

ODILE HEYNDERS

## Great Men

### Political Leadership in Literature

*Abstract* – This article addresses the question of how European leaders are portrayed in two novels published shortly after World War II. In 1949, Hella S. Haasse publishes her first historical novel, *Het woud der verwachting*. In this voluminous work, she gives a complete description of the medieval court of France in the fourteenth century. The hero of the novel is Charles d'Orléans, predestined to become the protectionist ruler of France, but feeling dubious about knighthood and fighting wars. In 1951, Marguerite Yourcenar publishes *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, a novel in letters presented as written by the sixty year old Roman emperor Hadrian, who lived in the second century AD. In his letters he describes his physical state and justifies political decisions taken during the years of his reign.

What both authors have in common is their fascination for history, and the times of transition. They also share an interest in psychology and intellectualism, and are aware of what might be called the 'synchronism of times'. In this article I focus on a number of sub questions that open up an interdisciplinary perspective on literature: What *is* leadership? Is there a gender perspective on leadership in both these works? And can we read the novels as being representative of twentieth-century opinions on leadership?

### Introduction

Shortly after the Second World War, two major novels appeared, telling the life stories and expressing the political opinions of historical European statesmen. After the downfall of Adolf Hitler, the ruler with megalomaniacal fantasies of a 'thousand-year' Third Reich, both texts presented a picture of a European leader bound to a specific time and local context. My main point in this article is to show how the novels reflect on ideas of leadership and power, and function as a response to what happened to European societies in the Second World War and the years of restoration. Both texts are still relevant when discussing leadership issues in today's European context.

Hella S. Haasse (1918-2011) can be considered the most important Dutch female author of the 20th century. Her first historical novel, *In a Dark Wood Wandering* (1949), starts off with a crucial scene. After the festivities for his new-born son Charles, Louis d'Orléans, brother of the mentally weak king of France, is visiting an old, former councilor in his monastery near the royal palace in Paris. Louis is showing doubts about his political role in the conflict with the Burgundy's and England. His role in fact is that of the 'secret wearer of the crown' next to the official, but incapable king. The councilor is convinced of Louis's strength and ca-

pabilities. This is what he says to his protégé:

You have more influence than you seem to realize – infinitely more. The place you occupy cannot be allowed to fall vacant, under any circumstances. You have never needed to tell me that you *serve* the interests of France. I know it; I know you too well to doubt it. You must go on *serving* those interests, my lord, you are the only one who can (Haasse 2002: 70/71) [Italics by me, O.H.].

It is November 24, 1394. We have just entered this voluminous novel on the Middle Ages and already we notice the reflective potential of the text. Louis knows that he is not an authentic hero, on the contrary, he is a puppet in a very crowded and complicated theatre play. His responsibility is to serve the interests of the kingdom regardless of whether this conflicts with his personal ethics. In this respect, his answer to De Maizières is revealing: ‘Don’t make me out to be better than I am (...) I might not be France’s champion if my interests did not happen to coincide with those of the Kingdom. I am only human’ (Haasse 2002: 71). *In a Dark Wood Wandering* was published in 1949. The novel depicts the court of France as a web of knotty intrigues in which political competition, adultery and intense personal rivalries are intertwined. Haasse projects the convoluted political situation at the end of the 1940s in Europe on the complexities of medieval France, dominated in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by the enmity between the Houses of Orléans and Burgundy. Some people in the novel are obviously in charge as political leaders, others have positions and power in the background, with some of these effectively bearing more responsibility than the visible leaders.

Two years after the publication of Haasse’s narrative, another novel is published, written also by a female author, and also dealing with European history. Belgian, Francophone writer Marguerite Yourcenar, living a solitary life in the US during the war years, puts second-century Roman emperor Hadrian on the stage. At the age of sixty, the emperor is suffering of heart disfunctioning. In a letter to Marcus Aurelius, his eventual successor, he explains his physical condition and justifies political decisions that he has taken during his reign. In this letter-before-dying he writes:

As in the days of my felicity, people believe me to be a god; they continue to give me that appellation even though they are offering sacrifices to the heavens for the restoration of the Imperial Health. I have already told you the reasons for which such a belief, salutary for them, seems to me not absurd. (...) I accept these new privileges with gravity. (...) I have both *ruled and served* (Yourcenar 2000: 238/39) [Italics by me, O.H.].

Again, as in the passage from Haasse’s text, the word *serving* is used to characterize the statesman. In both scenes we are dealing with a dialogue of some sort: in Haasse’s novel the participants are Louis and his advisor carrying on a private conversation on public affairs; in the text by Yourcenar, we have Hadrian writing a letter to young Marcus, explaining his motives and ideas. This is a ‘one-sided’ dialogue without an active response from Marcus himself.

