

ΨΥΧΟΛΟΓΙΑ

hoc est,

DE HOMINIS

BEYOND PSYCHOLOGISATION: THE NON-
PSYCHOLOGY OF THE FLEMISCH NOVELIST
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Abstract

Is not the most intriguing aspect of psychologisation seems to be that every critique threatens to bounce back in some kind of meta-psychologisation. Although in this day and age and age it seems highly unlikely to repeat the popular anti-psychiatry movement of some decades ago and to get an anti-psychology movement on the tracks, it would leave us immediately stranded in some kind of essentialization of the human being and its life-world. Are we thus lost in psychologisation? Is there no outside of psychology and psychologisation? In the following I will focus on the novel *De Paradijsvogel* (The Bird of Paradise) of the leftist Flemish novelist Louis Paul Boon. I will briefly juxtapose it with Christopher Lasch's seminal critique in his book *The Culture of Narcissism* and search for the germs of a *non-psychology*: which is, a critique on psychologisation which transcends the pitfalls of meta-psychologisation and reopens the path of an ideology critique, the latter seemingly having become impossible too

Introduction

In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch is primarily concerned with identifying the fundamental shift in late-modern subjectivity; a shift he defined as *economic man* giving way to *psychological man*, the final product of bourgeois individualism. He writes:

The new narcissist is haunted not by guilt but by anxiety. ... His sexual attitudes are permissive rather than puritanical, even though his emancipation from ancient taboos brings him no sexual peace. ... [The narcissist] demands immediate gratification and lives in a state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire (Lasch, 1978, p. xvi).

For Lasch, the days of classical psychology, of the good old hysteric or the firm obsessional neurotic, are over. The post-war consumerist society produces other clinical pictures. The new *pathological Narcissus* attempts to fill his existential emptiness in a hedonistic pursuit of enjoyment, and by mirroring him or herself to the celebrities of the entertainment industry. This critique of personality and cultural critique echoes the novels of the leftist Flemish novelist Louis Paul Boon (1912-1979). Many of Boon's characters can be said to be, in Christopher Lasch's terms, "pathological narcissists" who even doubt the reality of their own existence.¹ Probing post-war society, the novels of the leftist Boon constitute an important critique of culture, presaging many of Lasch's arguments and observations. One of the most pregnant examples is offered by his 1958 novel, *De Paradijsvogel* (The Bird of Paradise), subtitled *A tale of amoral times*. One of the central protagonists in the novel is the platinum blond movie star Beauty Kitt who lives in *Hemelland*. Beauty Kitt clearly refers to Marilyn Monroe, while *Hemelland* stands for Hollywood. The novel might be regarded as a critical view not only of post-war America but also of its global impact, as American culture proved to be the stowaway in the Marshall plan-dollars which were pumped into Old Europe. Boon's novel was thus an early cultural critique of the *society of the spectacle*, as Guy Debord later termed it (Debord, 1994).

Boon considered *De Paradijsvogel* one of his more important novels—ironically, referring to it as his dissertation. As the fool tells the truth by breaking his jests, it is perhaps worthwhile, then, to take Boon's claim seriously and juxtapose it with Lasch's book, especially the latter's deadlocks. Lasch depicts the narcissistic personality against the background of the emerging therapeutic culture of the period. He shows us how the increasing

¹ "The new narcissist is haunted not by guilt but by anxiety. He seeks not to inflict his own certainties on others but to find a meaning in life. Liberated from the superstitions of the past, he doubts even the reality of his own existence." (Lasch, 1978, p. 23)

psychologisation of post-war society serves to remediate an inner emptiness, loneliness and inauthenticity. However, in the process of crafting this Olympic, Archemedeian vantage point upon the new narcissist, Lasch has no recourse but to use psychology. Or, phrased otherwise, in order to criticise psychologisation, Lasch himself has to psychologise: resorting to Freudian terminology, and padding us out with phallic breasts, vagina dentata, and castrating mothers (Lasch, 1978, p. 203). It is at this precise point that the cultural critique of Lasch threatens to succumb to meta-psychologisation (De Vos, 2010).

