



# Flooded cities in Low Countries fiction: Referentiality and indeterminate allegory in Renate Dorrestein's *Weerwater* and Roderik Six's *Vloed*

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## ABSTRACT

In a range of environmentally oriented international novels, future cities in the Low Countries have been flooded, with Dutch populations relocated to higher grounds or to floating cities. In contemporary Dutch and Flemish fiction, however, reflections on cities by the water are few and far between. More conspicuously, in the few literary novels that imagine cities under threat from rising water levels, the cities in question are not located on the shore but further inland, gesturing towards other meanings and symbolical repercussions rather than towards an engagement with flooding per se. This article examines two contemporary flood novels: Roderik Six's *Vloed* ("Flood") and Renate Dorrestein's *Weerwater*. We approach the floods in these novels in terms of indeterminate allegory, examining the contradictory meanings that can be attributed to the radical upheavals recounted in these narratives.

## KEYWORDS

flood; allegory; city; climate change; Low Countries

## Introduction

This article examines two contemporary flood novels originating from the Low Countries: *Weerwater* (Dorrestein 2015) by the Dutch author Renate Dorrestein and *Vloed* ('Flood'; Six 2012) by the Flemish author Roderik Six. We approach the flood tropes in these novels as examples of indeterminate allegory, in which multiple layers of meaning invite competing possible readings. While not referring unequivocally to anthropogenic climate change, *Weerwater* and *Vloed* offer important insights into literature's complex interaction with climate change and rising water levels in the way they draw attention to the language in which traumatic experience is couched, as well as by highlighting the enduring flexibility of novelistic form to evoke our changing relationship to the environment.

## The fate of the Dutch in international future fiction

The Low Countries on the shores of the North Sea have always been vulnerable to flooding, with considerable parts of the Netherlands and Belgium located below sea level, along tidal estuaries, and in the historical flood planes of rivers prone to large seasonal shifts in volume. However, with the land sinking and sea levels rising, the coasts

of both countries look set to be impacted severely by the ravages of radical climate change. This being the case, it is striking that particular flood fiction tropes – that of flooded Dutch cities, Dutch climate refugees, and the dispersion of the Dutch across the North Atlantic, the North Sea, and the Baltic Sea – are largely absent from Dutch literature, while being wide-spread in international literature. Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* mentions a floating 'New Amsterdam, the Dutch township ... a detached piece of the Netherlands' (Robinson 2017, 223), linking the trope of the wandering Dutchman with that of future submerged Dutch towns while invoking the previous name of New York City. Frederick Turner's *Apocalypse: An Epic Poem* (Turner 2016) imagines a catastrophic flood that drowns Amsterdam in 2067. One of the protagonists, Anneliese Grotius, a descendent of Hugo Grotius, escapes the drowning Netherlands with Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* in tow – a representative of the Dutch population and its cultural heritage in climate exile. In Annika Luther's *De hemlösas stad* (Luther 2011), a novel from Swedish-speaking Finland set in the near future, Finland is divided between a submerged coastal area inhabited mostly by non-European climate refugees, a buffer zone inhabited by Dutch and Danish climate refugees, and an inland Finnish zone. German writer Tom Hillenbrand's future thriller *Drohnenland* (Hillenbrand 2014) describes a dystopian Europe in which the Netherlands have been converted back to swampland and renamed New-Zeeland, its inhabitants dislocated. And in Swedish writer Nils Håkanson's *Ödmården* (Håkanson 2017), southern Sweden is flooded, with the Dutch occupying the other part of the country; the language in which the novel is written is an estranging mixture of (old-fashioned) Swedish and Dutch. In several other novels, too, future water rise is connected with the dispersion of the Dutch language across the North Sea. In the Norwegian writer Oyvind Rimbereid's long poem *Solaris korrigiert* (Rimbereid 2004), the language spoken in a future, submerged Stavanger is a mixture of various dialects and languages found along the North Sea coast, including Dutch (Ritson 2018, 132 ff.). In Ben Smith's *Doggerland* (Smith 2019), there are hints of a near future in which Dutch – alongside Chinese – functions as a substratum of English for inhabitants of the submerged areas around the North Sea: the characters in the novel swear in Dutch and use Dutch-sounding interjections (such as 'klote', 'godverdomme', and 'tsjoch'; 17, 40, 42, 44). The impact of rising waters on Dutch cities more generally is envisaged almost routinely in international fiction and non-fiction, from Jim Shephard's short story 'The Netherlands Lives with Water', with a focus on Shephard (2011; see Ritson 2018, 55 ff.), to Jeff Goodell's journalistic book *The Water Will Come*, which also includes a visit to Goodell (2017).

