

IMAGINING ADVENTURE IN MIDDLEBROW FICTION:  
Cosmopolitan Novels by Maurice Dekobra and Johan Fabricius

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RELIEF 9 (1), 2015 – ISSN: 1873-5045. P 102-118

<http://www.revue-relief.org>

URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-117145

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The first half of the twentieth century saw the rise of a new type of novel that straddled the divide between popular entertainment and legitimate culture by combining 'high' and 'low' literary forms and catering *en masse* for the tastes of an expanding middleclass reading public. In this article we want to explore the ways in which the novels *La Madone des sleepings* (1925) by the bestselling French novelist Maurice Dekobra and *Venetiaansch avontuur* [Venetian adventure] (1931) by the Dutch author Johan Fabricius fit into this broad category of the middlebrow novel and how their use of *adventure* as a structural devise might complicate the common view of the middlebrow novel as a form of *domestic* realism.

Maurice Dekobra is often introduced as the author who invented a new type of novel, viz. the so-called cosmopolitan novel. As his biographer, Philippe Collas, notes, "avec ses premiers romans cosmopolites, Dekobra rompt avec une tradition pour se lancer vers de nouveaux horizons, ouvrant de nouvelles voies, offrant des sensations inexplorées jusqu'alors" (241). Immediately, however, the novelty of this cosmopolitan dimension is qualified. Collas rightly points out that cosmopolitanism as a novelistic theme or setting as such was far from unprecedented. Instead, he claims, it is the realistic treatment of the different locales, all over the world, that make Dekobra's successful novels stand out from earlier explorations of foreign territories, as they can be found for instance in the works of Chateaubriand, Loti, Stevenson (241). A similar argument is made by Tom Genrich, who argues that "Dekobra participates in the inter-war realist-historicist illusion, with his major novels containing passages that privilege Reality or Truth over their artistic representation"

(124). Although there might certainly be some truth in these observations, it remains to be seen to what extent the combination of cosmopolitanism and realism of novels such as *La Madone des sleepings* really epitomizes something new. Instead, there are good reasons to argue that Dekobra's cosmopolitanism is in at least two ways firmly rooted in the prewar cultural context, and hence in the context of a bygone past.

To begin with, *La Madone des sleepings* is a cosmopolitan book in that it explores different geographical contexts, moving from the very heart of civilization (London) to the exotic (yet not very attractive) borderland of the Caucasus (Nikolaïa). Such a geographical organization is reminiscent of some major 19<sup>th</sup> century novel types (such as the historical novel, see for instance Moretti 1998) and, in particular, of the adventure novel, which saw its heydays from the 1870's onwards (Letourneux 2010, 9). The typical novel of adventures is often based on a kind of conflict between the ordinary, western world and an *univers dépaysant* at the very end of civilization, in which the hero is threatened by *sauvagerie* (Letourneux, 20, 22). The development of the genre is clearly linked to the 19<sup>th</sup> century notion of empire, the exploration and 'cultivation' of hitherto 'unknown' and 'savage' territories and – as Rosalind Williams shows, drawing on the example of among others Jules Verne – can be seen as a reaction to the growing intuition at the end of the century that the expansion of 'human empire' is coming to a close, as the 'mapping' and 'conquering' of the world is reaching its completion.

Dekobra's books, however, are cosmopolitan in yet another sense. Their main characters are casted as members of a high society that is depicted as profoundly international. Gérard Dextrier, the male protagonist of *Mon cœur au ralenti* and *La Madone des sleepings*, for instance, is a French member of the high society who is in need of money, begins a new life in the US, marries a wealthy American woman and finally moves to London, where he meets Lady Diana Wynham, the female protagonist of *La Madone des sleepings* and *La gondole aux chimères* (and, later on, *La Madone à Hollywood*), who is born in Scotland, lives in London, has travelled in sleeping cars throughout the continent and ends up living in Venice. These people of the smart set seem to cross national borders without any difficulty. Hence, Dekobra's cosmopolitanism seems to be rooted in a kind of nostalgic longing for the prewar Europe of the *fin de siècle* and the *belle époque* in which the upper class could travel freely across the civilized world – until World War I passports were generally not required for travel inside Europe. Travel was facilitated by the expanding infrastructure of modern tourism, which got an enormous boost in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, due for instance to the increasing density of the

railway system and the construction of luxurious grand hotels (see for instance Gottwaldt 2005 and Knoch 2005). These landmarks of modern tourism, as they had materialized by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, are key to the spatial and geographical organization of Dekobra's early cosmopolitan novels: the Orient Express, grand hotels (such as the Adlon Hotel in Berlin (since 1907) and the Bristol Hotel in Vienna (since 1892)), restaurants, tourist attractions like Venice, etc. If the kind of cosmopolitanism epitomized by the novels by Dekobra becomes a real hype in novel-writing in the 1920's and 1930's (Genrich 2004) (on a par with, for instance, the fashion of novels set in hotels, from Thomas Mann's *Der Tod in Venedig* (1913) to Vicky Baum's *Menschen im Hotel* (1929), see Matthias 2006) this hype is at least anticipated since the end of the nineteenth century and has definitely something nostalgic, and even conservative in its depiction of social relations.