But Boon, too, knew his Freud; indeed, he even called him one of his favourite writers (Leus & Weverbergh, 1981, p. 133). The novel *De Paradijsvogel*, therefore, cannot be seen apart from this influence. Boon writes:

The bird of paradise symbolises nothing more or less than the phallux. I wanted to show in this book that our whole society, our religions, and our cult of filmstars is but the celebration of this phallux. Yes, even that God is the phallux (Leus & Weverbergh, 1981, p. 130).²

In the following, I will attempt to answer a double question. First, is Boon able to realise his explicit rejection of the psychological novel or must we contend that the spectre of meta-psychologisation still haunts *De Paradijsvogel*? And second, has Boon truly left behind the sharp economico-political critique of his earlier novels, and turned instead to the exploration of the *condition humaine* and its existential vicissitudes?

Beyond psychology

In the same way as Lasch's narcissists doubt their own existence, Boon's characters are painfully aware of their own emptiness. Mr. Wadman for example, the second central character in the novel, who turns out to be a psychopathic murderer, explicitly testifies to this lack of substantiality: "I actually lack personality" (Boon, 1999, p. 15). Beauty Kitt embodies this psychological emptiness, too, insofar as she is always on the verge of losing her posture and her public appearances and utterances are carefully staged by her manager. One of these "Kittisms", as the press calls them, is the casual announcement of her future epitaph: "Beauty Kitt, Blond, 37-23-27," the ciphers standing for her body measurements (Boon, 1999, p. 82). Boon's quip, written in 1958, is very close to the 1961

² Boon wrote this in a letter to Julien Weverbergh. Both Prof. Kris Humbeeck as Prof. J.M.G. Muyres (both via personal communication) suggest that "phallux" is Boon's contraction of phallus and Phoenix. The meaning of the latter will be clarified below.

Clairol hair-dye publicity add mentioned by Tom Wolfe in his famous article *The Me-Decade*: “If I’ve only one life, let me live it as a blonde!” (Wolfe, 1976). In both accounts one cannot miss the deadly dimension of the narcissistic stance: being without personality, or without a psychological ‘filling’, is being already dead.

However, if Boon depicts his characters as lacking personality, this does not mean that they have no content on the level of their history. One can even argue that they are attributed genuine Freudian family plots. Only, this background does not produce a substantial subjectivity. Despite their romanesque psycho-biography, both Mr. Wadman and Beauty Kitt remain in a certain sense de-psychologised. Mr. Wadman’s father is, for example, depicted as an authorial and very puritan man who condemns his son’s weaknesses. Furthermore, this typical patriarch has his, equally typically, peculiar Freudian proto-perverse symptom; although he was an architect, he has the strange inclination to pass himself off publicly as a medical doctor. Wadman’s mother is described as a “strange community animal” and Wadman depicts his childhood as a period without a moment of happiness (Boon, 1999, pp. 18-20). We get to know the *family romance* of Beauty Kitt, tellingly, through her long monologues in front of the mirror. She was born to a mentally unstable woman who was raped by an alcoholic. After her father dies in “terrible circumstances” and her mother is put away in madhouse, Beauty Kitt is sent to various foster families. She lives in miserable conditions and is raped at a very young age by the same Mr. Wadman (Boon, 1999, pp. 10-12). Wadman and Beauty Kitt’s family histories can be said to be purely traumatic, leading to a mere abyss of a subjectivity without content. Boon makes clear that these family histories are not the place where ultimate explanations are to be found. Mr. Wadman, for example, contends that his account of his youth and the circumstances of his crimes will never satisfy the psychiatrists and the judges: “I know. They’ll desire to know other things of my past. But what use would it be to make up some absurd stories to tell them” (Boon, 1999, p. 45). In Boon’s novels subjectivity is not about psychology. The subject, baffled and bereft of any firm ground, cannot but encircle the ruins of its own destituteness, the abyss of its own zero-level of psychology.

Boon once pleaded for “psychologically untruthful stories”: much like a painter, a novelist should change and distort the perspective in order to construct his piece of art (Boon, 1997, p. 542). The question concerns whether this is only a matter of a literary procedure, a technique utilised by the novelist in order to shed a better light on the *condition humaine*? In this interpretation, Boon would be writing psychologically untruthful novels in order to realize an awry, but more truthful, look at the human being. Or, alternatively, does Boon’s denouncing of psychology testify to the fact that the post-war late-modern human has come to a point where it is beyond psychology? Such an eventuality would mean that the psychological outlook, as such, has become obsolete: in other words, psychology only tells the story of forms of subjectivity long gone. However, both interpretations, in fact, only beg a further question: is it possible to know something about the

human being beyond psychology, be it that the discipline, as such, is inadequate and structurally failing, or be it that the late-modern human being itself has reached a position beyond the psychological? Is meta-psychological knowledge possible? In order to disentangle these questions, let us return to Boon and demonstrate the problematic status of any knowledge concerning the human being.

