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ILJA LEONARD PFEIJFFER AS A LUXURY IMMIGRANT: A EUROPEAN PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL AND THE 'REFUGEE CRISIS'

> *„Het gaat er niet om of je als schrijver je voordeel kunt doen met betrokkenheid bij de maatschappij, maar dat de maatschappij haar voordeel kan doen met de betrokkenheid van schrijvers." [It is not about whether you as a writer can take advantage of your involvement with society, but whether society can take advantage of the involvement of writers.] (Pfeijffer 2016a)*[1)]

These are the words that the Dutch classicist, poet and writer Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer spoke after winning the E. du Perron prize in 2015. He had received the award of 2,500 EUR for a number of literary and journalistic texts in which he deals with the consequences of mass migration in the 21st century, or with what is currently often referred to as the 'refugee crisis' and its effects on Europe. In his acceptance speech the laureate reflected on the topic of mass migration as the greatest geopolitical development of today. Building on this Pfeijffer argues that dealing with such a major social issue demands a radical change of thinking, and in order to achieve such a change, society needs literature. He remains rather vague, however, about the actual literary strategies that are able to establish this change of thinking:

> *„[Literatuur] kan de meerduidigheid en de complexiteit laten zien van problemen die we tevergeefs trachten op te lossen met goedkope slogans. In een wereld waarin alleen maar wordt gesteggeld over aantallen, kan zij de verhalen vertellen en van de getallen weer mensen maken." [Literature can show the ambiguity and complexity of problems that we try in vain to solve with cheap slogans. In a world in which we are only quibbling over numbers, she can tell stories and turn numbers into people again.] (ibid)*

Throughout the speech Pfeijffer repeatedly emphasizes the ability and importance of literary works in revealing complexity. He also touches upon the thematic content of literature: juries of literary prizes do normally not judge so much *what* you say, but *how* you say it. Literary works, however, should also

1) All translations are my own. I would like to thank Audrey McMahon for her help with translating the quotations and correcting the text. Also thanks to Christoph Rausch for his corrections.

be considered as valuable contributions to the public debate; we cannot reduce them to style and composition. In order to make his claim that society needs to listen to its writers, Pfeijffer proceeds to shift the focus from the literary work towards the literary writer: "Ik ben een geëngageerd schrijver die verdomme iets te zeggen heeft over de wereld waarin we leven" [I am a committed writer that has damn well got something to say about the world we live in] (ibid).

Pfeijffer's speech after receiving the E. du Perron prize contains all the ingredients that define his role as a *public intellectual*. According to Odile Heynders, professor of comparative literature, the public intellectual is someone who has "critical knowledge and ideas, stimulates discussion and offers alternative scenarios in regard to topics of political, social and ethical nature, thus addressing non-specialist audiences on matters of general concern" (2016: 3). In recent years, Pfeijffer has also presented himself as a literary public intellectual. He appears driven by a feeling of responsibility that is highly connected to his status as a *European* citizen and writer. "Ik besef terdege dat het een beetje uit de mode is", says Pfeijffer, who migrated to Italy in 2008, "maar ik geloof hartstochtelijk in Europa, de Europese gedachte, de Europese Unie en ons dappere, logge, tergend moeizame proces van politieke eenwording" [I am well aware that it is a bit out of fashion, but I passionately believe in Europe, the European idea, the European Union and our brave, unwieldy, painfully difficult process of political unification] (Pfeijffer 2016a). In his acceptance speech he declares himself *a writer without boundaries*, a strategic effort to grant his authorial image an international grandeur.

In this article I examine Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer's role as a European public intellectual during the so-called 'refugee crisis'. I will begin by briefly discussing Heynders work on the public intellectual, providing a theoretical framework for my analysis. Then, after offering some background information on Pfeijffer's literary career, I conduct a close reading of *Brief aan Europa* [*Letter to Europe*] from the collection *Gelukzoekers* [*Fortune Seekers*] (2015). My analysis reveals the ways in which Pfeijffer is able to add complexity to the public debate about the 'refugee crisis'. What are the means and literary tools with which a writer can do this? I also examine some of the more general difficulties of writing on the 'refugee crisis' today. Which difficulties arise when addressing this theme from a Western, privileged position?