On the one hand the verb ‘serve’ in both texts is embedded in a specific private exchange, on the other it occurs in an interaction dealing with broad concerns, and exhibiting certain social and cultural patterns. The specific dialogue in *Memoirs of Hadrian* is that of the elderly emperor writing to his successor. The old man

explains his ideas and relates his experiences to the younger man. In Haasses's novel, the ruling statesman is the younger partner in the conversation, looking for counsel from his aged advisor. The statements on serving in both contexts emphasize the idea that a statesman (more specifically the emperor and the (brother of the) king) *performs* a duty and *fulfills* a purpose (ruling the Roman Empire and the kingdom of France). The broader interaction in both novels, however, complicates this interpretation of serving in the sense of performing a duty. After all, the emperor and the king are chosen ones, and therefore the ones *beyond* any obligation to serve in the neutral sense. They rule by divine right, authorized by the gods or God himself and, in Hadrian's case, are even thought of as a god. This gives the word serving an ambiguous quality. The denotational notion (of 'performing a duty') shifts to another level: the emperor/king is selected, his job is not a normal one, but a very special, *honorable* one. Emperor and king can never be self-effacing in performing their job; the real statesman is never humble in his relation to his subjects.

The Duke of Orleans and the Emperor of Rome, as created in the novels, both consider themselves servants of the people *and* rulers of the state. As said, with both texts being written during and shortly after the Second World War, the historical backdrop of the weakening Roman Empire and the falling apart of France offer palpable parallels to the chaotic situation reigning in Europe. In this sense, both literary texts are responding to what is happening in contemporary society. We might even say that the texts express a certain postwar optimism regarding the future of mankind<sup>1</sup> by convincingly conveying the magnetism, sincerity and intelligence of the historical leaders. Haasse and Yourcenar are interested in psychology and individual motives and on a deeper level in the transition of time periods. They are aware of what might be called the *synchronism of times*.

My point of departure in this article is literary studies. I am interested in the singularity and responsiveness of literature (Attridge 2004), namely the formal and contextual aspects of texts becoming meaningful, dynamic and culturally operative. Fiction as effectuated in these novels, combines both factual and imaginative writing; these texts represent and reconstruct history by exposing the inner lives of great men. A typical feature of fiction is that the text reveals social knowledge (Felski 2008): this means that we can make use of these literary texts in order to arrive at a better comprehension of leadership in 'real life'. Both texts in some way offer assessments of leadership, by presenting an in depth analysis of the psychological motivation and the social responsibilities of particular characters in a specific historical and political context. My approach in reading these novels will be an interdisciplinary one. First, I will explore a conceptualization of leadership and construct a frame to discuss features of leadership as described in the literary works under scrutiny. Second, I will analyze statements on and conversations about leadership in the texts in order to find out how the historical figures are represented as leaders connected to a specific, complicated context. Finally, I will try to link issues of leadership in the literary texts to the post-war context.

<sup>1</sup> Howard (1992: 184) refers to the speech Yourcenar delivered in 1981 (her introduction to the Académie Française): 'Those were the years when, searching in the past for a model that remained imitable, I imagined as still possible the existence of a man capable of 'stabilizing the earth', thus of a human intelligence extended to its highest point of lucidity and efficacy'.

## Features of leadership

To construct a frame of leadership I will use two sources: the ideas on ruling the state by renaissance political writer Niccolò Macchiavelli (1469–1527), and a text on politics and the domination of power by modernist theorist Max Weber (1864–1920). These texts belong to what we could call the canon of texts on leadership and power. The first step takes us to Florence 1513. Machiavelli publishes a text, *IL Principe* (*The Prince*), dedicated to Lorenzo de Medici, in which he reflects on the practice of running the state. The book<sup>2</sup> shocks Europe with its advocacy of ruthless tactics for gaining absolute power. Machiavelli argues that social benefits of security and stability can be achieved in a morally corrupt context. The successful ruler should have *virtu* (strength, competence, skills) in both favorable and in adverse circumstances.<sup>3</sup> This implies that the prince must employ any tactics, even vicious ones, needed to ensure his control over the state. *Virtu* has nothing to do with moral soundness as described by ethical philosophers. Public success and private morality are separate.

Each chapter of Machiavelli's Italian text has a title in Latin, indicating that traditional topics are discussed. But it is clear right from the start that Machiavelli's take on these topics is different from that of his humanist colleagues. He is describing what from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective might be called *Realpolitik*, claiming that he treats politics as *it is*. Machiavelli uses the term *virtu* in a variety of senses, including that of the basic ability needed, independent of any questions about good or evil, to keep control of one's subjects and kingdoms. The qualities traditionally considered as 'virtuous' in the Christian sense, were not 'virtu'-ous at all in a prince.<sup>4</sup> Some scholars have interpreted Machiavelli's treatise as a praise of tyranny. Others argue that we should understand the text in its historical political context: Machiavelli was not the only Florentine *prophet of force*. Yet, it is clear that Machiavelli insisted the bold would succeed better than the hesitant and explained how the absolute ruler could take over and maintain control in the state.

The second contribution to a frame of leadership comes from sociologist Max Weber, famous for his writings on political power structures. Following Nietzsche's 'Will to Power', Weber asserted that every modern state is founded on force and domination. In a famous lecture 'Politics as Vocation' (*Politik als Beruf*, 1919), Weber explains that the state is a community that successfully claims the 'monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force' within a given territory.<sup>5</sup> In order to justify the authority claimed by the rulers of the state, three categories of domination can be distinguished. The underlying question here is: when and why do citizens obey; how is power legitimized?

