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“Real” or “Literary” Poles? The Maniewski Family in the Works of Willem Elsschot

Over the past few decades, the image of Poland and the Polish people in the Low Countries has attracted increasing attention on the part of academics. In most of the existing research, however, there has been a strong thematic focus on the early modern period and the nineteenth century.¹ Moreover, whereas the mutual perceptions of – and cultural contacts between – Poland and the Netherlands have been fairly well-documented and researched in recent years,² this is much less the case with respect to

1 See, e.g., the research of Andrzej Borowski (the early modern period), Paul Hulsenboom (seventeenth century), Jan Urbaniak (eighteenth century), and Idesbald Goddeeris (nineteenth century). For some additional references, see Kris Van Heuckelom, “Złodziejce i złote rączki. Polskie stereotypy w Niderlandach,” *Postscriptum Polonistyczne*, vol. 1, n° 1, 2008, pp. 101–114.

2 See, e.g., some of the chapters in: Lucia Thijssen, *Polska i Niderlandy. 1000 lat kontaktów*, trans. Jerzy Koch and Jadwiga Tyszkiewicz-Pol, Zutphen, Walburg Pers, 2003, as well as Duco Hellema, Ryszard Żelichowski, and Bert van der Zwan (eds.), *Poland and the Netherlands. A Case Study of European Relations*, Dordrecht, Republic of Letters, 2011; Wim Willems and Hanneke Verbeek, *Honderd jaar heimwee. De geschiedenis van Polen in Nederland*, Amsterdam, Boom, 2012; and Kris van Heuckelom, “In Holland staat een huis,” *Internationale Neerlandistiek*, vol. 53, n° 2, 2015, pp. 113–140.

Belgium.³ In this chapter, we aim to tackle these imbalances by imagologically studying what we consider to be the most important literary contribution to the public image of Poland and the Poles in Dutch-speaking Belgium between the two world wars: Willem Elsschot's diptych *Chirp/The Lion Tamer* (*Tsjip/De Leeuwentemmer*).

In the Dutch-speaking world – in Flanders as well as in the Netherlands – Willem Elsschot, the pseudonym of Alfons De Ridder (1882–1960), is nothing less than a canonical author.⁴ The Antwerp writer and advertising agent largely owes this status to his realist and succinct, usually ironic, and occasionally cynical style, which is considered timeless and is often associated with the interwar *Neue Sachlichkeit* movement.⁵ Indeed, typical traits of Elsschot's writing are his penchant for themes from the world of business, as is prominent in two of his most famous works, the duology *Soft Soap/The Leg* (*Lijmen/Het been*, 1924/1938) and *Cheese* (*Kaas*, 1933).⁶ Two of his invariably short novels,⁷ however, have little or nothing to do with the pursuit of money, but concentrate on family life instead: *Chirp* (*Tsjip*, 1934) and *The Lion Tamer* (*De Leeuwentemmer*, 1940). One of the central characters in these two novellas, which since 1943 have formed a diptych, as the author has wished,⁸ is Bennek Maniewski, the Polish

3 Some of the very few books that deal with Polish-Belgian relations are Jerzy Rebeta (ed.), *België–Polen. Balans en perspectieven van onderzoek*, Lublin, Wydawnictwo Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1988, and Maria Barbara Styk, *Belgia w relacjach Polaków. Antologia*, Lublin, Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1999.

4 His works are still widely read, regularly republished, and receive a lot of attention, not only from scholars; see Koen Rymenants, *Een hoopje vuil in de feestzaal. Facetten van het proza van Willem Elsschot*, Antwerpen, Garant, 2009, pp. 7–11.

5 Such labelling, however, is not unproblematic; see Ralf Grüttemeier, “Vlaamse zakelijkheid? Over de nieuwe zakelijkheid als poëticaal concept in Vlaanderen”, *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde*, n° 114, 199, pp. 138–155, 140, 143–144.

6 Also in his later novels *Pension* (*Pensioen*, 1937) and *The Tankship* (*Het tankschip*, 1942), everything revolves around money, whereas in his prose debut, *Villa des Roses* (1913) and *A Disappointment* (*Een ontgoocheling*, 1921), the theme of (earning) money is omnipresent as well.