In contemporary Dutch and Flemish fiction, by contrast, reflections on the future fate of coastal cities are few and far between. In fact, critics have repeatedly remarked upon 'the absence of climate fiction in Dutch literature' (Bracke 2016b; see also Anker 2018; Bracke 2016a; Craps and Mertens 2019; Rouckhout 2019; van Gaal 2015). This state of affairs has caused some surprise. After all, as Astrid Bracke points out, '[g]iven the importance of the sea to Dutch history and culture it would make sense if Dutch authors would use that as a site of climate change' (2016b). However, she has yet to find 'a Dutch novel ... that explores the sea in its own right and in relation to climate crisis' (2016b). A possible explanation that has been proposed is the virtual absence of a Dutch Romantic tradition or a tradition of Dutch nature writing (Bracke 2016a, 2), which in turn can be seen to have its roots in 'a centuries-old identity premised on the struggle and conquest of the water, and the malleability of the

landscape' (Bracke 2016a, 8). However, as we will go on to show, while contemporary Dutch and Flemish literature may indeed have tended to refrain from engaging explicitly with the threat of future flooding, this does not mean that flood thematics are altogether absent from its pages (see also Craps and Mertens 2019).

In contemporary Low Countries literature, two novels stand out for how they imagine flooding: Roderik Six's *Vloed* and Renate Dorrestein's *Weerwater*. Six's novel is set in a recognisable but unnamed future (or alternative) Leuven, Belgium,<sup>1</sup> where four students look down on a flooded world emptied of other inhabitants from the heights of a student housing flat, amid a constant downpour of rain and continued water rise. Dorrestein's novel is set in a future (or alternative) Almere, the Netherlands. A mysterious fog, announced by strange weather, envelops the world, and only Almere seems to have survived, albeit with a severely depleted population. The protagonist and narrator, who bears the same name as the author, is a writer in residence whose task it becomes to document humanity's survival in this unlikely city.

In both novels, the referentiality of the spatial setting and the allegorical overtones raise a number of questions. The city in *Vloed* is not named, but there are several fairly unequivocal indications that this is Leuven: it is an inland, provincial university city in Belgium with an iconic beguinage, powerful Catholic organisations, a student apartment block called Torres, and a famous rebuilt university library. In *Weerwater*, the plot is largely structured around the reader's awareness of Almere's negative image in the Netherlands, as a city with a short history and a reputation for lower-middle-class boredom, and the satirical notion of this city, of all places, being saved from annihilation. The title refers to the iconic artificial lake of Almere, and the provincial Dutch city and its negative image are named from the opening pages. The referential relation to Almere is what prompted the writing of the novel: Dorrestein spent three months in the city as writer in residence, with the specific mandate to put the city on the Dutch literary map (see e.g. Hamer 2015).

At first sight, the choice for an inland provincial city, rather than a city on the coast, is counter-intuitive for novels that engage with the spectre of rising waters. However, one can also see the focus on these provincial locations within a broader shift towards new productive cultural contact zones. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale writes about the effect of the closing of the Western frontier in the American context. He suggests that cultural narratives 'reacted to the closing of the frontier ... by *reopening* the frontier in Middle America', in nondescript places such as Kansas or Ohio. Ohio, McHale argues, 'has gained a place in the postmodernist repertoire not by virtue of being Ohio as such, but by virtue of being typically middle-American.' The frontier is replaced by the 'Zone of the Interior', whose 'strangeness and liminality are foregrounded by its being located not on the edges of the continent, but at its center' (McHale 1987, 50; italics in original). The Netherlands and Flanders never had a frontier mythology like that of the US, but there are some affinities in terms of how the contact zone with the water appears in the Dutch cultural imagination as a border that has been closed, with the closure of the IJsselmeer in 1932 and the 1953 flood and the subsequent Delta works giving rise to new, internal frontiers or new 'Zones of the Interior'. The creation of Flevoland and Almere, a city of 200,000, located below sea level and named after a historical body of water, is part of the picture of such a closed and domesticated frontier. In *Weerwater*, Dorrestein draws on this idea when she somewhat ironically describes the inhabitants of Almere as '*frontier people*'