The first legitimacy of power is *traditional* authority, exercised by the patriarch or the patrimonial prince. This form of authority is built upon mores sanctified through ancient recognition.<sup>6</sup> Respect for the age-old rules and customs and the

2 Note that Machiavelli's text was not published until after his death, in 1532.

3 Cf. [www.Machiavelli/Encyclopedia Britannica](http://www.Machiavelli/Encyclopedia Britannica) and *The Prince*, Penguin Classic 2003.

4 See Introduction by Anthony Grafton in: Machiavelli 2003: xxiii.

5 Max Weber, Politics as vocation. See: <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/ethos/Weber-vocation.pdf>

6 Ibidem, 2.

loyalty to a personal master are fundamental. The people in power have inherited their leadership position. The second category is *charismatic* authority, the extraordinary and personal gift of grace.<sup>7</sup> This authority rests on devotion to the exceptional heroism or personal magnetism of a leader figure. Revolutionary leaders, prophets and warriors exercise this type of authority. Disciples and followers are the people who obey this type of ruler, believing that the leader will transform their lives. The third category is *legal* rational authority.<sup>8</sup> This form of authority is founded on the belief in the validity of legal statute and functional competence based on rationally created rules. Modern servants of the state, bureaucrats as well as government ministers, have authority of this type. The persons who exercise power are superiors appointed or elected through legal procedures. Weber underlines that in most societies the three types of authority are found in combination. Legitimacy changes over time when leaders fail to live up to the expectations of the ruled. Kieran Allen (2004: 102/105) notes that Weber's sociology of domination is a top-down sociology, not focused on the workers or citizens. The main population in traditional societies, the peasantry – have no role in the shaping of authority structures. And this is what we recognize in both novels; there is no specific interest in the common man; it is the voice of the elite that we hear at the center of the narratives.

The features of leadership and the domination of authority as discussed by Machiavelli and Weber can be used as a frame in a reading of the two novels, and help us focus on specific ideas and statements on leadership. My assumption is that both novelists took a special interest in historical leaders, since the European political context at the time was characterized by disorder and destruction on the one hand, and the presence of strong and outspoken leaders such as Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle, and Joseph Stalin, on the other. On the one hand, the *Grand Alliance* was established, a political structure exemplifying strategic cooperation, on the other hand, Europe had to deal with dissemination: millions of displaced persons, survivors and prisoners as well as military personnel. And somehow, while all this was going on, 'amidst the chaos, the ex-Reich had to be administered' (Norman Davies 1997: 1057) and in tribunals justice had to be restored. By way of contrast, and in order to reflect on the current situation, both novelists return to an era *before* Parliament took over power from the Monarch, as if to underline that traditional leaders from the past are not as far removed from modern 20<sup>th</sup> century political statesmen as we might think.

### Portrait of a leader in *In a Dark Wood Wandering*

Louis d'Orléans, as was illustrated by the quotation in the introduction of this article, is portrayed as the charismatic and energetic leader who is the real ruler of France, although his brother the King is the official and traditional one. Unfortunately, Louis is murdered by order of his kinsman Jean of Burgundy in 1407, and his son Charles, just fourteen years old at the time, has to take over his father's

7 Ibidem, 2. See also Allen 2004: chapter 7.

8 Ibidem, 2.

role as leader. But Charles is not like his father, an attractive, sharp politician who could strengthen the kingdom.

Before characterizing the leadership of Charles d'Orléans, I will first point at a few typical narrative devices of the novel. The story, a fictionalized biography, is told by a narrator who has an overall view and tells us what the different characters do and think. In *Uses of Literature*, Rita Felski emphasized that what is typical of the novel is that it is the only medium in which the 'interiority of persons' is depicted. Narrators routinely know more about the minds of the characters than the characters know themselves. (Felski 2008: 89) This is typically the case also in this historical novel, in which all the characters are interwoven by crisscrossed bloodlines and competition: the mad king Charles VI and his heartless wife Isabeau, the king's brother Louis and his contemplative Italian beauty Valentine. Isabeau and Louis are 'lovers' for the sake of power. There is Charles, son of Louis, inheriting the leader position *and* the disagreement with the House of Burgundy. Three very different women share phases of his life. And we meet three English kings: Richard II, Henry IV and Henry V. We know what all these people think and do, we pick up their motives, desires, frustrations and failures. The novel is divided into three segments in which we follow Charles from his birth to his death. Of special interest from a narratological point of view are the many conversations in the novel, presenting different political positions and opinions. Because of these wide-ranging discussions we can compare the work to a modernist novel like *Der Zauberberg* (1924) by Thomas Mann.

*In a Dark Wood Wandering* has a strong visual quality, effectuated by the quick fluctuation of scenes and the extensive depiction of interiors of rooms, halls and palaces, the details of garments and the *couleur locale* of music, dishes and festivities. This *mise-en-scène*<sup>9</sup> is important for the development of the main character: he is placed in particular social contexts and localities, each of which has certain effects on his inner quest for his own position and identity in tradition and family. Charles discovers his creative talents and finds a way to deal with the societal role of the leader that he is expected to play, even though he does not really feel up to it. In this *Bildungsroman*, Charles finally turns from what he was meant to be (the ruler) into what he wants to be (the poet).

