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The Figure of the Migrant: Tommy Wieringa's Intellectual Intervention

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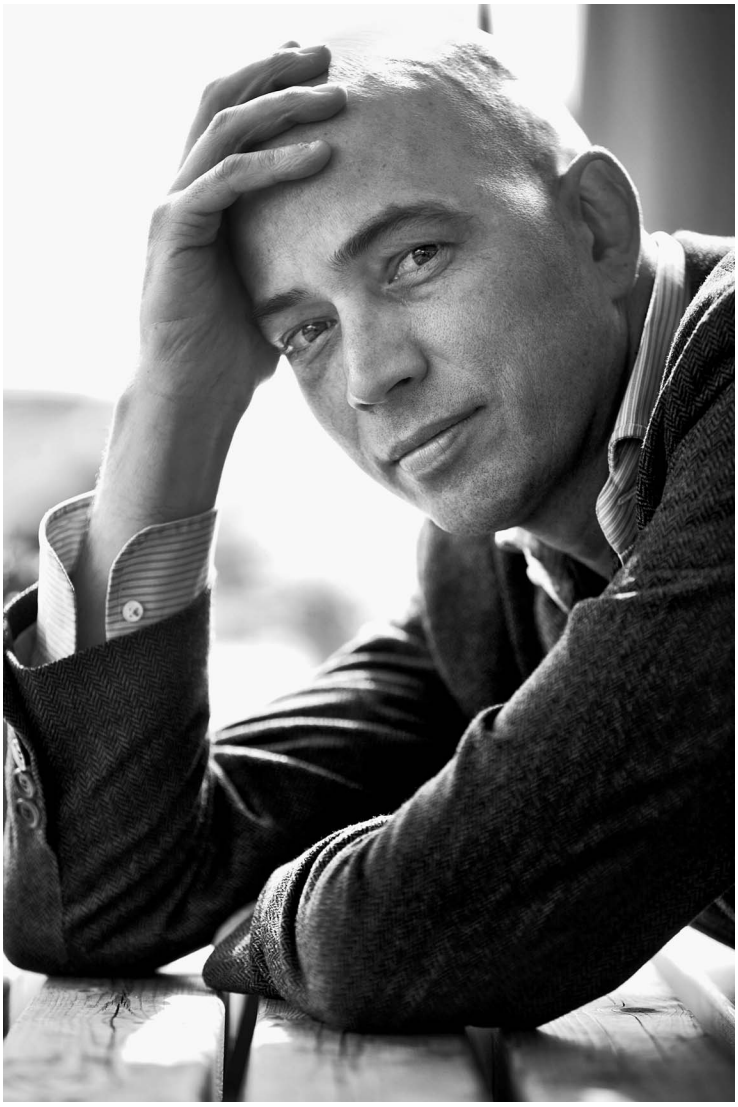
Abstract: In today's transforming European public sphere various literary authors position themselves publicly and engagingly in the debate on migration and exclusion. Dutch writer Tommy Wieringa is a clear voice in this context: his ideas on the topic are meaningfully expressed in literary novels. This article analyses Wieringa's position as an authoritative public intellectual speaking with great moral weight about the figure of the migrant. Drawing on positioning theory, the main claim of the article will be that Wieringa's literary articulation of migration contributes to the societal discussion and underlines a specific type of moral knowledge as well as an appeal to human solidarity.

Keywords: migration; literature; public intellectual; imagination; morality; solidarity

1. Migrant literature

In 2009 Albanian born author Gazmend Kapplani (b. 1967) published *A Short Border Handbook* in which he revealed how in 1991 he travelled across the Albanian mountains to the-promised-land Greece. In the novel Kapplani depicts the route and the arrival, the daily reality and the dreams, the culture shock after



Tommy Wieringa. Photo: Literaire Activiteiten Sneek (LAS)

having lived in a communist state, and the ignorance. "We all knew where we had escaped from but not one of us knew anything about where we were going" he writes. It was a "march into the unknown" (Kapplani 2010: 42-43). The partly autobiographical and partly fictional novel describes how the obsession with borders relates to a certain context and identity. It is the Stalinist regime in Albania that the author/protagonist aims to escape from, but in doing that he becomes a migrant and is put in a "position of weakness" (Kapplani 2010: 153). Migrants are to be pitied: being a migrant, "means acknowledging the power of the will, and coming to terms with the outrageous tricks of fate and to understand that the greatest human virtue is the ability to adapt and change and has nothing to do with who you are descended from" (Kapplani 2010: 154).