The Homo Epistemologicus, The Woman and Sexuality...

Where Boon's characters constitute themselves in the very zero-level of subjectivity and psychology, he mocks the falsity of the psychologisation of mainstream psy-experts. An example of this would be when Mr. Wadman is taken into custody on suspicion of several murders and he overhears an expert proclaiming:

... the pure sadistic murder is rather rare in reality and necrophilia even rarer, but, still the murders under scrutiny can be added to the limited cases mentioned in the juridical annals (Boon, 1999, p. 174).

Wadman calls this "scientific humbug" and describes how the "drawling professorial voice" evokes the image of old yellowed medical books on blood-letting to which a chapter on vampirism is added (Boon, 1999, pp. 174-175). Should we not interpret Boon here as suggesting a metaphor of the psy-experts as vampires, feasting on the supposedly scientific truth they extract from their patients?³ Remember Stanley Milgram's experiment (Milgram, 1974), which can be considered as paradigmatic for psychology in its claim to lay bare the truth of the psychological human being. Milgram's intention with his experiments in the early 1960s was to study obedience to authority.⁴ In his fake learning experiment, which was said to test the effects of punishment on learning, test subjects turned out to be willing to press a button to deliver an electric shock to another person simply because he or she was instructed to do so. While no one was actually shocked, the majority of the subjects who played the role of teacher followed the orders. The experiment ends when in a kind of didactic candid-camera moment Milgram himself enters the room to lift the veils of deception, reconciling the victim with his torturer—a moment that may remind us of today's emo-television. Milgram debriefs the baffled subject with questions such as "Do you feel upset?" "What did you feel?" and "Now that you know, how do you

³ To this one can add Boon's depiction of the press, who equally as vultures throw themselves on the proto-freudian stories as they for example find out that the mother of Beauty Kitt is still living.

⁴ The analysis presented here is based on: (De Vos, 2009b).

feel?” Milgram clearly addresses his participants on their zero-level of psychology, showing them that the human being is but an automaton of processes of obedience which psychological science has laid bare. Milgram not only induces his subjects to turn their gaze inwards, he also ‘ghouls’ on this twofold process, de-subjectivizing his subjects (exactly with psychology), he, at the same time, enforces the birth of the psychological Narcissus of the emotions (*now that you know, how do you feel*). Milgram capitalizes on the alienation, skimming the surplus of the psychological standard emotions. But perhaps the strangest aspect of the experiment is the role in which Milgram places his test-subjects: the so-called naive test subject is, surprisingly, asked to play the role of an experimental-learning psychologist! Does Milgram in this way, then, not enact a central feature of late-modern psychologisation: the phenomenon whereby the human being is called upon and interpellated to become its own psychologist? The *homo psychologicus* only has access to itself, or better, to the psychological golem he is said to be, via academic knowledge.

As such, Milgram’s “psychologisation-psychology” testifies to the fact that modern subjectivity is fundamentally tied to knowledge and theory. Boon’s characters in *De Paradijsvogel* are also marked by this push to knowledge to fill the lack of being.⁵ Beauty Kitt, for example, relates that when her first, heavily tattooed husband tried to wrap his arms around her, she had to hide a self-help booklet on sexual problems. The booklet did not, however, bring her solace, she tells, it only put her again into a miserable despair thinking about suicide (Boon, 1999, p. 44). This desperate desire to know with the expectation of alleviation from science shows how psychology(zation) begins with a subjectivity without content, as the latter is nothing but the Kantian epistemological ego in search of a subjectivity and psychology from which it, as an emptied zero-level, is itself for ever exempt.