In the introduction to the French translation of *In a dark wood wandering*, Haasse wrote that a novel, whether historical or not, always is the projection of the author's inner reality at a certain moment in her existence. She subsequently referred to her colleague Yourcenar, who used the notion of 'magie sympathique' to characterize the power of a secret union between author and historical world.<sup>10</sup> In the historical figure of Charles d'Orléans, kept in captivity by the English for almost 25 years and trying to endure his imprisonment by reading and writing, we can easily recognize the young writer Haasse, surviving the war in Holland far away from her provenance (Batavia where she was born and grew up).<sup>11</sup> This novel was to open up her world, making her known to a wide audience, and it marks the start of an impressive career as a writer, celebrated today for her intellectual oeuvre.

9 *Mise en scène*: 'the arrangement of actors, props, and scenery (...), or: the environment or setting in which something takes place'. See, Bal 2002: 96.

10 Stouten 2006: 38.

11 Heumakers 2006: 11.

Let me concentrate now on the analysis of a few episodes from the novel to point toward various ideas on leadership and power. Haasse's novel is based on a prologue in which Louis, the father, is positioned as the strong, charismatic leader. Against this background, Charles the son stands out. As a boy Charles thinks highly of his father:

His father came to visit them very often now, always with a large entourage, usually attended by lords from his provinces or from Luxembourg. (...) Charles, observing him from a distance, admired him greatly. He had never seen such a handsome and splendidly dressed man as his father – he could not help identifying him with the heroes of the romances, with Perceval, Lancelot, Arthur and Aeneas. He knew his mother felt that way too. Often he saw her looking at her husband – the glow in her eyes was almost frightening (Haasse 2002: 163).

Here we immediately notice in a subtle psychological confrontation, Charles's future development. He is a mother's boy, a bystander, fascinated by the power and magnificence of the father. The fact that his father reminds him of the romantic heroes that he read about in books already shows that his imagination is that of a dreamer and a scholar, not that of a man of arms and physical challenges. However, only two years later this admiration for the father takes a severe blow. On the twenty-ninth of June 1406, Charles at the age of twelve is married to his cousin Isabelle. She is sixteen years old and already the widow of the King of England. Sitting next to his wife, Charles is still only a small boy. She, bored by his youth and silliness, tells him that his father and her mother are deceiving the king: Charles denies it, although he immediately knows that it must be true. Still a child, he suddenly gets a glimpse of the world of grown up men; a world of deceit and sexual play. Isabelle realizes the effect her words are having: 'She wanted to make up for what she had done, but she knew it was too late. She had not anticipated the effect the words would have on her twelve-year-old husband. In a few hours the quiet, childish youth had changed: his head drooped slightly and his eyes seemed suddenly disturbingly wise' (Haasse 2002: 182). Tellingly, we not only see the absurdity of child marriage here – from a Western 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective of course –, but also the power play between man and wife, a theme Haasse worked out in many of her later texts. In this case Isabelle has more power than Charles, while his father strengthens his political power by sleeping with her mother.

One year later Charles has to succeed his father, and it is obvious that he doesn't like to be in the position of a statesman: 'At the moment when, for the first time, members of his family and servants, bowing deeply, called him Duke of Orléans, a chill seized his heart. He was the head of the family, lord of great and important domains; the dignity of his House rested wholly upon his shoulders' (Haasse 2002: 196). Charles inherits the leadership and acknowledges the traditional feudal code. But there is no longer a role model that he can really emulate. He has to find his own 'way through the woods'. Thus without an example to follow, Charles has to make his own decisions on how to operate in complicated political conflicts. When the Royal Court is organizing a ritual of appeasement between Jean of Burgundy and the Duke of Orléans, he is for the first time a real statesman, but then immediately realizes that power always brings humiliation:



At that moment Charles became acutely aware that the entire reconciliation was essentially a senseless, ridiculous spectacle, undertaken to throw sand in the eyes of the simpletons – among whom, no doubt, they counted him as well. (...) In later years he was to remember this moment in the sparkling twilight of the cathedral as decisive. He understood that in the eyes of many he was the personification of justice which had been trampled underfoot by a merciless ambition. So it went in the world always: the strong prevailed: those who allowed themselves to be oppressed deserved only contempt or pity. Shall it then always be so? thought the youth, embittered and rebellious. Must I bow before Burgundy; my steward before me; one of my farmers before him; a serf before the farmer, and can the serf finally kick his dog if he wants to? Must a man suffer injustice because he is weak – isn't there any defense? (Haasse 2002: 241)

Having had this astute thought, Charles decides to behave differently: he bows before Burgundy and says he is ready to make peace, although he realizes that it is a lie and that a few weeks later the purpose of the charade will have been forgotten. Charles is a deliberative leader here, thinking over his arguments and position. He knows that there are different options, but is aware that none of them is without violence, humiliation or negative effects. This is a crucial passage in the novel. It seems that this agency is typical of a modern subject, the 'self in moral space' as Charles Taylor (1989) has called it. The modern subject's identity is defined by commitments and identifications which provide a frame of reference within which he can determine what is good or valuable and what is not (Taylor 1989: 27). Haasse's protagonist seems anachronistic here, going through these 'modern' inner reflections in a traditional context. However, we need to realize that this is exactly what a novel can do: making times *synchronic*, creating coherence in different time layers. Synchronization creates a particular point from which one speaks, a point in history crystallized in a particular way of speaking (Blommaert 2005: 134). Charles as a figure of transition shows a modern outlook and speaks (thinks) a modern discourse in a traditional context.