### **The invention of the middlebrow**

Given the widespread character of literary cosmopolitanism in the 1920's and its dependence on prewar cultural models, Dekobra was neither the writer who introduced cosmopolitanism in literature, nor did he invent the genre of the cosmopolitan novel, as the latter is clearly based on older generic models (such as the novel of adventures). What he did, rather, was adapting older themes, geographies and generic models to new cultural constellations. What is crucial in this process of reinterpretation is that his novels are not only set in cosmopolitan contexts, yet are cosmopolitan themselves, in that they almost immediately began to circulate internationally and can be seen as early examples of the phenomenon of the international bestseller. In this way, Dekobra made the elite cosmopolitanism of the turn of the century, epitomized for instance by luxurious tourism, accessible for a much broader audience, ingeniously mixing elitist social assumptions and highbrow cultural references with popular generic models such as the novel of adventures. Hence, what is new about Dekobra is not so much his cosmopolitanism or his realistic journalistic style, but the fact that he, together with many others, participates in the relatively new and rapidly expanding cultural domain of middlebrow culture, which did emerge more or less simultaneously with the rise of modernism and its mechanisms of distinction (for a genealogy of these mechanisms, see McGurl 2001).

The fact that the link between Dekobra and middlebrow culture has never been systematically explored – and that he is mainly remembered as the popular author par excellence, an essentially lowbrow figure – has several reasons. First, the emergence of the middlebrow as a distinctive cultural

sphere in between the high and the low has been more pronounced in the Anglo-American cultural context, in contrast to other literary contexts (such as the French), where a more dichotomous (instead of tripartite) model for thinking cultural hierarchies (high vs. low) seems to have prevailed. Recent scholarly research, however, is finding more and more evidence of the truly transnational character of the emergence of middlebrow culture, which gave rise to similar effects in different European countries. Second, the middlebrow novel has typically been understood as a specific subtype of the novel. Although, in her seminal book on the 'feminine middlebrow novel' Nicola Humble admits that "the middlebrow literature of this period encompassed a wide range of genres, including romances and country-house sagas, detective stories, children's books, comic narratives, domestic novels and the adolescent *Bildungsroman*" (12), she (like most others) *de facto* gives priority to books that concentrate on femininity, middleclass consciousness and domestic life (mainly in the context of the modern city) that can be understood as updated versions of 19<sup>th</sup> century realist domestic fiction (11). From this narrow interpretation of the middlebrow follows that the novels by Dekobra can only be understood as more marginal examples, given their affinities with the novel of adventures, which is almost by definition at odds with the realist domestic novel. Finally, there is a third reason why Dekobra may be conceived of a rather atypical case. Though it is undoubtedly true that the middlebrow novel is by definition a hybrid form "that straddles the divide between the trashy romance or thriller on the one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenging novel on the other" (Humble, 11), it is equally true that the successful middlebrow novel is increasingly conceived of as a form of its own, with its own generic features, its own thematic concerns and stylistic peculiarities. From this follows that, in the interwar years, the middlebrow novel is increasingly functioning independently from highbrow modernism as well as from popular genres, according to its own models for the production, distribution and consumption of literature. A common feature, for instance, which sets the middlebrow novel apart from highbrow as well as lowbrow genres, is the concern for a certain kind of pedagogy; generally speaking, middlebrow novels want to instill their readers with a *savoir-vivre*. In order to facilitate the transfer of models and values it is essential for the reader to experience a kind of homology between the lives of the fictional characters and his/her own life. In contrast, one could argue that the early cosmopolitan novels by Dekobra represent an earlier stage in the process of the integration of highbrow and lowbrow elements and generic patterns, since both are still fairly easily discernable. On top of that, the books contain numerous elements

that seem to complicate the transfer of models and values which is essential to the pedagogy of middlebrow fiction.

