



**passa porta seminar 2016**

**NEED & NECESSITY**

## **A Fireside Seance**

by Jeroen Olyslaegers

The first chapter of *Chapel Road*, Louis Paul Boon's masterpiece, begins with an exchange between two voices. The first asks the second, seemingly the writer, what he still has to contribute to literature. The fire rages at once, for isn't that the question that writers ask when embarking on yet another book or when that tantalizing idea starts nagging in your head and you just know that it could germinate and grow into a book? Why make another contribution to such an immense library? Who am I? What is the sense in me writing? Such questions can spark off an ice-cold fire, a fire surrounded by pitch-black darkness. But Boon turns it into a spiritist seance. The questioner calls up names against which the writer will have to measure himself, authors of which we know that Boon read them and treasured them. Lautréamont, Dostoyevsky, Proust, Céline, Lawrence or the anonymous writers of fairy tales and fables ... What can the writer have to add? They emerge out of the darkness and come and sit around the fire. Each of them with their own truth, each with their own climax, each with their own oeuvre (whether forgotten or not), each with so much influence on so many others. It is a sign of both bravura and modesty to gather these ghosts in the opening pages of a book of which Boon must have known that it would be something else, something different from all the others. That is also why the writer explains during this seance he himself summoned that it is *possible* that it will be *impossible* to contribute something new to all that literature. But dust falls on all that, according to the writer, and once in while a writer needs a tabula rasa, and it is a good thing that the writer 'articulates the world-of-today with other words'.

*Chapel Road* is thus also an 'articulation' or, rather, a staged exchange between friends, as well as between writer and reader, where the latter often gets the feeling of being addressed directly in a book that blends so many themes, from industrialization and the life of workers in the nineteenth century until today, how history misunderstands its own echoes, power rages senselessly and people fool themselves so much about this, that and the other and try to keep silent about the darkness in each of them.

The need to articulate oneself is part of the genetic structure of this book.

If we want to talk about need and necessity, I offer this as a possible starting point. Every writer knows that his path has already been levelled in part, but can just as well indulge in the illusion that he has arrived in territory that he is the first to discover, where the carpet of snow still lies untouched or where the trees have only come into existence because he is going to try to capture them in words. Sometimes it feels as though you have arrived at a waterfall after a long walk with no one to be seen on the banks and so to be overwhelmed by the thought, completely absurd in this day and age, that this spot was made specially for you because you are the first one to pierce its secret. But this illusion is not without danger. Think of poor Actaeon, who separated from his resting hunting party in order, aimlessly and led by chance, to wander a bit in a forest only to come across a bathing and quite naked goddess Diana, a secret that mortal eyes could not behold. Ovid describes in his *Metamorphoses* how this cannot but lead to a transformation. Actaeon is turned into a stag by the goddess, after which the hounds tear him to pieces, goaded by his unknowing hunting friends. The hunter becomes the prey. At first sight, it is the act of straying that seems to be punished, but beyond good and evil, Ovid rather seems to be describing a mechanism of enchantment, how the uncovering of secrets is a sign of change and how coincidence and the act of straying are precisely instructors that can provide insights.

The need to stray and to stumble across unknown territory is just as important as the acknowledgement of reference points, of a tradition in which we write and think. Our physical world has been disenchanted. At least, we fool ourselves with this illusion. Nothing on this planet remains untouched, one of us has already been there, has photographed the place or was the forerunner of a little army of biologists and anthropologists who then measured, researched and analysed everything. The tales

about pioneers and explorers only fan nostalgia, and not necessarily spontaneous curiosity. It should therefore not come as a surprise that in the past decades so much literature has surfaced whose creators feel the need to show explicitly to what tradition they belong and what writers they see as benchmarks with parodic allusions and references that are sometimes obscure, sometimes hardly concealed. We have names for this ailment. We call it 'intertextuality' and place it in turn in the tradition of postmodernity, no matter how painful it is to the eyes of every upright postmodernist to have the latter lumped together in a single sentence. Sometimes belonging to any tradition whatsoever seems itself to be one of the deepest needs of the writer in question.

We are well read, and just as disenchanted.

But where is the need to blow, in full awareness, the dust off everything that has been told and written before, to cross out that whole past ritually as Boon did in *Chapel Road*? Is such a position still defensible? Is there no arrogance lurking here that now hardly seems conceivable, or is this necessity the very opposite and is it a motive for so many writers? Do we not all want to articulate the world-of-today with our own words, in complete awareness of the existence of every great writer and at the same time also, as if those two were to be united, to maintain a wilful word blindness with regard to everything, literally everything, that was ever put down on paper?

