

**THE THEORETICAL FICTION OF THE UNFINISHED NOVEL:
AN UNDERCOVER PERFORMANCE INTO
*THE MIRACULOUS LIFE OF CLAIRE C***

Where fiction and reality meet is where the imagination is unlocked.

SARAH VANHEE, *The Miraculous Life of Claire C*

The C-Project

“According to the ‘common sense’ theory real people cannot meet fictional characters” artist Sarah Vanhee argues in the preface of *The Miraculous Life of Claire C* (2010), a novel by Guillaume Maguire, Claire C, Klara Trajcev, Sarah Vanhee and many others (5). But what if a real person takes over the identity of a novel character and “goes undercover” in the world of fiction? In *The C-Project*, the initial project leading to the completion of *The Miraculous Life of Claire C*, Belgian artist Sarah Vanhee does precisely that: she temporarily takes over the role of Claire C, the eponymous anti-hero of an unfinished novel she “found” some years ago on the train from Antwerp to Amsterdam, and goes in search of the other characters from the book. Written and signed by late Irish writer Guillaume Maguire, the thirty-two pages of highly condensed, poetical text stage, according to Vanhee, the story of Claire C, an unworldly, insecure woman, being in the midst of an “existential crisis:” “A woman in search of her lost identity, who talks to strangers in a park, hoping they will be able to solve her ontological problems” (3).

Fascinated by this atypical character and the unfortunate fate that had befallen her within the frame of the work of fiction – having no nationality, no family bonds, no professional occupation – Sarah Vanhee decided to take care of this, as Hannah Arendt calls it, “abstract, naked human being,” and to complete the narrative of *The Miraculous Life of Claire C* and therewith to develop Claire C into a fully-fledged character. By taking over the figment of Maguire’s imagination, she literally puts Claire C *under the cover* of the novel. “I, Claire C, novel character, am looking for the other characters that I meet in my book” is the message that

Vanhee spreads via various channels, from Twitter to an ad in the supermarket, from newspapers to electronic mails, followed by a description of the characters she was looking for (4). Sarah Vanhee pretends to be a novel character in search for her lost identity and although this is obviously not “true,” more than two hundred people got in touch with Claire C – two hundred of which she would actually meet twelve in Amsterdam’s parks. As in an undercover operation, Sarah Vanhee puts on her pink “C-jacket” and goes in search of the other characters from the book in order to find the missing part of Claire’s identity. She literally *covers* Claire C by performing a “new” version of a character originally performed by Maguire.

In the “real” world, being undercover means that a person is operating in secret within a community or an organization, especially for the purposes of police investigation or espionage. Thereby, the undercover agent disguises her own identity or uses an “assumed identity” for the purposes of gaining the trust of this community or individual and thus obtain secret information or evidence. *The C-Project* is surely not about an undercover police operation, but an undercover “art operation,” in other words, an artistic performance. The question arising from this is which information or evidence previously secret or unknown, which “truth,” is there to be discovered *by*, or respectively, *in* this artistic undercover operation? What is there to be uncovered? We do not know if Vanhee’s story of the found unfinished novel is true, but this is precisely the point: the unfinished novel is, as I will argue, a “theoretical fiction.”

First introduced by Sigmund Freud in his influential work *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the concept of the “theoretical fiction” travelled or has been travelled from psychoanalysis into literary studies, and more recently, into the realms of filmmaking. In the following, I will engage *The Miraculous Life of Claire C* with two different approaches on the interaction between theory, or criticism and fiction: the “intimacy-model” by Catherine Lord in *The Intimacy of Influence* (1999), which she would carry on in her later essay “Rapturing the Text: The Paraliterary between Works of Derrida, Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson” (2003), and the idea of a “mutual contamination” by Mark Currie in *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (1998). Whilst Lord first deals with the theoretical fiction in terms of psychoanalysis, referring to Freud and moving it then further into the realms of postmodern literature and criticism, Currie covers the concept exclusively from the point of view of narrative theory, taking the author’s biography into account.