7 Elsschot's collected prose – eleven novellas – counts less than eight hundred pages. He also wrote a limited number of poems, one of which (*The marriage*, 1910) has the status of a classic.

8 See Willem Elsschot, *Tsjip / De Leeuwentemmer*, Amsterdam, Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, 2003, namely the section “Verantwoording” (p. 206, 233). Although *Chirp* has been translated into German, Czech, and Danish (all in the 1930s), Polish is the only foreign language in which the diptych can be read as a whole: *Poskramiacz lwów* (*The Lion Tamer*, 2007, trans. Zofia Klimaszewska) contains both

(future) son-in-law of the Antwerp first-person narrator, Frans Laarmans. Although these two partially Poland-themed novels already have been the subject of various studies,⁹ they have so far not been approached from an *imagological* point of view. However, before introducing and applying the tripartite model for the study of ethnotypes as proposed by imagologist Joep Leerssen, we will acquaint the reader with the plot and the main characters of Elsschot's "Polish" diptych.

Chirp (1934)

In twenty-one short chapters, *Chirp* tells the affectionate story of the complicated romance and engagement, hastily organized wedding, and first year and a half of the marriage between Adele Laarmans and the Pole Bennek Maniewski. All this is told entirely through the first-person perspective of Frans Laarmans, an Antwerp office clerk with a caring, resolute wife and four children, of whom Adele, aged twenty-two, is the eldest.

Already in *Chirp*'s opening paragraph,¹⁰ Frans Laarmans introduces the reader to his Polish "visitor":

I don't remember exactly how and when the stranger came into the house, but he is now walking around here constantly. I probably did not notice his presence at the beginning, and he was upstairs when I was downstairs. Now, however, I meet him on the stairs, bump into him in the corridor, and am now sitting across from him at the table, because he's eating with us, too, now. My eldest daughter, who brought him into the house, is sitting next to him. They are both at commercial college, and I believe that he initially came to study together with her.

He was weak in French and she in state economics, and they would try to help each other. At least I heard something like that then.

Chirp (*Ćwirek*) and the eponymous novella (see Cornelis Jan Aarts, *Al is hun taal mij zo vreemd: Willem Elsschot in vertaling. Dl. 1: Bibliografie van de zelfstandig verschenen vertalingen. 1936–2008*, Antwerpen, Willem Elsschot Genootschap, 2008, pp. 40–42, 48, 57–58).

9 The main and oldest interpretation model is the biographical one (esp., Frans Smits, *Willem Elsschot. Zijn leven, zijn werk en zijn betekenis als prozaschrijver en dichter*, Brussel, Manteau, 1952, pp. 81–97, 132–144). The political reading (see Matthijs De Ridder, "De langverbeide geest van begrijpen en verbroedering: een politieke lezing van Willem Elsschots *Tsjip / De Leeuwentemmer*, *Vooys*, n° 25, 2007, pp. 6–17) and the poetological approach (of *Chirp*, by Koen Rymenants, op. cit., pp. 181–266) also deserve to be mentioned.

10 Only preceded by a two-page "Dedication" (Elsschot, *Tsjip / De Leeuwentemmer*, op. cit., 2003, pp. 9–10).

It's a tall, polite Pole who claps his heels together while greeting and who kisses my wife's hands upon entering and leaving¹¹.

The East European student, Bennek (short for "Bernard") Maniewski, with whom the Laarmanses speak French, is well received by the lively family, and it soon becomes clear that he is frequenting the house not just to study. The question of whether Adele and Bennek can and will get engaged keeps everyone (tacitly or not) busy. When the news arrives that Bennek's father, an architect, will use a working visit in Western Europe to meet the Laarmans family, this is understandably considered as *the* opportunity to finally settle the engagement issue. However, during the visit of Bennek's imposing father, who suddenly starts ostentatiously praying before dinner among the unbelieving Laarmanses, the tricky subject is avoided. Shortly afterwards, however, Laarmans receives a letter in German in which Maniewski's father urges him to no longer allow Bennek in his house. His son is too young to let his head be turned; he should limit himself to study and then immediately return to Poland to look for a position.