In *De Paradijsvogel* this epistemological desire above all finds its expression in the figure of E.H. Ramadhoe⁶ who is writing a dissertation on “the meaning of the frivolity of our civilization” (Boon, 1999, p. 93). He is building an extensive annotated collection of photographs of glamour girls in order to understand the “idolatry of woman” (Boon, 1999, p. 158)⁷ in his time. Here we come close to Boon’s own biography. Boon not only calls

⁵ One could critically regard this as a move to meta-psychology as we might regard a epistemological desire as the primordial psychological feature of the human being. However, one cannot cut this epistemological drive loose from the birth of the modern subject (the subject of the sciences), precisely where psychology comes in at the deadlock of epistemology. See: (De Vos, 2010, in press-b)

⁶ Boon himself explains that while E.H. could stand for an abbreviated name, it could also stand for the “Eerwaarde Heer” the Dutch title for ‘Honorable Reverend’. (Florquin, 1972, p. 74)

⁷ Ramadoe considers himself a true scholar, claiming that his study does not turn him into a “lecher” (Boon, 1999, p. 167). The lecher of course is Mr. Wadman

this particular novel "his dissertation", he was also engaged himself in compiling a, both serious and ironic, collection of pin-ups and erotic pictures in order to compose the "the standard study of the female human-animal" (Boon & Steivekleut, 2004, p. 7). Boon and his characters are thus themselves theorists, if not psy-scientists, directing their academic gaze at the world and, above all, at the enigma of (the idolatry of) The Woman.

As such, the specific place of sexuality in Boon's cultural critique is an important amendment to Lasch's dealing with sexuality in his account of narcissism. In *The Culture of Narcissism* sexuality can be said to be the very place where Lasch's critique of psychologisation overtakes him and where he himself engages in a psychologising stance. In wanting to promote a kind of unmediated and authentic sexuality against the pop-psychological accounts that besiege the late-modern subject, Lasch has to resort to a meta-psychological use of psychoanalysis.⁸ In contrast, Boon show us that modern man relates to himself and the other —this is where sexuality comes in— via an epistemology, via an academic perspective. For Boon, there is no unmediated direct way of being in the world. When Ramadhoe says that he "prefers the role of the indifferent spectator above the role of the actual actor", it is not hard to recognize here Descartes' foundational move: the withdrawal from the world stage (the withdrawal, of course, being that which creates the stage) as the very condition for the modern sciences.⁹ The modern subject, as a fundamentally Cartesian subject, is irrevocably marked by this epistemological rupture: modern man thus relates to himself and the world from a point of departure outside of the world, outside of himself. The central aspect in Freud's discovery is that the mediated relation between the human being and the world passes over the particular, and problematic, knot of sexuality. It is this which Lasch attempted to render un-problematic, in considering an unmediated authentic sexuality as a positive possibility. In Boon's novel, however, the problematic relation between sexuality and knowledge is not resolved, but rather made fully explicit in its insolvability. Mr. Wadman is an exemplary figure in this respect: if the perversion of the epistemological drive is already immanent with his father, then it fully blossoms with Wadman junior. Remember how the father as an architect visiting building

⁸ Lasch, recouring to the American psychoanalyst Kohut, proclaims: "Those who feel secure in the ego's ability to control the id, according to Kohut, take pleasure in occasionally suspending the secondary process (for example, in sleep or in sexual activity), since they know they can regain it when the wish to." (Lasch, 1978, p. 97) This amounts to a paradoxical, psychologised/psycho-analysed promotion of authenticity

⁹ "And inasmuch as I hoped to be able to reach my goal better by conversing with men than by staying shut up any longer in the stove-heated room where I had all these thoughts, the winter was not yet over when I set out again on my travels. And in all the nine years that followed I did nothing but wander here and there in the world, trying to be more a spectator than an actor in all the comedies that are played out there; and reflecting particularly in each matter on what might render it suspect and give us occasion for erring, I meanwhile rooted out from my mind all the errors that had previously been able to slip into it" (Descartes, 1996[1637], p. 16)

sites was thrilled if workers had an accident so that he could pose as a medical doctor passing by chance:

What my father liked most in these days was to put his finger in the mechanism which, as they say, is actually moved by a God. And in a way he became a God himself in doing so. And I ... but I am again cynical, I resemble these lads from my school time, who always came up with their ambiguous sayings (Boon, 1999, p. 47).¹⁰

Mr. Wadman junior can thus be said to be the one who reveals the other side of his father's medical pretensions. This is repeated in an even more clear way regarding the scientific ambitions of E.H. Ramadhoe. Ramadhoe is the conscientious and decent scholar slowly building his scientific collection. Wadman also collects women and classifies them: he kills them and adds their bodies to his "collection", as he calls it, in his backyard under the rose bushes. Wadman is the dark truth of the academic pretensions of Ramadhoe. Marquis De Sade already revealed the perverse potential of science and modernity in his *philosophie du boudoir* (Philosophy in the bedroom: De Sade, 1990), drawing the radical conclusions of the philosophy of the Enlightenment. A more recent example of the immanent perverse core of academia is how central Milgram's experiment has become to the canonical literature that informs the "enhanced interrogation" of the military (McCoy, 2006). The involvement of psychologists in torture practices in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo might in this way not be mere happenstance. But it is important to note that Milgram's experiment is itself already structured as a form of torture. Indeed, Milgram uses deception and unethical, transgressive methods (experiments like Milgram's were immediately legally forbidden) in order to extract the truth from test subjects, and to produce scientific data (De Vos, 2010, in press-a).