When Haasse looked back on her career in 1991, she remembered well what her objective was in writing this novel: 'I wanted to follow the track of the slow and painful development of a human being who, in the discovery of his creative talent succeeds in keeping his personal faith in himself against the societal role he has to fulfill' (Stouten 2006: 39, Translation O.H.). Charles realizes that he is part of a tradition of power and ambition from which he cannot escape. The only possible way out is in his mind, *via* his unique imagination. The world in which individual freedom and empathy meet, is the world of books. This is what he has learned from his mother and what he in turn teaches at the end of his life to his thirty years younger last bride:

My mother sought and found solace in reading what wise men and great poets had written to direct us to a path in the impenetrable forest which life is. (...) We too seek a path in the wilderness, ma mie. Perhaps we shall wander inaccessible to each other, each in a different place. But shouldn't we try to find each other? Trust and sharing of views, these could bring us together (Haasse 2002: 532).

Charles is speaking here from the perspective of the Christian tradition in which it is essential for human beings to be able to trust one another and to share experiences. Living at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, religion was obviously the most



important moral code. In the picture of 'wandering in the woods' we recognize the explicit reference to Dante Alighieri. But the catholic way of thinking of the Italian poet is here transformed to a much more personal belief in God and destiny. Charles tries to accept fate in his own terms. He is able to analyze himself, and in doing so emerges as modern, *self-critical* subject out of the traditional context in which he is kept.

As a fourteen-year-old boy Charles became Duke of Orléans. At the age of twenty he was captured by the English during the battle of Azincourt. Should we conclude from this that the young fellow was not ready for his task? When he was released at the age of forty-five Charles had become an old man, someone who could not really play a central role in the politics of France anymore, no longer taken seriously as a political leader. It is clear that in Haasse's protagonist we do not find the type of leadership characterized by the Machiavellian *virtu*. Indeed, if anything, Charles is the *exact opposite* of the strong, violent, relentless Prince. By birth in a feudal aristocratic atmosphere he was destined to be a leader of France, because of his father he was doomed to fight with Burgundy, and because he lost a war he was held in custody for twenty-five years. Nevertheless, locked up in the London Tower he found comfort in writing poems. Prison made him a poet. And it is after having become a poet that he is able to decide what his reign should bring: 'He does not want to choose a party, he wishes to be neither the leader of the feudal lords nor the King's servant – he wishes to be impartial, independent, to cooperate to bring conflicting interests into agreement with one another. (...) He will act only as an intermediary' (Haasse 2002: 497). Charles decides to stand apart from all factions and hopes that the King will see the importance of his task and will recognize his services as a mediator. But not long after he has explained his position to the King, he is reminded that power does not reside where he would expect it. After an encounter with the King's mistress, it is explained to him that she is 'not only mistress but council and parliament as well. There goes the real ruler of France' (Haasse 2002: 510). It's the woman and not the man who decides what will happen to the kingdom.

### Reading *Memoirs of Hadrian*: 'My dear Mark'

Even though the two writers did not know each other at the time of writing these novels, we can recognize striking similarities between the two works under scrutiny. Both authors composed novels characterized by strong visual effects. They created fictionalized biographies based on extensive historical research. And, more important, they both are fascinated by periods of transition. Charles d'Orléans lives in a period marking the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance; Hadrian enjoys a period 'when the gods had ceased to be, and the Christ had not yet come'.<sup>12</sup>

Yourcenar's text is composed as a letter, written by the sixty year old and now physically weak emperor Hadrian who tells the story of his life to his successor Marcus Aurelius. This narrative device does not open up a space for critical reflec-

12 Cited in Rousseau, 2004:63.

tion: we do not know if Hadrian is telling the truth, we only hear *his* voice commenting on politics and strategies. The novel opens late in the year 137 AD when Hadrian has just returned from a visit to his physician Hermogenes and knows that he is ill and will die soon. The novel as letter is divided into six chapters, all carrying Latin titles. The first chapter, *Animula Vagula Blandula*, offers a self-analysis. The book subsequently flashes back to important events in Hadrian's life: youth, education, relation to former emperors, years of travel throughout the empire, years of retreat. The climax of the novel is the chapter entitled *Saeculum Aureum* (Golden Age) in which Hadrian tells about his meeting with the boy Antinous in 127 AD. The love and later the drowning in Egypt of his lover led Hadrian into occult preoccupations. In the end, the emperor welcomes death because it will bring him back to his beloved one. Again I will consider certain relevant episodes and statements in the novel that have a bearing on leadership, power and responsibility.