Which theoretical implications does the fiction of *The Miraculous Life of Claire C* add to the discourses of Lord and Currie and in how far does the novel intervenes and criticizes both? I suggest that it is by means of the concept and practice of “undercover theory” that *The C-Project* adds new theoretical insights into the long lasting, and as I argue, untenable debate differentiating reality from fiction, respectively critical statement from fictional

representation. My thesis is that, whether critical or fictional, both discourses perform theory. By finishing Maguire's novel and by "becoming" Claire, Sarah Vanhee did not only complete Claire's identity in an artistic or literary fashion, but her performance is also highly theoretical. By means of *The C-Project*, Vanhee did not only infiltrate the real and fictional world, but also the realms of theory, adding the practice of "undercover" as theorizing activity to the debate. I will argue that *The Miraculous Life of Claire C* is a "fiction with a theoretical performance," a fiction that theorizes, beside the nature of identity, a number of specific issues regarding the interaction of reality and fiction (Currie 60). In a first step, I will thus compare Catherine Lord and Mark Currie's definitions of a "theoretical fiction," and then focus on the theoretical insight the novel offers on the dual relationship between reality and fiction.

The Theoretical Fiction As Performative Discourse

For both Catherine Lord and Mark Currie, the "theoretical fiction" is a phenomenon related to postmodernism, precisely to postmodern fiction and criticism. In *Postmodern Narrative Theory*, Mark Currie pinpoints the connections between fiction, criticism and ideology that mark the contribution of narrative theory to an understanding of postmodern culture. It is precisely in the chapter "Theoretical Fiction" where he establishes direct links between fictional and non-fictional narratives, arguing that it is their inseparability, their "mutual contamination," which characterizes postmodern fiction and criticism (56). Although Currie contends that a theoretical fiction "cannot be defined in biographical terms," his argumentation is structured by means of the respective authors' biography: firstly, he deals with "Criticism as Fiction," pointing out whether she initially is a critic aspiring to be a fictional writer, or, secondly, in "Fiction as Criticism," a writer assimilating the perspectives of academic criticism into the narrative process. Currie focuses on Derrida, stating that his work "threatens to remove the boundary separating fictional representation from philosophical or critical statement, beginning a fashion for their mutual contamination" (62). By so doing, his reasoning goes in line with that of art critic Rosalind Krauss, who, in her short essay "Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary" (1980), coins the term "paraliterary" for those forms of criticism, which are informed by, or, alluding to Currie, exposed to the poisonous or polluting devices of fictional writing. Thereby, Krauss mainly refers to Derrida and Barthes whose writings "blur the distinction between literature and criticism (Krauss 37). In their works, "criticism finds itself caught in a dramatic web of many voices," "alerting to the dramatic interplay of levels and styles and speakers that had formerly been the prerogative of literature but not critical or philosophical discourse" (ibid). Nevertheless, Currie concludes: "A writer-critic may personify the boundary between fiction and criticism, but a theoretical fiction has to be seen as a

discourse which dramatizes that boundary [between fiction and criticism] or uses it as energy source” (53).

Rather than on bibliographical information, I will therefore concentrate on crystallizing the characteristics of a theoretical fiction seen as “discourse,” as narrative, regardless of the biography of the person communicating that discourse; and this, above all because for an undercover operation, the “true” biography of a person is either not known or irrelevant for the success of the operation. For Currie, a theoretical fiction is thus a performative discourse, which makes the theoretical point precisely by complicating the threshold between fiction and criticism. In contrast to Currie’s model of a “mutual contamination” stands the “intimacy model” developed by Catherine Lord in her book *The Intimacy of Influence* (1998). Based on the concept of “friendship,” the intimacy model argues not for a conflicting but intimate interaction between criticism and fiction, allowing, both theoretical and fictional works, to critique each other. As for the purposes of my analysis, I will concentrate on Catherine Lord’s later essay “Rapturing the Text” (2003), in which she furthers her intimacy model by means of the concept of “rapture” – the “rapture” between Derrida’s outstanding essay “Freud and the Scene of Writing” (1978) and two twentieth century novels, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1931) and Jeanette Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry* (1989). Following Lord, it is through “rapture,” through an “intimacy of influence,” that the novels critique each other; she argues that “[i]n this intimacy, the experimental artistic or theoretical text follows the tracks left by a predecessor” and this is exactly what Sarah Vanhee is doing within *The C-Project*: by performing the fictitious Claire C, she does not only follow, but also moves the figment of Guillaume Maguire’s imagination on towards new adventures (Lord 143). Lord’s intimacy model argues that “the tracking, the quest for new paths to break, takes place effectively when fictions theorize their antecedents and contemporaries, and when the theorizing activity itself partakes of narrative and aesthetic practice (ibid).”