The situation with the Polish student becomes increasingly awkward for the whole Laarmans family and when Bennek, like Adele, passes his final exam, an irrevocable farewell seems inevitable. Bennek indeed returns to Poland, while Adele is left behind unhappy and with many questions, and the narrator, Frans Laarmans, sighs: "I really don't know what should become of our child."¹²

Two sentences later – the pace of Elsschot's novels is quick – everything turns out for the better. A letter by Bennek announces that he will come to Belgium within two months to get married. The civil marriage ceremony is performed with a small number of participants (Bennek without any of his relatives) in the small coastal town of Koksijde, where the Laarmanses have a summer cottage. Much to Laarmans's surprise, however, Adele and Bennek then interrupt their trip to Poland to have a church wedding in Belgium. They had initially intended to do this in Poland, but just after having left, Adele has considered it better to do it *before* arriving there, and so – with her father's help – they hastily arrange it in Antwerp. In a memorable chapter, the far-from-religious Adele is baptized and married on one and the same day by an unusually tractable priest. In the meantime,

11 Ibid., p. 11. All translations are ours.

12 Ibid., p. 52.

Laarmans teaches his daughter the principles of the Christian faith, making no effort to hide the fact that he finds all these dogmas highly questionable.¹³

Laarmans's occasional melancholic feelings, when he thinks about how his three other children too will once leave the parental home come to an abrupt end when a letter arrives from Gdynia (where the young couple has settled; in the northeast of the so-called "Polish Corridor," just west from the Free City of Danzig) announcing Adele's pregnancy. The Laarmanses beam with happiness, and as soon as the child, a son named Jan, is born, Laarmans's wife goes to Poland to help Adele in the household for three months.

A few months later, Adele and little Jan spend their summer holidays in Belgium, in the summer cottage in Koksijde. After a glass of beer in the local café, an excited grandfather Frans awaits the arrival of his very first grandchild in the kitchen garden of the cottage. Immediately after Jan's arrival, Frans takes the boy in his arms and walks with him alone into the garden, since the other family members do not need to know anything about the "covenant" which they will make. When the two see a couple of sparrows, the grandfather says "chirp," whereupon little Jan smiles. "Yes, boy," Laarmans says, "from now on your name will be Chirp. You have come here to relieve me of my leading role, and thus I can re-baptize you, I think."¹⁴ It is only on the penultimate page of the actual story¹⁵ that we get the explanation of the title of Elsschot's novella.

The Lion Tamer (1940)

Published six years later, *The Lion Tamer* continues the story of the Belgian-Polish marriage of Adele and Bennek as well as their son Jan ("Chirp" or, as he is known in this novella, "the Lion Tamer"). Frans Laarmans remains the emotionally involved narrator, but formally we are dealing with an epistolary novel. In a series of sixteen letters/chapters¹⁶ addressed to his son, Walter, who is studying in Paris, Frans Laarmans describes and

13 Ibid., pp. 79–81. For the critical reactions this particular chapter (XVII) caused in Catholic Flanders, see Koen Rymenants, op. cit., pp. 241–257.

14 Ibid., p. 99.

15 From the second edition (1936) onwards, *Chirp* comes with a reflective epilogue by the author (on its theme and style); see Willem Elsschot, *Tsjip / De Leeuwentemmer*, op. cit., pp. 101–115, 219–220.

16 The long opening letter (ibid., pp. 119–137; the next fifteen letters cover only sixty-one pages) presents a conversation between Laarmans and his three-year-old

comments on the unfortunate developments between his eldest daughter and his Polish son-in-law.

Almost three years have passed, and Adele and Bennek, now living in Danzig, appear to have grown apart, especially since Adele does not feel like leading the kind of life which is expected from the wife of a Pole who is climbing up the social ladder. When, during a short visit to Antwerp, Bennek tells his father-in-law that he and Adele are about to have a divorce, Laarmans does nothing but resign himself to this. It must be due to her upbringing, he thinks, which was probably too liberal and warm.¹⁷ The divorce in Danzig goes through several administrative and legal steps and, after that, the letters to Walter focus on the fate of the eponymous character: the Lion Tamer. In Poland, Bennek and his very Catholic mother, Bapcia (sic; the Polish word for “grandmother” is *babcia*) want to provide the boy with a strict, Catholic upbringing. The Laarmans family surely acknowledges that Jan is half-Polish and that he has to stay with his father now and then, but they nevertheless want to keep him out of his Polish sphere of influence as much as possible.

