within that context that the conversation between the living and the dead is a recurring *topos*. The dead are not gone. They are still here, in a different form, addressing us by way of their manifold manifestations. Attractive as this notion may be, however, it does not explain why we choose to speak to this specific deceased person and not to any of the others. Many more of the dead are forgotten than the marginal number we care to remember. This riddle can be solved by pointing to the aesthetic power of the text, which is why Pieters especially focuses on the work of Jerome McGann. Both, however, tend to ignore the inescapable issue of interest. Why would we study texts if we are simply not interested in them?

The matter of interest directs the questions as to how the historical work is actualized, how it acquires meaning, and how it is able to show its force as a work in the present or, somehow, of the present. Such questions are distinctly different from what has been called by Greenblatt (for instance) 'Old Historicism'. This approach would be dealing with the work of art as a piece of history, in which case its force and content is unequivocally determined by its historical appearance and context. In contrast, Greenblatt proposed his New Historicism

⁵ Pieters's thoroughly revised studies on this issue can be found in his *Historische letterkunde vandaag en morgen*. For earlier studies on New Historicism, see his *Moments of Negation*.

⁶ Notably Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning from More to Shakespeare*, Jardine, *Reading Shakespeare Historically*, Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, and *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden*, and McGann, *Radiant Textuality* and *The Beauty of Inflection*.

(although, perhaps, we had better stick to his idea of 'cultural poetics'). The major difference between the Old and the New was that New Historicism would shun any totality in the description of an historical situation. Still, both are forms of historicism. The alternative would be to consider the historical work as an actual thing of the present. To this end, it can best be studied in semiotic terms – or in material terms, as Paul de Man would describe it, with language and textuality as forms of acting matter.⁷

In relation to the materiality of language, one could argue that the very idea of 'history in the present' is only the result of the rhetorical or linguistic turn in the twentieth century. The point would be that there is no thought or meaning without manipulated – and manipulating – language, or any other sign-system. There is not one untarnished meaning deep within language; neither is there thought without language; and nor is there history without mediation. Through language, thought, meaning and history are made, which is why Michel de Certeau called the writing of history a matter of 'making history'.⁸ Philosophy as well as historiography, in their search for truth, are not simply using language: they are made by language itself, time and again, in a specific present. Within that context, principally, the 'present past-ness' of historical works may be called a form of anachronism.⁹

The term 'anachronism' has its advantages, because it is a technical term and a necessary concept to indicate a mismatch between two times. To be sure, this term has been used pejoratively to indicate, for instance, how awkward it is when, in a movie that purports to be historically accurate, we meet a Jesus wearing rubber shoes. But this awkwardness, the unease or *strangeness* produced by anachronism, is functional, as Mieke Bal argued in a study that was tellingly titled *Loving Yusuf: Conceptual Travels from Present to Past*. Anachronism opens up another potential of 'interest', as that which is in-between and can never be contained in one domain alone. When, for instance,

⁷ See the volume edited by Tom Cohen, *Material Events*.

⁸ '[F]aire de l'histoire', Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*.

⁹ The dominance of the present in our study of the past has often been called 'presentism' lately. The notion has rather easily turned into a pejorative term that serves to disqualify those accused of using the past for their own, present, agenda. This is one reason why I prefer anachronism.

characters from the Bible wear seventeenth-century clothes in a Rembrandt painting, this is surely a kind of mismatch. However, one could also describe it as the coincidence of different times, or the new embodiment of things past in a present – what Hans Blumenberg called *Umbesetzung*.¹⁰ Things, ideas and texts travel through time and are taken up differently in different times. In a fundamental sense, any historical artefact that functions in some kind of present can be seen as an example of anachronism. The complexity here is not so much a matter of language or representation, but is primarily an issue of how we can connect to, or experience history, or deal with history in terms of actuality.

Gilles Deleuze convincingly argued that time as history – chronological time – cannot deal with history on its own terms.¹¹ The radical cleavage in time between one moment and the next excludes history from being present. There is simply no getting back to history. This is why Deleuze postulated another mode of time in which history and the present are, or can be, brought together. This is the mode in which history is always in, or together with, the present. The two are not reducible to each other, but they are principally connected or related. As a consequence it is impossible to consider them as two separate positions. Such a separation would allow the present to become a position from which one can survey a radically different past. In fact, bringing the two together in time causes them to be lifted out of the chronological organisation of time called history. This is what produces anachronism, as was put forward by Walter Benjamin, although he did not explicitly use this term. He defined it as a form of understanding that consisted in blasting open ‘the continuum of history’.¹²

Is this a typically postmodernist stance? I think not, as the case of Benjamin, or Vondel, may indicate, or that of Catherine Belsey, who is rightly quoted at the end of the aforementioned study by Pieters: ‘To read the past, to read a text from the past, is always to make an interpretation which is in a sense an anachronism.’¹³ If anything, Belsey

¹⁰ Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*.

¹¹ Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*.

¹² See Benjamin. ‘A Berlin Chronicle’, or ‘On the Concept of History’ and ‘Prolipomena to “On the Concept of History”’ (especially thesis XVI, *Selected Writings* IV, p. 396). For a survey, see Ferris, ‘Introduction: Reading Benjamin’ or Pensky, ‘Method and Time: Benjamin’s Dialectical Images’.

¹³ Quoted in Pieters, *Historische Letterkunde vandaag en morgen*, p. 207.

surely cannot be called a postmodernist. Moreover, even if this is a characteristically postmodernist position, the qualification need not be damaging – as long as it does not amount to the recurring and nonsensical view of postmodernism as the philosophy of ‘anything goes’. In the case of historiography such a view would come down to saying that, if history does not exist independently, we can do anything with history and manipulate it in any way we see fit, or appropriate it for our own needs. There are several forms of postmodernism, or postcolonialism, in which scholars and writers are highly interested in such manipulation, in relation to notions of truth and representation. By and large they acknowledge that truth and representation cannot be considered separately from subjectivity, power and interest. They also insist on the fact that, as a result, there can never be such a thing as ‘the’ history. There are always different histories, connected to different parties and interests, which is anything but relativism.