At this point, it is crucial to consider Mark Currie’s suggestion – a suggestion he states right at the beginning of his chapter on theoretical fictions and which he will actually repeat twice in the course of his argumentation: “Some narratives are more theoretical than others” (Currie 51, 56, 57). According to Currie, this statement implies a paradox: “if some narratives are more theoretical than others, they must be *theoretical in themselves*, objectively or intentionally, and not merely construed, constructed, created or invented as theoretical by the reading” (56; my emphasis). In the novel of *The Miraculous Life of Claire C*, there are no explicit references to achievements or insights made by academic criticism. However, it is in its form and content that the novel is *theoretical itself*. It all depends on the definition of “theory;” if it is seen as constative or performative. Etymologically, the word theory means ‘speculation, contemplation,’ and as Catherine Lord points out in her essay, the other etymological root of

the word theory is the greek verb *'theorein'* meaning to contemplate. Theory is therefore an activity, a practice, which must not obligatory, be explicit, but which can be conducted implicitly, thus, undercover. According to Currie, the theoretical implications of a fiction are not entirely generated by the reading; they are enacted rather than explicitly stated and produce a “performative rather than constative knowledge” (60). Thus, Currie differentiates between a theoretical content “inherent” to narratives and theoretical insights “suggested” by the reading. I emphasize, once again, my suggestion that, in *The Miraculous Life of Claire C*, this very “theorizing activity” happens undercover. This means that the novel, the fiction, actively theorizes – in a way that art and literature unconsciously, implicitly, theorize whilst academic criticism does it consciously, explicitly. As it is conducted undercover, it is a question of how to deal with, which is how to “read,” theoretical fictions. Therefore, before going into the analysis of the novel, I will discuss how to read the theoretical fiction.

Referring to Krauss, Catherine Lord speaks of a “paraliterary reading,” a reading of critical discourse along with postmodern novels, and I would like to further on this point by arguing that this paraliterary reading can be applied to one and the same discourse (141). Concerning her methodology, Catherine Lord states that she reads both novels, *Orlando* and *Sexing the Cherry*, “as possessing postmodern elements, in the sense of the term developed by literary theorist Brian McHale, in his influential *Postmodernist Fiction* (1991) (Lord 141).” This is a problematic, which Currie explicitly addresses in relation to the poststructuralists’ reading of James Joyce, especially Jacques Derrida’s reading of *Ulysses* in “Ulysses Gramophone.” Is it Joyce’s writing or Derrida’s reading that is poststructuralist? This is a question legitimate to raise concerning Lord’s reading of *Orlando* and *Sexing the Cherry*: Is it her reading or the novels that are postmodern? For Currie, the “trick” that Derrida, and as I argue, Catherine Lord applies is “to make the reading itself a work of theoretical fiction” (57). A performative rather than constative narratology is, following Currie, characteristic of the theoretical fiction: “it does not try to state the truth about an object-narrative but rather enacts or performs what it wishes to say about narrative while itself being a narrative” (52).

The Miraculous Life of Claire C comprises three narratives: the “original” manuscript by Guillaume Maguire, Claire C’s e-mail correspondence with the potential and actual characters of the novel, as well as the completed chapters by ghostwriter Klara Trajcev. The “trick” is that Maguire, Claire C and Trajcev actually are one and the same person: Sarah Vanhee herself. Thereby, she simultaneously performs four voices, or, taking the preface into account, in which Vanhee reflects upon *The C-Project* and her own role in the genesis of Claire C, the novel consists of four voices. Referring to Krauss’ essay, Lord points out that “multi-voicings” are typical for the paraliterary writing, respectively for theoretical fictions (Lord 141). The four voices of *The Miraculous Life of Claire C* are not only narratologically but also typographically

differentiated: the original manuscript of Guillaume Maguire is typewritten, alluding to the raw version and provisional character of the unfinished novel that is yet to be edited. In contrast to the manuscript and the serif typeface of the completed novel chapters by Klara Trajcev stands the sans-serif screen-typeface of the e-mail correspondence between Claire C and the potential characters of the novel. In its typography, the novel alludes to paraliterary works such as Derrida's *Glas* (1986) or Krauss' *The Optical Unconscious* (1993).