The relationship of mutual understanding between little Jan’s parents drastically worsens when one day, contrary to their agreement, Bennek does not let his son come to Belgium. He has learned of Adele’s new marriage and considers such an environment inappropriate for his son’s further upbringing, so he wants to keep him in Poland for good. After some desperate months, Adele leaves for Poland, morally and financially supported by her family, “on a punitive expedition”¹⁸ to kidnap, as it were, her son, who has been staying for a long time with his “Bapcia” in Posen (Poznan). The ever-increasing threat of war in Poland (the plot is set on the eve of the Second World War) is an additional incentive for the Laarmanses to act quickly now. The “undertaking” proves difficult, but Adele succeeds, and when the Laarmanses receive a telegram “from an unknown hole in Germany” with the message: “arriving tomorrow evening at nine”, the worst suffering is over, at least in Antwerp.¹⁹

grandson, during which little Jan turns out to be so fascinated by lions that his grandfather nicknames him “the lion tamer.”

17 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 192, 195.

Imagology in Theory and Practice

As a theory and a research method that defies any kind of naive essentialism, imagology is *not* interested in the (un)truthfulness of ethnic and national stereotypes, but rather concentrates on the way in which these images (of the Self and Other, of Us and Them) function in a wide variety of representational practices across time and space. In a recent state-of-the-art article, Joep Leerssen has pointed out three closely intertwined components of imagological research: the intertextual, the contextual, and the textual,²⁰ all of which will be applied here. First, the *intertextual* level of investigation serves to analyze the representations of national character as an amalgam of "discursive objects" (re)appearing in a broad range of (literary and other) texts. As Leerssen notes, "any given instance of an ethnotype refers not to empirical reality as such as to the established commonplaces, and the imagologist's task is to retrieve these implied commonplaces."²¹ Meanwhile, the *contextual* dimension relates to "the historical, political, and social conditions within which a given ethnotype is brought forward."²² Finally, the *textual* approach serves to uncover the way in which such ethnotypes operate within the text itself.

Apart from these methodological observations, it is important to note that imagology does not solely engage with representations of "national character," but also looks into spatial dichotomies which are – rather than being nation-bound – broadly applicable to various kinds of cultural constellations, such as "the temperamental opposition between a cool, cerebral-moral North and a hot, sanguine-emotional South; between a dynamic Centre and a static or backward Periphery."²³

Regarding the Polish connection in the works of Willem Elsschot, we need to emphasize the crucial role played by the East-West dichotomy in the process of European identity formation, a dichotomy that set the allegedly more developed and civilized "core" of the continent apart from its peripheral antithesis situated in the East.²⁴

20 Joep Leerssen, "Imagology: On Using Ethnicity to Make Sense of the World," *Iberic@l. Revue d'études ibériques et ibéro-américaines*, n° 10, 2016, pp. 13–31.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

23 Joep Leerssen, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

24 The emergence of this particular discursive economy has been thoroughly examined by, a.o., Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994, and Ezequiel Adamovsky, "Euro-Orientalism and the Making of the Concept of Eastern

Elsschot's "Polish" Diptych Through an Intertextual Lens

The emergence and proliferation of a homogenizing concept such as "Eastern Europe" does not imply, of course, that the countries (and subregions) affected by this discursive process have lost their representational distinctiveness altogether. A pertinent example is Poland, which – partly as a result of the turbulent events leading up to and following its three partitions (1772, 1793, 1795) – remained fairly visible as a distinct cultural entity in political, journalistic, historiographic, and literary texts alike, to which widespread metaphors such as "Polish parliament" (unruliness, chaos) and *polnische Wirtschaft* ("Polish economy;" that is, economic mismanagement, incapability of self-governance)²⁵ bear witness.

In the Low Countries, the Polish November Uprising (which took place in 1830–1831 and was directed against the Tsar) evoked strongly divergent reactions, as this was a time when Belgium itself was struggling to gain independence from the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (1815–1830). Dynastically affiliated with the Romanovs, the Dutch royal family perceived the rebelliousness of the Polish people in accordance with the recalcitrant behavior of the Belgian political elite, which understandably resulted in a socially widespread attitude of "Polonophobia."²⁶

On the Belgian side, meanwhile, the opposite attitude of "Polonophilia" initially prevailed, which found expression, for example, in the hospitable reception of several hundred Polish officers and soldiers in the aftermath of the unsuccessful November Uprising. However, once the Kingdom of Belgium had achieved stability, the revolutionary idealism that would repeatedly lead to uprisings in partitioned Poland was deemed excessive and pointless.²⁷

Some decades later, the "Polish question" would be instrumentalized on an *intra*-Belgian level; for example, in Albrecht Rodenbach's Flemish two-act play *De studenten van Warschau* ("The Students of Warsaw," 1879) the

Europe in France, 1810–1880," *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 77, n° 3, 2005, pp. 591–628.