From this follows that the case of Dekobra is a rather complex one. His work definitely instantiates new developments in literary fiction, which are related to the rise of the so-called middlebrow novel, and yet his books are clearly reminiscent of older novelistic, cultural and social models and they are atypical with regard to some of the main directions of this new kind of novel writing. In order to explore the ambiguous position of Dekobra vis-à-vis the middlebrow, we will compare his major work *La Madone des sleepings* with a novel by the Dutch novelist Johan Fabricius, of whom the position as bestselling writer is similar to Dekobra's, as he is known for having introduced an element of cosmopolitanism and adventure in the Dutch literary context of the 1930's. This juxtaposition can help to entangle some of the abovementioned paradoxes in Dekobra's cosmopolitan novels. Conversely, since these cases share their sense for cosmopolitanism and adventure, they can add something to the debate on the interwar middlebrow novel, which has primarily been associated with femininity, with domestic life and the home, and with the nation.

### ***La Madone des sleepings: coming home, and leaving again***

As Nicola Humble points out, the 'feminine middlebrow novel' showcases a marked "fascination with domestic space" (11) (and the gender and class relations attached to it), which can to a certain extent be understood as a relic from the 19<sup>th</sup> century realist novel. In contrast, the novel of adventures appears to be based on a completely different spatial and geographical structure, in which the home is left behind and domesticity gives way to travel and to adventurous action in all kinds of exotic places, often situated at the 'edges' of the civilized world. This distinction, however, is far from absolute. Humble, for instance, argues that the "middlebrow women's fiction of this period" was not only concerned about domesticity, yet also "indulged in a curious flirtation with bohemianism" (5), which can be understood as the integration of the idea of adventure in the universe of the home. Conversely, Mathieu Letourneux convincingly argues that the place of the home is not absent from the novel of adventures, as "la forme du récit distingue deux moments enchâssés, l'aventure et le quotidien":

Le roman d'aventures fonctionne comme une mise en crise de l'univers familial, qui correspond à l'entrée en aventure, et l'intrigue se résume aux efforts du personnage pour réintégrer le monde ordinaire. Ainsi, si le récit se centre sur le moment de

l'aventure (qui en forme la matière), le quotidien, ce chronotope que l'on quitte et qu'il s'agit de retrouver, joue un rôle essentiel dans la dynamique du récit.

In other words : the home often functions as both the point of departure and the ultimate destination of the hero's adventurous travels. Hence, many novels are not so much concerned with the home, or with adventure as such, as well as with the negotiation between these two poles, which allows for an endless range of variations between 'home' and 'away'.

At first sight, *La Madone des sleepings* qualifies as a typical adventure story. The male hero of the story, the Frenchman Gérard Dextrier, also known as prince Séliman, secretary of Lady Diana Wynham, leaves their house at Berkeley Square in London in order to try to secure her interests in an oil concession in Georgia, on Soviet territory. First he travels to Berlin, where he meets two Russian characters, Varichkine, a representative of the Russian government in Europe, and his wife Madame Moravieff, who will turn out to be Gérard's main opponent in his quest for oil (and money) in order to solve the financial needs of Lady Diana. From Berlin he travels further east, by train, via Vienna, 'Budapest, Brasov, Bucarest, Constanza' (139) and Constantinople, where he embarks for Batumi in Georgia. Upon finally arriving in the small seaside town of Nikolaïa, he is arrested by the Soviets, at instigation of Irena Moravieff, and awaits his death in an underground prison. This movement through space can be seen as a movement away from home and from western civilization, to a place that is the complete opposite of a cozy and comfortable house and is situated at the frontiers of civilization. If the houses where the protagonists lived in the civilized world are depicted as luxurious storehouses of culture – with "colonnes doriques" (28), "quatre copies de déesses grecques [qui] cachait mal leur impudeur millénaire au fond de leurs niches de marbre rose et gris" (28-29), "livres à reliures anciennes" (255) –, in his prison, Gérard is bereft of all marks of civilization, and will die naked: "Vous vous dévêtirez avant de mourir... Ce sera une sensation nouvelle pour vous... Vous vous souviendrez alors de vos garçonnières parisiennes où vous accomplissiez ce rite pour immoler une vertu complaisante... Mais cette fois-là, la chute sera définitive... Ni fleurs, ni porto" (211). In the end, however, with three other people, Gérard succeeds in a spectacular escape and he is miraculously rescued by a ship, owned by his wife Griselda Turner. It is clear that the escape by ship can be understood as a return to civilization, which is explicitly voiced by Gérard himself: "Messieurs, [...] nous ferons les présentations à bord du *Northern Star*, quand nous aurons regagné cet asile flottant où les règles de la civilité occidentale reprendront toute leur valeur" (230). In the case of Gérard this escape from *la sauvagerie* and return to civilization really means

a return 'home', as the situation helps to restore his relationship with his wife Griselda Turner.