This awry look at science and its perverse core allows us, in the same vein, to consider the psychopathological cruelties of Mr. Wadman. In doing so, one observes that such cruelties are not the atavistic remainders of primitive violent man, but, rather, are radically modern, and to be understood as epistemologically driven. For if state and military torture aims at the truth, does psychopathic torture not equally aim to engender the truth of the human being? The psychopath can thus be said to desire to lift the veils of deceiving reality to lay its finger on bare life.¹¹ The humiliation and pain inflicted by the psychopath aim

¹⁰ Passage translated by Stefan Hertmans.

¹¹ The street-killer Hans Van Themsshe's lamentation during his trial "I want to become human" (see: De Vos, 2009a) in this way perhaps betrays the true motive of his atrocities, stabbing two toddlers and a nanny to death

to unearth the truth of the human being. And, as both the practices of “enhanced interrogation” and those of the psychopathic Wadman show us, this endeavour is a scientific one. The truth must be reached according to the academic paradigm.¹² Furthermore, Boon’s Wadman shows us that the true subject is the dead subject:

Dead people gain a form of beauty they have never possessed alive. A human being lives to become a beautiful corpse one day. But I do not express myself well... I mean, a dead person has been freed of the burden that has oppressed him all of his life. A woman for example, then finally finds satisfaction, she in vain looked for all of her life with the man (Boon, 1999, pp. 14-15).¹³

Thus, in contrast to Lasch’s attempt to envision a subject beyond narcissism, one able to transcend the “ironic, pseudo-analytic self-awareness as a kind of ‘second nature’” (Lasch, 1978, p. 79), Boon is far more radical, showing how the true subject is a dead subject, refuting in the same movement Lasch’s envisioning of a full realization of the sexual relation. Boon, consequently, evades the trap of meta-psychologisation and, in his problematizing of sexuality vis-à-vis subjectivity, can thus be said to stay closer to the original Freudian stance than either Lasch or Kohut. As said above, Boon knew his Freud, in *De Paradijsvogel* Ramadhoe even refers to him:

... one of our greatest thinkers uncovered, that all what men achieve is only motivated by an erotica gone astray. And because of this sentence he has been loathed by us, his contemporaries (Boon, 1999, p. 201).¹⁴

The question remains, here, whether Boon has finally opted for the mere exploration of the *condition humaine*? Does his attempt to go beyond psychology also lead him beyond economico-political critique? Has Boon thus embraced Freudianism and finally left behind his Marxism, exchanging his ideology critique for a more limited cultural critique?

in order to put his finger on life itself. This would mean that the deeds of psychopaths are epistemologically motivated. But of course, perhaps this epistemological *Hineininterpretierung* is the only way that we can understand them.

¹² Psychopathology is a modern phenomenon, or, phrased otherwise, there are no psychopaths without the psychosciences.

¹³ Passage translated by Stefan Hertmans. One might interpret this along the lines of Žižek’s idea that the only good neighbor is the dead neighbor (Žižek, 2004, p. 213) This is Žižek’s rather forced interpretation of Kierkegaard’s Kantian approach that the true love is the love for the neighbor (for a concise discussion see: (Neill, 2011). The specific point of Boon’s character seems to be that the only true neighbour and the only true love is death itself: for Mr. Wadman death is the only possible aesthetization of the abject otherness of the other

¹⁴ Passage translated by Stefan Hertmans.

Beyond the condition humaine

When Boon tries to give an account of subjectivity in post-World War II times, interrelating sexuality, religion and culture, it is beyond doubt that he is informed and guided by Freudian theory. This is particularly discernable in a sub-story interwoven in the novel, a mythical story situated in an undefined historic time on the origins of religion and on the origin of the city called Taboo. The name of the city is a clear allusion to Freud's seminal book *Totem and taboo* (Freud, [1913]1955), in which Freud attempts to explain the origin of human culture. In addition, Freud constructs a mythical story, the myth of the primal horde, in which he places the intertwining of religion and sexuality at the origin of human culture. Boon's story of the city of Taboo connects with the Freudian myth at several different points: Boon's basic argument is that religion, originating in the scarcity of resources, eventually takes the path of the repression of sexuality, and pushes the human being out of nature into the alienation of culture.