LITERARY PUBLIC INTELLECTUALS Heynders states in her book *Writers as Public Intellectuals* (2016) that the public intellectual traditionally is someone who "intervenes in the public debate and proclaims a controversial and committed and sometimes compromised stance from a sideline position" (2016: 3). Her hypothesis is that the present status the public intellectual has changed, because "strategies of celebrity behavior and the subsequent responses of the public are transforming the traditions and modes of intellectual thinking and writing" (2016: 2). The traditional sideline position, from which the intellectual in the past could present a rational, uncompromised standpoint, and from which he gained cultural authority according to literary sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, has transformed into a position from *within* the audience, says Heynders. Nowadays, the public plays an important – if not essential – role in either or not accepting the intellectual's authority (ibid: 5).

According to Heynders, literature is still a major drive of the public intellectual's activity, while "literature is a lively and complex negotiation of text, author, reader and society" (ibid: 20). Her book therefore specifically zooms in on the *literary* intellectual, a person, mostly male, "with a certain artistic prestige and writing career, who tries to convince an audience beyond his main readers or followers, and in doing so deliberately uses various media platforms, styles and genres" (ibid: 7).[2)] She points briefly at the fact that the female intellectual is "time and again neglected and even considered as non-existent", a state of affairs for which she gives two explanations: "First, the gender bias in society has overlooked the activities and output of female intellectuals, focusing on the dominance of the male public lecturers, commentators and writers. Second, there seems to be a certain unwillingness of women to participate in the conversation about intellectuals, and to perform the role of the intellectual appearing in the media as a convinced, provocative and encouraging speaker" (ibid: 55). Rather than finding explanations and comparing female to male intellectual manifestations, she states we should focus on the distinctive performance of *any* public intellectual.

Heynders is specifically interested in ways in which authors discuss ideas and opinions *in* and *beyond* their literary texts. On the one hand, the literary intellectual is someone who has *imaginative power* and who uses literary strategies and scenarios to discuss his ideas on societal issues. He has to have the ability to "read the world as a book, interpreting it and offering alternative scenarios for understanding it" (2016: 20). On the other hand,

2) In this article I will use the male pronoun when referring to either the public intellectual, the narrator or the reader.

the literary intellectual has to be a recognizable figure in the *public sphere,* who is able to address an audience beyond his main group of readers.

Heynders is also interested in the role of literary intellectuals' contribution to, what we might call, envisioning Europe and the European Union. In both the above-discussed monograph and her inaugural address *Voices of Europe: Literary Writers as Public Intellectuals* (2009), she discusses the various roles authors can play in the public debate: "What are the possibilities and perspectives in culture of increasing the awareness of Europe's roots, symbols and identities? Can we (re)construct a novelistic outlook on Europe and on the solidarity a democratic Europe requires?" (2009: 10). Today, a decade later, now that Europe has to rethink its identity as a result of the rise in migratory movements towards the European continent, Heynders's questions seem even more relevant than before. What role can literature and the literary writer play – as a public intellectual – in influencing people's thoughts and attitudes towards what is happening at Europe's borders? In a recent article on Pfeijffer's television documentary *Via Genua*, Heynders claims that "we need writers as Pfeijffer to rethink our position in regard to developing cities [in Europe]. We need them because they sharpen our views and touch our emotions" (2017a).[3] In what follows, I scrutinize this claim by looking into the ways in which Pfeijffer has contributed to the debate on the 'refugee crisis' *in* and *beyond* his literary works.

THE IMMIGRANT WRITER Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer was born in Rijswijk, The Netherlands, in 1968. He studied Classics at Leiden University and wrote a dissertation (1996) on the Greek poet Pindar. His literary poetry debut came out in 1998, *Van de vierkante man* [*Of the square man*]. Since then, Pfeijffer has published over forty titles, including poetry, novels, short stories, plays, essays, columns, translations and anthologies. He is well-known for his provocative life-style, both in looks and behavior. He is a tall, bohemian figure, with long hair and a red scarf as his trademarks.