Moreover, the accusation that postmodernism implies an ‘anything goes’ has its ironies when brought forward from within the field of history. Generally, history is qualified as the substance of recorded history. The very fact that history exists because of records, because of writing and representation, means that manipulation stands at the heart of history.¹⁴ With regard to this manipulation, there are indeed many disturbing traces of an ‘anything goes’ attitude. This attitude would not be the result of scholarly or philosophical irresponsibility, but of a pivotal connection between recording and power. To put it simply, having the power and ability to record implies having the power and ability to make ‘history’, or to contest it. One famous and relatively recent example is the sudden rise of attention that has lately been paid to the Chinese admiral Zheng He (or Cheng Ho, 1371–1435). Anybody surfing the net right now will find hundreds of sites and a society entirely devoted to the study of Zheng He’s life and works.¹⁵ He travelled to the east coast of Africa, to South and North America and Australia, before any European did. The story goes that the fifth Ming emperor Yongle (or Xuan Zong) had ordered his admiral to give testimony to other nations that he was now emperor. The records of these

¹⁴ This can be seen as one of the dominant themes in the work of Michel Foucault, throughout its different phases, as in *Madness and Civilization*, *The History of Sexuality*, *The Order of Things* and especially *The Archaeology of Knowledge* with the influential ‘Discourse on Language’.

¹⁵ See <http://www.chengho.org/>

travels were destroyed, however, on the orders of Xuan Zong's successor (presumably his son), who would prohibit the building of ships with three masts, thereby effectively ending China's imperial expansion overseas.

This is a clear case of history being made, in different ways and modes, in past and present. It is rather evident that the renewed attention for Zheng He is almost directly linked to the rise of China as a dominant global power. The fact that Zheng He was a Muslim even expands the possibilities of claiming him as a heroic ancestor (although this complicates things as well, in the Chinese context). For those readers who are a little surprised that I use this Chinese example in relation to Vondel's historical presence in the present, it may be of interest to know that Vondel wrote a play in 1667 on the fall of the last emperor of the Ming dynasty that took place some decades earlier, in 1644: *Zungchin of ondergang der Sineesche heerschappije* (*Chongzhen or the Downfall of the Chinese Dominion*). In this play about the emperor Chongzhen, Vondel amply testifies to his ability to handle histories, bringing together distinctly different strands of culturally diverse and even disparate histories in his text. It will come as no surprise that, in doing so, he was appropriating the history of others. Still, in doing this, the play highlights an important distinction.

If we speak about history in the present, this can mean either our present or the present of the play in its own time. For both, similar questions are involved. Consequently, we can look at the way in which Vondel's plays are part of our present, or at the way in which history was made present in the plays by Vondel in his own day and age. In what follows, in order to stress the importance of this distinction I will devote two sections to the force of history in Vondel's present and three sections to history in our present.

Perhaps the most direct way in which history is built into the present consists of structuring characteristics that lead to the recurrence through time of unresolved issues and problems within a certain socio-cultural body. Consequently there is the possibility of a dialogue through time, which is always performed within a certain present, with partners from different historical times debating the issue concerned. The second, rather direct form of history in the present consists in path dependency, or tradition, as a result of which the contingent and yet pre-given character of history manifests itself in the present. With the third form of history in the present, we enter more complex territory. It concerns the issue of trauma, which keeps human beings 'caught in

history', as if the past is a cage that holds subjects imprisoned in any future present, freezing the way in which they can or wish to remember. As a fourth option, history can also be located on the level of representation. The past as such is not what is present, but its *active* representation is. Likewise, memory is not a natural given, but an act.¹⁶

Finally, with the fifth form we will deal with the dynamic between 'pre' and 'post'. This dynamic is commonly considered in terms of precedence – the *pre* coming before the *post*. What I will question is not the issue of precedence, but what, in some context, is the *pre* and the *post*. Historically, for instance, all material from classical antiquity predates the material from the seventeenth century. The point is that the classical material is taken up the other way around, in the light of seventeenth-century (Christian) society. What came later in time is put up front in order to read what came earlier as, somehow, the result of what came later. This once again indicates how, indeed, one can also consider history in Vondel's present. But allow me to first continue with Vondel's historical presence in our present.

Transcendence in History: Speaking to Each Other Through Time

Vondel's works cannot be reduced to the issues and problems they deal with or the thoughts they express. This, however, has been a dominant way of dealing with art, as Jean Mary Schaeffer has argued. When discussing the work of Hegel, he explains how for the latter, ideal knowledge and real being conflate in philosophy and art but in a markedly different way. With art, they do so in 'sensuous reality'.¹⁷ This will lead, in the Hegelian frame, to the question of what art is *about*, thus abstracting an ideal expression from a real object. It is as sensuous objects, however, that works of art can do many things, both at the same time and *through* time. This never occurs in an abstract fashion, but always in particular ways.

Works of art are part of a history in which it is hard to speak of some kind of progress. In the field of art things surely change, but one cannot say that twentieth-century authors write better plays than their seventeenth-century predecessors. They simply write different plays.

¹⁶ On memory as an act, see Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, the collection of essays edited by Bal et al., *Acts of Memory*, or Todorov, *Hope and Memory*.

¹⁷ See Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age*, specifically p. 139.

Because of this, one can trace formal or technical problems that make works comparable through the ages, in a relatively horizontal way. They exist on a par. In the case of Vondel, for instance, one of his artistic problems is how to write Christian tragedy. Whereas Christian comedy could consist of the change of a miserable, desperate situation into a spiritual and enlightened one, Christian tragedy had a basic problem, for the end of any history had to be just. There could not be such a thing as an undeserved fate. Consequently, the issue of the possibility of Christian tragedy has vexed many authors throughout the centuries, and they have come up with rather different ways of dealing with it.¹⁸ One can see this as an ongoing discussion that transcends time. When, for instance, Dutch author Connie Palmen published her novel *Lucifer* in 2007, she was not engaging with Vondel's play *Lucifer* as a historical piece locked in its own time, but rather as a work in the present that deals with a recurring theme or problem.¹⁹ In fact, the notion of intertextuality developed by Kristeva pointed to this possibility of looking at texts on a strictly horizontal level.