And where they had known the happiness of being young, human animals, they now began to hate more and more the natural and the animal. They embarked on a journey, to a "beyond", and immediately started to feel the pain and the sorrow for what they left behind (Boon, 1999, p. 179).

The "beyond", put between quotation marks, seems to be invoking another well known book of Freud, *Beyond the pleasure principle* (Freud, [1920g]1955). In fact, it is evident that Boon, now and again, lapses into a mere translation or illustration of certain theories concerning the origin of religion —especially the Freudian idea concerning the role of sexuality.¹⁵ This is not the strongest part of the novel, for, and this is similar to the case of Christopher Lasch, it is there that the ghost of meta-psychology threatens to weaken the narrative power. Although the integration of the mythical story in the novel does not always succeed, and despite the fact that Boon's critique of religion is not wholly convincing, there are nevertheless some important aspects which transcend the immanent meta-theoretisation. We should, for example, valorise Boon's penetrating insight that, even if post-war Europe was engaged in a secularization process, nevertheless religion was bound to return and reclaim its position. The "monster of religiosity", as he calls Noema (Boon, 1999, p. 213), the mythical double of Beauty Kitt, is bound to reclaim its rights, albeit passing over the cult of film stars and the society of the spectacle. Moreover, Boon's at-

¹⁵ Boon does not only lean on Freud's *Totem and Taboo* but incorporates other ideas and theories. The Freudian elements he explicitly uses are totemism, incest and the murder of the father figure.

tempt to ground a cultural critique within a critique of religion is at least an interesting and original approach.

A second important point to salvage from meta-psychologisation is *the position of the subject*, which becomes clear via the mythical story. In order to do so, let us depart from the proposition that the central character, and the actual subject of the myth, is the storyteller. In *De Paradijsvogel*, the story is told by the impotent boxer Vulcan Fiber— an ex-husband of Beauty Kitt modeled on Joe DiMaggio (De Poorter, 1989). Vulcan Fiber is above all a non-character: his actions in the novel are limited to falling into a kind of epileptic stupor, in which he is visited by the figure of Tubal Kain who tells the story of the city of Taboo. Vulcan Fiber, impotent and epileptic as he is, is the subject beyond sexuality, beyond psychology, beyond *the condition humaine*. Is he thus not the figure of the naked human being, reduced to its essence, or more succinctly, to its non-essence? Stripped of every substantiality, this emptied subject is the actual protagonist of the novel. Vulcan Fiber, then, stands for the true modern subject which grew to full stature in the postwar society of the spectacle. Vulcan Fiber embodies the zero-level of subjectivity previously discussed in relation to Mr. Wadman and Beauty Kitt. The existential emptiness is radically empty: there is no psychology, no meta-psychology, not even a *condition humaine* to be situated at that abyss. At most, one can try to depict the borders of the chasm. The position of Tubal Kain, the poet of the people of the mountain cleft, is no different: "I was empty, and this emptiness would have sufficed if I only could live solely in it" (Boon, 1999, p. 183). However, as a poet he is called upon to relate the vicissitudes of the lives of others:

And again I discovered (and how immensely sad this made me!) that once again I let myself be guided by the lives of others, as always I lived only through the others (...). I was a sounding board, an instrument to be played, which would produce the tones, the words which one desired to hear (Boon, 1999, p. 182)

The artist and the novelist incarnate the zero-level of subjectivity insofar as this zero-level is that which defines the modern human being itself. Consider how in a TV sit-com, for example, the laughing— via canned laughter— is done in our place; or how cybersex is performed by your avatar: the specificity of modern subjectivity is that it has a non-participatory core, an exempted zero-level subject. Tubal Kain does not fit anywhere; against his own will he becomes the Poet and the Prophet, giving voice to an utopia which is only the fantasy of others (Boon, 1999, p. 186). Tubal Kain cannot identify with the religion of nature of Irad, the one who found the hidden valley, nor with the monotheism of his sister Noema who wants to return to the city of Taboo. It is clear that Boon above all sympathizes with what one could call this in-between-period, dominated by a kind of religion of nature in which sexuality is not yet the central taboo which it becomes with monotheism. Although Boon understands this period as a transition, I am tempted to say