akin to the ‘settlers’ of the American prairie.<sup>2</sup> Seen from this perspective, what is important for the cities in *Vloed* and *Weerwater* is the oscillation between their real-world referentiality and the symbolical associations of these cities, including that of Almere as the epitome of Dutch middle-class boredom, and the unnamed city in *Vloed* as exemplary of any provincial inland university city. In both cases the allegorical meanings are far from straightforward. It is fruitful to read these texts, their settings, and the flood imagery they contain in terms of ‘indeterminate allegory’, in a postmodernist tradition in which ‘[e]very expression belongs simultaneously to several frames of reference’, with ‘a perpetual jostling and jockeying for position among a plurality of simultaneously present (and therefore simultaneously absent) worlds’ (McHale 1987, 142). In performing allegorical readings of postmodern storyworlds, this article situates itself within a broader contemporary interest in allegory in the context of postmodern literature, as evident in recent work by, among others, Pirjo Lyytikäinen (2013), Michael Golston (2015), and Fredric Jameson (2019).

### *Weerwater*

In reviews of *Weerwater*, climate change and flood imagery were not particularly highlighted (see e.g. Luis 2015; Wilcke 2015). The pivotal atmospheric disturbance in the novel is a mysterious fog that envelops the entire world except for Almere, and the novel focuses on the development of new societal forms in a world with radically reduced resources. The novel does, however, explicitly engage with strange weather, with the fear of flooding, and with a sense of Dutch preparedness for natural disaster, as well as with a Dutch self-consciousness about living with the water (Figure 1).

Almere is repeatedly described in the novel as located in a precarious position, built on the bottom of the IJsselmeer, the artificial lake that came into being with the construction of the Afsluitdijk. The city is located ‘metres below the NAP’ (12),<sup>3</sup> with NAP referring to



**Figure 1.** Almere as seen from across the Weerwater. 2019. Photo by the authors.

Normal Amsterdam Level, the standard measure in the Netherlands for relating land to sea level. A considerable part of the Netherlands is below NAP, and in this sense, too, Almere can be seen as exemplary of Dutch efforts to build on, with, and below the water. In its description of the Dutch – and Almere's – reaction to environmental threats, *Weerwater* draws repeatedly on the familiar image of a Dutch can-do attitude vis-à-vis rising waters (cf. Ritson 2018, 162–163). When the coming world-threatening change is announced in the novel by heavy rainfall, one of the characters comments, 'It's good for the garden', with the narrator adding: 'as she [Bianca] would always say about herself, she was as Dutch as a glass of buttermilk. The weather was the last thing that would disturb her' (25).

As the stormy weather passes, possible flood risks are foremost in the mind of the inhabitants. Commuters discuss how '[I]luckily it wasn't a north-western wind, otherwise the dykes would never have held' (33). When it seems the storm has passed without much lasting damage, the narrator refers to the famous phrase 'luctor et emergo' ('I struggle and emerge'), which is the motto of the province of Zeeland (in the southwest of the Netherlands), a motto that has often been read as a reflection on the Dutch relation to the sea (33).<sup>4</sup> Even the title of the novel can be read as a reference to the uncanny presence of water. 'Weerwater' is the name of the artificial lake within the artificial city of Almere, but it also means 'water again', a reference to the return of water in the context of land that was reclaimed from the sea.<sup>5</sup>

When it transpires that the world as the characters know it has come to an end, not by way of flooding but with the arrival of a fog that makes everyone and everything around the city dissolve, there remains a sense of threat that is related to water management and the spectre of flooding. The uncertainty about the extent of the catastrophe beyond the foggy curtain has a bearing on the fate of Almere, whose inhabitants speculate that paradoxically, only the total disappearance of the world and its physical properties outside of their own city keeps it from drowning. If the water outside of the fog still existed, the danger to the city would be acute:

the water management [waterschap] officials ... dreaded to think of De Blocq van Kuffeler, the pumping station that for decades had ensured that people in Almere kept dry feet. ... Now that Lelystad has disappeared from the face of the earth, the pumping station had probably stopped and seepage water [kwelwater] could at any moment seep underneath the dyke. (54; see also 231)

Detailed technical knowledge and highly specialised vocabulary ('De Blocq van Kuffeler'; 'kwelwater') combine in this passage with popular expressions referring to water management ('keep dry feet') to exhibit the extent of the narrator's awareness of the water management of Almere and her affinity with the popular language of Dutch flood narratives.