In 2008 Pfeijffer moved from Leiden to Genoa, Italy, where he has lived and worked ever since. His major literary breakthrough came with his fifth novel *La Superba* (2013), for which he received the prestigious Dutch Libris Literary Prize. This novel is set in Genoa and explores different forms of migration. Pfeijffer's alter ego Leonardo contrasts his own fortunate position as a *luxury immigrant* to that of the poor migrant workers he meets in the streets of Genoa. Since 2013, this city and the theme of mass migration

3) On literature and the 'refugee crisis' see also: Heynders 2017b, Heynders 2018a

have been at the heart of Pfeijffer's oeuvre, for instance in the poetry collection *Idyllen* (2015), *Gelukzoekers* (2015), the semi-autobiographical *Brieven uit Genua* (2016) and in his columns for the Dutch newspaper *nrc.next*. In 2017, Pfeijffer was asked to make a three-part documentary for television, titled *Via Genua* (VPRO), in which he guides his viewers through the streets of Genoa, and talks with native inhabitants as well as with newcomers to the city about the topic of migration. In 2018, Pfeijffer's latest novel *Grand Hotel Europa* was hailed by the press and became an instant bestseller. Central to this novel is once again the European identity; it reflects on contested issues such as mass migration and mass tourism.

Not only does Pfeijffer position himself explicitly as a European writer, his work also seems to appeal to an international readership. His novel *La Superba* (2013) has been translated into eight languages and *Grand Hotel Europa* (2018) is in the process of being translated into ten languages.[4)]

DEAR OLD MADAME EUROPE My case study from *Gelukzoekers* is a literary text called *Brief aan Europa [Letter to Europe]*. This text in the form of a letter, written by an unnamed sender, is dated February 28, 2015 in Genoa (Pfeijffer, 2015: 7). In the following, I will refer to this sender as 'correspondent' to distinguish the fictional writer of the letter from the biographical writer Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer. The letter is addressed to a *Madame*, using the French word without further salutation (ibid: 7). This *Madame* is a personification of Europe and she is addressed in the polite form (using the Dutch *U* [you], which is similar to the German *Sie*). At first sight, this seems to be an indication of the respect the correspondent is paying her. Upon second thought, however, it appears to be only a rhetorical strategy, as *Madame* Europe appears not to be the intended reader of this letter. This becomes more explicit later on in the text, when the correspondent uses the possessive pronoun *our*, for instance in: "om niet gestoord te worden in onze dromen richten wij kunstmatige barrières op voor andere mensen" [in order not to be disturbed in our dreams, we set up artificial barriers against other people] (ibid: 14–15). This *our* does not only include the correspondent and *Madame* Europe, but indicates a much broader *we*. When looking at the title again – *Brief aan Europa* – I would argue that the letter only *suggests* to be directed at *Madame* Europe, but in fact it is (indirectly) addressed to all Europeans (using the name *Europe* as a metonym for all its inhabitants).

4) The Dutch Foundation for Literature provides an online database of translations: https://letterenfonds.secure.force.com/vertalingendatabase/search (June 19, 2019).

This letter thus immediately raises questions about its supposed addressee. I have therefore chosen to analyze it here not as a letter, but as a literary text. Another argument supporting this decision is the resemblance of the text to the genre of Greek lyric poetry, in which a lyrical *I* often directs himself to a *you* (the so-called *apostrophe)*, to whom he declares his love. *Madame* Europe is actually not having an epistolary conversation with the correspondent; she rather is the *subject* of his writings. In this sense, the letter is actually a monologue in disguise.

The personification of Europe appears in the shape of an old woman who inhabits an apartment in Brussels. To her residents, *Madame* Europe is not of relevance anymore, the correspondent proclaims: "de wereld heeft u afgeschreven, beschouwt u als irrelevant, heeft u als een lieve, seniele oma in een schommelstoel gezet en opgesloten in een kamer op zolder, van alle gemakken voorzien" [the world has written you off, considers you irrelevant, has put you as a sweet, senile grandmother in a rocking chair and has locked you up in a room in the fully equipped attic] (ibid: 9). But contrary to this depiction, Europe certainly remembers her own history. The correspondent takes her back to what he assumes to be her first childhood memories. The narrative form in which he does so, is noteworthy:

> *„U herinnert zich, zoals u zich alles herinnert, dat u als meisje speelde op het strand van het land in Noord-Afrika waar u bent geboren. U had bloemen geplukt in de tuin van uw vader, koning Agenor, die een zoon was van Libya en de god van de zee. U hield van de zee. U houdt nog steeds van de zee." [You remember, as you remember everything, that as a girl you played on the beach of the country in North Africa where you were born. You had picked flowers in your father's garden, king Agenor, who was a son of Libya and god of the sea. You loved the sea. You still love the sea.] (ibid: 7)*