As the example of Christian tragedy may have indicated, there is more to this particular problem than formal organization. In terms of content, it is hard to speak in terms of progress in many cases. One can argue that the present-day juridical organization of the Netherlands is surely better than the juridical organization prevalent in the seventeenth century. If the possibility of time travel existed, one might have second thoughts about being transported to the seventeenth century if one had homosexual or kleptomaniacal tendencies, or if one were disposed towards religious or political radicalism. In this strict context one can speak of progress. This does not mean, however, that historical texts cannot deal with issues of content that may contribute directly to an ongoing discussion in the present. The issue of sovereignty as it is explored in many (and perhaps all) of Vondel's plays is a good case in point. If one approaches it in classical hermeneutical or exegetical terms, one would have to specify how Vondel's explorations were

¹⁸ For different recent attempts, see Cox, *Between Earth and Heaven: Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and the Meaning of Christian Tragedy*, or Hunt, *The Paradox of Christian Tragedy*, and Bouchard, *Tragic Method and Tragic Theology: Evil in Contemporary Drama and Religious Thought*. Perhaps the best, but also the most confusing study is Pranger, 'The Artifice of Eternity'.

¹⁹ To get just one impression of the enormous discussion surrounding the appearance of Palmen's *Lucifer*, see <http://www.nrcboeken.nl/leesclub/connie-palmen-lucifer>.

particular to his times, how they built upon specific works and thoughts and were followed by others. In my own work, I decided to take another approach by placing Vondel's works within a discussion that transcends history, as a result of which it is *present* in an ongoing discussion. This possibility exists because of two elemental aspects of history.

The first elemental aspect is that any cultural organization has certain structuring characteristics. The issue of sovereignty, for instance, presents a fundamental problem that shows a clear development in European and Western history as a result of the clashes, fusions and encounters between distinct cultural bodies and coinciding political organizations. It bears the marks of classical antiquity (Greek and Roman), of the peoples inhabiting or invading Europe (in relation to this specific theme: Germans, Franks), of Judaism, or of Christianity (in its different modalities). It is not coincidental that one of the most influential studies on this issue, by Giorgio Agamben had a Roman concept in its title: *homo sacer*. Up until this day several problems posed by the idea of sovereignty have not been resolved, such as the question as to what grounds sovereignty, or what the relation between the sovereignty of the ruler and the sovereignty of the ruled may be, or whether sovereignty requires a centre or not. In relation to these questions it is of interest to see how Vondel dealt with them in his plays, to see what his explorations contribute to the ongoing discussion. In that context it is possible and valid to confront his works with the work of contemporary – both modern and postmodernist – theoreticians.

It goes without saying that I still consider Vondel's works in their historical specificity. It is a principally dialogic way of dealing with the object, although it is a different type of dialogism than proposed by New Historicism. Whereas the latter approach would remain within the confines of a historical period to show its fundamentally dialogic structure, here the dialogue transcends time. Historical texts are taken seriously now whilst their meaning is not exhaustively explained or framed by their own historical context. This possibility of reaching through time depends for a considerable part on the fact that we are dealing with a work of art, the potential of which is not restricted to the times of its production. As we know, in different times and differing historical circumstances, a work of art can be opened up anew, and its manifold potential is developed in different directions.²⁰ The work

²⁰ For an overview of editions and performances, see the contributions by Mieke B. Smits-Veldt and Riet Schenkeveld-van der Dussen in this volume.

keeps speaking, as a force in the present. If it stops doing that, people will probably lose interest in it. It may get lost at a certain moment, or it will become a historical curiosity.

Tradition, or History's Resilience

Nothing could seem to be more common than saying that we have to read or understand something within a tradition. In the case of Vondel, for instance, we would have to read his work in the tradition that was shaped and defined by the sociocultural organization of the Netherlands. Although this appears to be quite straightforward, there is ample historical evidence that tradition can be very hard to define, and appears to be flexible as well. There is no such thing as a tradition that is solid and stable through time. Tradition is constantly being made.²¹ Obviously we cannot reconstruct it from scratch. There are pre-given elements with which we have to work. Tradition is analogous to history, here, in a fundamental way, since there is no way we can reconstruct history from scratch. In history, there is a principal path dependency in operation, which causes some possibilities to be opened up and others to be closed. If, for instance, Europe would not have been successful in its process of colonization and subsequent colonialism, we would have lived in a completely different world. But as it is Europe was successful in conquering large parts of the world. In other words, there is something in the past that determines our current situation, whereas we have the power to reconstruct history at the same time. We are able to present our view on it, another view, to pay attention to something that has been neglected so far, to explore possibilities that were there but not realized, and so forth.

When studying Vondel's play *Palamedes* I was fascinated by a passage that may illustrate the issue. This play is an allegory that was meant to accuse Maurits, the Stadtholder of the States, of having murdered Oldenbarnevelt, Grand Pensionary of the States General and the most powerful political figure in the Dutch Republic. The accusation had to be an allegory, since a blunt accusation would have brought Vondel before a court that most surely would have sentenced him to prison or to death. In order to avoid such a grisly fate, he wrote a play in which the characters are taken from a classical story about a miserable set-up,

²¹ On this dynamic, see Bal's chapter 'Tradition' in *Travelling Concepts*, pp. 213–52.

and he presents them as masks for contemporary players. Right in the middle of that classical, allegorical play, we suddenly encounter another character, however, from another time and another place. The chorus after the second act describes him as follows:

That the African both cruel and strong
 Built a church from people's heads,
 And that his temple priest had
 A skull for his censer:
 And before he said prayers,
 Lit a torch of human fat,
 And with pretense of holiness poured
 Purple human blood instead of wine:
 And sacrificed, as a burnt offering to the gods
 Human entrails half alive:
 While a human intestine fastens
 Round his body his tough human skin,
 His sacrificial robe and festival adornment:
 And sang, and screeched without measure,
 From parchment full of blood-red script,
 Maddened by an inner rage:
 And had a chorus of savage
 Murderers echo each verse
 Whose weapon was neither sword nor cutlass,
 But jawbone or thighbone:
 That Tantalus still spattered with filth
 Of fresh murder, dared to serve up
 His son's flesh at Jove's table:
 Has not happened by chance:
 But was inescapable fate!²²

What we see is a strange mixture of so-called traditional material. Tantalus fits in with the classical tradition from which the allegory has acquired its material. In this particular case the text is not inspired by

²² *Palamedes* ll. 697–721: 'Dat d'Africaen soo wreed als sterck, / Van menschen hoofden boude een kerck, / En dat zijn tempelpriester had / Een doodshoofd tot zijn wieroockvat: / En eer hy noch gebeden sprack, / Een menschenongeltoorts ontstack, / En plengde met een heylgen schyn / Paers menschenbloedt in plaets van wyn: / En offerde, den Goon tot brand / Halflevend menscheninghewand: / Terwyl een menschendarrem sluyt / Om't lijf syn taeye menschen huyl, / Syn offerkleed en feestcieraed: / En song, en schreude sonder maet, / Wt parkement vol bloedrood schrift, / Verruckt door innerlijcke drift: / En deë weergalmen op elck vaers / Een rey van woeste moorde-naers / Wier wapen, swaerd noch kortelas, / Maer kakebeen of schinckel was: / Dat Tantalus noch vuyl bemorscht / Van versche moord, opschaffen dorst / Het vleesch sijns soons op Iovis disch: / Niet by geval gebeurt en is: / Maer onontworstelbaer bescheer!'

the classical tradition, however, although A. Geerts stated that this African had to be the Egyptian king Busiris, who was well known from Greek mythology and from Seneca. Geerts has a point. Busiris indeed sacrificed people, but did so with a reason and limited himself to foreigners. His sacrifices were ordained by an oracle, to be sure. But that oracle told him to fend off famine by sacrificing others. The issue of sacrificing others is of interest. Still, if Vondel can introduce Tantalus explicitly, why would he not mention Busiris by name as well? It makes more sense to consider the description of this African in the Western tradition of racial stereotyping. In fact we see Vondel working on the installation of that tradition, whilst complicating it as well.

The figure of the African as depicted here relates to some stories and reports that were produced due to the rapidly developing contacts between Dutch traders and their African partners. In the background there is the history of the slave trade. This trade was, at the time of the publication of *Palamedes*, predominantly in the hands of the Portuguese in Western Africa. Yet their position was looked upon with envy by the Dutch.²³ The history that ensued would cause 'a rift in the soul' even as Africa and the Americas were being 'stitched together', as Derek Walcott described it in *Omeros*. When Toni Morrison coined the term 'Africanism' (a sister concept of Orientalism) she was not immediately thinking about seventeenth-century Dutch literature.²⁴ Nevertheless, the characteristic features that she described could hold for that literature as well. When we use her conceptual tools, we are able to get a sharper view of the construction of a tradition that would prove to be a persistent one.

When we use modern theory and insights in order to revisit historical texts, this is again a form of anachronism. Because of Morrison's work, the presence of Africans or African elements in art and thought can be described in functional terms in three ways: (1) the African is a surrogate who is not presented for his own sake, but is taken up in order to enable white writers to think about themselves; (2) the African functions as the primitive, who can, as such, be the negative of the positive of white, European or Western modernity; (3) the African functions as a pivot in the construction of history in which the African is

²³ In Allison Blakely's *Blacks in the Dutch World: The Evolution of Racial Imagery in a Modern Society*, Blakely presents an overview of the deep-rooted cultural structure of racial prejudices in the (European) West.

²⁴ Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*.

relatively history-less or context-less whereas the white subject has history and is put 'in place'. As I stated elsewhere, it is as if *Palamedes* aims to substantiate these claims, since 'the African appears here from nowhere. And he will disappear just as suddenly and without trace as well'. At the same time, however, the African can also be read as a figure pointing to Stadtholder Maurits.²⁵

In relation to the African it is relevant to note that there is a strand in the European tradition in which 'black' is considered positively. *Moriaen* is a famous medieval, Arthurian novel in the Netherlands, with a black protagonist and hero. The figure of Moriaen was probably inspired by St. Maurice, a medieval saint whose name can still be traced in city names such as Sankt Moritz. It is this positive hero that is re-inscribed negatively here, with the African referring to Maurice. What makes this example complex, then, is that the white Maurice is not contrasted with the cruel African, but that the positive of St. Maurice is turned into a negative in order to be able to indicate Stadtholder Maurits, who is described as cruel *himself*. This does not lift the racial stereotyping, but *complicates* it in fact.

As scholars, we can resist or reshape those elements of a tradition that we consider to be disadvantageous, but of course we can only go so far. We may be helped by the fact that there is always more to history than we think there is, as if history is a magical attic where there is always one more box to open. This discarded set of boxes was, in fact, the set that New Historicism was after. Despite history's complexity, however, nobody can reshape history any which way she or he would like. History resists. The presence of the African in European or Western literature is both the result of history's contingency and the determined path history took, with the coinciding development of certain traditions. Any presence of Africans in art or literature, then, is a case of history in the present. It carries a charged history with it, and immediately infuses the present with that history. Again, this does not mean that we simply have to accept any pre-existing structures, but we cannot ignore them either.