There are also references to warming and climate change in the way the fog and its effects are described. The disaster that strikes Almere and the world around it is presented in climatological terms:

The climate nipped all other activities in the bud. Each new morning brought the same bright sun, the same numbing heat. ... The seasons had turned their backs on Almere. (106)

Several of the tropes and formal elements of the narration share characteristics with contemporary environmentally oriented literary fiction. Such features include the

description of the climate as an active agent, with anthropomorphic properties, as in the quote above; the prevailing sense of loss in the novel and the list-like enumeration of attributes of a lost world (107; on lists and climate change, see Heise 2016, 56); the fact that the novel is narrated by a chronicler, whose explicit task is to draw up the minutiae of a disintegrating world – a twenty-first century Crusoe keeping a diary (Boxall 2013, 217–218); and the image of the novel as literally a message in a bottle to future readers (cf. Vermeulen 2017), holding up an image for the contemporary audience via this detour: the narrator announces in the final pages that she will enclose her writings in watertight bottles that will be sent floating on the Weerwater lake (297–298).

The novel contains a number of tropes also found in conventional flood narratives. One notable trope is the little baby saved in the flood. It is a trope with Biblical echoes and with a specific resonance in Dutch flood narratives from early modern times onwards; in early modern paintings, the motif was often used (Lamers and Jensen 2019). It is featured also in a range of more recent international flood narratives, including the Finland-Swedish young adult novel *De hemlösas stad* mentioned earlier, in which the protagonist is a foundling-like character, saved as a baby from the rising waters that have transformed Helsinki forever. In *Weerwater*, the few survivors are unable to bear children, a state of affairs thrown into relief by the arrival of a mysterious child found in a basket on the shores of the Weerwater lake. The novel, then, contains numerous clues inviting the reader to interpret the text in terms of the Dutch struggle with the sea and as a narrative engagement with the spectre of climate change, against the backdrop of a prevalent Dutch discourse of self-confident water management.

There are several other and in part contradictory ways in which the tropes of flooding and natural catastrophe can be read allegorically. One such reading is that of the novel as a commentary on the malleability of Dutch society and the way in which it is in dialogue with non-fictional city-planning narratives, especially when bearing in mind that this is a book effectively commissioned by the city of Almere. In the context of Dorrestein's other works, the trope of the foundling points away from climate change or flooding to entirely different questions of procreation, motherhood, and the possibility of alternatives to the nuclear family – all issues that are thematised in and through the characters' responses to the fog, and which also reverberate forcefully with common themes in other works by Dorrestein (on problematic motherhood in Dorrestein's work, see Buikema and Wesseling 2011, 131 ff.; Weusten 2011, 15).

One way to begin to unpack the fundamentally indeterminate nature of allegory in the novel is by way of the fog around which the end of the world is centred.<sup>6</sup> A first field of meaning is that of the fog in terms of mystic encounter with powers that are beyond the sphere of human comprehension. The fog is repeatedly described as a symbol for death or for the senselessness of human life, for example when the protagonist observes the motionless wall of fog from up close, and ponders:

For kilometres on end, a lifeless, careless nothingness extended outward. I had to fight against the sense of hopelessness that came over me again, against the crushing thought that our entire existence was meaningless. It was the kind of hidden knowledge that you avoided your whole life while trying to make the best of it, but that had inescapably materialized here. There is nothing more. You will have to make do with this. (282–283)



The emptiness of the fog wall coalesces with the protagonist's gloomy vision of life as ultimately meaningless. This hopelessness of human existence, as experienced by the protagonist, feeds forcefully into the possibility of suicide, which is one of the key themes of the novel in that it is possible to see the fog as a reference to both the thought of suicide itself and the sense of incomprehension that the suicide of a loved one fosters in the bereaved. One of the characters struggles with his father's suicide, linking this individual tragedy to what he claims is Almere's high suicide rate, a phenomenon that the narrator associates with a perceived lack of social cohesion, which in turn may be due to the artificiality of this ad-hoc city (130–131).<sup>7</sup> In interviews, Dorrestein has pointed multiple times to how this novel is her way of coming to terms with her sister's suicide decades earlier (Peene and van der Klis 2013, 1, 7).