Here the correspondent manifests himself as an *auctorial* narrator: he is in charge of the narrative and has insight into the thoughts and desires of his character *Madame* Europe. The memory he recounts, refers to the Greek mythological story of Europe, the Phoenician princess after whom the continent of Europe was named. Princess Europe was originally from North Africa, but was abducted by the Greek god Zeus. He transformed himself into a bull and persuaded the girl to climb on his back. After swimming

with her to the island of Crete, he exposed himself and sexually abused her. Nine months after being raped by Zeus, Europe gave birth to three sons. "Zo is het begonnen. Weet u dat nog?" [That is how it started. Do you remember?], the correspondent asks, after which he provides the confirmative answer himself: "Natuurlijk weet u dat nog. U weet alles nog" [Of course you remember. You remember everything] (ibid: 8). Note that the question he asks her is merely rhetorical. He has taken the freedom to speak *on her behalf*. In my opinion, the correspondent from the outset establishes a somewhat paternalistic attitude towards *Madame* Europe.

The personification is the main figure of speech used in this letter and does seem to serve a number of goals. In the first place, it points at the origin of the continent of Europe. Referring to the classical myth of Europe, the correspondent makes one of his most important claims: "de geschiedenis van de mens is een verhaal van migratie" [the history of man is a story of migration] (ibid: 13). In a sense, we are all migrants, he implies. The correspondent draws a very explicit parallel between *Madame* Europe and the boat refugees of our time: they have fled the same continent, crossed the same see, and faced similar dangers. History keeps repeating itself, he seems to suggest. In contrast to the young Phoenician princess, however, many of the African boat refugees do not make it to the other side of the Mediterranean Sea.

The correspondent is not only pointing at the shared origin of Europeans and Africans, he is also claiming that our urge to travel can be a beneficial one:

> *„Onze nieuwsgierigheid naar de ander is het geheim van ons succes, zo niet van ons voortbestaan. U weet beter dan wie dan ook hoe belangrijk verplaatsen is, Europa, juist u. U hebt het vrije verkeer van mensen en goederen tot uw grootste project gemaakt, omdat u ziet hoeveel voordeel u dat oplevert." [Our curiosity for the other is the secret of our success, if not of our survival. You know better than anyone how important moving is, Europe, especially you. You have made the free movement of people and goods your biggest project, because you can see how much you can gain from it.] (ibid:14)*

Hinting at one of the basic tenets behind the European Union, which was founded to enable free mobility without borders, the correspondent points at the inequality by which this benefit is nowadays defined. If it is natural to all human beings to travel and

migrate, he reasons, why then would we raise barriers for certain people and not for others?

What is interesting in Pfeijffer's text is that it also touches upon some of the underlying issues in the debate on mass migration, for instance the way in which we welcome different types of guests in Europe.[5] One of his main arguments is that Europe has sold her cultural heritage for economic reasons:

> *„U leeft van uw verleden. U verkoopt uw herinneringen. Miljoenen en miljoenen toeristen uit de nieuwe werelden van Azie en Amerika bezoeken uw boudoirs als een pretpark. De vergeelde foto's van uw gloriedagen, uw jeugdig optimisme en uw verdriet, uw ontdekkingen en uw oorlogen in uw beduimelde albums worden gekoesterd en vermarkt als erfgoed." [You live from your past. You sell your memories. Millions and millions of tourists from the new worlds of Asia and America visit your boudoirs as an amusement park. The yellowed photos of your glory days, your youthful optimism and your sorrow, your discoveries and your wars in your well-thumbed albums are cherished and marketed as heritage.] (ibid: 8–9)*

In this fragment the correspondent paints a cynical portrait of the European tourism industry. Through the use of marketing terminology (*to sell, to market, to exploit*), he claims *Madame* Europe is driven by greed and opportunism. According to the correspondent, "herinneren is [haar] corebusiness" [remembering is her core business] (ibid: 8). Consequently, the type of guest that is welcomed in Europe is the tourist with purchasing power. The refugee, on the other hand, is expected to bring costs to the European economy and is therefore not welcome.[6] According to the correspondent, however, tourists are not behaving as proper guests. Rather, "[ze] staan [...] in de rij voor het Louvre, de Uffizi, de Vaticaanse Musea, om wat nog even van u is alvast te plunderen met hun blik en telefoons op selfiesticks" [they stand in line in front of the Louvre, the Uffizi, the Vatican Museum, already plundering what is momentarily still yours with their gaze and telephones on selfie sticks] (ibid: 9).[7]

Note that the negative image of Europe and its tourists is intensified through several connotations that the terminology he uses evokes: the *glory days* of *discoveries* and *wars* hint at Europe's colonial history. Further on in the text, the correspondent explicitly refers to the colonial era:

5) See, for instance, Gibson (2006).