Hadrian, born in Spain, has had first-class military training and an extensive education in matters political. In the first parts of his letter, he reflects on former emperors: Trajan, Mark Anthony, Titus and Domitian. At the age of forty-one in 117 AD he ascends the throne after Trajan has died. Yourcenar presents him as a traditional leader, who became emperor by more or less hereditary succession. But the fact that four magistrates were murdered around the time of Trajan's death, a fact that is 'impossible for me to reconstruct', as Hadrian puts it modestly in his letter to Marcus, surrounds this inherited leadership with difficulties. According to some historians, Richard Sennett among others, Hadrian became emperor under very ambiguous circumstances. It was not certain at all that his predecessor Trajan had adopted him as son and heir, following the normal imperial practice.<sup>13</sup> Yourcenar, however, depicts Hadrian as the responsible leader, and it is clear that, preferred successor or not, as soon as he is emperor he does not continue his uncle's militant course. This is what Yourcenar makes him say of his predecessor:

I pitied him; we were too different for him to find in me what most people who have wielded total authority seek desperately on their deathbeds, a docile successor pledged in advance to the same methods, and even to the same errors. But the world about him was void of statesmen: I was the only one whom he could choose without failing in his obligations as a good executive and great prince; this chief so accustomed to evaluate records of service was almost forced to accept me. That was, moreover, an excellent reason to hate me (Yourcenar 2000: 84).

Trajan was the emperor as military servant. Hadrian refused to continue Trajan's politics of brutal conquest, and characterized himself as the only promising option for succession. His particular position gave him the power to change things. Hadrian's efforts to pacify and stabilize the empire made him the emperor of the *Pax Romana* and the building campaign. (He built the Pantheon in Rome, the Villa Hadriana and several cities in the regions.) Just like Charles d'Orléans, Hadrian patronized the arts. His marriage remained childless and at the end of his life he adopted both Lucius Aelius and Marcus Aurelius as sons. But as Aelius died before he did, Marcus was to be his successor. The situation after the death of

13 Sennett 1996: 92.

Hadrian will be more or less the same as it was before he succeeded to the throne from Trajan.

Hadrian is a leader with traditional authority in the Weberian sense, although he did not really inherit the power position from his father. Furthermore, his ability to negotiate and to stabilize the empire makes him more of a leader with rational authority. After the conclusion of the peace treaty with King Osroës, when border incidents in the East threatened to erupt into full-scale war, Hadrian travelled to the Parthian territory to visit the king. First he returned the king's daughter, taken hostage years before, then the negotiation sessions began. Hadrian's talent was to imagine himself in the position of the king: 'I imagined myself as Osroës bargaining with Hadrian' (Yourcenar 2000: 125). The greatest difficulty was to persuade his rival that promises were meant to be kept.

In the beginning of his letter to Marcus, Hadrian is telling a story of experience and wisdom. He reflects on health, the virtues of sleeping soundly, and on meditation. He positions himself as a man whose intelligence is matched by his humanness and philosophical wisdom. From the beginning of the novel it is clear that this man is capable of self-reflection and self-relativism. To illustrate this, I quote from the end of the first chapter.

I strive to retrace my life to find in it some plan, following a vein of lead or of gold, or the course of some subterranean stream, but such devices are only tricks of perspective in the memory. (...) But there is between me and these acts which compose me an indefinable hiatus, and the proof of this separation is that I feel constantly the necessity of weighing and explaining what I do, and of giving account of it to myself. In such an evaluation certain works of short duration are surely negligible; yet occupations which have extended over a whole lifetime signify just as little. For example, it seems to me as I write this hardly important to have been emperor (Yourcenar 2000: 32).

This is an interesting comment from the perspective of history. The famous emperor realizes that his leadership does not seem as important as his lost love. Not his political power and personal influence, but the sacrifice of the loved one is what is etched in his memory. Is this a typical rational leader distancing himself from his personal ambitions, is this again an anachronistic historical figure as modern subject relativizing his success, or is this image of Hadrian a self-portrait of an author living a solitary life far away from her native country? Various answers can be given here, but what is essential is that we are once again confronted with synchronization: different time levels are connected, the classical hero is a modern thinker, the modern writer feels at home in ancient times and the reader is invited to step out of her time bound position.

Hadrian's rise to power was steady and swift. During the reign of Trajan he had a number of different military appointments. When he became emperor, with the help of Trajan's wife Plotina, he made it clear right from the start that he would refuse to continue his predecessor's politics of conquest. I quote from the chapter *Tellus Stabilita*: 'Negotiations were resumed, this time openly; I let it be generally understood that Trajan himself had told me to do so before he died. With one stroke of the pen I erased all conquests which might have proved dangerous; not only Mesopotamia, where we could not have maintained ourselves, but Armenia, which was too far away and too removed from our sphere, and which I retained

only as a vassal state' (Yourcenar 2000: 89). Pretending that the former emperor had made decisions while in reality no such decisions were made at all, is a typical action for a Machiavellian leader. The truth can be manipulated. Hadrian is feeling strong and it is his belief in this strength that makes him succeed. After a few years of leadership he even realizes that he is beginning to feel god-like: 'And it was at about this time that I began to feel myself divine' (Yourcenar 2000: 127). The successful emperor, forty-eight years old, – and how different he is from Charles of Orléans at this age returning into society after twenty-five years of imprisonment – is feeling magnificent and powerful. Tellingly, we recognize that his self-esteem is rooted in responsibility, as understood by Machiavelli:

The Parthians, in gratitude to the Roman who had established and maintained peace, were soon to erect temples in my honor, even at Vologasia, in the very heart of that vast world beyond our frontiers, I had my sanctuary. Far from reading in this adoration a risk of arrogant presumption, or madness, for the man who accepts it, I found therein a restraint, and indeed an obligation to model myself upon something eternal, trying to add to my human capacity some part of supreme wisdom. To be god demands more virtues, all things considered, than to be emperor (128).