Today Kapplani is a respected writer, scholar and Harvard visiting fellow, who still is obsessed, as he puts it, [1] with the border syndrome and uses his personal experiences in talks, writing and opinion pieces. He is in the company of quite some other migrant writers and artists in Europe, as the fascinating German project *Migrants Moving History, Narratives of Diversity in Europe* (2008) [2] demonstrates. In this project writers such as Fouad Laroui (born in Morocco, living in Amsterdam and Paris), Michael Konupek (born in Prague, living in Oslo), and Wladimir Kaminer (born in Russia, living in Berlin) reveal how their experiences of migration influenced their lives and artistic careers, and sharpened their perspective on where they are now. "By settling in Amsterdam, far from Morocco, I may have learned to see it better, to discern its traits more clearly. My novels are my way of being Moroccan without having to live there," Laroui explains in an interview. [3]

Importantly, writers focussing on migration do not necessarily have to have a migrant background themselves. Informative migration literature is often written by authors who use their imagination instead of autobiographical experiences. The storytelling does not have to be personal. German author Jenny Erpenbeck, *Do, Went, Gone* (2015), Belgium Elvis Peeters, *The Uncountables* [De ontelbaren, 2005] and Russian Mikhail Shishkin, *Maidenhair* (2005) are interesting and distinctive examples. A relevant case also is Dutch author Tommy Wieringa, born in the Netherlands, who contemplates on migration in his novels *These Are the Names* (2012) and *The Death of Murat Idrissi* [De dood van Murat Idrissi, 2017]. The first novel tells of an ageing police commissioner, living in the fictionalised

[1] Lecture at Emerson college January 2017. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_l8NWnMJeU>. Accessed 2 November 2017.
[2] The project provides interviews with 12 renowned European artists of immigrant origin in 9 European metropolises. A website with filmed interviews and a publication are the output of the Berlin based project. See: <http://www.migrants-moving-history.org/index.htm>. Accessed on 2 November 2017 [interviews are temporarily blocked, OH].
[3] Interview on *Words without Borders*, 2016. See Chauffee 2016.

Eastern town Michailopol. A group of migrants enters the city and destabilises it. They are received as "untouchables" and "victims of the plague" (Wieringa 2015: 139). *The Death of Murat Idrissi* is the narrative of a migrant who dies in a car during the transport from Morocco to Spain. The naïve youngsters involved in the accident do not know how to deal with the body and how to articulate the consequences of their behaviour. The novel is based on a court case that the author witnessed in 2004.

This article puts forward the claim that in the two novels Wieringa explores various figures of the migrant and has a specific interest in the related theme of human solidarity. In his writing the author positions himself as public intellectual, that is, as a writer who intervenes in the public debate and proclaims a moral stance. The public intellectual has critical knowledge and ideas, stimulates discussion and offers alternative scenarios in regard to topics of a political, social and ethical nature, thus addressing non-specialist audiences on matters of general concern (Heynders 2016: 3).

In what follows I will briefly discuss studies on the public intellectual agency of literary writers, and then focus on the specific type of the authoritative moral intellectual providing abstract ideas to make his claim. I will conduct a close reading of *These Are the Names*, triangulating the analysis with academic research on migration and with the reception of the novel. The central argument of the article will be that Wieringa's novel can be read as a meditation on descent, movement and the meaningfulness of human existence. The public intellectual writer investigates the figure of the migrant and as such contributes to the debate on one of the most urgent societal issues in Europe today.

2. Public intellectual intervention

In the last two decades, the public intellectual has been researched by theorists from the fields of intellectual history, sociology and literary studies (Small 2002; Posner 2004; Collini 2009; Baert and Booth 2012; Heynders 2016). Much of their work was based on studies from the early 20th century by Antonio Gramsci and Julien Benda, and on the thesis of J. Habermas. The various theoretical inquiries illustrate how the notion of the intellectual has developed over the years in the context of a rapidly transforming public sphere due to new technologies and mediatisation. The societal engagement is still relevant, but the (media) performances and visibility of the public intellectual have developed to a great extent (Baert and Morgan 2017). These media performances have brought new attention to old rhetorical strategies and devices, such as the Aristotelian ethos, pathos and logos (Heynders 2016: 109-116; Baert and Morgan 2017: 9).