6) Gibson (2006) discusses the lack of truth in this assumption, by pointing at the shadow economy that relies on illegal labor(ers).

7) Pfeijffer has pictured the same image in his novels *La Superba* and *Grand Hotel Europa*.

> *„U herinnert zich, zoals u zich alles herinnert, hoe u bent uitgevaren op machtige galjoenen, gedreven door de wind in uw zeilen, met honger naar onmetelijke rijkdommen in uw ogen, om het oosten, het westen en het zuiden te koloniseren en te plunderen. U hebt de zonen van Afrika geroofd, vervoerd in overvolle schepen en op een ander continent verkocht als slaven voor plantages.“ [You remember, as you remember everything, how you went out on mighty galleons, driven by the wind in your sails, with a hunger for immeasurable riches in your eyes, to colonize and plunder the east, west and south. You have robbed the sons of Africa, transported them in overcrowded ships and sold them on another continent as slaves for plantations.] (ibid: 12)*

Here he uses precisely the same terminology in regard to Europe's colonial endeavors as to the tourists from Asia en America. The tables have turned, however, now it is *Madame* Europe who has to worry that her *riches* are being *plundered* by an *en masse invasion*:

> *„Het zijn er ontelbaren, duizend maal duizend maal meer dan de barbaren die Rome onder de voet hebben gelopen, en ze doen de oude, breekbare vloeren kraken onder hun massale invasie tot het te laat is om hen nog te stoppen. Het is al te laat. Maar ze betalen ervoor, dus het is goed.“ [They are uncountable, a thousand times a thousand times more than the barbarians who have trampled Rome, and they make the old, fragile floors creak under their en masse invasion until it is too late to stop them. It is already too late. But they pay for it, so it is okay.] (ibid: 9)*

In *our* era *Madame* Europe is overrun by tourists, just as the Roman Empire was taken by barbarians in the year 476. Interestingly enough, the image of the tourists that the correspondent sketches here, resembles the way in which refugees are often portrayed in popular news media. The tourists are described as an *en masse* group of *barbarians* and they are *uncountable* and *unstoppable*. The same terminology and imagery is used in regard to refugees, as various scholars have argued. Bleiker *et al.* (2013), for instance, have shown how refugees are often displayed in anonymous medium or large groups, which frames them "as a potential threat that sets in place mechanisms of security and

border control" (2013: 399). Others have pointed at the frequent use of *water* metaphors, portraying refugees as a *flood*, *stream* or *tidal wave*, all of which are unstoppable.[8] In its use of terms such as *invasion* the above Pfeiffer-quotation also repeats the war imagery that is dominant in written as well as visual representations of refugees. Scholars have argued that these different types of metaphors serve to dehumanize and de-individualize refugees.[9] I argue that Pfeijffer's *Brief aan Europa* tries to critically expose these framing strategies, by applying them not to refugees, but to tourists.

It seems that by personifying Europe, the correspondent is able to hold someone *personally* responsible and therefore to make an abstract discussion more concrete. Instead of addressing the (EU) government as an anonymous institution, he turns to *Madame* Europe as someone who can be held personally accountable for her actions. Moreover, the personification of Europe is combined with a meaningful metonym, that of the European Union as a house. *Madame* Europe has moved into a flat in Brussels, the political heart of the EU, but because of old age she is no longer able to leave her home. The correspondent depicts how she hides in her apartment: "U staat op van uw chaise longue, zet de televisie uit en strompelt op uw oude, stramme benen naar de ramen van uw Brusselse appartement om de luiken te sluiten. Als u de verschoppelingen niet ziet, houden ze misschien vanzelf op te bestaan" [You get up from your chaise lounge, turn off the television and stumble on your old, stiff legs to the windows of your Brussels's apartment to close the shutters. If you do not see the outcasts, they may cease to exist] (ibid: 16). By using the image of the private home, the discussion on migration is transferred to a more personal and – consequently – ethical level.