This circle of adventure – from *univers familier* to *univers dépaysant* and back again –, however, is not entirely closed and this complication follows from the fact that the novel is based on the adventures of two different protagonists – Gérard Dextrier and Lady Diana Wynham – and that their adventures are of a different kind. Lady Diana, to name but one example, never leaves the civilized world. After having waved goodbye to Gérard in Berlin, she stays at home, and yet, one cannot say that she epitomizes domesticity, or that she adheres to 19<sup>th</sup> century gender roles in which women are confined to the private sphere of the home. After Gérard has returned, he is invited by Lady Diana at her home at Glensloy Castle, near Loch Lomond, in Diana's native region of Scotland. Glensloy Castle is in many respects the home *par excellence*, since it connects Lady Diana to her birth ground, as she is "élevée sur les rives élégiaques des lochs aux eaux tranquilles" (53). This setting seems to provide anchorage for the traveling and cosmopolitan nature of *la Madone des sleepings*; in this context she receives the alternative nickname of the Lady of the Lakes (251), after the Arthurian legend, which bears totally different overtones than the association with sleeping cars. More than any other house in the novel, this house is associated with culture and tradition, with for instance "une page manuscrite de Sir Walter Scott dans un petit cadre d'or entre les deux hautes fenêtres" (251). Increasingly, however, the house is associated with death (as Lady Diana wants to commit suicide there); it is "une cage dorée" (255), "un château qui abritait une condamnée" (263), and hence, despite all its luxury, it is not dissimilar to Gérard's prison in the Caucasus. In the last scene of the novel, we find Lady Diana leaving by train, escaping Glensloy Castle, in search of new adventures: "Ma vie depuis six mois a été monotone [...]. Il est grand temps que je pimente mon menu et caracole sans but précis dans la pampa de l'Aventure" (281). This *pampa* of adventure, however, is not situated on the verge of civilized society, yet it is situated at the very heart of it, as Lady Diana will travel to Venice (which will become clear in Dekobra's next book, viz. *La gondole aux chimères*) with the aim of seducing wealthy men who can finance her exuberant lifestyle.

In short, *La Madone des sleepings* manifests a chiasmic structure with regard to the tension between domesticity and adventure. Whereas the male protagonist Gérard Dextrier, a *chevalier errant* (283), is finally coming home, the female protagonist Lady Diana, who is homebound when Gérard is away, finally decides to leave her house and her birth ground, in order to become *la Madone des sleepings* again. When the focus shifts from Gérard to Diana, the

nature of adventure changes from something at the outskirts of the civilized world to something at the inside of it. In a similar vein, for instance, the threat of communism is framed as something that differs from the war between nations because it is a war that is fought on the inside: “On ne se bat plus entre Français, Allemands ou Bulgares, on se bat sans explosifs, entre bourgeois et prolétaires, à l’intérieur des nations. C’est la lutte en vase clos” (93); “Soyez sincère, Lady Diana, et dites-moi si, dans votre luxueuse maison de Berkeley Square, vous n’êtes pas campée jour et nuit en face de l’Ennemi... Quel ennemi?... Mais votre femme de chambre qui vous envie et votre chef qui vous vole, en attendant mieux...” (94). In this way, *La Madone des sleepings* can be understood as a novel that renegotiates the opposition between domesticity and adventure, the inside and the outside, that informed 19<sup>th</sup> century fiction and ran through adventure tales and domestic fiction alike. Although Dekobra’s cosmopolitanism may be based on a certain sense of nostalgia, Diana’s act of leaving Glensloy Castle seems to imply a departure from 19<sup>th</sup> century culture (the imaginary universe of Walter Scott), from 19<sup>th</sup> century values (domesticity, nationalism and the expansion of (human) empire), from 19<sup>th</sup> century social hierarchies (based on inherited property) and gender roles, etc. In the new constellation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it could be argued, the division between domesticity and adventure has become obsolete to a certain extent. This has strong repercussions for the home, that loses its function as the ultimate cornerstone of bourgeois society. As Enda Duffy convincingly shows in his account of detective fiction and its relation to speed, the detective story – that other popular genre of the period, yet of more recent date than the adventure tale – “faced the new phenomenon of mass traffic in the early years of this century by raising anxieties to assuage them, by denigrating the notion of home as fixed structure of refuge, and by indulging in escape fantasies which marked movement and participation in mass traffic as a gesture of freedom”; “the idea of space as refuge, and in particular of the home as sanctuary and guarantor of personal prestige and identity, was coming under attack” (64-65). This is exactly what is happening in *La Madone des sleepings*: the ‘home’ is relocated from the stable structure of Glensloy Castle to the moving object of the sleeping cars. This is even true for Gérard, whose new home is the *Northern star*, a yacht, which combines the conveniences of the house with the ability to travel freely from port to port. If the house (and, by extension, the nation) is no longer the foundational force of society, what force then has taken its place? The force of ... capital, since in contrast to land, money moves freely and enables people to move freely. In the end, it is not the house, but the *cheque* that awaits the adventurous hero: “Tandis que vous, Gérard, tout vous