Dorrestein relates her sister's traumatic suicide to the writer's block she was struggling with before taking up the position of writer in residence in Almere (Peene and van der Klis 2013, 14; Van der Linden 2015). Seen in this light, the fog in the novel can be interpreted as the most fundamental blockage possible for a storyworld: that of the narrator (who is also a struggling writer in residence called Dorrestein) unable to break through the shackles that make her powerless to perform the very act of narrating. Natural and climatological phenomena become aligned with the imaginative powers of the narrator herself. In such a reading, however, connections become further complicated, since the fog – impenetrable, frightening, and hopeless – is also what enables the narrator to start writing. This alignment of the poetic imagination with otherwise frightening natural or climatological elements recurs in a number of flood poetry collections in the Low Countries (including recent work by Lies van Gasse and Pieter Boskma), in which symbols from the natural world are reinterpreted as symbols for narratorial imagination and artistic freedom.

This brings us to our final reading of the novel: the fog within the storyworld as a manifestation of metaleptic interference on the part of the protagonist. Metalepsis happens when the boundaries between different levels of the narration are breached, with 'disorienting transgressions of boundaries that are physically or logically impossible' (Bell and Alber 2012, 167), for example when an author ends up within her own storyworld. There is a strong suggestion in the novel that the fog itself and all the disturbances connected with it are set in motion when the intradiegetic author character constructs the storyworld within which she operates. The very naming of the file 'Almere' on her computer sets in motion the end-of-the-world events:

I created a new file and without hesitation called it 'Almere'. At the same time I heard something funny. As if a Christmas bauble burst, an eerie 'PING' that was nevertheless so penetrating that hours later I still had a whistling sound in my ears. The light seemed to become pale yellow. A flash of searing heat passed by. ... However, the strange light and the heat only lasted shortly. (36)

The far-reaching idealist thinking behind this operation, in which a speech act of naming produces a powerful effect in one's own storyworld, is aligned with the poetics of Dorrestein's oeuvre, which has always tended to include magical-realist or fantastic elements, and in which there are 'many characters ... especially children, who are in possession of a belief in magical thinking', i.e. who believe that their thoughts can come true (Andeweg 2010, 272). It also chimes with postmodernism's simultaneous foregrounding and questioning of the power of language over the world. Metalepsis as a narrative

device has playful connotations, but it also tends to foreground the power of language vis-à-vis the material world. In *Weerwater*, two of the thematic uses of metalepsis as outlined by Alice Bell and Jan Alber (2012, 176) stand out: metalepsis as highlighting the power and potential danger of fiction; and metalepsis as a loss of control over the fictional creation. The incomprehensible world-ending fog evokes a profound sense of loss of control but also highlights the power and potential danger of language, and literary language in particular. In combination with themes such as coping with loss and grief, and the traumatic inability to write, the metaleptic operation in *Weerwater* emphasises language's always tentative relationship to the referential world it aims to represent, while also positing language or literature as the ultimate world-making instrument, with far-reaching power to affect material relationships.

### *Vloed*

Roderik Six's novel *Vloed* is very different from *Weerwater* in several ways, including for how it fits into the broader oeuvre of its author. However, this, too, is a novel that invites a reading in terms of flooding and rising waters; it is a novel that is clearly referentially anchored in one particular city in the Low Countries, while simultaneously opening up as an indeterminate allegory into multiple directions, including that of a metaleptic act of creation through language. While *Weerwater* is one of the last novels of a prolific and well-respected author (Dorrestein passed away in 2018), *Vloed* is the debut novel of an author who, after two novels so far, remains somewhat on the margins of the literary field. *Vloed* was critically acclaimed and received Flanders' prize for the best debut novel in 2012, but it has been largely forgotten. Some critics have categorised it as a climate novel (Rouckhout 2019), without, however, specifying how it engages with climate change. In what follows, we will explore the implications of flooding in the novel, paying particular



**Figure 2.** A view of Leuven from the rooftop of Camilo Torres. 2019. Photo by the authors.



attention to the location's referentiality and to the trope of the flood, understood in terms of indeterminate allegory (Figure 2).