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) Habermas conceded that intellectuals in the modern liberal society are supposed to influence the formation of opinions through rhetorically pungent arguments. The ideal type of intellectual is supposed to take normative stances and express them in fresh perspectives, resisting the lures of power while remaining an observer from the relative margin of society. According to Habermas, the intellectual speaks out when events are threatening to spin out of control, and then implements "an avant-gardistic instinct for relevances" (Habermas 2009: 55). This avant--gardistic instinct involves, as I explained in *Writers as Public Intellectuals* (2016), a sensitivity as well as anxious anticipation of threats to the shared political and societal forms of life. The intellectual has a sense for what is lacking and could be otherwise, and uses imagination to conceive alternative perspectives. Habermas' writing provides a vision of the ideal public sphere, that only deals with serious issues of real importance. It should not be sensational, commercialized and only engage in rational, logical argument. Therefore Habermas' theory did not yet acknowledge the changing public sphere in its full potential (or weakness) – and some scholars have criticised him for this (McCallum 2013; McKee 2005).

Crucial to my analysis of theories on the literary writer as public intellectual is that technological changes have altered the public sphere and stimulated the dialogue between intellectual and audiences, while at the same time, televised talk shows and documentaries have blurred the borders of fiction and reality which audiences do not always accept (Baert and Booth 2012; Heynders 2016). What a literary author conveys in a novel cannot be judged in the same way as that which s/he explains in a television interview or online. The writer as narrator can get away with things that will not be accepted from the writer as real public figure as studies on authorship have demonstrated (Franssen and Honings 2016). [4]

In the context of the transforming public sphere and the rising dramatization of the public intellectual (Baert and Morgan 2017) the case of Tommy Wieringa can be considered pivotal as well as counter-claiming. On the one hand Wieringa indeed is a public figure, appearing on television every now and then, writing columns in the newspaper as well as on his Facebook account. On the other hand, he establishes and cultivates the image of the classical authoritative writer, publishing novels on a regular basis and building an oeuvre of books that is

[4] An intriguing recent example of this was an interview with respected Dutch female author Charlotte Mutsaers in the newspaper *De Volkskrant*, in which she revealed that she sold the child porno she had found in her brother's house. Later she explained on television that it was an alter ego from the novel who had done this. Since the trade in child porno is quite rightly prohibited in the Netherlands, the issue of reality/fiction is very urgent in this case. Young fellow writers did not accept Mutsaers' explanation. See: Hulst 2017.

becoming more and more impressive, translated and renown. He is regarded as one of the most respected authors in the Netherlands, and apparently can escape too much self-branding and the blurring of genres. What make his case pertinent, however, is that in his literary novels Wieringa focusses on societal issues and deals with migration, which is currently a pressing political theme, espousing progressive and egalitarian values. As Baert and Booth (2012: 113) observed, in this type of public intellectual writing there is a tension between authority and egalitarian principles, that was already being conceived at the end of the 19th century when the Dreyfusards performed their roles as public intellectuals.

The observation therefore is, that in a public sphere in which new technologies enable more immediate intervention by public intellectuals, Wieringa does intervene, but not so much by acting on prominent web-platforms and appearing in talk shows on the television screen, rather by doing what the literary author traditionally is supposed to do: creating a fictional world that expresses what is happening in the real one. The novelist does not represent a status quo in his literary work, he imagines what is going on, and ponders on what are causalities and consequences, as such providing a moral framework for societal analysis and reflection.