sourira désormais... L'Amour et l'Argent... La princesse Séliman vous attend, reconquise... La sérénité la plus parfaite vous guette au coin de l'Eldorado" (282); "Muet adieu de la Femme à la conquête d'un Graal rempli de chèques barrés..." (283). In this way *La Madone des sleepings* can be said to navigate between old and new social and economic realities. To name but one example, the shift from the house to money is paralleled by a shift from the old continent to the new continent. While Glensloy Castle is the materialization of European tradition, the Eldorado where the money comes from is America. This is true for Gérard, who had married a wealthy American woman in *Mon cœur au ralenti*, as well as for Diana, who will receive financial support from Jimmy, "jeune merle importé d'Amérique", in *La gondole aux chimères*. The dispositions of the latter leave no doubt: "Le charme de Venise, *darling*? C'est la cheminée d'usine de Santa Elena; c'est la digue du chemin de fer qui relie la ville à la civilisation" (Dekobra 1926, 9).

### ***Venetiaansch avontuur* : adventure as a product of the imagination**

The novel *Venetiaansch Avontuur* (Venetian adventure, 1931) by the highly successful Dutch novelist Johan Fabricius is in many respects comparable to Dekobra's early cosmopolitan novels. To begin with, there are numerous evident intertextual connections: like *La gondole aux chimères* the novel by Fabricius is set in Venice, like in *La Madone des sleepings* a major role is played by Americans on a ship, etc. The name of Dekobra is even mentioned explicitly; he is called "een zeer zondig auteur, dien ze eigenlijk niet mogen lezen" (a very naughty author, who they are in fact not allowed to read, 109). Besides such more superficial reminiscences – which, by the way, do not impinge on the originality of *Venetiaansch avontuur* –, there are also more profound and structural similarities, related for instance to the role of adventure in the structure of the plot and to the redefinition of adventure in a twentieth century world governed by capital and marked by shifts in social hierarchies.

*Venetiaansch avontuur* tells the story of the young *Wiener* Walther Drachentöter (Walther 'Dragon-killer') who is not satisfied with his job as an office clerk in the firm Julius Kleingeld & Zonen (Julius 'Small-Change' and Sons), which deals in shirt boards made of rubber. As his name already suggests, he is a man with romantic ideals, who reads and writes poetry and is the author of radical essays in the periodical *De ontketende Prometheus* (Prometheus unbound), pleading for the spiritual emancipation of the suppressed working class. Desperate to flee his ordinary life, he travels to Venice, hoping to win the love of one or another marriageable "travelling

dollar princess" (27), whose money would free him from daily routine forever. Walther's quest is roughly similar to Diana's, since, likewise, money would allow him to buy freedom: "Ik wil me vrij kunnen bewegen... Wat van de wereld zien. – Ik heb altijd moeten rekenen. Schillinge. Halve Schillinge" (I want to be able to move freely. See something of the world. I have always been obliged to do the math. Schillings. ½ Shillings, 26). At first sight, Walther's voyage follows the traditional paths of adventure, since Venice is framed as an exotic place, totally different from Vienna: "het avontuur van een reis, de scènerie van een vreemde, romantische wereld" (the adventure of a journey, the scene of a strange, romantic world, 36). From the moment he arrives in Venice, however, the city shows him a double face, since it qualifies as exotic/strange and prosaic/ordinary at the same time. Throughout the entire book there is the idea that the city (and its romantic and poetic effects) are nothing but a chimera, an illusion, a dream or a stage performance (see for instance pages 50-51). This idea is so pervasive that it sometimes appears as if the whole idea of adventure is nothing more than the projection of the imagination of Walther in overdrive. Behind that illusion lurks an image of Venice as a world that is as ordinary as the one Walther has left behind. From his arrival onwards, Venice is portrayed as a gigantic tourist trap, in which people continuously need to pay attention to how much they are spending:

Hij [Walther] haalt een potloodje uit zijn zak en begint weer eens te rekenen. Zijn kamer kost hem twaalf lire per dag, maar daar komt nog toeristentaxe en de fooi voor Marcolina bovenop; hij kan, met de caffè-latte er ook nog bij, gerust op twintig rekenen.