25 Hubert Orłowski, "*Polnische Wirtschaft*". *Zum deutschen Polendiskurs der Neuzeit*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 1996.

26 Idesbald Goddeeris, "Dutch Reactions to the Polish National Insurrections (1830–1870)", *Acta Poloniae Historica*, n° 2, 2007, pp. 139–169.

27 Liesbeth Vandersteene, "Polonofilie, nationalisme en nationale identiteit: Belgische reacties op de eerste Poolse vluchtelingen van de 'Grote Emigratie' (1831–1832)", *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, n° 1–2, 2000, pp. 49–130.

Polish January Uprising of 1863 (also suppressed by the Tsar) is deployed to comment and support the activities of the Flemish Movement.²⁸

Willem Elsschot also made use of the malleability of images of Poland, but he did so in a way that strongly deviated from the discourses described so far. His refreshing take on Polish characters and topics in *Chirp and The Lion Tamer* definitely takes on additional poignancy if we compare both novellas with other Dutch-language texts that were written at more or less the same time. A case in point is, first, the voluminous (three-part) study which the Antwerp physician and anthropologist Gustaaf Schamelhout (1869–1944) published at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s under the umbrella title *The Peoples of Europe and the Struggle of Nationalities*.

In the second part of the trilogy, which was published in Amsterdam in 1929, Elsschot's contemporary and fellow townsman devoted some one hundred pages to the history and current political situation of Poland. Although generally well informed and thoroughly documented, the book also charts imagological territory, most notably in a six-page section entitled "National Character" ("Volksaard" in Dutch).

While mainly drawing his inspiration from French, German, and Scandinavian sources, Schamelhout includes a number of reflections that immediately bring to mind eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Poland-related clichés such as "Polish parliament" and *polnische Wirtschaft* (see above), for instance, when he observes: "They [the Poles] are enthusiastic and impractical, beautiful and loose, lively and frisky. They want to enjoy life but not earn their living; to enjoy life rather than to live in complete carelessness. They are bad householders and unscrupulous in financial matters. [...] They squander their gifts and waste their wealth. They have no talent to be citizens."²⁹

While Elsschot's (strongly autobiographical) approach is based on first-hand experiences and not on a given reputation, Schamelhout stands much more emphatically in the intertextual tradition, borrowing from a pre-existing body of texts (as described by Leerssen and others).

28 See Ingrid Van de Wijer, "Albrecht Rodenbachs 'Studenten van Warschau' (1879): niet iedere gelijkenis met bestaande personen en toestanden is louter toevallig," *Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen*, vol. 39, n° 4, 1980, pp. 205–226.

29 Gustaaf Schamelhout, *De volkeren van Europa en de strijd der nationaliteiten*. Dl. 2, Amsterdam, Maatschappij tot Verspreiding van Goede en Goedkoope Lectuur, 1929, p. 308. For a general (introductory) discussion of the "Polish ethnotype," see André Gerrits and Joep Leerssen, "Poles," in: Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen (ed.), *Imagology. The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters. A Critical Survey*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2007, pp. 216–219.

At the same time, *Chirp and The Lion Tamer* also mark a significant shift within Elsschot's own oeuvre, especially when compared to his 1913 prose debut *Villa des Roses* (see note 6). Set in a dilapidated Paris boarding house and featuring a wide range of international characters (French, German, Norwegian, Dutch, American, Hungarian, and Polish), *Villa des Roses* is undoubtedly Elsschot's most "imagological" book.