When I discussed the controversy concerning the status of Zheng He as a discoverer above, I did not mean to imply that all participants in a debate have equally sound arguments, or use equally sound methods. With regard to history, however, the principal point is that we all

²⁵ Korsten, *Sovereignty as Inviolability*, p. 121.

have to build our case on some kind of historical records (whether these consist of writings, artefacts, or any other remnants of the past). These records have to be defined as such, their trustworthiness has to be assessed, they have to be interpreted, and need to be brought into some kind of (narrative and argumentative) connection. This is surely cause for much manipulation, and it cannot be otherwise. Although manipulation may be well known for its negative connotations, originally it means nothing more or less than handling a matter, or the skilful treatment of some matter. Such handling does always take place in a present.

Caught in History or Opening it Up: Pain and Love

One of the most famous plays written by Vondel is *Gysbreght van Aemstel* (1637). In this play, one of the best known *dicta* in the history of Christianity is being reshaped. It concerns Tertullian's dictum 'semen est sanguis Christianorum'.²⁶ One might ask what kind of seed (*semen*), or whose. This becomes clear if one takes a look at the context in which Tertullian puts forward this phrase. He is discussing the function martyrs have had for the constitution of the church. As a result his dictum was better known in later times as 'sanguis martyrum semen christianorum', or 'ecclesiae': the blood of martyrs is seed for the Christians, or the church in which they are gathered. That is to say, it is the blood of martyrs that stands at the basis of the future growth of the church. Put like this it seems as if there have to be martyrs, who stand at the basis of the glorious church that is to be established. That, however, is just one way of looking at it. Another option is that if the church wishes to grow, it will constantly need new seed, new martyrs, and, consequently, new pain.

This second option is explored in Vondel's play, especially in a chorus that has an opening line that gained a life of its own in Dutch literature, and as such acquired a deeply ironic meaning. The chorus starts with: 'O Christmas night, more splendid than the days' (l. 903).²⁷ Considered on its own, this line describes Christmas as, indeed, the most splendid of nights, or as the source of all light. But in the continuing lines this is not at all what the chorus elaborates. It describes the

²⁶ Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 50, 13.

²⁷ 'O Kersnacht, schooner dan de daegen', l. 903.

slaughter of the children of Bethlehem ordered by Herod, who was afraid that the prophecy about a Hebrew infant usurping his throne would come true. In this context the splendour of Christmas Eve is intrinsically connected to the slaughter of innocent children. The chorus then invokes the biblical figure of Rachel, Jacob's second wife, who begot Joseph. Her tomb lies next to the road to Bethlehem. Upon being summoned, her ghost starts to roam the fields in order to witness the pain that is being inflicted. Seeing all this pain, Rachel starts to cry. Then the chorus asks her to stop crying, since:

Your children die as martyrs
And firstlings of the seed
That starts to grow from your blood
And gloriously will flower to God's honour
And that will not perish by whatever cruelty.²⁸

The passage offers an obvious allusion to Tertullian's dictum, but it is indeed an allusion rather than a citation. Here the seed will grow out of Rachel's blood – and Rachel is emphatically not a martyr (the comment in the *Collected Works* makes Rachel out to be a personification of the Jewish people here, but this is highly ironical since Rachel is a non-Jew, bought from Laban by Jacob).²⁹ Most important, however, is the fact that the seed is not human *semen*, but the seed of flowers. These flowers not only seem to form a marked contrast with cruelty, they are able to resist it. In no case is there any cruelty needed to let them grow. What causes this particular twist?

The answer is that the play explores different ways of making history. The first way of making history entails that subjects remain somehow caught in history. As has become clear in the broadly developed field of trauma studies in the last decades, the infliction of pain may lead to traumatising, which in its turn leads to a certain stasis.³⁰ Traumatized subjects remain 'caught in history', as the title of one important study has it.³¹ That is to say that the moment of trauma stretches out over

²⁸ *Gysbreght*, ll. 946–50: 'Uw kinders sterven martelaeren, / En eerstelingen van het zaed, / Dat uit uw bloed begint te groeien, / En heerlijk tot Gods eer zal bloeien, / En door geen wreedheid en vergaet.'

²⁹ Bringing in Rachel, the text alludes directly to *Matthew* 2:18, which in turn is a direct allusion to *Jeremiah* 31:15.

³⁰ Some important studies in the field were Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, and Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*.

³¹ Van Alphen, *Caught in History*.

future developments, as a result of which traumatized subjects are not able to live relatively independently in the present, but have to live in a present that is the recurring present of the moment of traumatization. They are somehow robbed of their relatively autonomous power to actively use memory. Instead of being the subject of memory, then, they are the objects of some kind of memory. History is not something of the past, but remains painfully present, enforcing its presence. So, in the Christian context, painful infliction serves to propel history towards the glorious future of the Church, but at the same time painful infliction serves to keep that history the same, as a history that has frozen active memory in order to remain closed, or at least in order to preserve the shape and status of the church.

This is one option, both shown by the play and consequently rejected. At the end of the play, it seems as if Gijsbreght wants to become a martyr. His city had been beleaguered, has been taken by means of a ruse, and has, by then, been conquered almost in its entirety, in an atrocious way, with people being raped and slaughtered. Gijsbreght, however, refuses to surrender, pledging to fight to the end, offering his own blood for – indeed, what for? His wife Badeloch, aided by an angel who suddenly appears and tells Gijsbreght to listen to her, asks her husband to save his life, and to save the lives of those who have survived. They have to flee elsewhere, in order to start a new life. History can be opened up, a new start can be made.

Interestingly enough, there is the possibility of a history in the present here as well. Hannah Arendt, in her reading of Augustine, developed the notion of *natality* in relation to politics, which, in contrast with pain, emphasises love as a driving force.³² In relation to Christmas Eve the notions of love and natality surely have their distinct thematic connotations, but the implications are pivotal. In relation to the Roman Empire, Christianity offered a new kind of history, an opening up of history, a new community. For Augustine, that new opening was immediately meant to be the very last one. For Hannah Arendt, however, natality is the constant potential present in politics. It can be seen as the opposite of traumatization. History, with its many roads and possibilities, constantly keeps alive the recurrence of an opening up. In the case of *Gysbreght* that opening up is revealed when in the end the love

³² Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*. The concept of natality is explored further in Markell, 'The Rule of the People: Arendt, Archê, and Democracy'.

between man and wife fuels the possibility of life. Instead of choosing to become martyrs, a band of survivors escapes through the one opening left to them: the harbour and the sea, at the other side of which there lies a new land, and a new history.