For me writing is about freedom. To put it more sharply: it is the illusion of freedom that I am chasing, not only behind my laptop, but also in the world outside my writing room. It is not easy. Today the rulers of this planet are deluding themselves into believing that there are no alternatives, that history is as dead as after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and that anyone still wanting to think about possible alternatives that could improve society is suffering from some mental disorder whereby he or she runs the risk of becoming a radical or of increasingly seeking out extremes, after which he will excommunicate himself from the righteousness of the rest. It is no innocent fight that I see raging outside my writing room. It is about telling stories, about laying foundations and a tradition, about what reality is and what belongs to this or that ideology. We watch an old paradigm die and like a birth, that approaching death offers up a violent spectacle. In his historical novel *Het Geuzenboek* (The book of Geuzen), Louis Paul Boon describes the war of religions that waged in these regions

in the sixteenth century especially, and he recounts the confusion that reigned at the time and that we can recognize today: 'People lived in a world that was dying and in a world that was being born, and no one saw the difference between the old and the new, because everything blended together imperceptibly and inextricably.' In a Flemish newspaper recently, the Italian author Alessandro Baricco claimed that the son of his now ten-year old son would probably not live in a parliamentary democracy anymore, adding that he could not evaluate what would take its place. These are times of change in which the hunter can become the prey and vice versa, and that can be a source of fear and confusion. But at the same time there is hope, and these are precisely exciting times because top-down thinking has thus revealed itself and because members of government almost daily display their own paradoxes in words and deeds like involuntary human billboards. For the simple confirmation of this existence 'without an alternative' of endless economic growth, zombie democracy and depletion of the planet with always the same instinct for plunder will see to it that the pendulum swings the other way and people in so many countries are actively starting to think about alternatives and, partly thanks to our technology but certainly also thanks to growing awareness, are generating a bottom-up movement that is rolling up its sleeves and that, step by step, is making that new world real and feasible in their own community.

Am I rambling? Possibly. Let me add by way of an apology that I have just described my own reality tunnel. This is my freedom, the field in which I stand, in which I think, write and try to act. It should therefore not come as a surprise that, in my own poetics – that conversation that I incessantly have with so many side roads, so many demons in my own head –, I consider a tabula rasa or the longing for it as a given. Like a sick man describing his own symptoms without a doctor around, I propose that respect for tradition, or rather, the recognition of your own place in this tradition, seems absurd to me in these times, far away from where the world rages, far away from this revelatory time. The fever that rages in me tells me that we can again reinvent the world from the bottom up and that we have to set out again on exploratory journeys, including to countries we believe we know. My fever orders me to tell you that we have to extort alternatives again and again with regard to whoever or whatever. While I shiver under my self-made blanket, I insist on the fact that the world is enchanting and that those who are of the opinion that nothing can still really

happen are welcome to be infected with my fever. Come give me a hug. I am not germ-free and I am not open to reason.

This disease means that lately I have wanted to visit those very domains where so many authors have already been, historical periods such as World War II about which so many libraries have already been filled, about which so much has already been visualized and which has taken up such a generous place in our collective memory. That is precisely where I want to go because I know that the dust of times and opinions is piled high there, that the god of the cliché has the last word there and has brought virtually every aspect of that time under his rule. That is precisely where I want to take a deep breath before blowing away the dust. That is precisely where I want to cross out everything that has been written and demand a space for myself. That is precisely where a fight with a god is justified. Those places are generally heavily haunted, so much so that literature itself, along with its ghosts that are called writers, are all too present there and thereby no longer seem to authorize any other life or even just another perspective. Voices are increasingly being raised to the effect that Europe is again being ravaged by the same forces that in the 1930s led our grandparents and great-grandparents straight into the horror. It is precisely through cinema and literature, both to a certain extent a collection of coagulated stories, that this period has taken on a form in our collective memory that makes such comparisons even more frightening. Chasing away such ghosts and reinventing that time with the imagination which a writer has at his disposal is more than a longing for a *tabula rasa*. It is a position, it means that history and literature have this in common: they continuously need to be enriched so as to escape from the god of the cliché.

It is, I presume, a mental defect to think that the world of literature and the world of the so-called reality mirror each other. Whoever catches sight of conservatism in the republic of letters will soon be inclined to perceive it also in social media, on the paper of newspapers with fewer and fewer readers, or in all the other symptoms of the world out there. Whoever holds a hammer looks for a nail. Whoever sees a layer of dust on things that are close to his heart has a tendency to blow hard on them. Whoever believes that the world constantly needs alternatives will go in search of them, both in the literature and outside of it.

Discerning need and necessity therein then seems self-evident. The only thing that can still torment a person is again that fire around which ghosts have gathered. Whoever wants a tabula rasa has to chase them away one by one, with a loud voice and as manfully as possible, just as Boon did. What is tragicomic about so much courage is the realization that those ghosts not only show themselves around a fire, but that they also live in the head of the writer, sometimes hidden, but therefore precisely inevitable, because of all those countless hours behind a book written by one of them.

*English translation by Patrick Lennon*

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