He [Walter] takes a pencil out of his pocket and, once again, starts counting. His room costs him twelve Lira a day, but on top of that comes the tourist tax, and the tip for Marcolina; with the caffè-latte included he can be sure it will amount to twenty.

From this perspective, Walther's life in Venice is little different from his life in Vienna, where he had to count every Shilling.

This idea is further developed in passages like the one in which Walther tries to seduce the Dutch girl Miep, who is on vacation in Venice with her parents. As her father is the "biggest shareholder in some Indonesian plantations, not only tobacco, but also tea and rubber" (209), the daughter represents one of Walther's last chances to acquire wealth by marriage. Upon hearing about Indonesia, Walther immediately starts dreaming again, complementing his visions about Venice, with visions about the East: "Hij ziet een heerlijk jungle-visioen voor zijn geest verrijzen, palmen, bruine inlanders... Een tropischen morgen met helder vogelgefluit, bonte orchiedeeën, apen..." (He is seeing a marvelous jungle-vision passing through

his mind, palm trees, brown natives... A tropical morning with the bright whistling of birds, multi-colored orchids, apes..., 210). Walther is attracted by the idea of marrying the daughter and being sent to one of his plantations by the father. The plan of living in the East, however, is immediately rejected by the daughter and the father alike: "De natuur is vol onbekende gevaren. Er heerschen ziekten, waartegen geen kruid gewassen is. De Inlanders zijn absoluut niet te vertrouwen" (Nature is full of unknown dangers. Diseases are reigning that cannot be cured. The natives are totally unreliable, 210). Unlike Gérard Dextrier in *La Madone des sleepings*, Walther will not be travelling to the outskirts of civilization. What is more, Miep and her parents ultimately confront him with the insight that adventure, even in Venice – i.e. in its reduced form within the confines of civilization – may prove to be a chimera, as all escape routes out of the ordinary and out of domesticity appear to lead back again to the ordinary and to domesticity. Walther fears that if he would follow Miep to her native country, his fantasies about a rural and idyllic Holland, with "windmills and farmer girls and Gouda cheese" would give way to "gray everydayness" populated by "tired typing girls" (217), "Sunday walks in a Sunday best suit" (218). In other words: his adventures in Venice would ultimately and unavoidably lead to a domestic life in the North again. Read in this way, *Venetiaansch avontuur* is not so much an adventure story, as well a novel about the impossibility of adventure, at least of adventure understood as an escape from domesticity and an exploration into an *univers dépaysant*. Adventure can only exist in the imagination.

If Walther is certainly not a Gérard Dextrier, he may be a Diana Wynham, as from the moment he arrives in Venice, he engages in one flirtation after another, with different girls, just like Diana's list of lovers is seemingly endless (13). In fact, it is as if he cannot even look at a girl without falling in love with her. The sheer number and almost arbitrary character of these flirtations has a comical effect, but is key to our understanding of the novel, as it reveals the central conflict between romantic ideals (based on authenticity and unique singularity) on the one hand and a capitalist economic logic (based on multiplication and reproduction) on the other hand – a tension lurking behind every corner in the age-old, yet very touristic streets of Venice. This conflict is inherent in Walther's plans from the very start, as he is in search for a romantic kind of freedom, which he hopes to realize by acquiring lots of money: "Een bourgeois droomt van het naakte leven. Een verlorene, die noch de handen, noch de lichaamskracht, noch het zelf- of Godsvertrouwen heeft van den vrijen man uit het volk. [...] Voor hem is er maar één weg naar de vrijheid: geld. Zoveel geld, dat hij zijn koortsfantasie overwinnen, het

naakte leven, dat hij verafgoodt, vergeten kan" (A bourgeois dreams of the bare life. [He is] a lost soul, who lacks the hands of the free man from the people, or his bodily strength, his self-confidence or trust in god . [...] For him, there is only one way to freedom: money. Plenty of money, so that he can conquer his feverish phantasy, so that he can forget the bare life he is worshipping, 86). Whereas in *La Madone des sleepings*, this connection between freedom and money is never challenged, it proves to be highly problematic here, which is manifested for instance by Walther's relation to the Tiller/Miller girls.