In *Vloed*, the setting is one of incessant rainfall, rising waters, and a world that has been thrown into chaos. The opening panorama, seen from the roof of the student housing complex Torres, depicts a city under water:

Nina and I sit smoking Ultra in soaked beach chairs, on the roof of Torres, four floors up on a mountain overlooking the submerged valley where the city centre once was. It drizzles. Of course it does. It always rains. The only thing that varies is the way in which the water falls from the sky. (13)

The scene is somewhat similar to other urban flood depictions in contemporary international literature, such as the opening panorama of a future submerged New York in *New York 2140* (cf. Ameel 2019). The reader is introduced to incessant rain, the breakdown of society as a consequence of rising waters, and the subsequent struggle for survival, a struggle that will culminate in the final pages, when the protagonist eventually escapes to dry ground after a desperate and improvised crossing by kayak. On the surface, this is a novel that would seem to have several of the elements of a prototypical climate novel. However, when we consider Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra's definition of climate fiction as 'a distinctive body of cultural work which engages with anthropogenic climate change, exploring the phenomenon not just in terms of setting, but with regard to psychological and social issues, combining fictional plots with meteorological facts, speculation on the future and reflection on the human-nature relationship ...' (Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2018, 2), what stands out in this novel is the lack of any explanation of what may have caused the incessant rain, or any reference to anthropogenic climate change or the broader environmental or societal events that may have led up to the moment in time of the opening panorama. And in contrast to *Weerwater*, there is little to no reference to actual, historically or geographically contextualised flooding risks. What takes centre stage is the rain, the flood, and the interaction between the water and the protagonist's complex consciousness.

Although no reference is made to anthropogenic climate change, flood tropes are foregrounded in the novel on multiple occasions, from Biblical precursors to Low Countries flood narratives to contemporary post-apocalyptic flood fiction. The water and the flood are described as cleansing the world of sin and filth, creating a world characterised by 'freshness' (112; 122; 190). Scavenging through the city, the protagonist finds ample proof of sin, debauchery, and senseless violence, suggesting that the flood is akin to the flood of sin in Genesis: 'The water had not come in vain. If anything, it had come too late' (211). As is the case for *Weerwater* and other contemporary post-diluvian narratives (such as *De hemlösas stad* and *New York 2140* [see above], or Maggie Gee's *The Flood* [2004] and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* [2009]), this is largely a survival narrative with a focus on a new order taking shape. There is a catalogue-like description of what the protagonist misses from the pre-diluvian world (184), and he imagines future readers or future archaeologists trying to make sense of his present (93).

Again, similar to *Weerwater*, part of the indeterminacy within the storyworld relates to the question of whether there is anything left of the world outside of the small group of survivors (168). The protagonists are described as latter-day Crusoes – 'castaways who never left their ship' (168), marooned on an island created by the rising waters (169). The

protagonist sees himself as the 'last man', with an intended gendered inflection to the term: when the other surviving man, Michael, dies and he is left alone with two women, he sees himself as 'the last dick' (197), a reference that – similarly to what happens in *Weerwater* – puts questions of sexuality, procreation, and gender roles at the centre of post-diluvian survival. Again, we find the trope of a saved child in a vessel, at the mercy of the elements. When Nina commits suicide, only the protagonist and the female character Joke, who is pregnant from Michael, are left, and the final scene sees them desperately making their way by kayak to a hoped-for dry other side (260–262).<sup>8</sup>

The trope of the flood recurs also in the novel's descriptions of an overflow of sensory experiences as a result of substantial drug abuse. From the opening pages, the protagonist and narrator consumes a drug called Ultra, a potent psychoactive drug that causes effects including 'splitting', a phenomenon in which time and space multiply, past and future can coexist, and inner and outer worlds collapse into one another (58–59; 60; 61; 83). Most of the first half of the novel consists of descriptions of a hallucinatory state over which the narrator has little or no control (e.g. 76–77). In its effects, Ultra aligns the novel with preoccupations of the climate novel and its interest in collapsing or crossing various scales: one of the first Ultra scenes witnesses the protagonist taking a robin in his hand and seeing it transformed gradually into a black cube, and then into a container with a door through which he steps into an anteroom of his own mind (60–61).