In his extensive analysis of the novel, Koen Rymenants has pointed out that the story builds on "classical" (both internationally and regionally oriented) oppositions such as North-South and city-countryside, but simultaneously problematizes and questions these established patterns and clichés.³⁰ In keeping with our imagological reading of Elsschot's work, the very fact that the central romance in *Villa des Roses* – between the maid Louise and the boarder Grünewald – is French-German appears to suggest that Elsschot initially perceived Europe through a dominant Romance-Germanic lens (his homeland Belgium being one of the hybrid manifestations of the North-South axis within the continent).

At the same time, it is difficult not to notice that the East-Central European characters – all of them women – are the least developed within the storyline, being de facto reduced to mere "appendages" to their (Western) male partners, without any form of financial or professional autonomy. This, in turn, seems to suggest that for Elsschot this region was still largely a blind spot on the eve of World War I and mainly evoked associations with poor economic development. More often than not, the two Polish women featured in the novel – Anna Krupinski and her mother Marie – are framed by the narrator in terms of poverty, while their much younger (and more attractive) Hungarian housemates are almost constantly looking for a wealthy "uncle" who would be able to provide for them.³¹

With respect to the important role of Catholicism in Poland – to conclude this "intertextual" paragraph – Gerrits and Leerssen have primarily linked *religiosity* to Polish self-perceptions throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: "The Polish self-image in the nineteenth century, strenuously Catholic as a result of the double pressure from Russian Orthodoxy and Prussian Protestantism and bolstered by ultramontanism, was disseminated in the many historical novels of Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916)."³² With its strong focus on Polish religiosity and piety, Els-

30 Koen Rymenants, op. cit., pp. 25–104.

31 Willem Elsschot, *Villa des Roses*, Amsterdam, Athenaeum-Polak & Van Genneep, 2008, pp. 26–28 and passim.

32 André Gerrits and Joep Leerssen, op. cit., p. 217.

schot's diptych turns this self-perception into a powerful hetero-image (which also serves, as we will see, a domestic agenda).

Poland in Alfons De Ridder's Biographical and Political Context

Just like Willem Elsschot's novels about business life have been widely linked to the commercial know-how of the advertising agent behind his pseudonym, the contents of *Chirp* and *The Lion Tamer*, too, from the outset have been approached biographically (see note 9). This is hardly surprising given the fact that Alfons De Ridder's eldest daughter indeed was named Adele; that she married a Pole named Bernard Maniewski; and that the only child from their short-lived marriage was indeed named Jan. What is more, in real life Jan Maniewski (born in Gdynia in 1933) was kidnapped by Adele while staying at his Polish grandmother's house in Posen.³³

On the other hand, since the diptych clearly consists of two *novels* instead of two diaries, we are evidently dealing with a literarized reality. Comparing the diptych to Alfons De Ridder's letters on issues such as the struggle for his first grandchild, one can easily observe the differences between literature and reality.³⁴ After all, first-person narrators and other literary characters must never be confused with authors and other real-life persons.

In the diptych, many Flemish characters indeed bear the same names as the author's family members, but there are no De Ridders, and the first-person narrator is neither named Alfons nor Willem Elsschot but Frans Laarmans, a character also featured in other (earlier as well as later) Elsschot novels. As for the Polish characters, however, the decisive impact of the actual personalities of the historical Maniewskis, Bennek and his parents, seems difficult to underestimate,³⁵ especially since Elsschot does not seem to have been substantially influenced by the Poles from the intertextual ethnotypical tradition.

33 See Vic van de Reijt, *Elsschot. Leven en werken van Alfons De Ridder*, Amsterdam, Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, 2011, pp. 198–267.

34 Adele, for example, undertook two trips (instead of one) to Poland to try to get her son back (Van de Reijt, *op. cit.*, p. 266).

35 In November 2015, we conducted a long interview with Jan Maniewski, a retired doctor still living in Antwerp, about Poland and the Poles in his life. Inevitably, his memories of his first years must have intermingled with what he read in his grandfather's novels. See also Hein Aalders (ed.), 'Voortaan heet jij Tsjip'. *Jan Maniewski en zijn grootvader Elsschot*, Antwerpen, Willem Elsschot Genootschap, 2018.