Nevertheless, it is not exclusively by means of its form that *The Miraculous Life of Claire C* systematically subverts the customary segregation of reality and fiction. The process of fictionalization - of fictionalizing reality - is also reflected in the content, namely in the completed chapters, when "the sisters make up their earliest memory together," and also within the email correspondence, where Claire C functions as "surrogate author," a figure in the narrative who dramatizes the process of fictional production (Currie 53). In a way, Claire C works as self-reflexive undercover agent, representing the "narrative self-conscious," which is, according to Currie, a definite characteristic of the postmodern novel is represented (ibid). By means of the email correspondences and meetings in the parks, Claire C's life becomes slowly interwoven with the life stories of twenty "real" people. Interesting is that some people however have mixed feelings about *The C-Project* showing skepticism towards being a character in a novel, a novel that is supposed to be published: "I was pleased to hear from you again. I do however have to add I find your question as to whether I have plants shocking. I am becoming suspicious, how many other things do you know about me?" *The Miraculous Life of Claire C* constructs identity as an accumulation of autobiographical memories, construed by dialogues with various people - in short, a dialogical identity.

Theorizing As "Undercover Activity"

By means of the theoretical fiction of the unfinished novel of *The Miraculous Life of Claire C*, Sarah Vanhee theoretically reflects on the nature of identity, reality and fiction. She constructs a "fiction with a theoretical performance," whereby the fiction is to have found a manuscript by late writer Guillaume Maguire, and the theoretical performance to go as Claire C in search for the other characters in the book (Currie 59). Within the novel, theory is not explicit but rather surreptitious; it is conducted in secret. Sarah Vanhee adopts Claire C's identity to get into the secret realms of fiction, and to conceal her "true" activity: to theorize the concept of identity as well as the thin line between reality and fiction. Vanhee explores the theory of fiction through the practice of writing fiction. By wondering why writers (have to) invent new stories, new characters, while there are already so many living stories walking around, she addresses the structuralist issue according to which "the realistic novel constructs rather than reflects the

real world – the real world is always mediated by language and narrative” (Currie 62). By pointing towards the creation or invention process each writer is involved in, Vanhee argues that any fiction contains “real” elements, insofar as fiction is inspired by reality. Through her theoretical performance, Vanhee turns the question around: this time, reality constructs and represents rather than reflects the fictional world. The fictional world is mediated – a double fiction. If the “real” encounter is staged, the novel is twice fictional.

Vanhee also questions the threshold between fiction and reality as she, in a theatrical gesture, fictionalizes reality by constituting a dialogue between fictional and real characters. While meeting the novel characters in Amsterdam’s parks, “real” people become fictional characters – and not only the people she directly meets, but also the people around: The undercover performance is “a theatrical gesture that made everything and everyone ‘play along.’ The bench on which Claire and her stranger met each other, thus became a stage for a partly playing and partly ignorant audience of casual passers-by.” In her undercover operation, Claire C moves back and forth, from reality to fiction, from fiction to reality.

Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold. 1973. *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Currie, Mark. 1998. *Postmodern Narrative Theory*. Hampshire, New York: Palgrave.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1986. *Glas*. Trans. John P. Leavey and Richard Rand. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 2010. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York, Basic Books. (Orig. pub. 1900.)
- Krauss, Rosalind E. 1980. “Poststructuralism and the ‘Paraliterary.’” *October* 13 (1980): 36-40.
- . 1993. *The Optical Unconscious*. MIT Press.
- Lord, Catherine. 2003. “Rapturing the Text: The Paraliterary between Works of Derrida, Virginia Woolf and Janette Winterson.” *Angles of Derrida. Jacques Derrida and Anglophone Literature*. Ed. Thomas Dutoit and Philippe Romanski. Spec. issue of *The Oxford Literary Review* 25 (2003): 139-156.
- . 1999. *The Intimacy of Influence. Narrative and Theoretical Fictions in the works of George Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson*. Amsterdam: ASCA Press.
- McHale, Brian. 1987. *Postmodernist Fiction*. New York and London: Methuen.
- The C-Project: a rendez-vous with Claire C*. Performance by Sarah Vanhee. Prod. Frascati Productions / Sarah Vanhee in cooperation with Onomatopée and Appel arts centre. Frascati Theatre, Amsterdam; 9 December 2010.
- Vanhee, Sarah et al. 2010. *The Miraculous Life of Claire C*. Amsterdam: Onomatopée.