One particular effect is that the protagonist becomes unsure as to what, in the actual world, is real and what is produced by his overstimulated senses: he doubts Nina's existence (66), and he is unsure about particular memories (because Ultra causes 'Ultraflashes' or fake memories; 98; 157) and about whether his thoughts are someone else's memories (89). Gradually, the reader realises that temporal frames have collapsed within the novel itself and that different sections within the same chapter are jumbled together from different time frames – although it remains relatively easy to see a chronological progression, narrated in the present tense, interspersed with flashbacks in the past tense (e.g. 111–113). The effect is typical of literary descriptions of urban apocalypse, in which 'urban destruction is often posited as thoroughly informed by or even caused by mental processes' (Ameel 2016, 796). If anything, the flood and rain in this reading become allegorical images for the protagonist's addiction and confusion, with his disturbed mental processes affecting the storyworld.

As in *Weerwater*, there is a distinct possibility that the disaster that besets the storyworld is a product of metaleptic intervention on the part of the protagonist, who, at the end of a nightmarish hallucination brought on by the use of Ultra, curses the world: 'I cursed all the light of the world and prayed that I would never see the sun again' (79; see also van Rooij 2013). When the protagonist wakes up after uttering this curse, a momentous change has taken place; the grey shades from inside his head and from inside his room have taken charge of the outside world:

Nina stood up and drew open the curtains: even more grey. It was overcast but impossible to discern the clouds. It seemed impossible to see through.

'That's strange. There was some nice weather on the forecast.' [said Michael] (92)

The entire novel, then, can be read as a struggle with substance abuse and addiction, with the protagonist eventually, through sheer force of will, reaching the dry shore and coming out the 'victor' – his last speech act is to pronounce his name for the first time: 'I am Victor' (262).

The allegory of the flood can also be read as something much more mundane, with the referentiality of the city in question – the university city of Leuven – inviting a reading of the book as a student novel. Time in *Vloed* is structured in terms of post-apocalyptic experience, with a clear before and after the ending of normality (see e.g. p. 17). However, another time is at work here as well, and almost as compulsively: that of student life. The momentous 'first day' of the narrated time is the day when the protagonist arrives in his new student home town by train on a sunny late summer afternoon (51), performing the first act of the student novel (Ameel 2014, 31–33). Time is measured in academic years (Six 2012, 13), and space is similarly oriented around student life. The focal point is the student home Torres, and on a reconnaissance mission in the deserted city, a student bar constitutes an important point of orientation (184). Moreover, as one reviewer notes, essential parts of the novel feel 'like teenage wishful thinking' (van Rooij 2013). They are in effect a set of clichés of student life: contemplating love and sex, getting drunk and high, and looking at the world of real choices from a somewhat safe but uneasy distance. The characters' activities are described as typical of any student 'in this city or in any city of the world' (Six 2012, 106). The referential elements in the novel, such as the setting in the existing student home Torres and the recognisable features of Leuven as a student city, also evoke allegorical readings in terms of a student novel or coming-of-age novel, with the characters' post-apocalyptic journey taking on the aspect of an allegorical journey of life itself.<sup>9</sup> When the protagonist and Nina venture outside of the tower, they find themselves at last in a world where choices have to be made, as if they have moved from the protected antechamber of the student home into the complexities of a more mature life, which opens up like a Dante-esque forest of branching pathways:

There are two options now – left and right – which branch off again after a few metres and again and again, until you find yourself wandering through a dense forest of choices.

...

Vigilantly we enter the winding alleys of moss-covered cobblestones. (177–178)

## Conclusion

In *Vloed*, as in *Weerwater*, there is an oscillation between referential foregroundings (such as the walk away from the actually existing student home, located in the actually existing city of Leuven), universalist meanings that stem from such referentiality (Leuven as prototype of a university city), and the complex allegorical meanings branching out from these (the flood as cognitive impediment, as an obstacle to coming-of-age or artistic achievement, as an ecological disaster, etc.). At first sight, this would seem to suggest that the novel explicitly points away from a reading in terms of real-life environmental questions. In fact, Six stated in an interview that he did not want his novel to be read as a work of environmental fiction: 'My novel is not at all about eco-stuff. I really do not want to warn about the deterioration of the environment ... It's a philosophical work' (qtd in Verplancke 2012). And yet Six's and Dorrestein's novels have important perspectives to

add to more conventional or straightforwardly referential flood narratives, in the way they draw attention to the affordances and limits of language and narrative fiction within the broader material and discursive meshworks in which literary fiction is embedded.