that this in-between-position is the very position from which Boon himself looks at things. Boon once argued that his characters belong to a time where one culture passes away in its death bed while another culture is born in the childbed (Cited in: Haasse, 2000, p. 23). Rainer Maria Rilke has described this position most aptly saying, “each age has such disinherited children, to whom no longer what’s been, and not yet what’s coming, belongs” (cited in: Agamben, 1993, p. 43). Does this not apply particularly to Boon, as he wants to part ways with a clerical, conservative Flanders, while he at the same time sees a new society coming to which he also does not belong? Note how close this position is to Christophers Lasch’s analysis of his own timeframe. Lasch writes that facing “a dying culture,” one has a particular responsibility:

... the task of building a new order—endures most of all in those who knew the old order only as a broken promise, yet who took the promise more seriously than those who merely took it for granted (Lasch, 1978, p. 235).

The witness of an old culture dying and a new narcissistic one emerging, is the in-between human, Never having lived the old order fully, he or she experiences it as a promise on the verge of breaking.¹⁶ But should we not recognize that this juncture is essentially what modernity is about? The gap between Old and New man might then precisely define modern man, and by extension, late-modern man.

Conclusions: from utopia to a non-psychology and back again

If the idea that every time is transitory time sounds comforting in a way — as, in a *nihil-sub-sole* stance, it would seem to argue that subjectivity always was and will be problematic and thus we should not really be worried about contemporary constraints on subjectivity as, for example, an intensified psychologisation — then I would, in contrast, like to invoke the image with which Boon’s novel closes. At the end Mr. Wadman is pursued by a mob who want to lynch him. He flees to the house in which Beauty Kitt lives, tellingly called Phoenix, built upon the dark waters of the mythical town of Taboo. The mob enters the house and corners Wadman, Beauty Kitt and Ramadhoe in the basement. Beauty Kitt, in a last gesture of identifying with Noema, opens her cape and the mob sees that her sex is covered by an inverted triangle, the mythical forgotten symbol of the Bird of Paradise.

¹⁶ One finds yet another example of this “in-between human” with Foucault’s suggestion of the coming of a new man while moderns man is “erased , like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea”, (Foucault, 2002, p. 442)

Then suddenly the building collapses. However, in a kind of post-war scene, Boon describes how the outer walls of the house remain standing, with a metal Bird of Paradise swinging on a beam. Marceau Dewilde has argued that this symbolizes the fact that, even if society and culture collapse, the bourgeoisie will always resurrect as a phoenix (Dewilde, 2000).

The end of the novel, then, refutes the interpretation that Boon has fully traded his economic-political critique for a more ethical and existential approach, in which he denounces social realism and psychological probability. If Boon does indeed exchange economic and social history for a metaphysical approach, as Weisgerber (1976) contends, then I would argue that Boon turns to a metaphysics of the social and the economic, elucidating, above all, their de-subjectivating logic. In other words, Boon, indeed, surpasses social realism and the psychological, but only insofar as he understands that late-capitalism itself has become de-realizing and de-psychologising. Thus, whilst the social optimism of his earlier novels has indeed withered away, this does not mean that *De Paradijsvogel* is not still a radical political critique. This critique is not merely existential: *the condition humaine, for Boon*, is not a timeless metaphysical element, but rather the concrete and real way in which, in late-modernity, the social gets de-socialized, the political de-politicized, and the subjective de-subjectivized. The paradox—which I have only alluded to in this paper—is that late-capitalism is the expropriation of subjectivity insofar as it expropriates precisely the zero-level of subjectivity inherent in modernity. Psychology, in its denial of the zero-level of subjectivity, plays a central role here. It is precisely where the subject is robbed of its subjective abyss and, in turn, filled by signifiers, imagery, and the forced upon roles of the psy-sciences, that its subjectivity is 'ghouled' or preyed upon by late-capitalism. And, even if Boon can be said to have left behind his utopianism, only his non-psychology can be the index of those psychologically unenvisageable possibilities.¹⁷

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¹⁷ Here I am inspired by Ray Brassier who, glossing the French philosopher François Laruelle, writes that the *suspension* of the traditional practice of thought opens up new possibilities of thought. (Brassier, 2003) I owe this reference to Ian Parker.

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