Above the ruler of the state is a god whose virtues have to be stronger than man's. Hadrian knows that he has to be greater than man now. Statesmanship is based on intelligence, the use of power and the building of a reputation. This is in line with Machiavelli's *virtù*. Hadrian's power is magnificent, he feels 'eagle and bull, man and swan, phallus and brain all together, a Proteus who is also a Jupiter' (Yourcenar 2000: 127). As a god, Hadrian can decide upon life and death. When, at the end of his life he realizes that he has to make room for his successor and adopted son Lucius, he does not hesitate to order the killing of two of his enemies: 'I had not ordered this double execution light-heartedly, but I felt no regret for it thereafter, and still less remorse. An old score had been paid at last; that was all' (Yourcenar 2000: 219). As Machiavelli wrote: a prince must not worry if he incurs reproach for his cruelty 'by making an example or two he will prove more compassionate' (Machiavelli 2003: 53). Cesare Borgia was accounted cruel, yet his cruelty brought unity. Hadrian, celebrated as a god, does not hesitate to kill in order to stay in power and keep his reign 'universal'.

Yet, Yourcenar's Hadrian does show that there is another element that is influential in solid leadership: erotic love. Antinous definitely is Hadrian's counterpart: he is the young man whose love energizes Hadrian and stimulates him into unifying the empire into the *Pax Romana*. The great emperor is Rome's towering figure, but it is the young, fragile Antinous, – the poet Shelley imagined him as 'sullen effeminate' – that gives the emperor his ultimate power and lust for life.

## Discussion

'Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War offered a prospect of utter misery and desolation', writes Tony Judt at the opening of *Postwar* (2005), the legitimacy of governments rested merely on their military victory over fascism, and not on particular acts of political courage or impressive leadership. In Belgium and the

Netherlands, governments had fled into exile and returned after May 1945. The International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg convicted the major Nazi leadership between October 1945 and October 1946. Hermann Göring was considered to be the most important surviving political leader and was sentenced to death, but many commanders escaped punishment (and Göring committed suicide in prison). It is in this context of destruction and failed leadership that both authors portray their leader figures. Traditional identity was disintegrating (Davies 1997: 1074), and although fascism had disappeared, social democracy was only just awakening. Hadrian as well as Charles of Orléans are figures from a classical and Christian European past that resonates in a contemporary Europe, not yet rebuilt by Marshall Aid, nor yet absorbed in equalizing consumerism. According to Tony Judt, after 1945 statesmen 'whose experience reached back beyond the troubled inter-war decades to the more settled and self-confident era before 1914' exerted a particular attraction (Judt 2005: 82). Haasse and Yourcenar affirm this tendency in choosing a respectable leader from a pre-ideological age as protagonist.

Haasse's novel shows that leadership is a complicated issue and can be executed in different ways. Some leaders, such as Louis of Orléans, Bernard of Armagnac and Charles's half brother Jean the Bastard, Count of Dunois are convincing 'strong' and charismatic leaders, eager to engage in physical power play and quick at taking strategic military decisions. Others obviously are either mentally incapable as rulers (King Charles VI), or are corrupt and irresponsible (King Charles XI). None of these leaders is Machiavellistic though, since they are manipulative rather than strong. Over against these stands Charles the protagonist, a person we might feel sympathy for, even if his traditional, inherited leadership was not very influential or impressive. He tries to 'understand' people rather than persuade or govern them. It need scarcely be said that he is more rational and democratic as novel character than he probably could have been in reality.

I have suggested that Yourcenar's Hadrian is both charismatic and Machiavellistic, that at least is the picture that emerges from the pages of his letter to Marcus. There is no narrator's text providing a critical context of his actions. From the 'Reflection on the Composition' published at the end of the novel, however, we know that the author was aware how much like a post-war era the time of the classical emperor was: 'Time itself has nothing to do with the matter. It is always surprising to me that my contemporaries, masters as they consider themselves to be over space, apparently remain unaware that one can contract the distance between centuries at will' (Yourcenar 2000: 276). The novel is not about history, but about contemporary occurrences. The novelist creates a point in time in which several times are connected, and in doing so she goes *beyond* time. This synchronization can have two effects: the first effect is the possible experience of a 'historical sensation' as Johan Huizinga coined it: a moment in the past reveals itself in a single detail<sup>14</sup>; the second is the reverse effect: a figure or locus from the past can become very contemporary and 'experienceable'. Yourcenar as well as Haasse has expressed these effects in many of her essays and short stories.