The Miller girls Susie, Phoebe and Peggy – who are first mistakably identified by Walther as members of John Tiller's popular travelling dance troupes – embody everything the protagonist can dream of: they are the young and beautiful daughters of an American billionaire who travels the seven seas in a luxurious yacht, decorated with tasteful artwork. Besides, they are fond of Walther, and invite him on board. There, Walther is passionately kissed by one of the girls, who immediately proposes him to marry. This would mean that Walther would join them on their sea travels, living from the money of their 'dad': "I, Walther Drachentöter, [...] are going to engage me with the daughter of a billionaire tonight and I will become one myself. I can go to China, to Australia, or to the Hawaiian Islands, wherever I like" (137). There is, however, one major problem; since the three American girls are almost identical triplets, Walther is not able to identify the girl he has kissed. Was it Susie, Phoebe, or Peggy? This situation can be seen as a manifestation of the clash between two cultures: on the one hand the culture of the old continent, based on romantic notions such as authenticity, singularity and distinction and on the other hand American culture, based on capitalism and the logic of economic multiplication and reproduction. Whereas Walther is (at least at first sight) depicted as a representative of the former – as he can even cite from Petrarch in the original (55, 109) – the girls are presented as typical exponents of American (non-)culture, as they cannot distinguish Italian from German (109), barely differentiate between popular authors like Edgar Wallace and classics like Shakespeare or Wordsworth (109), are grown up with images from Hollywood cinema and the sounds of popular music (110), etc. They do not bother much about social differences and hierarchies either (115-116). Moreover, they are depicted as the products of a homogenizing system of production as they are all dressed the same way, after the latest fashion, even to the extent that Walther first imagines them to be actors in a marketing stunt ("een reclame-truc") of a fashion firm (54). Hence, whereas Walther ought to find the 'one', he is only confronted with the 'many'. In the new social context,

American capitalist culture, which is based on the lack of hierarchies and distinctions and the laws of reproduction and multiplication, is pushing aside obsolete romantic ideas about singularity and authenticity (in love, in art, as well as in the experience of a city like Venice). The tragedy of the situation is that Walther needs the 'many' (i.e. lots of dollars) to realize his dreams about the 'one'. As he is increasingly embarrassed by the fact that he cannot distinguish between the three Miller sisters, he breaks off the budding love relation and the American ship leaves the port of Venice without the Austrian 'adventurer'. His other attempts at seducing rich girls – of which some are successful and others definitely not – all to a certain degree reiterate this initial dilemma between the one and the many, the singular and the multiple, romanticism and pragmatism, idealism and capitalism.

Near the end of the novel, however, after many failed love affairs, when Walther is really running out of money, he experiences a moment of epiphany:

Als hij echter in zijn kamer is en zijn hoofd in de waschkom onderdompelt, gebeurt er iets zeer verrassends met hem: hij herinnert zich plotseling zeer duidelijk een bepaalde intonatie in Susie's stem; hij weet in ditzelfde oogenblik met groote zekerheid, dat hij haar stem van die der beide anderen zou kunnen onderscheiden. Het is een eigenaardige wijze om alle zinnen met een vraagteken te laten eindigen (212).

However, when he is in his room, and plunges his head in the washing bowl, something very surprising happens to him: suddenly he can recall very clearly a certain intonation in Susie's voice; at that moment he knows with great certainty that he would be able to distinguish her voice from the voices of the other girls. It is a peculiar way of ending all sentences with a question mark.

After a period of erring in Venice, in which he has made friends with another group of Americans, who have initiated him to the American way of life, the major dilemma is finally solved and Walther is finally able to identify the girl who he had kissed (the 'one' out of the 'many'), by interpreting the intonation of her sentences. The book ends with Walther's decision to head to Naples by train, where the yacht of the sisters is anchored. The question arises, however, how we should accurately interpret this final twist of the plot. In our view, there are at least two options, not surprisingly an idealist and a more realist one. In an idealist reading, Walther has indeed finally reached a moment of insight; he has learned to single out the right girl out of an undifferentiated mass. Such a reading suggests that ideas of singularity can indeed survive in a new social and economic context dominated by Americanism and capitalism. In this respect, it is a telling detail that, at the last page of the novel, when he imagines his reunion with his girl (who he has finally been able to identify as

Peggy now), Walther compares his own love story to the plots of ancient mythology:

Oh, Peggy, is het dan niet als een Grieksche mythe zooals ik jou eindelijk gevonden heb? Door hoeveel vuren heb ik moeten gaan voor ik er in slaagde de drieëenheid te splitsen, waarin jij gevangen zat als een bedrieglijk spiegelend kristal (256).

O Peggy, is it not like a Greek myth, the way in which I have finally found you? How many fires did I have to cross before I was able to split the trinity in which you were imprisoned as in a delusively mirroring crystal.

Walther is referring here neither to the narratives of popular culture (such as sentimental Hollywood cinema), nor to the narratives of the great authors he cherishes (like Petrarch and Dante), yet to a still more primordial narrative, underlying them all and providing his own 'adventures' with universal and transhistorical overtones.