Cultural theorist Sarah Gibson has pointed at the different connotations that are connected to a number of dominant metonyms for the nation: "While the *house* has connotations of a private, personal hospitality, the *hotel* represents a public, commodified experience of hospitality subject to the logic of economic exchange. In contrast, the *fortress* signals defensive nationalism, with strong and secure borders, inhospitable rather than hospitable" (2006: 694). The terminology and imagery that is used in public debates to refer to the nation, thus also reveals one's attitude towards incoming strangers. By using the metonym of the house, the correspondent is able to address *Madame* Europe on a specific level, namely the private and personal. Is *she* prepared to be hospitable to others? The old lady has chosen to close the shutters

8) For instance: El Refaie 2001, Van Gorp 2006.

9) On the framing of refugees see for instance: Santa Ana 1999, El Refaie 2001, Van Gorp 2006, Bleiker et al. 2013.

of her home and not let anyone in. The correspondent, in turn, can address her on this personal decision. He warns *Madame* Europe that her house is actually about to collapse; the tourists "make the old, fragile floors creak under their en masse invasion". In order to survive, she has to be hospitable to the *right* kind of newcomers, not the greedy tourists.

The letter therefore ends with a personal plea addressed to *Madame* Europe: "Zet uw ramen open, haal uw deur van het nachtslot en verwelkom hen. Haal hen binnen en omhels hen" [Open your windows, unlock your door and welcome them. Bring them inside and embrace them] (ibid: 17). The use of imperatives here is noteworthy, for it raises (again) questions about who is being addressed in this letter. These lines seem to function on multiple levels simultaneously: as a personal address to the character *Madame* Europe, as a more general plea to European citizens to offer hospitality to refugees, and maybe even as a solution for some of the economic and social problems the European Union has to deal with (for instance Europe's aging population).

In *Brief aan Europa* the attention is thus directed at *Madame* Europe, who the correspondent, in an accusatory form, holds personally accountable for the recent migratory movements. Yet this personification is problematic in several respects. The correspondent portrays her as a vulnerable and old woman, who is not able to take care of herself anymore: "Uw bleke, magere handen [...] kunnen geen aarde meer ploegen, geen graan meer dorsen en geen deeg meer kneden. U kunt zichzelf niet eens meer kleden" [Your pale, thin hands can no longer plough soil, thresh grain, or knead dough. You can't even dress yourself anymore] (ibid: 12). He uses this metaphor of *aging* to point at the economic and cultural dependence of the European Union on foreign industries: "Uw japonnen, negligés, handtassen en boa's komen uit China. Uw fantasieën worden in Hollywood gemaakt en uw telefoongesprekken gevoerd door iemand in India" [Your gowns, negligees, handbags, and boas come from China. Your fantasies are made in Hollywood, and your telephone conversations are handled by someone in India] (ibid: 17). *Madame* Europe is not able to perform manual work anymore and, moreover, she has no political voice, she has to obey her politicians. To them she is just "een lieve, seniele oma in een schommelstoel" [a sweet, senile grandmother in a rocking chair] (ibid: 9). This weakened and aged identity of *Madame* Europe is emphasized by the attitude of the correspondent towards her, which is sometimes patronizing and paternalistic.

Problematic from a gender-critical perspective is, for instance, his declaration of love to *Madame* Europe: "Ik heb u innig lief en voor mij bent u nog net zo mooi als toen u een meisje met een mand vol bloemen op de rug van een stier de zee overstak en oog in oog met een adelaar vrouw werd, of mooier nog dan dat [...]" [I love you dearly and to me you are just as beautiful as when you crossed the sea with a basket full of flowers on the back of a bull, and when you face to face with an eagle became a woman, or even more beautiful than that] (ibid: 16–17). By singing her *physical* beauty, the correspondent expresses not only his love, but also his desire for *Madame* Europe, who becomes a fetishized object. An important as well as highly disputable detail in this respect is that the rape of Europe by Zeus is here euphemistically called *to become a woman*. This can be considered problematic because not only has he taken the right to speak on behalf of *Madame* Europe, he has also chosen to retell the story solely from his male perspective. He does not pay attention to the violent aspects of the strongly gendered and sexualized myth of Europe, which he is retelling. On the contrary, he suggests Europe's eager sexual willingness towards Zeus: "U vond het machtig mooi. U slaakte kreetjes van opwinding, zoals meisjes van goede komaf dat in die lang vervlogen tijden plachten te doen" [You thought it was powerfully beautiful. You let out cries of excitement, as upper-class girls were wont to do in those long gone days] (ibid: 7).