Narrativism and Nomadic Thought

When Frank Ankersmit developed his controversial notion of narrativism in the early nineties of the twentieth century, his idea was to present an alternative to what he called historicism. He was not alone in this endeavour. One of his major sources of inspiration was the American scholar Hayden White.³³ Both argued against the option that it would somehow be possible to approach history by assuming that it is possible (a) to have access to a history that exists independently and (b) to represent that access in such a way to historians and other readers that this access is 'transferred'. White and Ankersmit rightly pointed to the fact that the element of representation is not just operative in relation to the way in which transference to others takes place. Instead, history comes into being on the level of representation. Confronted with a number of often disparate sources and facts, any historian has to start by connecting them. She has to produce a coherent whole of chronological, causal connections. With respect to these, Ankersmit came up with his notion of narrativism, which was a confusing notion in the sense that it also had to capture argumentative elements in the text. Each sentence being a proposition, the narrativism consisted in the fact that all these propositions were eventually caught in a narrative frame.

Ankersmit's notion was discussed at length because it seemed to imply that history did not exist as an independent entity that could be studied and represented, as Leopold von Ranke argued, in order to 'simply show how it actually had been'. However, as became clear in the course of the discussion, Ankersmit did consider history as an independent entity, be it as an entity of disparate elements. There is no coherence in history, the writing of history produces coherence – on

³³ After White's *Metahistory*, *Tropics of Discourse*, or *The Content of the Form* and Ankersmit's *Narrative Logic*, or *The Reality Effect in the Writing of History* in the early seventies and eighties of the twentieth century respectively, a debate ensued on the issue that lasted for at least two decades. An overview and response was Ankersmit and Kellner's *A New Philosophy of History*.

the level of representation. In this way it is possible that an ever-increasing number of such productions, in being combined, increasingly approximates what one could call history as that which had taken place. It is fairly safe to say that Ankersmit's way of saving the independent status of history distinguishes him as a historian from more radical positions taken up elsewhere in the humanities. These would hold that even the choice of sources, or the qualification of a source as a historical one, is an act framed by representation. Nonetheless, Ankersmit's option was distinctly anti-hermeneutical, something that was emphasized once more when he published his study on historical sensation, and intrinsically linked up that sensation to the notion of the sublime.³⁴

The more radical positions taken up in the humanities can be described shorthand as nomadic, or as schizo-analysis, and the major source of influence is Gilles Deleuze.³⁵ The central tenet of this type of analysis is that there is no pre-given or pre-ordained theory or method that one can use in order to deal with any historical artefact. A good example here may be the play *Adonias*. In this play, Solomon is the newly appointed king. He is appointed by David, who preferred the younger Solomon over the older son who was first in the line of succession: Adonijah. This distribution of power goes against what in the preface Vondel calls natural law (according to which the eldest born is entitled to succeed to the throne) and defines the power struggle that the play explores. This power struggle develops in relation to two female characters: Bathsheba, the mother of Solomon, and Abishag, the latest wife of David and a beautiful young woman who is now widowed (and perhaps the reader needs to be reminded that David, like Solomon, had many wives). At the beginning of the play Adonijah sets out to ask Abishag to marry him, in order to underpin his claim to the throne. This act throws Abishag into the midst of a political battle that damages her so much that in the end, when Adonijah seeks refuge with her, she rejects him, although she does direct him to a hiding place in the woods and promises to send people to pick him up in the night.

Any classical reading of this play would have to stick to the fact that Solomon's reign is seen as a pre-figuration of Jesus. Solomon is the one who establishes an empire of peace and who builds the temple – just as

³⁴ Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*.

³⁵ The essay volumes called *Critique et clinique* and *Labécédair de Gilles Deleuze* can be considered paradigmatic.

Jesus will install an empire of peace and stands at the basis of the Church. Such a reading has much that it must reinterpret, but it also has much that it must ignore, or it has to state recurrently that we have to see things 'in the light of'. It considers Solomon and Adonijah as the natural protagonists of the play and considers Bathsheba and Abishag as, at most, sidekicks.

A nomadic reading of the play must in the first instance pay attention to the nomadic elements in the text of the *Tanakh* itself and the Christian Bible. All its inconsistencies, the stories that are told in different versions, the traces of other religions, the signs of internal controversies and discussions are not reinterpreted in order to get to a final meaning (as Jewish and Christian allegoresis aimed to do, in order to get to a final meaning), but they are seen for what they are: elements that turn the text into a collection of travelling thoughts and issues. That collection of nomadic elements is not restricted to the text itself, for the text links itself to many different users through time, and in the present. In my case, for instance, I was puzzled by the qualification of this play – not just in its subtitle but also in its reception – as a tragedy. That led me to the question of whose tragedy this is.

There is no room here to pay closer attention to the complex issue of Christian tragedy. For now, I would like to make clear that a tragedy needs a character that is the subject of that tragedy. In the case of *Adonias*, the supposed protagonist, Solomon, can hardly be defined as a tragic character. He finds himself in a power struggle with his brother and he solves that struggle as he should, in both the Jewish and Christian frame of history. He has to build the temple, the prefiguration of the Church. At the end of the play, his power is affirmed and prosperous times are to begin. The court priest ends the play by saying: 'It pleases me to meet in Solomon the king of peace / who at the altar of his feet sees all archenemies / lying in the dust, and sees them bow before God's throne. / I expect in Solomon another son of David' (ll. 1884–87).³⁶ This is hardly tragic – quite the contrary. Since Adonijah ends up dead, he might seem to be a more likely candidate for the tragic role. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the play Adonijah sets out on his endeavour knowing that it may cost him his life. He gets the punishment he already expected, which also is hardly tragic. If there is one

³⁶ 'Het lustme in Salomon den vredevorst tontmoeten, / Die alle erfvyanden, aen 't outer van zijn voeten, / In stof ziet leggen, en zich buigen voor Godts troon. / 'K verwacht in Salomon een' andren Davidszoon.' ll. 1184–87.

tragic figure in this play it is Abishag, who starts out as a grieving widow, is then used in the power games of others and ends up with a tarnished reputation as a result of which, for centuries to come, as she puts it, people will put the blame on her.