Jacques Rancière's *Mute Speech* (1998) helps to reconsider this singular position of the writer as public intellectual. Rancière breaks down the idea that classical literature is mimetic and representative, while modern literature is subversive, self-reflective and autonomous (Rockhill 2011: 3-25). [5] The French philosopher is interested in replacing mimesis by fabulation, as the language of "the image in which the categories of *inventio, dispositio* and *elocutio* founder" (Rancière 2011: 16). Here again, an interest in classic rhetorical principles is demonstrated. In an analysis of the writing of Balzac and Flaubert, Rancière makes his point more clearly; Balzac did not know how to write, he was a seer and not an artist. Balzac made his rogues "speak in slang, his Auvergnats in regional dialect, and his bankers with a German accent" (Rancière 2011: 116). In contrast, Flaubert strived for something different, he aimed at style as a force of "disindividualization" (Rancière 2011: 117). Style is a matter of conception providing the principle for the revolution in fiction, "a reversal of the ontology and psychology proper to the representative system" (Rancière 2011: 118). Absolute style is not about individuals, mechanisms of passions, and concatenations of actions, it is about an idea as the medium of vision, the "becoming-impersonal in which the seer's position coincides with that of the seen" (Rancière 2011: 118).

Rancière's account on style explains, so I would argue, a very relevant symptom in the novels of a public intellectual literary writer like Tommy Wieringa

[5] Rancière opposes the view "that separates a representative age and a non-representative age based on the model of the transition from figurative depiction to abstraction" (Rancière 2011: 15).

– or J.M. Coetzee, Italo Calvino, and the Portuguese Gonçalo M. Tavares for that matter – that is: the idea drives the style of the narrative and transposes the economy of the representative system to the objectivity of vision. The representative narrative is constituted of atoms of anti-representation (Rancière 2011: 123). What we read in *These Are the Names* is an allegorical novel, based on a strong ethos principle and inviting the reader to ponder on a social topic, to take a conscious moral stance. The point is not that the author writes about issues that can be related to societal equivalents in reality. Rather, the point is that Wieringa does not communicate an explicit message on reality, but opens a vision, a moral space as confrontation with the 'real' world. *These Are the Names* is of interest because of the moral deliberation it processes and invites the readers to (re)consider. The read can be disturbing and shocking, because even when we know this is not the true world – we experience the suffering and human vulnerability as recognizable perception.

3. The figure of the migrant

Before engaging in a close reading of *These Are the Names* it is important to interrogate a few academic studies on the figure of the migrant. In *International Migration* (2007) Khalid Koser conveys three categorizations of the migrant. First, there is a distinction between voluntary and forced migrants. They have to move due to conflict, persecution or environmental reasons (such as drought or famine). Forced migrants are often described as refugees or asylum-seekers. The second distinction is between people who move for political reasons and those moving for economic ones. The latter are usually described as labour migrants, divided into low and highly skilled people. In between them are migrants who move for social reasons: often women and children joining their husbands. The third category is the distinction between legal and illegal or irregular migrants, people *sans papiers,* without documents or with forged documents. Ruben Andersson has pointed to the illegal immigrant as indeed a specific figure, alternating "between untrustworthiness and innocence, the roles of the villain and the victim" (Andersson 2014: 8). He also underlines, however, that clandestine migration is not all gloom, but can be "a journey of self-realization" that reveals "the resilience, restlessness, and striving of a very contemporary human condition" (Andersson 2014: 11).

Distinctions between the categorizations of migrants are fluid, as Koser argues, someone can lose a job because of race or religion, and thus for political as well as economic reasons. There also is the phenomenon of return migration, people moving back to origin countries because political circumstances have

changed. An interesting question asked by Koser, is where migration ends. Most of the time this is when people become citizens in a new country, when they get new papers, jobs, housing facilities. But as second-generation studies have illustrated – acquiring citizenship does not also mean that people really belong somewhere.

Migrants applying for international protection are judged by criteria of the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. The core principle of this 1951 convention is non-refoulement, which asserts that a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life of freedom. [6] It is argued that humans have always migrated (Evans Braziel 2008; Nederveen Pieterse 2009; Sollund 2012). But it is also relevant to mention the current increase in numbers and the global geography of refugees, as well as the various causes of refugee movements in history. Merolla and Ponzanesi (2005) point at the symbolic date of 1492 in which the European expansion started and global displacement became a fact. In the next centuries, colonial interest and imperialism spread extensively. Forced displacement of millions from Africa to the Americas in the profitable slave trade was one form of migration, while intercontinental movement because of economic, political, ethnic and religious reasons was another. In the 1960s major refugee populations were being generated as result of decolonization (Koser 2007). In the 1970s many refugees had to leave nations in South-East Asia; in the 1990s refugee flows were generated in the former Yugoslavia as well as in the Horn of Africa, Rwanda, Afghanistan and East Timor. Today migration flows have become a truly global phenomenon. The United Nations estimated that by the year 2006 there were 200 million international migrants. [7]