One can therefore rightly say that it was most of all Alfons – more precisely, Adele – De Ridder’s biographical context that made Elsschot portray the Maniewskis as they appear in *Chirp* and *The Lion Tamer*. Because biographical matters are seldom unaffected by societal developments, the political context of Poland’s turbulent 1930s has obviously also left its traces in the characterization of the Maniewski family. Rather than interpreting Elsschot’s “Polish” diptych as a vehicle to express the author’s premonition of and hopes for the arrival of a new political (communist) wind over Europe,³⁶ we would like to emphasize how Bennek Maniewski and his father turn out to be two incarnations of how a resurrected Poland, which regained independence following World War I, wanted to manifest itself on the new geopolitical map of Europe.

As we have seen, beginning with the first chapter of *Chirp*, the reader is introduced to the “tall, polite Pole,” and in the wake of the East European student the extraliterary context of Poland’s complex contemporary history seeps into the story. Not daring to broach the subject of his daughter who is eligible for marriage, Laarmans talks about things such as the “Polish Corridor,”³⁷ which could be seen as a metaphor for Adele standing between Laarmans and Bennek. When, at the end of the opening chapter, the first-person narrator ponders: “For almost a year, that Polish mystery remains unsolved,” what evidently resonates is the uncertain, “mysterious” fate of interwar Poland, geographically so close to the burgeoning Nazi regime, and of Europe as a whole.³⁸ In *Chirp*, the “mystery” of Poland may be considered to suggest a rather positive future, featuring Bennek and his father as, respectively, a promising and an established builder of the new Polish state, symbolized in the flourishing young seaport town of Gdynia and in the birth of little Jan, from a marriage between Poland and the West. In *The Lion Tamer*, though, which was completed in 1939, the feeling of positiveness and amicability has disappeared, bearing witness to increasing hostilities between the Flemish and the Polish family against the menacing background of the outbreak of World War II.

36 As Matthijs De Ridder (no family of Alfons) has done in 2007, see note 9.

37 Willem Elsschot, *Tsjip / De Leeuwentemmer*, op. cit., pp. 11–12.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 14. Whether or not intended by Elsschot, this passage also echoes the proverbial “Polish question” which had remained “unsolved” throughout the nineteenth century.

Searching for "Polishness" in the Text

The significant Polish characters in *Chirp* and *The Lion Tamer* are limited to three, or, rather, three and a half: Bennek Maniewski, his imposing father whose first name remains unmentioned; Bennek's mother Bapcia; and, finally, his son of a Belgian mother: Jan. That they, just like almost all Antwerp characters, are close relatives, is no coincidence: in fact, the duology can be considered as the account of two families with their different values and educational concepts, in search of each other, but ultimately clashing. The confrontation of these two concepts is embodied, as it were, in the very young Jan Maniewski, literally a product of the two corresponding cultures (in terms of upbringing). Although Jan is introduced only near the end of *Chirp*, the prominent position he occupies as a character is stressed by the two titles of the duology, both referring to him alone. Beginning with the troubles in the marriage of his parents, his "Polishness," as well as "Polishness" in general – which increasingly boils down to discipline and Catholicism – is definitely problematized in the Laarmans family, but already before his birth, too, the positioning vis-à-vis Poland plays a role in the text.

After Bennek's introduction in *Chirp* as a Pole (see above), he is later called "our Pole;" later, after his father's visit, he is referred to as "the Pole;" and, finally, after the marriage he is referred to as "our Pole" again. After the divorce in *The Lion Tamer*, Bennek is almost systematically referred to as "the Lonely One,"³⁹ also indicating that despite his prosperity in Danzig the Pole stands alone and is no longer part of the warm, close-knit, although chaotic Laarmans "clan."

This chaos, the traditional stock feature in the West of stereotypical Poles (see above explanations of the terms: "Polish parliament" and *polnische Wirtschaft*), is certainly a leitmotiv to characterize the Antwerp Laarmans family throughout the duology. Consequently, to support the well-functioning of the "Us-Them" opposition, the sense of discipline of the "competing" family had to be emphasized; hence, quite paradoxically, the association of a (stereotypical) Prussian trait with the Polish Maniewskis.