To see Abishag as the subject of this tragedy would be impossible in any classical, hermeneutical approach to this text. In fact I could be accused of anachronism since Vondel, framed by the Christian patriarchal world-view, would not have been able to think of a woman as an autonomous subject, let alone as a tragic or somehow heroic subject. Even if I would agree with this, I would be able to point to the fact that the text does not coincide with Vondel's thoughts, that the text is itself a collection of travelling elements, and that it started to travel through time afterwards. Puzzled, I followed some of its traces, and came to the conclusion that Abishag is the only character that can be called tragic. Is this a wilfully anachronistic interpretation? It is, but not in the form of a deliberate mismatch. The anachronism resides in the sense of an unavoidable misreading – which is not meant to indicate a wrong reading, but the principal inability to ascertain the right one.

Preposterous History, Allegory and Appropriation

History seems to be defined chronologically by the prepositions *pre* and *post*. Yet this seemingly natural order of things is not that solid. The point was put forward convincingly by Mieke Bal, who coined the term *preposterous history* in order to indicate how past and present are caught in an embrace that confuses chronological order.³⁷ In the case of Bal, in her *Quoting Caravaggio*, she considered the way in which many postmodernist artists reworked material from the Baroque. Usually this would be seen as a matter of influence, or of chronologically hierarchized intertextuality. Bal's point was that it works the other way around. We now read baroque works of art through the pre-position of postmodernist art. In the case of literature I could say, for instance, that we now read the *Iliad* as much through Derek Walcott's *Omeros* as we read *Omeros* through the *Iliad*. But, as the term 'preposterous' suggests, there is more to it than this simple reversal. Taking her cue from anthropologist Johannes Fabian, Bal is talking about 'shared time', of a coequality between scholar and historical subject.³⁸

³⁷ Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*.

³⁸ Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*, p. 7.

Using Bal's term, preposterous history can be done and must be done from the present – from any present. It is not possible to get back to Vondel's present, but it is possible to consider it *as* a present, in relation to a history. Subsequently the same dynamic of preposterousness comes to the fore, especially in relation to allegory. Such an approach is deeply historical because it encompasses chronological order into a larger dynamic of times crossing each other. The play *Leeuwendalers* is a good case in point. Written to celebrate the ending of eighty years of war and civil strife in the Netherlands – the last thirty years of which have become known as the Thirty Years' War in Europe – the play was a comedy. In it, the Christian God did not play a role; the classical god Pan, however, did. In the classical hermeneutical reading, this god is supposed to stand for the Christian God. In a sense we are not supposed to take the figure of Pan seriously, because we have to read him as 'God'. But even classical, hermeneutical readings of the play have encountered great difficulties in doing this. The reason is that allegory is perhaps meant to be a means to solve discrepancies in texts or in history, but it is also a means that cannot succeed in doing this. Allegory's metaphorical structure does not allow one meaning to be replaced, but produces new meaning, or an interpretative oscillation between signifiers and signified.

In terms of preposterousness, the classical material, in this case embodied by Pan, pre-dates Christianity. The latter is the heir of classical antiquity, and also thinks of itself as such: it comes after the Roman empire in order to succeed it and bring it to a higher level. So, in being its heir, it supersedes it at the same time. Classical antiquity should be read, then, through the lens of Christianity. Here the scales are reversed. Consequently the *post* becomes *pre*, and as a result classical material can and should be read differently, with hindsight. In the case of *Leeuwendalers*, Pan came first but should retrospectively be read first, as God. This is the major reason why history becomes preposterous here – as all the readings of this play in one way or another testify. Nobody is able to grasp the dynamic installed by the play. It escapes, exceeds and transgresses because of the confusion of shared times.

Preposterousness is distinctly different from appropriation, precisely because the dynamic concerned does not solve contradictions and tensions by incorporating everything, or by removing traces of what could not be incorporated. These are all goals of appropriation – something that may partly be the goal of Vondel's Chinese play mentioned earlier.

In this 1667 play, Vondel introduces a company of Jesuits that happens to be present when the last Ming Chinese emperor falls due to internal strife and a Tartar invasion. Vondel's sources on the issue may have been manifold (see W.A.P. Smit on this),³⁹ but the most important ones came from Jesuits who had had mission posts in China since the sixteenth century. Studies by Martinus Martinius in particular were important. One appeared in 1654 through the famous Antwerp publisher Plantijn, *De bello Tartarico Historia*, which was published in Dutch in 1664, as an additional description in Blaeu's *Atlas*, entitled *Historie van den Tartarischen oorlog* (*History of the Tartar War*). This was three years before Vondel wrote his play. But perhaps even more relevant were the reports by Joan Nieuwhof (1618–1672), who had worked by commission of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) as part of a mission from Batavia to China. In 1665 his report was published.⁴⁰

As may be clear, Vondel's sources were serving distinct interests of particular organizations, in this case the Roman Catholic Church and the Dutch East India Company, but more generally the interests concerned the 'body' of European Christianity as a whole, and the emerging world powers constituting it. Within that context one can see the play as a way to appropriate the downfall of the Chinese emperor and read it as a historical event that was preordained in order to prepare the ground for the Christianization of the Chinese empire. However, W.A.P. Smit has rightly pointed to the fact that the Jesuits in the play have no part whatsoever in the unfolding of its history.⁴¹ It is as if they are thrown in either as commentators (taking the part of the classical chorus), or as a foreign cultural body that carves out its own path through the events. Appropriation fails, then. If one takes a look again at the sources Vondel may have used, one explanation of this failure may be the sheer immensity of the history and might of the Chinese empire.