Thomas Nail (2015) offers a political-theory perspective on migration, and researches the migrant as the political figure of movement who can be characterised in various ways: as "the floating population, the homeless, the stateless, the *lumpenproletariat*, the nomad, the immigrant, the emigrant, the refugee, the vagrant, the undocumented, and the barbarian" (Nail 2015: 11). Nail denies that there is a general ontology of the migrant and claims that figures of the migrant emerge and coexist throughout history relative to specific sites of expulsion and mobility. Nail (2015: 15) asserts, "[j]ust as there are different types of societies, so there are different types of migrants, different degrees of mobility, and different forces of expulsion. […] The movement of the migrant is not always 'good,' and social regimes of expulsion are not always and in every way 'bad.'"

The figure of the migrant is not a fixed identity or specific person but a mobile social position. There is nothing essential that makes the person this figure.

[6] See, <http://www.unhcr.org/1951-refugee-convention.html>. Accessed on 8 November 2017.
[7] See, "Preface" in Evans Braziel 2008.

The figure of the migrant is like a social persona that bears many masks (the nomad, barbarian, etc.) depending on the relative social conditions of expulsion, Nail claims. In the work of Wieringa, I would argue, this claim is further nuanced: the figure of the migrant is what s/he is in the eyes of the others, either fellow migrants or inhabitants of a specific place.

4. Migration and exodus in *These Are the Names*

These are the Names was characterized by *the Guardian* as "a timeless tale of migration" as well as an urban comedy, dark fairytale and Confucian parable (Taplin 2015). My reading fits most with the first characterisation, referring to how the novel can be understood as a mediation of migration, a form of moral knowledge on migrant experiences and the perceptions of *bystanders*. The novel enables the reader, as it were, to engage in complex portrayals of migration and human suffering, and at the end blurs the distinction between migrants and locals.

The novel interweaves the stories of the middle-aged police officer, Pontus Beg, and those of a group of seven migrants: five men, a woman and a boy. In the first part (of three: "Autumn," "Winter," "Spring") short chapters alternately and chronologically tell the story of Beg, and of the group traveling to the West. They do not know where they are going, they do not know what the final destination will be: "They no longer had any clear reason to start moving anew each day: mechanically like sunflowers, they followed the sun. As they breathed, so did they walk" (Wieringa 2015: 7). Thomas Nail, in his research on figures of the migrant, uses the term *vagabondage* for this type of wandering movement. Vagabond being the legal name for the oscillatory or wandering group of disjoined migrants (Nail 2015: 147). From the 13th and 14th century onwards this type of migrant could be seen all across Europe, moving from the countryside to the cities.

The story is closely focalised around Beg's experiences, in his home with his housekeeper/mistress, and in the office with colleagues dealing with the everyday events in the city, such as bribery and power play. The third person narration does not offer much information about the exact political and historical context. The small border town Michailopol is fictional, but looks like an East European city in decline: there is poverty and corruption, while the prestigious nuclear institute, sixteen religious buildings (Orthodox, Catholic, Armenian, synagogues) and the ice-hockey team have disappeared. In contrast to Beg's ordinary life connected to the specific place, the group of vagabonds wanders around on the steppe, arriving at an abandoned village and moving on. There is a precarious negotiation of power relations and survival-of-the-fittest practice

among them. The two strong ones have names, "Vitaly" and "the man from Ashkhabad," the others are nameless: the poacher, the tall man, the woman, the boy and the "negro." The last three "play a different role. Prey. Victim. Observer. They do their best to make themselves invisible" (Wieringa 2015: 19). Chance has brought the group together, no one feels responsible for anyone else. As long as "you could walk, you belonged to the group" and made the group stronger. If the group had to care "for its individual members, it weakened. Altruism would be the death of it. Strict self-interest improved the chances of survival" (Wieringa 2015: 39).