Since we have read two novels by famous female writers, we can in conclusion take a closer look at the gender-perspective on leadership in these works. We

could simply identify the preference for a critical, self-reflecting and serving leader, combining principles and pragmatism, as a typically female issue. But this observation deserves more detailed attention. In Haasse we find two rivaling female characters: Isabeau, the King's greedy wife, and Valentine, Charles's mother from whom he inherits his love for books and spirituality. In Yourcenar there is only one explicit female character that is worked out: Plotina, Trajan's wife, for whom Hadrian feels a Platonic love. But the attractiveness for the boy Antinous is far more important, and obviously gender-based. Yourcenar is evading female characters, concentrating as she is on the homosexual love between the emperor and his young lover, while Haasse is and will stay in the best of her work, more fascinated by the bond of marriage between man and woman.

We may conclude that both novels discuss the complexities of leadership. Hadrian is the charismatic, and sometimes rational and Machiavellistic leader, efficient, convincing and exerting a lot of power. His treatment of others, as explained by himself, is logical and judicious. But his rationality is corroded by his love for Antinous. Charles is the more prudent and contemplative traditional leader, though clearly maneuvering 'out of tradition'. From the start, he is interested more in issues of the mind than in physical power. In fact he sometimes even behaves as the *opposite* of the strong powerful and responsible leader and accepts his years in prison without complaint. Both writers clearly do not create one dimensional moral heroes. Instead, they explore ethical issues and political dilemmas through their characters. Hadrian and Charles are good in some respects, but definitely not good in others. As such they are similar to the Putins and Camerons of today. Both Haasse and Yourcenar are 'classical' authors in their creating of fictional characters as historical figures, and in guiding the reader through different conceptions of leadership. The interesting question of course is, how the classical and even 'ethical' guiding with explicit historical references, can still be relevant and articulated today. What I have argued here is that both authors have inscribed their work in a specific ethico-political realm, that still challenges the reader to reflect on leadership in a contemporary context. 'In order for a literary work to take place', Derek Attridge states, 'the act of reading must be responsive to its singularity' (Attridge 2004: 9). This means that a literary text can (and should) be grafted into new contexts, that its potential for reinterpretation should be based on re-contextualisation. Every act of literary response asks for an engagement with the political and social issues offered by the text. The example of two fictional characters can be relevant for current European politicians and civil servants.

## Bibliography

- Allen 2004 – Kieran Allen, *Max Weber, A Critical Introduction*. London / Ann Arbor, MI (Pluto Press) 2004.
- Ankersmit 2007 – Frank Ankersmit, *De Sublieme Historische Ervaring*. Groningen (Historische Uitgeverij), 2007.
- Attridge 2004 – Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading, Literature in the Event*. Chicago and London (Chicago University Press), 2004.
- Bal 2002 – Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto, Buffalo, London (University of Toronto Press), 2002.



- Blommaert 2005 – Jan Blommaert, *Discourse*. Cambridge (Cambridge University Press), 2005.
- Davies 1997 – Norman Davies, *Europe, A History*. Oxford (Oxford University Press), 1997.
- Felski 2008 – Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*. Malden and Oxford (Blackwell Publishing), 2008.
- Haasse 2002 – Hella S. Haasse, *In a Dark Wood Wandering, A Novel of the Middle Ages*. Revised and edited by Anita Miller from an English Translation from the Dutch by Lewis C. Kaplan, reprint. Chicago (Academy Chicago Publishers), 2002.
- Heumakers 2006 – Arnold Heumakers, 'Een en al distantie en betrokkenheid, Actualiteit en engagement in de 'fictieve' romans van Hella S. Haasse'. In: Arnold Heumakers et al, *Een nieuwer Firmament, Hella S. Haasse in tekst en kontekst*. Amsterdam (Querido), 2006, p. 11-33.
- Howard 1992 – Joan E. Howard, *From Violence to Vision, Sacrifice in the Works of Marguerite Yourcenar*. Carbondal Il. (Southern Illinois University Press), 1992.
- Judt 2005 – Tony Judt, *Postwar, A History of Europe since 1945*. London (Penguin Books), 2005.
- Machiavelli 1999 – Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Translated with Notes by George Bull, Introduction by Anthony Grafton. London (Penguin Books), 1999.
- Rousseau 2004 – George Rousseau, *Yourcenar: Life & Times*. London (Haus Publishing), 2004.
- Sennett 1996 – Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone, The Body and the City in Western Civilization*. New York and London (W.W.Norton & Company), 1996.
- Stouten 2006 – Hanna Stouten, 'Herboren uit de hete as, Over de vogels Phoenix en de historische romans van Hella S. Haasse'. In: Heumakers et al, *Een nieuwer Firmament, Hella S. Haasse in tekst en kontekst*. Amsterdam (Querido), 2006, p. 34-55.
- Taylor 1989 – Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self, The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge Ma (Harvard University Press), 1989.
- Weber 2012 – Max Weber, *Politics as vocation*. <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/ethos/Weber-vocation.pdf> retrieved May 2012.
- Yourcenar 2000 – Marguerite Yourcenar, *Memoirs of Hadrian, and Reflections on the Composition of Memoirs of Hadrian*. Translated from the French by Grace Frick in collaboration with the author, With an Introduction by Paul Bailey, reprint. London (Penguin Books), 2000.

## Adres van de auteur

Tilburg School of Humanities  
 Postbus 90153  
 5000 LE Tilburg  
 o.m.heynders@tilburguniversity.edu