The tendency to appropriate is not something restricted to Vondel's times. As a tendency it is part and parcel of doing history, and of

³⁹ Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, 3.

⁴⁰ Sources mentioned by Smit are: Martinus Martinius, *Sinicae Historiae Decas prima*; Joan Nieuwhof, *Het Gezantschap der Neerlandische Oost-Indische Compagnie, aen den Grooten Tartarischen Cham, den tegenwoordigen Keizer van China*. Nieuwhof used other studies in order to add to the history of China as it was known then.

⁴¹ Smit, *Van Pascha tot Noah*, 3, p. 491 and ll. 497–98.

writing it. Although it may seem to fit in with the anachronism of which I talked earlier, it does not – and in scholarly circles it is something to be addressed, to be both done and avoided. I agree, principally, with Quentin Skinner when he states that we should not consider historical actors in the light of what came afterwards.⁴² In fact, Skinner shows himself the heir, in this respect, of a fundamental change in the European conceptualization of the past. As Paula Findlen has argued, the value of the past as something different to – as 'other than' – the present is an invention of the Renaissance.⁴³ Consequently, the past is a foreign country, the otherness of which needs to be respected. But anachronism in the theoretical sense that I discussed does not deny the principal otherness of history (its *Alterität*, as Jauss would call it).⁴⁴ In fact, it renders it central. Appropriation would lift the tension and the awkwardness that is intrinsic to the notion of anachronism. As that notion highlights there are two different times coming together, and they cannot be made one, as a result of which the anachronism would be lifted. Historical material, historical actors are *different*. The point is that their difference can only be felt from within a certain present. History persists in the present, in the sense that it is from within the present that its difference is felt and is constituted.

I conclude by saying a little more, very briefly, about this dynamic in relation to Vondel's relevance for us, today, in the context of which appropriation can acquire a positive meaning.

Why Vondel Matters

After nigh on total silence during the 1960s, '70s and '80s, the Dutch theatrical scene has recently seen a growing number of performances of plays by Vondel.⁴⁵ Apparently there is renewed interest in scholarly circles too. As for my own scholarly work on Vondel, I was interested in his treatment of sovereignty because of the principal discussions on this issue both in society and in scholarly circles. One pivotal element was, and still is, the relation between religion and politics, but also

⁴² Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method*.

⁴³ Findlen, 'Historical Thought in the Renaissance'.

⁴⁴ Jauss, *Modernität und Alterität*.

⁴⁵ For an overview of that growing number of performances, see the contribution by Smits-Veldt.

between religion and philosophy. I consider Vondel's plays to be important and highly complex statements on these issues.

These statements cannot be easily divulged. In Vondel's case, for instance, its language will be a major stumbling block for a modern audience. There is a distinct difference here to the work of Shakespeare. Seventeenth-century Dutch is nowadays nearly incomprehensible to the general audience. Whereas in recent decades there has been an important movement towards performing classical music as much as possible in the way in which it was done in its own time, the theatrical approach has to be distinctly different. The reason for this may be fairly basic – in terms of interest too. Apparently, a large audience is able to enjoy music when it is being performed as close to its original form as possible (on original instruments, for instance, and with the original setting of the orchestra). In the case of the theatre, however, only a very small portion of the audience is able to enjoy plays that are staged as they have been in their own times. Plays need to be updated in terms of content, in terms of form, and in terms of language.

With respect to this, there is also a distinct difference to paintings. Although people from very different times and cultures may not be able to understand everything in a painting by Rembrandt, they are able to recognize the picture. To be sure, with Rembrandt as well, a modern, by and large secularized audience will miss much of the major concerns of the seventeenth century. It is hard to sense nowadays how volatile, uncertain, tough, dangerous, gritty and at the same time spiritual, brilliant and exuberant life in the Dutch Republic was. However, this may also be a reason why Vondel still fascinates, because his work testifies to its baroque era to such an extent.

Ultimately the immense difference in appreciation between Rembrandt and Vondel, or between Shakespeare and Vondel, may be the result of their status and skill as artists. It may also be the result of the way in which they have been dealt with by the powerful forces of art's institutions. Whatever the case, much more effort is needed to bring Vondel across the footlights than Rembrandt.

Why make such an effort?

Perhaps the most powerful argument is given by Jürgen Pieters when he states that historical texts 'speak back' and have an independent power to allow us to look at ourselves anew, in another way, slightly alienated from ourselves and our own times.⁴⁶ A good case in point

⁴⁶ Pieters, *In denkbeeldige tegenwoordigheid*.

may be the performance by Theater Nomade of *Gysbrecht van Aemstel* under the direction of Ab Gietelink in the season of 2008–2009. They performed the play not in average theatres, but on location, in churches, city halls, castles, bunkers and so forth. The actors were dressed both in medieval clothes and as present-day soldiers, and the theme of the play could be read against what happened at present in the province of Uruzgan, Afghanistan, where Dutch soldiers were engaged in a war against Taliban fighters (as the political underpinning of the mission had it).⁴⁷ *Gysbrecht*, with its consideration of violence, pain and martyrdom, but with its love of life as well, and with its possibility of fleeing, responds to what a Dutch 'we' are doing 'there'. We may start to read, inevitably, Vondel's *Gysbrecht* through this performance. But it works the other way around as well. *Gysbrecht* apparently still has the power to speak to our present situation, and through it. For the average modern audience there may be no need to go back to the original text. The performance will be enough in itself. That performance was based, however, on a careful study of the original text, considering it as an independent comment on current needs and interest. Vondel is still speaking, and we are still listening to this voice, so strange, so ambitious, so baroque and rigid, and, at the same time, so Dutch and un-Dutch, so alienating, so irritating and so touching.

⁴⁷ On this see http://www.abgietelink.nl/Projekten/gijsbreght/gijsbreght_frameset/gijs.htm. Meanwhile, the Dutch government in the course of 2010 decided to withdraw the troops.