This crucial (educational) opposition between free, joyous chaos and cold discipline, between congenial laxity and a strict sense of values – pinpointed by Frans Laarmans as the main cause for the breakdown of the marriage (see above) – is corroborated, in the field of religion, by the

39 See, a.o., *ibid.*, p. 11, 12, 65, 170.

opposition between the unbelieving Laarmanses and the strictly Catholic Maniewskis. In this respect, a telling difference between real-life Adele De Ridder and Adele Laarmans is that the former *was* baptized as a child,⁴⁰ whereas the latter in *Chirp* still needed to be baptized just before her church marriage. Clearly, Elsschot did this to stress the un-Catholicity of the Antwerp protagonists, and thus to more efficiently oppose the Antwerp “Us” to the Polish “Them.” Yet at the same time, this – then particularly un-Flemish – laxity and wildness in religious matters should also be interpreted as a statement against Catholic literary criticism which was dominant at the time in Flanders (which strongly objected the contents of *Chirp*’s chapter XVII; see note 13).

The unbridgeable gap between the two educational concepts of the respective families is stylistically supported by the first-person narrator’s frequent use of, for example, battle and war metaphors as they have already been thoroughly studied by Rymenants in *Chirp*.⁴¹ In *The Lion Tamer*, they are even complemented and intensified by a rich repertoire of maritime metaphors, the combination of which may be connected to the militarily contested Free City of Danzig, the strategically important seaport city where Bennek climbs the social ladder and where he wants to pave the way for his son Jan. An example of this imagery is the “caravel” of the Laarmanses that is to sail to Poland in order to bring back its “cabin boy” Jan,⁴² the small, well-maneuverable caravel being an appropriate metaphor for the Laarmans family and its aversion to rigidity.

Conclusion

The previous three paragraphs have confirmed Leerssen’s observation that in practice, one cannot study the three imagological operational levels – intertextual, contextual, and textual – separately.⁴³ The sophisticated way in which Elsschot has crafted the interactions and confrontations between his Antwerp and Polish characters into a literary form indeed

40 Vic van de Reijt, *op. cit.*, p. 223. Curiously enough, the young Adele may have been baptized without her parents’ knowledge at the time; see Jef Van Elst, “Willem Elsschot en Blauberg,” *ZL*, vol. 3, n° 1, 2004, pp. 2–15, 12–13 (we thank Koen Rymenants for drawing our attention to this).

41 Koen Rymenants, *op. cit.*, pp. 204–212.

42 Willem Elsschot, *Tsjip / De Leeuwentemmer*, *op. cit.*, p. 188, 196; for the ship metaphors, see also Smits, *op. cit.*, pp. 95–96.

43 Joep Leerssen, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

defies a level-per-level investigation of the imagological processes under operation in his "Polish" diptych.

Be that as it may, we hope to have demonstrated how the Poles in *Chirp and The Lion Tamer*, actually one concrete family, are one of the constituents of an overarching "Us-Them" opposition: that between the strict Maniewskis and the loose Laarmanses. Because the context was so unique and rich, it provided more valuable narrative material for Elsschot's text than the whole existing intertextual tradition of images of Poland (as far as Elsschot was familiar with them). The biographical and contemporary political contexts have indeed offered "better" – more suitable – and in any case fresher material to elaborate the "Us-Them" opposition. As a matter of fact, this material also enabled him to bring to the fore a modern "Us" that was highly atypical by contemporary (Flemish) standards.

Admittedly, "Us-Them" oppositions are characteristic of older literary works in which a foreign nationality is traditionally juxtaposed with that of the author or narrator. As we have seen, such an opposition in this case is indeed omnipresent, but in essence it is not an opposition between nations or nationalities, but between families and their educational concepts that is at stake. Just because Elsschot was not interested in the "virtues" of typical, "nationalized" Flemings or Belgians, there was no need whatsoever, one could say, to stage (stereo)typical, "nationalized" Poles. Unlike in *Villa des Roses*, the Poles in *Chirp and The Lion Tamer* are clearly biographically motivated, which did not prevent Elsschot from "adjusting" their Polishness (or better: otherness) in order to highlight the atypically Flemish "wildness" of his Laarmans family.

To finally answer the question posed in the title of this article, the very fact that we are dealing with novels unquestionably has as its logical consequence that the Maniewskis in Elsschot's diptych are *literary*, not *real* Poles. However, since the particular context – as we have seen – of Alfons De Ridder's biographical and political *reality* on the eve of World War II had an arguably much bigger impact on the literary construction of their Polishness than any stereotype-driven "intertext," one could in this respect at least consider the Maniewskis to be "real" rather than stereotypical Poles.