This final episode of the letter is also questionable from a postcolonial perspective, for it portrays the African migrants in a stereotypical way. Europe's salvation comes from masculinized helpers, migrants who look like *bulls*: "Zie hoe breed hun zwarte ruggen zijn en hoe sterk hun zwarte spieren" [See how broad their black backs are and how strong their black muscles] (ibid: 17). They are reduced to their physical features, namely their *broad*, *black backs* and the *strength* of their *black muscles*. Moreover, these migrants are compared to animals: "Ze lijken wel stieren. Zie de blik van hoop en vechtlust in hun ogen. Het is de blik van een adelaar. U moet niet bang voor hen zijn" [They seem like bulls. See the look of hope and fighting spirit in their eyes. It is the look of an eagle. You must not be afraid of them] (ibid: 17). Their image is one that is frightful: they have *fighting spirit* and look fearful. However, they also have *the look of an eagle*, which, upon first sight, seems to offer reassurance. This comparison refers again to the mythical story of Zeus, who transformed himself into a bull and abducted princess Europe to Crete. After a following transformation into an eagle, he raped and impregnated her. Therefore,

at second glance, the comparison of the migrants to an eagle cannot be considered positive, because it connects – indirectly – to a dominant image of migrants in nowadays news media: that of refugees as rapists. In my opinion, it is regrettable that in one of the few scenes in which migrants are active personas, they are reduced to highly problematic images. Moreover, the letter does not contain any more nuanced images of migrants to make up for this stereotyping.

THE GENOA-MYTH These problematic images cannot only be ascribed to the unnamed correspondent, but also to the biographical author. The reader has received several signs that associate the correspondent with Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer. For instance, *Brief aan Europa* is dated 28th February 2015 in Genoa, which is Pfeijffer's hometown since 2008. The letter has also been published in Pfeijffer's semi-autobiography *Brieven uit Genua* (2016), in which he writes letters to his mother, his former lover, his publisher, his younger self and – thus – to *Madame* Europe. It is not my intention to directly link the correspondent to the biographical author, but rather to point at a specific effect the text has on the reader. Because Pfeijffer (in almost all of his literary works) raises a complex internal and external self-image, the reader starts wondering whether this is a fictional or autobiographical piece of writing.

This does not apply to Pfeijffer's literary oeuvre alone, however. It becomes even more complex when we look at some of his extra-textual activities. On the 19th of February 2017, he was invited to *Jinek*, a well-known late-night talk show on Dutch public television to talk about his television documentary *Via Genua* that had just started broadcasting. Another guest to that evening's show was Secretary of State Klaas Dijkhoff who was at the time responsible for migration policy in The Netherlands. What is interesting about this interview is that Pfeijfer takes on the role of spokesperson for refugees. In debate with Dijkhoff, he is advocating a more humane migration policy and – implicitly – he claims to have insight into the actual needs of refugees:

> *„Ik wil wel iets zeggen over [die Turkije-deal]. Dat is misschien een deal die vanuit ons Europees perspectief heel goed gelukt is, en die heel gunstig is, omdat we het probleem onzichtbaar hebben gemaakt. Maar vanuit het perspectief van die vluchtelingen hebben we het alleen maar erger gemaakt. Er is echt niemand geholpen met die Turkije-deal." [I do want to say something about the Turkey*

deal. It is a deal that, from our European perspective, might appear very successful, and that is very beneficial, because we have made the problem invisible. But from the perspective of those refugees, we have only made it worse. There is absolutely no one helped by the Turkey deal.] (Jinek 2017)

Here we see the writer in the role of the public intellectual who intervenes in the public debate, on topics that may safely be assumed to be beyond his professional expertise. Other guests at the talk show table also play a role in granting Pfeijffer this platform as an intellectual. In terms of Heynders: his authority is accepted by the public. He is, for instance, asked what *he* thinks the solution to the recent migratory movements is. Pfeijffer responds by saying: "Ik denk dat je minder beleidsmatig moet denken en meer menselijk. En ik denk dat je dus heel goed moet beseffen dat die stroom vluchtelingen nooit valt te stoppen. Ze zullen altijd komen" [I think one should think less in terms of policy and more humanely. And I think you therefore have to realize that the flow of refugees can never be stopped. They will always keep coming] (ibid).[10] Rather striking about his role as a spokesperson, however, is his distantiating use of *those* and *they* when referring to refugees. Pfeijffer keeps a safe distance – the intellectual's traditional side-line position Heynders refers to (2016: 5) –, and seems to hold on to the refugee's otherness.