In the first part of the novel, the character development is subtle but clear; protagonist Beg is in a way an unsatisfied person, using too much of his physical strength to demolish a truck driver, and wondering why he remembers a Yiddish song. The story develops as a tale of conversion, of finding the consolation of Jewish religion. Beg meets a rabbi who initiates him into the Jewish religion and stimulates him to read books: "he became entangled in the cacophony of standpoints, interpretations, and commentary on commentaries, there wasn't a single subject they agreed on, not a single question that received an unequivocal answer" (Wieringa 2015: 124). Character development occurs in the group as well. Over time one of the group members, the black man from Ethiopia, becomes different and is excluded. First, he makes a sacrifice and receives gratitude for sharing a can of (dog)food with the weakened tall man. But then the feeling of gratitude turns into resentment, the tall man suddenly conceives the black man as "personal servant, a slave" because he cannot deal with his own dependency: "How could you come to terms with owing your life to someone? How could you acquit yourself of that debt?" (Wieringa 2015: 50). Along the way, the travellers lose their civilization and social codes, they become animal-like: "The journey left no room for other thoughts. They had become people without a history, living only in an immediate present" (Wieringa 2015: 51). They are the *sans papiers* and thus do not have a recognizable or verifiable identity anymore: "Those who once possessed proof of identity now possessed it no longer. Nacer Gül had said they should tear up their papers. I was better to arrive without an identity in the country of refuge" (Wieringa 2015: 75). The narrative in the first part of the novel is very much a story of decline and survival, or to put it more sharply: it is a story of becoming inhuman while striving for life.

The second part of the novel narrates how the group arrives in the city and is held in detention (the men) and hospital (the woman-now heavily pregnant, and the famished boy). The novel thus refers to a standard procedure in regard to incoming refugees that is applied all over the globe. People are cleaned up, checked for diseases, accommodated, and as such have to eradicate their

previous adventurer selves (Andersson 2014: 215). The migrants in the novel are even considered criminals, since they are carrying the head of the black man with them in a sack. There is the mystical idea – or idolatry – that the whole group seems to believe in, that somehow the head has showed them the way to the city. Beg, representing the police system based on rationality and order, has to investigate what happened and who is responsible. In separate conversations with the migrants he gets fragments of information on what took place. In the dialogues the migrants become individual human beings again, each with a voice and a name: Said Mirza is the boy, Samira Uygun the woman, and Akmuhammet Kubankiliev the man from Ashkhabad.

The novel points to discourses that are used to describe the newcomers, and as such relates the fiction to worldly circumstances again. It is indeed in newspapers, on the internet, and even in parliament that we can notice this type of metaphor (current, swarm) to refer to refugees and asylum seekers. In the novel, as soon as when the migrants are noticed in the city, the differences between the group and the locals become clear. People in the city address the others as "drifters" (p. 137), "shadows, separated from their bodies" (p. 137), "weeping phantoms almost mummified" (p. 137), "the untouchables" (p. 139), "victims of the plague" (p. 139), "vagrants" (p. 141), "illegal migrants" (p. 141), "the undead" (p. 143), "creatures of the twilight" (p. 144), and they are compared to "the Jews in the camps" (p. 142). In his interrogations, Beg gets more and more insight into what has happened, and finally he can reveal their experiences to his friend, Rabbi Eder. This, we could argue, is the minimum plot, the core of the *story-in-the-story*,

> 'Try to figure it,' he said. 'They all pay a huge chunk of money to cross the border. They spend hours hiding in a dark trailer until they get to the border. Dogs, guards, they're shitting in their pants. When the truck starts rolling again, they feel like screaming in fear and joy. It's night out, dark, by the time they leave the truck. The driver points them in the direction they need to go, says they'll find a city out there. Morning comes, they walk and walk but never get to a city. They're in doubt, they fight. All they see are steppes, nothing else. The group splits up, a few of them go back, most of them push on. Westward, all the time. But they never get anywhere. There is no civilised world anymore; they've ended up in the wilderness. Without water, without food. They have nothing to shield their heads against the sun by day or their bodies against the cold at night. People die. That's the way the woman put it: one after the other died, and any one of us could have been next. In the end there are five of them left. They wandered across the flats for months. (Wieringa 2015: 174)