In contrast to this idealistic reading, however, a more realist interpretation is possible too. By the time of Walther's epiphany, the reader has learned to know the young *Wiener* as a somewhat naïve romantic who takes his own egocentric dreams and desires for real. Since the novel ends immediately after Walther's decision to travel to Naples, there is no way for the reader to check whether his method to single out the right girl is accurate, or maybe just another offspring of his vivid and often misguided imagination. This would mean that Walther keeps chasing his dreams in a world in which ideals of singularity and authenticity are out of place, just like the city of Venice is nothing more than a chimera (as opposed to the modernized city of Naples?). The final reference to Greek mythology would then be nothing more than another sign of the mythomania of Walther, who continually tries to legitimate his own worldly 'adventures' by referring to the prestigious, yet outdated cultural models of the past – in fact he only uses his knowledge of the classics to impress easily impressible young girls.

### **By way of conclusion**

It is clear by now that *La Madone des sleepings* by Maurice Dekobra and *Venetiaansch avontuur* by Johan Fabricius definitely share some middlebrow characteristics (such as the mixing of elite cultural references with popular culture), while they also challenge more reductive definitions of the middlebrow by introducing themes, settings and plot structures that are not typically associated with the domestic realism commonly associated with middlebrow fiction (mainly in the Anglo-American context). One can think here of the systematic exploration of the idea of adventure as an alternative for domesticity. In their use of adventure as a structural device, however, the two

novels differ considerably. In contrast to Gérard Dextrier's expedition into the Caucasus, Walther Drachentöter's trip to Venice does not – in spite of the title of the novel – follow the pattern of the typical adventure story, which is based on a transition from an *univers familier* to an *univers dépaysant*. What is more, adventure is not only relocated from the outskirts of civilization to the very heart of it (as in the case of Lady Diana Wynham), but it is still further interiorized and transferred to the mind and imagination of the characters. Hence, in *Venetiaansch avontuur* adventure is to a certain extent rather imaginary than real and this has strong repercussions for the generic identity of the novel. Whereas *La Madone des sleepings* is clearly based on structures borrowed from popular genres (such as the adventure tale, yet also for instance erotic literature), *Venetiaansch avontuur* may contain numerous references to popular culture, but is structurally different, as it comes closer to the essentially middlebrow genres of travel fiction or documentary realism, and even to the highbrow forms of the psychological novel. Both novels can rightly be labeled as cosmopolitan novels, but this label covers different generic structures.

On top of that, there is a difference as far as the depiction of social and cultural hierarchies is concerned. Middlebrow literature has often been described as a literature of the growing middleclasses in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a kind of literature written for and read by new middleclass groups and dealing with middleclass themes and issues. As Nicola Humble sees it: "In the obsessive attention [middlebrow writing] paid to class markers and manners it was one of the spaces in which a new middleclass identity was forged, a site where the battle for hegemonic control of social modes and mores was closely fought by different factions of the newly dominant middle class" (5). The precariousness of these emergent middleclass identities can explain many of the dilemmas and paradoxes experienced by the young Walther Drachentöter, who, as a lower middleclass bourgeois, is continuously navigating between different social identities and roles, ranging from the romantic bohemianism of the poet, over his own position as an office clerk, to the luxurious life of the smart set he dreams of. The open ending of the story suggests that this process of negotiation between social and cultural hierarchies has not come to a definitive conclusion (yet). The identity of the middleclass is not fixed (yet) and is based on volatile compromises. The social identity of the main characters in *La Madone des sleepings* is totally different. Although the problems Lady Diana faces may seem similar to the problems experienced by Walther – she is in need of lots of money to buy her freedom and to secure her social position –, she remains aristocratic by nature (which

not necessarily means: by birth). She is looking for new means to live her aristocratic life in new social contexts, but her social identity is fixed and will not change (she would rather die, as she, at a certain moment, considers killing herself). Her identity is stable like the stock characters of popular fiction. If both novels engage with the issue of social hierarchy in a democratizing world – which is a central theme in the middlebrow imagination – Lady Diana Wynham seems to represent an attempt to escape these realities in a nostalgic, or even escapist fashion, whereas in *Venetiaansch avontuur* it is up to the reader to decide whether the idea of (a certain) cultural or social aristocracy can still survive in a middleclass world ruled by capital (be it the symbolic capital of young Europeans, or the material capital of young Americans). It remains to be seen whether Walter Drachentöter is indeed, as his name suggests, a heir of the adventurous race of dragon killers, or rather just another representation of the middleclass Everyman.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article has been realized in the context of the research project *Dutch Middlebrow Literature: Production, Distribution, Reception*, a joint project of the University of Groningen, the Open University in the Netherlands and the University of Nijmegen, funded by the NWO.

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