In environmentally themed fiction, the trope of the flood has arguably become 'the dominant literary strategy for locating climate change' (Trexler 2015, 82–83). Literary fiction can provide an important complement to future visions of environmental relations as they are found in STEM texts (cf. Hulme 2011). One crucial contribution lies in the way literary fiction is able to provide a sense of *qualia*, of what it feels like to live under possible or future environmental circumstances. A second one is grounded in the metafictional realm, in how literary fiction is able to pose questions about storytelling and about the kinds of literary tropes, narrative forms, and genres at our disposal to narrate past, present, and future engagements with our changing environment. On both accounts, Renate Dorrestein's *Weerwater* and Roderik Six's *Vloed* provide important perspectives from a particular cultural and geographical setting with accute relevance for climate change and rising sea levels. Both novels can be seen as illustrative of literature's potential as 'laboratory of the possible' (Westphal 2011, 63) in the way they envisage personal and societal resilience under environmental duress. The events in *Weerwater*, in particular, operate in close dialogue with discourses on Dutch can-do attitudes vis-à-vis the water, and with ideas on urban resilience in the face of rising water and global warming. *Vloed* eschews direct references to ecocritical concerns, but, like *Weerwater*, it draws extensively on tropes from flood fiction and environmental future fiction to reflect on the human capacity for survival, including concerns about reproduction, sexuality, and gender dynamics.

The collapsing temporalities in *Vloed*, and the sense of powerlessness felt in *Weerwater* by the protagonist when confronted with the otherworldly fog, can be interpreted as a reminder of the limits of language and narrative form for grasping the vast scales of climate change, but also as allegorical attempts to interrogate our interaction with the environment, with all the sensory and cognitive tentativeness such interaction entails. Our reading of Six and Dorrestein is in line with Astrid Bracke's insistence, in her article 'Flooded Futures: The Representation of the Anthropocene in Twenty-First-Century British Flood Fictions', on the significance of the metafictional level in narratives that make use of flood tropes. As she suggests, the uncertainty in such narratives about what is real and what is unreal, within the storyworld as well as for the reader, chimes with 'the deep epistemological uncertainty at the heart of the Anthropocene' (2019, 284). In their use of indeterminate allegory, Dorrestein's and Six's texts emphasise the lack of control over sense-making processes, as particular narrative tropes turn out to have diverging and contradictory meanings. At the same time, the novels' metaleptic operations affirm the creative, world-building potential of language, which, it is implied, literary fiction can unlock.

## Notes

1. While readers may be tempted to read *Vloed* as a novel set in the future, there are no clear temporal markers. It can therefore also be read as being set in an alternative, speculative universe parallel to ours, rather than at a future point in time.

2. Historically, Leuven has had its own role to play on the front lines of Belgium's twentieth-century history: it was severely damaged in the two World Wars, becoming an early and internationally recognised symbol of urban destruction, and in the 1960s, it was a flashpoint for the struggles between the Dutch-speaking and French-speaking communities as well as for the 1968 student movement.
3. All translations from *Weerwater*, *Vloed*, and other Dutch-language sources quoted in this article are ours.
4. The roots of the motto, however, lie in the Eighty Years' War with Spain and the struggle for independence (Scholten 2013, 258).
5. The prefix 'weer-' in words referring to the natural realm tends to have associations of uncanny or threatening phenomena ('weerlicht' or lightning; 'weerwolf' or werewolf).
6. The trope of fog in the literary city, combined with the threat of an apocalyptic flood, ties *Weerwater* to one of the founding apocalyptic city texts, Alexander Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman* (Pushkin 1833), which profoundly influenced the Petersburg text and had various international followers (Alter 2005, 91 ff.). In Pushkin's work, as in later iterations of the fog-and-flood trope, there are already competing interpretations of what the fog as allegory entails, ranging from personal madness and despair to national ineffectiveness.
7. In fact, the suicide rates in the province of Flevoland are significantly lower than elsewhere in the Netherlands (CBS 2017).
8. A strikingly similar image appears in the closing scene of the film *Children of Men* (2006).
9. The figure of Camilo Torres adds further complexity to a possible theological reading of the protagonist's journey in the novel: the student home (which opened in 1968) is named after a Catholic martyr and priest-revolutionary, exemplary of a militant liberation theology that resonated within progressive Catholic circles in 1960s Leuven.

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