Once he has reconstructed what has happened Beg finds out that the whole trip was senseless, since there was no border, the border was fake, it was a "replica

of a border built by people smugglers" (Wieringa 2015: 175). Ruben Andersson (2014) has demonstrated, that in the real context of human trafficking quite a large number of smugglers and mafias do indeed work together in the "illegality industry" selectively retaining and deporting migrants. As claimed earlier, I do not think the novel *represents* facts and figures as they are in reality, but expresses an idea about migration, movement and human existence, that is more visionary and based on an apprehension of a common human vulnerability (Butler 2004: 30). As soon as the migrants arrived at Michailopol, they realised, as the woman tells Beg, that it "had all been for naught. […] They had crossed the wilderness to a new country, only to discover that it wasn't a new country at all – only the nightmare of the eternal return" (Wieringa 2015: 178). It is a Nietzschean *ewige-Wiederkehr-des-Gleichen* that makes the migrant journey absurd as well as continuous. People leave and arrive, it is the mobility as such that defines migration.

Two thematic lines are interwoven with this idea of cyclic and ongoing mobility. First the theme of death as organic system in itself, and second, the theme of the Jewish exodus. The idea of the organic system comes to the fore in the first part of the book, when the group is moving, and Vitaly realises that the death of another human being means opportunities for the living. "The cares of the living were greater than those of the dead" (Wieringa 2015: 87). Shoes, coats, cigarettes will be taken immediately. The corpse is robbed and left on the field, becoming a basis for existence for other creatures,

> When he dies that afternoon beneath the high, hellish sun, all manner of invaders – yeasts, fungi, and bacteria – begin proliferating on the corpse. The next morning, the fly eggs have already reached the pupal stage; maggots swim trough the subcutaneous tissue, their food. The body has become the stage for a bacchanalia, converted into energy by micro-organisms that reproduce at lightning speed, by thousands and thousands of maggots that drill their way through the softened tissues, until the little red fox comes and eats its fill. (Wieringa 2015: 87-88)

Wieringa's novel demonstrates that life has a rhythm on various scales, what remains is the non-coincidence of the whole and the part, of survivors and dead, of passage and stay. This theme is related to the very explicit theme of Jewishness, of discovering one's descent, as which Beg becomes aware of: "he had been born of a Jewish woman who had concealed her past […] that he belonged somewhere, that was the poignant thing" (Wieringa 2015: 104). In this frame of two related themes the novel can be read as a story of conversion and rootedness contrasting the story of the dwelling migrants. Beg discovers his mother's background and suddenly realizes that there is meaning in his life. But the juxtaposing image of aimless mobility of the vagabonds makes his discovery ambiguous,

even more so when it is emphasized that the exodus of the Jews is a fundamental metaphor for today's migration,

> The rabbi had said that every Jew, wherever and whenever on earth, had to see himself as a refugee out of Egypt, a wanderer in the desert; that's how important the escape and the forty years lost in the wilderness were for the people of Israel. Every step a Jew took was a reminder of the exodus, and carried him back to the birth of a people in the desert […] In some mysterious way, the interrogations brought the exodus closer to Beg. History was being projected before his eyes – he sometimes had the feeling that the refugees' story had been spun specially for him. The Everlasting was so close at such moments that he was seized by joy. (Wieringa 2015: 188).

What is challenging in this reading of the novel, is that the movement of migrants – whatever their motives for traveling are – is related to the religious image of exodus and the *epiphany* (as a moment of great revelation) of Beg. This leads to a disidentification of the migrants, it mystifies migration.

The last part of the book, arguably a melodramatic dramatization, brings the themes together. Beg takes the boy as his son, asks him to become a Jew, and promises the land of Israel as a future destination. While the man and the boy are discussing this, they are standing at the beginning of the steppe, watching the border with visible fences and invisible infrared, mobile teams and satellites to keep people on one side or the other. Finally, the border is real, but there is a promise that it can be crossed.

These Are the Names received the Dutch Libris Literature prize in May 2013. The jury praised the two explosive themes: integration and religion (De Veen 2013). Arjen Fortuin (2012) in the *NRC* argued that the religious theme is most prominent: "*These Are the Names* is not so much a story about migration or corruption or the longing for a mother (a repetitive element) – but a novel on religion […] to find answers to questions on the nature, relevance and necessity of a religion." [8] To Joost de Vries (2012) the novel is more about ideas than about real people. That is what my reading in this article elaborates on as well, by pointing to the moral authority that Wieringa expresses. The public intellectual writer investigates figures of the migrant and juxtaposes this with the figure