These statements are also interesting in that they can be considered an extension of the opinions expressed in Pfeijffer's literary works. What is complicated about his intellectual position in relation to the 'refugee crisis', is that it also contributes to his popular media image, or – in terms of Jérôme Meizoz – to his *posture*. In his book *De literatuur draait door. De schrijver in het mediatijdperk* literary scholar Sander Bax has pointed at a fairly recent shift in Pfeijffer's public image: in the last few years he has created a successful "Genoa-myth", both in and outside his literary oeuvre (2019: 309). After the publication of his best-selling novel *La superba* in 2013, the author has become a literary celebrity, and part of his celebrity identity is his status as an immigrant living in Genoa. Pfeijffer keeps, for instance, emphasizing that his position as a "luxury immigrant" is somehow connected to the position of the migrants he writes about (*VPRO Boeken* 2016). Journalists have consecrated this myth, Bax says, by interviewing and portraying the writer in Genoa and by depicting the city as his natural decor. Moreover, this myth has proven to be a profit-

10) On this specific interview see also: Bax (2019: 313-315).

able media strategy. Dutch tourists have embarked on expensive, organized cultural trips to Genoa, during which Pfeijffer steps in as an actual tour guide. The Genoa- and refugee-myth thus seems to pay off. Not only financially, but also in terms of cultural authority: in recent years Pfeijffer's book sales have enormously increased and he has on a number of important literary awards.[11)]

The profitability of telling refugee stories is a complex issue literary scholar Agnes Woolley has also discussed. She demonstrates, for instance, by looking at paratexts in a literary novel, how "editorial devices blur the boundary between the author's ethical aims of raising awareness of forced migration through fiction, and marketing strategies which appropriate these aims to sell the book. The singular, and often traumatic, nature of the refugee's story thus becomes the means by which the book is marketed" (2014: 183). The same mechanism seems to apply to Pfeijffer's texts: the reader starts wondering to what extent the author's occupation with these refugee stories is driven by a marketing strategy.

CONCLUSION Through his literary involvement with the 'refugee crisis', Pfeijffer positions himself explicitly as a European writer and intellectual. My analysis has shown this involvement to be both appreciative and critical towards Europe. On the one hand, Pfeijffer is passionate about Europe's achievements, heritage and liberties and he claims to be a fervent believer in the European idea. On the other hand, he critically appeals to our European conscience. In his *Brief aan Europa* he directs our attention to the European self-image. I have shown that through the use of literary techniques such as personification, focalization and identification, Pfeijffer prompts his Western readers to rethink their luxury position and puts forward issues such as mass tourism, border politics and the dehumanization of refugees. My analysis has also shown that writing on the 'refugee crisis' comes with difficulties that are hard (or maybe even impossible) to tackle. Some of the images Pfeijffer uses are rather problematic and result in stereotyping. Moreover, I have shown that the Western writer cannot simply disacknowledge his privileged position. Is he allowed to use the stories of refugees for his own benefit? Pfeijffer's recent economic success and cultural authority seem intricately connected to his position as a public intellectual writing on the 'refugee crisis'.

The above discussed literary and public interventions have shown that by using literary imagination, by creating stories, and by adopting rhetorical strategies and performances, the writer can confront readers with "critical ideas and new perspectives", like

11) For a more detailed analysis of Pfeijffer's marketing strategy, see: Bax 2019: 297–315. Worth mentioning is that the proceeds of *Gelukzoekers* are donated to a non-profit organization called *Werken zonder grenzen* [*Working without borders*].

Heynders has claimed (2016: ix). Pfeijffer is able to direct the attention of his readers to some of the underlying issues of the 'refugee crisis', such as the European history of migration, the dominant framing in popular discourse, and the ethics of hospitality. At the same time, we as readers need to be critical and vigilant towards literary interventions like these, for they can also be problematic mediations of the 'refugee crisis'.

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