[8] "Pontus Beg is vooral bezig met de parallel tussen de reis van de nu opgepakte landlopers en de vlucht van het Joodse volk uit Egypte naar het beloofde land. En de overeenkomst tussen de botten van Jozef die door de Israëlieten werden meegevoerd en het hoofd dat de naamlozen bij zich hadden. Met die opmerkelijke tournure wordt duidelijk wat Wieringa voor ogen heeft gehad met *Dit zijn de namen:* niet zozeer een verhaal over migratie of over corruptie of het verlangen naar een moeder (een terugkerend element) – maar een roman over religie. En een bijzonder knappe roman bovendien, waarin ook duidelijk wordt waarom Wieringa zijn lezers zo lang de steppe op heeft gestuurd. Niet om de gebeurtenissen daar, maar om een antwoord te vinden op zijn vragen over aard, nut en noodzaak van een geloof. Vragen die Wieringa tot het laatst doodernstig blijft stellen."

of the local person re-establishing rootedness. Phoebe Taplin in *the Guardian* underscores the braveness of the religious theme:

> Bravely, in an era of secularism or religious fundamentalism, this is also a novel about the uncertain pleasures of faith. From Beg's childless housekeeper, praying for a baby among plastic flowers and gold icons, to the prostitute punning on the last supper ("Take this body, it's how I earn my bread"), the book raises difficult sacred questions. (Taplin 2015)

At the novel's heart, Taplin claims, is both a search for the un-nameable and the unquenchable human desire to start again. My reading points indicates how the desire to start again also is disturbing, in the connection between migration today and the exodus from Egypt centuries ago. If we ponder on the idea of the *ewige-Wiederkehr-des-Gleichen*, as is suggested in the novel as well, we could encapsulate ourselves in the determinism of this equivalence. If, on the other hand, the desire to start again is taken as positive closure of the narrative, then we still wonder why others (the woman, the men) did not get the chance. [9]

5. Conclusion: moral stances of the authoritative intellectual

Tommy Wieringa creates in his novel *These Are the Names* a fictional world in which he tries to interweave ideas about human existence as mobile and rooted. The impersonality of the main characters defines his poetic expression and moral stance. Next to the protagonist Beg are the nameless migrants whose stories are self-effacing. They do not exist as recognizable human beings, but as migrant types, as such inviting the readers to invent links to reality, to relate stories of 'real' migrants. Wieringa, in his moral contribution to the debate on migration, creates an abstract narrative in order to demand his readers to respond, to fill in, to colour in the sketch and add differences and nuances. Abstract and symbolic descriptions ask for personalisation. Abstraction is precarious,

> Countries and continents had once stood open to those seeking their fortunes, borders were soft and permeable, but now they were cast in concrete and hung in barbed wire. Like blind men, travellers by the thousands probed the walls, looking for a weak spot, a gap, a hole through which they might slip. A wave of people crashed against those walls; it was impossible to keep them all back. They came in countless numbers, and each of them lived in the hope and expectation that they would

[9] Gender and migration is a complex issue that could not be discussed in the context of this article. It is distressing, though, that the woman was pregnant, gave birth after her arrival in the city, and then died.

> be among the ones lucky enough to reach the far side. It was the behaviour of animals that travel in swarms, that take into account the loss of individual members but will survive as a species. (Wieringa 2015: 76)

In this type of abstract but heavily loaded rhetorical passage, Wieringa takes up the role of authoritative public intellectual, developing a moral dilemma – rootedness versus mobility, descent versus forgetting where you came from, religion versus idolatry – that his readers have to reconsider. The point is that the readers have to experience and accept that they are addressed by the author, that a response is demanded, a responsibility is assumed. As Judith Butler asserted in *Precarious Life* (2004), the "structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept not just that we address others when we speak, but that in some way we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails" (Butler 2004: 130).

Gazmend Kapplani described, as I observed at the beginning of this article, how the migrant's ability to adapt and change has nothing to do with who he is and where he descended from. Wieringa's novel can be read as a fundamental reflection on this migration strategy, and in fact as a plea to rediscover rootedness and religion. In the current debate on migration, this voice of the author as moral public intellectual, is very much needed to not lose sight of the complexity of human mobility and categorization. The literary novel is needed in the context of social, legal, and ethnographic research on migration.

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